

FROM THE FIELDS OF CRIMEA TO THE SANDS OF MARS



BY MICHEL POULIN

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TO THE SANDS OF MARS**

A HISTORICAL FICTION/SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY MICHEL POULIN

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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 UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS MANY HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL EVENTS AND ONLY DESCRIBE ALTERNATE HISTORICAL SCENARIOS. RELIGION-RELATED EVENTS DEPICTED IN THIS NOVEL IN NO WAY REFLECT THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE AUTHOR.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is the seventh and last installment in a collection of novels depicting the adventures through time of Nancy Laplante, a female Canadian war correspondent from 2012 and the chief of operations of the Time Patrol, an organization originating from the 34th Century. Those novels were written prior to the fictionalized events of the 21st Century depicted in them, thus should be treated as novels about alternate realities. The years in the dates shown in the headings are followed by either the letters 'A', 'B' or 'C', denoting in which timeline the action is happening. Timeline 'A' is the original historical line, while Timeline 'B' is a parallel alternate history created accidentally by Nancy Laplante when she was transported against her will from 2012 to the year 1940 and

involuntarily changed history by her actions. Timeline 'C' is a second parallel history created from 1941 'B' when enemies of Nancy tried to kill her to change history in their favor. While Nancy Laplante 'A' died in 2019 'A' while reporting on a war in Northern Iraq, her young timeline twin, Nancy 'B', has taken over her mantle as a field agent of the Time Patrol, while Ingrid Dows 'C', timeline twin of the adopted daughter of Nancy, is opening the use of Space for the United States.

TABLE OF CONTENT

CHAPTER 1 – AMNESIA.....	5
CHAPTER 2 – ROCKET SHIP SQUADRON.....	123
CHAPTER 3 – VARNA.....	176
CHAPTER 4 – CRIMEA.....	211
CHAPTER 5 – THE ANGEL OF BALAKLAVA	244
CHAPTER 6 – SEDITION.....	313
CHAPTER 7 – HEARTBREAK.....	386
CHAPTER 8 – MADAME LA MARQUISE.....	397
CHAPTER 9 – REBELLION.....	436
CHAPTER 10 – A VIEW TO THE EARTH.....	480
CHAPTER 11 – SPY OF THE SUN KING	499
CHAPTER 12 – RED CROSS AND WINE	514
CHAPTER 13 – TO THE MOON AND BACK.....	535
CHAPTER 14 – U.S.S. CONSTITUTION.....	568
CHAPTER 15 – GOODBYE, D’ARTAGNAN.....	582
CHAPTER 16 – THE PARIS COMMUNE	587
CHAPTER 17 – MARS OR BUST.....	602
CHAPTER 18 – ANOTHER ROAD ENDS.....	688
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	698

CHAPTER 1 – AMNESIA

21 :12 (London Time)

Saturday, March 11, 1854 ‘A’

Hyde Park, London

England

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

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

The distinguished, 54 year-old woman looked up at her son and caressed his chin tenderly. A tall and very handsome young man, Gordon was wearing a striped dark blue suit and overcoat tonight instead of his uniform of captain of the 8th Hussars, which was truly a shame: he was so dashing when in uniform. Gordon was Carmelia’s only child but he had made her rightly proud of him. Her only disappointment was that he was still resisting the advances of the young, respectable ladies Carmelia kept presenting him, like tonight at the reception given by Lord Carver. Gordon had still not completely come over the deaths less than three years ago of his young wife Megan and of his newborn son. His most persistent objection to hopeful ladies was that, while well bred and proper, they lacked character and were often vain and boring. Carmelia had to recognize that Gordon’s wife had been a real firebrand, owing probably to her Irish bloodline. Finding another woman like her that was not from hopelessly low class was proving to be quite a challenge.

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

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

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

“Does she look like a proper sort, Thomas?”

“Hard to say from this distance, maam. I...”

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

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

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

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

Both Gordon and Carmelia were pushed back in their bench seat as the driver yelled at his horses and the carriage took up speed. Gordon jumped out in the rain as soon as they came to a stop. Looking out by the window of the door, Carmelia saw Gordon and Thomas pick up a woman lying still on the pavement. Opening the door, she held it open as both men carried the woman to the carriage and labored to get her inside. The stranger was very tall for a woman and, while not apparently overweight, appeared to be quite heavy, making Gordon swear as he pulled her inside and sat her on one of the two benches.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"RIGHT AWAY, SIR!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A rich woman indeed!” Agreed Carmelia. “She must belong to a prominent family. Let’s dry her quickly, girls.”

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

“God, she is really heavy for her size!” Said Clara. “She must be all muscles.” They soon saw for themselves when they removed her wet undergarment and Judith passed a towel over the stranger’s nude body to dry it.

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

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

“Sweet Mary! What happened to her?” Bending over to have a better look, Carmelia nearly immediately recoiled from surprise and shock: those were whip marks! Looking again more closely, she was then able to see a number of burn marks on her back and buttocks. Turning laboriously the woman on her back, Carmelia saw similar whip and burn marks on her chest and belly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Torture?” Said Gordon in a shocked voice. “Was that woman tortured?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thanks, Gordon!”

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

“Where is this woman, Mister Smythe?”

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

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

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

“Of course! This way, Doctor.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I will. Be patient, though.”

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

“How is she, Doctor?”

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

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

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

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

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

“They were quite a shock to me, Mister Smythe. They are effectively marks from horrible tortures suffered by this poor woman years ago. From their severity and density of pattern, I would say that they were not sustained simply as some form of punishment ordered by a court. Whoever tortured her went at it for hours, maybe days, and probably

wanted some kind of answers. She probably passed out a number of times during that ordeal. There was also a scar from a long gash made by a blade weapon on her belly. She however looks extremely fit and strong and is otherwise in good health. In fact, she is by far the most fit woman I ever saw.”

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

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

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

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

“Oh! In that case I will let you know when that poor woman wakes up. How much do I owe you, Doctor?”

Portal stopped Gordon as he was searching his pockets for money.

“I will wait until I finished treating her before presenting my bill, sir. Have a good night, sir and madam.”

“Let me at least get my carriage driver to give you a ride home, Doctor.”

“A kind thought, sir, which I will accept gladly.”

Escorting Portal out of the bedroom, Gordon was back in after a few minutes, closing the door before looking at his mother.

“I will take the night vigil, Mother. You can replace me in the morning, after you have rested.”

Carmelia hesitated for an instant while glancing down at the young woman in the bed: the stranger was naked under the bed sheets.

“Alright, but let me get a night gown for her first: we don’t want her to wake up and think that she was abused in any way.”

Gordon gave her a pained look at those words.

“Mother, I am not that sort of bastard.”

“Of course not, Son! I just want that girl to feel secure.”

“I understand. While you get the gown, I will get myself an extra oil lamp and a good book.”

Going to his study, Gordon took the lit oil lamp on his work desk and used it to scan the rows of books filling the wall shelves. A well educated man, he always enjoyed reading and could do so in Latin and Greek as well. He finally grabbed a thick book on the life and death of Joan of Arc, his favorite heroine, and returned to the guest bedroom only to find its door blocked by his mother, who signaled him to halt.

“You will have to wait a bit: Judith and Clara are busy putting a night gown on her.”

She then looked at the book in his hands and smiled.

“Still stuck on Joan of Arc, I see?”

“Hey, is it my fault if she was such a brave girl, even if she was bashing on English soldiers? Besides, you know that I am attracted to women of character rather than to those spoiled aristocratic girls I keep bumping into.”

“I noticed!” Replied his mother rather frostily.

Gordon had to cool his heels another few minutes before the two maids left the bedroom and he was allowed in by his mother. Putting a chair besides the bed, he moved the bedside table so that he would be between it and the bed, then put the oil lamp on the table and sat in the chair. Before starting his reading, he admired the face of the sleeping woman: a physical attraction towards her was now growing quickly in him. His secret hope was that she would prove as attractive of character as she was physically. Since he still had over three weeks of leave left, he should have ample time to find out about her. With a sigh, he opened his book and started reading.

Hours later, having gone through one third of his book, Gordon rubbed his tired eyes and, putting down the book on the bedside table, rose from his chair to stretch his legs a bit. Taking out his pocket watch, he saw that it was merely one thirty in the morning. This was going to be a long night indeed. Turning around to face the bed, Gordon nearly did a double take from surprise: the young woman was now looking at him with dazed eyes. She then spoke in a weak voice as he was hurrying to her side of the bed.

“Où suis-je¹?”

¹ Où suis-je? ‘Where am I?’ in French.

Silently swearing at himself for knowing only half a dozen words of French, Gordon knelt beside the bed and gently took one of her hands. His hope now was that she could speak English.

“You are in my home, miss. You were nearly struck by lightning and have been unconscious for hours. Can you understand me?”

“Yes.” She replied weakly in English, bringing a feeling of relief to Gordon, who smiled down at her.

“Good! A doctor already examined you a few hours ago. You suffered a severe shock. Can you tell me your name, so that we could advise your relatives?” The woman was about to speak when she froze, a growing look of despair and horror appearing on her face.

“I... I don't know my name! I can't remember who I am!”

Patting the hand of the now distraught young woman, Gordon spoke to her softly, trying to reassure her.

“That is quite normal after the kind of shock you suffered, miss. You will probably remember everything back after a good night's sleep. The best you can do now is to rest. I will post myself outside in the hallway to leave you some privacy.”

The quickness and fierceness of her reaction to his words came as a shock to him: a look of sheer despair appearing on her face, she grabbed his right arm with a strength that surprised Gordon.

“No! Don't go! Don't leave me alone!”

Gordon looked down into her beautiful green eyes and saw genuine distress in them.

“Alright, miss, I will stay. Now, calm down and rest.”

Followed by her eyes, Gordon sat back in his chair and picked up his book to resume his reading. He soon saw from the corner of one eye the woman go back to sleep. Then staring at her, he pondered how he would handle an amnesiac French woman but decided to leave that problem to Doctor Portal later. The French embassy would probably have to be contacted as well at one point. She didn't wear a wedding ring when she had been picked up, even though she wore three rings on other fingers. Now feeling really tired, Gordon decided to replace his straight chair by the easy chair near the dresser. Switching them around as silently as he could, he then got himself a thick wool blanket and installed himself as comfortably as he could. He was asleep in less than a minute, dreaming about charging on his war horse and saving a tall, beautiful French woman.

06:37 (London Time)

Sunday, March 12, 1854

14 Belgrave Square, London

Gordon was awakened by progressively more vigorous shakes and opened his eyes to find the French woman standing in front of him, dressed in a night gown that stopped at her knees. She then asked him something in French that he didn't understand, making him shake his head apologetically while replying in English.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I don't speak French."

The young woman, who looked to be in her early twenties, hesitated a bit, then switched to a fluent English.

"Could you tell me where I am and what I am doing here, mister?"

"But, I already told you when you first woke up, miss." Said Gordon, both surprised and alarmed: if she couldn't remember such a recent event, then her mind must have been affected quite severely. "My name is Gordon Smythe and you are in my London home on Belgrave Square. Me and my mother picked you up in Hyde Park after you were nearly struck by lightning. Can you remember your name now?"

The woman's green eyes wandered around as she seemingly concentrated. She finally sat back heavily on the edge of the bed and answered him in a soft, discouraged voice.

"I...I can't! What am I going to do now?"

Gordon threw away his blanket and got to his feet, then took her hands to reassure her.

"Do not worry, miss. You are safe in my home and can count on the full support of both me and my family. You must be hungry by now. Would you like to have breakfast?"

She answered by nodding her head sheepishly. Gordon then showed her the door.

"Then let's put one of my robes on your first: a lady such as you should be dressed properly in public."

"How do you know that I am a lady and not some tramp?"

Her question made Gordon smile.

"Tramps don't go around wearing expensive jewels and with over four hundred pounds in cash in their purses."

She instinctively raised a hand to her throat, searching for a necklace. Gordon quickly reassured her.

“Don’t worry, miss. Your valuables are in a safe place. Just tell me when you will need them and I will get them for you. This way, please.”

As he was leading her towards his bedroom, she looked at her left hand and slowed down, forcing him to stop and turn around.

“Tell me, sir, was I wearing a wedding ring?”

“No, miss. You did have three rings on other fingers, though.”

“Then I must be single.” She said after a pause. Gordon nodded and, getting to his bedroom, opened the door and invited her in. Going directly to the main closet and opening it, he pulled out a warm burgundy robe made of thick wool, along with a pair of sheepskin slippers. He still had his back to her when she spoke, excitement in her voice.

“You’re in the Army, mister?”

Gordon then realized that she must have spotted his Hussar’s uniform, visible inside the closet. Smiling proudly, he took his uniform out to display it to her.

“I’m a captain in the 8th Royal Hussars, presently garrisoned in Winchester. I am right now on a long overdue leave.”

“It is a nice uniform.” Said the woman while detailing the golden cordons and embroidering on the vest. She then stared for a moment at the two medal ribbons sewn on the left breast of the vest. “You served in India and Afghanistan?”

Gordon raised an eyebrow at that, not a little surprised and impressed: few people knew well enough military ribbons to identify those two service ribbons. As for women, Gordon had never met one who knew military ribbons well.

“I have effectively served in those two countries, miss. How come you know those ribbons?”

She hesitated while concentrating and trying to remember. She finally shook her head sadly.

“I don’t know. The only thing that I know is that I seem to be familiar with things that are military and about war.”

She then looked around the closet, apparently searching for something.

“I don’t see your combat uniform, though.”

Giving her a dubious look, Gordon put back his uniform in the closet and handed her the robe and slippers.

“Miss, that uniform is meant for parades as well as for the field. You should know that if you are really familiar with the Army.”

She somehow seemed to have troubles with that notion, looking perplexed as she put on the robe and slippers.

“You use such a flashy uniform in the field? Wait! What year are we in?”

“I believe that we are still in 1854, miss.” Replied Gordon sarcastically. The shock from the near lightning strike had decidedly been more severe than he feared on her. “To be exact, we are on Sunday, March twelfth.”

“1854... The Crimean War, of course.” She muttered to herself, making Gordon tense up.

“Which war, miss?”

“But, the Crimean War, you know! The one between England, France and the Ottoman Empire on one side and the Russian Empire on the other side.”

Gordon was speechless for a moment, staring at her. The situation in the Balkans was tense and the Russians had been fighting with the Turks for a few months now but England and France, while diplomatically supporting the Turks, were not yet at war with Russia.

“Miss,” he said coldly, “where did you get this fancy notion of a war between us and Russia?”

“I don’t know!” She replied vehemently. “It just popped in my head when you mentioned the year 1854.”

“The year 1854...you are speaking as if it was already history, miss.”

“It feels like it to me.” She said, her tone heating up and obviously getting irritated by his skepticism. “The Crimean War was so primitive in terms of tactics and weaponry! I...”

She then stopped speaking, realizing how odd her words had been. On his part, Gordon was starting to seriously wonder if her mental state could make her dangerous. He finally resolved to watch her closely for the time being, in case she did something regrettable.

“I see. Well, let’s forget this, uh, Crimean War, and let’s go downstairs to have breakfast.”

“As you wish, sir.” She replied, obviously unrepentant. Whoever she was, Gordon could see that she had to be a woman of strong character.

“Please, call me Gordon, not sir. You are my guest, remember?”

She understood at once from his tone that he meant as much to remind her that this was his house as much as meaning that he was ready to care for her. Taking a deep breath to calm down, she then managed a smile to him.

“You are right, Gordon. Please excuse me if I have irked you.”

“No offence taken, miss. Please follow me.”

They walked downstairs together but in silence. Gordon was still going over what she had said, while she seemed to go be going through her own mind to make sense of what was in it. Carmelia, having breakfast already in the dining room, immediately noticed the frost between the two as they entered the room. She got up as Gordon presented her to the young woman.

“Miss, this is my mother, Lady Carmelia Smythe. Mother, I would like to present our guest properly but, unfortunately, she seems to be amnesiac because of her accident.”

“Oh dear! I am sorry to hear that, miss.” Said Carmelia before going to the young woman and kissing her on both cheeks. “Doctor Portal will come to examine you further today. In the meantime, feel at home here.”

“Thank you, madam.” Replied the woman before sitting at the table with Gordon. Carmelia called Judith and ordered her to serve breakfast to Gordon and the stranger, then gave a tentative smile to the young woman.

“Can’t you remember anything about yourself, miss?”

“The only thing that seems to be a fact about me is that I am French, Lady Carmelia, as I spoke first in French on waking up. I am not sure about anything else for the moment.”

She looked down for a moment at her hands, devoid of rings.

“My rings and jewels, was there anything about them that could help identify me? Maybe my name was engraved on them.”

Carmelia and Gordon looked at each other: they had not thought about that possibility. Gordon rose from his chair at once.

“I will go get her jewels and purse to show them to her. Hopefully they will be able to jog her memory a bit.”

“A good idea, Gordon. Ask in passing as well to Thomas to go get Doctor Portal.”

"I will, Mother." Replied Gordon before leaving the dining room. Carmelia, now alone with the stranger, discreetly detailed her while sipping on her tea. Judith soon brought a tray with a cup of tea, English muffins and jam, serving the young woman and Gordon's empty place, then returning into the kitchen. The stranger first ate in silence, obviously preoccupied. Carmelia could understand well her state of mind, as being amnesiac had to be a most unsettling experience. If found by unscrupulous men, that beautiful stranger could then have ended in some dire predicament indeed. She was young and beautiful, with a firm and generous chest, large hips and long athletic legs. Many men would have had little scruple to abuse such a woman. Carmelia felt pity for her. Clara then showed up and bowed respectfully to Carmelia before presenting a rolled newspaper to her.

"The morning paper, madam."

"Thank you, Clara."

Carmelia barely had time to look at the titles on the front page before Gordon came back and sat, putting on the table besides the stranger her jewels and purse.

"Here you are, miss. You may count your money if you wish so."

The stranger gave him a funny look then but didn't speak yet, taking instead her purse and opening it. Emptying it on the table, she looked briefly at the large collection of banknotes, gold and silver coins, then grabbed the set of keys to examine it closely.

"One key here seems to be for a bank safety deposit box, with the number 138 on it. There is unfortunately no indication about what bank it is from. There is also another numbered key, possibly for a hotel room, again without a name or address on it. The other five keys could be for a house somewhere."

She next examined her jewels, which included a pair of emerald and diamond earrings matching with a rich necklace, bracelet and broche, plus three rings. One of the rings bore a coat of arms with a fleur-de-lis in it. That ring got the young woman excited at once.

"I recognize that coat of arms: it is that of the French House of Orléans."

"You are sure, miss?" Said Gordon, suddenly hopeful that they were finally getting somewhere. She nodded her head somberly.

"I am. My head seems to be full of all kind of historical details and knowledge and this ring woke up the name of Orléans at once. I must be related to that family line."

"Well, that is one good lead we could follow, miss. What about that gold ring? I see some strange inscriptions on it."

Taking the plain gold ring, which seemed of rather primitive manufacture, the woman appeared surprised as she looked at the inscriptions engraved around the ring.

“Cuneiforms?”

“Cunei what?” Said Gordon, mystified.

“Cuneiforms. They were the writing system used by ancient Sumerians, in Mesopotamia.”

“How ancient were those Sumerians?” Asked Carmelia, having a poor knowledge of ancient history. The young stranger answered her while still looking at the ring.

“The Sumerians date as far as 5,000 years or more ago and were the first to develop a writing system. This is weird: I can actually read those cuneiforms.”

“You can?” Nearly exclaimed Gordon. “What do they say?”

She read apparently without difficulty, surprised by her own linguistic skills.

“May the great Ninshoursag, Goddess of the earth, protect Sarai, daughter of Shoudou-Usur, great servant of the mighty Rim-Sin, King of Ur and Chaldea.”

She had a puzzled expression on her face as she put down the ring on the table while both Carmelia and Gordon looked at her with disbelief.

“This is an ancient family ring from 5,000 years in the past?” Asked Carmelia, quite dazzled. “How did you get it?”

“Uh, I don’t know.” Said sheepishly the young woman, who then slowly put the ring around her left middle finger. “It however fits my finger perfectly.”

Carmelia saw that she was right and looked at her son.

“Would many people know how to read those cuneiforms, Gordon?”

“Very few, I suppose. I could go to the British Museum some day and ask an expert there. Our friend is however obviously well versed in history, which would be another good reason to visit the museum.”

“And dressed in what? Her dress was extensively damaged by the lightning strike.”

“Talking of my clothes, could I see them later?” Asked the young French woman.

“Of course, my dear! But take the time to eat your breakfast first.”

While Carmelia started reading the morning newspaper, Gordon took a sip of his tea and bit in a muffin. The French woman however took the time to put her other rings

and jewels on, then quickly counted her money and returned it with the key ring into her purse, which she pocketed. Carmelia suddenly saw a title that attracted her attention.

“Gordon, it says here that England and France just signed a military alliance pact with the Ottoman Empire against Russia. We may be going to war again.”

Gordon strangled on his tea at those words, nearly making him spit it out and attracting a reprobate look from Carmelia.

“Gordon, watch your manners!”

Gordon, still choked up, took a few seconds before he could speak, pointing to the French woman.

“Mother, she predicted that war this morning!”

The young woman nodded somberly as Carmelia stared at her.

“Your son is right, madam. I somehow knew about this already. I also know that a terrible war will follow in the Crimea and around the Black Sea. War will be declared at the end of March.”

“But, we are now only in mid-March.” Said a stunned Carmelia. “How could you know this?”

“I don’t know, madam. Things are still quite confused in my head.”

Thinking for a second, Carmelia gave the newspaper to Gordon, who started reading it avidly, then rose from her chair.

“If you may excuse me for a moment, I will be back shortly.”

She was back at the table after about ten minutes. In her hands were a pen, an ink bottle, some sheets of paper and a thick book. Sitting down first, she showed up the book to the young woman.

“A French-English dictionary and lexicon.” She explained. “I do speak a passable French but I will need it for what I’m going to do now.”

“What are you up to, Mother?” Asked an intrigued Gordon.

“You will see shortly, Son.”

Alternatively searching in the book and scribbling on a sheet of paper, Carmelia finally presented one page of writing to the French woman.

“I wrote down common French female first names, in no particular order. Could you scan them and tell us if one of them feels familiar to you?”

Her expression somber, the French took the sheet of paper and studied it for a minute before pointing out one name.

“Jeanne! That one is the only one to awake a feeling inside my head.”

“Then, do you mind if we call you Jeanne for the time being?” Asked a satisfied Carmelia.

“It is the best alternative for the moment, madam.”

“Then Lady Jeanne it is! After breakfast we will see if your dress can be repaired.”

They were rising from the dining table when Doctor Portal showed up with Thomas. Looking first at Jeanne, he then bowed his head politely to Carmelia.

“Good morning ladies, sir. I am pleased to see that the young lady is up and apparently well.”

“Apparently is the word, sir.” Said Jeanne. “I can’t remember who I am or where I come from.”

“Oh! I was afraid of that.” Replied Portal, who then looked at Gordon. “At what time did she first wake up?”

“At one thirty this morning, Doctor.”

“Then she was out for only a little more than four hours. That is good news indeed.”

“What do you mean, Doctor?” Asked Gordon anxiously. Portal stared at Jeanne as he answered calmly.

“It is my experience with victims of trauma who suffer from amnesia that the persons who wake up and stop feeling disoriented within a day normally recover all or nearly all of their past memories. The memories of their general knowledge will come back quickest, normally within days or at most a few weeks. The memories of their personal experiences and of their identities will however take more time, typically many months. Some never recover their identity but those are the exceptions.”

“Months?” Said Jeanne hesitantly. Portal nodded sadly.

“I am afraid so, miss. Your memories will come back gradually as time goes by. Seeing a familiar person, object or place also often helps in reviving souvenirs. If you may, I would like to examine you in private.”

“As you wish, Doctor.” She replied, discouragement in her voice, before following Portal out of the dining room. Carmelia and Gordon then exchanged worried looks.

“The poor girl will need prolonged support to go through this. Are you ready to help her out, Gordon?”

“A true gentleman wouldn’t do otherwise, Mother. I am not due back at my regiment before April fourth anyway. That gives me a full three weeks to actively take care of Jeanne. I suppose that you could take care of her after that.”

“Of course, Son! By the way, your father is giving a reception next Saturday evening. You could bring Jeanne with you then.”

Gordon smiled at the idea of dancing with the beautiful and statuesque Jeanne in his parents’ manor. She may be a bit strange but she was attractive as hell.

“That would please me a lot, Mother. We will be there.”

“Good!” Said Carmelia while getting up. “I will now go see if I can salvage Jeanne’s dress. Otherwise we will have to find her new clothes in a hurry.”

“If need be I know a Jewish tailor who would be willing to work on a Sunday.” Volunteered Gordon, getting a scandalized look from Carmelia.

“That man would work on God’s day of rest?”

Gordon shrugged as he replied to her.

“Hey, we do work during the Sabbath.”

“Hmm, true! We’ll see!”

Leaving Gordon to finish his breakfast, Carmelia went to the laundry room adjacent to the kitchen, where Jeanne’s clothes were suspended. A quick inspection showed her that Jeanne’s overcoat and hat, bearing extensive burn marks and even holes, were beyond repair. While burned in a few spots, the French woman’s dress could still be worn if absolutely necessary but was finished as a proper attire for a true lady. Gordon’s Jewish tailor may yet come handy after all. Going back to the dining room, Carmelia found Gordon in the process of reading the morning paper. He looked at her as soon as she came back in.

“So, what’s the verdict?”

“Jeanne could use her dress to go to the tailor shop but that’s about all it is good for now. Her overcoat and hat are write-offs.”

“Well, that does it! I will bring her to that tailor shop as soon as Doctor Portal is finished with her.”

As if he had called the Devil, Portal showed up just then, Jeanne in tow. Both sat at the table, with Jeanne keeping a sullen silence as Portal spoke to Gordon and Carmelia.

“Her burns, which were light anyway, are healing very well indeed. As for her mind, I made her pass a few simple tests. She is not yet fully out of the post-trauma

period and has some difficulty still on remembering details. That should however return to normal by tomorrow morning. Her past memories should return...in time."

"Should..." Said Jeanne softly while looking despondently down at her hands. Gordon's hands then covered hers gently.

"Do not despair, Jeanne. We will help you through this."

"Thank you! I owe you and your mother so much."

Doctor Portal patted her shoulder as well while getting to his feet.

"Please have faith, miss. You will remember your past. It is only a question of time."

Gordon rose as well, ready to escort him to the door.

"Thank you for your help, Doctor. How much do I owe you?"

"Please let me pay him!" Suddenly cut in Jeanne. "It is not as if I am poor."

"But, it is nothing to me, my dear Jeanne." Replied Gordon, taking his wallet out. She in turn got to her feet and stopped his hand, looking straight into his eyes.

"Please, Gordon. I may not know who I am but I know that I am a proud woman. I don't want to be a burden on you."

Gordon returned her stare for a moment. His heart racing, he realized then that he couldn't refuse anything to this woman, that he would not let her go ever if he could help it. He nodded his head slowly, speaking softly to her.

"Alright, Jeanne. Do as you wish."

Jeanne smiled to him, then faced Portal while fishing her purse out to pay him. While she paid Portal, Carmelia examined her discreetly with a new eye: she had seen Gordon's look and realized that he was rapidly falling in love with her. She was certainly extremely attractive and her manners and behavior up to now had been those of a well educated woman, but her past was still a total mystery. For all they knew about her she could be a thief or, God forbid, one of those celebrated French high flight courtesans. Carmelia promised herself to keep a close watch on that woman, in case her only son fell for the wrong woman. Gordon then escorted Portal to the door, coming back after a minute and taking out his pocket watch, glancing quickly at it.

"Half past seven. How about a quick tour of my house, Jeanne?"

"Why not?" She replied good-naturedly, presenting her arm to Gordon, who gallantly took it. He led her first into the kitchen, where they encountered Clara and Judith, who were busy washing dishes in a wooden tub full of water.

"Jeanne, may I present you my two maids, Clara and Judith."

Both servants did a curtsy and shook hands with Jeanne, who noticed the Mediterranean looks of the plump Clara.

“Are you of Italian descent by chance, Clara?”

“Yes miss!” Answered the maid timidly. “I was twelve when my parents emigrated from Milan.”

That brought a warm smile to Jeanne’s face.

“Aah, Milano! Come va la tua familia?”

It was then Clara’s turn to smile widely.

“Molto vene, signora. Gracie!”

Gordon and Judith exchanged surprised looks as Jeanne and Clara launched into an animated exchange in Italian, speaking for a good minute. Jeanne finally hugged Clara before facing Gordon.

“Sorry about delaying the tour with my chatter.”

“Don’t be! You’re putting me to shame with your abilities. How many languages do you speak?”

She concentrated for a moment, her face reflecting growing puzzlement as seconds went by.

“Er, I can’t explain how, but I seem to have the knowledge of dozens of languages in my head.”

Gordon and both maids stared at her with disbelief.

“Dozens? But that’s unheard of!” Protested Gordon.

“Try me!” Replied Jeanne, smiling.

“Alright, you asked for it!” Said Gordon, getting into the game. He first tried out his Greek and Latin on her, to which Jeanne replied perfectly. That didn’t surprise him too much, since she seemed to have received a good classical education. Having served nearly six years in India, Gordon next spoke haltingly a few sentences in Hindi and was stunned to be corrected by Jeanne, who obviously spoke the language much better than him. Now backed up to his last linguistic notions, he said the few words he had heard and registered while fighting Afghan rebels. Jeanne winced on hearing him.

“My God, Gordon, where did you learn your Pashto? That was about the crudest collections of insults I ever heard!”

“Oh?! What did I just say?”

Jeanne then translated for him, making both maids gasp while Gordon reddened with embarrassment.

“Blast! No wonder that Afghan chieftain got mad at me. And I thought that I was greeting him.”

That made Jeanne break out in laughter.

“You did greet him alright, Gordon. Now, how about continuing that tour?”

“Good idea!” He agreed, anxious to have his Pashto words forgotten. He next led Jeanne into the laundry room, where he pointed at her suspended dress and overcoat.

“I’m afraid that your clothes are beyond repair.”

Jeanne examined them, then shook her head sadly.

“I’m afraid that you are right. I will need to visit a tailor shop urgently.”

“That is precisely our next stop after touring the house.” Replied Gordon jovially. “I know a Jewish tailor who is open on Sundays.”

“Excellent! Let’s hope that he will have something that fits me.”

Gordon didn’t say a word then, eyeing her up and down instead. Few women he knew were as tall and broad-shouldered, yet feminine, as Jeanne was. Fitting her was definitely going to be a problem. Skipping the pantry, Gordon led Jeanne back through the kitchen and the dining room, ending up in the main lounge. There, she looked at the rows of shelves full of books covering two of the walls, nodding her head in approval.

“You seem to be a well educated gentleman, Gordon.”

“Not as educated as you, I would say.” He retorted, getting a malicious look from her.

“I haven’t found out yet what I am, remember?”

“I am a patient man, Jeanne.”

That got him a devilish grin from her.

“You would like to explore my inner self with me? You cheeky devil!”

“Ahem! Let’s visit the first floor now, shall we?”

Followed by Jeanne, Gordon went up the main staircase and guided her around the first floor. Apart from Gordon’s bedroom and office, two guest bedrooms occupied that level, along with a washroom. In the latter, Gordon proudly showed the sink, bathtub and toilet.

“We have tap water around the house and everything is connected directly to the sewer system. Very few areas of London have such services yet.”

“What about hot water?” Asked a seemingly unimpressed Jeanne. A disappointed Gordon kept his tone neutral as he answered her.

“The maids of course still have to bring hot water from the kitchen. Let’s go to the second floor now.”

Jeanne became a lot more excited when Gordon led her inside his exercise room, previously a large study that he had converted himself. She looked happily around at the suspended punching bag, weights and padded benches and at the floor, covered by a thick wool carpet.

“This is great! Could I use this room in the days to come?”

“You are welcome to it, Jeanne. Do you practice sports normally?”

“I must be! The sight of this room awakened an urge to exercise in me. Yes! You have sabers and rapiers too!”

“Of course! I am an army officer, remember?”

He watched Jeanne with interest as she picked up a saber from a wall and, taking it out of its scabbard, did a few practice passes with it. He had to recognize that she looked quite proficient with it.

“Could I try you in a friendly saber duel some time in the future?” She asked with a big smile, amusing Gordon.

“If you wish. I have to warn you though that I am considered one of the best swordsmen of my regiment.”

“Then we have a deal.” She replied before putting the saber back in place. Gordon led her out of the exercise room, showing her next a guest bedroom and two servants’ bedrooms before going up to the third floor. Three more servants’ bedrooms, a washroom, a storage room and a knitting room occupied that floor. The knitting room was well lit by two large windows, a detail that pleased Jeanne.

“That room is just what I may need to fit my new wardrobe.”

She then faced Gordon, pointing an index at him.

“And don’t even think about paying for my new clothes! You do that and I get the hell out of here.”

“Alright, alright, I get the message!” Protested Gordon, throwing his hands up.

“Then, how about visiting that tailor of yours?” Proposed Jeanne, her feigned severity changing to joviality.

09:33 (London Time)

Piccadilly, St-James’ District

While walking side by side with Jeanne, Gordon was seriously starting to suspect that his regretted late wife, Megan, had been tame compared to this Jeanne. Wearing her expensive jewels with her damaged dress and a borrowed shawl, she made for a curious sight that had attracted many side looks and snide remarks from well-to-do passersby. Jeanne had ignored it all, acting as if she had not noticed the attention she attracted. Gordon knew better by now, for Jeanne had demonstrated quickly a powerful sense of observation during their walk from Belgrave Square. During that relatively short walk, she had already saved Gordon in extremis from a runaway cart, then had foiled a young pickpocket who had tried to get away with Gordon's wallet. Only Jeanne's pleas had saved the young teenager from being handed to the police by Gordon. She had stared then in the boy's eyes before letting him go, taming him first into presenting his sorriest excuses to Gordon. To top the cake, she had then given a shilling silver coin to the stunned boy, making Gordon nearly choke with reprobation.

Gordon, with Jeanne still holding his left arm, finally turned on Sackville Street and stopped in front of a small shop. Trying the entrance door first and finding it locked, he then stepped back from it and looked at the upper floor windows, shouting loudly over the din of the street traffic.

"NATHAN! NATHAN! IT'S GORDON SMYTHE. I NEED YOUR SERVICES URGENTLY."

A middle-aged, bespectacled and bearded man soon showed his head at one of the windows and looked down at Gordon and Jeanne.

"It's Sunday, sir. My shop is closed."

Gordon was about to insist when Jeanne put one hand on his shoulder.

"Let me handle this, Gordon."

She then shouted in a foreign language at the tailor, who answered her after going over his surprise, then disappeared from the window. Gordon stared at Jeanne, who was smiling with satisfaction.

"What language did you use?"

"Yiddish!" She said, pointing at an inscription in the store's façade. "There is writing in both Yiddish and Hebrew there."

“Don’t tell me that you know Hebrew as well.” Said Gordon in disbelief. Jeanne nodded soberly and pointed at the façade of a store across the street, where an advertising board in Arabic was visible.

“I do, Gordon, no kidding! I can also read that Arabic sign over there.”

“Damn!” Muttered Gordon, overwhelmed by her linguistic talents. “I’m starting to feel like a moron compared to you.”

That made her look tenderly at him in a way that made him melt. She caressed his cheek while speaking softly to him.

“Gordon, you are anything but a moron. You are in fact a very tolerant and kind man for your time.”

“For my time? Why did you say that, Jeanne?”

She froze for a moment, thinking over the choice of words she had used but coming up blank and confused.

“I...I don’t know. It came up unconsciously.”

The noise of bolts being pulled and of the shop’s door opening prevented Gordon from asking her more questions then. Urged on by Nathan, both of them got quickly inside the shop, with the tailor then locking the door behind them.

“Some people take exception at a Jew working on a Sunday.” Explained Nathan apologetically, getting a nod from Gordon.

“I know. Anti-Semitism is unfortunately all too common. The lady here had an accident yesterday and she has no wardrobe left save for this burned dress. Could you help her out?”

The tailor eyed critically Jeanne, noting her uncommon height and wide shoulders.

“The lady is of unusual built but I will do my best. This way, please.”

Nathan led them to the back of his shop, where a few dresses were on display on top of dummies. Taking a measuring tape, he noted down Jeanne’s principal measurements, then compared them to those of the displayed dresses. He shook his head in frustration after a few minutes while pointing at two of the dresses, flounced affairs designed to be worn with crinoline cages.

“Those two dresses were made for, uh, large ladies and are the only ones big enough to accommodate the shoulder and chest sizes of the young lady. They are however too short for her. Modifying them will take time.”

Jeanne, examining the two dresses closely, smiled at the tailor after a moment.

“I think that I have a solution for this problem: let me try them without those stupid crinoline cages. Whoever invented those damn things should have been hanged anyway.”

“Of course!” Replied Nathan, looking at the wide bottom extremities of the dresses. “Without the cages, they will go much further down. They will be somewhat loose and will float around, though.”

“I don’t mind.” Said Jeanne resolutely. “I need a quick fix until you can fit me with custom dresses anyway. Where can I try them?”

“My daughter will help you out. MIRIAM! MIRIAM! COME HERE AND HELP OUT THE LADY.”

As a young woman in her early twenties appeared from a backroom, Gordon noticed a change of expression on Jeanne’s face.

“Is something wrong, Jeanne?” He whispered to her.

“No, not really.” She said hesitantly. “The name of that girl sounded very familiar to me but I can’t say why. This amnesia is so frustrating.”

“Like the doctor said, your memories will come back in good time.”

“Yeah! In the meantime I feel like an empty shell.”

Miriam then led Jeanne in the backroom so that she could try the two dresses, leaving Gordon to ponder her last words. He was not sure how he would have reacted to finding himself an amnesiac but Jeanne was showing a remarkable coolness in the face of her present situation.

Gordon waited patiently for a good twenty minutes before Jeanne reappeared, wearing a burgundy red and gold dress. It was a bit large at the waist but was of the correct length and her wide hips quite made up for the crinoline’s absence. Being a ball dress, it had a deep cleavage that gave a tantalizing view of her generous chest. Gordon felt a reaction immediately.

“Mister Meir is going to adjust it at the waist later on. What do you think, Gordon?”

“Why, you are just delightful like this, my dear Jeanne.”

She smiled with contentment at those words, making her even more appetizing to Gordon.

“I am sure that you say that to all the amnesiac girls you meet. Let me try the other dress now.”

She returned in the backroom, emerging again after ten minutes. She was now wearing a white and pink city dress with a buttoned collar more appropriate than the other dress for everyday wear. After being complimented by Gordon, she put on top of it a beige overcoat that fit with the dress she wore. A small pink hat was then picked up by Jeanne, who tried it in front of a mirror.

“Not bad overall.” She pronounced then. “It should do until I could get a full wardrobe done. Let me just try some spare underwear.”

That part didn't go exactly as well as the rest. When she got out of the backroom, wearing a white bodice that was too short for her, her breasts popped out as soon as she raised her arms, making Gordon's eyes pop out of their sockets. Covering quickly her breasts, the embarrassed Jeanne ran back in the dressing room. She finally resolved her problems by having Nathan Meir cut the bodice in two at the waist, turning it into a two-piece undergarment. Adjusting and putting the last touches to Jeanne's new clothes took another hour. Promising Meir to come back on Monday to order custom-fit clothes, Jeanne paid the tailor and left the shop, Gordon following her with his arms full of boxes. She had already thrown away her original, ruined dress and was wearing her new city dress and overcoat. As Gordon was flagging down a Hansom cab, Jeanne got close to him and spoke in a low voice.

“I'm sorry about the earlier incident in the shop. I hope that I didn't embarrass you.”

“Me, embarrassed?”

His smirk got him a playful elbow in the ribs from Jeanne, who rolled her eyes in mock exasperation.

“Men! They will never change.”

Gordon felt her to be a lot more relaxed and self-assured as they rode home in the horse cab: the promenade seemed to have had a good effect on her mind. Deciding to test her, he had her recall the name of the preceding street as their cab reached each street corner. To their combined delight she remembered them all, something she would have been incapable of only a few hours earlier. In her happiness, Jeanne planted a kiss on Gordon's cheek. Seeing that it had troubled him, she smiled apologetically to him.

“I'm sorry if I did something inappropriate, Gordon. Please excuse me.”

“No need to excuse yourself, Jeanne. It’s just that parts of you reminds me of Megan, my late wife.”

“I...I’m sorry. I didn’t know that you were a widower. Did she die a long time ago?”

“Less than three years ago, while in labor. I lost my newborn son at the same time.”

“Again, I’m sorry.”

They then kept silent for the rest of the way. Carmelia was in the lounge when they entered Gordon’s home. Seeing the boxes in Gordon’s hands and the new dress worn by Jeanne, she let go her bible and came to them. She frowned when she noticed the absence of a crinoline under Jeanne’s dress.

“Didn’t they have crinolines at that tailor shop?”

“They did, madam, but everything was too short for me so I had to improvise. Besides, there is nothing wrong with my hips, right, Gordon?”

“I wouldn’t change a thing in you, my dear Jeanne.” He answered enthusiastically, getting a suspicious look from his mother.

“Uh, I was going to attend the early afternoon service at Saint Paul’s Church after lunch. You are both coming as well, I suppose.”

Gordon hesitated, glancing at Jeanne.

“Mother, Jeanne is French, thus probably Roman Catholic as well. Bringing her to a Protestant church may be inappropriate.”

“Well, we are all good Christians, aren’t we?” Replied Carmelia while looking at Jeanne, who searched her mind for a moment before speaking slowly.

“I do seem to know the bible’s history very well. I can also recall various prayers in a multitude of languages on top of Latin.”

“Multitudes?” Said Carmelia, intrigued. Gordon then jumped in on the conversation, patting proudly Jeanne’s shoulder.

“Didn’t I tell you that Jeanne is a linguistic genius, Mother? She already demonstrated her knowledge of ten languages.”

“Ten?!”

“That is besides the point.” Said Jeanne, a bit embarrassed by Gordon’s admiration towards her. “As you said, madam, I am a good Christian and will be glad to accompany you to the church.”

“Perfect! Then let’s have lunch!” Pronounced Carmelia, both satisfied and relieved: a high flight prostitute could be a practicing Christian but was very unlikely to be an intellectual and a linguist as well. While quite unorthodox, Jeanne was proving to be a respectable lady after all.

14:26 (London Time)

Saint Paul’s Church, Wilton Place

Knightsbridge-Belgravia District

London, England

Carmelia left the church slightly disappointed: while Jeanne had followed without difficulty the service and had recited all the prayers without hesitation, her heart clearly had not been in it despite honest efforts on her part to fully participate. She was a competent churchgoer but obviously not a devout one. When they reached the foot of the church’s steps, Gordon took hold of one of Carmelia’s hands.

“Mother, ride the carriage home. I am going to bring Jeanne to the British Museum.”

“The British Museum? Why?”

“Jeanne seems to have an interest in history and foreign places. I am hoping that a visit there will help awake some souvenirs in her mind.”

“Hmm, not a bad idea actually.” Agreed Carmelia, who then smiled to Jeanne. “Well, I hope that your visit will be entertaining as well as educative. Have a good afternoon, Lady Jeanne.”

“And you as well, madam.” Replied Jeanne politely, curtsying. Gordon then helped Carmelia get in Thomas’ carriage and waved at her as it pulled away. He next flagged one of the number of Hansom horse cabs waiting outside the church for potential customers. Thankfully the weather was bearable, the air being cold but rain being mercifully absent despite the overcast sky. He helped Jeanne into the carriage that stopped in front of them and sat besides her. He smiled with satisfaction at seeing her eagerness as they rode towards the British Museum: she definitely seemed to be enjoying the idea of visiting that most cultured institution.

There was a dense crowd of visitors inside the museum when they arrived, the institution being one of the few places apart from churches to be opened in London on

Sundays. Going up the steps of the Greek style South Façade, Gordon and Jeanne turned left once inside and climbed a flight of stairs, entering the Assyrian Transept Room. The joyful expression on Jeanne's face as she admired the colossal winged lion stone gates from Nimrud warmed Gordon's heart. Getting close to her, he gently took hold of her right hand. She in turn pressed his hand and smiled to him, sparkles in her green eyes.

"Thank you so much for bringing me here, Gordon. This place is awakening a mass of souvenirs in me."

"So you visited this museum before, right?"

She shook her head at once, then pointed at the stone artifacts.

"It is more than that, Gordon. I actually remember those antiquities as if I lived with them."

Moving along with the other visitors nearly filling the gallery, they stopped in front of a group of stone obelisks and clay bricks bearing inscriptions. Gordon saw Jeanne suddenly freeze with surprise as she looked at a clay brick covered with strange signs.

"Gordon," she said excitedly, "I can read this!"

"What?" Replied Gordon, completely stunned.

"I tell you, I can read these inscriptions."

As the other visitors around them and a museum guide nearby listened on with growing disbelief, Jeanne started reading aloud in a strange language, then translated in English for Gordon's benefit.

"This commemorates the restoration of the ziggurat of Nimrud by King Shalmaneser the Third."

Moving to face an obelisk, she spoke again in Assyrian, then in English.

"This obelisk celebrates the victorious campaign in Syria of the Assyrian King Ashur-Nasir-Pal the Second."

An overwhelmed Gordon looked at the terse label at the foot of the obelisk: it only said 'Assyrian obelisk, Ninth Century B.C.'. There had been no label in front of the brick.

"Bloody hell, Jeanne, how could you be able to read this?"

"I don't know!" Replied Jeanne, looking sincere. She then seemed to think about something and looked at the gold ring on her left middle finger. "My ring...it bears cuneiforms, like this obelisk. Maybe I learned Assyrian at the same place as I got my ring."

She didn't see the museum guide nearby walk away hurriedly as a richly dressed old man with an arrogant face sneered at her, while the old woman holding his arm looked contemptuously at her.

"That woman is obviously making this up to attract attention, Bertha. Let's leave that lunatic alone."

Anger rising at once in him, Gordon stepped between the man and Jeanne and stared down at the pompous couple.

"Sir, you just insulted my friend. I will ask you to excuse yourself with the lady forthwith!"

"And why would I do that?" Replied the old man, trying to hide his fear as he faced off the much bigger and younger man. "No woman could know this writing system, so she is obviously lying. As for you, know that I am Lord Spencer, Earl of Islington."

Gordon was about to retort to that when Jeanne stepped forward, drilling the aristocrat with her green eyes.

"I don't care what you think of me, sir, as you are of no consequence in my opinion. Being a man or an earl doesn't make you superior to me, on the contrary. If you want, we can get one of the museum's historians and see if I really made up that Assyrian text. Then I will expect either an apology or a duel with the weapons of your choice...against me!"

Gordon was about to protest when Jeanne's hand gripped his left arm with surprising strength, signaling him to keep quiet. As for the earl, he was too surprised to answer at first and, seeing the fierceness in Jeanne's eyes, decided that retreat was the better part of valor this time. Whispers and amused comments went around the crowd of visitors as Lord Spencer, red-faced, walked away with his wife, not daring to look back. Facing Jeanne and taking hold of her shoulders, Gordon chided her in a low voice.

"Jeanne, why did you risk a duel with that man? I was there to protect you if need be."

Her eyes didn't waver as she stared back at him.

"Gordon, I know that I would have won easily against that pompous ass. Now, please forget him and let's continue our visit."

"Alright, but on one condition: that you be more discreet when translating ancient texts. I..."

The obvious truth then struck Gordon like a ton of brick.

“An archaeologist! You must be an archaeologist of some sort!”

“Me? Why?”

“Think about it, Jeanne! You know at least a dozen languages, including a few ancient ones; you have a keen interest in history and old artifacts; have obviously traveled a lot and seems to be a strong, rugged type. What else could you be?”

She didn't speak at first, thinking over Gordon's words. She finally smiled and kissed him on the lips.

“You must be right! You're a genius, Gordon. How could I ever thank you?”

“By guiding me around the museum.” He replied maliciously. Jeanne's eyes sparkled with amusement at those words.

“You have a deal, my dear Gordon.”

15:48 (London Time)

Egyptian Sculpture Gallery

British Museum, London

Sir Arthur Waddel, Curator of the British Museum, had been discreetly following the lady an excited guide had pointed to him twenty minutes ago, listening to the discreet lectures she was giving to her companion about the various artifacts of the museum. To his total bemusement, she had proven to have a vast and detailed knowledge of history, easily qualifying her in Waddel's mind as an expert historian. She also had demonstrated fluent mastery of such ancient languages as Assyrian, Etruscan, Old Greek, Latin and now Egyptian hieroglyphs, both ancient and Demotic types. Right now she was treating her companion to a translation of the Rosetta Stone, which bore texts in old hieroglyph, Demotic hieroglyph and Coptic, while a fascinated crowd of visitors listened on. The truly incredible part was that she had not made a single mistake yet, being in fact better at reading hieroglyphs than Waddel himself. Having seen and heard enough by now, Waddel accosted the couple as they were about to go up the Southeast staircase to the upper floor of the museum. Bowing his head, he shook hands first with the man.

“Good afternoon, sir. I am Sir Arthur Waddel, curator of this museum. May I compliment your friend on her extensive historical expertise?”

“You may, sir.” Replied the man, obviously pleased. “This is Lady Jeanne, a recent acquaintance of mine.”

Waddel then kissed the woman's hand and smiled at her. She was certainly a more agreeable sight than the average historian.

"Just Lady Jeanne, miss?"

"For the moment, yes, I'm afraid." She sighed. "I was nearly struck by lightning in Hyde Park yesterday and since then can't remember who I am. My friend Gordon, who found me unconscious in Hyde Park, brought me to this museum after he saw my interest for history, in the hope of awakening souvenirs in me. It did work, as I believe that I must have been an archaeologist."

"You certainly have the expertise to claim such a title, Lady Jeanne. I am truly sorry for your unfortunate accident. Can you remember anything about yourself now?" His question made her shake her head sadly.

"Nothing! A doctor told me that it could be months before I start remembering my identity, if ever."

"A true shame! Lady Jeanne, I would be truly honored if I could tour the rest of the museum with you and your friend. We could also examine together a few pieces recently received from the Middle East that are not on display yet."

"That would be fantastic, sir!" She replied, overjoyed. "I accept with pleasure." Gordon felt as proud as a peacock as they resumed the tour, Jeanne's hand hooked to his arm. He couldn't wait to tell Carmelia what kind of gem they had found yesterday. Jeanne certainly outshone by a few orders of magnitude the collection of high-born twits his mother had been pushing on him up to now.

20:09 (London Time)

Sackville Street, St-James' District

"God, I'm stuffed!" Pronounced Gordon as he stepped out of the Lebanese restaurant with Jeanne. Their visit of the British Museum had gone well past closing hour, with Jeanne actually having translated an old Sumerian tablet still in the museum's workshop. That had stunned Sir Waddel, who had claimed that nobody else had been able to decipher Old Chaldean before. Yet, Jeanne had made it look like child's play. Being both famished by the time they left the museum, Gordon had gone along with Jeanne's proposal to stop at this restaurant, something he certainly didn't regret now. Jeanne patted her own belly as they turned into Piccadilly.

"I'm certainly full myself. How about walking the rest of the way to your home to help digest our loads?"

"A good idea."

She waited a few seconds before speaking again while walking besides him.

"Gordon, I know as little about you as you and I know about myself. Would you mind telling me a bit about yourself?"

"There isn't much to say, really. I was born on May third of 1826 on my family's estate of Twickenham, was educated by a private preceptor and enrolled in the army as a cornet in 1844. I first served here in the Eight Hussars for two years, then was transferred to the Seventh Hussars in India, where I fought Indian and Afghan rebels and bandits. I was brevetted lieutenant there and married Megan four years ago. Then, she died during labor, along with our baby. I thought that I would go insane with grief but somehow got over it, mostly. I was transferred back to England in May of last year. Well, there I am! Not much to it, as you can see."

Jeanne stopped and faced him while holding him by one arm, speaking very softly while staring in his eyes.

"Gordon, you are a lot more than not much. I have known you for less than a day but you already proved to be honest, kind and a perfect gentleman. May I also say that you are very handsome."

His heart now beating faster, Gordon put his hands on her cheeks, admiring her smooth but resolute face.

"Jeanne, I am still nothing compared to you."

"And I would probably be nothing now if you wouldn't have saved me yesterday."

"But you did save me this morning from a runaway cart."

Gordon saw her smile in the darkness. She then took one of his hands and pulled him along.

"Let's not do more comparisons about ourselves. Now, continue about your life. Which regiment are you in now?"

"In the Eight Hussars, of course. Didn't I tell you that already this morning?"

"Me and my damn memory!" She muttered while shaking her head in frustration.

Gordon then saw a look of horror suddenly appear on her face as she braked to a halt.

"Jeanne, what's wrong?"

“Balaklava...The charge of the Light Brigade!” She said in a near whisper, then hugging him while looking at him with tears in her eyes. Gordon could only hold the shaking woman clinging to him.

“Jeanne, don’t be afraid! I’m here. What is happening?”

“Gordon,” she said in a choked voice, “I can’t explain this but I just had a memory flash about that Crimean War I told you about this morning. At a place called Balaklava, the British Light Cavalry Brigade will charge down a valley ringed on three sides by Russian guns. It will be a massacre and the Eight Hussars will be part of the charge.”

“But, that’s in the future!” Protested Gordon, both shocked and incredulous. “How could you predict this?”

“I don’t know!” She answered, desperate. “Call it a premonition, a vision, anything. I just know that it will happen.”

Gordon then realized that, whatever she had just seen inside her mind, she was afraid for him to the point of despair. Tightening his hold, he kissed her neck tenderly, getting a kiss on the lips in return. They stayed glued together for a long moment, getting sympathetic smiles from a passing couple in the process. Jeanne finally stepped back while still holding his shoulders.

“Let’s forget the future for the moment, Gordon. We have the present for ourselves.”

“Then let’s go home.” He replied softly, then presenting his left arm, which she took. They now walked more slowly and deliberately, as lovers would do.

Walking alongside Green Park, they eventually came up to Hyde Park Corner. Looking around him, Gordon then had an idea and veered right towards the park, still leading Jeanne.

“I’m going to show you the spot where we found you. Maybe it will help you remember from where you were coming.”

“A sensible idea. Good thinking, Gordon.”

They soon stopped just past the Wellington Arch, with Gordon pointing at a spot on the pavement in the darkness.

“This is where you lay unconscious after lightning struck the arch.”

“My God! I was lucky not to be fried on the spot. I...”

She suddenly stopped speaking and looked around her nervously.

“Gordon, there are men around us.”

Gordon tensed up immediately, not wasting time in wondering how Jeanne could have seen hidden men or if she was even right. Hyde Park at night was notorious for harboring thieves and pickpockets and both of them could be in real danger right now. Adrenaline rushed through his veins when he saw four men leave their hiding places and converge quickly on them. Moonlight reflected on at least two blades as the men positioned themselves two paces to the front and back of the couple. Gordon could now see that one of the bandits held a single shot pistol, while another had a short truncheon in his right hand. The man with the pistol pointed his weapon at Gordon and spoke in a raspy voice.

“Hand over your money and your valuables and you won’t get hurt.”

Gordon, not wanting to put Jeanne at risk, was about to comply when the French woman surprised everybody by jumping forward and kicked away the man’s pistol, making the weapon discharge harmlessly skyward. Jeanne followed up by kneeing the surprised bandit in the groin. The nearest other bandit reacted too slowly and had his knife lunge parried by her before being savagely punched in the plexus by Jeanne while she pushed an ear-splitting yell at the same time. As the second bandit collapsed, she turned on the third bandit, also armed with a knife. Feeling shame at standing by like this and doing nothing while Jeanne performed her heroics, Gordon took on the man armed with a truncheon, dodging a furious swing before delivering a powerful right hook to the jaw that made the bandit stagger on his feet. A second hook sent the man down on his posterior. A right uppercut under the chin then took Gordon’s assailant out. Gordon turned around in time to see Jeanne violently twist her opponent’s right arm, making the man drop his knife, before slamming down her elbow on the man’s twisted elbow. Gordon heard the noise of the articulation breaking just before the thief screamed horribly. Jeanne then picked up the man’s knife in time to face the man who had a pistol, enraged and now holding a knife. Totally fascinated by her now, Gordon watched Jeanne hold her knife with the cutting edge facing outward and down, using it to parry the first lunge from the bandit. Now realizing that he was facing a dangerous opponent, the bandit stopped pushing forward, instead thrusting his blade at her. She easily beat off his attacks, fencing with her knife in a way Gordon had never seen before. One lightning-quick swing of her blade and the bandit emitted a gurgling sound while holding his sliced throat and collapsing to his knees. Gordon’s shout of triumph suddenly turned into one of alarm when he saw the second bandit Jeanne had taken on get on his knees and reverse his hold on his knife, preparing to throw it.

“JEANNE, WATCH OUT TO YOUR LEFT!”

He then started to run, trying to interpose himself between Jeanne and the knife-wielding bandit, but was too late. A blade swished through the night air and the bandit collapsed backward, a knife in his throat. Repeated whistle blows could now be heard in the distance as Gordon looked with disbelief at the dead thieves, then at Jeanne. She was barely breathing faster than usual and didn't appear bothered by the corpses and the blood around her one bit.

“My God, Jeanne, how did you do all this?”

There was no reprobation in his voice then, just awe. With the adrenaline flow cutting out now, she got out of combat trance and looked quickly around her.

“Hell, I don't know! It was all pure reflexes, Gordon.”

“Some reflexes! Someone trained you damn well.”

“I wish I knew who.”

Both of them then saw two men in overcoats and top hats running towards them.

“Peelers², at last!” Announced Gordon. Jeanne hurriedly dropped the knife in her hand to the ground at those words and walked to Gordon, speaking in a low voice.

“Don't tell them my role in this, please. They would never believe me anyway and your mother could get some weird ideas about me if this splashes over the newspapers' front pages.”

He couldn't help smile in amusement at that and took hold of her.

“Jeanne, I am the one having weird ideas about you now. Alright, I will tell the police that I did all this carnage.”

“Thank you, Gordon. You are sweet.” Said Jeanne, following those words with a gentle kiss. The first policeman then arrived at the scene, a truncheon in his right hand, and contemplated the four bandits sprawled on the pavement, one of which was screaming with pain and holding his right elbow.

“Bloody hell! What happened here?”

Gordon then stepped forward and spoke calmly.

“Those four men tried to rob me and my lady friend. I defended myself. Please let me present myself: Captain Gordon Smythe, of the Eight Hussars Regiment.”

He saw the policeman grin in the dark as the second policeman arrived.

“Well done, sir! It seems that those ruffians attacked the wrong person.”

² Peelers: Nickname given to the old London policemen.

“They sure did!” Replied Gordon, glancing discreetly at Jeanne and repressing a smile.

21:35 (London Time)

London Metropolitan Police headquarters

Great Scotland Yards

London

Inspector John Wren shook hands with both the man and the woman and invited them to take the chairs in front of his desk. Sitting himself behind the desk that half filled his small office, he detailed the couple for a moment, noting the expensive jewels on the woman and the high quality clothes of the man. The latter was a bit over six feet tall, had black hair and eyes, a mustache and looked strong and fit, as befitted a cavalry officer. The woman, also around six feet in height, was unusually broad-shouldered and strong looking but was beautiful and very shapely. Wren’s trained eyes saw bloodstains on the woman’s right sleeve but none on the man’s clothes. While surprised, he didn’t raise that subject, only grabbing a sheet of paper and a pen before looking first at the man.

“I’m sorry if we had to bring you and the lady here, sir, but two men are dead and I must take care of a few formalities.”

“We perfectly understand and don’t mind it, sir.”

“Then, may I have your name first?”

“Certainly! I am Gordon Smythe, captain in the 8th Royal Hussars. My house is at number fourteen, Belgrave Square.”

Wren wrote that down, then looked at the woman.

“And your name, miss?”

“That may be a problem, Inspector: I am an amnesiac and can’t remember yet who I am. Gordon calls me Jeanne because the name sounded familiar to me.”

She then told how she had become an amnesiac and how Gordon had been sheltering him. That left Wren thoughtful for a moment, measuring the implications of this.

“So, Lady Jeanne, you may have friends or relatives looking for you at this moment.”

“If I have any here in London, yes. I was planning to come here on Monday anyway to report myself. I guess that this incident saved me the trip.”

"It did, miss. I will post a notice about you afterwards."

"Thank you, Inspector." She said, sounding relieved.

"You are welcome, Lady Jeanne."

Wren then looked back at Gordon.

"Could you now describe the incident with those thugs, starting at where you were coming from?"

"Certainly, Inspector."

Gordon then spoke slowly for a few minutes, letting time to Wren to scribble down the information, with an occasional question here and there to clarify a point. At the end of it, Wren looked at him inquisitively.

"So, you took on four armed men single-handedly and defeated them, sir?"

"Actually, I tripped one man who was going to attack Gordon in the back." Volunteered Jeanne. "I then sat on him and held him down until Gordon could deal with him."

"I see!"

Reading back his notes, Wren noticed a small discrepancy and looked up at the man.

"Captain Smythe, you said that you and Lady Jeanne left the British Museum at about seven O'clock, yet the museum closes at six. Could you explain this?"

Gordon smiled then and took hold of Jeanne's right hand.

"I can, Inspector. The curator of the museum, Sir Waddel, had invited us to stay late so that he could use Jeanne's linguistic and historical expertise to help translate some ancient texts. You see, sir, I believe now that Jeanne must be an archaeologist of some sort."

Wren rose an eyebrow in interest at that: this case was becoming more intriguing by the minute. He then rose from his chair and smiled at his visitors.

"If you may excuse me for a moment, I will just go check on something and will be back soon. Would you like some tea in the meantime?"

"That would be kind of you, Inspector." Replied softly the woman. Nodding his head, Wren called in an assistant and put him in charge of serving tea to the couple, then left the office and went downstairs to the interrogation rooms. There, he found Junior Inspector Charles Medhurst as the latter was leaving an interrogation room, while two policemen led away one of the two surviving bandits.

"So, what do you have, Charles?"

The young man looked at a notepad in his hand before answering Wren.

“Well, you will be happy to learn that that bastard of Jack Hill was one of the two dead men.”

“Good!” Exclaimed Wren with glee: Hill had been on the run for four months now after escaping from prison. His sinister record included the murder of a policeman, numerous aggravated assaults, rapes and countless robberies. There was in fact a reward of 500 Pounds Sterling for his capture. Medhurst then went on.

“The other dead was Michael Kelly, a long-time associate of Jack Hill. Of the two others, one is named Peter Robinson and has a history of petty theft. The other one is a Bob Cole, a new one for us. Cole was the one you saw being returned to the cells. Robinson had his right elbow dislocated, by the way.”

“Ouch! That must hurt!” Said Wren, wincing. Medhurst smiled and delivered his punch line.

“Indeed! Robinson said that a woman did that to him, apart from cutting Hill’s throat and pinning Kelly in the throat from five paces away.”

“WHAT?”

“My own reaction exactly, sir.” Said Medhurst, deadpan. “He must be lying, of course.”

Wren then gave a jaundiced look at his subaltern.

“Think, Charles! What would other criminals think of Robinson and of his accomplices when learning that a single man defeated the four of them?”

“Uh, they would probably be considered with contempt, sir.”

“What if a woman defeated them?”

Medhurst paused, seeing Wren’s point.

“They would most probably become the butt of London’s jokes, sir.”

“Then, why would Robinson tell such a story, unless it was true?” Asked Wren forcefully.

“But,” protested Medhurst, “no woman could be this dangerous, sir!”

“Charles,” said Wren patiently, “did you see the woman involved in this incident?”

“Uh, no sir!”

“Well, I have now in my office a six foot tall lass with wider shoulders than you and with bloodstains on her right sleeve. What do you say to that?”

“But this is unheard of!” Protested the junior inspector. “Who is that woman anyway?”

“A French archaeologist, if she and her companion are to be believed. Where is Robinson now, by the way?”

“In the infirmary, sir, getting his arm treated. Sir, you don’t really believe that bit about a woman defeating three men, do you?”

Wren sighed in exasperation then: nobody would effectively believe that, even if it was the obvious truth. As much as he hated hiding the truth, he was going to have to paint over that part of this case.

“Alright, book both Robinson and Cole on charges of attempted armed robbery.”

“What about assault, sir?”

“Who assaulted who, Charles?” Replied Wren cynically before walking away.

Wren found the couple still waiting patiently in his office, sipping tea and chatting casually. Taking back his place behind his desk, he smiled at both the man and the woman.

“Good news! One of the dead robbers was a Jack Hill, a dangerous felon on the run. The 500 Pounds Sterling reward on him is now yours.”

“Five hundred pounds?” Exclaimed the Hussars’ captain. “That’s quite a sum for a felon.”

“What did this Hill do to warrant such a reward, Inspector?” Asked Lady Jeanne, curious.

“His criminal record is quite thick, Lady Jeanne, but the highest charge was the murder of a policeman.”

“Did that policeman leave a family behind, Inspector?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. He had a wife and five young children, which I met at the funeral of our poor agent. Why do you ask, Lady Jeanne?”

She didn’t answer directly, instead asking another question after a short pause.

“Could I have the name and address of that policeman’s widow, Inspector?”

Wren nodded his head gravely as Gordon Smythe gave a tender look at Lady Jeanne: he could see already what she had in mind.

“I certainly can get that information for you, Lady Jeanne. If you may both sign this declaration about the night’s events, I will then get you both the reward and the information on that widow.”

Once both had signed the paper Wren presented to them, with Jeanne hesitating before simply putting down ‘Lady Jeanne’ as a signature, the inspector then led them out of his

office and through a series of corridors. He finally stopped in the accounting and administrative offices of the Metropolitan Police. It took twenty minutes to Wren to get the two duty clerks to deliver the cash reward and sign it out, plus finding the name and address of the policeman's widow requested by Jeanne. Presenting the large purse containing the 500 Pounds Sterling to the couple, Wren repressed a knowing smile when Lady Jeanne took it without hesitation. He then gave her a piece of paper, which she read aloud.

"Elizabeth Hatfield, apartment 23, 286 Mansell Street, Tower Hamlets."

She then looked with dismay at Wren.

"That whole area is a living dump! Is this woman getting a pension from the Metropolitan Police?"

"A very small one I'm afraid, Lady Jeanne." Replied sadly Wren. "Her husband was quite junior in the service and didn't draw much of a pay for starters. Misses Hatfield had to move to her present address when she couldn't afford her old place anymore."

Gordon and Jeanne looked at each other at those words.

"Could we visit her tomorrow, Gordon?"

"I will escort you there with pleasure, my dear Jeanne." Replied softly Gordon before looking at Wren. "Please don't forget to put up a notice about Jeanne, Inspector, so that relatives searching for her could trace her."

"I will, Captain. You are now free to go. Thank you again for your help and assistance in capturing those bandits. Let me guide you to the exit and get you a carriage."

"You are most kind, Inspector." Said Gordon, then offering his arm to Jeanne before following Wren. John Wren went back to the administrative offices after bidding goodbye to the couple, filling a report on Lady Jeanne and giving it to the duty clerk before returning to his office to formalize the case against Robinson and Cole. Unknown to him was the fact that his notice about Lady Jeanne was going to be inadvertently misfiled and lost by the clerk.

23:12 (London Time)

14 Belgrave Square

London

Carmelia ran to Gordon as soon as he entered the house with Jeanne, kissing her son on one cheek.

“My God, where have you been? I was getting scared to death about you two.” Gordon took the time to hug his mother before smiling down at her.

“We had a few adventures today, me and Jeanne. We are just back from the Metropolitan Police headquarters, where we testified against a group of robbers who attacked us in Hyde Park. Don’t worry about us: we were unhurt and those bandits are now out of the circulation. First, let me reintroduce you to our guest.”

He then took Jeanne’s hand and looked proudly at the French woman as he spoke.

“I am happy to have in my house Lady Jeanne, expert archaeologist and linguistic genius.”

08:46 (London Time)

Monday, March 13, 1854

14 Belgrave Square

London

Carmelia, still half asleep, entered the kitchen and found Clara in the process of boiling water for making tea on top of the pot-bellied stove.

“Ah, good! Tea is just what I need now, Clara. Are Gordon and Lady Jeanne up yet?”

With the maid’s back to her, Carmelia didn’t see Clara’s knowing smile then.

“Yes, madam. They are washing up now.”

Not catching on to this, Carmelia sat sleepily at the small dining table of the kitchen, with Clara soon serving her tea and English muffins with jam. As she ate, Carmelia thought about Lady Jeanne. A woman of such rare aptitudes and a rich one to boot should have been quite well known around, yet she had never heard of a woman, French or otherwise, who remotely resembled Jeanne. The question of whether or not Jeanne was really single also nagged her mind. She wouldn’t have minded seeing Gordon court her except for the fact that so little was known about Jeanne, if that was her real first name.

The object of her concerns showed up half a hour later, led by a happy-looking Gordon.

“Good morning, Lady Carmelia.” Said Jeanne amiably.

“Good morning, Lady Jeanne. I hope that you slept well.”

“I did, madam. That walking around yesterday really relaxed me.”

“You find meeting four robbers at night relaxing?”

Jeanne took Gordon’s hand and smiled tenderly to him while answering.

“Why worry with such a man at my side?”

“My son was right, Lady Jeanne.” Said Carmelia proudly. “You do have a way with words. Please sit down and have breakfast.”

Carmelia chatted with Jeanne and Gordon for another twenty minutes before getting up from her chair.

“If you will excuse me now, I have to dress and pack: Thomas is driving me back to our family manor in Twickenham this morning. Don’t forget that you are invited to a reception next Saturday, Lady Jeanne.”

“I will be there, Lady Carmelia.”

“Excellent! Sir Charles will be most delighted to meet you.”

Carmelia then left the kitchen. Jeanne glanced at Gordon, who had a smile on his face.

“You, mister, look like the cat who was just left alone in the house with the canary.”

“A good comparison indeed! So, what’s next today?”

“I first go to Mister Meir’s shop and get fitted for a new wardrobe. We then visit that poor Misses Hatfield. If there is still time left after that, I will do more shopping.”

“Shop, shop, shop! Women only have that in mind.” Said Gordon jokingly, earning a friendly slap on the shoulder.

13:41 (London Time)

Mansell Street, Tower Hamlets District

London

Gordon looked around him with dismay as he helped Jeanne get out of the Hansom cab: the street was crowded, filthy and stank like a sewer, while the multistory brick townhouses lining the narrow street reeked of poverty and neglect. The people circulating in the street were a pitiful, ragged lot with little but despair and resignation on their faces. Escorting closely Jeanne to the door of number 286, Gordon had to run a

gauntlet of emaciated children begging for money and had to screen Jeanne from seeing a drunken man busy urinating against the wall of the building. The noise level inside the building proved nearly as high as in the street, with children playing and running everywhere and with adults shouting at each other. Gordon now understood why Jeanne had chosen not to wear her expensive jewels today, keeping only her gold ring with cuneiform engravings on. Going up the wooden staircase to the first floor, they came up to a door with a number 23 painted on it. The wails of a baby could be heard inside as Gordon knocked on the door. A small boy, maybe three or four years old, opened the door after a moment, looking up at Gordon and Jeanne with curiosity. Gordon smiled down to him, getting a timid smile in return.

“Hello, boy. Is your mother in?”

“Yes!” Said the boy, not moving.

“Uh, can we see her?”

“Thomas,” shouted a woman from inside the apartment, “let the man in!”

The boy opened the door wide and let Gordon and Jeanne in, then pushed the door closed, slamming it violently and attracting a concert of invectives from across the hallway. The couple was now inside a tiny two-room apartment crowded beyond belief. The room they were in served obviously as a kitchen, dining room, lounge and washroom and was no bigger than nine feet by twelve feet. Gordon could look inside a similarly sized bedroom filled with three beds, a crib and an old dresser. A woman in her late twenties was sitting in a rocking chair, holding a baby and looking at Gordon and Jeanne with suspicion. The red-haired woman had once been beautiful but misery and hardship had marked her face and her body had thinned to a ghost of its former self. A toddler girl with hollow eyes was playing at the woman’s feet, soon joined by little Thomas. The pot-bellied stove sitting in a corner of the room was empty and the whole apartment was cold and damp. Gordon swallowed the lump in his throat as he surveyed the miserable place: he had heard of the poor living conditions in the eastside districts but had never visited them because of their reputation as high-crime areas. He could see Jeanne’s eyes becoming moist as the woman in the rocking chair addressed him.

“Can I do something for you, sir?”

“Uh, yes. Are you Misses Elizabeth Hatfield?”

“I am!” She replied cautiously. Gordon then walked to her and, taking gently her right hand, gallantly kissed it.

“Madam, I am pleased to bring you good news.”

The woman sighed at those words and smiled weakly.

“That will be a nice change, sir. What is it?”

“First of, your husband’s killer is dead. He tried to rob us last night and met his match.”

Elizabeth Hatfield was silent for a moment, looking past Gordon at nothing in particular. She then spoke with bitterness in her voice.

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful, sir, but that will not give me back my Francis.”

“No, but we can help you escape this miserable life, madam. There was a 500 pounds reward for the capture of Jack Hill: that reward is now yours.”

Elizabeth looked up with disbelief at Gordon.

“You said 500 pounds, sir?”

“Yes, madam.” Said Gordon, who had decided by now what he was going to do next. “Do you know how to cook?”

“Of course, sir!” Replied the woman, puzzled. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I am offering you to move with your children in my house in Belgrave Square, to work for me as an assistant cook. Do you accept?”

Tears appeared nearly at once in Elizabeth’s eyes as she tried to answer Gordon. She only could nod her head in agreement as she started crying silently. Jeanne immediately knelt besides her, caressing the woman’s dirty hair.

“Please don’t cry, madam. This is your chance to offer a decent life to your children. By the way, we were told that you had five children. I see only three of them here.”

Choking off her tears, Elizabeth stared into Jeanne’s eyes.

“Mary and Peter are working at the garment factory up the street, madam.”

That shocked both Jeanne and Gordon: those children could not be more than ten years old, judging from the age of their mother.

“How old are your two children, madam?” Said Jeanne, nearly afraid to ask. Elizabeth answered in a near whisper.

“Mary is seven, while Peter is six. Without their earnings we would be starving.”

Cold rage filled Gordon as he digested that information.

“Madam, lead me to that factory: we are getting your kids out of there. Jeanne can take care of your three youngest children in the meantime.”

“Let...let me get my shawl first, sir.” Said the overwhelmed woman, then handing her baby to Jeanne before rising from her rocking chair and talking down to the two children at her feet.

“Thomas, Helen, be nice with the lady while I am gone. I am going to get Mary and Peter.”

Both children nodded silently their heads and went back to their playing. Their mother took a ragged shawl from a wall hook and left the apartment, Gordon on her heels. Going down to the street level and leaving the building, she turned right on Mansell Street and walked up two blocks before stopping in front of a dilapidated brick building similar to the others they had passed. She then looked hesitantly at Gordon, examining him from head to toe.

“Why are you doing this for us, sir? We never met before.”

“No, we didn’t, but I believe in simple Christian charity, madam. Unfortunately, many people seem to have forgotten that concept. Let’s go in and get your children now.”

Elizabeth stared into his eyes for a moment, then turned around and entered the building. They found themselves in what looked like an apartment building crudely converted into a garment sweatshop. A small, fat and rude-looking man blocked their path as they walked towards the staircase, looking cautiously at Gordon before staring at Elizabeth.

“What do you want, Misses Hatfield? You know that visits are not permitted during work hours.”

“I am here to take back Mary and Peter, Mister Grant.” Replied Elizabeth, trying to sound resolute. “They will not be working here anymore.”

“May I remind you that you still owe me last month’s rent, madam?” Said the man, unsympathetic. “Your kids will work here until you can pay your rent.”

“Bloody hell, man!” Swore Gordon, stepping between Elizabeth and Grant and staring down angrily at the man. “Do you have to be such a bastard about this? How much does she owe you?”

“One pound and four shillings.”

“What? You charge her this much for such a dump?”

“If she’s not happy in it, she can always move out...once she pays her rent.” Replied the unphased man. Gordon gave him a black look while taking out his wallet, extracting three one pound gold coins and throwing them in the man’s face.

“Here is your money, mister! Consider this month’s rent covered as well. Pray that I find those two children in a good state.”

Pushing aside the red-faced man, Gordon followed Elizabeth up the staircase all the way up to the third floor. Once there, the woman started calling out for her children.

“MARY! PETER! WHERE ARE YOU?”

A young girl ran out of a room nearly immediately, smiling.

“Mother! How come you’re here?”

Elizabeth took the girl in her arms and hugged her tearfully.

“I’m taking you and Peter out of here for good. Where is your brother, Mary?”

“They moved him to the boiler room in the basement, Mom.”

The little girl then looked up at Gordon.

“Who is that man, Mom?”

“A gentleman who has come to help us, Mary.”

Before Gordon could present himself to the girl, a burly man emerged from a room, holding a wooden stick.

“Mary, you little tramp, get back to work before I..”

“Before you what?” Shot back Gordon, advancing quickly on the man and taking away his stick before breaking it in two. The man had one look at Gordon’s muscular bulk, then retreated inside a room without a word, attracting a caustic remark from the Hussars officer.

“Bloody coward! Only brave enough to beat kids up.”

Turning towards Elizabeth and Mary, Gordon smiled down at the girl.

“Hello Mary! I’m Gordon Smythe. How about leading us to your brother now?”

“Yes sir!” Answered timidly the girl before running down the staircase. The trio found little Peter in a gloomy basement room, shoveling coal with another boy into the furnace of a steam boiler. Gordon gave a warning look to the man watching the boys as Elizabeth hugged Peter.

“We’re taking the boy out of here. Don’t interfere!”

As they left the basement and exited the factory, Gordon surveyed the children’s clothes: they were not much more than rags and were woefully inadequate for the cold, damp March weather. A stop later at a clothing store was definitely in order.

Going back to the Hatfield’s apartment, they found there that Jeanne had already bundled up the family’s meager wardrobe inside a blanket.

“No sense delaying your move out of this hole.” Explained the French woman, sweeping one arm around her. “As for your other belongings, they are not worth salvaging. Don’t worry: I will furnish you all that you will need. Are we all ready?”

“Wait, please!” Said Elizabeth, who then went to her bed and searched for a moment under the mattress before pulling out a large silver badge.

“My husband’s police badge.” She explained in a soft voice, close to tears.

16:41 (London Time)

14 Belgrave Square

London

Elizabeth Hatfield was in a near state of shock when the Hansom cab transporting her family and their two benefactors stopped in front of a luxurious townhouse. The cab was filled with boxes from the wildest shopping spree she had witnessed in her life, courtesy of Lady Jeanne. The 500 pounds of the reward was still intact, kept inside Elizabeth’s coat pocket, itself part of the brand new clothes she was wearing. All of her children were similarly attired in new garbs and each held a new toy as well. Helped down by Gordon, she then took baby Harry as Jeanne handed him to her. Shouted orders from Gordon brought out of the house a foot servant and a maid, who helped bring inside the Hatfields’ new acquisitions while Lady Jeanne led the family inside. A plump maid who was waiting for them inside smiled with delight at the sight of the children.

“Bambinos! Que vene!”

Lady Jeanne then engaged in a short conversation in a foreign language with the maid, who ran to a room at the end of the hallway, apparently all excited and happy.

“What language did you just speak, Lady Jeanne?” Asked Elizabeth, intrigued. Jeanne gave her a big grin.

“Italian. Clara seems to love children, like most Italians do, in fact. I just asked her to heat up water for your baths.”

“Our baths?”

“Of course! If you are going to start a new life here, you might as well start it clean. Besides, a nice-smelling baby is so much more fun to cuddle, right, Harry?”

The baby boy giggled as Jeanne tickled his feet, making Elizabeth feel warm inside: she still couldn’t believe her luck in meeting such kind strangers.

20:53 (London Time)**Third floor bedroom****14 Belgrave Square**

Gordon watched on, fascinated, as Jeanne was singing a soft ballad in some ancient language in order to put the Hatfield children to sleep. She was also playing soft music from the box lyre she had found this morning in an antique shop. Seeing her sitting besides the big bed with four children in them, looking tenderly at the kids while singing, made Gordon dream about the day when he would have children of his own. To have them with such a wonderful woman as Jeanne would be bliss indeed. Elizabeth Hatfield, standing besides Gordon in the doorway of the bedroom, looked up at him and whispered in order not to disturb Jeanne's performance.

"You are lucky to have such a wife, Mister Smythe. She has so many talents." Gordon couldn't help smile in amusement then: somehow, they had not yet have time to explain to Elizabeth who Jeanne was.

"Jeanne is a guest here and not my wife, Misses Hatfield. I will tell you later about her. But you are right about her: she is indeed full of unusual talents."

"Not your wife? But...you look like such a perfect couple. You should marry her while you have a chance, sir."

"That's in the books, madam." Replied softly Gordon while eyeing Jeanne.

23:58 (London Time)**Master bedroom****14 Belgrave Square**

Gordon sighed as he stopped turning around in his bed and opened his eyes in the darkness of his bedroom. He just couldn't sleep, not with the face and body of Jeanne constantly in his mind. Finally making up his mind, Gordon jumped out of bed and groped for his robe in the dark, putting it on as he walked to the bedroom's door. Opening it, he stepped in the hallway and had to come to an abrupt stop: Jeanne had been about to knock on his door and was now nose to nose with him, her fist raised and ready to knock. Both smiled at each other.

“Uh, hi Gordon!” She whispered in the dark, her sparkling white teeth showing. “I... I was kind of restless and couldn't sleep.”

“How curious! Me too!”

Both were silent for a moment. Gordon's hands moved first, taking hold of her waist before caressing her back. Jeanne then slowly glued herself to him, her hands roaming as well while she exchanged a long kiss with Gordon. They finally parted, both of their hearts racing.

“Gordon, the truth is that I'm lonely in my bedroom. Could I stay with you for the night?”

“Jeanne, I was about to ask the same thing.”

Without thinking further, Gordon grabbed Jeanne and lifted her in his arms, then walked back inside his bedroom while she giggled.

“Aren't we supposed to do this only once married?”

Stopping besides his bed, Gordon stared into the French woman's green eyes.

“Jeanne, you just need to answer one question: will you marry me once you will have regained your memories of yourself?”

“Yes!”

Her answer had been a whisper, but it had come out instantly and passionately. Kissing her while she was still in his arms, he then laid her on the bed. Both shed their robes and underwear quickly before Gordon lay on top of her.

“Jeanne, I don't care what your real name could be or what you were before. I just know that I will love you all my life.”

She caressed his face and kissed him before replying very softly.

“Gordon, I can only be eternally grateful that a man such as you found me first in that park. Without you I would probably have gone insane.”

“Then, let's celebrate our reunion the proper way.” Said Gordon before starting a round of love session with her.

07:14 (London Time)

Tuesday, March 14, 1854

Master bedroom, 14 Belgrave Square

London

Gordon kissed Jeanne awake, bringing a radiant smile to her face.

“Good morning, my dear. Did you sleep well?”

“Like a baby.” She replied softly, kissing him back. Both then stayed besides each other in the large bed, exchanging caresses. Gordon noticed a puzzled look appear on her face after a minute or so, making him curious.

“Something is bothering you, Jeanne?”

“Yes: my mind! It seems to be playing tricks on me.”

“No wonder: you’re amnesiac.”

“That’s not what I meant, Gordon. Things are coming back to my mind constantly since yesterday, but not what I would expect from remembering my identity.”

“What kind of things?” Said Gordon, now intensely curious. Jeanne thought her words over carefully before answering.

“The kind of general knowledge that Doctor Portal said I would remember first, like about languages and objects I learned to use, historical events and general knowledge about the world and sciences.”

“That seems normal stuff to me, Jeanne.”

“Not if they include things such as flying machines and weapons that could destroy whole cities in one mighty blast, Gordon.”

Shocked and surprised, Gordon rose on one elbow while staring at her.

“Flying machines? But, that’s impossible! Your imagination must be playing tricks on you.”

“Gordon,” said cautiously Jeanne, not wanting to scare him away from her, “the pictures that now appear in my mind are quite graphic and detailed, as if I was living among those machines. When I tried to understand the machines or tools I pictured in my mind, answers and some scientific and technological knowledge came to my mind as well.”

“Such as?”

“Well, while thinking about a flying machine called an aircraft, I wondered what made it able to fly. A series of scientific principles and technical concepts then popped up in my mind, answering my questions in such detail that I think that I could build at least a rudimentary flying machine.”

“But, no such machine exists, Jeanne. Where would you have learned such knowledge?”

“I wish I knew, Gordon, since that would probably help me remember who I am.”

“Did you learn anything else unusual from those souvenirs?”

“A lot, actually, much of it that would be considered impossible today, like submersible ships and guns that fire repeatedly before needing to be reloaded.”

Gordon did his best to hide his dismay then, looking down gravely at Jeanne.

“And what do you think all this means, Jeanne?”

“I believe two things right now, Gordon. First, I believe that those things really exist, or existed where I came from, wherever that is.”

“And second?” Asked Gordon, swallowing hard. Her eyes then became moist as she got close to him.

“That, whoever I am or wherever I come from, I still love you, Gordon.”

08:22 (London Time)

Dining room

14 Belgrave Square

Clara couldn't help notice the preoccupied look on her master's face as she picked up his now empty tea cup and plate. He had hardly spoken six words in the half hour since he had come down from his bedroom. Lady Jeanne was also noticeable by her absence.

“Excuse me, sir. Is Lady Jeanne coming down for breakfast this morning?”

“Uh, I don't think so, Clara.” He answered absent-mindedly. “She is going to do some shopping all by herself this morning. How are Misses Hatfield and her children doing, by the way?”

“Just fine, sir.” Said the maid, grinning. “Her kids are so cute! They are finishing breakfast now in the kitchen.”

“Good! When they are finished, show Misses Hatfield around the house. Tell her also that she will start helping you in the kitchen tomorrow morning. I will take her to the bank after lunch, so be ready to baby-sit her kids for an hour or two.”

“To the bank, sir?”

“Yes, Clara. Misses Hatfield has a rather large sum given to her by Lady Jeanne that she has to put to safety. No sense either in missing on potential return interests from a savings account.”

“You are right, sir. One should always get the utmost from one's money.”

Jeanne then chose that time to walk in the dining room, fully dressed and with her new overcoat on. Going to Gordon, she bent down and kissed him quickly before starting to walk out.

“I’m going to tour Saint James’ District, Gordon. I’ll be back for lunch.”

“Have fun!” Replied Gordon, watching her leave before getting up and looking at Clara. “I’ll be in my study if anybody needs me, Clara.”

The maid in turn watched him leave the dining room. With a beautiful woman as a guest and with a family of six now in, the household’s atmosphere had changed drastically from the quiet, routine rule of a mostly absent single man like Gordon Smythe.

09:30 (London Time)

67A St James’ Place

London

Neville Black had a last look at his pocket watch, then decided that it was opening time and pocketed back his watch before leaving the back room of his gunsmith store and walking to the entrance door to unlock it. To his surprise a young woman was waiting on the sidewalk in front of his store, looking through the façade window. Female customers were a rarity indeed in any gunsmith store. She came in as soon as Neville unlocked the door, exchanging a polite greeting with him before avidly looking around his display cases. The woman, wearing fine jewels and being very tall for her gender, was quickly attracted to the counter displaying pistols. Moving to that counter, Neville cleared his throat to attract her attention.

“Ahem! Are you looking for something in particular, miss?”

“I am!” She replied in a clear, agreeable voice. “Do you have any American-made Colt revolvers, sir?”

That made Neville raise an eyebrow in surprise: very few of his customers knew about Colt weapons, them being so new. She must have heard stories about them from someone returning from the United States. Moving to the end of the counter, he bent down and fetched some guns from the lower tablets.

“You are in luck, miss: I acquired a few Colt models from Mister Colt himself when he was exposing his guns at the 1851 Great Exhibition. I can’t say that they are big sales items, though. I sold only one of them in three years.”

“That’s because your other customers didn’t know a good pistol when they saw one.” Replied resolutely the woman, nearly getting Neville to make a remark of his own on women and guns. He did manage to keep it to himself, though, and was about to present each of the Colts to her when she surprised him again. Pushing a whoop of delight, she took hold of a particular gun and smiled with satisfaction.

“A Dragoon! Excellent! Do you have a second one like this, by chance?”

“Uh, I have a few others in my back store.”

“Then, bring three more Colt Dragoons, if you have that many, sir.”

“Three more, miss?” Said Neville, having a hard time believing his ears.

“Yes! I need two for a friend of mine and two for me. If you have the reloading accessories and any tools that go with them, then I will take them too, along with at least 500 percussion caps, six cans of fine grain powder and a reserve of already molded .44 caliber bullets, Minié type if possible.”

“Good God, miss! Are you planning on attending a war?” Exclaimed Neville. He then found himself the target of the woman’s unflinching green eyes.

“As a matter of fact, maybe, sir.”

Deciding that he didn’t want to antagonize further that customer, Neville went inside the back store and got her extra revolvers, percussion caps, accessories and bullets. Putting the lot on the counter in front of the young woman, he smiled to her.

“I guess that I will have to get more of these from the United States now. Each gun case for the Colt Dragoons include a spare six-shot cylinder, by the way. Anything else, miss?”

“Yes! I will need holsters, both belt and saddle types, for these guns, along with belts and ammunition pouches.”

“Then, this way please.” Answered the gunsmith while pointing at a corner of his shop where leather products were displayed. The woman followed him there and examined the items as he described them.

“These holsters here will fit your Colt Dragoons. You also have here various types of belts and pouches that will go with these holsters. What waist size is your friend, miss?”

She eyed Neville critically before answering.

“He’s taller than you but has about the same waist size as you, I would say.”

“Then this one should fit him.” He said while grabbing a belt and adding it to the holsters she had selected. The woman grabbed a few matching pouches as well, then

shocked Neville by taking another belt and trying it around her own waist after slipping two Colt Dragoon holsters and two pouches on it.

“This will do just fine for me.” She pronounced resolutely, ignoring the gunsmith’s stunned look. “Do you have fighting knives as well, sir?”

“Knives? Uh, yes miss, right here.”

The woman looked for a moment at his knives display and quickly decided on a huge American Bowie hunting knife. Taking it and its scabbard, she then smiled at him.

“Well, I think that I’m nearly done here. Since you got Colt revolvers, would you also happen to have models of Colt-Paterson revolving carbines or rifles?”

“In fact, I do, miss, but to be frank they sell even less than Colt revolvers. They have a bad reputation for unreliability and accidents.”

“Oh?” Said the young woman, who was actually as tall as the shop owner. She then concentrated for a moment and frowned with apparent frustration. “I can’t remember anything about that, but you certainly must know better than me about it. Could I see them anyway?”

“Certainly, miss.” Said the gunsmith, who walked behind his counter and took two rifles from a well filled wall rack, putting them on the counter in front of Jeanne and pointing at each weapon in turn while speaking.

“First, I have this Colt-Paterson Model 1836 revolving cylinder rifle. It has a caliber of .69 inch and has a seven-shot cylinder. The weapon above it is a Colt-Paterson Model 1942 carbine. Its cylinder can hold eight shots of .55 caliber. The main complaints about those Colt-Paterson weapons are their unreliability, their tendency to spit lead and hot gases from the gap between the barrel chamber and the front of the cylinder and the possibilities of having chain firing, when all chambers ignite at once when you fire a shot.”

“Those are serious problems indeed, sir. Are those complaints founded in your opinion, though?”

“Well, the lead and gas spitting is definitely a problem in these weapons, especially in the bigger, more powerful .69 caliber. The reliability could be better but, in the hands of a caring professional, these guns can be devastating, even if they are a bit fragile. As for the problem of chain firing, I believe that it is due to the fact that many shooters are not careful enough to cover with grease the front of the loading chambers once the powder and balls are in place. These weapons are by the way the only

production repeating long guns you will find on the market now, anywhere. If you are looking for heavy firepower, then those are the things you want.”

The woman nodded while eyeing the two guns, then grabbed the smaller, .55 caliber carbine and examined it from up close.

“Do you have a set of spacer gauges, sir? I would also need a tool set for dismantling this gun.”

“Uh, sure, miss!” Replied the surprised gunsmith before going into his back store. He was back after two minutes with the gauges set and the tools, putting them on the counter. The woman first checked with the gauges the spacing between the face of the loading cylinder and the back of the barrel. She was apparently unimpressed by what she saw.

“The spacing is effectively quite large. It will lose quite a lot of energy from the powder through that gap.”

“I could always fit a thin plate to diminish that gap, miss. It would be maybe half a day’s work.”

“You could, sir?” Said the woman, smiling. “Could you as well fit a flash guard plate around the lower half of the cylinder, so that my left arm is protected during firing?”

“Certainly, miss. In fact, that modification is one that is often requested with those weapons.”

“Perfect! Let me just finish my inspection of this carbine and I will then pay for my acquisitions.”

Watched closely by the gunsmith, the young woman quickly dismantled the carbine, then checked the internal mechanisms before reassembling the weapon, all the while showing the assurance and flair of a person expert in gun handling. She finally looked and smiled at the gunsmith.

“I will take this carbine, sir. If you have spare cylinders, I will take them as well, along with a full accessories kit, two cans of powder, one can of percussion caps and what you have in .55 caliber Minié bullets. I will come back on Friday to pick up the carbine once you have a filler plate fitted to it. You may add up my bill now.”

“Yes miss!” Said the happy shop owner, who then went to his cash register and counted her bill. The young woman didn’t flinch when he told her that it all came to a total of a bit over 37 Pounds Sterling, a sum many Londoners would find quite impressive, it representing months of salary for an average worker. The woman actually added even more to that bill, selecting a pair of leather saddlebags in which she stuffed

her new acquisitions, minus the carbine. She then left the store, the heavy bags slung over her right shoulder. The shop owner watched her walk away from a window, then shook his head in amusement: that woman had to be his most unusual customer ever.

11:28 (London Time)

Private study, 14 Belgrave Square

Gordon sighed with relief as he closed the accounting book and put down his pen. He always hated doing his household accounting, finding it boring and making him feel like a cheapskate. However, as his mother kept telling him, Sir Charles Smythe would not be part of the top shareholders of the prestigious East India Company if he had neglected his accounting chores. Gordon was putting back on the lid of his ink bottle when someone knocked on the door of his study.

“Come in!”

His heart accelerated when Jeanne stuck her head inside, a charming smile on her face.

“Hi, Gordon! I have a few things for you with me. Could you close your eyes for a minute?”

“Sure, my love!” Replied Gordon, closing his eyes and straightening in his chair, a smile of anticipation on his face. If the few days with her had taught him something, it was that Jeanne loved making other people happy, a trait that only endeared her more to him.

“You can look now.” Said Jeanne from behind him after a moment. Doing so, Gordon saw two closed wooden cases now sitting in front of him on his desk.

“What are these, Jeanne?”

“Open them and look!” She said encouragingly. Gordon did so, revealing two big revolvers and their accessories. Taking one of the revolvers, he examined it with growing happiness.

“A pair of six-shot pistols. They are real beauties.”

“These are American-made Colt Dragoon .44 caliber revolvers. I also have a few more things to go with them.”

She then lined on the desk the belt, holsters, pouches, powder and ammunition. Gordon got up from his chair and kissed Jeanne for a long moment before looking into her eyes.

“These revolvers are magnificent! Somehow I think that my pair of Adams single shot .577 caliber pistols will take an early retirement. Thank you, Jeanne.”

“Actually, you could say that those guns are as much for my benefit as for yours, Gordon. They will help you stay alive while in combat and thus also help me keep you.” His happiness suddenly tempered by those last words, Gordon eyed cautiously Jeanne.

“I suppose that you are referring to that war in Crimea you predicted?”

“You suppose right, Gordon.” She said somberly. “I keep remembering more details about it all the time.”

“Jeanne, to remember something you have to either live it or see something about it, yet this war still hasn’t happened. What you see must be visions from the future.”

“Maybe that’s what they are, Gordon.” Said resolutely Jeanne. “It however doesn’t change the fact that they make me worry about you. You are too good a man to lose.”

Softened up by her declaration, Gordon stepped to her, hugging her for a long kiss. When they parted, Gordon sighed while looking into her eyes.

“And you are too good a woman to pull away from, Jeanne. Come downstairs and let’s have lunch: we have to escort Misses Hatfield to the bank this afternoon.”

13:39 (London Time)

Midland Bank

Prince’s Street, The City

London

Gordon, Jeanne at his left side and Elizabeth Hatfield behind him, swept his right arm around as they entered the large main hall of the Midland Bank.

“The Midland Bank, repository of my family’s wealth and the best bank in London, notwithstanding what the Bank of England across the street may say about it.” The trio then took place in one of the short waiting lines of customers. Chatting about the sights they had seen while riding in Thomas’ carriage, now parked outside the bank, they only had to wait five minutes before their turn at the service counter came. A clerk in his mid forties, thin and balding, smiled at Gordon and his two female companions as they stepped forward.

“Good day, Mister Smythe! I see that you had the pleasure of meeting Lady Jeanne D’Orléans.”

While Gordon froze up, thunderstruck by the clerk’s words, joy filled Jeanne’s face.

“You...you know me, sir? What name did you say again?”

“But...your name: Lady Jeanne D’Orléans. You are our biggest account holder.”

Replied the clerk, surprised by their surprise. “Is something wrong, miss?”

“Not anymore!” Said Jeanne before hugging and kissing happily Gordon. “I can’t believe it! I’m finally going to know who I am.”

While hugging Jeanne, Gordon looked at the puzzled clerk.

“We need to see the bank’s director, sir. Tell him that this is most urgent and important.”

“Uh, yes sir!”

As the clerk hurried to one of the offices behind the service counter, Gordon gently took hold of Jeanne’s face and kissed her.

“Jeanne D’Orléans: a pretty name for a beautiful woman.”

Taking her hand, he led her and Misses Hatfield through a wicket and past a few bank employees desks. They were approaching a wood and tainted glass door when the clerk who had greeted them at the service counter emerged from that door. Stopping cold at their sight, the clerk then stepped aside, holding the door open for them.

“The director will see you now, ladies and gentleman.”

Jeanne took the time to slip a gold coin in the clerk’s vest pocket before going inside.

“I owe you a big one, mister. Thank you for remembering me.”

“What did I do to deserve this, miss?” Said weakly the puzzled employee, getting a grin from Gordon.

“Like Lady Jeanne said, you remembered her.”

He then followed Jeanne and Elizabeth Hatfield inside the office, where the bank director greeted them and shook their hands. Sir Kenneth Maple was a jovial, rotund man with long whiskers and moustache. Offering chairs to his visitors, he then took place behind a huge desk of polished wood, sitting in a leather padded armchair. He immediately noticed the expectation on the faces of his visitors and looked questioningly at Gordon.

“How may I help you today, Mister Smythe?”

“It is Lady Jeanne that you can help, Sir Maple.” Answered Gordon while putting a hand on Jeanne’s shoulder. He then spent a couple of minutes explaining to him how Jeanne had become amnesiac and had been sheltered by him. The director nodded gravely his head at that story, shifting his gaze to Jeanne.

“You were indeed very lucky, Lady Jeanne. You could have been robbed while unconscious and then end up a lonely, destitute woman without memories. Your fate could have been quite grim, miss.”

“I know, sir.” Replied softly Jeanne, bowing her head. “That’s why I am grateful to have met such a gentleman as Gordon. This may sound silly, sir, but could you tell me about myself?”

“By all means, Lady Jeanne. Let me just get your account file first, please.” Gordon felt Jeanne’s hand search for his hand and then press it anxiously as Sir Maple left momentarily the office. The director returned within minutes with an inch thick file full of papers, receipts, account updates and cashed checks, putting the lot on his desk and sitting down. Taking a particular sheet from the file, he cleared his throat before reading from it.

“This is the account opening form you filled five years ago when you first came here. Your…”

“Wait!” Interrupted Jeanne. “Could I have something to write all this down first?”

“Of course, miss!” Replied the director, then searching in a desk drawer and taking out a few blank sheets of papers, putting them on the of the desk nearest to Jeanne, along with an ink bottle and a pen. Jeanne then shifted her chair close to the desk and dipped the pen’s tip in the ink bottle as Sir Maple resumed his reading in a slow, deliberate voice.

“As I was about to say, your full name is Jeanne Marie Céleste D’Orléans. You were born as Jeanne Marie Céleste de Brissac in Brissac, France, on June thirteen of 1831. You married the Chevalier Pierre Alphonse D’Orléans in the French overseas Territory of the Guadeloupe in 1846 but your husband died of a tropical fever in 1847 and you had no children. Both of your parents are dead according to the information you gave on this form.”

Gordon felt relief on hearing this: Jeanne’s true marital status had been increasingly bothering him, what with his project to marry her. Feeling much better now, he listened on as the bank director continued.

“Your official residence in France is listed here as the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, at number 12 Rue Charles-V in Paris. Your official occupation is as founder and head administrator of a philanthropist organization, the d’Orléans Social Foundation, based in Paris. From what I know of that organization, it is dedicated to charity work directed at

the poor and the socially disenfranchised. You opened a local office in London last year, while your foundation has other offices in Italy, Germany and Holland.”

“Good God!” Uttered Elizabeth Hatfield, impressed. “No wonder Lady Jeanne helped me: she could nearly qualify as a saint with this pedigree.”

Sir Maple gave Elizabeth an amused look.

“Actually, many members of London’s high society call her less flattering names, such as socialist revolutionary, mad visionary and stock market shark.”

“Stock market shark?” Said Gordon, not having expected such an epithet for Jeanne. Sir Maple grinned at that and referred to one of the financial information sheets in Jeanne’s file.

“That’s right, Mister Smythe. Lady Jeanne seemingly started investing heavily in the stock markets on her return from the Guadeloupe, both in France and in England, using the fortune left by her dead husband. She hired an experienced stock trader here, who regularly comes to this bank to make deposits and withdrawals to and from a corporate account belonging to her foundation. The rumor at the London stock market, where I personally trade from time to time, is that Lady Jeanne is the one truly calling the shots and that her instincts on the trading floor are impeccable. Right now, Lady Jeanne’s London portfolio of shares and bonds is valued at approximately one and a half million pounds, while her personal account at this bank stands at a meager 873, 912 pounds. Lady Jeanne also has of course another bank account and stocks portfolio in Paris rumored to value over four million pounds in total. I have here the bank address and account number in Paris.”

While Jeanne recovered quickly from her surprise and then scribbled down all that information on paper, Gordon’s mind boiled up: Jeanne’s fortune eclipsed by far that of his own family and actually made her one of the richest women in Europe, if not the richest. Sir Maple gave Jeanne the address of her bank in Paris and the number of her bank account, then spoke cautiously.

“Since you became amnesiac, Lady Jeanne, I should remind you of a point of British law pertinent to you. According to it, women are not recognized as full legal persons. Married women in particular have no rights to private ownership, with their husbands automatically becoming owners of all their possessions on marriage.”

“But, that’s preposterous!” Exploded Jeanne with indignation. “You said yourself that I support a number of charitable works. How am I supposed to continue doing that if all my wealth is forcibly stripped away from me when I marry?”

Sir Maple gave a cautious look to Gordon before answering.

“For the moment, the British laws regulating the rights of women do not apply to you, Lady Jeanne, as you are both single and French. If you however marry in England, those laws will apply, unless you arrange some special legal measures.”

“Such as?”

“You could always transfer the money you have in England to a corporate account, with you as sole signatory authority for its use. You could also, in the case you marry in England, have your husband sign a legal waiver leaving you in charge of your fortune. That last measure would however be open to legal challenges in British courts and is not foolproof. As for your money in French accounts, it is out of reach of British law. I’m sorry if I had to raise such a subject and didn’t want to infer anything bad about Mister Smythe, who is both a good customer and a personal friend of mine, but, in view of your immense fortune, I thought it my professional duty to warn you about these laws.”

“You did well to warn her, Sir Maple.” Cut in Gordon, his face sober. “To be frank, I already proposed marriage to Lady Jeanne after being conquered by her personality, even though I didn’t know who she was. The last thing I would want to do is to abuse her confidence and strip her of her fortune. I am ready any time to sign a waiver to my rights to her fortune if we marry. Your professional honesty is a credit to you, sir.”

Sir Maple nodded his head at that compliment, then looked back at Jeanne.

“Your last account entry dates from last Friday and was incidentally the first one since January 26 of this year. You took out 600 pounds then and changed some French Francs as well. I thus presume that you just arrived from France on Friday.”

“That could be a useful information for later on, sir.” Agreed Jeanne politely. “Do you by chance have an address for me in London? I have no clue where I resided here before I became amnesiac.”

“Unfortunately, none, Lady Jeanne. You are known to live rather modestly for a woman of your wealth and use middle scale hotels while in London. I do have however here the address of the local office of your foundation, along with the names of its local representative and of your stockbroker.”

“Those I will certainly note down, sir.”

“Finally, I can tell you that you have a vault safety box in your name here, miss. Would you have with you your box key by chance?”

“Wait a minute!” Replied Jeanne, frantically taking out her purse and searching inside it. She shouted in triumph as she took out a small key attached to a key ring and showed it to the bank director. “Could this be it, sir?”

Kenneth Maple grinned after examining the key.

“This is definitely one of our safety box keys. This is decidedly your lucky day, Lady Jeanne. If you will now excuse me for a moment, I will go get your deposit box.”

The director then left the office for a second time. Jeanne hesitated a bit, then counted out 200 pounds out of the remaining cash left in her purse and handed it to a stunned Elizabeth Hatfield.

“You would make me very happy if you would add this to the account you are about to open, Elizabeth. There is plenty more where it came from.”

After some hesitation, the widow took the money, tears filling her eyes.

“Lady Jeanne, you are simply too good to be true. How could I ever repay your kindness?”

“By raising healthy and happy children, Elizabeth.” Said Jeanne softly. Gordon, a lump in his throat, rose from his chair and gently took Elizabeth’s right arm.

“Please come with me, Misses Hatfield. I will escort you to the service counter so that you can open a savings account.”

He then bent down and kissed Jeanne as he walked by her.

“You are the best woman any man could hope for, Jeanne. I love you!”

“I love you too, Gordon.” She said while returning his kiss.

Jeanne used the time taken by Gordon and Elizabeth at the service counter to continue writing down information contained in her bank file. The two came back just before Sir Maple, who was carrying a large, flat steel box and a booklet in his hands. He gave first the booklet to Jeanne and put the safety box in front of her on the desk.

“This is your new bank account book, Lady Jeanne. A clerk is now preparing your new checking book, which should be ready soon. Do you want a private room to examine the content of your safety box?”

“No sir. I am with people I can trust.”

Maple bowed at the compliment. Jeanne then inserted her key in the lock of the box and, after a slight hesitation, turned it and held her breath as she raised the lid. Gordon involuntarily bent forward to look inside the safety box, as did the director and Elizabeth. Jeanne first extracted a large, decorated wooden box. Next were a booklet and a

leather holder. Her hands trembled as she opened the holder and unfolded the large velum sheet inside, which bore an official seal.

“A French passport... My passport!” She said in a quivering voice. “I am now officially a person.”

Nobody spoke as Jeanne took the time to control her emotions. Her voice was more firm when she looked at the booklet.

“A bank account book in my name, from the Banque de Paris. Let’s see the wooden box now.”

Grabbing the box and fully opening its lid, she got a concert of admiring gasps, including from herself: inside was a full set of jewels worthy of a royal person. Taking out a large diamond and emerald necklace, Jeanne held it around her neck, smiling at a mesmerized Gordon.

“So, how do I look?”

“Just irresistible, my dear Jeanne.” Said Gordon, meaning it. This was turning into a true fairy tale for him. Putting back the necklace in the jewel box and closing the box, Jeanne put it back in the safety box but kept her passport and Paris bank account. Folding the sheets of paper she had scribbled on, Jeanne put them in an overcoat pocket and shook hands with the bank director.

“Sir, I owe you a big one today. I will not forget this.”

“It was my pleasure to be of help, Lady Jeanne.” Replied jovially the fat man. “Let’s go see if your checking book is ready before you leave, though.”

Leaving his office with his three visitors, Maple led them to an employee’s desk while carrying Jeanne’s safety box under one arm. Getting the now ready checking book from the clerk, the director handed it to Jeanne before heading to the bank vault, where he put back in place the safety box while Jeanne watched him. After a last round of handshakes with the director, his visitors started heading out of the bank. As they were passing the wicket separating the employees area from the public area, Jeanne suddenly turned around and went to the clerk who had recognized her, kissing the stunned little man on the cheek.

“I owe you my name and my fortune, mister. Thank you again.”

Jeanne then walked out with her amused companions, holding Gordon’s arm. Once out on the sidewalk, she flashed a happy smile to Gordon and Elizabeth.

“Well, how about finding a suitable place to celebrate this, my friends?”

“Uh, I don’t want to be a killjoy, Lady Jeanne,” said apologetically Elizabeth, “but I’m due soon to breast-feed my little Harry.”

Jeanne grinned and shrugged at that.

“Then, we will buy something quickly and celebrate at home. Harry must not be made to wait for his milk. By the way, Elizabeth, please call me simply Jeanne. I believe that I am a very informal woman.”

“Thank you, Lad... uh, Jeanne.”

“That’s better!” Said Jeanne cheerfully, patting Elizabeth’s shoulder.

15:06 (London Time)

14 Belgrave Square

London

Both Judith and Clara sighed with relief when Elizabeth Hatfield arrived home with Lady Jeanne and their master. Taking four years old Thomas, who had been playing horsy, off her back, Judith got back on her feet and hurried to Gordon, taking the box and bags filling his hands. On her part, Clara gratefully gave a crying Harry to Elizabeth.

“I changed him and tried everything to calm him down, madam, but I’m afraid that he is hungry.”

“No need to apologize, Clara. I will take care of that right away.”

The young widow, little Harry in her arms, then disappeared in the kitchen. Clara, helping Judith with the bags, saw the content of one of them.

“French champagne? May I ask what we are celebrating, sir?”

“You may, Clara.” Said Gordon happily while passing an arm around Jeanne’s waist. “We are celebrating the rebirth of Jeanne Marie Céleste D’Orléans, born Jeanne de Brissac, the richest woman in Europe and now my fiancée.”

He then told the two maids what had happened at the Midland Bank. Both servants then hugged and kissed Jeanne in turn, sharing her joy. Taking the large box they had brought with them, Jeanne offered it to Mary, smiling tenderly at the small girl.

“This is for you and your brothers and sister. I will let you take care of the distribution.”

“What is it, Lady Jeanne?”

“Chocolate!” Answered the French woman, starting a rush on the box by Elizabeth’s children. By the time Jeanne had put the children under control and lined them up for their ration of chocolate, Gordon had fetched four champagne flutes. He let a radiant Jeanne pop open the first bottle and fill the glasses, two of which went to the delighted maids. Raising his glass high, Gordon looked at the three women around him in the lounge.

“To my fiancée, Jeanne Marie Céleste D’Orléans, and to happiness!”

“Cheers!” Replied the women before sipping from their glasses. Clara then timidly looked at Gordon.

“When are you going to announce your engagement to your parents, sir?”

“Saturday, at the reception thrown at the family estate. Before, though, me and Jeanne are going to make a short trip to Paris: Jeanne has business to take care of there.”

“Paris!” Said Judith dreamily. “How I would love to see and visit it.”

“You will have your chance soon, Judith.” Replied Jeanne, smiling with malice at the maid.

19:58 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, March 15, 1854

Hôtel de Brinvilliers

12 Rue Charles-V

Paris, France

“What a trip!” Sighed Judith as she stepped out of the coach with Gordon’s help. “Thomas’ carriage to Dover, a boat trip across the Channel, then this coach ride from Calais. My bum feels like stone!”

“I’m sure that you could find yourself a nice Frenchman to massage feelings back into your bum, Judith.” Said jokingly Jeanne. The young maid, wearing her best dress for this trip, smiled but did not reply to that: while pretty and still only 21 years old, she had been raised by strict, conservative parents and had not slept with a man yet. Looking up at the beige stone façade of the building in front of which their coach had stopped, she examined the two storey residence quickly. It occupied half of a block and had a wide arched entrance gate that gave access to a private courtyard meant to accommodate horses and carriages. As soon as their luggage was unloaded from the

coach, Jeanne led Gordon and Judith to the large carriage gate giving on the street. Taking out her set of keys, she had to try three keys before getting the good one and unlocking the pedestrian door in the carriage gate. Bringing their luggage with them inside the tunnel leading to the inner courtyard, Jeanne unlocked a side door that gave on the tunnel. The trio stepped inside a wide entrance lobby with cream-colored walls and a large staircase with forged hand railing. Two lit oil lamps illuminated the lobby, telling Jeanne that someone was in the building.

“Y a t’il quelqu’un³?” She called in French. After a few seconds, they heard light footsteps upstairs and a tiny young oriental woman then appeared at the railing of the top of the staircase. She smiled at the sight of Jeanne and spoke a few words in a language Gordon had never heard before. Jeanne hesitated for a moment, then replied in the same language. As both women engaged in an animated conversation, Gordon examined with curiosity the newcomer. She looked very young indeed, probably no more than twenty years old, and stood at most five feet tall. Her slim, graceful body was enhanced by a long, beautifully embroidered red and gold silk dress that earned an admiring look from Judith. She had long, silky black hair that went down to her waist and a tiny nose that enhanced her youthfulness. Overall, Gordon found her beautiful. Jeanne then turned sideways to look at him and Judith.

“Gordon, Judith, this is Li Mai, my personal assistant. Unfortunately she speaks only French and Chinese, so I will have to play translator between you. Please follow her to the bedrooms, so that we can drop our luggage.”

Gordon locked back the main entrance door before grabbing his two suitcases and climbing the curved staircase behind Judith, Jeanne and Li Mai. Once on the upper floor, they followed a hallway lined with doors that made a ninety degree turn after fifty feet. Li Mai finally stopped and opened a door, speaking briefly to Jeanne in Chinese, who in turn spoke to Judith in English.

“This will be your room during your stay, Judith. Just drop your bags and take off your overcoat, then we will tour the rest of the residence with Li Mai.”

Judith did as told, entering a fair-sized bedroom that was very comfortably furnished. Li Mai lit an oil lamp for her while she took off her wool overcoat and hung it inside a closet. Then following the Chinese girl and Jeanne, who kept translating Li Mai’s words in English, she and Gordon toured the upper floor, which had a high ceiling that further

³ Y a t’il quelqu’un? Is there anybody?

enhanced the impression of spaciousness of the residence. The place, while not extravagant in terms of luxury like some of the British manors Judith had seen, looked and felt very comfortable, with thick carpets, tapestries and well-padded furniture everywhere. It also had a strong historical flavor, being decorated with innumerable pieces of antique weapons, armor, furniture and artwork. Jeanne's bedroom, apart from being quite large, made Gordon and Judith feel like they had been thrown back to the Middle Ages, with its canopy bed, large fireplace and medieval furniture, all apparently authentic. In contrast, the private study was furnished with magnificently sculpted lacquered wood Chinese furniture and decorated with ancient pieces of oriental artwork and weapons. As for the main lounge, where Jeanne finally invited Gordon and Judith to sit with her and Li Mai, it had the looks of an ancient Persian palace lounge. Going to an antique sword hanging above a fireplace, Gordon passed a hand on it, admiring its leaf-shaped bronze blade.

"How old would be this sword, Jeanne?"

She approached him and gave a quick look at the weapon.

"Greek, Achaean Period. Probably dates from the Fourteenth or Fifteenth Century before Christ. The age and good condition of this blade would make it nearly priceless."

Gordon gave her an awed look.

"Then you really must be an archaeologist to own such a piece."

"It seems so." She replied in a subdued voice while looking around her. "I see here antiques that most museums would kill to get their hands on them. Take that Egyptian bronze hand mirror over there: it must be over 3,000 years old. That little clay cylinder on that shelf is a Sumerian seal and is probably even older than the Egyptian mirror. The funny thing is that I feel completely at home around those pieces of antiques, as if I lived with them all my life."

"Talking of home, do you have only a single servant for such a large residence?"

"Uh, let me ask Li Mai about that."

After a lengthy exchange with the Chinese girl, Jeanne faced back Gordon and Judith.

"It seems that I gave a few days off to my other employees. According to Li Mai, I help a lot with house chores...when I'm not traveling, which seems to be often. I also help serve my guests when I throw private receptions and discussions for intellectuals, artists and scientists."

Gordon nodded in appreciation at that: Jeanne had more than proven by now that she was a very intelligent and extremely well educated woman. She was also very liberal-thinking by any standards. She was definitely a far cry from the often empty-headed snobs that seemed to populate much of the British aristocracy. Gordon then eyed the young Chinese woman, who was sitting on large Persian cushions.

“And your Li Mai, how did you find her?”

Jeanne had to ask the maid again, translating her story as Li Mai spoke.

“Li Mai is an orphan who was picked up at a young age by French missionaries in Beijing, in Northern China, and educated by them. A French Army captain fell in love with her when she was fourteen and married her. He brought her with him back to France but died shortly thereafter of cholera, leaving Mai alone and desperate. I found her begging in the streets five years ago, the target of pimps and abusers, and helped her by offering her a job as my personal assistant. It seems that I trained her to be a hostess for my guests, who apparently love the exotic touch she brings to my receptions. Talking of reception, how about a little snack and drink after this long trip?”

“That sounds like a good idea, Jeanne.”

“Good! Let’s find the kitchen, then.”

The four of them then walked out of the main lounge, stepping into an adjacent dining room through a connecting French double door. Despite being used to work in the quite luxurious surroundings of the Smythes’ home, Judith opened her mouth in admiration at the sight of the fine China and crystal ware displayed in glass shelving units around a large dining table made of polished and sculpted mahogany wood. Going down to the kitchen, which was connected to the dining room by a wooden staircase, they found it quite large, with both a large fireplace and a wood stove. The kitchen was impeccably clean, sporting stainless steel kitchen ware and marble top counters. It also contained a small table for informal meals, around which Gordon and Judith sat while Jeanne and Li Mai prepared a frugal assortment of bread, cheese, pickled fish and dry sausages. Judith was stunned to see Li Mai sit with them afterwards. Her facial expression prompted a smile and an explanation from Jeanne.

“This may look most unusual to have my servant eat with me but I am a very democratic woman. To me, everyone is equal, without regards to race, sex, social status or religion.”

"I remember that Sir Maple told us that many in the high society of London supposedly call you a socialist revolutionary and a mad visionary." Said Gordon while pouring himself a cup of red wine. "You truly seem to honor those terms, Jeanne, not that it bothers me, though."

"Thank you, Gordon. You are indeed a tolerant and comprehending man, the way I like them."

Gordon smiled at that, having seen her wink to him. Li Mai then said something to Jeanne, prompting a quiet exchange between the two of them. Jeanne finally looked back at Gordon and Judith to explain what had been said.

"Li Mai told me that, apart from my domestic day staff, employees of my charitable work foundation work out of an office suite on the ground floor of this residence. I also have a personal mount in the stables opening on the inner courtyard, along with two more horses for my carriage."

"Could I go see those horses after this?" Asked Gordon, who had a keen interest in horses, as was fitting for a cavalry officer. Jeanne smiled and nodded.

"I also would want to see them, as my amnesia left me with no souvenirs of them and as I also love horses. That will also give us an excuse to finish touring my residence."

After chatting and eating together for twenty minutes, Jeanne helped Li Mai put away the leftovers and clean the dishes, prompting Judith into helping them. They then left the kitchen, guided by Li Mai, who first showed them the offices used by the D'Orléans Social Foundation. Jeanne took some time there to review the papers in the 'in' and 'out' baskets on the desk of the executive secretary, in order to acquaint herself with the latest business handled by her foundation.

"I will decidedly have to have a serious chat with this Mister Jacques Leblanc. I hate to be ignorant of what my foundation does when so much people are touched by its good works. Just from those papers here, it appears that my foundation is supporting in Paris a school for poor girls, two orphanages and a shelter for abused women. I also see a transfer of funds to cover the buying last month of shares of the Minié Company."

"The Minié Company?" Said Gordon, surprised. "But that's the company that provides the new ammunition for the rifles of the British Army."

"It also provides the bullets for the French Army as well." Added Jeanne, thoughtful. "If what I believe about the Crimean War is correct, that company is going to

make a fortune by providing ammunition for the French and British armies during that war.”

“And so will you, by buying shares of that company.” Said Gordon, somber. “And your foundation bought these shares before England and France became implicated politically in that war. Your visions of the future apparently helped you become rich.”

“I do not use my fortune for my own benefit, Gordon, and you know it.” Protested Jeanne, raising her voice. “You know what kind of living standard I could be enjoying with the money I have? Hell, I could have a palace the size of Versailles if I wanted to. Yes, I do not live like a pauper either but part of the success of my foundation depends on maintaining social and political contacts at various levels and I thus have to maintain a minimum level of social decorum. If some good can be done out of that war, which I can’t stop or prevent, then I will do it.”

“Jeanne,” said softly Gordon, “don’t take me wrong. I am not blaming you for how you make your money or how you spend it. In fact, I approve of it. Let’s forget this financial business for the moment and let’s visit the stables.”

“You’re right.” Said Jeanne, sighing. “Not remembering anything about myself and what I did in the past is really annoying and irritating me.”

“No wonder!”

Locking back herself the door to the office suite, Jeanne then collected a lit oil lamp and followed Li Mai outside to the three large carriage entrance doors opening on the inner courtyard, Gordon and Judith behind them. Entering the first one through a small door set in the large double doors, they found that garage occupied by a carriage parked in it, with various spare harnesses and carriage parts stored in it as well. Gordon noticed at once the unusual design of the carriage. While the passenger cabin of the carriage was luxurious and comfortable, as expected from the carriage of a rich lady, the structure and suspension system were nothing like Gordon had seen before. Instead of the leaf spring suspension common on carriages everywhere, this carriage had coil spring suspensions on all of its four wheels. Furthermore, each wheel was attached to one of four independent half axles. The main structure was also based on a metallic tubular chassis supporting a lightweight shell. Gordon scratched his head on seeing that.

“This is the strangest carriage I have seen yet, Jeanne. I suppose that you had something to do with its design, since you have visions of strange mechanical things.”

“You are probably right, Gordon.” Said Jeanne while examining a small plaque screwed to the chassis of the carriage. “I see here that this carriage was built here in Paris by a local carriage shop. I will have to visit it soon to find out the story about it.”

They then used an inside door connecting the garage with the next one, finding two horses occupying stalls well provisioned with hay, grain and water. Li Mai spoke briefly in French with Jeanne, who then translated for Gordon and Judith.

“Li Mai says that these are the horses for my carriage. Their names are Clémentine and Hercule.”

“Hello, Hercule.” Said Gordon, caressing the head of the stallion near him. It was a healthy and strong Arabian horse, like the mare in the other stall. Both horses seemed quiet and docile animals and obviously enjoyed the attention. Jeanne and the others next went into the third and last garage, again using an internal connecting door. That garage housed one brown horse and a small, two-seater buggy. The buggy was as unusual as the larger carriage in the first garage and also used coil spring independent suspensions and tubular chassis construction. The big brown mare occupying the stall next to the buggy watched them quietly as Jeanne, Li Mai, Gordon and Judith examined the buggy. Gordon found the buggy surprisingly light, being able to lift one side with little effort.

“I decidedly like this design. Being this light, it must be quite fast and maneuverable.”

Gordon next went to the mare, who eyed him quietly as he caressed her head.

“And what is the name of that beauty, Jeanne?”

Li Mai again answered through Jeanne.

“Pegasus. It is my personal horse. Li Mai says that she is a very intelligent animal.”

“She appears so.” Agreed Gordon while passing a hand on the right side of the horse. Jeanne, standing close to the head of the mare, saw that the animal was staring at her insistently and caressed its forehead.

“Hello, Pegasus. We will have to reacquaint with each other soon. You will have to excuse me if I don’t remember you.”

The horse raised its head at those words, as if it had understood her. Intrigued, Jeanne looked into the animal’s eyes.

“You seem to be a bright beast indeed, Pegasus. It shall be a pleasure to ride you again.”

Gordon then came to her, a smile on his face.

“Well, this was certainly interesting, especially your carriage and buggy. Shall we continue the tour of the ground level of your residence?”

“By all means! Let me ask Li Mai about what is left to see.”

She conversed with the Chinese woman in French for a short while before looking back at Gordon.

“There is still my personal exercise room and a small workshop used by my handyman to see. My exercise room is supposedly well equipped and quite spacious.”

“Let’s see it then!” Said Gordon enthusiastically. With Li Mai again leading the way, the four persons left the garage, watched by Pegasus. A few seconds after the door of the garaged had closed, the horse silently floated up a foot from the ground, then disappeared in a flash of white light.

15:08 (New Zealand Time)

July 9, 2980 B.C.E.

Main residential tower, main Time Patrol base

Future site of Auckland, New Zealand

Rina Tonen ‘B’, on duty as the officer in charge of the spacetime transit hall, was not a little alarmed to see a brown robotic horse appear alone on arrival pad number six: robotic horses were programmed to jump spacetime with the agents they were assigned to and did otherwise only in case of emergencies. Running from her control desk to the horse, the giant ex-Imperium woman gave it a short, concise order.

“Identify and report!”

“Robotic mount Pegasus, assigned to field agent Nancy Laplante ‘B’. I just arrived from March 15, 1854 Paris. Nancy ‘B’ returned from a solo trip to London in an apparent state of amnesia and accompanied by two unknown British persons.”

“Amnesia?” Said softly Rina, not liking this one bit. “How severe did that amnesia appear to you, Pegasus?”

“She didn’t remember me, her name or even the layout of her Paris residence. Her maid Li Mai had to guide her around. I attempted discreet radio contact with Nancy ‘B’, including on the emergency frequency, but got no answer. Her mental brainwaves

showed some disturbances and anomalies from normal. Physically she seemed in good state.”

“Damn! Alright, Pegasus, come to the control station and I will download your recorded data on your last encounter with Nancy ‘B’.”

The robotic horse trotted at once to the control station, where Rina Tonen connected Pegasus to her computer via an optical fiber cable plugged in a hidden port inside its left ear. While the video, sound and mental wave data was copied into her computer, Rina called at once Mike Crawford, the chief of operations of the Time Patrol.

“Mike, this is Rina ‘B’, in the spacetime transit hall. We have an emergency with Nancy ‘B’: her robotic horse just showed up here, alone, to report that she is now apparently amnesiac in the Paris of 1854.”

The big American reacted with understandable shock at those words: Nancy ‘B’ was after all the timeline twin of his late wife, Nancy ‘A’, and was very dear to his heart.

“Amnesiac? But this could cause a major breach of spacetime protocol if someone exploits her amnesia and would put her at serious risk. You are getting the raw data now from her horse, I suppose?”

“Nearly done by now, Mike. I believe that Farah Tolkonen should be informed of this at once.”

“Damn right she should! Tell Nancy’s horse to stay for the moment in the transit hall. We will pass on to it specific instructions after the senior operations staff can meet and review this situation.”

“Understood. Uh, what about her two children and her parents? Shouldn’t someone warn them of this?”

There was a pause as the face of Mike Crawford on the videophone screen showed some misgivings. He finally shook his head.

“No! Not yet at the least. We need to learn more about Nancy’s full status before we alarm them with such a story. I will inform you of the decisions taken once we have a chance to discuss this.”

Mike Crawford then cut the line, leaving Rina to worry about the young Nancy ‘B’. In truth, Nancy was very popular with everybody in the Time Patrol, being a fantastic girl with a heart of gold and a brilliant personality. There was also the scary possibility that Nancy, unable to measure the full consequences of her acts, could irremediably alter history and create a new timeline in 1854 by her actions or words.

15:46 (New Zealand Time)**Time Patrol command conference room**

As the last pictures taken of Nancy 'B' by Pegasus showed on the large wall screen, Mike Crawford looked around at the six other members of the Time Patrol sitting around the conference table.

"Well, you just had it from the horse's mouth, literally. Nancy 'B' is now obviously unable to fully measure the consequences of her acts, since she probably doesn't even remember that she is not from the 19th Century. That could open the door to some frightening scenarios, many of which could end up with a new timeline splitting from the main trunk in 1854. Since she didn't respond or even react to the radio calls from her horse, we have to assume that her implanted radio, and maybe her other implants as well, is non-functional. Now, what could both cause a bout of amnesia and the breakdown of her implants?"

"A violent electrical or electro-magnetic shock." Answered after a moment of reflection Farah Tolkonen 'A', the chief administrator and head scientist of the Time Patrol. "An explosion violent enough to take out her implants would have killed Nancy, while a simple cranial trauma wouldn't have been enough to take out her implanted radio, unless the blow was hard enough to open her head wide. Those implants are very resistant to mechanical shock and would take something like a direct bullet hit to be taken out. On the other hand, they have a good electrical insulation but it has its limits. A high voltage jolt could have rendered Nancy amnesiac as well as overload her implants. Whatever the cause, one thing is clear: we must pull Nancy out of the 19th Century and bring her here for a complete examination and rehabilitation, and fast! We can then return her within minutes of her departure time from Paris."

"Agreed!" Said Miri Goshenk 'B', the head psychologist of the Time Patrol. "In her present state she is emotionally very vulnerable and is probably ready to cling at straws. She probably believes that she really is Lady Jeanne D'Orléans right now. The problem is that she will certainly remember souvenirs of using advanced technology items well before she remembers her real identity. Nancy has a degree in robotics engineering and knows all of history, among many other things. You can imagine the things that could happen if that Gordon learns from her future history."

"But would he believe Nancy or would he do like most men of the time and think that she is plain crazy?" Asked the young Ingrid Weiss 'B', pilot and commander of the

scoutship TEEN TEAM 2. Her question made the others look around the table before Miri Goshenk answered it.

“That British man seemed to be in very good terms with Nancy. He also looked quite bright.”

“...and very handsome.” Added Ingrid Weiss, making Miri nod her head.

“That as well. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that this Gordon found Nancy after she was rendered amnesiac and then brought her back to Paris, possibly after identifying her through her French identity papers. Knowing Nancy the way we know, she could very well be having a romance with that Gordon, which implies that she could say things to him more readily than to another person. I thus support Mike’s suggestion: let’s get Nancy out of there as fast as possible before she does or says something she shouldn’t!”

“And what do we do with that Gordon and the other British?” Asked Fernand Brunet, leader of the assault section to which Nancy belonged. Mike answered that one.

“We do not hurt or even touch them in any way, Fernand. We will make Nancy disappear for a few minutes, probably at night, and they will be none the wiser in the morning.”

“Sounds like a plan. Don’t take me wrong, Mike: if that Gordon truly helped Nancy and went to the trouble of bringing her back to Paris, then I would be the last to want to hurt him.”

“I knew that, Fernand. One thing we should do concurrently while recuperating Nancy is to find more about that Gordon and how he met Nancy in the first place. I believe that this would be a perfect job for Elizabeth Windsor.”

The others around the table nodded at that: Elizabeth Windsor ‘B’, apart from being an experienced field agent with many tough missions under her belt, also happened to be very familiar with the England of the 19th and 20th Centuries, having been in her youth the heir to the throne of England until 1941 ‘B’. Farah Tolkonen added to Mike’s words.

“Then, send her with some solid backup, Mike. I would choose Eli for that: he can blend in easily in the England of that time and his powers of Chosen could become handy if Elizabeth hits a snag. The scoutship BRITANNIA could fly in overhead support to our two agents, with Elizabeth and Eli starting their investigation at the last known spacetime location of Nancy in London.”

“Consider it done, Farah.” Said Mike without hesitation.

22:19 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, March 15, 1854

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Paris, France

Jeanne, about to go to bed for the night with Gordon, opened the closet of her bedroom to hang her dress but then froze: the closet was nearly full of female clothes that seemed made to fit her. She burst out laughing, surprising Gordon, who was also undressing for the night.

“What? What do you find funny, Jeanne?”

“My clothes! I am having Mister Meir make five dresses in a hurry for me in London and I have here a closet full of dresses and other clothes. Let’s see what I have in here.”

Sifting through the closet, she selected and took out a few dresses and items of clothing so that Gordon could see them, putting them on the bed. Jeanne suddenly shouted triumphantly and pulled out of the closet a magnificent sky blue ball dress studded with pearls, holding it against her and smiling at Gordon.

“Do you think that this would do for your parents’ reception on Saturday?”

“Do? My dear Jeanne, you will be sensational in this.” Said Gordon, sincere. Grinning at his response, she laid the ball dress on the bed, then kept foraging through the closet. At one point she frowned and took out a red dress with pleated skirt, examining the bottom part.

“What is this? It looks like a normal dress but the skirt is split in two at crotch level to form a sort of trousers with wide legs.”

“I don’t know, but it should be perfect for you to ride.” Said Gordon without thinking. His words made a sudden look of revelation dawn on her face.

“A riding dress! Of course! I would still look like a proper lady but wouldn’t need to use that stupid Amazon riding position. I wonder if I was the one who came out with this design.”

“You probably did, Jeanne. It is an ingenious idea indeed.”

“Thank you, my love! I see in there five more riding dresses, so I must ride quite regularly.”

She then gave a malicious look at Gordon, who was now down to his shorts.

“Talking of riding, I have some projects involving you tonight, Gordon.”

23:52 (Paris Time)

Time Patrol scoutship TEEN TEAM 2

55,000 feet above Paris

Fernand Brunet looked with disbelief at his watch, then back at the screen of the surveillance station set up in the cargo bay of the scoutship. Mike Crawford, Miri Goshenk, Farah Tolkonen and Ingrid Weiss were also looking at the screen, where Nancy could be seen making love passionately with the man still known only as Gordon.

“Damn! She has been going at it for well over an hour now: she will kill that guy if she keeps on like this.”

“You were saying about a romance between Nancy and that man, Miri?” Said Ingrid, grinning. Miri rolled her eyes at that. Something that Nancy had just said suddenly made everybody tense up.

“Did she just mention the word ‘marriage’ to that guy?” Asked Ingrid to no one in particular. A few more seconds of listening then made things clear, with Farah sitting back in discouragement.

“She really forgot everything about herself. She is going to marry that man while ignoring that she already has two sons and that she is in love with d’Artagnan in the 17th Century. That poor Nancy will be devastated once her memories return.”

“One more reason to get her out of there fast.” Said firmly Mike. “Ingrid, the moment that Nancy is alone, capture her with a transit probe. Fernand, be ready with a stun pistol, just in case that she reacts violently on appearing in the cargo bay.”

The occasion to grab Nancy came when, after another fifteen minutes of cuddling and lovemaking, Nancy left the bedroom to go to the bathroom, while the man named Gordon went to sleep, utterly burned out but happy. The moment that Nancy, wearing a bathrobe, closed the door of the bathroom behind her, Ingrid sent a programmed transit probe down. Jumping spacetime directly to the bathroom of Nancy’s Paris residence, the small cylindrical probe flew quickly to Nancy and glued itself to her belly. Before the surprised Nancy could react, the probe activated its time distorter field, catching the young woman in it and making her jump spacetime with the probe back to the cargo bay

of the TEEN TEAM 2. The moment that she appeared in the middle of the cargo bay Fernand Brunet approached her slowly, both of his hands up.

“Don’t panic! We are friends of yours. Your true name is Nancy Laplante and you are one of us.”

Nancy looked quickly around her at first, her eyes stopping briefly on the two bald, giant women standing a few paces away with a young redhead woman and a tall, powerful man. She then looked with suspicion at Fernand.

“How the hell did you get me here? What is this place anyway?”

“This,” said Farah Tolkonen while stepping forward, “is the Time Patrol scoutship TEEN TEAM 2, commanded by your friend Ingrid Weiss here. Nancy, you are one of our field agents, sent to this century under a false identity to study in detail this time period. My name is Farah Tolkonen, Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol. To my right are Mike Crawford and Miri Goshenk and the man facing you is Fernand Brunet, your direct superior in the Time Patrol.”

“The...the Time Patrol?” Said hesitantly Nancy, making Farah nod once.

“Yes! Nancy, what I will tell you now may hurt you in view of the love you showed towards the man you call Gordon: you have already two children, both boys. One is your natural son from the famous musketeer D’Artagnan, with whom you are still in love, while your second son was adopted by you in Ville-Marie in 1655.”

Nancy stayed frozen by those words for a moment, then slowly sat on the deck, sobbing.

“No! It can’t be! I love Gordon and want to marry him.”

That was when Miri Goshenk hurried to her, kneeling in front of her and gently taking hold of her hands while speaking softly.

“Nancy, you still can love Gordon if you want to. You just need to know that others love you deeply too. I will help you remember them all again.”

A flash of white light then enveloped the whole cargo bay for a fraction of a second without causing any apparent effect on its occupants except for making Nancy tense up and look around her.

“What was that?”

“That was our scoutship jumping spacetime back to our main base, Nancy. Once...”

“YOU ARE TAKING ME AWAY FROM GORDON?” Shouted at once Nancy in an angry voice while jumping on her feet. She then grabbed Miri’s uniform collar. Before she could do more, a yellow stun beam from Fernand’s pistol struck her, making

her stagger on her feet. Nancy surprised Fernand by showing enough remaining stamina to start charging him, forcing him in shooting her a second time. Nancy then collapsed at his feet, knocked out. Fernand looked down at her, shaken by her fierce reaction.

“Hell, she must really love madly that guy! You saw how she reacted at once when she understood that we were taking her away from Paris?”

Miri, also shaken by Nancy’s reaction, nodded sadly.

“Yes, and it won’t make her recovery easier, I can tell you right now. Do we really have the right to deny her this love?”

“And what about the love of her sons Charles and James for her, and that of D’Artagnan?” Replied Farah. “Poor girl! She will find herself in an impossible situation.”

“So, what do we do now with her?” Asked meekly Ingrid, hurt by the plight of her friend. “All this was probably through no fault of hers.”

“I know.” Said Farah, sounding discouraged. “Miri will have to do her best with her. We can only hope that Nancy will recover quickly and completely from her amnesia.”

“But, what will happen of that Gordon, Farah?” Insisted Ingrid. “He will be undoubtedly hurt and upset if Nancy tells him afterward that they can’t continue their romance because she already has two sons. You know how strict the social conventions are in the England of the 19th Century.”

“We will find a way to reconcile all of this.” Farah said, sounding more wishful than certain. “We have to.”

08:02 (Paris Time)

Thursday, March 16, 1854

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, Paris

The Sun was well up when Gordon woke up in Jeanne’s big bed. His first move then was to extend an arm, intent on caressing Jeanne, but his hand found the place besides him empty. Fully opening his eyes and looking around the bedroom, he then saw that Jeanne, wearing a bathrobe, was sitting at her private desk, a letter in her hands. The weak smile she did on seeing that he was awake alarmed Gordon, who jumped out of bed at once and went to her, kneeling in front of her.

“Is something wrong, Jeanne?”

Nancy, having returned a few hours earlier from seven months of medical treatment and rehabilitation and now in full possession of her past memories, felt her heart falter for a moment. She still loved very much that handsome and kind man who had saved her but she was going to be forced to deceive him and lie to him. The only permissible way out of her dilemma for her if she wanted to still love him was for her to live a secret triple life: one here in the 19th Century with Gordon; another in the 17th Century with D'Artagnan, with her playing the role of the Marquess De Saint-Laurent; and a third as Nancy Laplante 'B', field agent of the Time Patrol and single mother for two young boys. Gordon was however a man well worth the extra effort. Farah Tolkonen had also seen the practical side of this and had bombarded Nancy as the specialist field agent of the Time Patrol for the 19th Century, apart from being already the designated specialist agent for the 17th Century. That had made Nancy wonder only half-jokingly when she would also have to find another man to love in the 18th Century and become specialist agent for that century as well. Looking down into Gordon's eyes and gently grabbing his hands, she spoke softly to him after shaking her head.

"Nothing is wrong, Gordon. My memories returned during the night, probably because the familiar setting of my residence stimulated souvenirs in me. Only a few small details are still fuzzy now."

"But that's great!" Said Gordon, sincerely happy for her. "So, what do you remember now?"

"My life as Jeanne D'Orléans." Lied Nancy. "I now know for certain that I am not married and that I am free to marry you if you still want me."

"Want you? Jeanne, I wish for no other woman than you to be in my life."

Those passionate words brought tears to Jeanne's eyes, who kissed Gordon tenderly on the lips and then smiled.

"And I want to continue living with you, Gordon, on one condition."

"And which one would that be?" Asked Gordon, a bit apprehensive.

"That, when we marry, you sign a clause in our marriage contract stating that you renounce any legal control on my fortune and possessions. I want to be able to continue administering my charity foundation as I wish and to keep my main residence in Paris. In exchange, I am ready to provide you with a sizeable dowry on marrying you."

"Jeanne, I wish to marry you because I love you, not because of your money. I also believe that the work of your foundation is worth continuing and even expanding." His answer got him another kiss.

“Thank you, Gordon. You are all that a woman could hope for. Let’s wash up and dress, then we will go have breakfast.”

“And what do you have planned for the rest of the day?”

“I will review the business of my foundation with my employees, then we will go together tour a bit Paris. I suppose that we will have to take the boat back to England tomorrow, so that we are able to be in time for your parents’ reception on Saturday.”

“Right! I’m going to shave now. I won’t be long.”

Gordon was effectively cleaned up, shaved and dressed in less than half a hour. With himself wearing a flannel suit and Jeanne wearing a nice blue city dress made of fine wool, the couple went to the dining room to have breakfast. To Gordon’s surprise, apart from meeting there Judith, who was already munching on muffins and bacon, he found nine young children already sitting around the big mahogany table and eating with gusto their eggs, bacon and croissants.

“Good morning, Jeanne!” Chanted in unison in French the children, making Jeanne grin.

“Good morning, children! This is Gordon, a good friend from England. He doesn’t speak French, so you will have to talk to him through me. Everything is alright here?”

“Yes, Jeanne!” Answered cheerfully the oldest child, a black girl of maybe ten years of age. Jeanne then looked at Gordon and spoke in English as she took a seat besides him.

“These are the children of a few of my female employees. They eat and study here while their mothers work. That way they are not left alone at home and their mothers can work without worrying about them. I employ two female teachers just for them and for a few other children selected for their special needs.”

“Jeanne, you must have the heart of an angel.” Said Gordon, making her smile weakly.

“No, I simply do what others should have done if they had placed the good of others ahead of their greed and selfishness.”

A young Arabic woman then came out of the kitchen and brought a tray with pots of coffee and tea, cups, cream and sugar. Jeanne spoke briefly to her in French before looking back at Gordon.

“This is Leila Benchetrit, my assistant cook. She is from Algeria. We have eggs, bacon, sausage, ham, sautéed potatoes, croissants, muffins, cheese, jam and butter available for breakfast. What would you like?”

“Uh, that’s quite a selection! I will have two eggs over easy with bacon, potatoes, croissants and jam.”

Leila took as well Jeanne’s order, then returned into the kitchen after chiding in Arabic a little girl who was playing with her toasts. Gordon watched the whole scene with amusement while sipping on his cup of tea: Jeanne’s daily routine seemed quite lively to him already.

His food and that of Jeanne was served in less than ten minutes by Leila, by which time two women came to collect the nine children to bring them to their respective classrooms. The couple ate while chatting quietly about Paris in general and Jeanne’s social foundation in particular. What Jeanne told him impressed Gordon to no little degree: if she was to be believed, she held stock shares in many of the most profitable and promising commercial and industrial ventures in both Europe and the United States. In turn, much of the profits from her portfolio of stocks were used either to buy more promising shares and bonds or financed a multitude of charitable and social help organizations, mostly on an anonymous basis. Gordon, remembering the awful conditions he had seen in Tower Hamlets when they had taken Elizabeth Hatfield out of her life of abject poverty, felt guilt as he realized how much social abuse was hidden behind the façade of industrial and commercial prosperity in England. Worse for him was the fact that he belonged to the privileged class that benefited from the cheap labor of so many people. He however could tell himself in good conscience that he had always treated his own employees with generosity and fairness, while he believed himself to be a competent officer who truly cared for his soldiers. In contrast, too many aristocrats had bought at high prices their officers’ commissions and had proved to be utterly incompetent in the business of war, apart from treating their men little better than slaves. Gordon then saw the look of near awe Judith was giving to Jeanne. The young maid was obviously struck by her revolutionary ideas and practices, which would be surely considered politically dangerous by many aristocrats and politicians in England. That made Gordon ponder how his own parents would react on learning about Jeanne’s social activities. His father, Sir Charles Smythe, was a major shareholder of the East India Company and of a few other companies and was quite rich, even though his

fortune paled compared to that of Jeanne. Gordon however honestly believed his father to be a good, generous man who simply had a good flair for business. He would thus probably approve of the charity work done by Jeanne. As for his mother, Lady Carmelia, things were a bit more complicated. While a good-natured woman, she was also a lot more class-conscious than her husband and could be at times unnerving with her snobbishness. She was also politically quite conservative, thus putting her in a direct collision course with Jeanne's socialist ideas. Gordon finally decided to keep discreet with his parents about the full extent of Jeanne's social work.

Once they were finished eating, Jeanne and Gordon, followed timidly by Judith, went downstairs to the office suite used by the employees of the D'Orléans Foundation. There, Gordon was presented first to Jeanne's executive secretary, a mature man named Jacques Leblanc with whom he felt at ease at once, then to the two female secretaries present. On Jeanne's demand, Jacques Leblanc reviewed his current dossiers with her and Gordon, spending a good hour to do so. That hour was enough to sink into Gordon the true extent of Jeanne's charitable work and how readily she spent most of her fortune on it. Jeanne's business and administrative savvy also struck him, while an overwhelmed Judith could only listen on in awed silence. Gordon couldn't help think that his father would love talking business with Jeanne, knowledgeable businesswomen being truly a rarity in England. Jeanne's beauty of course would add to that enjoyment. Once she was satisfied that she was fully up to speed with her affairs and had given precise directives to Jacques Leblanc, Jeanne got up from her chair and smiled to Gordon and Judith.

"Well, enough about business! Since we will have to leave for England early tomorrow, I better use the limited time left to us here to show you Paris. This will be a good pretext to take out my carriage and exercise my horses a bit."

17:08 (London Time)

Saturday, March 18, 1854

The Smythes Manor

Twickenham, 8 miles west of London

England

Sir Charles Smythe looked again nervously at his pocket watch while standing under the porch of his three-story brick manor: nearly all of his guests had arrived and his son had yet to show up. Carmelia, who had been greeting guests inside, joined him briefly outside, obviously getting worried.

“Any sign of Gordon yet?” She inquired while looking down the manor’s access road through the light rain and growing darkness. Her husband shook his head in irritation.

“No, and he will hear me whenever he shows up.”

“Don’t be too harsh on him, dear. Maybe the rain delayed him.”

“With yesterday’s storm I would have understood, but he will prove a poor cavalry officer indeed if such a light pour as the actual one can delay him.” Fumed Sir Charles. Carmelia gave him a cautious glance before going back inside, leaving him and two foot servants under the porch. After another ten minutes, Sir Charles was ready to give up on Gordon when he saw a carriage turn on the access road, closely followed by a second one. To his hidden disappointment, the first carriage disgorged three French aristocrats living nearby in self-exile since the 1848 proclamation of the Republic in France. Out of the second carriage came the Earl of Cardigan. Knowing the quarrelsome nature of his last guest, Sir Charles greeted his French guests as quickly as good manners permitted, then faced the earl, shaking his hand vigorously.

“Aah, my good Lord Cardigan! How nice to see you in such splendid shape. Your presence at this reception truly honors me, sir.”

“How could I refuse an invitation from such an illustrious man as you, Sir Charles?” Replied with satisfaction the major general, flattered. Sir Charles made a forced smile then: he had in reality little regard for that pompous incompetent but the man was after all Gordon’s brigade commander and had to be treated according to his rank, even if that said rank had been purchased instead of earned.

“Thank you again for coming, Lord Cardigan. Please come inside so as to escape this cold rain.”

“With pleasure, Sir Charles!”

The cavalry officer, escorted by a foot servant holding an umbrella, then entered the manor, leaving Sir Charles still waiting for his son outside.

Another carriage turned on the access road as the two previous carriages, now empty of passengers, rolled towards the stables. To his relief, Sir Charles soon

recognized Thomas, Gordon's foot servant, at the reins of the incoming carriage. His son, decked in his best uniform, jumped out as soon as the carriage came to a stop, then held the door open to let a tall young woman come out. Sir Charles forgot the recriminations he had saved for his son as soon as he could detail the young woman, who wore a splendid, pearl-studded blue ball dress and a fabulous set of jewels. Nearly as tall as Gordon, her face reflected both intelligence and strength of character, apart from being beautiful. While a foot servant held an umbrella over her, Gordon happily presented her to his father, holding her left hand as he spoke.

"Father, this is my fiancée, Lady Jeanne D'Orléans. Jeanne, this is my dear father, Sir Charles Smythe."

"I am truly pleased to meet you, Lady Jeanne." Said Charles while kissing her right hand. "I..."

What Gordon had said then fully registered.

"Did you say that she is your fiancée? And how come you know her full name? Does she remember her past now?"

"I will be happy to explain everything to you, Father." Replied patiently Gordon. "Could we get out of the rain first?"

"Uh, of course!"

Letting the couple pass first, Sir Charles followed them inside, where servants took their dripping coats from them. Taking off his coat as well and giving it to a servant, Charles detailed with growing admiration Lady Jeanne. Her ball dress exposed her shoulders and had a deep cleavage that enhanced her firm, generous chest. Taking his eyes off her chest with difficulty, Charles eyed discreetly the jewels she wore. The matching set of diamond and emerald tiara, necklace, earrings, broche and bracelets was probably worth more than the Smythes Manor. Standing besides Gordon, she truly looked like a princess or even a queen.

"My God, Lady Jeanne, you are truly...royal!"

"Thank you, Sir Charles." She said in a clear, agreeable voice while curtsying. "Please call me simply Jeanne."

"Then Jeanne it will be."

Charles then faced Gordon.

"So, how about a few explanations, my son?"

"I will be too happy to comply, Father. Our big luck came when we went together to the Midland Bank to open an account. It turned out that Jeanne, who was recognized

by one of the bank clerks as well as by the director, already had a fat account there. We found as well in her bank safety deposit box her French passport, as well as her Paris bank account book. We then decided on a short trip to Paris in order to visit her residence there. Fortunately, the sights inside her home helped Jeanne remember fully who she was. She is actually a philanthropist and a generous contributor to a number of charitable works, both on the continent and in England. By the way, I'm really sorry for arriving so late: yesterday's storm delayed our passage back to England."

Charles patted the shoulder of his son, smiling.

"That's not important, Son. Let's announce the good news to your mother."

Sir Charles then whispered a few words to his majordomo, standing at the entrance to the main lounge. The man then knocked the tip of his cane three times on the floor and shouted as Gordon and Jeanne entered the lounge, hand in arm.

"CAPTAIN GORDON SMYTHE AND LADY JEANNE D'ORLÉANS!"

Sir Charles, a few paces behind the couple, saw his three French aristocrat guests look sharply at Jeanne when her name was announced. Their looks were not very friendly either. Deciding to clarify the matter without delay, he walked casually to the trio, letting Gordon guide Jeanne to Carmelia. The three French, a teenage boy, a mature woman and an old woman in her seventies, returned his bow as he stopped in front of them. Sir Charles faced the young Prince of Orléans, who didn't possess much apart from his title now that the French monarchy was out of power.

"Pardon me, sir, but could I presume that Lady Jeanne is linked to your family?"

The prince, trying without much success not to look with hostility at Jeanne, answered after a short hesitation.

"She claims our family name through a distant cousin of mine who had an estate in the Guadeloupe. We first heard of her when my father received a letter from my cousin eight years ago, announcing in it that he had just married a young lady named Jeanne. Then, a year later, that woman arrived in France with the news that my cousin had died of a tropical fever and had left everything he owned to her. My father's lawyers checked her claims thoroughly but she had unimpeachable documentation and even knew intimate details about my cousin."

"So, what happened then?"

"What happened?" Replied the young prince, getting agitated. "She used the money she got from my cousin, which should have come to my family, for various investments and speculations."

“How did she do in that, sir?” Asked Sir Charles, genuinely interested by now. The prince sighed and lowered his eyes.

“She actually proved to be a very shrewd speculator, I have to give her that. She may live rather modestly but we know that she is quite rich by now.”

“A woman wearing such jewels can’t be modest, Louis!” Retorted the prince’s grandmother and ex-queen of France. Sir Charles managed not to call her the hypocrite she was and excused himself with the prince, bowing at the trio before leaving them to their champagne cups and appetizers. He found his wife Carmelia in conversation with Gordon and Jeanne in a corner of the lounge. She smiled happily at him as he approached.

“Charles, did you hear the good news?”

“I did, my dear: Gordon told me on arrival. Uh, just out of curiosity, Lady Jeanne, could I ask how much is your financial worth? You may make a good venture partner for improving our family assets.”

As an answer, Jeanne got close to him and whispered in his ear. Carmelia saw her husband’s face reflect utter surprise then.

“I...I see!” Said Sir Charles with difficulty. Gordon then jumped in the conversation.

“Father, Mother, me and Jeanne have decided to get married before the end of this month. As we are of two different faiths, we intend to make it a civil marriage, with a simple ceremony at my London house. I would like to have your approval for this.”

Sir Charles stared for a moment at Gordon and Jeanne as the couple held hands together, smiling. What he had heard of Jeanne up to now had favorably impressed him and she was certainly a beautiful woman. To have his son marry the richest woman in Europe, even if that fact was not public, would be positively fantastic. He was sure though that Gordon was not marrying her for her money.

“Gordon, this may be quite sudden but I will be delighted by such a marriage.”

“You chose well, my son.” Added softly Carmelia before kissing in turn Gordon and Jeanne on the cheek. “I hope that you will stay after the reception?”

“We were in fact planning to stay for a day or two, if you don’t mind of course.” Said Gordon.

“Stay as long as you want.” Replied Sir Charles, grinning. “You did bring some luggage, I hope?”

“Our bags are in my carriage, Father.”

“Then I will get a couple of servants to bring them in. In the meantime, you may want to present your new fiancée to my guests and enjoy the reception.”

“Please, Sir Charles,” urged suddenly Jeanne as the host was about to walk away, “could you have a servant take out of my wicker chest a lyre and a lute I brought: I would like to play some music for your guests.”

“You play the lyre and the lute, my dear?” Asked Camelia, agreeably surprised. “You do have many talents indeed.”

“Thank you, madam.” Said Jeanne, smiling modestly.

“She also sings like an angel...in a dozen or more languages.” Added proudly Gordon, getting his parents’ eyes to widen.

“That I must see and hear!” Exclaimed Sir Charles. “I will make sure that Jeanne gets her instruments.”

“And I will make sure in the meantime that our guests are being properly served.” Added in turn Carmelia before leaving the young couple to themselves. Gordon then looked around the main lounge. There were about forty other guests, a few of them in military uniforms, mingling around the large room while servants circulated in the midst of them, bearing platters of drinks and appetizers. A four-man band sat in a corner, providing a soft background of classical music. Taking Jeanne’s hand, Gordon discreetly pointed at one of the uniformed guests.

“I believe that it would be appropriate for me to present you first to my brigade commander, Major General Lord Cardigan.”

To his surprise, her face hardened at the mention of Cardigan. She then whispered to Gordon while drilling the general with her eyes.

“Do we really have to speak to that infatuated martinet, Gordon?”

“You know him, Jeanne?”

“Let’s say that his reputation is not exactly a shining one.”

Looking at Cardigan, then back at Jeanne, Gordon sighed while gently pulling her by the hand.

“He may very well be a bad commander, Jeanne, but he is still my commander and a guest of my father. Could you be civil with him for a moment?”

“Alright, I will turn up my hypocrisy factor for this reception.”

“That’s my girl! By the way, he likes to be called ‘General’.”

“If you say so.” She replied, then pasting a smile on her face as they walked towards Lord Cardigan.

Cardigan was conversing with a fat baroness when Gordon and Jeanne stopped besides them. One look at Jeanne made him all but forget the plump aristocrat facing him. Quickly acknowledging Gordon's presence, he then kissed Jeanne's right hand.

"I see that the good captain has impeccable tastes, miss. Let me present myself: Major General James Thomas Brudenell, Earl of Cardigan."

"Pleased to meet you, General." Said Jeanne as warmly as she could force herself to do. "I am Lady Jeanne D'Orléans, Gordon's fiancée."

Lord Cardigan raised an eyebrow in interest then.

"Then I could hope to see you again, possibly at the Winchester Barracks, Lady Jeanne?"

"Maybe, my good general."

"If you will excuse us now, sir," cut in Gordon politely, "I have to present Jeanne to the other guests."

"Of course, Captain. Please proceed." Replied amiably Lord Cardigan, kissing again Jeanne's hand before the later faced the baroness nearby. After short presentations with the aging woman, the couple went on towards another group of guests, with Gordon whispering as soon as they were away from Cardigan.

"You see! It wasn't so bad after all."

"Gordon, the man was pleasant because he is hoping to seduce me one day and bed me. He thinks that he is irresistible to women. Believe my female intuition on that." Shrugging his shoulders at that, Gordon then guided Jeanne from guest to guest, exchanging presentations and pleasantries all the while. He whispered to her again when they approached the trio of French exiled aristocrats.

"Beware! This is Prince Philippe D'Orléans, Count of Paris, Head of the House of Orléans and grandson of the late King Louis-Philippe. Besides him are his mother, Princess Helena of Mecklemburg, and his grandmother and ex-Queen of France, Queen Marie-Amélie. From the way they are watching you approach, I would say that they don't like you."

The trio's attitude was indeed frosty as Jeanne curtsied in front of Prince Philippe, while Gordon bowed his head politely.

"Your Highness, may I present my new fiancée, Lady Jeanne D'Orléans?"

The young prince exchanged a quick glance with his mother and grandmother before looking up at the couple, as he was quite shorter.

“We already know Lady Jeanne well, sir. How long have you known her?”

“A whole week.” Replied Gordon deadpan, making the French look severely at Jeanne. Princess Helena actually sneered at her.

“So, she is still a fast girl. It didn’t take her long either to seduce our cousin Pierre Alphonse in the Guadeloupe.”

Gordon repressed his anger with difficulty: this was not the first time that he met the D’Orléans and their snobbery was really starting to get on his nerves. He drilled Princess Helena with his eyes while answering in a cold voice.

“Your Highness, Jeanne conquered my heart by being the extremely intelligent, kind and caring woman she is. She doesn’t flaunt her fortune around and is dedicated to a number of charitable works. I also believe that she truly loves me as well and I intend to marry her by the end of this month.”

The trio of aristocrats stared at Gordon for a moment, taken aback by his forcefulness. Prince Philippe then nodded his head curtly.

“If this is your true feeling for her, sir, then I can only wish you happiness together.”

The three French then walked away to join a group of English aristocrats. Gordon gave Jeanne an apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry if they were disagreeable to you, my dear. No doubt that they will now spread nasty stories about you around them.”

“Well, I will have to prove them wrong publicly, I guess.”

Jeanne’s eyes then caught sight of two tall men in foreign military uniforms talking with each other.

“That officer on the right, isn’t he wearing the uniform of a Russian imperial guard cuirassier?”

Gordon looked at her with unmitigated surprise at those words.

“You do know your military uniforms very well, Jeanne. Yes, Baron Koslov is a cuirassier officer and is the Russian military attaché. The one speaking with him is the Prussian military attaché, Colonel Franz Von Schwarz. Would you like to speak with them?”

“Absolutely!” She answered enthusiastically at once.

Wading through the guests, the couple soon stopped besides the two military attachés, who couldn’t help stare admiringly at Jeanne as she bowed to them, giving

them a plunging view down her wide cleavage. Jeanne then surprised them by exchanging greetings in both Russian and German, making Gordon roll his eyes in dismay: if his count was right that made twenty languages in her incredible encyclopedia of knowledge and abilities. She then switched back to English for Gordon's benefit.

"It is truly nice to see officers from different nations speaking amicably together instead of fighting each other. Peace is so much preferable to war."

"You are right, Lady Jeanne." Replied Koslov. "While soldiers may cover themselves with glory, war too often brings ruin and misery to a country. I personally hope that the British crown and the Russian crown will be able to resolve their differences peacefully."

"I hope so too fervently, Baron, even if I am not overly optimistic about the prospects of peace around the Black Sea. Would you mind telling me about yourself?"

"Not at all, Lady Jeanne!" Replied the delighted Russian. The four of them were soon engaged in a group conversation that naturally veered towards military subjects and military history. Sir Charles, who was standing nearby with other guests, soon excused himself with them and discreetly joined Gordon's group, listening with growing awe as Jeanne went head to head with Koslov in an animated but friendly discussion on the strategies and tactics of the battles of the Napoleonic invasion of Russia in 1812. More and more guests around them then caught on to the fact that Jeanne was talking like an expert soldier and started eyeing her with both surprise and misgivings. Sir Charles saw that and gently touched Jeanne's arm.

"Uh, I must congratulate you on your military knowledge, my dear Jeanne, but I believe that your musical instruments have been brought in and are waiting for you near the musicians. Would you like to play something for the other guests?"

Jeanne, suddenly catching on to the fact that she was attracting the wrong kind of attention, grinned and nodded to Sir Charles.

"I would certainly love that, Sir Charles."

After Jeanne excused herself with Koslov and Von Schwarz and as she made her way towards the small musical band sitting in a corner of the lounge, Gordon patted his father's shoulder.

"Nice move, Father. Sometimes, Jeanne talks and acts much like a soldier and, while I don't mind that, others may think that she is not a proper lady because of that."

"Well, now we will see her feminine side...which should be quite nice indeed."

"You have no idea, Father!" Replied Gordon with a grin.

Jeanne first played her lyre, a small model that was actually more properly named a 'bardic harp' and could be played even when standing. Playing solo a melancholic tune on her harp, she started singing in the beautiful voice Gordon had quickly learned to admire and appreciate. Her words were however in some foreign language that, while sounding nice, was unknown to him and to the other guests. Her overall performance on her first tune however still attracted sincere applauses from the guests and from Sir Charles. Jeanne bowed at the applauses and smiled to the crowd around her.

"What I played was a very old Greek love song from 2,800 years ago. I will now use my lute to sing a French troubadour song of a more modern variety."

Switching instruments, she asked for some extra room around her, then started playing a fast, catchy tune while singing in French and dancing around. That performance made a grinning Baron Koslov clap his hands to accompany her singing and playing.

"By Saint Peter, this woman could bewitch any man!"

Jeanne apparently heard him and, at the end of her second tune, waved to him to join her.

"You can dance a good Cossack tune, Baron Koslov?"

"Of course I can!"

"Then accompany me here!"

She then started playing a fiery Russian tune while dancing around. Gordon, like the others around him, opened his eyes wide when Jeanne, still playing her lute, crouched and started dancing by alternatively throwing up her legs, showing tremendous stamina and agility. Koslov made a meritorious effort to follow her but had to give up after a couple of minutes, out of breath and sweating heavily. Gordon gave him a glass of chilled champagne as the Russian officer rejoined the ranks of the spectators while Jeanne kept dancing, singing and playing around.

"Here! I believe that you need to refresh yourself, Baron."

"Thank you my good Gordon. I'm afraid that I am not as young as I believed. Your fiancée certainly is in top physical shape, apart from being an excellent musician, dancer and singer."

"I have to say that she keeps surprising me every day."

Gordon then saw the loving look Jeanne was giving him while giving her performance. Koslov saw it too and whispered to Gordon.

“You, sir, are one lucky man indeed!”

“Ain’t I!” Replied Gordon enthusiastically, having eyes only for her.

17:41 (London Time)

Tuesday, March 28, 1854

14 Belgrave Square, London

“...and whoever has objections to this marriage, speak now or hold your peace forever.”

The judge looked briefly around the crowded lounge of the groom’s house and, seeing nobody with obvious qualms about the union, looked back at the couple facing him.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss.”

Cheers went up as Gordon and Jeanne, him in his best uniform and her in a custom-made white nuptial dress, passionately kissed each other. In the forefront of the onlookers was a relieved Sir Charles, holding the right hand of his crying wife. The bride’s gown had proved longer to make and fit than expected, due to Jeanne’s unusual size, a fact that had delayed the ceremony by two days and caused no ends of problems in rescheduling the invitations. To further sour things, this morning’s newspapers had announced that England was, along with France, declaring war against Russia, in defense of Turkey. Carmelia had cried then, knowing that her only child was probably going to go to war in a distant place. Now, Carmelia was crying tears of joy at the sight of Gordon and Jeanne kissing. Moving forward, Sir Charles and Carmelia were the first to hug and kiss the newlyweds, then stepped aside to let the other guests do the same. Charles thought that at least the announcement of war with Russia was a good explanation why Baron Koslov would not attend the ceremony: Charles and Gordon would still have welcomed the military attaché but the Russian was probably busy packing up for home right now.

Sir Charles’ attention was suddenly attracted to a soldier in uniform being led in the lounge by Thomas. The man, wearing a Hussars uniform, looked unsure of what to do, so Charles went to him and addressed him discreetly.

“May we do something for you, Sergeant?”

“You may, sir.” Replied the NCO, also keeping his voice low. “I have urgent orders to pass to Captain Smythe but I seem to have arrived at a most inopportune moment.”

“Indeed, Sergeant, but orders are orders. Please follow me.”

“Thank you, sir!” Said the grateful soldier before following Charles through the crowd of guests. Once face to face with Gordon, the sergeant stopped at rigid attention and saluted crisply.

“Sir!” He said in a loud voice as Gordon returned his salute. “I’m sorry to announce to you that your leave has been cut short on orders of Lord Paget. You are to report no later than sundown tomorrow at the Winchester Barracks, ready for field operations, sir!”

“Do you know why such orders were issued, Sergeant?”

“No, sir, but I know that the leaves in the whole army have been cancelled, sir.” Gordon then looked sadly at Jeanne, who was fighting off tears.

“It must be about Crimea. I’m sorry, Jeanne: I will have to leave early in the morning.”

The despondent Gordon then saw a flash in Jeanne’s eyes. Her face hardening with resolve, she took hold of his hands and spoke out loud in a firm voice.

“Gordon, I will not let you go alone. I will go too to Crimea if you are shipped there.”

“But, that could be dangerous!” Protested Gordon. “You could get killed or contract a sickness.”

“I would much prefer die at your side than to wait in England while you risk your life daily over there, my love.”

Deeply touched by this, Sir Charles put one hand on her left shoulder.

“That was an answer worthy of a Smythe, Jeanne.”

He then looked firmly at Gordon as the guests around them nodded approvingly.

“Don’t leave her, my son. She deserves to be with you, all the way.”

Gordon exchanged a tearful look with Jeanne and spoke in a strangled voice.

“Then we will live and die together, me and Jeanne.”

Cheers rose from the male guests as the newlyweds kissed each other again, while Carmelia and most of the other women present broke out in tears.

16:22 (London Time)
Wednesday, March 29, 1854
8th Hussars regimental barracks
Winchester, Southern England

“Sergeant-Major, I see Captain Smythe up the road, riding this way with a woman.”

Grabbing the regimental roster list, Regimental Sergeant-Major Sean O’Neil got out of the guard shack located at the entrance to the barracks complex, joining Private Harry Brooks by the side of the dirt road that led in the complex. Squinting his eyes from the sudden change of luminosity, the beefy RSM saw that Captain Smythe was effectively approaching at a trot, followed closely by a tall woman on a brown horse. What then caught his attention was the fact that the woman was sitting astride her horse and was not riding Amazon-style, as a proper lady should have done. He soon had a better look at her as the two riders stopped briefly in front of the guard shack. Coming to attention, O’Neil crisply saluted Captain Smythe, while Private Brooks presented arms with his rifled musket. The captain looked to be in his usual good spirits as he returned their salute.

“Good afternoon, Sergeant-Major O’Neil! I’m reporting back early from leave, as ordered. Do you have any directives or orders from Lord Paget for me?”

“Yes sir! You are to report to his office on arrival, sir.”

O’Neil then glanced at the woman, who was dressed with a red jacket and a green skirt that curiously split in half, which permitted her to ride like a man without being indecent in the process. Her shapely body and beauty were going to attract many eyes around the barracks.

“May I ask who is the lady, sir?”

“By all means, Sergeant-Major!” Replied Smythe, grinning. “This is my new wife, Lady Jeanne. Jeanne, this is Mister Sean O’Neil, our RSM.”

To Sean’s delighted surprise, the woman then spoke in fluent Gaelic.

“Pleased to meet you, Mister O’Neil, or do you prefer to be called RSM?”

“Mister O’Neil will do just fine in your case, madam.” Replied Sean, also in Gaelic. Gordon then exchanged another salute with O’Neil and rode towards the regimental headquarters, followed by Jeanne. Stopping and dismounting near the entrance to the headquarters, they both tied their horses to a pole before entering the

three-story brick building. The lobby they entered was decorated with battle trophies and pieces of regimental mementos. Jeanne looked at the 8th Hussars regimental flag, bearing the embroidered names of the battles the regiment had fought, her face solemn.

“A proud, distinguished unit indeed.”

Gordon nodded his head proudly.

“And one I am proud to belong to. Lord Paget’s office is on the next floor up.”

Leading the way, Gordon climbed the wooden staircase to the first floor and turned left, following a wide corridor for about twenty yards before stopping in front of an open door. The few NCOs and junior officers they met saluted Gordon before hoggling Jeanne in her back. The lieutenant who served as the Aide De Camp to Lord Paget also gave her a quick admiring look before speaking briefly with Gordon, then going inside an adjacent office. The ADC soon came back out, letting Gordon in Lord Paget’s office while inviting Jeanne to sit and wait.

Lord Paget was a small, aging man with graying hair and a large moustache. Gordon knew that, despite his age and time in the service, the aristocrat had no experience of real war, having purchased his commission and successive ranks. He was however a mild-mannered gentleman, in contrast to Lord Cardigan, and greeted Gordon warmly.

“Aah, my good Smythe! Please, have a chair.”

Taking the seat offered by his commander, Gordon sat rigidly as Paget went on.

“I’m dreadfully sorry to have had to cut your leave short, especially in view of your marriage, but Lord Raglan has ordered all leaves to be cancelled. He has also notified a number of army units, including our own, to be ready to depart for the Black Sea area.”

Gordon stiffened then: up to now, Jeanne’s predictions were decidedly proving to be flawless. That, along with her visions of advanced machines and weapons, kept raising gnawing questions about her in Gordon’s mind. While he loved her deeply and believed the feeling to be mutual, he was starting to wonder what her accidental amnesia may still be hiding from her mind. His few days at the Smythes Manor with her had demonstrated to Gordon that Jeanne was not only thinking often like a professional soldier: she also had proven that she could shoot both pistols and rifles like a top marksman and also ride a horse as if she had been born in the saddle.

“Do you know when we could be leaving, sir?”

“Details are still sketchy, but I expect the regiment to sail within a month, maybe as soon as two weeks time. What I want from you, Captain, is to make sure that B Troop is ready in all respects for a military campaign around the Black Sea, and this as soon as possible.”

“B Troop will be ready, sir!” Replied firmly Gordon, attracting a satisfied smile on Paget’s face.

“I know it will, Captain. Do you have any questions before you are dismissed?”

“Only one, sir. You know that, according to the Queen’s Regulations, about six wives per hundred men can accompany a unit in a campaign. My new wife, Lady Jeanne, desires to accompany me in the oncoming war and to serve as a field nurse and ambulance driver. I would be most obliged if you would permit her to do so.”

Lord Paget stared at him for a moment, not a little surprised.

“But...that could be a most hard and grizzly job. Is she sure that she really wants to do this?”

“You can ask her personally, sir: she came with me and is waiting in the next office. As for her abilities and toughness, I can vouch that she would be most fit for the job, sir.”

“Then, I would very much like to speak with her, Captain.” Said Paget before shouting towards his ADC’s office. “Lieutenant Campbell, please send the lady in!”

The moment Jeanne stepped in, Gordon saw Paget’s face soften as he looked up and down her tall, fit frame.

“I am told that you wish to accompany this regiment as a field nurse and ambulance driver, madam. You do realize the dangers and hardships of such a position, I hope?”

“I do, sir!” She replied, coming to attention. “I have a good knowledge of medicine and first aid, am an excellent rider and know how to drive a wagon. I also know how to live in field conditions, sir.”

Her firm reply and stance seemed to impress Lord Paget, who nodded his head in appreciation.

“In that case, consider yourself on strength of this regiment as a field nurse as of today. Go see the regimental surgeon first, then visit the paymaster, so that he can put you in his books.”

“Thank you, sir! Your comprehension is much appreciated, sir.” Said Jeanne, grinning. Paget then looked at Gordon.

“You are dismissed as well, Captain. You can escort your wife around for now. Be ready with a roster of the men fit for field duty in your troop by tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir!” Shouted Gordon, shooting up from his chair and saluting. Lord Paget watched in amusement as both the captain and his wife did a simultaneous about turn and walked out single file at a regulation pace. Lady Jeanne Smythe promised to be a very interesting cat indeed.

Leading Jeanne out of the headquarters building, Gordon followed its eastern façade towards a small building that appeared to have been built as an afterthought. It certainly looked neglected enough to Jeanne the nearer they got to it.

“This is the infirmary?” She said in a dismayed tone.

“What passes for one, unfortunately.” Replied Gordon, embarrassed. “Funds for medical care are quite scarce and have been so for many years. The regiment, like the rest of the army, had to make do with very limited resources in nearly everything.”

As they were about to enter the infirmary, Jeanne noticed that half of the windows were broken and were either boarded up or crudely covered with cardboard. She also nearly tripped on a broken step of the entrance’s wooden stairs.

“Well, I know now where to spend some of my fortune.”

“Wait!” Replied Gordon, deadpan. “You haven’t seen all of it yet.”

Once inside, Jeanne was able to see that the building was a near ruin, with rotting floor planks and ceiling beams and with whitewashed brick walls showing cracks. It was now evident to her that the so-called infirmary was nothing more than an old converted stable. Seeing her scandalized expression, Gordon led her straight to a small room next to the entrance, where they found a frail young man sitting on a rickety chair and reading a medical journal. Apart from a worn suit, the young man wore an overcoat to stay warm in the cold building, as the stove in one corner was empty. On seeing Gordon and Jeanne, the young man smiled timidly and rose from his chair, putting the journal he was reading on it.

“Good afternoon miss, Captain Smythe. May I do something for you?” He said in a juvenile voice. He could not be much more than twenty years old and looked very shy and unassuming. Somehow, Jeanne took an immediate liking to him. Gordon then made the presentations.

“Doctor, this is my wife, Lady Jeanne. Jeanne, this is Hospital Assistant Thomas Farrell, of the Army Medical Department. He took his post here only a few months ago.”

“Fresh from medical school, I presume?” Asked Jeanne while shaking hand with Farrell, who nodded his head.

“Correct, Lady Jeanne. I graduated from St-Thomas Hospital in December and immediately joined the army, hoping to travel around the World and see exotic places.” Farrell then swept his arms around, his face reflecting disillusion.

“Instead I got...this!”

Jeanne then patted the doctor’s shoulder, smiling in encouragement at him.

“Don’t despair, Mister Farrell: you are probably about to see lots of exotic places, apart from having your hands full of patients soon enough.”

“What do you mean, madam?”

Jeanne looked sharply at the surprised doctor and shook her head.

“Let me guess, Doctor: apart from getting little or no consideration, this regiment is treating you like a mushroom, that is they keep you in the dark and feed you shit.”

“That’s the story of my short military assignment, madam.” Replied Farrell, smiling. “So, what is going on?”

“We are going to war against Russia and will depart for the Black Sea within a few weeks. The good news is that I am accompanying you as a field nurse and ambulance driver.”

His face reflecting joy, the young doctor looked at Gordon.

“Does this mean that I can be rid of Mister Connors, Captain?”

“Aah, yes, Trooper Connors!” Said Gordon, while Jeanne listened on, visibly confused.

“Who is this Trooper Connors, Doctor?”

“What passes as my medical orderly. Let me show you.”

Leading the couple out of his office, the doctor crossed the hallway and entered a large, dilapidated room filled with a double row of shoddy beds, each supporting a straw mattress of dubious cleanliness. Two of the beds were occupied, one by a young soldier sporting a big cast around his left arm, the other by a bearded man sleeping and snoring like a bear. Doctor Farrell pointed at the snoring man.

“That’s Trooper Connors, madam.”

Walking quickly to Connors’ bed, Jeanne bent down and sniffed close to his face before straightening up, reprobation on her face.

“This man is drunk! Is he still on duty?”

“According to my watch he is, madam.”

Gordon was about to give a rough waking up to Connors when Jeanne preceded him by taking hold of the side of the drunk's bed and violently toppling it. Connors, thrown on his face without warning, woke up with a startle and got up on shaky legs. His angry look changed to surprise at the sight of Jeanne, then to fear when he saw Gordon. Jeanne then once again took the initiative, planting herself in front of the trooper and shouting angrily at him.

"Don't you have duties to perform, Trooper? This infirmary needs a good sweeping and mopping. Get to it!"

"Yes maam!" Said the drunk, his eyes still foggy, before running out of the ward. While Farrell looked with awed surprise at Jeanne, Gordon had a hard time containing his laughter.

"By Jove, my dear! Should I expect this kind of treatment if I ever displease you?"

"You better believe it, buster!" She replied jokingly while shaking an index at him. Then becoming serious, she looked at both Farrell and Gordon.

"Doctor, lots of lives will soon depend on you. The last thing you need is a drunkard to weigh you down around a battlefield. Gordon, is there a way to get a more dependable soldier to help the doctor?"

The officer shook his head after thinking for a moment.

"I doubt it very much, Jeanne. Troop officers will not send a good soldier to what is considered a low priority duty, like infirmary duty. Connors was most probably assigned here because nobody wanted him. He has already lost his corporal's stripes twice for drunkenness and dereliction of duty."

"Damn!" Muttered Jeanne, annoyed. "What about some of the soldiers' wives who will accompany the regiment to Crimea? Can one or two be assigned to Doctor Farrell?"

"Uh, probably." Answered Gordon hesitantly, not prepared for her last question.

"Good! Then we could use up to two women to help the doctor at his future field dressing station, plus another one to assist me in driving the regimental ambulance, so that I can patch up wounded soldiers before loading them in our wagon."

"Uh, there is a problem with that, Lady Jeanne." Said Farrell, obviously embarrassed. "I don't have an ambulance wagon. In fact, I don't have any horse or vehicle assigned to the infirmary."

That got him a look of shocked disbelief from Jeanne.

“Then, how the hell did the regiment expect you to go around and treat the wounded and sick?”

“The Commissariat representative told me that they would provide something if and when the need comes.”

“The Commissariat!” Spat Jeanne contemptuously. “Don’t wait for anything from those rule-bound, incompetent civilian bureaucrats, unless excuses are what you are looking for, Doctor.”

“She’s right, Doctor.” Added Gordon glumly. “Unfortunately, the regiment can’t help you here, since the Commissariat Department of the Treasury Ministry controls army logistics. I had to buy my own war horse with my personal money, believe it or not.”

“Bureaucrats!” Uttered Jeanne as if it was an insult. She then looked resolutely at Farrell. “Don’t worry about infirmary transportation, Doctor: I will take care of it personally. Do you have any other pressing needs to be filled before you are ready to do battlefield duty?”

“Well, I do have my own set of surgical instruments, but I am short of most medical supplies. I don’t even have a single stretcher as it is.”

“I will take care of that too. Please write down a detailed list of your needs by noon tomorrow. I will be going back to London then to place orders for supplies and equipment.”

Taking out her pocket watch, Jeanne looked at it briefly, then smiled at her husband.

“A quarter past five. How about presenting me informally to your gang of ruffians before supper, Gordon?”

“As you wish, my dear. Don’t expect geniuses and saints, though.”

“Believe me, Gordon: I’ve already seen the worst there is before.”

Taking time first to bring their luggage to Gordon’s room in the building reserved for the officers, then to lead their horses to the stables, the couple entered a barrack block that faced the headquarters building from across a large parade square. While clean, it became quickly obvious to Jeanne that the building was overcrowded and lacked even running water. The communal room assigned to B Troop was actually on the second floor and lodged about fifty men amidst wooden bunk beds and small personal lockers, with three tables and a few benches and chairs thrown in. The farthest bunks were actually crudely separated visually from the other bunks by gray wool

blankets hanging vertically around their sides. A corporal that saw them enter then snapped to attention and shouted.

“ROOM!”

The soldier’s shout brought the room’s occupants to a standstill. It also made the heads of five young children and two women pop out from behind the blanket partitions. Gordon saw Jeanne’s surprised look and whispered in her ear.

“Those are the families of my married troopers. There are no formal married quarters for the junior ranks and a simple soldier can’t afford civilian housing. This is unfortunately the best that can be done for them.”

Gordon then shouted at his men.

“At ease, men! Please gather up in the middle of the room: I have news to pass. I would also like your wives to join in as well.”

“You heard the captain! Move!” Shouted the senior sergeant present. Gordon and Jeanne soon had 46 soldiers and seven women formed in a semi-circle around them, with a dozen children of varied age looking on with curiosity from atop bunk beds. Gordon looked briefly around the crowd before starting to speak in a sober tone.

“As you must know by now, we are at war with Russia because of its attack on Turkey. Our regiment is expected to sail within a month for the Black Sea, as part of an expeditionary force that will also include French troops.”

“Blimey, sir! We are going to travel with shiploads of frogs, sir?” Asked a young soldier, starting a round of laughter. Jeanne took a false air of indignation then.

“Et l’Entente Cordiale, merde?”

Laughter redoubled as the private turned red with embarrassment. Gordon shook an index at him playfully.

“Private Pearson, please be respectful to my new wife, Lady Jeanne, especially since she may be dressing your wounds one fine day.”

Becoming serious again, Gordon scanned the faces of his men and of their wives. While most of the men seemed to take the news of the war in stride, the women uniformly looked tense and apprehensive now.

“My wife Jeanne will accompany the regiment overseas and will help Doctor Farrell as a field nurse. She is looking for up to three women to assist her for infirmary work. I will now let her speak more on this.”

“Thank you, dear.” Said Jeanne to Gordon before stepping forward and concentrating her attention on the women present.

“I fully realize how hard separation can be, especially for those of you with small children. I also know about the financial hardships you may go through if left in England. The oncoming war will be no picnic, though. The Winter weather in Crimea is very harsh and diseases plague the whole area. You can also expect little or no material support from those uncaring incompetents from the Commissariat. On the other hand, the three women who will accompany me to work with Doctor Farrell can expect lots of hard work, primitive living conditions and heart-wrenching sights. I will need persons with a strong will, with at least one who can drive a heavy wagon. I would also prefer women with no children in their charge. I know that a ballot normally decides which of you accompany their husbands overseas, but I am ready to offer a better way out of your predicament.”

What she said then surprised even Gordon.

“As a strictly personal initiative outside of army rules and customs and out of my own pocket, I am ready to offer a special war separation allowance to all the wives from this unit staying behind in England. That allowance will run from the day the regiment leaves the barracks to until your men come home. If one or more of you are widowed by this war, then this separation allowance will become a lifetime pension.”

There were seconds of total silence as the stunned British stared at her, digesting what she had just said. One woman then timidly raised one hand, speaking after Jeanne nodded her head to her.

“I don’t want to sound picky, madam, but how much would be this...allowance?”

“One Pound Sterling a week per wife, plus an extra two shillings a week per child.” Answered Jeanne, smiling. She could nearly feel the wave of relief and joy that went through the crowd then. The same woman who asked about the allowance grinned to her.

“Madam, with such a generous allowance you will not get one volunteer to follow you overseas.”

“Depends!” Replied Jeanne, deadpan. “Apart from offering a good field pay, I was counting to find women dedicated enough to their husbands to follow them to Hell if need be.”

A stoutly built woman in her mid-thirties then stepped out of the crowd. About five feet four inches tall and with red hair, her brown eyes looked firmly at Jeanne as she spoke resolutely.

“I’m going with you, madam. I know how to drive a wagon or a mule as well as I can drive a man and I’m damned if I will let my James down!”

“May I have your name, madam?” Asked Jeanne, both amused and impressed.

“Sarah Champion, wife of Troop Sergeant-Major Champion. All my children died of cholera two years ago, so I have nothing to hold me back.”

“I am sorry for your loss, madam. I will speak to you in private afterwards.”

Jeanne then looked at the other women around her.

“Any other volunteers?”

After a short hesitation, two more women stepped forward nearly simultaneously.

“I’m Mary Pearson, wife of Trooper John Pearson.” Said the first one, a young and pretty blonde. “I will go with you, if my husband agrees to it.”

The young soldier who had made the joke about French troops looked tenderly at Mary and took her right hand.

“Thank you, my love. I will be happy to know that you are near me.”

Another trooper whispered in the ear of the other woman that had stepped forward, who then spoke up firmly.

“I’m Margaret Ward, wife of Corporal Joseph Ward. I will go as well.”

Jeanne smiled at the slightly overweight brunette in her mid-twenties.

“Excellent! I will speak to you as well as to Misses Pearson and Champion in private while my husband gets on with his men.”

Leading the three women to the farthest bunk bed, Jeanne invited them to sit on it, then sat on the bunk opposite from it.

“Before we go further, I must tell you that I married Captain Smythe only yesterday. As you get to know me, you may find me quite unusual, as I can shoot, ride, fence and fight better than most men. I also speak a number of languages, including Turkish and Russian. By the way, please call me simply Jeanne: I am a very informal woman. Yes, Sarah?”

“Correct me if I am wrong, mad...uh, Jeanne,” said the wife of Sergeant-Major Champion, “but I thought that the regiment had no ambulance wagon left. That old drunkard of a doctor we had until last November smashed the ambulance while driving it stone drunk. We’ve been waiting for a new one ever since.”

“I am taking care of that, Sarah. In fact, I will leave for London tomorrow afternoon to order supplies and equipment for the infirmary, including a wagon and a light cart. By the way, I will also need to measure you so that I can buy warm Winter clothes for the three of you.”

“Why?” Then said weakly Margaret Ward, bordering on tears. “Why are you doing all this for us? Nobody cared about us or our husbands before, save for a few rare officers like your husband.”

Jeanne thought for a moment before answering softly.

“I am helping for two main reasons, Margaret. First, I want our husbands to come back alive and well from the coming war. Giving them proper medical care is one way to help doing it. By caring for their families left in England, the morale of our men will be that much higher and their resolve and will to live stronger. Keep this to yourselves for the moment, but I intend to extend this war separation allowance system to all the wives of the junior ranks in the 8th Hussars. I also just made my mind to acquire a number of townhouses in Winchester and to turn them into subsidized housing units for the families of the soldiers who can’t afford civilian housing. This business of sharing accommodations in an open barrack room full of single men is both improper and inhumane.”

“But...all this will cost you a fortune!” Protested Mary Pearson, making Jeanne grin to her.

“That is the second reason why I am helping out: I’m filthy rich and can easily afford those expenses.”

“How filthy rich, exactly?” Asked sneakily Sarah Champion.

“Well, I will keep the full extent of my fortune confidential but, as a clue, I can tell you that the dowry my husband got on marrying me amounted to 100,000 Pounds, which is mere peanuts to me.”

All three British women then gawked at Jeanne, speechless.

18:13 (London Time)

Dining room, 8th Hussars Officers’ Mess

Fanny Duberly, wife of Regimental Paymaster Henry Duberly, was having dinner with her husband at a corner table of the Officers’ Mess dining room when she saw Captain Smythe enter with a richly dressed young lady. Discreetly getting Henry’s attention, Fanny then looked at the newcomer while whispering to her husband.

“This must be the Lady Jeanne I heard about from the men of B Troop. God, is she ever tall!”

“Must be about six feet tall, in fact.” Replied Henry after a quick glance. They both soon could detail Lady Jeanne much better, as Captain Smythe made for the Duberly’s table and stopped with his wife besides it, smiling down at the couple.

“May we sit at your table for dinner? My wife Jeanne has to discuss a few things concerning payroll.”

“Of course, my good Gordon!” Replied Henry cheerfully. “Have a seat, you and your beautiful wife.”

Fanny had a good look at Jeanne as Gordon Smythe gallantly pulled a chair for her. Despite being surprisingly wide-shouldered and muscular for a woman, Lady Jeanne had a most shapely body and a chest that got the undivided attention of Henry, something that prompted Fanny to discreetly kick him under the table. Lady Jeanne also wore a set of beautiful jewels with her elegant red city dress. The stories about her fortune appeared to be true after all. Captain Smythe took the time to call a steward and order dinner for himself and his wife before speaking again to the Duberlys. That gave the occasion to Lady Jeanne to present herself in the meantime. While she had a very slight French accent, Fanny found her English to be flawless. The French woman also radiated confidence and strength of character and immediately gave a favorable impression to Fanny.

“Well,” said finally Gordon Smythe cheerfully, “here we are! You may have heard that Lord Paget has agreed to Jeanne coming with the regiment overseas as a field nurse.”

“We heard rumors to that effect, Gordon.” Replied Fanny. “It will be nice to have another lady coming along with me.”

“You are going overseas as well?” Asked an obviously delighted Jeanne.

“Of course! I can’t let my Henry go on his own, can’t I?”

“True!” Said Jeanne, grinning. “Men are like lost children when away from their wives: they tend to play around. Those old Turkish pashas with their harems of young women will probably not be pleased to see the flower of British manhood descend by the thousand on their land.”

“Hmm, a point of view I didn’t think about before, Jeanne. Thanks for the warning.”

“Ahem!” Said Henry, clearing his voice. “So, Lady Jeanne, you are ready to serve Her Majesty the Queen in the field, all for the fantastic pay of three shillings a week?”

“Three shillings a week?” Exclaimed Jeanne in faked delight. “I’m overwhelmed, sir!”

Gordon giggled at that, patting Jeanne’s hand.

“Don’t listen to her. She probably could buy the whole regiment, lock, stock and barrel, without denting her fortune. She only needs to be put in your pay books so that her position becomes official.”

“That’s right.” Seconded Jeanne. “I will probably use my pay to help feed and care for my horse.”

“Is it true that you are going to give a separation allowance to the wives staying behind?” Asked Fanny. Jeanne then stared at her, now serious.

“I see that rumors fly quickly around here. Yes, it is true, but I was hoping for this to stay low key. I am also paying for three women to come with me to help Doctor Farrell.”

“May I ask which ones, Jeanne?”

“You may, Fanny. They are Misses Champion, Ward and Pearson. They are going mostly out of devotion to their husbands, though, a much better incentive than simply pay.”

“Just out of curiosity,” ventured politely Henry, “how much do you intend to pay those women?”

“Three pounds a week, plus rations if not provided by those idiots from the Commissariat.” Answered Jeanne nonchalantly. While her answer made the Duberly’s choke with surprise, a civilian gentleman eating at a nearby table gave Jeanne a dark look on hearing her last words. Fanny could swear then that Jeanne noticed the man’s reaction but ignored him as she went on in good humor.

“Talking of supplies, may I counsel both of you to bring warm clothing with you for Crimea? The winters there can be very harsh indeed.”

“But...the war will certainly be over by Christmas.” Protested Henry, getting a dubious look from Jeanne.

“Home by Christmas...an old saying indeed but one you should not be putting much store into in this case. Believe me, sir: this will be one long and miserable war.”

The uneasy silence that followed was broken by the showing up of Thomas Farrell, who timidly approached their table and saluted the Duberly’s and Gordon before handing a sheet of paper to Jeanne.

“Here is the list of supplies and equipment required for the infirmary, Jeanne, as you earlier requested.”

Taking the paper, Jeanne looked questioningly at Henry and Fanny.

“Would you mind if Doctor Farrell sits at our table?”

“He is most welcome to it, Jeanne.” Replied quickly the paymaster, who then looked up at Farrell. “Have you eaten yet, Doctor?”

“Uh, not yet, as a matter of fact.” The young surgeon answered in his mild voice.

“Then please join us for dinner, Doctor.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

A steward showed up nearly at once to take the doctor’s order. Jeanne had finished reading Farrell’s list by the time the steward walked away.

“What about chloroform, Doctor? Do you have some already in stock?”

Farrell hesitated for a moment, unsure how to phrase his answer.

“In truth I have none, Jeanne, but the medical department is not favorable to the use of chloroform.”

“Why? I know about the possible side effects of chloroform but those are certainly minor compared to the agony of having a limb amputated while fully conscious. What is your personal opinion about the use of chloroform, Doctor?”

“Frankly, I have not formed an opinion on the subject, Jeanne.”

“Would you mind then if I buy some chloroform?”

Farrell was suddenly conscious that the regiment’s Commissariat representative, Mister Grant, was looking severely at him from a nearby table. Jeanne noticed it too and stared at the plump civilian.

“Do you mind, sir?”

Seeing that other patrons of the mess around him eyed him with antipathy, Grant cut short his meal and, rising from his chair, left the dining room. Fanny Duberly, who had no love for the civil servant, looked with glee at Jeanne.

“My God, that’s what I would call staring someone down. Are you always this feisty, Jeanne?”

“You haven’t seen half of her yet.” Replied Gordon, a big smile on his face. Farrell then made up his mind.

“On second thought, add chloroform to my list, Jeanne.”

“Good boy!” Was Jeanne’s happy reply as she patted his shoulder.

12:41 (London Time)

Thursday, March 30, 1854

8th Hussars regimental stables

Jeanne gave a last kiss to Gordon as she was about to mount her brown mare, watched by a few troopers on stable duty.

“You can expect me back in about two weeks maximum. Don’t leave for Crimea without me, you lovely hunk.”

“I won’t, I promise. Those will be two long, lonely weeks, Jeanne.”

“For me too, love. Wish me luck!”

Taking three quick steps, Jeanne then jumped astride her horse without help, attracting appreciative comments from the troopers present. Blowing a kiss to Gordon, she turned her horse towards the stable’s open door and rode off at a gallop. Troop Sergeant-Major James Champion, who was supervising the stable’s work detail, approached Gordon and whispered in his ear.

“I didn’t thank you yet for letting my wife come with me, sir. I owe you a big one, sir.”

“Correction, Sergeant-Major: you owe my wife a big one.” Replied Gordon in a quiet voice. “God, I miss her already.”

“That’s the mark of true love, sir.” Said Champion before returning to his supervisory duties.

16:49 (London Time)

Friday, April 14, 1854

Parade square, 8th Hussars regimental barracks

Winchester, England

“REGIMENT, ATTEN...TION!”

Four hundred and sixty officers and men snapped to attention at Major William Henry’s command. Along one side of the parade square were lined up Doctor Farrell, 35 regimental wives and two other civilians designated to accompany the unit overseas. Only seven soldiers either sick or on guard duty were not present on the parade square for the commander’s address. Pivoting on his heels, Major Henry then marched six

paces forward and stopped in front of the dais on which stood Lord Paget, saluting him crisply.

“Regiment present and ready, sir!”

“Thank you, Major!” Replied Paget, saluting back. Henry then marched to the side of the dais and took position there. Scanning the troops, the lieutenant colonel then spoke as loud as he could.

“Officers and men of the 8th Royal Hussars! I am pleased to announce to you that I have received from the brigade commander, Lord Cardigan, our marching orders for the war. We will leave this garrison with all our horses and our baggage train on the morning of April 20th and will then ride to Plymouth, where we will board the transport ships SANS PAREIL and WANDERER. We will then sail on April 22nd for the Black Sea. Our destination will be the port of Varna, on the Bulgarian coast of the Black Sea. We should arrive in Varna around early June, weather permitting. The following sub-units will be part of the overseas contingent.”

Taking a sheet of paper handed to him by his ADC, Lord Paget then read slowly, letting each sub-unit commander acknowledge the call.

“Headquarters Troop, A Troop, B Troop, C Troop, D Troop, Quartermaster Troop and Regimental Ambulance. The sub-units staying behind in these barracks will be E Troop, F Troop and the Regimental Band. The garrison commander here will be Captain Ramsay Fields as of April 20th. I am sure that every one of you will do his duty to the Queen to his utmost capacity. God save the Queen! Major Henry, you can dismiss the troops!”

“Sir!” Shouted the major, saluting Paget as the latter left the dais. Marching back in front of the regiment and stopping at attention, Henry shouted at the top of his lungs.

“OFFICERS, DIS...MISSED!...SERGEANT-MAJOR, TAKE THE PARADE!”

“YES SIR!” Shouted back RSM O’Neil before taking place in front of the men and dismissing them with a few quick orders.

After being dismissed with the other officers by Major Henry, Gordon gathered with the others along the north side of the parade square to discuss their new orders. Some of their wives, including Fanny Duberly, soon joined them there. On her part, Fanny found her husband Henry in conversation with Gordon and with Captain

Lockwood, of A Troop. She listened to them politely until an officer nearby suddenly spoke up in wonderment.

“What the hell is that?”

Turning her head towards the main gate of the garrison, Fanny watched with the others the strangest wagon she had ever seen roll through the gate. Pulled by two big horses, it had six wheels instead of the standard four, with each wheel being much wider than normal. Its top half was made of white canvas strung on an oval section framing, while the lower half seemed made of wood planks backing a metallic framework, the lot painted green. The word ‘AMBULANCE’ in English, Turkish and Russian was painted in big red letters on the canvas top. One woman was at the reins of the long wagon, which was pulling both a small covered cart and two horses.

“JEANNE!” Suddenly shouted joyfully Gordon Smythe before running towards the wagon. By the time Fanny herself got to the wagon a crowd had formed around it, while Gordon Smythe was kissing passionately his wife. Going around the wagon and examining it in detail with Henry only made Fanny more curious about it, like many others around her. Lord Paget himself then showed up, greeted with pride by Jeanne Smythe.

“Sir, I have the pleasure of presenting you our new regimental mobile field dressing station and your field ambulance, just completed according to my design specifications.”

Paget had one bewildered look at the big white and green wagon before facing Jeanne again.

“Uh, the least that I can say is that it is a most unusual design, Lady Jeanne. Would you care describing it to me quickly?”

“With pleasure, sir! Let’s start with the construction method.”

Going to the right side of the wagon, Jeanne then touched part of the visible metallic framing.

“The wagon’s main structure is made of hollow steel tubes forming connecting trusses. This gives both very high rigidity and relative light weight. Bolted to the metallic frame is a waterproofed shell made of wood planks, which makes the wagon able to float and cross streams and rivers if need be.”

“This can float?” Asked Paget, incredulous. Jeanne smiled and nodded once.

“It does, sir. There are rubber flotation bags for the horses as well. The top part of the framing is lined inside by thin wood paneling and on the outside by waterproofed

canvas. The six wheels are made very wide so that the wagon can negotiate deep mud and snow. The front axle pivots to permit turns, while the two rear axles are fixed. All the axles are however equipped with independent coil spring suspensions, to give a smooth ride to any wounded man transported inside. When stopped and operating as a field dressing station, this wagon can quickly deploy a large tent to the rear, plus two smaller tents on the sides. Let me show you. Gordon, I will need your help here.”

“Coming, dear!”

Going with Jeanne to the rear of the wagon, Gordon watched her first unhook the cart and move it out of the way, along with the two horses tied to it. She then undid a few leather straps holding in place a sort of inverted U-shaped framing to which rolled canvas was attached. She did this on both rear sides, then pulled out two large steel pins held by thin chains to the wagon’s frame. Next, she extended out with Gordon’s help the inverted U-framing, which then proved to be mounted on horizontal telescopic tubing that was part of the wagon’s frame. To everybody’s surprise, the framing turned into a large telescopic tent that was about twenty feet long and six feet wide. Jeanne completed the tent’s installation by pulling out the telescopic legs of the tent’s framing and unrolling the lower canvas parts. After a grand total of four minutes, Jeanne faced back Lord Paget, pointing at the now fully deployed rear tent.

“Here you are, sir: a field dressing tent ready in less than five minutes and able to accommodate six stretchers. As you could see, it is also quite simple to assemble.”

“Indeed! By Jove, I like this!”

“That is not all, sir. Just give me a minute and I will show you.”

Going to the right side of the wagon, Jeanne undid some more straps, then went inside the wagon through the front. To everybody’s amazement, part of the canvas side soon folded down, forming in seconds a sort of side tent suspended over the side of the wagon. Coming out and climbing down, Jeanne pointed at two steel telescopic legs still folded under the side tent.

“Once deployed, those legs help support the floor of that side tent. There is a second, similar folding tent on the other side. One will be reserved for Doctor Farrell and me, the other for the nurses. The rear half of the wagon can accommodate up to six wounded on stretchers during moves, while the forward half contains storage lockers for medical supplies, as well as a small pot-bellied stove.”

Lord Paget scanned the wagon from end to end, then smiled to Jeanne.

“Madam, this is outstanding. Thank you in the name of the regiment.”

“You are most welcome, sir. I do however have one last thing to show you: our field ambulance cart.”

Going again to the back of the big wagon, Jeanne stood besides the compact four-wheeled cart parked side by side with it.

“This is a light cart built on the same principles as the bigger wagon, but it is much lighter and more mobile. It also can float and can carry up to two loaded stretchers under canvas protection. I intend to use it to pick up wounded soldiers on the battlefield and to transport those wounded to the field dressing station.”

“Again you amaze me, Lady Jeanne.” Said Paget, by now truly overwhelmed. “How could we ever repay you for this?”

“Simple, sir: by getting me a written safe-conduct signed by the expedition commander that will guarantee that neither this cart nor the wagon will be requisitioned by anybody for purposes other than the transportation or treatment of the wounded and sick.”

“Madam, you can count on me to do my best to get you that safe-conduct. Have a very good evening, Lady Jeanne.”

Gordon went to Jeanne and kissed her as Lord Paget was walking away.

“Jeanne, you are fantastic! How could you have done all this in so little time?”

“Easy! I threw in lots of money, requested and got top production priority at the Pullman Wagon Company and stood over their backs with a whip in my hands.”

That made both Gordon and the Duberlys laugh. Jeanne then saw Doctor Farrell standing timidly nearby, with Misses Champion, Ward and Pearson besides him.

“Doctor, girls, come with me! I will give you the grand tour.”

“Can I go in too?” Asked eagerly Fanny Duberly. Jeanne smiled to her and took her right hand.

“Sure! You’re coming too, Gordon?”

“Of course, dear!”

Thomas Farrell looked like a big kid entering a toy castle as he climbed in the back of the wagon, using a ladder deployed from under the wagon’s chassis by Jeanne and entering through a wooden door. A grin appeared on his face at the sight of a dozen steel and canvas stretches piled in the left rear corner of the wagon.

“Yes! Just what we needed. Would you believe that Mister Grant, our Commissariat representative, has refused to procure any stretchers, on the pretext that they are not part of the official regimental kit list?”

“What would it take for him to amend that list?” Asked Jeanne in a bitter tone. “A gun to his head?”

“Hey, that could work!” Exclaimed Gordon, making Jeanne smile back to him.

“Maybe I should shoot him and take his place. I would probably save more lives ultimately this way than as a field nurse.”

“It won’t work!” Pronounced firmly Fanny Duberly, deadpan. “They don’t accept women in the public service.”

“I should have known.”

Giggling from Jeanne’s expression, Margaret Ward pointed at a pile of travel bags and storage chests in the right rear corner of the wagon.

“What’s in there? Medical supplies?”

“In the chests, yes. Those travel bags contain our new winter clothing.”

That made Henry Duberly glance dubiously at her.

“You really believe that this war will go past Christmas, are you?”

“You better believe it, sir.” Replied Jeanne, dead serious. “If you haven’t got really warm clothes yet, I will strongly counsel that you buy some before departure. By the way, Gordon, do you know when the regiment will sail for Varna?”

“We will leave Winchester on the 20th and sail from Plymouth two days later.” Answered Gordon before realizing something and looking in amazement at Jeanne.

“Hey! How did you know that our destination is Varna?”

Everybody then stared at Jeanne as she hesitated.

“Uh, simple geography, I guess: Varna is the best port inside the Black Sea and near Constantinople. It is also close to where the Turks and Russians are fighting each other right now. This is unimportant anyway. Let’s continue the tour.”

Not really convinced by her explanation, the group nonetheless followed Jeanne through a canvas curtain partition dividing the inside of the wagon in half. They found themselves in an eight by five and a half feet compartment. The head clearance was high enough even for Gordon to stand without having to bend his head. Mary Pearson had a look through the modesty curtain giving access to the still deployed right side tent and whistled in appreciation.

“Look at this! There is even a real mattress and a bear fur.”

“A bear fur!” Exclaimed Margaret Ward. “What for?”

“A bear fur beats a wool blanket any time in cold weather, Margaret. Now, those side storage bins, apart from acting as seats, also contain reserves of food, grain, water and firewood. Talking of firewood, this small pot-bellied stove here will help us heat this wagon and boil water. For the good doctor, there are those two large supply cabinets where he can store his medications and instruments.”

Going to one of the cabinets pointed by Jeanne, Farrell opened it and went through it, pulling open a number of small drawers.

“This is really well designed, Jeanne. You keep surprising me.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Uh, what is this exactly?” Asked Henry Duberly, holding up a sort of brown leather sleeveless jacket covered with wide cargo pockets that had been hooked to a wall.

“That’s a specially-made medical equipment-carrying vest I intend to use while picking up wounded soldiers on the battlefield. The inside of the shoulder straps are padded in order to distribute the weight. I will also carry a white apron over it that will prevent blood stains on the vest.”

“Including two pistols?” Insisted the paymaster, pointing at the two holsters strapped horizontally to the front of the vest, at belly level. Jeanne nodded slowly, conscious that the other women were looking at her with questioning expressions.

“Actually, I will be armed with two six-shot revolvers, with which I can assure you that I am most proficient.”

“Why be armed?” Wondered Mary Pearson. “Who would attack a nurse treating wounded men?”

“Russian Cossacks, for starters. The Cossacks are first rate cavalymen but they also happen to be extremely undisciplined and most ruthless. If they find a woman with a wounded on the battlefield, they will most probably kill the wounded first, then rape the woman before cutting her throat.”

The women around her gave her horrified looks, while the men’s jaws tightened. Grabbing her web gear from Henry Duberly’s hands, Jeanne then smiled to Fanny.

“Let’s forget the horrors of war. How about a test ride in my light cart, once we have returned this wagon to its rolling mode? It will also give a chance to Misses Champion to prove how good she is at driving a wagon.”

19:57 (London Time)

Officers quarters

8th Hussars barracks

Gordon threw on his bed the two travel bags he had helped Jeanne bring from the medical wagon, then closed the door of his room and locked it while Jeanne dropped the two bags she held. Going to her next, he hugged and kissed her tenderly, then looked her in the eyes.

“Jeanne, I’m proud of you, truly. What you did may save the lives of many of our men.”

“Saving lives is a reward by itself, Gordon. By the way, you should know that I enlisted your father’s help in order to provide for the regimental wives staying behind in Winchester. He will administer my system of allowances and pensions and will also supervise the running of free housing units for military families in Winchester and the shipping from England of essential medical supplies to the regiment in Crimea. Being an old Hussar himself, he was too happy to volunteer for this.”

“You decidedly think about everything, Jeanne. All this good work deserves some reward.”

Gordon then gently laid her flat on the bed and started kissing her all over while undoing her clothes.

09:02 (London Time)

Thursday, April 20, 1854

Parade square, Winchester Barracks

Lord Paget had a last look at his regiment, mounted up and ready to go, then shouted at the top of his lungs.

“REGIMENT, FORWARD...MARCH!”

His order relayed down by his subaltern officers, the long column of cavalymen, pack horses and wagons slowly started moving out of the parade square, heading out of the garrison. Lined up alongside the barracks were the 65 men staying behind, along with the wives not chosen to accompany the regiment overseas. In contrast to other similar separations, the mood and morale of both the men of the regiment and of their families

were very high, thanks to Jeanne's generosity and sense of care. The extent of Jeanne's fortune, rumored to be in the millions of Sterling Pounds, had come as quite a shock to Lord Paget. For such a rich woman to be willing and eager to share the hardships and risks of a war denoted rare commitment and, as was now widely realized by all, deep love for her husband. Captain Smythe could indeed count himself a very lucky man.

Saluting each sub-unit as it paraded past him, Lord Paget bowed his head politely when Jeanne Smythe, closing the convoy at the reins of her light ambulance cart, rode past him and saluted him. Lady Jeanne wore one of her now well-known riding dresses, plus a warm burgundy tunic. Pushing his horse to a gallop, Paget then rode to the head of the regiment's column to assume the lead out of Winchester, cheered along by the crowd of well-wishers lining both sides of the road.

23 :18 (London Time)

Saturday, April 22, 1854 'A'

Forward deck of the troopship H.M.S. SANS PAREIL

Off the port of Plymouth, England

Having excused herself with Gordon under the pretext of wanting to get some fresh air on the open deck of their troopship, Jeanne went to a dark corner behind a deckhouse and, checking first that nobody was in sight, concentrated and ordered mentally her implanted time distorter to make a space-time jump : she had another life to go resume in the 17th Century as Nancy Sommers, Marquess of Saint-Laurent, as well as two boys to take care of. No one on the ship saw her disappear in a brief flash of white light.

CHAPTER 2 – ROCKET SHIP SQUADRON

17:47 (New York Time)

Saturday, March 30, 1957 'C'

BOAC ticket counters, La Guardia Airport

New York City, USA

Elizabeth Osborne was bored to tears as she stood behind the ticket counter of the British Overseas Airways Corporation, or BOAC, in La Guardia Airport, as she was still hoping for her first customer of the afternoon. She also was depressed and fearful about her job. The number of customers showing up at the BOAC counters had been steadily declining for over two years now, thanks to the entry into American airlines service of the new Boeing 717 and of the other American-produced jet airliners. The buying by Air France of a sizeable fleet of Boeing 717 airliners two years ago had further cut the share of the transatlantic air traffic that BOAC previously held. The Vickers VC-20, an outstanding aircraft in its own right that had entered service with the BOAC and other British airline companies in 1954, was no match for the Boeing 717, which had more than double the passenger capacity, had longer range and, most importantly, was much more fuel-efficient and economical to fly than the VC-20. As a direct consequence of this, the BOAC had been unable to match the much lower ticket prices offered by American airlines on the transatlantic and transpacific routes, something that had made potential customers flee BOAC ticket counters in droves. Worse even, Pan Am had now been offering for three years a supersonic long range service between the United States, Europe and the various countries across the Pacific, including Australia. Great Britain, having no supersonic airliner similar to the Northrop VC-5000, had by now lost all the commercial transpacific air routes to American and French companies. In a final blow to the British aircraft industries, previously dependable customers in Canada and Australia had started buying American-made jetliners instead of British-made aircraft, finding the latter underperforming and uneconomical. As an end result of all this, BOAC was on the verge of bankruptcy despite massive subsidies from the British government. And all that could basically be blamed on one person : Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows, who had landed her fantastic spaceplane right here at La Guardia last Monday. Dows was now

widely known to have directed the development of all the new American jet aircraft, both military and civilian, that had been entering service since late 1952, on top of having directed the American space program to a thunderous success with her first ever manned space flight in orbit.

Elizabeth was still hoping for a customer when her supervisor, Donald Fielders, came to her station. She noticed at once his long face and braced herself for bad news as the tall, thin man in his forties stopped besides her and spoke in a low voice.

"Elizabeth, I am afraid that I have bad news for you, for all of us, in fact. The company is closing as of next Monday all its airport service counters in the United States and Canada. It will also terminate all transatlantic air services at the same time. In fact, it is not even sure if it can stave off bankruptcy in the near future."

Her throat now dry and near tears, Elizabeth could only speak then with the utmost difficulty.

"And us, sir? What is going to happen to us?"

"We will be repatriated to England soon afterwards. Some of us may be offered new positions within the company, but the majority will most likely be released."

Tears then flowed out, as Elizabeth saw her future evaporate : unemployment was already high in Great Britain and she could probably only hope for an unskilled, low-paying job over there.

"Why? Why didn't the company buy some of the new American jetliners? That would have saved our jobs."

Fielders made a grim smile at those words : while he had to publicly support the official position of the BOAC, which had insisted on buying British aircraft as a matter of national pride, Elizabeth's question was a most pertinent one.

"You could say that it was a political decision, Elizabeth. I will be holding an information meeting for all our airport employees after supper, at seven in the personnel lounge. Be there!"

"I...I will be there, sir."

As Fielders walked away to go back to his office, Elizabeth leaned on her service counter and cried silently her despair. A group of Pan Am pilots and air stewardesses that was passing in front of the BOAC counter saw her and slowed its pace, looking at her. However, none of them made a derisive remark, as they could understand too well what could have prompted her tears.

08 :14 (California Time)

Tuesday, April 16, 1957 'C'

Hangar of the First Space Squadron

Vandenberg Military Space Command Base, California

Ingrid looked around her at the seventeen men and three women assembled in a semi-circle in front of her, mentally reflecting on the enormous amount of talent and flying experience pooled in that group. All of them were qualified test pilots, while all but four held engineering degrees. The three women in the group, Gertrude Meserve, Shirley Slade and Jeane Hixson, were all veterans of Ingrid's old command, the 99th Composite Wing, while Ingrid had extensively worked at Muroc Air Force Base in the past with both Charles Yeager and Jack Ridley. Also part of the group were the seven men that, in Nancy Laplante's history, had become the first American astronauts under the Mercury program. In turn, many of the men present who hadn't known her before seemed mesmerized by her impossibly youthful appearance and angelic beauty. Keeping a serious expression, she then spoke in her clear, youthful voice.

"Again, welcome to the Military Space Command and to the First Space Squadron, ladies and gentlemen. Now that you had time to complete your administrative clearances on this base and were able to install your families in the base married quarters, it is time to start our work as a squadron. Behind me are the two Douglas XC-2000 LEVIATHAN heavy space transporters and one SPS-10A space plane that are presently on strength of our squadron, on top of five F-83A chase planes that will also serve to keep your piloting skills current. A second SPS-10A space plane is due to be delivered before the end of this month, with the first SPS-10B heavy space plane to follow in May. You may have noticed the smell of fresh paint all over the base, which is due to the fact that this base was only recently rebuilt and enlarged to accommodate the facilities of the Western Test Range Complex of my Military Space Command. As you were able to see by themselves, that meant that both the single and married quarters are brand new and state of the art, something which can only help the morale of everybody. I am sure that all of you had to deal in the past with either Air Force or Navy old, cramped or decrepit quarters, so don't come to me complaining about your new quarters."

Her last sentence drew a concert of laughs and giggles from the assembled pilots.

"My wife doesn't like the paint color of our lounge." Said jockingly Major Leroy Gordon 'Gordo' Cooper Junior. "What should I tell her, General?"

"If she doesn't like the paint color, then she can repaint her lounge herself, Major."

"But, she certainly will dump that job on me, General."

"Not my problem, Major!" Replied Ingrid with a smirk, attracting more laughs. She then became serious again. "Present here today is Brigadier General Gertrude Meserve, freshly graduated from the Air Force Test Pilot School in Muroc, and who was previously in command of the First Fighter Wing in Langley. General Meserve is now my deputy for manned space operations at Military Space Command and will be de facto commander of the First Space Squadron. If you have any problems from now on, she will be more than happy to help you."

The group applauded politely as the tall and thin brunette in her late thirties nodded her head to acknowledge Ingrid's declaration. Ingrid next told her pilots to follow her and led them to the sole SPS-10A space plane present in the huge hangar, stopping under its nose and facing again her group.

"Ladies and gentlemen, here is the STARBLAZER, the space plane in which I did the first ever manned space flight three weeks ago. It has now been refurbished and fully checked following its orbital flight, with the surfaces exposed to the highest reentry temperatures replaced by new ones. The SPS-10A is designed so that those parts, mostly the forward-facing edges, can be easily replaced after each orbital flight. This feature allowed Lockheed to avoid the need to use exotic and very expensive metal alloys in its construction. It is built mostly of steel honeycomb panels over titanium and aluminum structural framing and weighs thirty metric tons empty, or 200 metric tons when fully fuelled. The mass goes up to 253 metric tons when fitted with its two jettisonable solid rocket boosters. Its main engines are two liquid bipropellant rocket engines integrated into two ramjet tubes. While the rocket engines burn a mix of liquid oxygen and a type of refined kerosene we call RP-1, the ramjet engines burn liquid hydrogen."

"Uh, why put those rocket engines inside the ramjet tubes, General?" Asked Milton Orville Thompson, a naval reservist who had been employed previously as a research pilot by the NACA, or National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics. Thompson was not in fact the only civilian test pilot from the NACA present in the group, with Albert Scott Crossfield, Neil Alden Armstrong, John McKay and Fitzhugh Fulton

Junior also coming from what became the NASA in Nancy Laplante's timeline. All five men had seen their old military ranks reactivated and bumped up on joining the Military Space Command. In response to Thompson's question, Ingrid pointed the huge twin air intake projecting under the belly of the space plane.

"Because we exploit a phenomenon called 'ram air effect'. The air scooped by the ramjet air intakes is first slowed down and compressed in the inlets, then flows around the rocket engine pods positioned in the center of the air ducts. In pure ramjet mode, when the SPS-10A is accelerating towards hypersonic speeds through the atmosphere, liquid hydrogen is injected in the ducts, both to cool down the compressed air, thus improving the efficiency of the engine, and to be lit up as fuel to provide thrust. In pure rocket mode within the atmosphere, the extra air volume flowing through the ramjet tubes is basically sucked in by the rocket exhaust, adding significantly to the thrust and also doubling the efficiency of the rocket engines, a critical factor for us. That ram air effect in fact would allow us to fire up the ramjet engines even at zero speed, something normally impossible for ramjets. In dual rocket-ramjet mode, the total thrust is actually greater than if we simply added the individual thrusts from each type of engine. This is basically our secret on how we manage to attain orbit without having to burn an insane amount of fuel or having to build a gigantic multi-stage rocket. Yes, Major Glenn?"

"And how efficient exactly does this ram air effect make the engines of our space plane, General?"

"Well, each of the two Rocketdyne S-3D rocket engines, which were also used in Army ballistic missiles, provide by themselves a thrust of 77.5 metric tons in vacuum, with a specific impulse of 282 seconds, or a thrust of 68.2 metric tons and a specific impulse of 248 seconds at sea level. With ram air effect and the extra volume of air from the unlit ramjet tubes, the maximum thrust at high altitude goes up to 95 metric tons, while the specific impulse goes up to 503 seconds. As for the ramjet engines themselves, they each provide a thrust of 120 metric tons and a specific impulse of 3,500 seconds at high altitude and hypersonic speeds. When using in combination the rocket and ramjet engines, the total thrust of our space plane at Mach 3 and an altitude of 60,000 feet will be a maximum of 432 metric tons, with a combined specific impulse of 1,600 seconds. My inaugural flight in space actually gave us a lot of precious data for our engineers and scientists to study on the true performance of our engines. As a result, the flight profile to orbit of our SPS-10A has now been seriously modified, to take

advantage of the unexpected high performance of its engines. We now know that the SPS-10A will easily be able to put in low Earth orbit a payload of over 5,000 kilos, or 11,000 pounds if you prefer, and this with a comfortable safety margin. All that at twelve percent of the cost of using a pure ballistic rocket to launch the same payload in orbit.”

Major Robert White wiggled a hand on hearing that.

“My God! We could thus bankrupt the Soviets if they try to keep the same pace as us in terms of putting payloads in orbit.”

“That’s part of the idea, Major.” Said Ingrid, a devilish smile appearing on her lips. “To complete this initial description of the SPS-10A, it has two orbital and two retro-rocket engines, all of which use storable liquid bipropellants and have a unitary thrust in vacuum of 4.43 metric tons, plus two TF-58 turbofan engines for subsonic atmospheric flight. Our space plane is also equipped with a total of four fixed strategic reconnaissance cameras, in order to fulfill its other main task : strategic reconnaissance from orbit. Don’t worry about trying to remember all of this at once, ladies and gentlemen : you will be spending the next few weeks studying in depth our space plane and the joys of orbital mechanics. Serious work awaits us!”

02:31 (California Time)

Senior Officers transient quarters

Vandenberg Military Space Command Base

California

Ingrid answered the bedside telephone of her transient room in a slurred voice, her mind still fogged by sleep and with her eyes unfocused.

“General Dows!”

“General, this is Major Compton, at Military Space Command headquarters. I am sorry to wake you up at such an hour, but our space tracking stations have detected the launch into orbit by the Soviets of a two-person space capsule. That capsule is now effecting its second orbit around the Earth, at an inclination of 65 degrees and an average altitude of 190 miles. We are still refining the orbital parameters of that Soviet craft, General.”

“You said ‘two-person capsule’, Major?”

“Yes, General! Our radio intercepts of the transmissions between the capsule and its ground controllers show that there is one man and one woman aboard the

capsule. The consensus here is that the Soviets want to upstage your solo flight of last month, General.”

Ingrid smiled to herself as her mind cleared up fast by now.

“Well, there is nothing like healthy competition to keep us on our toes, Major. How are those two Soviets doing up to now?”

“Up to now, the Soviets have kept their transmissions to a minimum, General, probably to preserve their operational security. If something abnormal happens, we should be able to learn about it quite fast, General.”

Ingrid thought quickly then : in her opinion, such a space launch at this early stage had to be a big gamble for the Soviets. Their manned spacecraft technology was untested and followed only by two months the launch of their first ever artificial satellite, SPUTNIK, a tiny affair indeed. To proceed with a two-person mission like this shouted of political pressure on the Soviet space program leaders...like the pressure from Washington that had prompted her first space flight a month ago. Someone was liable to get hurt eventually at that game.

“Has the Pentagon been advised about this Soviet space launch, Major?”

“Yes, General! Do you have directives for our command, General?”

“Yes! Put our space tracking network on full alert and retransmit all your data and intercept links to the headquarters of the Western Test Range Complex here in Vandenberg : I will monitor the situation from there. Pass my thanks to our space tracking technicians for a job well done, Major.”

“Will do, General! Have a good night, General.”

The duty officer then hung up, leaving Ingrid looking at her telephone while thinking furiously. Her feeling was that this rushed space launch business may well end very badly. In that, the Soviets would only have themselves to blame for it, but that still meant the possible death of two brave human beings engaged in a peaceful mission. She could not in all conscience simply sit back and do nothing if that ever happened. Taking a decision, she formed a number on her telephone and got a sleepy answer after four rings.

“Brigadier Meserve speaking!”

“Gertrude, this is Ingrid : there is a possible space emergency in the making. I want you to go to your squadron’s hangar and to alert our space squadron personnel at once : we may have to launch the STARBLAZER with little or no notice. Don’t ask questions now : I will brief you at the hangar.”

Cutting the line and putting down the receiver, Ingrid then jumped out of bed and started to quickly put on a fresh flight suit.

Using the base duty driver, Ingrid went from her transient quarters to the huge hangar structure housing both the First Space Squadron and the headquarters of the Western Test Range Complex. There, she found a flurry of activity as the personnel of the First Space Squadron was streaming in and was then directed immediately by Gertrude Meserve in preparing both an XC-2000 and the STARBLAZER for a space mission. Gertrude gave her a questioning look when Ingrid entered the squadron's operations room.

"So, what is going on, Ingrid?"

"Details are still scant, but I was alerted by the command headquarters that the Soviets launched tonight a two-person capsule in orbit. It should be doing its third orbit by now."

"A two-person capsule, only two months after their small satellite? Are the Soviets nuts? That's way too big a step for them to safely take right now."

"You hit the nail with the word 'safely', Gertrude. This was probably a political decision taken by Moscow against the advice of their space scientists. I hate to say this, but I fully expect that soviet space mission to end badly. As a consequence, I want to be ready to help those Soviets in orbit if they ever get in trouble."

"But, would the Soviets even request our help if things go wrong for them in orbit, Ingrid? That would be like acknowledging our superiority in space technology, something their propaganda would never allow. If we try to help them without being formally asked, the Soviets could turn it against us. Hell, they could even pretend that we shot at their capsule or bumped into it."

"True!" Said Ingrid, thinking over the problem. A slight smile appeared on her face a few seconds later, prompting a question from Gertrude.

"What are you thinking about, Ingrid? Do you have an idea?"

"I believe so, Gertrude. I am now calling this a practice emergency space interception mission, with the goal of identifying a potentially hostile space object. In essence, that Soviet manned capsule will play the role of the potentially hostile space object."

It was then the turn of Gertrude to smile in amusement.

“Neat! That will allow you to approach to within visual range of that Soviet capsule and be ready to react at a moment’s notice if something wrong happens. The fun part is that, even if nothing bad happens, this will indeed constitute a very good exercise for our unit.”

“Exactly! However, there will be no weapons fitted to the STARBLAZER. Instead, I want the towing cable module and the survival chamber module to be loaded in the payload bay of my space plane.”

“I will get on it right away, Ingrid. Uh, if you ever have to rescue those Soviets and bring them back to Earth aboard the STARBLAZER, where will you land? They may object to being taken to the United States.”

“A good point, Gertrude. However, I suspect that it will be up to diplomats to decide that once any rescue is made in space. It may be a good idea for me to pack my passport, some money and a small travel kit, in case I have to land in some neutral country. Well, I am going now to see if we received more detailed data on that Soviet spacecraft’s orbit.”

11 :52 (GMT) / 03 :52 (California Time)

Soviet VOSTOK 2 spacecraft

Low Earth Orbit

Major Lydia ‘Lylia’ Litvyak reflected mentally on the strange twists of fate along the last few years that had brought her to where she was now, sitting besides Lieutenant Yuri Gagarin in the cramped reentry sphere of the VOSTOK 2 spacecraft. Originally a city girl from Moscow, she had volunteered to become a fighter pilot during the Great Patriotic War⁴, shooting down a total of 32 German aircraft during that conflict and earning in the process the title and gold star medal of ‘Hero of the Soviet Union’. She had been one of the few female pilots to stay on as a military aviator after the war and had gone on to fight in the Korean War as a ‘volunteer’, shooting down five American aircraft before the Americans had been forced to evacuate Korea completely. Then had come the Indochina War, where she had again flown in combat against the Americans. However, her luck had then turned and, after shooting down three American Navy fighter aircraft, had been downed by one of the new devilish American air-to-air missiles.

⁴ Great Patriotic War : name given by the Soviets to World War 2.

Fished out of the sea off the coast of Vietnam by the Americans, Lilya was then sent with six other captured Soviet pilots to the United States as prisoners of war, where she had spent over a year before being repatriated to the Soviet Union after her country had lost the devastating war of conquest Stalin had initiated in Eastern Europe in 1953. At that time, Lilya had been fearful of the kind of reception she would get once back in the Soviet Union, as the Soviet secret police looked with deep suspicion at any Soviet serviceman captured by the enemy. Instead, she had found out on her return to Moscow that Joseph Stalin was dead and that his hated secret police had been dismantled by an alliance between the new Soviet leader, Nikita Krushchtchev, and the leaders of the Red Army. Instead of being sent to a reeducation camp in Siberia, as she had fully expected, Lilya had been reinstated as a fighter pilot, even keeping her rank of senior captain. In this, she had to partially thank her old nemesis in the air, Major General Ingrid Dows, who had conducted the airstrikes that had killed Stalin and most of the members of the Politburo and had destroyed the secret police headquarters in Moscow. The same Ingrid Dows had visited her and the other Soviet pilots detained in Fort Leavenworth and had spoken to her then, revealing that she knew many things about Lilya thanks to the historical information passed on to her by her late adoptive mother, the celebrated Canadian time traveler, Nancy Laplante. Without becoming true friends, Lilya had then developed a measure of respect and admiration for that exceptional young woman. As for how she had become a cosmonaut, things had been even more twisted, even ironic. Her fame, her extensive flying experience and her widely acknowledged skills as a pilot had earned her a place in the first batch of candidates chosen for the Soviet space program five months ago. The fact that she had pursued a diploma in aeronautical engineering through part-time studies during the last few years had also helped. Still, she would probably not have flown on this first manned Soviet space mission if not for Ingrid Dows, whose first human space flight in March had plunged the leaders of the Soviet Union into utter dismay. Those leaders had then decided that only a multicrew space flight could regain some glory to the Soviet Union around the World. The problem was that the VOSTOK 1 capsule, which had been about to be launched, had been designed for only one cosmonaut sitting in an ejection seat. Soviet engineers had then decided to replace the bulky, heavy ejection seat with two lightweight molded, crashworthy seats. That would still have been insufficient as weight saving went, unless the two smallest cosmonauts available were selected for the mission. That had left the young, 23 year old Yuri Gagarin and the petite Lilya, who

weighed less than fifty kilos. Lilya could thus thank the fact she was the smallest cosmonaut available for being in orbit now.

Sitting besides Yuri in the cramped, 2.3 meter-diameter reentry sphere and wearing her bulky orange spacesuit with its visor open, Lilya saw on the rudimentary navigation instruments of their capsule that they were approaching the southwest coast of Africa while on their 'up' part of their orbit around the Earth.

"We are about to get to the precalculated retro-braking point. We should soon get the remote commands for turning around our spacecraft and firing our retro-rockets." Yuri acknowledged that with a nod of the head, being quite nervous. Like Lilya, he did not like the fact that the whole mission was under the complete and direct control of their ground controllers in the U.S.S.R.. Even if he or Lilya wanted to take manual control due to some emergency, they would then have first to open a sealed envelope in order to get the password that would unlock the said controls. In essence, both of them were no more than mere passive passengers, restricted to simply reading the instruments on the radio when requested. As predicted by Lilya, who was the senior cosmonaut for the flight, the attitude rockets of the capsule soon fired short bursts at interval, turning it around so that their solid propellant retro-rocket could fire and slow them down enough to initiate reentry into the Earth's atmosphere. The muffled roar they expected from their retro-rocket never came. Instead, a loud explosion jarred both cosmonauts in their seats and sent the capsule tumbling wildly around in space.

"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?" Asked Gagarin, near panic.

"I'M NOT SURE! MAYBE THE RETRO-ROCKET EXPLODED ON IGNITION. DAMN! WE HAVE RED LIGHTS ALL OVER OUR INSTRUMENTS PANEL! THE PRESSURE IN OUR OXYGEN TANKS IS FALLING QUICKLY. ZARYA-1, ZARYA-1, THIS IS VOSTOK 2 : WE HAVE HAD AN EXPLOSION IN THE EQUIPMENT MODULE, POSSIBLY FROM THE RETRO-ROCKET. WE ARE TUMBLING AROUND AND LOSING OXYGEN."

The ground controller at the Baikonur cosmodrome took long seconds to respond, probably taking the time first to check the telemetry data from the spacecraft.

"VOSTOK 2, from Zarya-1, we are going to fire your attitude rockets to stop your spinning, then you will read out on the radio the readings from your instruments."

"We acknowledge, Zarya-1." Replied Lilya, who then waited and prayed silently. Unfortunately, their attitude rockets never fired and their mad stumbling around continued, prompting another radio message from Lilya to Baikonur.

"Zarya-1, this is VOSTOK 2. The attitude rockets have not fired yet, over."

"But...we did send the command signal over fifteen seconds ago, VOSTOK 2. Something must be wrong with the attitude rockets. Read out your instruments now, over."

Lilya did that, her heart sinking when she saw that their reserves of nitrogen, used to fuel the attitude rockets, were emptying even faster than their reserves of oxygen. The explosion had probably cut a nitrogen line. Knowing that she had only a few minutes at the most to act before they would be out of nitrogen, Lilya took a decision and grabbed the sealed envelope containing the password to unlock the manual commands, ripping it open.

"Zarya-1, the remote control systems are not working. I am going to go to manual control before we lose all of our nitrogen."

Extracting a small piece of paper from the envelope and reading the single word on it, Lilya then punched that word on her control box. As soon as the indicator light for manual control mode came on, she grabbed the short control stick and started giving gentle commands to the attitude rockets, using the artificial horizon and the three small portholes of her spacecraft to orient herself. She managed to stop their tumbling and to roughly stabilize their spacecraft on the correct axis after nearly forty seconds of tense efforts. Yuri blew air out in relief as Lilya spoke again on the radio while throwing switches on her instruments panel.

"Zarya-1, from VOSTOK 2: I have managed to stabilize the spacecraft and return it to its original flight axis. The nitrogen reserve is now nearly empty and still leaking out. I have shut the valves of the leaking oxygen tanks to prevent more losses, but that leaves us with only enough oxygen for maybe a day. I request instructions, over."

This time, the silence from the ground controller was long and ominous, with his voice showing his dismay when he answered Lilya.

"VOSTOK 2, from Zarya-1. We...we are studying the situation here and will call you back soon with instructions. Zarya-1 out!"

Lilya was left stunned by that, understanding with dread that Baikonur probably had no practical solution for their problem. Closing her eyes for a moment, she whispered a prayer in a fervent tone.

“Dear God, please have mercy on me and on my comrade.”

12 :04 (Washington Time) / 17 :04 (GMT) / 09 :04 (California Time)

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

Having just been briefed on the dire situation of the Soviet Vostok 2 spacecraft by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Arthur Radford, President Eisenhower sat back in his chair.

“So, the Soviets tried to upstage us in space but bungled it. Is there any possibility that they could still manage to return their two astronauts safely to Earth?”

“According to Lieutenant General Dows, the chances for that are about nil, Mister President. However, on learning of the Soviet manned space launch, General Dows decided to use that opportunity to conduct a snap space interception exercise. She then took off five hours ago from Vandenberg aboard an XC-2000 giant space transporter carrying her space plane. After flying to a precalculated point meant to match with the trajectory of the Soviet capsule, that XC-2000 dropped its SPS-10A, with Dows at the commands. Dows has now been in low Earth orbit for more than one hour and is slowly approaching the Soviet craft from the rear. She intends to stay behind the Soviets but close enough to be able to intervene quickly if needed. She is however loathe to force herself on the Soviets, something that could prompt Soviet claims that we interfered with their space mission and caused their mishap.”

“Decidedly, Dows keeps impressing me with her solid logic and sense of initiative. Have the Soviets contacted us, even informally, to ask for our help yet?”

“No, Mister President. State Secretary Herter told me that they have not heard a thing from the Soviets. In fact, the Soviets have hidden to their own public the fact that their spacecraft is in trouble. I would not be surprised if Moscow simply decides to let those two astronauts die rather than ask for our help.”

"What a cold, cruel way of thinking." Muttered Eisenhower to himself. He thought things over for a few seconds before looking back at Radford, who still stood at attention in front of the presidential work desk.

"Very well, Admiral! Tell General Dows to hold her position behind the Soviet spacecraft while I contact Premier Krushchtchev to offer him our help. Hopefully, that old bastard will find the heart to accept it. Thank you for coming to me with this, Admiral."

"It was a pleasure, Mister President." Replied Radford before turning around and leaving the Oval Office. After a moment, Eisenhower reached for his telephone and asked for a line to be opened with Moscow.

In Moscow, Nikita Khrushchev was conducting an emergency meeting of the Politburo to discuss the situation of the VOSTOK 2 when an aide came to whisper in his ear.

"Comrade Premier, President Eisenhower is on the telephone from Washington and wishes to speak to you about our stranded spacecraft."

Khrushchev gave the man a jaundiced look. The situation was dire enough without having the Americans gloating about another Soviet failure.

"Did he say what he wanted exactly?"

"Yes, Comrade Premier : he is offering the help of the United States to rescue our two cosmonauts."

The look of surprise on Khrushchev's face was noticed by Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who was attending the Politburo meeting as Defense Minister. As the representative of the Red Army, who had been the real power in the Soviet Union since the demise of Stalin and of his secret police, he didn't hesitate then to speak up.

"Is there a new development concerning our spacecraft, Comrade Khrushchev?"

"Uh, not directly, Comrade Zhukov. President Eisenhower is on the line, wanting to offer me the help of the United States in rescuing our two cosmonauts. Are the Americans really able to effect such a space rescue, in your opinion?"

"From what we know about their new space plane, I would say that they probably can reach our capsule in orbit. We however don't know if it has enough space inside for two passengers."

"And we still can't see a way to rescue our cosmonauts ourselves?"

Sergei Korolev, the head of the Soviet space program, who was attending the meeting as the expert on space matters, took on himself to answer his Premier.

"None, Comrade Premier. The capsule has no retro-rocket left to slow down and reenter the atmosphere before our cosmonauts run out of air. We also don't possess another spacecraft able to go rescue our people in orbit. While this may hurt our national pride, the Americans are now the only ones who could possibly save our cosmonauts."

Leonid Brezhnev, a junior member of the Politburo, objected at once to that.

"Comrade Premier, surely we can't go and ask for the Americans' help about this. The Soviet Union's prestige would be gravely hurt if we are seen to depend on the Americans at such a time."

"And you think that the death in orbit of our two cosmonauts would not hurt our prestige, especially if the Americans later claim that they could have helped but that we refused their help?" Countered Marshal Zhukov. "Either way, our prestige will take a hit, whether we like it or not, so let's at least try to save our cosmonauts."

That argument seemed to win over Khrushchev, who then looked around the conference table, his face somber.

"Then, let's vote on this, comrades. Those in favor of accepting the Americans' help, raise one hand... Those against..."

To the relief of Korolev, who didn't have the right to vote in this, the result was nine against four in favor of accepting the help of the Americans. Apparently satisfied, Khrushchev nodded his head and looked at the aide, still waiting by his side.

"Connect the line to the telephone here : I will speak to President Eisenhower in front of the Politburo."

"Right away, Comrade Premier!"

Watched by the Politburo members and by Korolev, Khrushchev was soon on the line with President Eisenhower, with the conversation being on speaker so that everybody could hear it. Translators at both ends of the line went to work as intermediaries as the two heads of states started conversing.

"President Eisenhower, thank you for calling me about the plight of our two cosmonauts."

"It is always a pleasure for me to offer help to rescue lives, Premier Khrushchev. I am sure that you have been briefed up to now on the details of what happened to your

spacecraft. I thus am formally offering the help of the United States in rescuing your two stranded astronauts.”

“Your offer is duly noted and appreciated, Mister President. Any peaceful collaboration between our two countries can only help our mutual relations. Unfortunately, my specialists have told me that we have run out of means to help our stranded cosmonauts. What do you propose to do to rescue them?”

“Lieutenant General Dows is standing ready to help with her space plane, the STARBLAZER, Premier Khrushchev. We only need your approval before getting to your capsule, so that there are no misunderstandings about our motives.”

Khrushchev glanced at Zhukov at the mention of Dows and covered up the mouthpiece of his telephone with one hand.

“That General Dows, could she save our cosmonauts without turning this into a big American propaganda act, Comrade Zhukov?”

“I met her in Finland four years ago : she is a very dangerous and most competent adversary, but she is also a person of honor in my opinion, Comrade Premier. She is also said to be a very humane person.”

Khrushchev nodded his head, then uncovered his telephone mouthpiece.

“In that case, we are happy to accept your gracious offer of help, Mister President. When could your General Dows launch her space plane for this rescue mission?”

Khrushchev thought that he detected some amusement then in Eisenhower’s voice as the latter answered him.

“She is already in orbit in her space plane, Mister Premier. She used her personal initiative to call a space exercise of her command when she was informed that you had launched a spacecraft in orbit. I can however swear to you that she had nothing to do with the problems your spacecraft experienced, Mister Premier.”

Khrushchev had to cover his mouthpiece again, as Zhukov shook his head in disbelief.

“That young girl is ahead of us...again! She’s unbelievable!”

Having gone over his own surprise, Khrushchev spoke again in his telephone.

“I believe you on this, Mister President. You can tell your General Dows that she has our permission to approach and couple with our spacecraft to rescue our cosmonauts. I would however like at this time to state a condition for accepting your help : that our cosmonauts not be brought to the United States, but instead to a neutral country.”

“That is a reasonable request, Mister Premier. I in fact had anticipated it before calling. Would Sweden or Finland do as a neutral country where General Dows could land with your two astronauts?”

“Either Sweden or Finland will do fine, Mister President.”

“Then, I will contact General Dows in orbit at once, so that your two compatriots can be rescued as quickly as possible. If I may suggest something, I would be willing to have your ambassador and military attaché in Washington briefed at the Pentagon about the progress of our rescue mission.”

“That is an excellent idea, Mister President. I will advise Ambassador Zarubin of this at once.”

“Thank you, Mister Premier. Admiral Radford, at the Pentagon, will be waiting for him. Again, thank you for accepting our help. Be assured that we will keep you informed of how our rescue mission goes. I will pray for the safety of your two astronauts in the meantime. Have a good day, Mister Premier.”

“And have a good day as well, Mister President.” Replied Khrushchev before hanging up and looking at the faces around the big table. “Well, we can only hope now that this young General Dows succeeds in rescuing our cosmonauts. In the meantime, let’s discuss the ways we can mitigate the impact of this on our national prestige.”

18:29 (GMT)

VOSTOK 2 spacecraft

Low Earth orbit

“VOSTOK 2, this is Zaria-1, over.”

Lilya, who had grown increasingly gloomy as the hours had passed without any encouraging word from Baikonur, hurried to answer the radio call from the ground controller.

“Zaria-1, this is VOSTOK 2. Go ahead, over.”

“VOSTOK 2, we have some news for you : the Americans are going to help you. They have launched their space plane, the STARBLAZER, and are heading for your craft. You are authorized to contact them directly on this present frequency and to allow it to close in on you, over.”

Lilya felt a mix of annoyance and happiness at those words : annoyance at the stupid notion that she could have even tried to stop the American space plane from

approaching her craft and happiness at the news that someone was coming to help her and Yuri. She was however mindful of her tone when she answered.

“Zarya-1, I copy. Over to you! STARBLAZER, this is VOSTOK 2, come in, over.”

The answer, in Russian and from a female voice she knew well, came at once.

“This is STARBLAZER. Go ahead, VOSTOK 2.”

Yuri sighed audibly on hearing the clear radio transmission. Lilya, also feeling relief wash over her, replied eagerly.

“Thank you for coming, STARBLAZER. What is your present position, over?”

“Like in the good old times, Lilya : right on your ass! I have you on my radar and am fourteen kilometers behind you, on the same orbit as you. I am going to start my final approach now. I will contact you again once I have you on visual.”

Yuri gave a funny look at Lilya after the short exchange.

“You know that American woman, Lilya?”

“You could say that, Yuri. She is Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows, the head of the American Military Space Command. I met her after I was shot down near Vietnam and captured by the Americans. She proved then to be a tolerant, caring and most decent woman, even though she also proved to be an extremely dangerous opponent in the air. She even invited me and the other six Soviet pilots she had captured to attend Christmas dinner with her pilots and some little Vietnamese children from an orphanage she was supporting in Da Nang. By the way, there are things about her that never made it in Soviet newspapers or radio news that I learned about her after my capture. By some kind of past miracle, she happens to be able to remember her past incarnations, which cover 73 lives over 7,000 years. She was also the subject of another miracle while in Palestine, after she was gravely wounded by Jewish underground fighters. She is said to have been completely healed and also rejuvenated by an act of God. I saw the pictures of her in an American newspaper I read while being detained as a prisoner of war in the United States.”

“And you believe those newspapers, Lilya? They could have been attempts at propaganda.”

Lilya gave the young pilot a caustic look.

“Yuri, even the Americans were shocked by what happened to her, with many doubting what had happened. By the way, even though she should be in her thirties today, she now looks like a teenager. She is also extremely beautiful.”

“Really?” Said Yuri, raising an eyebrow. That made Lilya smile.

“Really!”

Forty minutes later, the radio came alive again.

“VOSTOK 2, this is STARBLAZER. I am now in visual range and about 700 meters behind you. I however have to go slow in my approach if I don't want to overshoot or rise too high above you, over.”

“Take all the time you need, STARBLAZER.”

“Thank you, VOSTOK 2! By the way, is your comrade cute?”

“Naah! Even Baba Yaga⁵ wouldn't want him.”

“Damn! Then I better turn around now.”

Unknown to Lilya and Ingrid, that exchange made more than one Soviet in the ground control room at Baikonur giggle or laugh. Ingrid then became more serious.

“VOSTOK, are you able to leave safely your craft in your spacesuits, when the time comes to transfer to my space plane, over?”

“Affirmative, STARBLAZER, but our suits' autonomy is limited to maybe thirty minutes in vacuum, over.”

“What about your exit hatch? Can you open it manually from the inside or the outside, over?”

“Uh, negative, STARBLAZER. It can either be blown away by explosive bolts or be unbolted from the outside, using a power tool, over.”

“Acknowledged, VOSTOK 2. Once coupled to your craft, I will unscrew the bolts myself. I will just ask you then to deactivate your explosive bolts switch.”

“You have power tools aboard your space plane, STARBLAZER?”

“Of course, VOSTOK 2! This is a decadent capitalist spacecraft, remember? Nothing is too luxurious for us. I even have a bottle of Champagne ready for you once you will be inside my space plane.”

Lilya had a chuckle at that before replying.

“What? No vodka?”

Ingrid sighed audibly on the radio.

“Those classless socialist workers! Alright, I will break out the vodka bottle instead.”

⁵ Baba Yaga : well known, hideous witch in Russian folklore.

By now, there was laughing in both Baikonur and in Vandenberg and Cape Canaveral at the radio exchange between both spacecraft. With the atmosphere much less tense than a few minutes before, Ingrid cautiously used her attitude jets to close in on the Soviet spacecraft, which was downright diminutive compared to her own space plane. The VOSTOK 2 would in fact have been able to fit inside her payload bay if not for the presence in it of her rescue module. After fourteen minutes of slow approach, Ingrid was finally in position just above the Soviet craft and had rolled over to present her opened payload bay to the VOSTOK 2.

“VOSTOK 2, from STARBLAZER : I am now going out to secure a cable to you, then will open your exit hatch. Be prepared to depressurize your capsule on my request, over.”

“We will be ready, STARBLAZER.” Replied Lilya as Yuri Gagarin looked with dismay at the American space plane filling the view from one of the three portholes of the VOSTOK 2.

“Look at the size of the American space plane, Lilya. It is the size of a heavy bomber! How could they send such a mass into orbit?”

“I suspect that many in Baikonur would give a lot to know more about that space plane, Yuri. Once we are safely inside the American craft, keep your ears and, especially, your eyes well opened : our superiors will want to ask us about everything we will see in there.”

“Uh, understood, Lilya.”

Inside the cockpit of the STARBLAZER, Ingrid left her pilot's seat and floated through the crew compartment, getting to the access hatch of the large airlock of her space plane. Opening the hatch and entering the airlock, Ingrid then secured the hatch behind her and checked her spacesuit, sealing its visor and then switching on her life support systems before depressurizing the airlock. She next hooked a long safety line to the belt of her spacesuit, then opened the upper exit hatch and gently floated out, her head now a mere seven meters from the Soviet craft.

“Vandenberg Control, I am now out in vacuum. I am proceeding to the payload bay.”

“Understood, STARBLAZER.”

Using the handrail meant for that purpose, Ingrid pulled her way to the opened payload bay and floated past the rescue module before landing inside the bay, besides the

towing cable module. Next, she attached a second safety line fixed to the inside of the bay to her waist and unhooked her first safety line, hooking it to a handrail, then took out of a fixed tool box a powered tool set and fixed it to her belt. Putting the towing cable drum in free rotation, she pulled out a good ten meters of cable and firmly grabbed the hook at the end of it before talking on the radio.

“I hope that you brought your wallet with you, Lilya. You know how expensive a capitalist space towing job costs?”

“I can barter my comrade as a down payment, General.”

“That will do! Ahoy, matey! I am going to board you! Aarr!”

On that, Ingrid pushed up with her legs, carefully aiming for the equipment module part of the Soviet craft. She flew out of her payload bay, covering the seven meters to the VOSTOK 2 in seconds and grabbing one of the radio antennas jutting out of it. Crawling to a handrail fixed to the side of the equipment module, she solidly hooked her towing cable to it, then spoke in Russian on the radio.

“VOSTOK 2, my towing cable is now hooked up to you. I am returning to the payload bay of the STARBLAZER to roll in the cable and pull you closer. You may secure the switch for your hatch’ explosive bolts now, over.”

“Understood, General! Explosive bolts now secured.”

Satisfied, Ingrid jumped back to her space plane, with the camera fixed to her helmet filming the action all along. Once back in the payload bay, she engaged the clutch of the towing cable drum and activated the electric motor in slow speed, making the cable tense up. The space plane barely shuddered when the cable started pulling in the Soviet craft. However, the VOSTOK 2, being much lighter, jerked noticeably then. That, more than anything else up to now, reassured Lilya : she and Yuri now had very good chances of surviving this misadventure. Ingrid cut the motor of the cable drum as the bottom of the Soviet craft was just one meter from the upper surface of the STARBLAZER. The VOSTOK’s inertia made it slowly bump against the space plane a few seconds later, with Ingrid then taking up the remaining slack in the towing cable.

“I have the VOSTOK 2 coupled to the STARBLAZER. I am now proceeding to its exit hatch.”

That part of the job proved a bit trickier, as there were no handrails or hooks near the exit hatch of the Soviet hatch. Ingrid finally used one of the topside radio antennas to secure herself there before speaking again in Russian on the radio.

“VOSTOK, I am now above your exit hatch. You may now depressurize your capsule, so that your hatch doesn’t pop out in my face.”

“Depressurizing now, General.”

“Just Ingrid will do, Lilya. I am now going to unscrew your bolts.”

Selecting first the proper size of bolt fitting for her power tool, Ingrid then worked calmly but assiduously to unscrew the bolts of the exit hatch one by one, throwing each released bolt into outer space, away from her craft. It took her a good ten minutes to undo all the bolts, then she spoke again on the radio in Russian.

“VOSTOK, your hatch is now unbolted. Push on it from the inside to make it pop out, gently.”

Inside the craft, Lilya looked at Yuri through the visor of her bulky helmet.

“Yuri, undo your harness and stand on your seat to push out the exit hatch.”

With Lilya holding his legs so that he would not lose his footing in the absence of gravity, the young man got out of his seat and raised his hands, resting them against the inside of the exit hatch. It took a marked effort from him before the hatch finally popped out and started flying away in outer space. Yuri then found himself facing a figure clad in a fantastic-looking spacesuit. That figure then extended its right hand for a shake.

“Lieutenant Gagarin, I am happy to finally meet you visor to visor.”

“And I am most happy to see you, General.”

“Tsk tsk! I told you to simply call me ‘Ingrid’.” Replied Ingrid before bending over and passing her head inside the hatch, looking at Lilya Litvyak and shaking her gloved hand as well. “Hello, Lilya! Long time no see! I will bring your comrade inside my airlock first, then will come back for you. Don’t move in the meantime.”

Making Gagarin hold on to her, Ingrid used her gas gun to go to the opened access hatch of her airlock and made him float inside the airlock before returning to the VOSTOK 2 to get Lilya. She was back over the airlock three minutes later, dropping Lilya through the hatch before going to the payload bay, where she released her towing cable and her secondary safety line, then hooked back her first safety line to her belt.

“Vandenberg Control, the two Soviet astronauts are now inside my airlock and I am about to push away their spacecraft.”

She then repeated herself in Russian, for the benefit of Baikonur and of Lilya and Yuri. Bracing her back against the upper surface of her space plane, Ingrid pushed hard with both feet, making the Soviet capsule slowly drift away in space. Rewinding her towing

cable and her secondary safety line and returning her power tool to its toolbox, she then crawled back to the airlock of her space plane, entering it and closing and securing its access hatch. Pushing a button on the control panel of the airlock, she started the repressurization process, which took forty seconds before a green light came on.

“It is now safe for you to open your visors, my friends.”

Showing the example, she opened her own visor and smiled to the two Soviets.

“I would have loved to be able to hug you right now, but those spacesuits are kind of in the way. So, Lilya, won't you present me your comrade? He is not as ugly as you implied earlier.”

Yuri Gagarin, who was staring at the hauntingly beautiful and incredibly young Ingrid, reddened somewhat with embarrassment at her compliment. On her part, Lilya smiled back to Ingrid, now feeling all her dread and stress evaporating.

“I was just joking, of course, General : Lieutenant Yuri Gagarin is a very nice young man. Before you set your sights on him, know that he is married.”

“Damn! And I was looking forward to build some goodwill between Capitalists and Socialists through some interpersonal relationship.”

Ingrid then became serious and showed the access hatch to the payload bay to the two Soviets.

“My payload bay presently contains a rescue module with seating for one fully suited astronaut. Yuri can go sit there for the reentry. He will have access to the intercom and radio channels of my space plane, plus will be able to have a view outside via a camera feed. As for you, Lilya, you can sit in the mission specialist's seat. Wait here while I go make Yuri comfortable.”

Less than three minutes later, Ingrid was back in the airlock and opened the access hatch giving on the crew compartment of the space plane. Lilya could only gasp on seeing the volume of space available in there and all the various equipment visible.

“Bozemoi! My VOSTOK looks downright primitive compared to this.”

“Don't sell your designers short, Lilya : they accomplished a lot in very little time, without the benefit of information from the future. You can thank my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, for most of what you see here.”

“Decidedly, I would have love to meet her, Ingrid. You must miss her a lot.”

“I do!” Replied soberly Ingrid. “I however have an adopted daughter of my own that makes me both very happy and proud. I will have to present Hien to you one fine

day. Here is the mission specialist's seat. I will switch on its intercom, radio, forward and down view cameras for you."

Lilya was soon sitting in the seat, which was an ejection type similar to those found in fighter aircraft but wider, to accommodate astronauts wearing bulky spacesuits. She didn't miss the fact that aluminum panels that had apparently been fitted hastily covered most of the instrument panels around her seat, leaving visible only the radio controls, a radar screen and two rectangular television screens. Lilya was shocked to see that both the radar and television screens were color displays and showed very high definition pictures. The level of technology visible up to now in the American space plane was no less than stunning. No wonder that the Red Air Force had taken such a drubbing over Vietnam and Eastern Europe!

"I see that you had things to hide to us, Ingrid." Remarked Lilya, keeping her tone conversational. Ingrid smiled at that and nodded her head.

"While I am happy to have been able to rescue you and your comrade, not all of my superiors will appreciate that I showed my space plane to you. This is only to prevent the worst of the criticism I will face once back on Earth. Well, I better get back to my own seat, so that we could leave orbit. You can put on that headset if you wish to send a short report to Baikonur."

"Thanks, Ingrid! I will owe you a big one for all this."

That brought a serious look on Ingrid's face.

"Please don't repeat that to your superiors, Lilya. I would hate to hear that you were sent to some Siberian work camp."

Ingrid then went forward to take place in the pilot's seat, leaving a thoughtful Lilya strapped in her seat. The Soviet woman tried the intercom first after putting on the headset at her station.

"Yuri, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Lilya."

"Excellent! I am now going to report to Baikonur... Zarya-1, this is Litvyak. I am now aboard the American space plane with Lieutenant Gagarin and Lieutenant General Dows. General Dows is about to initiate reentry, over."

"Understood, Major Litvyak. Are both of you secured in proper seats, over?"

"Affirmative, Zarya-1! There is in fact plenty of room to spare up here, over."

Ingrid then cut in on the conversation with Baikonur.

"Zarya-1, this is General Dows, on the STARBLAZER. I am about to fire my retro-rockets and reenter the atmosphere. Understand however that my space plane is also an hypersonic glider and that my first flight saw it bounce repeatedly over the top stratas of the atmosphere. I thus cannot guarantee where I will end up when time to land comes. If I land on the American continent instead of Europe, would Mexico or Brazil be acceptable landing places for your two cosmonauts, over?"

There was only a short delay before she got an answer from the Soviet ground controller.

"Mexico or Brazil will do fine for us, General Dows. Good luck for your reentry."

"Thank you, Zarya-1! I will initiate my reentry over the Indian Ocean, out!"

Ingrid then switched to English, repeating her last sentence and also giving a status report to Vandenberg. She was then silent, waiting for the right moment to fire up her engines to slow down.

Ingrid actually turned around her space plane on its yaw axis seven minutes later, prompting a question from Lilya.

"Why are you rotating your craft, Ingrid?"

"I still have for over a minute of fuel left for my main rocket engines. I am going to use it to slow down, thus will save the fuel for my retro-rockets. The more powerful impulse will also allow us to reenter the atmosphere quicker than if I used only my retro-rockets. Hold on, guys! This is going to kick!"

Ten seconds later, Lilya was effectively pushed in her seat as a powerful roar reverberated inside the space plane. She evaluated the G forces then acting on her at close to three Gs. That crushing force went on for about a minute before the roar stopped, making Lilya bounce forward in her seat harness. Ingrid then nearly at once turned her space plane around again before firing her actual retro-rockets, which sounded and felt much less powerful than the main rocket engines of the STARBLAZER. Lilya mentally recorded all this as she watched both the camera views and the radar screen in front of her. The really scary part soon came as the space plane started to reenter the upper layers of the atmosphere. The first wisps of hypersonic wind soon grew to a roar, then to a deafening, continuous thunder, as Lilya's forward view camera showed long flames dance over the forward surfaces of the STARBLAZER. By then, all radio contact with the outside had been cut, due to the ionization of the air around the space plane. The force of the deceleration made Lilya's head bow forward in her seat,

with the G forces pulling her forward easily exceeding seven Gs at one time. She was close to passing out then, while fervently wishing that Ingrid Dows did not pass out herself, but managed somehow to keep conscious. Then came the first atmospheric skip, with the space plane bouncing against the top layers of the stratosphere. However, Lilya had to concede that Ingrid seemed to pilot her extraordinary craft with consumed expertise, keeping it level and stable on course. After a series of six bounces, the space plane seemed to finally settle inside the atmosphere, at which time Ingrid spoke again in Russian on the intercom and the radio.

“The STARBLAZER is now inside the atmosphere, at an altitude of 36,000 meters and a speed of Mach 16. I am starting on my upward part of my trajectory and am now approximately 3,000 kilometers southwest of the coast of Australia. I am going to coast in hypersonic glider mode for the moment to save on the fuel for my atmospheric engine.”

She then repeated herself in English for the benefit of the Vandenberg ground controllers. Lilya wiped the sweat on her forehead while blowing air out in relief : that reentry had sure been a scary experience. The American space plane’s performance up to now had been simply astounding, crushing anything the Soviet Union could build right now. She certainly would have a lot to say to her superiors once back in the USSR.

“Yuri, how are you?”

“Shaken but okay, Lilya : that reentry was quite an experience.”

“It certainly was. What course are we going to follow, Ingrid?”

“We will soon overfly Australia at hypersonic speeds, then will fly across the Pacific on a general northeast heading. If I have enough velocity and fuel left for that, I will fly across the Atlantic and go land in Sweden, but I somehow doubt that we will make it this far. I expect us to probably land in either Mexico or Brazil. Do you have a preference?”

“I will vote for Mexico, Ingrid : there is presently a rather nasty, fascist right-wing military government in power in Brazil. They don’t like Communists over there.”

“They sure don’t! Mexico or Sweden it will be, then.”

05:36 (Central Australia Time) / 20:36 (GMT)

Thursday, April 25 / Wednesday, April 24, 1957 ‘C’

Command bunker, Woomera secret test range area, South Australia

“Sir, we have an impossibly fast flying object coming from the Southwest at an altitude of 92,000 feet and a speed of Mach 12. It will directly overfly our Maralinga test site in about three minutes.”

The British R.A.F. commodore that reacted to the report by one of his radar operators threw a jaundiced look at the radar screen, where a tiny dot was crossing it. His face hardened as he thought about the only possible identity for that dot.

“That young Dows bitch and her space plane! First, she overflies our fleet anchorage area in Scapa Flow, probably to photograph it. Now, she is trying it again, this time just as we are due to test our new thermonuclear warhead. This time, she will not get away so easily with it! Did the Americans put up any notice of a supposed space exploration flight for today?”

“No, sir! The only notice for a space flight was done by the Soviets, for their VOSTOK 2, with two cosmonauts aboard. Their spacecraft is supposed to reenter and land over the Soviet Union. That dot couldn't possibly be the Soviet craft, sir.”

“Then, that leaves only a spy mission as a purpose for this overflight. Activate our high altitude interceptor missile battery and fire on that space plane as soon as it is within range.”

“Yes sir!”

The British commodore had a mean smile as his personnel was reacting to his orders : that Dows probably didn't know a thing about the R.A.F.'s new THOR hypersonic surface-to-air missile. She was however soon to learn about it...the hard way. Then, that killer of British servicemen would finally pay. Nobody in Great Britain was going to be sorry for that young megalomaniac.

05:39 (Central Australia Time)

SPS-10A STARBLAZER

Ingrid had just announced a few moments ago to her passengers that they had crossed the southern coast of Australia, when a violent shockwave made the space plane bounce up wildly. Lilya also heard a noise that she knew too well from her war experiences : the multiple 'tonk' of shrapnel hitting their space plane, followed a mere tenth of a second by the noise of a loud explosion outside.

“What the...” She only had the time to say before another outside explosion shook the STARBLAZER. Multiple indicators turned red on the instrument panels around her, while a recorded voice started to be heard.

“Warning, fire! Warning, fire! Warning...”

The voice of Ingrid shouting over the noise of the alarm then came from forward her station.

“MISSILES! WE ARE UNDER FIRE! I HAVE MULTIPLE SYSTEMS FAILURES! LILYA, YURI, SEAL YOUR SUITS, NOW!”

Ingrid then spoke on the radio, intent of warning both Vandenberg and Baikonur of this.

“Mayday! Mayday! This is the STARBLAZER, presently overflying Southern Australia. I have been engaged by at least two surface-to-air missiles over the general area of Cook and have sustained serious damage, over.”

The Vandenberg ground controller was the first to react, as Ingrid had spoken first in English out of combat reflex.

“This is Vandenberg Control. Can you still fly, STARBLAZER?”

“Barely, Vandenberg! My space plane was peppered by shrapnel and my ramjet and turbofan engines are off line. I just had to extinguish a fire in my port engine pod. I will have to crashland somewhere in Central Australia...if I don't break up in the air before that, over.”

The next to speak was the Soviet ground controller in Baikonur.

“STARBLAZER, do you have casualties aboard your space plane, over?”

“I don't know yet, Zarya-1. Let me check! Yuri, Lilya, are you alright?”

“I am intact!” Shouted Lilya, soon followed by Yuri.

“I am also intact, General.”

“Thank God! Zarya-1, the three of us are okay...for the moment. I will however have to crashland soon before my poor space plane gives up the ghost for good.”

“Vandenberg to STARBLAZER : can you eject instead, over?”

“Negative on that! One of my passengers does not have an ejection seat. I am not going to abandon him. I will now have to concentrate on landing in one piece. I will send updates as I can, out.”

Unknown to Ingrid, who anyway was too busy right now to think about it, her response to the last question from Vandenberg earned her bonus points in both Baikonur and Moscow. The question for her now was if she would ever get the chance to spend those points in the future.

05:46 (Central Australia Time)

Ringwood Station, 111 kilometers east of Alice Springs

Northern Territory, Australia

Rose Kimlin was fast asleep with her husband Kenneth in their large bed when a loud, long noise from outside their isolated cattle ranch woke her up with a startle. Her husband also woke up, sitting up in bed and shaking his head to chase sleep.

“What the hell was that?”

Rose, seeing a distant, dancing light in the night through one of the windows of their bedroom, got up in a hurry and went to look through the window. What she saw alarmed her.

“Ken, I think that a plane crashed not too far from here : I can see some sort of fire in the distance, to the Southeast.”

Kenneth, jumping out of bed at those words, joined her at the window, squinting his still unfocused eyes to see better.

“I think that you are right, Rose. I better go in our truck to check that out, in case some people need help.”

The Australian rancher then started to put on his work clothes, as his wife put on a bathrobe before leaving the bedroom to go down to the kitchen. Before she could go down the stairs, she nearly collided with her four children, who were now running out of their rooms, all excited.

“What was that noise, Mother?” Asked young Rosemary, ten years old, curiosity on her face.

“I am not sure, but it could be an airplane crashing near here.”

“Then, we should go help!” Said without hesitation Patrick, her oldest child at sixteen.

“Your father is about to do just that, Patrick. If you want to help as well, then you better go dress very quickly.”

Patrick didn't have to be told twice, disappearing back in his room in a flash. Rose, followed closely by Rosemary, fourteen year-old Mary and seven year-old Peter, then quickly went down to the kitchen, where a quick look through the windows confirmed that whatever had crashed was now burning.

“Dear God! I hope that no one was hurt in this.”

From another window, she saw as well that two dark silhouettes were now walking towards the main residence, coming from the annex lodging their six farmhands. A minute later, Derreck Flynn and Bo, their aboriginal ranch hand, entered the kitchen and nodded their heads to Rose as a salute, with Flynn then talking first.

“We heard some kind of a crash in the distance, maam. Is Mister Kimlin going to go investigate it?”

“Yes, he is, Derreck. He is presently getting dressed and should be down here soon. Let’s assemble what we have in terms of first aid materiel.”

That proved to be rather limited, with one small first aid kit and a few wool blankets being about all they could muster. The two ranch hands were loading those, along with a water jerrican, in the Kimlins’ old war surplus Dodge $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton truck when Kenneth came down to the kitchen, closely followed by his son Patrick. He immediately turned to his son when he saw Derreck and Bo loading the light truck.

“Patrick, go wake up our four other jackarroos⁶ if they are not awakened already, so that they can follow us in the Jeep : we may need quite a few hands to help at that crash site.”

“Right away, Father!” Replied the teenager before running out of the house. He was back with their four other employees less than three minutes later. Kenneth, who was already sitting in the truck, with Derreck Flynn at the wheel and Bo in the back, tapped impatiently on the outside of his door.

“George, get the Jeep and follow us! The rest, get in! There may be hurt people in need of help out there.”

The men and the teenager piled in, with two of them jumping in the Jeep parked in front of the house. The two vehicles then drove off in the night, their headlights on, watched anxiously by Rose Kimlin and her three younger children.

Kenneth Kimlin was thinking hard as Derreck Flynn drove across the mostly dry bed of Gaylad Creek and crossed the dirt track that passed as Ringwood Road, heading cross-country towards the crash site, visible in the distance thanks to the glow from orange flames coming from behind a line of sand dunes maybe four kilometers away. There were a number of small dirt airfields in the region, used by small private planes

⁶ Jackaroo : Male station hand in Australia. Female hands are called ‘jillaroos’.

and flying doctors to link the various isolated stations around. There was in fact one such dirt airstrip besides his own station. However, those small planes rarely flew at night, unless absolutely necessary. On the other hand, the airport in Alice Springs, some 110 kilometers to the West, accommodated many regional and national airlines that often flew at night. From the position of the crash, this could well have been a transport plane or even an airliner on its way to Brisbane from Alice Springs. If that was the case, then there could be many people either dead or wounded out there, maybe dozens of them. Wishing hard that this was not the case, Kenneth held on to his bolt-action hunting rifle stuck between his legs as the light truck bounced around on the sandy terrain. Wild dogs that roamed the Simpson Desert could well be attracted to any bodies lying around the crash site and he firmly intended to keep them at a distance.

Fifteen minutes later, as the two vehicles were about to crest the line of low sand dunes hiding from sight the location of the crash, a loud explosion followed by a big fireball rising in the night sky filled Kenneth with dread, while Derreck Flynn swore out loud.

“Bloody hell! The fuel in those blokes’ plane must have just gone up.”

Kenneth nodded at that, his fears redoubling : a lot of fuel would have been needed to create the huge fireball he had just seen rise up in the night sky. That reinforced his guess that this was a transport or airliner headed for Brisbane or even Sidney, on the East Coast. He thus anxiously scanned the darkness forward. They finally came within direct line of sight of the crash site, with the flames from a furious fire illuminating the surroundings. Kenneth’s heart sank when he saw that it was indeed some kind of plane, and a large one : a pair of twisted, broken wings stuck out of the inferno consuming the rest of the plane, with only the nose section being visible. He could not recognize the type of airplane, it being unlike anything he had seen before. His driver then shouted while pointing to their front and left.

“BOSS, OVER THERE! I SEE THREE PERSONS MOVING!”

“I SEE THEM! DRIVE TO THEM!”

Kenneth anxiously eyed the three moving silhouettes as Derreck gunned his engine and drove down the gentle slope of the low sand dune. Two of them were supporting the third one, who seemed to be limping with difficulty. As they got closer, the strange shape of those persons, one dressed in some kind of white coverall and the two others wearing orange coveralls, struck Kenneth. The shapes were somewhat deformed and

bloated. Once within fifty meters, now able to have a good look at them, Kenneth let out a surprised exclamation.

“Well, I’ll be stuffed⁷! These must be rooting⁸ Martians!”

Derreck Flynn, also struck by the appearance of the trio, braked to a halt and threw a worried look at his employer.

“What do we do now, boss?”

“Let me get out : I will approach them and see what’s up here.”

Grabbing his rifle and opening his door, Kenneth then stepped out on the sand : he could clearly feel the intense heat from the burning plane, even from this distance. Holding his rifle but not pointing it yet directly at the trio, he approached them at a quick walk, detailing them as he got closer. The three persons wore what looked like fully enclosed suits with large helmets. The one with the white suit also had a big pack in the back that made it look like a hunchback, plus wore a kind of carry-on bag suspended from a strap. He then saw the large red letters ‘CCCP’ written on the white helmets of the two strangers wearing orange suits. Stopping maybe ten paces from them, he raised his rifle and spoke out.

“Who are you, people? What kind of suits do you wear?”

The one in the white suit then opened its golden visor, revealing the face of a young woman. She then spoke in a teenager’s voice.

“We are astronauts, mister. We are wearing spacesuits. One of my companions has sprained an ankle while jumping out of my burning space plane.”

“Astronauts? Space plane? Who are you exactly?”

The teenager, a beautiful one with blue eyes and reddish-brown hair, sighed with apparent resignation while still supporting the limping person.

“I am Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows, from the United States Military Space Command. I just had saved in orbit Major Litvyak and Lieutenant Gagarin from their disabled spacecraft but we crashed after reentry. Lieutenant Gagarin sprained an ankle after jumping out of my burning space plane.”

The name and the face, along with the stories accompanying them in past Australian and British newspapers, then came back to Kenneth’s memory and he pointed his rifle at her, now on his guards.

⁷ Well, I’ll be stuffed! Expression of surprise in Australian slang.

⁸ Rooting : Synonym of ‘fucking’ in Australian slang.

"General Dows? Aren't you the one that sank the British cruiser H.M.S. TIGER off the coast of Palestine in 1953?"

The girl didn't avert her eyes then, answering him in a firm voice.

"Yes, I am! However, the British didn't leave me a choice then : they were jamming my radars and radio communications while my base was under attack by Arab airforces. That cruiser had been warned beforehand but still interfered, and this after a British commando force under disguise attacked my base the previous night. I just fulfilled a space mission to rescue two Soviet cosmonauts in distress, mister, and have no hostile intentions. Now, could you please lower that rifle?"

After a moment of indecision, Kenneth decided that she was no threat to him, especially while wearing her bulky, cumbersome spacesuit, and lowered his rifle. The Jeep that carried his son Patrick and George Wilder then stopped by his side, with Patrick jumping out at once.

"Are there any wounded to take care of, Father?" Asked the teenage boy before he could eye in detail the strangers, whose sight then made him freeze with surprise and wonderment. "Who are they?"

"Astronauts from space, if I can believe General Dows, there. Two of them are Soviets and one has a sprained ankle."

"Astronauts? Wow!"

"Don't be enthusiastic too quickly, Son : that Dows is wanted by the British for war crimes."

"So does claim British propaganda, mister." Said the teenager in a bitter tone. "They have conveniently forgotten quite a few facts, including that I fought to defend Australia and helped Great Britain during World War Two. Now, could we have finally some help for Lieutenant Gagarin, mister?"

"Very well, General Dows. Patrick, George, help put the limping man in the Jeep."

The second Soviet, a small woman with blond hair, then opened the visor of her helmet to speak to Kenneth with evident reprobation.

"The Soviet Union and the United States have been enemies in battle before, yet General Dows came to our rescue in orbit, acting out of humanity and compassion. We were expecting to be greeted with hospitality and care after our crash, not with threats of violence."

Kenneth, still not fully assuaged, glanced at Dows.

“And how did you happen to crash here in Australia, if you were simply bringing those two Soviets down from orbit?”

“Simple enough : someone shot missiles at us as I was starting to overfly Australia, on my way to the American continent. I suppose that I can thank the British again for that, as I am not aware that Australian forces have any surface-to-air missiles in their inventories.”

“Why would you need to overfly Australia if your destination is the United States? That’s a hell of a long distance from here. Don’t try to bullshit me, miss.”

“You want a quickie on orbital mechanics, mister? I was doing Mach 12 when I was shot down and could have crossed Australia and the whole Pacific Ocean in less than thirty minutes. If you haven’t realized it by now, shooting down a plane engaged in a rescue mission is by international law’s definition a crime. Do you really want to be a participant to that crime, mister?”

Young Patrick, who had listened with growing dismay to the exchange while helping Gagarin towards his Jeep, then pleaded to his father.

“Dad, could we just help them for the moment?”

“I guess we can. Alright, Dows : you and the other Soviet can go in the back of my truck.”

Watched by the still suspicious Kenneth, Ingrid and Lilya walked to the light truck, which had come forward and had stopped besides the Jeep. The four ranch hands in the back of the truck helped them climb in the truck, sitting them on the side benches. The group then kept mostly silent during the trip back to the Kimlins’ ranch.

15:47 (Washington Time) / 05:47 (Central Australia Time)

Wednesday, April 24 Thursday, April 25, 1957 ‘C’

Joint Chiefs of Staffs’ briefing room (‘The Tank’)

National Military Command Center, The Pentagon

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Georgy Zarubin, who had been graciously invited, along with his military attaché, Colonel General Andrei Klimov, to follow the progress of the space rescue mission from inside the Pentagon, took a moment to go over his shock and disbelief. Just as he and the American officials around him, including State Secretary Christian Herter, were ready to celebrate the success of the rescue mission, this had to happen. With anger

replacing disbelief, Zarubin spoke in the receiver of the telephone passed to him, which was presently connected to the Kremlin.

"Comrade Premier, this is Zarubin. The American space plane carrying our two cosmonauts has just been shot down by missiles and crashed in Central Australia. We don't know yet if our cosmonauts or General Dows survived the crash."

"Shot down? By whom? Why?" Asked Khrushchev in a disbelieving tone.

"Probably by British missiles, Comrade Premier. My military attaché tells me that Dows' space plane flew close to a secret British test range complex in Southern Australia, where the British test their new nuclear weapons."

"Was there any warning given by the British before they shot at the space plane, Comrade Zarubin?"

"None that we are aware of, Comrade Premier. From the last position sent by Dows, her space plane probably crashed in the vicinity of Alice Springs, in the center of Australia. The Americans are unable to get a response from Dows now."

Zarubin could nearly hear Khrushchev steam up with anger during the seconds it took before he spoke again.

"If anything has happened to our cosmonauts, those British will pay for it. I am going to have the British and Australian ambassadors called in at once to get explanations. What are the Americans doing right now?"

"They are still trying to regain contact with Dows, Comrade Premier. Secretary of State Herter is with me in the room and is presently on the line with President Eisenhower. I may be able to tell you soon about the intentions of the Americans. Please hold the line."

Zarubin lowered his receiver and looked at Secretary Herter, who was finishing to brief President Eisenhower. As soon as Herter hung up, Zarubin asked him a question politely.

"Mister Secretary, may I ask what the United States intend to do in response to this?"

"You may, Ambassador Zarubin!" Replied Herter in a firm tone. "The President is considering this as an act of war on the part of Great Britain and Australia and will respond accordingly. Admiral Radford, the President is ordering our forces to go to

DEFCON 2⁹ at once and wants our nearest warships in the Pacific to head for Australia and be prepared for strikes. Do you have a carrier group near Australia at the moment?"

After a quick exchange with his Chief of Naval Operations, Radford answered Herter.

"Unfortunately, our carrier group nearest to Australia is off the coast of Vietnam at this time. It would take it a good four days to arrive off the Australian coast. We however have an amphibious group presently on a joint exercise with French forces off New Caledonia, a day and a half from Australia."

"Then have that amphibious group ready for war operations against Australia and send it towards the Australian east coast at best speed. On my part, I am now going to call in the British and Australian ambassadors for a serious dressing down. Ambassador Zarubin, you may repeat my words to Premier Khrushchev."

"Thank you, Mister Secretary." Replied Zarubin before passing that information to the Kremlin. The irony of all this, only four years after a costly war in Europe between the Soviet Union and the Americans and their allies, did not escape the Soviet diplomat.

06:38 (Central Australia Time)

The Kimlins ranch, Ringwood Station

Northern Territory, Australia

The first rays of twilight were barely showing up when the two vehicles braked to a halt in front of the main residence of the station. Rose Kimlin ran out at once with her children to meet Kenneth as he stepped out of his light truck.

"Was it a plane crash, Ken?"

"You could say that, dear. We had no less than a space plane and three astronauts fresh from space crash over there. We brought back the three astronauts with us."

"A space plane? Astronauts? Are you serious?"

"Very! Rose, one of those astronauts is the American teenage general, Ingrid Dows, while the two others are Soviet officers. Dows says that she had just rescued

⁹ DEFCON 2 : Defense Condition 2, the highest step in combat preparedness short of actual war in the American armed forces.

those Soviets from orbit but that she was then shot down by missiles while overflying Australia.”

Rose watched with curiosity as three persons wearing fantastic suits stepped out of the Jeep and light truck, one of them limping badly.

“One of them seems to be wounded. We should care for him right away, Ken.”

“Right!” Said Kenneth before looking at his ranch hands.

“Bring the wounded to the lounge. We will treat him there.”

He then gestured with his rifle at Dows.

“Come this way with your other Soviet companion, General.”

That earned him a reprobate look from Rose, who raised her voice at him.

“Ken, there is no need to swing that rifle around. Those people just crashed, for God’s sake!”

Kenneth was tempted to reply to her, but refrained from doing so and slung his rifle, pointing the entrance door to the two female astronauts.

“After you, ladies.”

Rose preceded the two female astronauts inside, while Kenneth followed behind them. Going to the large lounge of the house, the group either sat or stood while watching the three astronauts get out of their spacesuits. The four Kimlin children were captivated by that, eyeing in particular the highly sophisticated spacesuit worn by Ingrid. Ingrid was out of her spacesuit much quicker than the two Soviets, thanks to its advanced design, which made putting it on or taking it off much easier than the Soviet spacesuits. As Yuri Gagarin slowly sat in a sofa and extended his left leg so that Ingrid could cautiously take his boot off, Lilya Litvyak looked at Rose Kimlin.

“Uh, would it be possible to go to the bathroom, miss? I need to go, quickly!”

“Of course, miss! This way, please.”

As Rose led Lilya towards the bathroom on the ground floor, Ingrid eyed critically Yuri’s left ankle, which was already badly swollen.

“I’m afraid that you have quite a bad sprain here, Yuri.” She said in Russian before switching to English and looking at Kenneth Kimlin, who was looking over her shoulder at Yuri’s foot. “I will need some ice and a towel for his ankle, mister.”

“I’ll get them! By the way, my name is Kenneth Kimlin.”

Ingrid didn’t reply to his rather cold presentation of himself and approached a padded foot rest, delicately putting Yuri’s foot on it. The ranch owner came back a minute later with a towel and a steel basin full of ice cubes. Ingrid was about finished wrapping Yuri’s

ankle in the folded towel, which now contained ice cubes, when Rose and Lilya came back in the lounge. Rose eyed the three astronauts, then her husband, who still had his rifle slung from one shoulder.

“What do you think will happen now, Ken? I suppose that this shooting down could have serious consequences, no?”

As Kenneth hesitated for an instant, Ingrid took on her to answer that, pivoting around while still crouched besides Yuri’s leg and looking up at Rose.

“You are definitely right about about the consequences, Misses Kimlin. I may look physically like a teenage girl, but I am actually 33 years old and I hold in my head the souvenirs and experiences of 73 past lives spread over 7,000 years. I have also been a special advisor to three American presidents since 1948 and know personally President Eisenhower. I can thus predict fairly accurately what will happen next. First, the fact of shooting missiles at an American spacecraft engaged in a peaceful rescue mission in space will be considered as no less than an act of war by the United States. Second, since I was carrying back to Earth two Soviet astronauts I had just saved in orbit at the request of the Soviet government, the Soviet Union will also consider that shutdown as an act of war. Your government either authorized that shutdown by British forces stationed on its territory, or allowed it through neglect or incompetence. Either way, Australia will be considered about as culpable as Great Britain in this by both the United States and the Soviet Union. Your country thus just pissed off the two biggest military powers in the World and lame excuses from your Prime Minister Menzies won’t cut it. Now, I can bet that the British who shot me down have already started searching for me and my space plane, to confirm if I am dead or not. When they will find the wreck of my plane and find no bodies in it, they will then search the desert around it to find me, probably using helicopters in the process. If and when they find me, they may just execute me on the spot as a war criminal, which they claim me to be, or will take me away for interrogation, with the goal of learning as much as they can about my space plane and other things I developed for the United States. Then, they could still execute me or send me to Great Britain to be jailed there. Since President Eisenhower would react very badly to one of his top advisors and his director of space programs to be jailed in Great Britain, I bet that the British commander who ordered me shot down will also order me executed, discreetly, while pretending that his men never found me. If he does that last thing, then it still will not save Great Britain nor Australia

from American retaliations. If my two Soviet companions also get killed, then you will be able to add Soviet retaliations to your problems.”

Angered by her assurance, which looked like outright arrogance to him, Kenneth unslung his rifle and pointed it at Ingrid, his index on the trigger.

“And what if I kill you myself as the war criminal you are said to be, General Dows?”

“Then, you will become the perfect scapegoat for everybody and will be made to pay in the place of those who shot me down, Mister Kimlin. Is that what you really want?”

“KEN, DON'T! PUT THE RIFLE DOWN!” Shouted Rose Kimlin, bordering on panic. His wife's plea, along with Ingrid's calm assurance, finally decided Kenneth to lower his rifle. He still glowered at Ingrid, so young-looking, yet so sure of herself.

“And what would you counsel that we do? Let you go? Technically, that would make me a traitor in the eyes of my government.”

She then surprised him with a question instead.

“Do you have a telephone in your ranch, Mister Kimlin?”

“Uh, no! We however have a long range radio, which we use for emergencies and for my children's schooling via radio. Why do you ask?”

“Because you could now claim that your radio was not functioning, thus could not call for instructions about me. That could gain enough time for common sense to prevail and thus prevent a lot of unpleasantness around Australia.”

“And if soldiers or policemen come for you, what then?”

“Then, I will play it by ear, but I don't expect that to happen before at least a few hours. A lot of things could happen in the meantime.”

Glancing around at his ranch hands, Kenneth saw that they seemed to find her course of action reasonable. He also saw the worried look on his wife's face and nodded his head.

“Alright, General Dows : your suggestion makes sense. We will thus relax and wait to see what will happen next.”

08:07 (Eastern Australia Time) / 07:07 (Central Australia Time)

Office of the Prime Minister of Australia

Canberra, Australia

Sir Robert Gordon Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia, was barely out of his official staff car and was about to walk into the building containing his office when an aide came to him at a run from the inside. Menzies looked at him with surprise as the aide stopped in front of him on the sidewalk.

"Why the hell are you running like that, Barney? Is my office on fire?"

"No, Mister Prime Minister, but President Eisenhower is on the line for you and is threatening war."

"WHAT? Are you drunk or just joking, Barney?"

"I am very serious, Mister Prime Minister. President Eisenhower accuses us of shooting down an American space plane over Australia. He has been waiting on the line for you for ten minutes now."

"Bloody hell!" Swore Menzies, starting to walk at a hurried pace towards his office, followed closely by the aide. "What the hell could have happened? Get me General Lyons on another phone at once!"

"Yes, Mister Prime Minister!" Replied the aide before bolting at a run again. All ideas of a relatively quiet day at the office now gone, Menzies entered the building and went to his office as quickly as he could. There, he found his personal secretary manning the telephone in the Prime Minister's office. Thanking him, Menzies took the receiver from him and spoke in it as calmly as he could.

"Sir Menzies speaking! What may I do for you, Mister President?"

"Prime Minister Menzies, you probably don't know anything yet about an American space plane being shot down by missiles at about six forty, Canberra time, as it was crossing the coastline of Southern Australia. That space plane, piloted by Lieutenant General Dows and bringing back to Earth two Soviet astronauts she had just rescued from orbit after their spacecraft was disabled, then crashed somewhere around the area of Alice Springs, according to Dows' last radio report. Now, I don't care whether British or Australian forces shot at General Dows or for what reasons. What counts to me is that she was fired on without warning from Australian territory and that I consider this as no less than an act of war. Your government now has 24 hours to find her and the two Soviet astronauts that had been traveling with her, and to name the ones responsible for that shooting down. If General Dows is found dead or is not handed to us intact within 24 hours, then Australia will suffer the consequences. An American amphibious assault group is already heading towards Australia and will launch search and rescue aircraft as soon as it is within sight of your coastline. I expect your

forces to allow those flights and not oppose them. If those planes are shot at or threatened in any way, then I will order my Strategic Air Command to launch heavy retaliatory airstrikes against Australian military bases. Do you understand me, Prime Minister Menzies?"

"But, but, this is totally uncalled for, Mister President! I am sure that Australia had absolutely no role in that shooting down you are describing. Are you sure that your General Dows didn't just lose control of her space plane over Australia and then crashed?"

The answer of Eisenhower to that was made in a cold, very deliberate tone.

"Prime Minister Menzies, General Dows is a highly decorated veteran of five wars. I am sure that she could make the difference between proximity-fuzed missile warheads exploding nearby and simple air turbulences. Don't take us for fools and, more importantly, take my threats seriously. You now have 24 hours, Mister Prime Minister."

Eisenhower then cut the line, leaving a now very flustered and nervous Australian Prime Minister to eye his telephone receiver.

07:16 (Central Australia Time)

The Kimlins' ranch, Ringwood Station

Northern Territory, Australia

Ingrid, like Lilya and Kenneth Kimlin, was attracted to a window of the lounge by the growing noise of a jet aircraft flying nearby. What she saw was a single jet aircraft that was now turning around the site of her space plane crash, which was still marked by a column of black smoke.

"Mister Kimlin, would you have a pair of binoculars, by chance?"

"Yes, I do. Give me a minute."

The rancher effectively returned quickly with a pair of powerful binoculars that he handed to Ingrid. Going out on the covered porch of the house, she pointed the binoculars at the jet aircraft. The latter unintentionally helped her when it turned around, performing a wide circle that made it overfly the ranch from an altitude of 800 meters.

"It's a British CANBERRA medium bomber." Announced Ingrid, making Kenneth look at her with misgiving.

"Could it be an Australian aircraft instead, General?"

Ingrid gave him a no-nonsense look.

"I know the difference between British R.A.F. markings and Australian R.A.A.F. ones, Mister Kimlin. This may be bad news."

"What do you mean?"

"That this jet knew in which general area to look for my space plane, and this less than two hours after I was shot at. At the speed I was flying then and the short time it took me to crash here afterwards, only those who actually shot missiles at me could possibly know where to look for me. It seems that those happy triggers were indeed British after all."

Lilya nodded her head, convinced by her logic.

"So, what could we expect next, Ingrid?"

"I doubt that those British want me any good, Lilya. I wouldn't be surprised if they lied to the Australia authorities and hid their search operations from them. The British hate me too much to let me go so easily. What I expect of those British, now that they have located my crash site, is for them to bring in troops by helicopter from their base, in order to examine the crash site. Once they will find no bodies in the wreckage, they will then start a methodical search of the area. With the distance from the area over which I was shot at, they could send helicopters to Alice Springs, the nearest significant airfield, within three hours, refuel there and then fly to the crash site. This area may thus start to crawl with British soldiers in about four hours. Even if the Australian government truly had nothing to do with our shooting down and genuinely wants to help find me alive, I doubt that the Australian authorities in Alice Springs will react fast enough or even be informed about me before the British arrive."

"What could we do then? We can't resist those British troops if they show up : we have no weapons and any resistance would put the Kimlins at risk."

"Agreed! That's why we will not resist those British if they show up first."

"But, you? They could kill you then!"

"Then, we better get out of here before they arrive, right?" Replied Ingrid with a smile, confusing both Lilya and Kenneth. The rancher looked at her crossly.

"Even if I would let you go, where would you go anyway?"

That brought a wide smile on Ingrid's face.

"To Alice Springs, of course! Where else? By the way, does Bo knows how to drive?"

“Actually, he does : he often drives my Dodge truck to Alice Springs to get supplies there, accompanied by me or one of my Jackarroos. Why do you ask?”

09 :55 (Central Australia Time)

Ross Highway, nine kilometers east of Alice Springs

Ingrid was nearly immersed in old souvenirs from her past life as Djanggawula, an Australian aborigine man who had lived in the Darwin area around the end of the 13th Century, as the old Dodge light truck driven by Bo rolled past desertic terrain, on the way to Alice Springs. The dark-skinned aborigine smiled on seeing her dreamy expression and spoke to her in his fair English.

“You look like someone ready to perform a ritual dance, General.”

“Maybe I am, Bo. Do you think that anyone in Amoonguna, or in Alice Springs itself, would know how to speak Wagiman, or any Ginwinyguan dialect?”

Bo, to which Ingrid had confided about her souvenirs as a past aborigine, thought for a moment before answering her.

“There may be an old woman in Amoonguna who speaks Wagiman. She came with her husband from south of Darwin decades ago. Her husband, a ranch hand, died a few years ago and she now lives alone in her hut, on the outskirts of Amoonguna.”

“Then, I would like very much to meet her, Bo. Me and my friends could stay at her hut for a while until things calm down.”

Bo looked at her again, this time with worry. She had changed into a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and running shoes, plus wore sunglasses and an old bush that she had bought from one of the ranch hands at the station. Still, her youthful beauty could attract attention to her.

“The British seem to hate you so much, yet you feel to me like a good person.”

“Bo, I have killed hundreds of times in wars, but I don’t enjoy killing. What I did, I did in the service of my country and I never targetted innocents or bystanders. The British once use treachery and deceit to hurt the unit I was commanding, even though they were supposed to be our friends. I unmasked their treachery and sank one of their warships, which was helping the enemies attacking my base at the time. Since then, the British have called me a war criminal, even though they were the ones in the wrong. Do you believe me, Bo?”

“I do, General.” Said softly the aborigine, attracting a smile on Ingrid’s face.

“Thank you, Bo. Your opinion counts for a lot to me.”

“And that is why I believe you, General : few white people in Australia respect us aborigines. Ha, here is the exit for Amoonguna, to our left. We can also see Alice Springs in the distance, to our front right. The airport is about three miles beyond Amoonguna.”

Ingrid looked in the direction of the airport as Bo turned left on a secondary dirt road leading to a small cluster of miserable-looking houses and huts. They were about to get to the first houses when Ingrid saw something in the distance, low in the sky. She then rapped her knuckles on the small window linking the cab with the back of the truck.

“Hey, Lilya! It seems that I was right about the British : there are four VULTURE medium transport helicopters about to land at the airport, coming from the South.”

The Soviet woman looked through the window for a moment, then sneered.

“Remind me never to bet against you, Ingrid. No wonder that you can beat everyone else, the way you keep guessing their moves in advance.”

“That’s not guessing : that’s simple logic!” protested weakly Ingrid.

Bo rolled past the few dozens rickety houses and huts of the aborigine community before finally stopping in front of an isolated hut made of straw and old pieces of wood planks. A single old aborigine woman wearing a dirty and dusty T-shirt that was way too big for her sat in the shade near the entrance. Stepping out of the truck, Bo then went to her and bent down to caress her dirty hair, speaking in Arrernte, the local aborigine language.

“Ginigwan, I brought a friend with me, a friend that can speak Wagiman. You do speak Wagiman, do you?”

The old woman looked up at him with a mix of nostalgia and surprise.

“Yes, I do speak Wagiman, although I haven’t had a chance to practice it with someone for years now. Is that white woman the friend in question?”

“Yes, she is. She is an American.”

Ginigwan looked at Ingrid, who had followed Bo out of the truck, with surprise and incomprehension.

“Then, how could she speak Wagiman? Only a very few of our people are left who remember the ancestral language.”

“The spirits of her ancestors are still in her head. She was once part of the Wagiman tribe.”

"Hello, Ginigwan!" Then said Ingrid in Wagiman. "I look forward to be able to speak again the tongue of one of my ancestors. His name was Djanggawula and he lived south of Darwin seven centuries ago. First, though, I must ask of you a favor. Me and two companions are wanted by bad men, British soldiers who shot down my plane and who are looking for me. Could we hide in your hut for the next day or two? Don't worry about providing for our needs : I will take care of that."

"How could I refuse to help someone inhabited by the spirit of an ancestor? You are welcome to my hut, you and your friends."

"Thank you, Ginigwan."

Ingrid then went to the back of the light truck and pulled away the canvas tarp covering the rear, speaking in Russian to Lilya and Yuri.

"An old aborigine woman has accepted to hide us in her hut. It is bare, but it is safe. Pass me the bags with our spacesuits, please."

She grabbed first the big jute bag containing her own semi-rigid spacesuit, which was partially folded, then carried it effortlessly into Ginigwan's hut, while Bo carried in the bag containing the two Soviet spacesuits. Next, she helped Yuri come out of the back of the truck, supporting him on one side so that he could limp inside the hut. She finally dropped in the hut her carrying bag, which now contained her folded inner space coverall, plus her pistol, a canteen full of water, a few rations, cash money and her passport and identity papers.

"Okay, guys, I am now going into town with Bo to buy supplies there for both us and for the ranch. He will then drop me back here and return to the ranch. Then, we will be on our own. By the way, the airport is a mere five kilometers southwest of here. The moment things will be quiet enough, we will go to the airport and bum a ride out by air."

"What about my sprained ankle, General? I am liable to slow you down then."

"Don't worry about that, Yuri. If you become hungry or thirsty while I am gone, there is water and some rations in my carrying bag. My pistol is also in there, but please don't start a fight that you can't win. I don't want to get our host in trouble on our account. I won't be gone that long anyway."

Going back into the truck's cab, where Bo was waiting for her, Ingrid lowered and inclined her bush hat, hiding her face from others as much as she could. Bo then started the engine and, after a wave at Ginigwan, rolled out of Amoonguna, taking the highway towards Alice Springs. The light truck entered the town after a ten minute drive, with Bo

heading first to a general store, where he was supposed to buy supplies and a few tools for the Kimlins. Ingrid got out of the truck with him and entered the store, wanting to buy food and drinks for her, Lilya and Yuri. She had exchanged a sizeable amount of her reserve of American dollars for Australian money at the ranch, so she was not worried about attracting attention on that account. As she had expected, however, most men in the store eyed her at once, attracted by her youthful beauty, some of them being quite insisting in their stares. The other thing that she noticed was the portable radio resting on the sales counter and tuned to a local radio station. Thankfully, it was actually playing music, not news. While Bo bought the supplies and tools meant for the ranch, Ingrid selected first a few food items, bottled water and three sets of mess tins, before going to the clothing racks and shelves and choosing two sets of jeans, cotton shirts, boots and bush hats of the appropriate size for Yuri and Lilya. As she was arriving at the cashier to pay for her stuff, the radio switched from playing music to broadcasting a news bulletin.

“...an unconfirmed news from American media sources states that an American space plane piloted by the famous Ingrid Dows, the so-called ‘God’s General’, was shot down over Australia early this morning, presumably by British forces based at the Woomera Test Range Complex. A search is now on for Lieutenant General Dows, who is said to have rescued in orbit the two Soviet astronauts aboard the VOSTOK 2, which had suffered a major malfunction and could not reenter the Earth’s atmosphere. The fate of Lieutenant General Dows and of the two Soviet astronauts that were aboard her space plane is still unknown, with her space plane said to have crashed somewhere on Australian soil. The American government is reportedly furious about the shutdown and has supposedly sent a strongly worded message to Prime Minister Menzies. On their parts, British representatives in Australia are refusing to comment about that news and...”

Trying her best to look unconcerned, Ingrid finally got her turn at the cashier and was able to pay for her purchases without problems. She blew air out in relief when she was able to sit back in the truck with Bo, with no one apparently having recognized her.

“Damn! Things could become dicey in the hours to come, if that news spreads much further.”

Bo was about to start his engine when something came to mind to Ingrid, who put a hand on his arm to stop him.

“Wait, Bo! I forgot to buy one important item. I will be back real quick.”

Coming out of the light truck again and reentering the general store, she selected a small portable AM/FM radio and spare batteries from the shelves and paid for them before returning to the truck and showing the radio to Bo.

"We can go back to Amoonguna now, Bo."

This time, Bo only took the time to let Ingrid out of the truck with her acquisitions once back at Ginigwan's hut, then tipped his bush hat to her.

"It was nice to meet you, Ingrid."

"And it was nice to meet you as well, Bo. Give my thanks to the Kimlins for their hospitality."

"I will, Ingrid. Goodbye!"

The aborigine then engaged his first gear and rolled away, on his way back to the Kimlins' ranch. Hoping fervently that the Kimlins wouldn't get in trouble for helping her, Ingrid entered the hut and put down the things she had bought on the dirt floor, in front of Lilya and Yuri. She smiled to them and showed them the portable radio, switching it on and tuning it to the local radio station.

"Well, my friends, we now have enough food and water to tough it out for two or three days here. In the meantime, we can pass the time by listening to the radio : I am already a news item on the local channel. If things go as I think they will, we should be able to leave in at most two days."

"You really think that the British will back down in the face of the threats the United States could do, Ingrid?" Asked Lilya, not completely convinced. Ingrid made a devilish smile at that question.

"The British, maybe not. The Australians? That's another thing. You ever put your hand on a hot stove?"

"I have to say that I was never stupid enough to do that."

"Well, Prime Minister Menzies now has one hand on a stove, and that stove is getting hotter and hotter."

19 :52 (Eastern Australia Time) 18 :52 (Central Australia Time)

Office of the Australian Prime Minister, Canberra

Sir Robert Menzies had just put down his telephone receiver when someone knocked on the door of his office, making him call out in a weary voice.

“Come in!”

His personal secretary then introduced General Sir Hugues Lyons, the head of the Australian General Staff, in the office. Lyons came to attention and saluted Menzies, who pointed at a chair near his work desk.

“Thank you for coming, General. Please sit down.”

Menzies waited for Lyons to be sitting before speaking again, conflicting emotions in his head. He had always been an utterly loyal and faithful servant of the British Crown, protecting British interests as well as Australian ones. However, the events of the day had seriously shaken that loyalty to Great Britain and the call he had just made had further damaged that trust.

“So, do you have anything new about that General Dows, Sir Hugues?”

“Er, not really, Mister Prime Minister. She has not been found yet, either dead or alive. The remains of her space plane, which burned and exploded on crashing, yielded no human bodies. She either ejected with the two Soviet astronauts before the crash or walked away afterwards. Unfortunately, she crashed in the middle of Simpson Desert, some 65 miles east from Alice Springs, and a recent sandstorm has already erased any traces we could have used to track her. She and the Soviets could be anywhere in that desert, lost without water and food. With night having fallen now, we had to stop our aerial search for them and will only be able to resume our search tomorrow morning.”

“But, we can’t wait until then!” Objected Menzies, getting agitated. “President Eisenhower’s ultimatum will be over by then.”

“I am sorry, Mister Prime Minister, but that desert area is huge and mostly uninhabited. Sending search teams there at night would risk those teams to get lost.”

“Alright, alright! Have you found something about who shot at Dows and why?”

“Not at first, Mister Prime Minister. I know for a fact that our own forces don’t have the means to shoot down that space plane, or even detect it at very high altitude. I thus concentrated on the British forces stationed in Australia, with a special focus on the British units manning the Woomera Test Range Complex. At first, I only got denials or even refusals to answer my questions. Then, around eleven this morning, I was informed by my local commander in Alice Springs area that four British helicopters full of troops had arrived in Alice Springs Airport, had refuelled and then flew off towards the East. Those British helicopters were evidently sent to search for Dows’ space plane, something that tells me that the British were the ones who shot Dows down. Furthermore, the presence of ground troops on those helicopters indicate to me that they

intended to hunt down Dows, possibly to kill her or arrest her. You probably already know how loathed her name is in Great Britain, Mister Prime Minister.”

“Yes, I know, Sir Hugues. She did after all kill nearly one thousand British sailors when she sank that cruiser off Palestine four years ago.”

Lyons was nearly tempted to add a few relevant facts to that but refrained from it as Menzies spoke again.

“So, the British nuclear test unit in Woomera did shoot her, correct?”

“Correct, Mister Prime Minister. In fact, they had been testing lately in Woomera a new type of high performance surface-to-air missile capable of engaging the new American supersonic planes. After pursuing that matter, the British commander in Woomera, an R.A.F. Commodore Belham, finally recognized that he had given the order to fire on Dows’ space plane.”

“And why did he do that?” Asked Menzies, getting angry. “Did he even think about the consequences of his acts?”

“Actually, he felt fully justified in shooting, as he believes still that Dows was on a spying mission and was sent to take pictures of the latest British preparations for nuclear tests.”

“And you believe that, Sir Hugues?”

The Australian general hesitated before answering. The way the British government had mostly left Australia to fend for itself against the Japanese during World War Two, sucking up Australian military units and supplies for the European and Middle East Theaters while sending precious little in return, had embittered him to no little degree then. To add to that, the Americans, with the young Ingrid Dows in the forefront, had then lent their support to Australia, possibly saving it from a Japanese invasion.

“At first, I wasn’t sure about that, Mister Prime Minister. However, after the space rescue operation led by Dows became evident, I became convinced that Dows was simply overflying Australia on her way back to the United States.”

Sir Menzies lowered his head then, apparently in discouragement.

“Sir Hugues, I just got off the phone with Prime Minister MacMillan, who shrugged off President Eisenhower’s ultimatum as being a simple bluff. The problem is that I don’t think that Eisenhower is bluffing. Didn’t Dows serve under him during the Second World War?”

“She did, sir. However, I believe that Dows is much more than a trusted officer for Eisenhower, or for the public in the United States. She is a full-fledged national

heroine in the United States, on top of being the first human in space. The miracles concerning her, which earned her the nickname of 'God's General', made her even more special in the eyes of the American public. If and when the fact that the British were responsible for shooting her down and are still hunting her down become known in the United States, then there will truly be hell to pay, Mister Prime Minister. If we don't do something to dissociate ourselves from that mess, which is solely of British making, then we will get caught in the crossfire."

"And what could the Americans do to us exactly, Sir Hugues?"

"Plenty, Mister Prime Minister! They have a full amphibious group, to which the French added four warships of their own, on its way to our eastern coast. An aircraft carrier group that was steaming off the coast of Vietnam is also said to have been rerouted towards Australia. Our intelligence and that of the British indicates that the American forces are now at DEFCON 2, only one step short of actual war, and that their strategic bombers and nuclear missiles are on high alert. One full squadron of B-50 heavy supersonic bombers has just moved to Guam, in the Central Pacific, joining another B-50 squadron already stationed in Guam. From there, these bombers could easily reach Australia and release standoff air-to-surface missiles that could be armed with either explosive or nuclear warheads. We have nothing capable of intercepting those bombers or their missiles. There is more, Mister Prime Minister."

"More? Isn't that already plenty?"

"It is, Mister Prime Minister. However, we can now add to all that a Soviet heavy cruiser group that precipitously left port in Madagascar and is now headed our way."

Menzies banged his fist on his desk then, out of frustration and anger.

"All that just because the British hate the guts of one American general? We have to do something to assuage the Americans on this, and quickly."

Menzies thought for a moment, then pointed an index at Lyons.

"Sir Hugues, I want you to have those British helicopters and troops leave Alice Springs at once. Tell them that we are taking over the local search for General Dows and those two Soviet astronauts, then arrange for our own troops to resume that search, with orders to treat Dows with courtesy and to safeguard her. On my part, I am going to call President Eisenhower to tell him that his search and rescue aircraft are welcome to enter Australian airspace at will for their search for Dows and those Soviets. Make sure that our fighter pilots get notice of that, so they don't start a war accidentally. There has been enough blunders committed today as it is."

“What if the British refuse to leave Alice Springs, or try to intercept those American search and rescue planes, sir?”

Menzies had to take a deep breath then, hoping that things wouldn't come to that.

“Then, remind them politely but firmly that they are only guests in our country, Sir Hugues.”

09 :11 (Central Australia Time)

Thursday, April 25, 1957 'C'

Ginigwan's hut, Amoonguna aborigine community

District of Alice Springs, Northern Territory

The Sun was rising in a clear sky as Ingrid, wearing her bush hat and sitting with Ginigwan and Lilya in front of their hut, was watching the airport, five kilometers away. She could not see on the tarmac the four British helicopters that had arrived yesterday, but that could simply mean that they were gone east to hunt her down. By now, the radio news were full of her, her shooting down and the American threats of retaliation. The pressure on the Australian Prime Minister must have been untenable right now. The noise of approaching jet engines coming from the East then made her twist her head around and look up. She couldn't help yell with joy when she recognized two Bell C-10 THUNDERBIRD VSTOL assault transport aircraft painted the colors of the United States Marine Corps as they overflew Amoonguna at low altitude before heading towards the airport, apparently to land there.

“YEAH! THE MARINES ARE COMING TO THE RESCUE! LILYA, WE WILL FINALLY BE ABLE TO BE RESCUED!”

Running inside the hut and going to her carrying bag, Ingrid took out her pilot's emergency locator beacon and transceiver unit and activated it before running back out and speaking in it.

“To the two Marine Corps MC-10 assault transports about to land in Alice Springs, this is Lieutenant General Dows speaking, over.”

She only had to repeat herself once before a male voice answered her with a strong American accent.

“General Dows, this is Zebra One. We are picking up your locator beacon now. How far from Alice Springs are you now, over?”

"Zebra One, I am only three miles northeast of the airport, on the outskirts of a small aborigine settlement. Do you have enough fuel to pick us up and return us directly to your ship off Australia, over?"

"Negative, General, but we will pick you up before landing to fuel up at the airport. Don't worry about your security at the airport : we have armed Marines aboard. Be ready for pickup in two minutes, out!"

Keeping her locator beacon active, Ingrid smiled to Lilya.

"Let's take our spacesuits out of the hut, so that we are ready to be picked up." She then looked with gratitude at Ginigwan, holding her by her shoulders.

"I will never be able to thank you enough for sheltering us, Ginigwan. The things I bought yesterday, including the radio, are now yours. They aren't much and I wish I could leave you with more but..."

"Your friendship was plenty, Ingrid. To be able to speak in Wagiman with you woke up many nice souvenirs in me. You will always be welcome in my hut."

The two women then hugged each other at length before Ingrid went inside to retrieve her carrying bag and the jute bag containing her spacesuit. By the time that the trio of astronauts had brought their things to a vacant spot away from the fragile hut, a MC-10 was on approach for a vertical landing. She shouted over the growing din of the two big turbofans of the assault transport.

"GRAB ON TO YOUR HATS IF YOU DON'T WANT TO LOSE THEM, MY FRIENDS!"

They soon were envelopped inside a small dust storm kicked up by the hot blast from the pivoting engine nacelles of the MC-10, which finally landed some forty meters away, then powered its engines to idle as its rear cargo ramp went down. Ten armed Marines led by a young captain ran out and came to Ingrid's group, with the captain coming to attention in front of Ingrid and saluting her.

"Captain Jack Norris, at your service, General. I am happy to find you in good health."

"Not as happy as me, Captain. This is Major Lilya Litvyak and Lieutenant Yuri Gagarin, of the Soviet Air Force. Those bags contain our spacesuits. Be advised that Lieutenant Gagarin has suffered a sprained ankle on landing."

"No problem, General!" Replied Norris before twisting his head to give orders to his men. "Sears, Woods, form a fireman's chair and carry Lieutenant Gagarin inside the plane. Sergent Gould, have those spacesuits brought inside."

Norris then saluted Lilya and pointed the MC-10 to her while smiling.

“If you may follow me, Major.”

Lilya smiled to Ingrid as she was about to follow the Marine captain.

“More decadent capitalist politeness, Ingrid?”

“Why not? Politeness never hurt!” Replied Ingrid with a shrug and a big grin.

The MC-10 took off a mere four minutes after landing, creating again a dust storm. Ingrid waved at Ginigwan one last time through one of the windows, then looked at her two Soviet companions.

“I sincerely hope that the welcome you will get in Moscow will be a friendly one. You did nothing to be ashamed of and certainly were not responsible for the defect in your spacecraft. Let’s wish that this incident and space rescue operation will mark a new, more peaceful relationship between our two countries. I am personally willing to encourage more joint space operations in the future, if your leaders are willing to entertain the idea.”

“That would be truly great, Ingrid.” Replied soberly Lilya. “It was really nice to work with you, instead of fighting you.”

“The same here, Lilya.”

Ingrid then looked out through her window, catching glimpses of the Australian desert that her old incarnation as Djanggawula had crisscrossed so many times, hundreds of years ago.

CHAPTER 3 – VARNA

20:08 (Constantinople Time)

Thursday, June 1, 1854 ‘A’

Port of Varna, on the Black Sea

Bulgaria

“Look at all this activity, all these diverse costumes and uniforms!” Wondered Fanny Duberly while leaning against the ship’s side and looking down at the crowded quay. Her husband Henry, standing besides her in his Hussar’s uniform, nodded his head and took her gently by the waist.

“You wanted adventure and travel, dear? Enjoy them before the killing starts. The captain told me that we will wait until tomorrow morning to unload most of our animals and supplies, except for a small reconnaissance party that will find and delimit a campsite for the regiment.”

“Can we at least go down on the quay and do a small walk around town, Henry? I’m sick and tired of being on this ship.”

Henry smiled in sympathy at that: the five-week sea trip had been hard and uncomfortable, to say the least.

“That we can do, dear. Let me just advise Major Henry first.”

The paymaster was back a few minutes later as a small group of cavalymen was riding off the ship through a large cargo ramp running down from a hull side opening. Fanny watched go out in succession Major Henry, Captain Heneage, Captain Smythe, RSM O’Neil and Jeanne Smythe, the latter driving her light cart and with Doctor Farrell sitting by her side on the bench seat. Jeanne was wearing her equipment vest, something that prompted Fanny to question her husband.

“Henry, what do you think of a woman who goes around armed to the teeth?”

Henry replied slowly while following the reconnaissance party with his eyes.

“Normally, not much good, Fanny. However, that French woman is anything but normal. You saw her during saber and pistol practice, right?”

“Did I ever!” Replied Fanny while rolling her eyes. “If she would have been a man, she would be recognized as fencing champion of the regiment. As for her pistol shooting, I’m not sure that anyone in Europe can equal her.”

Henry nodded and looked at Fanny with a strange expression.

“Correct, dear. That is not all, however.”

“By God, isn’t that enough already? I’m getting jealous of her abilities as it is.”

“Well, you remember that mid-March newspaper article about Captain Smythe killing or wounding four bandits in Hyde Park while walking with Lady Jeanne?”

“How could I forget it? It earned him a round of toasts at the Officers’ Mess on his return to Winchester.”

“Yes, and I went to congratulate him privately afterwards about that. The problem was that, instead of being flattered, he became deeply embarrassed and revealed a secret to me on the condition that I didn’t repeat it to anyone. Captain Smythe didn’t kill or wound those bandits: Lady Jeanne did.”

Fanny was struck speechless for a moment, staring at her husband with utter disbelief.

“That I can’t believe, Henry! No woman could do that, ever, especially when considering that one of the bandits was a murderer and a man considered very dangerous.”

“Think what you want, dear.” Replied softly Henry, shrugging. “Let’s forget this for the moment and let’s take a nice walk.”

Taking the arm he offered her, Fanny followed eagerly Henry down the gangway and onto the quay. They had to make their way through a crowd of sweating soldiers and local workers busy unloading cannon balls, shells and other supplies from the ships moored to the quay. Finally setting foot on the shore, the couple hesitated on which way to go until Henry decided to follow a party of French Army officers down a main street of the port.

Even if the town was a dirty, impoverished one, Fanny found pleasure in being able to walk around and escape the crowded, smelly confines of the H.M.S. SANS PAREIL. It also thrilled her to see such various accoutrements and hear so many languages in one place. In the street they were walking along, Fanny could detail French Zouave soldiers from Algeria, North African Spahi cavalrymen, Ottoman soldiers from Egypt, Tunisia and Albania and even irregular Muslim volunteer cavalrymen called Bashi-Bazouks. She had a glimpse of one of those bearded, ragged men sitting under a porch and caressing the exposed breasts of an equally ragged camp follower, oblivious of the passing humanity around him. Henry saw Fanny scandalized expression then and grinned in amusement.

“War can’t be all work and no fun, dear.”

“Maybe,” replied his wife with a frown, “but don’t count on me undressing in public like this wretch.”

“Oh, I’m not asking for that much.”

That remark earned Henry a light slap on the back of his head and a snub for the next few minutes. The couple soon had to cut their promenade short, though, as it was quickly getting dark. On their return to the ship, they found out that the reconnaissance party was staying overnight at the regimental campsite. Hoping that this would be her last night in their cramped ship’s cabin for at least a few weeks, Fanny changed to a night gown and went to bed. She nearly protested at Henry’s eagerness when he cupped her right breast with one hand as soon as she lay besides him. However, the feeling that his fingers quickly arose in her nipple then reminded her that being married had its advantages too.

08:21 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, June 2, 1854 ‘A’

H.M.S. SANS PAREIL

Port of Varna, Bulgaria

“WOAH, BOB! CALM DOWN!”

It took Henry’s firm hands to get Fanny’s horse back under control, so excited the beast was. Most of the horses about to be disembarked were similarly agitated, anxious to be free from the confines of the ship. Only the pack mules stayed manageable. While waiting for their turn to disembark, the Duberlys watched Captain Tomkinson’s A Troop file off the ship, followed by B Troop, led by Lieutenant Wells. The Quartermaster Troop was last off the ship, with the medical wagon closing the procession. Driven expertly by Misses Champion, the big vehicle was transporting as well Misses Ward and Pearson, plus five other regimental wives who had no means of transport of their own. From what Jeanne Smythe had told her during their sea voyage about the conditions to expect in Varna, Fanny suspected that those women would not stay inactive for long. Her heart pounding with excitement, she spurred her horse to a trot, following Henry’s horse through the narrow streets of the port.

The regimental camp turned out to be a barren, rocky expanse of ground measuring about 200 yards to the side and surrounded on three sides by camps for

other cavalry regiments. The free side ran along a small stream, which shoreline was lined at fifty yards intervals with bright signs mounted on pickets. Intrigued by these, Fanny galloped to the stream and examined one of the signs, reading it aloud.

“Fresh water source. No urinating, defecating or throwing of waste of any kind within fifty yards of the water. By order of Regimental Surgeon.”

Looking next around her, Fanny saw Jeanne Smythe’s cart near one corner of the campsite, with the French woman hard at work nearby digging a hole with pick and shovel. The medical wagon pulled to a halt near Jeanne’s cart as Fanny stopped her horse besides the French woman and dismounted. Wearing a light sleeveless shirt, a riding skirt and cavalry boots, Jeanne was already sweating in the rising heat of the day as she was shoveling dirt out of a waist-deep hole. Jeanne smiled up at Fanny while continuing her work.

“Good morning, Fanny. It’s going to be a hot day.”

“It certainly will. What are you doing?”

“Digging a latrine for us women. Maybe our example will push our men into respecting some camp sanitation rules.”

“Uh, I supposed that you are planning something to hide us from the hundreds of men that will camp around us.”

“Of course! I will erect a small bell tent around it that will also protect us from rain. Another tent will be reserved for female bathing and washing.”

“Jeanne, you’re a genius!” Said Fanny enthusiastically. “Can I help?”

Jeanne looked at Fanny’s ankle-length fine city dress, tunic, embroidered blouse and fancy hat before smiling apologetically to her.

“I appreciate the offer, Fanny, but aren’t you kind of overdressed for the job?”

Fanny had one quick look at herself and realized that Jeanne was right.

“Damn! I didn’t think about bringing informal work clothes with me.”

Jeanne’s smile faded then as she looked with concern at Fanny.

“Did you at least bring warm winter clothes?”

“That I did.” Answered Fanny sheepishly. “At first I thought that you were being over pessimistic about the length of this war. Then I changed my mind.”

Jeanne stopped shoveling for a moment, resting on her shovel as she stared seriously at her friend.

“May I ask what changed your mind?”

“Maybe the way you always seem to be ahead of the rest of us in so many things.”

Fanny looked downright embarrassed now as she looked down at Jeanne.

“Jeanne, at first I thought that you were some kind of rich eccentric with mental delusions. After watching you for a few weeks, I now realize that you mean business, deadly serious business. In fact, I’m starting to have more confidence in you than in many of our officers. I wish I knew how you ended up the way your are, though.”

Jeanne was thoughtful for a moment, then spoke quietly.

“Put it on years of adversity, hard training and continuous self-education. War is also an old acquaintance of mine. Sometimes I watch those so-called officers who bought their ranks instead of earning them and am tempted to push them aside and show them how it’s done. However, I do not wish to become too conspicuous, something that would hinder my job of helping the sick and the wounded and could also hurt my husband’s career. For that same reason I would ask you to not include me in your journal. The less known I stay, the better.”

“How do you know that I am writing a journal?” Asked Fanny, surprised. “Only my husband knows about it.”

“Fanny, just assume that I somehow know more than I should and accept me as I am.”

Fanny looked at Jeanne suspiciously for a moment, then nodded her head slowly.

“Alright, I will, but you are the strangest friend I ever had.”

“Thanks, Fanny!” Replied happily Jeanne before resuming her digging work.

11:18 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars campsite, Varna

Henry Duberly smiled with amusement when he found his wife Fanny down to her blouse and skirt and digging a narrow ditch around a rectangular tent with the help of Misses Ward. The seven other women from the medical party were busy erecting another big rectangular tent about twenty yards away, isolated from the other tents around it. Fanny stopped digging long enough to accept a kiss from Henry, who then looked at the grounds occupied by the medical section. Apart from the big medical wagon, with its rear and side tents already deployed, five large rectangular tents were either already up or about to be erected around the wagon. The tents were not of the

regulation army bell tent model and, apart from being more spacious, were made of much sturdier, better quality fabric than the army-issued ones, having been procured in London by Jeanne Smythe. Two of the tents, including the one Fanny was busy surrounding with a ditch, flanked each side of the medical wagon, while the three others were each twenty yards from it and well separated. Two solid poles were firmly planted in the ground near the wagon, to which were attached four horses and five mules. One of the horses was 'Bob', fanny's mount, while another was Jeanne Smythe's personal horse. The remaining horses were those for the medical wagon. Near the horse poles was parked the small wooden baggage trailer that had been towed behind the medical wagon. Of conventional construction, in contrast to the medical wagon and cart, that two-wheeled covered cart had been bought in Winchester and quickly modified so that it could be towed by the medical wagon. Overall, the regimental ambulance section now had a mobility and degree of self-sufficiency that the rest of the army could only envy.

"By God!" Exclaimed Henry admiringly while looking around him. "I wish that the regimental quartermaster be this well equipped and organized. That Jeanne Smythe would have made a first class quartermaster if a man."

Those words made Fanny look dubiously at him.

"You know, Henry, I'm starting to think that us women are not so weak and dependant of men after all."

She then swept one arm towards the crowd of cavalry soldiers surrounding them.

"Look at those idiots! While the medical section is nearly finished setting up, with no thanks to men, our good officers have been busy all morning shouting useless orders around, harassing their men and wasting everybody's time. The tent lines have been moved and realigned three times already and not a single latrine or cooking tent has been set up yet."

Henry blushed under the vehement but well deserved criticism from his wife: the utter lack of field experience of many of the regiment's officers was already becoming painfully obvious, attracting bitter comments from experienced troopers. What he had come to tell Fanny was thus all the more embarrassing to say.

"Uh, I'm afraid that I have two bad news for you, Fanny."

"Not concerning us directly, I hope?"

"One, yes. I have been assigned a tent. The problem is that three other junior officers are sharing it with me."

"WHAT?" Shouted Fanny, getting angry. "And where am I supposed to sleep?"

"I don't know yet, dear. The quartermaster has not come around yet to assigning tents to women."

Margaret Ward, who had been discreetly listening on, then cut in politely.

"If I may, Misses Duberly, we have plenty of space left in the women's tent. You are most welcome to move in if you wish so."

"Hell, I think that I will do just that." Replied Fanny while staring down her husband. "So, what is that other bad news you were bringing, dear?"

Wincing at the sarcastic way she had pronounced the word 'dear', Henry braced himself as he answered her.

"Well, C and D Troops have arrived, along with the Headquarters Troop, but they have no means of transportation for their baggage and supplies. The quartermaster, Captain McGregor, sent me to see if the doctor would be willing to spare his mules for the day in order to help."

Fanny and Margaret exchanged a knowing look then.

"Henry," replied Fanny with an exasperated tone, "you can tell Captain McGregor that he will get an answer after lunch: Doctor Farrell and Lady Jeanne have gone into town to talk with French Army doctors and to procure supplies. Those mules are the private property of Jeanne Smythe and she has a letter signed by Lord Raglan himself certifying that the equipment and animals of the medical section cannot be requisitioned without her tacit agreement. Talking of lunch, what is on the regiment's menu for noon?" Fanny didn't like the way Henry tucked his head in like a turtle at her question.

"Nothing yet, dear: the cooks and their rations are still stuck aboard the ship. We were hoping for your mules to bring some ration biscuits to the men."

Margaret Ward could barely contain her laughter as Fanny Duberly bent down and leaned on her pick, looking totally discouraged.

"God, is this regiment an army unit or a traveling circus act?"

"Hey," protested weakly Henry, "you should see the other regiments."

"I don't want to know!"

Fanny's eyes then focused at something in the distance.

"Well, you are in luck after all: here is Jeanne's cart back from town."

Looking in the same direction, Henry saw the ambulance cart coming effectively towards them, with Jeanne Smythe and Doctor Farrell sitting in the front. He didn't like the glum look on their faces as they got nearer. Stopping her cart besides the medical wagon, Jeanne then jumped down from it with commendable agility and faced Henry and Fanny.

“I’m afraid that we have bad news: cholera cases have developed in the French camps. Our men may become infected soon.”

Everybody around Jeanne stiffened at the name of the dreaded killer disease. Fanny then looked at young Doctor Farrell, whose face reflected preoccupation.

“The best thing for us to do now is to prevent its spread through sound camp sanitation and quarantine of the sick. For the sick, we can only help them by combating dehydration, cleaning them up and keeping down the fever. Jeanne gave me a few good ideas about how to do this best.”

All eyes then turned to Jeanne, who spoke slowly.

“Don’t get this wrong, people. Cholera is a nasty, merciless disease. We probably will be swamped with patients emptying themselves constantly by both ends all over the place and who could die within hours of showing the first symptoms. We can help fight dehydration, the most dangerous aspect of cholera, by constantly giving to the sick a solution of water and minerals. A light broth or soup could do. Thankfully, the medical wagon contains a good supply of bed pans and bed sheets that will help us keep the quarantine tent clean. The washing to be done will however be backbreaking, continuous work. One crucial point: everything used to treat cholera victims will have to be washed, then disinfected by boiling. Another important point is to safeguard our fresh water supply from infection. No human waste must touch the stream passing through this camp, or we will all be infected. Our next big piece of work will be to dig a sewer pit away from the river, in which we will throw all the infected waste, plus quicklime at regular intervals. I will direct the work this afternoon while Doctor Farrell alerts Lord Paget and the surgeons of the other regiments of the brigade.”

Henry Duberly looked gravely at Jeanne as she spoke: Doctor Farrell may officially be in charge of the regimental ambulance but there was no mistaking who was in real control. Everything that Jeanne had said however made good, solid sense and cholera was too serious a matter to start petty power games now.

“Misses Smythe, I will talk to Captain McGregor about this to see how he can help you. I however have a pressing request from him. Could you spare your five mules so that the essential rations and supplies can be unloaded from our ships?”

Jeanne shook her head dejectedly before looking back at Henry.

“Hurrah for the Commissariat’s usual incompetence! Tell Captain McGregor that he can have my mules for today, but remind him that there is a big string attached to them. In the meantime, us girls will take a well deserved lunch.”

“You have rations with you?” Asked Henry, both surprised and envious. Jeanne gave him a dubious look, then went to the back of her cart and unloaded a number of wicker baskets, opening them and exposing their content.

“Alright, girls, we have fresh bread, cheese, hard-boiled eggs, smoked beef sausages and red wine. Let’s set the table!”

Henry Duberly shrank under the sarcastic look Fanny then gave him. It became even more stinging when Jeanne went back to the cart and took out of it a live lamb.

“By the way, I also secured our supper. If any of you girls want to, you can bring your husbands a portion then.”

“Hmm, I’ll think about it.” Said Fanny, grabbing one of the baskets and bringing it inside the rear tent of the medical wagon.

08:36 (Constantinople Time)

Saturday, June 3, 1854 ‘A’

8th Hussars camp

Varna, Bulgaria

Fanny Duberly woke up to find herself alone in the women’s tent, now well lit by daylight. She could hear outside the usual noises of an army bivouac: shouted orders; the sound of marching feet and horses hoofs; the clicking of weapons and the conversations of idle soldiers. With her muscles stiff from yesterday’s digging work, she rose from the folding camp cot lent to her by Jeanne and quickly dressed, putting on her most informal gown, which was however still overly fancy for rugged outdoors work. She emerged from the tent, intent on using the women’s latrine, only to nearly bump into a bearded man wearing civilian clothes who was gawking at the medical wagon nearby. The man, who looked in his late thirties, quickly took off his cap and bowed politely.

“I’m sorry for being in the way, madam. Let me present myself: William Howard Russell, correspondent for The Times of London.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir.” Replied Fanny politely but now on her guard. “My name is Fanny Duberly, wife of the paymaster of the 8th Hussars. May I help you?”

“You may, madam.” Said Russell, then pointing at the medical wagon. “This is a most ingenious design. Do you know how long it has been in army service?”

“In fact I do, sir. It was introduced into Hussars’ service on April ninth of this year, but you won’t find any other similar wagon in the army.”

“Oh, why? Is the design flawed?”

Fanny couldn't help grin as she managed her effects on the journalist, who had taken out a pencil and a notepad.

“Not at all! This wagon is the best I ever saw. It was actually designed specifically for the regimental ambulance by Lady Jeanne Smythe, the wife of one of our officers. She paid for it from her own pocket, her being a rich woman. She gave it as a gift to the regiment to replace the old ambulance wagon that had been smashed in an accident.”

“That is mighty generous of this Lady Smythe. I... wait! Did you say that she designed it as well as pay for it?”

“I did.” Answered Fanny, smiling at Russell's surprise. “She also volunteered as field nurse and ambulance driver. Would you like to speak with her?”

“Very much so, madam.” Said eagerly the journalist while scribbling on his notepad. He then followed Fanny inside the medical wagon's rear tent, where they found Doctor Farrell disinfecting his instruments with rubbing alcohol and a clean piece of cloth.

“Aah, Doctor Farrell! May I present you Mister William Russell, correspondent of The Times of London?”

“How do you do, sir?” Said timidly the young doctor while shaking hands with Russell. “I suppose that you would like a tour of the medical section.”

“I would, sir, but I was also hoping to speak to a Lady Jeanne Smythe.” Farrell then shrugged and smiled apologetically.

“I'm afraid that you are out of luck today, sir: she left early this morning with Misses Ward, one of our assistant nurses, on a three-day trip to the town of Burgas, fifty miles to the South, to get additional supplies.”

“Three days?” Said Russell dejectedly. He however regained quickly his composure and smiled to Farrell. “Well, how about that tour of your section then, Doctor?”

“I will be glad to oblige, sir.” Replied Farrell while packing away his surgical instruments.

09:26 (Constantinople Time)

Quarantine tent, medical section

Russell nodded his head in approval, writing notes down quickly as Doctor Farrell finished describing the equipment of the quarantine tent, the last stop of the guided tour. By now the journalist was both jubilant and angry: jubilant that someone was at last doing the job right; angry that the rest of the army wasn't like this regimental ambulance. Thanking the frail doctor and shaking his hand, Russell waited until Farrell was back into his medical wagon, then went quickly to the laundry tent, where a young blond woman was washing clothes. The woman, whom he had met earlier during the tour, had seemed eager to be interviewed and have her name mentioned. Mary Pearson effectively appeared pleased when Russell entered the tent. Starting with a few questions concerning her, the journalist waited until she was warmed up to get into his real subject of interest.

"...and you were then hired by Lady Jeanne Smythe, right?"

"Correct, sir."

"Do you know this Lady Jeanne well, Misses Pearson?"

That made the young blonde giggle.

"Know her well? Not really, but you wouldn't believe the stories about her. Take the time when she did saber practice with the officers of the regiment..."

11:08 (Constantinople Time)

Tuesday, June 6, 1854 'A'

8th Hussars camp

Varna, Bulgaria

Fanny Duberly was kneeling in front of a wooden tub full of soapy water, washing one of Henry's shirt, when Mary Pearson ran into the laundry tent and shouted excitedly.

"Jeanne and Margaret are back! Their cart is approaching the camp."

Dropping the shirt in the tub and hurriedly drying her hands with the white apron she wore over her dress, Fanny ran outside and looked south across the shallow stream flowing through the camp. Her heart jumped when she saw Jeanne's ambulance cart, now less than 400 yards away and with Jeanne and Margaret waving at them. A line of loaded pack mules trailed behind the cart. Fanny looked at the two poles near the medical wagon, to which five mules and four horses were still attached, then back at the mules following Jeanne's cart.

"Don't tell me that she bought more mules!"

“It would make good sense, Misses Duberly.” Replied Sarah Champion, standing besides Fanny. “The regiment is still sorely short of transport animals and could certainly use more mules. Besides, the way those approaching mules are loaded, I doubt that Jeanne’s cart could have taken even half of the supplies she bought.”

By the time that Jeanne Smythe drove her cart into the camp, a small crowd of idle soldiers and women had formed to greet her and Margaret Ward. The first near the cart when it stopped was Gordon Smythe, in whose arms Jeanne literally threw herself, sending both of them down in the dirt, laughing and kissing each other. Fanny Duberly was nearly pulled down by Jeanne’s weight when she lent her a hand to get up. Summarily dusting herself off, Jeanne then smiled to Thomas Farrell, who stood in the front ranks of the crowd.

“I found all that we needed in Burgas, Doctor. The town has not been depleted of supplies the way Varna has. We probably should do periodic resupply trips to that town.”

“You did excellent work, Jeanne.” Replied Farrell, pleased, before shouting at the soldiers around him. “May I have volunteers to help unload those mules and the cart and to bring the supplies in the medical section’s cooking tent?”

A chorus of voices answered the doctor, who soon had over twenty men to help him. Putting Sarah Champion in charge of supervising the work detail, Farrell then went to see Jeanne, who was holding hands with her husband.

“Excuse me for interrupting your reunion, but do you have a list of the supplies you procured?”

“Sure!” Said Jeanne with good humor, then searching in a side pouch of her web gear and extracting a piece of paper that she handed to Farrell. “in a nutshell, I bought over two tons of dry foodstuffs, lots of white cotton cloth, cooking oil, spices, smoked fish and cleaning products. Oh, I nearly forgot: add 25 mules and a sword to the lot.” As she said those last words, she unsheathed a curved Turkish saber slung across her back and grinned at Gordon while showing him the weapon.

“I even had a chance to test it on my way back: four thieves tried to rob us, thinking that two women would be an easy prey. They learned otherwise the hard way.” Jeanne then noticed a bearded civilian man that was writing furiously on a notepad while standing nearby.

“Are you intent on writing a book about me, sir?” She asked him nonchalantly. The man looked up from his notepad and smiled.

“A book, no. An article, yes. I’m William Howard Russell, correspondent for The Times of London.”

Jeanne shook hands with him, visibly not too thrilled by this encounter.

“Pardon my lack of enthusiasm, sir, but I would rather keep a low profile: celebrity would not help my job as a field nurse.”

“Can I then quote you as the rich and adventurous French wife of a Hussars officer?” Asked Russell, a devilish grin on his face. Jeanne’s own face then softened.

“If worded that way, then I withdraw my objection.”

“How did you kill those four bandits, madam?”

“I beheaded the first one with my new sword when he made the mistake of coming close, then I shot the three others with my Colt revolver.”

As the crowd around her, except for Gordon, who knew her enough by now not to be surprised, stared at her with disbelief, Jeanne cautiously passed a fingertip along her sword’s cutting edge.

“I was really lucky to find this sword: it is a first quality weapon, with a Damascus steel blade and good balance. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a few things to attend to.”

Sheeting back her saber, Jeanne then went to Doctor Farrell and whispered to him.

“Any cases of cholera yet in the regiment?”

“None in this regiment but six men from other regiments of the brigade have fallen sick with what I believe to be cholera.”

Jeanne sighed with relief, then raised her voice to a normal level.

“Do we have any patients yet?”

The frail young man hesitated for a second. If he knew Jeanne well, the French woman was not going to like the news to come.

“I have two patients at the moment: one trooper who was hit in the head by a kicking horse, plus another trooper who is recovering from a flogging.”

“WHAT?!”

Jeanne’s furious shout made heads turn around them at once, as well as making Gordon start walking towards her.

“Why? Who ordered this?” Asked Jeanne in a dangerous tone, making Farrell shrink while facing her.

“Lord Cardigan caught a corporal drunk while on duty and summarily condemned him to twenty lashes. I’m sorry but this is still a legal punishment in the Army, unfortunately.”

Jeanne had to turn away from the doctor to vent her frustration with a choice series of swear words. That was when Gordon joined her, only to get a black look from Jeanne.

“I hope that you had nothing to do with this flogging, Gordon.”

“I didn’t and I assure you that I don’t like it either, dear. Unfortunately, nothing can be done about this as long as flogging is legal in the Army.”

Jeanne inhaled deeply a few times to calm down, then faced back Thomas Farrell.

“I will go see our patients as soon as I have taken care of my horse and cart.”

“Can I come with you?” Asked timidly Gordon, getting a nod from Jeanne.

Gordon ended up helping to unhook Jeanne’s pulling horse from the ambulance cart, then pushed the cart near the medical wagon while Jeanne gave some water and feed grain to her horse. The couple then accompanied Doctor Farrell inside the sick ward’s tent. The big tent contained twelve camp cots, a small iron stove with a pipe leading outside the tent through a special vent hole in the canvas, two wooden chests containing medical supplies and a small folding table and chair for use by the duty nurse. Mary Pearson sat in the chair at the time, while two men occupied camp cots. Jeanne went first to the man wearing a bandage covering his head and left eye. Despite the bandage, it was obvious that the left side of the man’s face was severely swollen. The wounded man was sleeping at the time, so Jeanne moved to the other patient after a short examination. That man lay on his belly and was obviously very much in pain. Gordon saw Jeanne’s face harden as she looked at the bloody bandages covering the man’s torso. She then muttered to herself.

“Bloody barbarians!”

She next looked at Farrell with an expression that left no room for debate.

“Doctor, I will take care personally of that patient: I have experience with flogging victims. I hope that you were planning to keep this man here for at least a couple of days, to make sure that his wounds don’t get infected.”

“Uh, of course, Jeanne.” Said timidly Farrell, who had actually not thought yet about that. The few weeks he had already spent with Jeanne, both in Winchester and on the transport ship, had however showed him that she was medically far more qualified than even an experienced nurse and could nearly qualify as a surgeon, that is if

a woman would ever be allowed to practice medicine, which was certainly not the case in England right now. His answer made Jeanne nod with satisfaction.

“Thank you, Doctor! You are a good man. I’m going to wash and change and I will then take the late afternoon nursing shift.”

She next faced her husband and pointed an index at him.

“You and I have an appointment tonight, alone!”

“I won’t argue with that order, dear.” Replied Gordon with a grin.

17:49 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars camp, Varna

Troop Sergeant-Major James Champion found Captain Smythe discussing with Major Henry in front of the regimental command tent. Stopping at a respectable distance from the two officers, Champion waited patiently that Major Henry left to step forward and halt in front of Gordon, saluting crisply.

“Sir! May I have a word with you, sir?”

“Always, Sergeant-Major!” Replied Gordon while saluting back. Champion knew from experience that Gordon was not lying then: the captain was one of the rare officers in the regiment to truly care about his men, apart from being a competent leader and cavalry officer. Marrying a woman of unparalleled generosity had just made him even more popular with the troopers.

“Sir, the men are complaining about their rations. I have to say that, in all my years in the army, I have rarely seen such swill as this evening, sir.”

“Did you taste the food, Sergeant-Major?”

“I spat it out, sir!” Replied Champion vehemently. “Some of the regimental wives came for their rations and vomited them as soon as they ate them. The cooks are arguing that they have to work with rotting food supplies, sir.”

Gordon frowned at those words: for Champion to spit out army food, it had to be awful indeed.

“Alright, Sergeant-Major, let’s go to the regimental kitchen and see how bad things are.”

“Yes sir!” Replied Champion, saluting Gordon before following him.

Gordon Smythe's arrival at the field kitchen calmed somewhat the nasty mood of the soldiers lined up to get their supper. They watched on expectantly as the officer confronted the nervous chief cook, Sergeant Mack Foster.

"Show me what you have on the menu tonight, Sergeant."

The small, somewhat overweight man wiped his hands on his dirty apron before leading Gordon to a large steel pot sitting on a wood stove.

"We have a cabbage and pork soup, along with bread, sir. Unfortunately, both the cabbage and the salted pork provided by the Commissariat are somewhat...stale, to say the least, sir."

"Alright, I will have a portion of that soup, Sergeant."

"Uh, as you wish, sir."

Gordon, busy watching Foster fill a mess tin with hot soup, didn't notice one of the cooks running back to the kitchen, coming from the overflowing latrines used by the whole brigade and going back to work without bothering to wash his hands first. Taking a piece of dry bread as well, Gordon went to sit at a lone table besides the kitchen, followed by Champion. Searching the soup with his spoon, he caught a few small pieces of blackening cabbage and of pork that was almost all fat or gristle. His stomach nearly turned upside down when he realized that the small white things floating in the soup were dead maggots, well boiled. The smell of the soup was not much better than its sight. Throwing in disgust the soup in the dirt, Gordon then tried a bite of his small piece of bread. Swallowing it was like eating a stone. Foster started sweating as Gordon stared at him angrily.

"You have nothing better than this to feed the men, Sergeant?"

"But, sir, that is all I was provided with by means of supplies, sir. The only alternative is ration biscuits."

"Then issue biscuits to the men! Your soup is unfit for human consumption. I will go speak at once with Captain McGregor and Mister Grant about the rations."

Gordon was about to leave the kitchen when an idea came to him. Watched by the surprised cooks, he refilled the mess tin he had with more soup, making sure to catch a few floating dead maggots as well, then faced Sergeant-Major Champion, mess tin in hand.

"Sergeant-Major, please go see my wife and ask her on my behalf if she could help give something decent to eat to the men while I talk to those responsible for this outrage."

“Yes sir!” Shouted Champion, saluting then turning around and walking away. His tin of soup in his left hand, Gordon left the kitchen as well, walking down the long lines of tents towards the officers’ mess. Contrary to the troopers, who had to eat in the open and on the ground unless they chose to eat inside their crowded tents, the officers were furnished with a large marquee tent with tables and chairs to have their meals. Gordon spotted quickly the regimental Commissariat purveyor, Peter Grant, eating at a table with Captains McGregor, Lockwood and Fields. Politely saluting Fanny Duberly first, who was eating with her husband at a nearby table, he went directly to Grant and slammed the tin of soup on the table, in front of his plate. The officers around fell quiet as Gordon spoke with contained anger to the civil servant.

“Mister Grant, I would like you to taste what our men are given to eat.”

“Eat this?” Asked Grant after a quick look at the soup. “Why?”

“Is it that you don’t like eating boiled maggots and rotting pork, sir?”

Gordon felt satisfaction as the officers around, as well as Misses Duberly, looked with horror at the mess tin. Reddening with embarrassment, Grant stammered as he felt hostile looks targeting him from many sides.

“But...we have no choice but to use the supplies sent from England. There is nothing else available.”

Gordon had a quick look at Grant’s plate: it contained fresh broiled beef, potatoes, fresh bread and butter.

“Really? Where did you get the supplies for the officers’ mess?”

Captain McGregor, the regimental quartermaster, then cut in, trying to defuse the confrontation.

“Smythe, you know as well as me that officers rations scales are separate from troopers scales. You surely don’t expect the men to share our rations?”

“And why not?” Replied Gordon forcefully, getting angry. “They will fight and die for England. Doesn’t that entitle them to be treated like human beings?”

“Aw, come on, Smythe!” Added Ramsay Fields, the commanding officer of D Troop. “Feed those ruffians with gentlemen’s rations? You can’t be serious.”

Gordon then gave Fields a black look: the man had purchased all of his successive ranks and had never been near combat. As a cavalryman and swordsman, Fields was widely considered as marginal at best, while the men of D Troop received more than their fair share of floggings, if you could call flogging a fair military punishment.

"I am serious, Mister Fields. This is war, not some field maneuvers at home. Your life will depend on your men's performance on the battlefield, especially since you can't fence or shoot worth a damn by yourself."

Fanny Duberly, listening on discreetly but carefully to this, had a hard time repressing a grin, like many around her. On his part, Fields shot up from his chair and put his right hand on his sword's pommel.

"Are you mocking me, sir?" He shouted loudly, trying to look defiant and sure of himself. In reality he knew that Gordon could cut him to pieces in a duel. A potential fight was averted by the intervention of Lord Paget, who came to their table, displeasure on his face.

"Gentlemen, calm down! The officers' mess is no place for a fight. You are officers and I expect you to conduct yourselves as such."

"Sir," said Gordon politely but forcefully, "what about the men's rations? They will starve or fall sick if fed such swill as like today."

Before answering, Paget took the tin of soup and had a good look at it, sniffing it as well. With disgust on his face, he then stared at Peter Grant.

"Good God, man! Can't you do better than this?"

"With what, sir?" Replied Grant sheepishly. "I do not decide what kind of rations are bought in England, nor do I have the power to do so."

"What about local purchases, sir?" Suggested Gordon to Lord Paget, who thought for a moment before nodding.

"That could be a solution, Captain. The problem will be to find the funds for such purchases. I will have to talk with Lord Cardigan and Mister Fielder, the Commissary General. In the meantime, the men will have to make do with ration biscuits."

"I already told the chief-cook to switch to biscuits, sir." Said Gordon, getting a sharp look from Captain McGregor: that should technically be the quartermaster's call to make. Lord Paget simply nodded his head at that.

"Very well, Captain. Dismissed!"

Saluting Paget crisply, Gordon then left the mess tent, followed by the unfriendly eyes of Grant, Fields and McGregor.

"Those ex-Army of India officers!" Spat Fields resentfully. "They think they know and have seen everything."

Fanny Duberly, cutting short her supper, rose from her table and faced Fields contemptuously.

“Well, he certainly has seen a lot more than you, sir.”

The warning look Fields got from Henry Duberly prevented him from replying as Fanny walked away. Rising as well from the table where he had been eating, William Howard Russell then left the mess as well, heading for the men’s field kitchen.

Gordon arrived back at the men’s kitchen to find a number of regimental wives distributing smoked fish and dried dates to the troopers ordered in multiple lines by Sergeant-Major Champion. Gordon went to Jeanne and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I knew that I could count on you. Thanks, dear!”

“That is the least I could do, Gordon.” Replied Jeanne, sullen, while giving three dried dates from a basket she held to each man passing by her. “Have you eaten yet?”

“Uh, no. I couldn’t in all conscience eat at the officers’ mess after this.”

That earned him a tender look and a caress on the cheek from Jeanne.

“I did marry the right man, truly. Go to the ambulance’s kitchen and get some food from Mary Pearson. I will join you there shortly.”

Kissing her and getting approving comments from the soldiers around, Gordon then went to the cooking tent of the medical section, fifty yards away. He found Mary Pearson serving Emma Armstrong, Fanny Duberly’s maid, from a steaming pot warming on top of the tent’s wood stove.

“Hello, Misses Pearson. Jeanne told me to come here to get fed.”

“Well, you will certainly eat better here than at the men’s kitchen, sir.” Replied the young blonde while fetching a plate and utensils from a chest for him. She then filled the plate with a ladleful from the cooking pot and handed it to Gordon, who sniffed the food.

“Hmm, this does smell good! What is it exactly?”

“Fried rice with lentils and smoked fish. Jeanne made it.”

Gordon’s eyes lit up after he had a first bite of his rice.

“This is good! Maybe I should eat here all the time.”

“I don’t think so, sir.” Replied Mary, smiling. “Only the medical personnel, the patients and the regimental wives of the junior ranks can eat here regularly: orders from your wife, sir.”

“Well, who am I to discuss such authority?” Said Gordon jovially, getting a giggle from Mary.

Jeanne joined them fifteen minutes later, serving herself some rice before sitting at the table with Gordon and Misses Armstrong. They exchanged small talk while eating, until Emma Armstrong and Mary Pearson left the cooking tent. Gordon then bent forward and lowered his voice.

“Jeanne, those visions of the war you have, what do they tell you about what we can expect?”

Jeanne was silent for a moment, weighing her answer: as Field Agent Nancy Laplante, she was not supposed to divulge the future to anyone from the past. Her earlier bout of amnesia had however caused some serious damage in that respect, damage that would be hard to undo.

“Lots of good men will die, mostly from disease, neglect and outright incompetence. The best that we can do is to care as best we can for the men and women of this regiment. Even if we do only that, then we will have done our part. The rest is beyond our control.”

Sobered up by such a bleak prediction, Gordon ate mostly in silence from then on.

09:11 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, June 7, 1854 ‘A’

Sick ward, 8th Hussars field infirmary

Varna, Bulgaria

Jeanne was nearly finished applying clean bandages over the wounds of the flogged trooper when Captain Ramsay Fields entered abruptly the sick ward’s tent. Looking briefly around him, then at the man Jeanne was bandaging, Fields spoke gruffly to the patient.

“You rested here long enough, Trooper Harrison. Put your uniform on and return to your duties.”

“Stay right were you are, Trooper!” Said at once Jeanne to the soldier before getting up and facing Fields, who now looked incensed at her having the gall to countermand his order.

“What do you think that you are doing, madam? This man is part of my troop and I will decide when he is needed on duty.”

“Wrong, Captain!” Said firmly Jeanne, staring hard into Fields eyes. “This patient will leave when Doctor Farrell decides that he is medically fit for duty. Right now, his wounds are still open and could get infected if he resumes work too early.”

“Madam, I won’t let a woman interfere with my command. Get up, Trooper!”

“Stay down, Trooper!” Shouted Jeanne before walking quickly to Fields, getting nose to nose with him. “Now get out of the sick ward before I throw you out, Captain Fields.”

“Ha, that would be the day!” Said derisively Fields. Things then went very fast, with Fields being brutally turned around and forced to bend over before being literally thrown out of the tent and landing face first in the dirt. Stunned by both the strength and speed of Jeanne, Fields got back on his feet as Jeanne shouted at him from just outside the tent.

“The next time that you try to take away a patient without the doctor’s permission, I will kick you all the way to the other side of the camp, Fields.”

Enraged and humiliated at being ordered around by a woman, Fields acted without thinking, drawing his saber and pointing it at Jeanne, its tip only inches from her face.

“I’m an officer and...”

Jeanne then knocked his sword out of his hand with a lightning kick that he never saw coming.

“You are a nobody, Fields, and I will show it to all around here.”

Jeanne then went on the attack, delivering a series of swift, painful punches and kicks and pummeling Fields’ face and torso despite his attempts at fighting back. The few regimental wives and the many soldiers going around the regimental infirmary at the time looked on with amazement as Jeanne deliberately chose hits that were painful but wouldn’t knock Fields out right away. One last karate punch to Fields’ jaw finally sent him down on the ground, unconscious and bleeding. After a last contemptuous look at the man, Jeanne then turned around and walked back inside the sick ward’s tent, leaving Fields in the dirt. Nobody at first came to Fields’ help until Regimental Sergeant-Major O’Neil, who had seen the fight from a distance, came at a run. Kneeling besides the unconscious officer, the RSM examined with disbelief his split lips, broken nose, bruised jaw and swelling cheeks. Looking quickly around him, he signaled four soldiers nearby to come to him.

“YOU FOUR, COME AND PICK UP CAPTAIN FIELDS!”

The four soldiers ran to him at once and surrounded the inert officer on the ground. O'Neil pointed at the nearby medical wagon, with its treatment tent deployed.

"Let's get the captain in there, so that Doctor Farrell can treat him."

One of the soldiers nearly made a joke then but kept it to himself, knowing that pissing off the RSM was normally not a wise thing to do. The four soldiers then each grabbed an arm or a leg and carried Fields inside the treatment tent, with O'Neil leading the way. Doctor Farrell, who was checking a feverish soldier at the time, looked with surprise and incredulity at the bloodied officer, then at O'Neil.

"What the hell happened to him, RSM?"

"Your head nurse beat him up." Replied tersely the veteran NCO. "Where should we put him?"

"Uh, on this table here, please."

Fields was then laid on the table covered with a white cloth that served as the treatment table. O'Neil dismissed the four soldiers as Farrell called Mary Pearson to assist him, then himself walked out of the treatment tent. He next walked to the sick ward's tent, entering it and facing Jeanne, who had resumed her bandaging work. She looked up calmly at him and smiled.

"What can I do for you this morning, RSM?"

"You could tell me why you just beat Captain Fields to a pulp, madam." Replied O'Neil, secretly admiring her spunk. She gave him a serious look while stopping her work for a moment.

"He tried to take away this patient without the doctor's permission, then pointed his saber in my face after I threw him out of the sick ward. He had it coming to him, RSM."

O'Neil nodded once at those words: he had seen Fields brandish his saber at the French woman. Apart from being about to become the laughing stock of the regiment, Fields was going to have to explain to Lord Paget why he had pulled out a sword at an officer's wife, something the regiment's commander was not going to appreciate one bit. Fields was also going to be lucky if he didn't have to contend next with Jeanne's husband. All told, Fields' bruises and wounds were probably going to be the least of his troubles. O'Neil thus came to attention and saluted Jeanne.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you, madam. Have a good day!"

"The same to you, RSM."

O'Neil then turned around in military fashion and exited the tent. Seeing numerous small groups of soldiers congregating around the regimental infirmary and whispering to each other while watching the sick ward's tent, O'Neil bellowed out in his strongest voice.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING, LOOKING LIKE A BUNCH OF SHEEPS? GET BACK TO YOUR DUTIES OR I WILL FIND YOU SOME DRILL PRACTICE TO DO!”

That motivated the soldiers in dispersing quickly, either disappearing inside their tents or making a show of cleaning their weapons or uniforms.

O'Neil's next stop was Lord Paget's command tent, where he recounted what he had seen to his incredulous commander. As O'Neil expected, Paget didn't like the part about Fields threatening Jeanne Smythe with his saber.

“Decidedly, Captain Fields is as much a ruffian and an idiot as he is a poor fighter. I will have a serious talk with him...once he comes out of the infirmary. In the meantime, could you tell Captain Smythe to come see me, RSM?”

“Yes sir!” Shouted O'Neil, saluting before turning around and leaving the command tent. Finding Captain Smythe took him only four minutes. Gordon Smythe broke into a grin when O'Neil told him why Lord Paget wanted to see him.

“Good old Jeanne! Always direct and to the point.”

“Direct is the correct word, sir.” Replied O'Neil, hiding his own grin. “She certainly knows how to defend herself, sir.”

“Somehow, I suspect that Jeanne prefers the offensive over the defensive, RSM.” Said Gordon Smythe before leaving for Lord Paget's tent. Only once alone did O'Neil allow a grin to appear on his face. After this he was certainly going to listen more closely to the stories his wife Sarah had to say about Lady Jeanne Smythe.

Gordon managed to keep a straight face as he presented himself to Lord Paget in his tent, saluting him first.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

“I did, Captain. Did the RSM tell you why?”

“He did, sir. If I got it right, Captain Fields got what he had coming to him, sir.”

“He certainly did.” Replied Lord Paget, serious. “He should have known that he needed the doctor's release authorization before fetching a patient out of the infirmary. As for drawing his saber at an officer's wife, it is simply inexcusable, no matter his

reasons to do so. Since I understand that your wife already gave him quite a bloody nose, I will not discipline him further and will let him live through the ridicule. As for Lady Jeanne, could you please ask her not to do this again? I don't have too many officers to spare these days."

"I will pass your request on to her, sir." Said Gordon, repressing a grin with difficulty. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"No, that will be all, Captain. You are dismissed!"

"Sir!" Shouted Gordon, saluting again, then pivoting on his heels and turning around before walking out of the command tent. He walked for maybe twelve yards before breaking out laughing.

15:40 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars infirmary

Light Cavalry Brigade camp

Varna, Bulgaria

Jeanne was thinking about the menu that they would prepare for supper when Margaret Ward rushed into the cooking tent, dread on her face.

"Doctor Farrell needs you at once, Jeanne: we may have our first case of cholera in the regiment."

Jeanne hurried out of the cooking tent at once, running to the field treatment tent attached to the medical wagon. There, she found Doctor Farrell examining a young trooper sitting on the examination table, with Mary Pearson standing nearby, a bedpan ready in her hands. Seeing the trooper's face turning sour, Mary stepped forward and presented her bedpan just in time as the soldier vomited violently. Taking a bedpan as well from a pile stacked in a corner of the tent, Jeanne joined Mary besides the examination table.

"I'll take over from here, Mary. Please ask Sarah to start a big pot of boiling water: we will have to start applying decontamination procedures and quarantine from now on. Have Margaret boil some rice as well in lots of water: we will need rice water to be constantly available from now on. Tell her to put some salt in the water as well."

"Rice water? What for?" Asked the sick trooper. Jeanne looked at him gravely.

"If you have cholera, rice water will be the only food you will be able to ingest. It will cut your diarrhea and prevent dehydration, which is the main complication with

cholera. It will taste bland but it may be the only thing that could keep you alive through this.”

“Am...am I going to die?”

“Not if we can help it, Trooper.” Answered Thomas Farrell, having finished his examination. “Nurse Smythe will now lead you to the men’s washing tent so that you can be cleaned up and can change into an hospital gown. Your uniform will be washed and disinfected for you.”

The trooper had just gotten off the examination table when he gripped his stomach with both hands.

“Doc...I’m going to get sick!” He said haltingly. Not wasting one second, Jeanne grabbed him and forcefully led him to a chamber pot sitting in a corner. Quickly undoing the man’s suspenders and undoing his fly, she pulled his trousers and shorts down and sat him down on the chamber pot, handing next a bedpan to the man. The trooper emptied himself from both ends at the same time, his vomit coming out like a liquid jet. Farrell shook his head at that sight.

“It’s cholera alright. Just before this man came in, I was advised that a corporal from the 11th Hussars had died a short while ago from cholera, a mere nine hours after showing the first symptoms. It seems that we are dealing with a most potent strain here.”

“Indeed!” Replied Jeanne glumly. “We will have to tighten camp sanitation rules further.”

“I wish that it would be this simple.” Said Farrell bitterly, making Jeanne look sharply at him. “Some of the other regimental surgeons and many unit commanders are not enforcing camp sanitation rules as they should be doing. They think that I am overreacting.”

“Overreacting? Are they mad or simply stupid?” Replied Jeanne, furious. Farrell, looking embarrassed, led her away from the sick trooper and lowered his voice.

“Jeanne, I am shamed to have to say that some of my medical colleagues here are not much more than incompetent drunks. Since I am by far the most junior surgeon of the brigade, my word doesn’t count for much outside of this regiment. We may have to deal with cholera in isolation from the rest of the brigade.”

“The idiots! This may cost thousands of lives!”

Farrell lowered his head sadly at those words.

“I know! Look at it this way, Jeanne: at least we can take care of this regiment, of the people we know.”

Jeanne had a look at the young trooper, still sick and sitting on the chamber pot.

“You’re right, Doc. After washing and changing him, I will organize a duty rotation for the girls. This is only the beginning of it.”

Farrell nodded his head, discouraged: Jeanne was unfortunately correct in her prediction.

10:51 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, June 16, 1854 ‘A’

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Doctor Farrell had a last look at the emaciated face of the thirteen year-old trumpeter, then slowly slid the wool blanket over the boy’s head, watched by a sobbing Jeanne Smythe. Thomas had to swallow hard twice before he could speak.

“Jeanne, could you take care of his burial, please?”

Without a word, the tall French woman gently picked up and lifted the small boy’s body, still covered by the blanket, in her arms and walked out slowly of the quarantine tent. Farrell then looked at Emma Armstrong, who was waiting near him.

“Emma, have this camp cot washed and disinfected and bring in a clean cot.”

“Yes, Doctor.” Said softly the woman, tears on her face. Emma had just left the tent with the soiled cot when Doctor John Gibbons, the chief-surgeon of the Light Cavalry Brigade, came in. The graying doctor went directly to Farrell, walking cautiously past the ten occupied cots crowding the tent.

“May I speak with you outside, Thomas?” Asked softly Gibbons, who had seen Jeanne Smythe bearing out the dead boy. Farrell nodded slowly, dead tired from long hours of work, then followed the chief-surgeon outside. Walking away for a few yards, Gibbons then stopped and faced Farrell, his expression sullen.

“This boy was the second patient you lost to date, correct?”

“Yes, sir.” Said Farrell bitterly, feeling helpless. Gibbons then patted the young surgeon’s shoulder in encouragement.

“Don’t feel so bad, Thomas. The truth is that you are faring much better than anyone else, the French included. You only lost two patients out of 39 so far, a remarkable result indeed. In comparison, over eighty percent of the men who fell sick in

the rest of the brigade died, with many more men falling sick each day. Even your sickness rate is much lower than that of the brigade. You and your nurses are doing wonders.”

Farrell looked intensely at Gibbons then.

“Are the other regiments finally going to follow the same sanitation rules as we do in the 8th Hussars, sir?”

The chief-surgeon bowed his head, acknowledging Farrell’s justified criticism.

“Look, Thomas, I was skeptical of your methods at first but the results speak for themselves. Even for Lord Cardigan, 106 dead in nine days is too much. The problem now is that the other regiments have nothing in terms of equipment and trained personnel compared to your ambulance and can’t cope with the numbers of sick.”

“Sir, you should praise Lady Jeanne Smythe for this, not me.”

“I know.” Said Gibbons softly. “I wish that I had ten women like her. This however brings me to the reason of my visit. Two wives of the 17th Lancers just fell sick with cholera but the Lancers have no medically-trained women to care for them in a way proper for ladies. From now on, I would like your nurses to care for the women of this camp who will fall sick. I even had requests from other brigades to the same effect. Could you do it?”

“Sir,” protested Farrell at once, “my two ward tents are already crammed full with 21 patients as it is and my nurses are barely coping under the workload. Treating cholera victims involves a staggering amount of washing and disinfecting, plus a lot of equipment.”

“I realize that, Thomas.” Said Gibbons sympathetically. “I got the support of Lord Raglan himself on this matter: you will get two large marquee tents before noon, along with the men to put them up and all the extra medical supplies I could scrounge for you. I also have a number of wives who volunteered to be trained as nurses.”

Farrell sighed heavily as he looked down at the dirt at his feet.

“This is a heavy responsibility you are putting on our shoulders, sir.”

“I know, but you can do it, that I am sure of. By the way, I sent a recommendation for your promotion to junior surgeon in view of your remarkable work here.”

“Then, bring in those tents as quickly as possible, sir, so that we can empty one of our ward tents and reserve it for female patients. We will do our best, sir.”

“I know that you will, Thomas. You will get the marquee tents within the hour.”

Gibbons then left Farrell and started walking up the dirt road that ran through the camp. He soon met a sad procession walking down the lines of tents towards the brigade's burial grounds. The padre of the 8th Hussars led four musicians playing 'The Dead March', who were in turn followed by two soldiers bearing a stretcher on which lay a small body wrapped in a blanket. Lady Jeanne Smythe and Misses Duberly closed the small procession, tears on their faces. The chief-surgeon removed his top hat and bowed his head as the funeral party passed in front of him, then hurried on his way.

04:18 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, June 21, 1854 'A'

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Mary Pearson took the now full bedpan from under Alicia Goad, gently rolling the sick woman on her side to do so, then cleaned her up with a wet rag, throwing the soiled rag in the bedpan afterwards. Following the strict routine established by Jeanne Smythe, Mary made Misses Goad drink a cup of rice water before heading out of the women's quarantine ward, the bedpan in one hand and the now empty cup in the other. The bedpan was going to be emptied in a sewer pit nearby and rinsed before it would be washed and put in a pot of boiling water for a good twenty minutes, along with the cup. Up to now, this complicated and work-intensive procedure had paid off handsomely, with only twelve deaths occurring in the 8th Hussars' wards compared with the hundreds of victims in the rest of the brigade. Those results had even prompted a visit by the British and French commanders of the allied expedition, Lord Raglan and Marshall Saint-Arnaud, two days ago.

Mary was halfway to the sewer pit when the first stomach cramp hit her, making her double forward. Falling on her knees, she then vomited violently. Realizing with horror what was happening to her, Mary shouted as loudly as she could towards the medical wagon.

"HELP! SOMEONE HELP ME!"

Emma Armstrong, emerging from the laundry tent, was the first by her side, closely followed by Jeanne Smythe, who had been on duty in one of the men's wards.

"What's wrong, Mary?" Asked anxiously Emma while helping her up.

"Cholera... I caught it!"

“My poor Mary!” Exclaimed Jeanne. “Quick, Emma, let’s bring her to the women’s washing tent.”

They didn’t make it to the tent before Mary involuntarily soiled her dress, groaning with the pain from atrocious intestinal cramps.

08:03 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Private John Pearson was nearly mad with apprehension when he was allowed inside the women’s quarantine tent. Kneeling besides his wife’s cot, he was about to kiss Mary when Jeanne’s firm hand stopped him.

“Do you want to catch cholera as well, Private? You may touch her but don’t kiss her.”

Obeying reluctantly, John put his hand on Mary’s forehead: she was feverish and her eyes had a dazed look. She didn’t appear to register his presence either. After contemplating Mary for a few minutes while holding her hands, John stood up and looked at Jeanne imploringly.

“Please tell me that you can save her, Lady Jeanne.”

“I can’t promise you that, Private Pearson.” She said with sorrow in her voice. “I will do my best for her, though. If it may reassure you, I will personally take care of Mary.”

“Thank you, Lady Jeanne. You are an angel.”

Jeanne sighed heavily as John Pearson left the tent, then went back to Mary’s side. She wasn’t so sure that the young blonde could be saved by contemporary care alone: her fever ran very high and she was dehydrating at a faster rate than they could make her drink rice water. Jeanne could cheat and go get modern medicine from the future but the question then would be where to stop. Sadly, the only answer to that was that she could not even start doing that, on pain of risking serious distortions in history. She was going to have to rely on the means at hand and on lots of work and care. Getting up and pouring a cup of rice water from a covered pitcher on the duty nurse’s desk, Jeanne went back to Mary and, gently holding her head, made her drink as much of it as she could. Having been vaccinated repeatedly as a field agent of the Time Patrol against numerous diseases, including cholera, Nancy was not worried about falling sick

from her constant contacts with cholera victims. Her brave assistant nurses however didn't enjoy that protection, a case proven by Mary Pearson's misfortune. Looking at Mary's drawn face, Nancy felt guilt at having brought her here to possibly die in this miserable hole. However, if not here and now, Mary was going to die anyway in this century, either from old age, disease or other causes, like all the persons Nancy knew in this camp. The cruelty of such inevitability brought tears to Nancy's eyes. Her conscience had been tormented many times before about the rights and wrongs of interacting intimately with persons from the past but she still couldn't accept to consider them simply like walking dead reduced to mere names in some historical records. She started sobbing quietly as she looked down at Mary.

"Hang on, Mary. Just a couple of days and you will be out of the worst of it."

15:52 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, June 23, 1854 'A'

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Doctor Farrell entered the women's quarantine tent, intent on doing his periodic visits of the wards. He immediately noticed one of the patients, standing weakly besides her cot and her back to him. The surgeon went quickly to the patient, ready to force her back down on her cot, when he stopped cold: the standing patient was Mary Pearson. The blonde then smiled weakly to him.

"I am really hungry, Doctor. Could I have something solid to eat?"

Unable to believe his eyes, Farrell slowly approached Mary and touched her forehead: her fever was gone and Mary's eyes looked focused. She was apparently well on the road to recovery.

"Do you mind if I examine you first, Mary?"

"Not at all, Doctor."

"Then please sit on the cot."

Examining her quickly, Farrell found her apparently well, apart from being understandably weak from dehydration and hunger. Margaret Ward, who had replaced Jeanne one hour ago and was back from a trip to the sewer pit, entered the tent as Mary was closing back her hospital gown. Looking at Mary with wide eyes, she then ran back out while shouting.

"MARY MADE IT THROUGH! SHE'S UP!"

It took less than two minutes before all the women working at the ambulance, including Jeanne, came running to the tent. Farrell had to stand in front of the entrance while raising both arms.

“STOP, ALL OF YOU! THIS IS A QUARANTINE TENT, NOT A CIRCUS!”

“What about Mary?” Asked Emma Armstrong. “Is it true that she is up?”

“Yes, it is. She however still needs to rest and recuperate. Emma, prepare a bowl of soup for Mary: her stomach will be fragile for a while so we will switch to a solid diet only progressively.”

“Right away, Doc!”

“Is this all because of me?”

All heads turned towards the tent’s entrance, where Mary Pearson had stuck her head out and was smiling weakly. Still wearing only a hospital gown, she then stepped out and was mobbed by the overjoyed nurses, Jeanne being first to hug her.

09:46 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, August 18, 1854 ‘A’

Lord Paget’s command tent

8th Hussars camp, Varna

Lord Paget, with Doctor Gibbons sitting to the left of his work desk, gave a critical look at Doctor Farrell and Lady Jeanne Smythe as they entered his tent and stopped in front of him. Somehow, Paget suspected that the feisty Jeanne Smythe was the real responsible person in the business at hand. If she was, she certainly didn’t look one bit nervous right now, contrary to Farrell.

“At ease Doctor Farrell, Lady Jeanne.”

Paget smiled in amusement when Jeanne, as was her custom, reacted in a proper military fashion to his order. She was definitely one strange cat, albeit an impressive one. Putting on a severe expression, Paget stared at Farrell first.

“Doctor Gibbons here has notified me of an irregularity in your medical procedures, Doctor Farrell. Mainly, you have stopped sending your patients to Scutari Hospital for follow-on treatment and recuperation, and this since at least early July. What do you say to this, Doctor?”

The young surgeon swallowed hard, being much less at ease than Jeanne.

“Sir, it is true that I have not sent any of my patients to our main hospital in Scutari since the start of July, but it was a decision I took to save lives, sir.”

“To save lives? Please explain!”

“May I answer this, sir?” Then cut in Jeanne politely. Paget nodded in approval, not surprised to see the French woman take the initiative. She certainly looked sure of herself as she started speaking calmly.

“It all started in the last week of June, when I and Misses Duberly left Varna by ship to escort four sick women that had been treated for cholera at our regimental ambulance and were convalescing. When we arrived at the Scutari military hospital near Constantinople, what we saw there horrified us and convinced us to avoid it at all costs. Please bear with me on this, sir: I am accustomed to rough living conditions but what we saw in Scutari was beyond description. First of, the thousands of patients crowding it are without beds and lie directly on the soiled floors of the wards. They are never washed by the hospital staff and are literally covered with vermin. They only get one meal a day, when there is something to eat, and have to eat out of their bare hands, as no plates, cups or utensils are provided by the staff. There are no latrines either and the whole hospital, if you can call it by that name, stinks to high hell, apart from being nothing more than an open sewer pit. I saw patients with maggots filling their wounds, as their bandages have not been changed in weeks. Probably the worse of are the women, wives of our soldiers who got sick and were sent to Scutari. We found them confined to dark cellars and were alive with lice and other vermin, apart from being half-starved to death and reduced to pauperism. They were also at the mercy of the hospital staff and were said to be abused regularly. Infections, fevers and diseases run wild in that so-called hospital, with a mortality rate of sixty percent among the patients sent there.”

“Sixty percent?” Shouted Paget, horrified. “What is the staff doing in there?” Jeanne’s jaw tightened as she glanced darkly at Gibbons before answering Paget.

“Sir, the staff there consists of a few doctors who use old, crippled Chelsea pensioners as medical orderlies. Those old men, apart from knowing nothing about nursing care, are often too drunk or too sick to do anything useful apart from being deadweights themselves. Some of them have also been caught stealing from dying patients.”

“These must be wild exaggerations.” Protested John Gibbons, getting a murderous look from Jeanne, who raised her voice then.

“Did you go see the conditions there by yourself, Doctor, or are you relying on the reports made by the same uncaring, criminally incompetent people who are directly responsible for this infamy? You want proofs? Then read this!”

Taking hesitantly the paper thrown by Jeanne in front of him, Gibbons looked quickly at it, then looked severely at Jeanne.

“This is simply a list of names. What is your point?”

“My point, Doctor, is that this is the list of the members of this regiment sent to Scutari supposedly to be returned to full health after we here worked our asses off to treat them and keep them alive. Those with a cross besides their names died in Scutari. That accounts for 46 of the 81 men sent there. As for the 12 women we had sent there, we were lucky enough to find them still alive and we then extracted them from that hell hole to treat them ourselves in Constantinople. This is why I recommended to Doctor Farrell on my return to discontinue sending patients to Scutari until things there improve drastically.”

Lord Paget, visibly shaken by Jeanne’s forceful speech, grabbed the list of names from Gibbons’ hands and read it slowly, paling as he went.

“My God! My own Aide-De-Camp, Lieutenant Campbell, dead? Lieutenant Wells too? Why wasn’t I informed of this?”

“Because that hospital is in a state of total chaos, sir.” Replied Jeanne. “The director of the hospital is in my opinion an incompetent buffoon who should be shot for criminal negligence and dereliction of duty. When we went to protest to him about what I and Misses Duberly had seen, he dismissed our complaints summarily and refused to do anything to correct the deficiencies in his so-called hospital. I then punched his lights out and took all our patients out of Scutari. There was no way I was going to abandon them in that...hospital!”

Jeanne had spit out that last word with a contained fury that finally convinced Lord Paget. Slowly sitting back behind his desk, the list still in his hands, he closed his eyes for a moment before looking up at young Doctor Farrell.

“Doctor, you have my express permission to keep in your infirmary any patient that you deem in need of local treatment. If you have to ship out any member of this regiment, please advise me immediately. Dismissed!”

“Yes sir! Thank you, sir!” Nearly shouted Farrell happily, then leaving the tent with Jeanne Smythe. Paget next gave a less than friendly look at Gibbons.

"I do hope that you are not planning to enter a formal complaint against Doctor Farrell, sir?"

"Uh, no...not anymore." Said the chief-surgeon weakly, then looking at his hands. "God, could it really be this bad?"

10:26 (Constantinople Time)

Monday, September 4, 1854 'A'

8th Hussars infirmary, Varna

Cleared in first by Sarah Champion, Gordon Smythe entered the women's living quarters to find Jeanne asleep on her cot. She had simply removed her nurse's apron and cap before crashing to sleep. While she had kept in top shape by exercising daily and eating the ambulance's plentiful and balanced diet that was the envy of the whole brigade, the hard, endless nursing work had taken a definite toll on her. The psychological toll had been the heaviest, though: the regiment's burial ground may have contained the remains of only eleven bodies, compared to the 473 dead suffered by the rest of the brigade, but the amount of pain and suffering Jeanne had witnessed from close by was more than anybody should have gone through. The plus side was of course the hundreds of lives she had helped save, plus the universal esteem and admiration she had gained through the camp, save of course for the men of the Commissariat Department, who both loathed and feared her. Looking at her exhausted face, Gordon decided to let her sleep and went out of the tent, going to speak instead with Doctor Farrell. He found him bidding goodbye to a woman from another regiment being released as a convalescent. Farrell noticed him and joined Gordon as soon as he was finished.

"May I help you, Captain Smythe?"

"It may be the other way around, Doctor. I am here to advise you that the brigade is embarking tomorrow morning, to set sail for Crimea."

"Thank God! Out of this hole at last." Exclaimed Farrell while looking skyward. Gordon couldn't help eyeing him dubiously.

"Doctor, we are going to face the Russian Army. This may well be like jumping from the frying pan into the fire."

That cooled down the young surgeon somewhat.

“Hell, I still prefer treating a wound that I can see and touch than a disease I can only hope to counter.”

“Doc, you probably will get both of them soon, lots of them.” Prophesized Gordon before walking away, leaving Farrell both discouraged and apprehensive.

CHAPTER 4 – CRIMEA

07:08 (Constantinople Time)

Thursday, September 14, 1854

Kalamita Bay, Crimea

“At last! They sure took their time to decide where to land.”

Fanny Duberly, standing against the side of the HMS SANS PAREIL and watching hundreds of large rowboats filled with troops race to the desolate beach facing them, smiled at the impatient remark from Mary Pearson.

“Maybe, but have you ever seen such a sight before?”

Mary looked around her at the 600 ships of the allied armada, which stretched for miles along the coast, and shook her head.

“Frankly, no. I hope that the Russians will be as impressed as me and will lay down their arms at our sight.”

“Don’t count on that, Mary.” Said from behind them Jeanne Smythe, making the women turn around and look at her. Wearing a dark brown jacket and riding skirt, long black boots. her leather equipment vest with revolvers, knife and saber, Jeanne looked ready for everything. “There will be fighting soon enough and it will be bloody, believe me.”

“So, when are we landing ourselves?” Asked Sarah Champion with expectation. Jeanne shook her head at that.

“Not for a while, Sarah. Lord Paget is making an exception for my ambulance cart but all other wagons and transport animals are staying on the ships for the moment. Lord Raglan wants to keep his army as mobile as possible. You and Doctor Farrell will stay aboard while the fleet follows the army down the coast towards Sebastopol. Me and Margaret will concentrate on picking up any sick or wounded man during the advance and bringing them to the shore, where they will be embarked for treatment on the ships.”

“God, I envy you, Jeanne.” Said Mary, making the French woman grin.

“Why? You get to stay and live in comfort aboard this luxury yacht for a while longer. See you in a few days, girls.”

The women, Fanny included, pulled their tongues at Jeanne as she walked away, giggling: the HMS SANS PAREIL was anything but a luxury yacht. There were however

some such yachts bearing what was now commonly called by the troops 'traveling gentlemen', or T.G.s in short, effectively accompanying the fleet in the hope of being able to watch the battles to come.

Margaret Ward felt quite nervous and excited at the same time while she watched Jeanne's ambulance cart, loaded with supplies sufficient for a couple of weeks in the field, roll down a side ramp, with sailors controlling its descent with ropes onto a large floating pontoon resting against the side of the ship. Made of two big rowboats supporting a common platform, the pontoon already bore the last squad of Captain Fields' D Troop and its horses. Jeanne led by the reins both Yasmina, the cart's pulling horse, and Pegasus, her personal mount, while Margaret waited until the cart was safely on the pontoon before walking down the ramp herself. Jeanne put on the hand brakes of the cart to prevent it from accidentally rolling off the pontoon, then stood besides Yasmina, calming the horse for the trip to the shore. Margaret climbed in the front of the cart, sitting on the driver's bench and grabbing the reins handed to her by Jeanne. Margaret then discreetly checked that the cavalry rifle provided by her husband Joseph was close at hand behind the bench. Both Joseph and Jeanne had encouraged Margaret to become proficient with a rifle and, helped by steady lessons from Joseph, Margaret was now a fair shot with the weapon. The hard, endless nursing work had trimmed the excess fat the brunette was sporting when they had left England, something that had pleased Joseph to no small end. While far from looking athletic, Margaret was now in better physical shape than she had been in years and felt ready for what was to come. She was however terribly aware of the unease within the troops around her about seeing women joining them on their way to battle. Even the most ardent feminists in England would pause if they would see her and Jeanne now. Jeanne didn't seem to care about that, though, as she had already broken about all the rules and taboos concerning the proper role and conduct of women considered acceptable in England. Being filthy rich, she could have been dismissed as a frivolous eccentric if not for her incredible intellectual and physical abilities. Those abilities had in turn further antagonized many men, especially officers, who were secretly afraid of not measuring up to her. Being French had helped Jeanne somewhat, as French women had the reputation in England of being notorious nonconformists and libertines. However, the major point helping Jeanne was the now widely acknowledged fact that she could beat up, shoot or cut to pieces about any man who would dare mock her openly. Still, as the

pontoon was let loose and started rowing towards the shore, Margaret saw a number of troopers whispering to each other while glancing furtively at Jeanne and her weapons. They were probably expecting her to be put back in her proper place after the first battle, as soon as she showed the first signs of weakness under fire. Having seen her in action against bandits, Margaret suspected that they were going to wait a long time for that to happen.

After maybe fifteen minutes of rowing, the pontoon started scraping on the bottom's sand just short of the shore. Once the pontoon came to a full stop, four sailors then slid in place a narrow ramp, allowing the cavalymen aboard to ride off the pontoon. Jeanne, mounted on Pegasus, preceded the cart, which was then driven down the ramp by Margaret. By now the beach was alive with thousands of British, French and Turkish troops, with not a single Russian to be seen, something that surprised Margaret.

"Jeanne, how come the Russians didn't do anything about our landing? With the size of our fleet, they surely know that we are here."

"Oh, they know alright, Margaret." Replied Jeanne, smiling with amusement as she rode alongside the cart. "Russian cavalymen must have reported us already to Prince Menshikov. Fortunately for us, Prince Menshikov is no Napoleon, or he would have stationed artillery on those hills surrounding this bay, out of range of our ships guns but within range of this beach. Good generalship is not something you will see much during this war, Margaret."

Seeing the men of the 8th Hussars forming up in a regimental column, Jeanne led the cart to it, then trotted to Lord Paget while Margaret stationed the cart at the rear of the column. After a short conversation with Paget, Jeanne trotted back to Margaret to pass on the latest instructions.

"The regiment is going to act as a forward reconnaissance screen for the infantry. We are to follow the infantry and lend assistance as needed with the sick and wounded."

"Sounds fine with me." Replied Margaret, who then looked up at the gray sky. "Let's hope that the weather will hold."

Looking up as well, Jeanne soon shook her head.

"Don't count on it. Crimea is quite wet in this season. You did bring your rain gear as I asked you to, I hope?"

“I did.” Said Margaret while looking at the darkening horizon. Jeanne’s 20/20 hindsight may be irksome at times but, from experience, Margaret knew that ignoring her advice was foolhardy. By now the Hussars were splitting into troops and galloping away to the East and South. Jeanne then pointed at a small hill overlooking the main road linking the nearby town of Eupatoria with Sebastopol, the ultimate target of the allied armies.

“Let’s take position on that hill and make ourselves comfortable. The wait could be a long one.”

Going to the hill and climbing its gentle grassy slope, they stopped besides a small clump of trees topping it and locked the cart’s brakes before untying Yasmina from it. While Margaret tied solidly their two horses to a tree, using very long ropes so that the animals could eat the long grass around them, Jeanne got busy chopping to bits with an axe a dead tree that was part of the clump. Their next labor was to erect the small rectangular tent stowed in the cart, digging a furrow around it as well to channel away any rainwater. Spotting a small stream nearby to the East of their hill, the two women led their horses to it to let them drink before filling a bucket with water for cooking purposes. Once back at their camp, a small fire was lit and a large pot of water put on it, with the intent of boiling it to make the water safe for consumption. As the water was warming up, Jeanne went to the cart and pulled out of it four steel posts, a canvas screen and a light folding toilet seat, intent on setting up a latrine that would afford them some privacy from the thousands of soldiers still busy landing and organizing themselves.

“Jeanne,” said Margaret as her companion was starting to dig a latrine hole, “our men don’t seem to be in a hurry to move out. We may well spend the night here.” Jeanne smiled at her while continuing her shoveling.

“I was expecting that, actually. I also bet that our commanders forgot to tell our troops to bring rations with them. The smell of our own food will probably drive them to us by supper time.”

“Uh, sorry but I’m not betting against you, Jeanne. I already got burned a couple of times.” Replied the brunette.

By the early afternoon, their hill was surrounded on three sides by British and French soldiers grouped into their respective regiments. Margaret couldn’t help notice again the striking differences between the French Army and the British Army. French

troops were broken down into small, easily manageable sub-units supported by dedicated cooks, surgeons, nurses and wagon drivers. Each French regiment also had its contingent of female auxiliaries called *vivandières*, who helped the doctors, did the laundry and ran cantinas to help troop morale. Margaret had met a number of *vivandières* in Varna and had been surprised to see that they were treated like real soldiers and even wore female variants of French uniforms, with some even sporting military medals. As a result of all this, French soldiers were well fed, received good medical care and had a high morale, apart from being led by combat-hardened officers and NCOs who were promoted on merit. In contrast, the British soldiers that Margaret was watching were formed in big regimental squares and had no logistical means of support with them. As predicted by Jeanne, they also had apparently nothing to eat, while inexperienced officers kept harassing them with useless orders and directives. While well disciplined, the British Army was clearly an amateur one compared to the French. Margaret was wondering if that sad state of affair was going to change one day when Jeanne shouted happily while getting on her feet.

“I see Leila coming our way! LEILA, COME UP HERE!”

Looking the way Jeanne was gesticulating, Margaret saw a young woman in the baggy red trousers and short blue tunic of the *Zouaves*, tough colonial troops from Algeria, walking up the hill. Margaret knew Leila as well, having met the *vivandière* in Varna. After conversing quickly in Arabic with Jeanne, the Algerian woman hurried to the freshly dug latrine.

“Please excuse Leila if she was in a hurry,” explained Jeanne good-naturedly, “but they had not had time to prepare separate latrines for the *vivandières*. Leila recognized my cart from afar and assumed that we had done our usual, efficient setup.” Margaret giggled at Jeanne’s words.

“It seems that you are as well known in the French Army as you are in the British Army.”

“Don’t forget that I am French, Margaret. They were quite proud to see that a French woman was running the only efficient infirmary in the British camp. General Bosquet even sent me a bottle of wine as a measure of his esteem.”

“I remember that. It was quite a good wine too.”

“A Chateau-Lafitte?” Replied Jeanne, faking indignation. “It better be good!”

Then going to the pot steaming over the fire, Jeanne pulled open its cover and plunged a spoon inside, stirring the lentil and fish rice before tasting it.

"It's ready!" She announced to Margaret before looking at Leila, who was coming back from the latrine. Exchanging a few Arabic words with Jeanne, the Algerian then tasted the rice and obviously liked it. However, she left nearly immediately after a quick salute at Margaret, who watched her go.

"Why the hurry? She could have eaten with us."

"She knows," explained Jeanne, "but she has to help run her regimental cantina. Besides, she already had lunch. Now, let's eat ourselves before the rain starts."

The sky was still holding, barely, when they finished eating twenty minutes later. On a common accord, the two women then grabbed the steaming pot of rice, still nearly full, along with a large service spoon, and headed towards the nearest regimental square. The men there, soldiers of the 42nd Highlanders wearing kilts and bearskin hats, welcomed Jeanne and Margaret enthusiastically, sniffing the pot of rice with famished looks. A sergeant ordered at once his men into a line and with their mess tins at the ready, allowing Margaret to spoon out rice into the presented mess tins while Jeanne held the pot. Even when rationing each man to one large spoonful, they emptied the pot quickly, leaving still many men in line with empty tins. Jeanne looked at the mass of soldiers still waiting for food and felt discouragement: there were still hundreds needing to be fed. The sergeant saw her expression and spoke quietly to her.

"Don't blame yourself for not being able to feed us all, madam. What you did is already a lot and is truly appreciated."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I however have some dried dates and cheese that I could go fetch in my cart and bring here for distribution. I do have a substantial food reserve with me, so that won't leave me in need. Do your men have any cooking utensils and pots with them?"

"We unfortunately have with us only what we were carrying in our backpacks, which is very little, madam. All our supplies and tools are with the supply chariots on the ships."

Before Jeanne could reply to that, a group of four mounted Highlander officers stopped by her side, prompting the soldiers around her to come to attention. The most senior officer, an arrogant-looking major, eyed with contempt the weapons worn by Jeanne.

"Madam, you are disturbing the ranks. I will ask you and your friend to leave the regimental lines."

Margaret saw Jeanne barely restrain herself from exploding, instead approaching the still mounted major.

“Mister, we were simply helping to feed your men, who obviously had nothing to eat, and...”

“Leave logistics to the commissariat and fighting to men, madam!” Replied brusquely the officer, then looking at the sergeant near Jeanne. “Chase those two camp followers out of the lines and make sure that they don’t come back, Sergeant.”

That was when Jeanne had enough of the pompous bastard. Making two quick steps towards the major, she then grabbed solidly his right arm and brutally pulled him down from his horse. The major landed hard on his back in the dirt and found himself pinned down by a furious Jeanne, who had one knee against his chest.

“Nobody insults Lady Jeanne Smythe like this, you arrogant moron!” Shouted Jeanne while holding her big hunting knife to the major’s throat. The officer, near panic, looked at one of the young captains that had been accompanying him.

“Mister Jones, get that woman off...”

The pressure of the sharp blade then increased on his throat, forcing him to shut up. He could now swear that there was murder in the eyes of the tall woman kneeling on his chest.

“You can’t feed your men and asks for others to defend you and you call yourself an officer? I could challenge you to a duel but I bet that you are too much of a coward to accept it. I will let you live this time but don’t ever insult me or my friend again.”

Jeanne then withdrew her knife and got up on her feet. No one had moved during the few seconds of the confrontation to help the major. Jeanne had turned around and was starting to walk back towards her camp with Margaret when the humiliated officer got up and drew his saber.

“YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS INSOLENCIE!”

Before anyone else could react, Jeanne drew her own saber in a flash while pivoting to face the charging major. One slash to the man’s right hand made him drop his blade, while a second slash followed a fraction of a second later, making a long bleeding cut across the left cheek of the major and making him scream with pain. Jeanne then applied the tip of her sword against the man’s throat, forcing him to freeze.

“I could by all rights kill you right here and right now and justly claim self-defense, Major. Find yourself lucky that I consider you unworthy of dirtying further my blade. Now, get back on your horse and return to your tent before I change my mind.”

The mortified senior officer, realizing that she outclassed him in fencing by a long margin, didn't argue, retreating to his horse and mounting it. After a last black look at Jeanne, he then galloped away, watched by the contemptuous eyes of his men and junior officers. One of the three mounted captains then addressed Jeanne, his face serious.

"Lady Smythe, we all saw how Major McAllister insulted you and attacked you in the back. I doubt that he will press a complaint against you."

"He better not!" Replied Jeanne firmly, then softening her tone. "I only wanted to give some food to your starving men, Captain, and was not expecting to be repaid with such rudeness."

The captain sighed while looking down at the ground.

"Your generosity is well known, Lady Smythe. God bless you for what you did already, madam. Keep the rest of your supplies for the wounded and sick to come soon: we will manage in the meantime. Again, thank you for your generosity."

Jeanne hesitated for a moment but finally turned around and walked away with Margaret, recuperating her kitchen pot at the same time. The captain watched her go, then looked bitterly at the major's tent in the distance: This was only the latest example of the man's utter disregard for his troops. He couldn't know yet that the said major was going to be killed in the month to come by a not so accidental British bullet in the head.

14:51 (Constantinople Time)

Sunday, September 17, 1854

Alma River, Crimea

Gordon Smythe took his time to complete his visual scan of the grounds in front of him while sitting calmly on his horse. Even while his cavalry troop was pretty much in plain sight due to the sparse cover available, the Russians fortifying themselves on the hilltops to his front didn't seem to care about the presence of British cavalymen. Using his spyglass, Gordon could see across the River Alma thousands of Russian soldiers digging gun positions along the ridges facing him, while more Russians were at work in the small village of Burluk, next to the wooden bridge carrying the main road to Sebastopol. Gordon then lent his spyglass to Sergeant-Major James Champion besides him so that he could also look.

“Quite a strong position the Russians have there. There are over a hundred artillery pieces along the ridges and the slopes are quite steep. On the other hand, those tall hills to the west of the main Russian positions are nearly empty of enemy soldiers. If we could take them, we would overlook their positions and would make their defenses untenable.”

“Maybe, sir,” replied Champion while looking through the spyglass, “but if that river is too deep to ford and we are forced to use that bridge, those guns will butcher our men as if in a bowling alley.”

“Well, there is only one way to know, Sergeant-Major.” Replied Gordon while urging his horse forward. “Stay here with the rest of the troop while I take a dip. If I get hit, return to the army with our information.”

Champion watched with apprehension as his captain galloped to the river, then made his horse enter the water. Some Russians in the village downstream from the British started to get nervous at the sight of the lone rider crossing the river, with about twenty of them soon starting to run along the southern bank towards Smythe. Champion then gestured to his men.

“TROOPERS DISMOUNT! GET READY TO GIVE COVERING FIRE TO THE CAPTAIN!”

While four men gathered the reins of their companions' horses, 23 British troopers dismounted and grabbed their Minié rifles, kneeling down in a firing line along the shrubs. Captain Smythe was now close to the opposite bank, with the water having gone barely to his horse's belly at its deepest. Champion nearly shouted in triumph when Smythe's horse climbed the southern bank and made a few steps before its rider made it turn around and calmly cross the river again. By now the Russian infantrymen were getting too close to Champion's taste.

“TROOPERS! ENEMY INFANTRY TO THE FRONT AT 300 YARDS! FIRE!”

The 23 rifles barked at nearly the same time, downing over a dozen of the Russians and prompting the rest to take cover in a hurry. Reloading their single-shot, muzzle-loading rifles frantically, the British had time to fire a second salvo before the Russians responded in the form of six guns opening fire from the top of the ridge facing them. Champion instinctively ducked as the shells passed over his head, exploding over fifty yards behind the cavalry troop. He saw as well a good hundred Russian cavalrymen

now crossing the wooden bridge towards them as Captain Smythe emerged from the river, yelling orders to his men.

“TROOPERS, REMOUNT! GET READY TO WITHDRAW!”

As soon as Gordon Smythe joined them back, the whole troop galloped north, with shells exploding on each side and with the Russian cavalry hard in pursuit. James Champion couldn't help shout excitedly at his captain riding alongside.

“Quite a warm welcome from those Russians, sir. I hope that our wives' welcome will be friendlier.”

“Nothing can beat Jeanne's welcome, Sergeant-Major.” Shouted back Gordon, grinning.

“The lucky bastard!” Grumbled quietly to himself one of the troopers, imagining the naked body of the tall, shapely French woman.

09:30 (Constantinople Time)

Monday, September 18, 1854

Kalamita Bay, Crimea

Margaret Ward, driving the ambulance cart towards the shore where a British rowboat was waiting, felt her heart jump when she saw a floating pontoon being towed towards the beach, coming from the HMS SANS PAREIL. On the pontoon was the medical wagon, its trailer and the train of pack mules of the regimental ambulance. Margaret could also see Doctor Farrell, Sarah Champion, Mary Pearson and the five other women that were now regular auxiliaries of the ambulance, all waving excitedly at her. Fanny Duberly was on the pontoon as well with her horse and pack animal. Waving back, Margaret drove the cart next to the beached rowboat and stopped, to be immediately approached by the navy ensign in charge of the rowboat's crew.

“What do you have for us this time, madam?”

Margaret half turned and pointed at the two men lying on the stretchers laid in the back of the cart.

“Two soldiers from the 23rd Fusiliers, sir. Both suffer from strong fevers.”

“Alright, madam, we will take it from here.” Said the young ensign, a mere teenager, before shouting at his six sailors. “Four men to unload those two sick lads, quickly!”

By the time the two feverish soldiers, wrapped in blankets, were off the cart and in the rowboat, the pontoon and its towing rowboat had beached. Fanny Duberly and her horses were first off the pontoon, followed by the wagon and its trailer, with the pack mules last. The beach was soon the scene of a joyful reunion, with everybody wanting to hug and kiss Margaret. Fanny was then the first to ask the question Margaret was expecting.

“Where is Jeanne, Margaret? Normally, she accompanied you when bringing patients to the ships.”

“She had to pitch tent some fifteen miles from here to take care of four severe cholera cases, Fanny. Thank God the wagon is here now: we sure could use your help.” Fanny answered her with an embarrassed smile.

“Uh, I’m first going to Eupatoria for a day: Captain Brock, the newly appointed governor of the town, has invited me to visit him.”

“Hmm, fun before work?” Replied Margaret, faking indignation. Sarah Champion then slapped the brunette playfully in the back, nearly upsetting her balance.

“Don’t worry, Maggie: we’re here now. Let us take over for a while and rest a bit.”

“Thanks! Me and Jeanne sure could use a respite: the last three days have been busy like hell.”

“With ten round trips between the front and the ships and 21 patients carried to safety, I can understand.” Replied Doctor Farrell with obvious pride. “You two have been doing a great job.”

“Thank you, Doc.” Said Margaret, fatigue showing on her face. “Could you and Sarah leave ahead of the wagon in the cart, to relieve Jeanne. She’s really burned up by now and has hardly slept in the last three days, what with the riding up and down the marching columns and directing me to the sick.”

“We’ll start right away, Margaret.” Said Farrell softly. “In the meantime I want you to go lay in one of the stretchers in the back of the wagon and sleep. Mary! Take Emma to help you and change the stretchers in the cart for clean ones before washing them. Me and Sarah are leaving right away.”

“We’re on it, Doc.”

As soon as Margaret had taken out her personal kit bag and two clean, disinfected stretchers were in place in the back of the cart, Sarah and the doctor loaded in their own

kit and sat in the front. They were soon out of sight of the medical wagon, trotting towards the front lines.

13:12 (Constantinople Time)

Eupatoria-Sebastopol road, Crimea

“There’s the medical tent!” Suddenly shouted Farrell while pointing slightly to the right and ahead of them. Looking herself in that direction, Sarah saw effectively the familiar shape of the tent, standing in the middle of a loose clump of trees. Near it was Jeanne’s horse, tied to a tree by a long rope. Guiding the cart towards the tent, Sarah stopped in front of it as Jeanne was emerging from the tent, a bedpan in her hands. Sarah was immediately alarmed by the exhaustion apparent on Jeanne’s face as she weakly smiled at them.

“Thank God you’re here! I sure could use a hand or two.”

Jumping down from the cart, Sarah went to Jeanne and took the stinking bedpan from her hands.

“Where is your sewer pit, Jeanne?”

“Thirty yards to the right of the tent. If you’re taking care of this, I will...”

“You will wash and disinfect your hands and then go to sleep, and that’s an order!” Cut in Farrell with a firm voice, making Jeanne look at him with dismay.

“But...my patients need me.”

“We will take care of them.” Said the doctor, his voice softening. “Just bring me up to date on their pathology before you go to sleep. You will be of no use to anybody if you fall down from exhaustion, Jeanne.”

The French woman was about to protest further but refrained after a hesitation, instead lowering her head and reentering slowly the tent, the doctor behind her.

Taking a well deserved break three hours later, Sarah found Doctor Farrell sitting on a medical supply chest in front of the tent, apparently deep in thoughts. Sitting besides him, she passed one arm around the surgeon’s shoulders, making him redden with embarrassment: Farrell was as timid as he was six months ago.

“What are you thinking about, Doc?”

“About our situation, Sarah. With Jeanne included, I have five medically trained orderlies to help me, which is much more than the norm in a regiment. Yet, we have

been running ragged just by taking care of the sick. With major battles to come, we will never be enough just the six of us to properly take care of the wounded as well. We need more trained orderlies but, with the ranks of the army already depleted by disease, I will never be able to get some men to help.”

“What about the four women traveling with us who do our laundry and cooking? They could be trained by you as nurses.”

“Maybe, but who will then do the domestic chores?”

“Doc, wake up!” Replied Sarah. “There are about two dozen more women from this regiment sitting on our ships, most of whom have little or nothing to do. I am sure that many of them would be glad to work for you, especially if Jeanne offers them the same wondrous pay that me and the other girls get.”

“Would Jeanne accept to pay them, though? I can’t force her to spend her own money.”

“I bet she will, Doc. That kind of money is a drop in the bucket for her, truly. On the other hand, I have never possessed so much money as now. Would you believe that I already put aside over fifty pounds since we left England?”

“Fifty pounds? That’s quite a sum.”

“Indeed! Do you really believe that the wife of a trooper who makes maybe five shillings a week will pass such an offer?”

“Uh, no. Maybe I should talk to Jeanne about this when she wakes up.”

“Please do that, Doc.” Said Sarah while patting Farrell’s shoulder.

22:51 (Constantinople Time)

Tuesday, September 19, 1854

8th Hussars camp, four miles north of the Alma River

Crimea

Thomas Farrell, standing at one end of the medical wagon’s retractable tent, looked somberly at his expectant medical staff assembled in front of him. A number of candle lamps provided sparse light that showed the grave expressions on everybody’s faces: they all knew why he had called this meeting after returning from Lord Paget’s tent. Present were Jeanne Smythe and her four junior nurses, four ex-domestic aides who had now rudimentary nursing training and six more women recently recruited by Jeanne to do the backbreaking but vital cleaning and cooking chores.

“Ladies, Lord Paget told me that our regiment will probably not see action in tomorrow’s battle, as our cavalry will act as flank protection for our attacking infantry. I thus requested and got permission to collect and treat wounded from the infantry regiments, who will undoubtedly suffer many losses tomorrow, as the Russian position is a very strong one. After this meeting, I will go visit the chief-surgeon of the Rifle Brigade to coordinate our efforts. The battle should start early tomorrow morning, so I want everybody up and ready to work by six O’clock. Here is how work will be divided: Sarah Champion, helped by Misses Short and Reeve, will keep taking care of the five sick men still in our custody inside the quarantine tent; Mary Pearson and Misses Pringle and Foster will receive the wounded and prepare them for surgery if need be; finally, Jeanne Smythe and Margaret Ward will act as forward ambulance, collecting the wounded on the battlefield and giving them first aid before bringing them here. The six ladies of the domestic staff will make sure in the meantime that we don’t run out of clean linen and instruments. Do you have any questions?”

The only one to raise her hand then was Jeanne Smythe.

“Yes, Jeanne?”

“Doc, I have a request rather than a suggestion. In order to efficiently treat and collect the wounded on the battlefield, I will have to go on foot and stay around while our cart ferries back the wounded to you. However, Margaret cannot both drive and take care of her passengers. I would like to ask for one volunteer who knows how to drive a cart well and who is strong enough to help lift a loaded stretcher. I have to be frank here: it will be dangerous work, as we will not wait for the shooting to stop before starting to collect the wounded. Bullets and shells will still be flying around.”

Margaret Ward swallowed hard but otherwise stayed impassive as the six auxiliaries looked hesitantly at each other. A sturdy woman in her late thirties then stepped forward.

“I’ll go! I drove a farm cart for years and have seen my share of blood and guts while following my husband, RSM O’Neil.”

“Thank you very much, Janet.” Said Jeanne gratefully. “I will show you the peculiarities of my cart tomorrow morning. Uh, would you by chance know how to shoot and reload a rifle?”

“Why, you need to learn?” Replied Janet with a big grin. “I went to Afghanistan with my Sean, after all.”

“Another war veteran? Excellent!” Said a pleased Jeanne, getting funny looks from the others.

05:51 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, September 20, 1854

8th Hussars field ambulance, British camp

Crimea

Janet O’Neil, emerging from the women’s tent in the dim morning light, was joining Jeanne near their cart when a civilian on a horse arrived at the ambulance and dismounted near them. The newcomer quickly tied his mount to a tree before coming towards Jeanne and Janet. He balked when he saw the revolvers and saber Jeanne carried, hesitating before speaking.

“Uh, am I at the 8th Hussars field ambulance, ladies?”

“You are, sir.” Answered Jeanne calmly. “May we help you?”

“I do hope so, miss. I am Doctor Paul Gardiner, junior surgeon with the 7th Fusiliers. Since my regiment lacks most medical facilities and equipment, my brigade surgeon decided to send me to your ambulance, which is said to be superbly equipped, so that I could assist your own surgeon.”

“A very wise decision, sir.” Said Jeanne, truly pleased by that. “Let me show you to Doctor Farrell, our surgeon. By the way, my name is Jeanne Smythe, field nurse with the 8th Hussars.”

“Pleased to meet you, madam.” Replied stiffly Gardiner, still put off by Jeanne’s outfit, while shaking hands with her. He then followed her to the medical wagon and entered its rear tent. Jeanne soon reemerged alone from the tent and went back to the cart and Janet.

“That really made Doc Farrell happy. Now, let’s roll!”

10:14 (Constantinople Time)

North bank of Alma River

“Come on, lads, “ shouted Gordon Smythe to his men as they followed him at a gallop, “we don’t want to make our infantry or, God forbid, our Russian hosts wait!”

“Why not, sir?” Shouted back Corporal Joseph Ward, riding hard with the rest of B Troop as it took its assigned position on the left flank of the long line of British infantry forming up a quarter mile short of the Alma River. “They did make us wait for them after all.”

“One must be lenient with our infantry fellows.” Shouted Sergeant-Major James Champion from just behind Gordon. “They try their best but still are nothing more than low life ground-pounders.”

One soldier from the 7th Fusiliers, behind which lines the cavalymen were passing, heard Champion and shouted at him while doing an obscene gesture.

“At least we don’t get our rocks off by rear-ending bloody horses!”

Both the cavalymen and the infantrymen broke out in laughter at that exchange. As B Troop, following A Troop across the open countryside, rode past the men of the 7th Fusiliers, Gordon saw and recognized a very familiar white and green cart that was slowly following fifty yards behind the infantry line. Riding besides it was a woman he knew very well indeed.

“Talking of arses, men, there are some of our wives!”

“Bloody hell!” Shouted a surprised Corporal Ward. “What is Margaret doing this close to the frontlines?”

“Close?” Replied James Champion. “This IS the frontlines!”

The cavalymen stared at the ambulance cart as the two women in it and the female rider cheered them. At the tail end of the column of Hussars, RSM Sean O’Neil saw his wife at the reins of the cart as he galloped past it.

“Hell! Is my Janet leading Lady Jeanne Smythe into this or is it the other way around?” He wondered aloud.

“That could be a difficult call, RSM.” Replied Captain Heneage, who was riding besides O’Neil.

11:51 (Constantinople Time)

North bank of Alma River

“There it goes!” Announced Jeanne at the sight of multiple puffs of white smoke erupting from the ridges to their right. Margaret didn’t understand until the delayed sound of the Russian guns firing reached them. The two mile-long line of British infantry, which had been idly waiting for the French supporting attack on their right, suddenly

came to life. With officers riding in front, the two men-deep assault line started to advance towards the nearby Alma River. The village of Burluk, situated on the southern bank across from the bridge on the river, then erupted in flames and smoke.

“What the hell is happening there?” Wondered Margaret, promptly answered by Jeanne.

“The Russians turned the village into a fire bomb and just ignited it. Things are going to become bloody very soon.”

A rolling thunder then announced the firing of all the Russian guns positioned along the ridges facing the British. Geysers of smoke and dirt started to erupt among the advancing British troops, mowing down men by the dozen under Margaret’s horrified eyes.

“My God! This is a bloody massacre!”

“I actually have seen worse, Maggie.” Said gravely Janet O’Neil, restraining her now nervous horse.

“Let’s wait until the troops are crossing the river before going in to help the wounded.” Said Jeanne with unbelievable calm. “There is no point in getting ourselves killed right at the start of the battle.”

Janet glanced at the French woman: this was indeed a seasoned veteran and a cool customer.

The British infantry, still under a murderous artillery fire, started crossing the Alma River ten minutes later, prompting Jeanne into signaling to Janet with one hand.

“Advance now, straight to our front.”

Urging on Yasmina, Janet drove the cart forward by 200 yards, following Jeanne’s horse, until they were surrounded by corpses and moaning wounded.

“Halt!” Ordered Jeanne before jumping down from her horse Pegasus, a pack full of bandages on her back. Margaret got down next from the cart, following Jeanne on foot to a nearby group of downed infantrymen. The sight of mangled bodies and thorn limbs then made the brunette bend over and throw up despite her best efforts to keep her composure. A shout from Jeanne soon brought her back to their duty.

“Margaret, I need you here!”

Going over her revulsion, Margaret joined Jeanne beside a young soldier with a large wound to his left leg. Jeanne took her right hand and applied it to a point just above the gaping, bleeding wound.

“Keep enough pressure here to stop the bleeding while I bandage him.”

Margaret did so while watching Jeanne work feverishly on the young man, who was delirious and agitated. A shell suddenly screamed by over their heads, exploding a mere thirty yards away from the cart and terrifying Margaret to no small degree. That prompted Jeanne into turning her head towards the waiting cart and to shout at Janet O’Neil.

“Janet, turn the cart ninety degrees and present your flank to the Russians. Maybe our ‘AMBULANCE’ sign will make them refrain from shooting at us.”

Jeanne then returned to her first aid work as Janet turned the cart to the right. Another shell screamed by seconds later, missing it by a mere twenty yards.

On the ridge of the main Russian position, an artillery officer looking through a spyglass suddenly shouted at the gun crews near him.

“Halt fire! Switch target back to the English infantry now!”

“Why, sir?” Shouted back one of the gun masters.

“Because that cart is an ambulance, you illiterate peasant!”

Smarting over the officer’s response, the gun master then relayed the order to his men. They were soon back at boring holes in the advancing British lines.

12:13 (Constantinople Time)

North bank of Alma River

“One, two, three, lift!”

The loaded stretcher, lifted in the back of the cart by the combined effort of the three women, was then slid in place on the rails specially designed to this effect, then secured in place by straps. Another wounded man on a stretcher was already inside the cart. Jeanne then helped a soldier with his left arm held in a sling get up and sit at the front, besides Janet O’Neil, while Margaret Ward knelt between the two stretchers in the back. Changing one of her water bottles, now nearly empty, for a full one, Jeanne then grabbed half a dozen small white flags on thin steel poles from inside the cart and patted Janet’s arm.

“Get those wounded back to our camp at top speed, then come back here. The white flags will mark wounded men ready for pickup. Go!”

Nodding in understanding, Janet turned the cart around and drove north at a gallop, using the main Eupatoria-Sebastopol road. The spring suspension system of the cart was now paying off handsomely, making it possible for Janet to push her horse without jolting around too hard the wounded she transported. They made it back to the field infirmary, four miles away, in less than half a hour. Doctors Farrell and Gardiner, along with Mary Pearson and four other women, were on hand to help unload the three wounded, who were then rushed inside the treatment tent. As soon as the cart was emptied and two clean stretchers had been put in place, Janet drove back towards the battlefield, an anxious Margaret sitting besides her.

“I hope that Jeanne is alright.”

“Don’t worry about her, Maggie. From what I have seen and heard of her, she can easily fend for herself.”

Both stayed silent during the rest of the return trip. Careful not to overexert her horse, Janet kept up a quick trot instead of a full gallop, still taking only 35 minutes to arrive back at the battlefield. They found the battle still raging on, with the British infantry now well past the river and climbing steadily the steep slopes leading to the Russian positions. The Russian guns were as active as ever, but now had to contend with some heavy British guns that had been brought forward on the north side of the river. The problem was that Jeanne and the wounded she was treating were directly in the path of the British guns’ muzzle blasts, with Russian counter fire falling around her on top of that. Margaret looked at the scene with horror and nearly pulled her hair in desperation.

“My God! She’s going to get killed in short order. What are we going to do?”

Janet clenched her teeth, then took a quick decision. Jumping down from the cart, which had stopped behind and to the right of the British guns, she put in place locking pins on the wheels and pulled out of the cart’s back one of their two stretchers, then shouted at Margaret.

“Maggie, get down here! We will go on foot and get the wounded with our stretchers.”

Only hesitating for a short moment, Margaret joined Janet and took one end of the stretcher, following her at a run. Janet could see that Margaret was as white as a sheet as they ran past the firing guns, but the younger woman didn’t falter.

“Run at a crouch, Maggie!” Shouted Janet as they started running directly in front of the British guns, only forty yards away. One muzzle blast half deafened them,

apart from making Margaret squeal in terror. Janet really couldn't blame the British gunners for this, as they were taking casualties from the Russian guns and had to keep firing. One Russian cannonball ricocheted off the ground ten meters in front of Janet, splattering her with dirt, before continuing on to decapitate a British gunner. Both women finally got to Jeanne, kneeling besides the wounded man she was treating. Jeanne's face was pale and tense but her voice was steady as she looked at Margaret.

"This man has shell fragments in his chest and legs. I did what I could to stop the bleeding and made him sniff some chloroform. You can take him away."

The three women cautiously laid the groaning man on the stretcher, then lifted him and walked back to the cart, buffeted all the way by explosions and muzzle blasts. Putting the wounded aboard the cart, they then ran back for a second wounded marked by one of Jeanne's white flags, carrying him as well to the cart. As she was about to turn around the cart to evacuate the two wounded, Janet watched Jeanne run back to take care of more wounded.

"Now, there's a brave woman." She said softly before urging Yasmina Northward.

16:04 (Constantinople Time)

North bank of Alma River

The staff officer, covered with dust and sweat, halted his horse besides that of Lord Raglan, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Corps, saluting him crisply before delivering his message in a triumphant voice.

"Victory, Milord! The Russians are in full retreat, abandoning much of their baggage in the process. Our troops are now in full control of the heights."

"By God, that is what I call good news." Said jubilantly the 66 years old, one-arm field marshal. "Let's go see by ourselves, shall we?"

"Uh, sir," cut in politely Lord Lucan, commander of the Cavalry Division, "my men are still covering the flanks and can pursue the Russians quickly enough. This is a golden opportunity to cut the enemy to pieces, sir."

Lord Raglan looked around at his staff officers and aides, hesitant. A perfect gentleman who had served under the Duke of Wellington and who had lost his right arm at Waterloo, he was nonetheless a cautious commander.

“We don’t know anything about Russian reserve forces, Lord Lucan. I prefer to keep our cavalry in reserve in case of a Russian counter-attack.”

“Yes sir!” Replied the disappointed Lucan. The command staff and its heavy cavalry escort then followed Lord Raglan down the knoll they had used as an observation point during the battle, following the road leading to the bridge crossing the Alma River. As they were approaching the river, they met a northbound white and green cart driven by a woman and bearing a big ‘AMBULANCE’ sign in three languages on both sides. The female driver waved briefly at Lord Raglan and his staff as she sped north, obviously in a hurry. Raglan, curious, looked at his army chief-surgeon.

“Doctor Sloane, whose ambulance was that and what are women doing on the battlefield so soon?”

“Sir, this was the 8th Hussars’ ambulance cart, the one donated and operated by Lady Jeanne Smythe. Since they are by far the best equipped medical unit the Army has in Crimea, I authorized them to help collect and treat the wounded from the Rifle Division. As for women driving ambulances, I believe that the only man on the staff of the 8th Hussars Field Ambulance is the surgeon himself, Doctor Thomas Farrell, who by the way did a superb job in Varna.”

“Are you telling me that no men are available for such battlefield duties?” Asked Raglan, truly shocked and incensed.

“Unfortunately, none, sir.” Replied Sloane, more than a bit embarrassed. William Russell, who was following Lord Raglan’s group as official correspondent of ‘The Times’, started scribbling furiously as the chief-surgeon went on.

“Disease has depleted the army’s ranks to such an extent that no men are left to act as orderlies and stretcher bearers, Milord. The old Chelsea pensioners London sent me as medical orderlies were of no use whatsoever and I shipped them straight back to Scutari, the ones who survived the trip, that is.”

Raglan then turned to face his chief of staff, speaking forcefully.

“Colonel, I want you to detail men from our quartermaster services as quickly as possible for stretcher bearer duty, along with chariots to transport our wounded. Our soldiers must be tended to as soon as possible.”

“If I may, Milord,” then cut in politely William Russell, “it seems that at least one person is already caring for some of our wounded.”

Looking in the direction pointed at by the journalist, Raglan saw a solitary figure about 300 meters away. The person was kneeling beside a wounded in the middle of the corpse-strewn battlefield, its back to Raglan, and was apparently treating him.

“Is that a French uniform? I can’t quite make it out.”

The commander’s chief of staff then turned towards one of his liaison officers.

“Captain Nolan, go identify that person and report back on the double.”

“Right away, sir!” Replied the young Hussars officer before launching his horse at a gallop. As he approached the crouched figure, who was busy bandaging a wounded British infantryman, suspicion arose in Nolan’s mind: the sword slung most un-regulation wise across the person’s back was no British or French sword. The stranger also had long hair going down well past the shoulders. Drawing his own sword, Nolan slowed his horse to a trot, stopping when only a few meters from the unknown person. The latter then turned around briefly, showing a beautiful female face smeared with dirt and blood.

“Could you help me here, please?” Asked the woman in a tired voice. Nolan took a few seconds to recover from the surprise.

“I’m afraid that I have to return right away to my commander, madam. May I ask who you are?”

“You may.” She replied quietly while finishing her bandage. “I’m Lady Jeanne Smythe, field nurse with the 8th Hussars.”

“How long have you been here, tending the wounded, madam?”

“Since the opening shots of this battle, Captain. Could you tell your commander that extra transports are needed urgently here. I’m doing the best I can here but our ambulance is four miles away and men are bleeding to death before our cart can pick them up.”

“I will pass the word, madam.” Replied Nolan respectfully. He did however have one last question nagging him. “If you are a nurse, madam, then why the weapons?” Jeanne glanced up at him while laying gently the wounded infantryman back on the ground.

“Captain, don’t be naïve. Russian Cossacks don’t respect the laws of war any more than Afghan tribesmen did. My weapons are for my protection and that of my patients.”

“I understand, madam. Have a good day!” Replied Nolan before galloping back to the command staff, now nearly at the bridge. He stopped besides Lord Raglan and saluted while reporting.

“This was Nurse Jeanne Smythe, from the 8th Hussars’ field ambulance, sir. She has been tending our wounded since the start of the battle and is asking urgently for more transports to get the wounded to the dressing stations.”

While many staff officers looked in surprise at the distant nurse, Lord Raglan stared severely at his chief quartermaster.

“You know what your priority is now, sir. Get to it right away.”

18:43 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars field ambulance

Crimea

Taking a break after finishing operating on his fourth patient of the day, Paul Gardiner walked wearily out of the ambulance wagon’s treatment tent, inhaling with delight the fresh September air. The sky was now darkening quickly and the people moving around were little more than silhouettes. They were already using a good dozen candle lamps and two oil lamps to illuminate the operating section of the treatment tent. A female silhouette then approached Gardiner, something in her right hand. Paul smelled the hot tea as soon as the woman offered the tin cup she was holding.

“I thought that you could use some tea after this grueling work, Doctor.”

“You are an angel, madam.” Said Gardiner thankfully while taking the cup. “Could you remind me of your name?”

The white of the woman’s teeth showed in the dark as she smiled.

“I’m Christine Sullivan, at your service, Doctor. I just relieved Diane Sutherland on cooking duty. By the way, we have some hot soup and fresh bread if you are hungry.”

“In fact, I am famished.”

“Then come with me to the cooking tent, Doctor.”

Sipping his hot tea while following Christine to the nearby tent, Gardiner went in and took place at a small table surrounded by four folding chairs. One side of the tent was lined up with stacks of bags, boxes and barrels of foodstuff, while an iron stove sat in one corner, two large pots on it. Christine Sullivan, a young and pretty redhead with freckles,

filled a bowl from one of the pots and put it in front of Gardiner before fetching a spoon, a knife and a half loaf of bread on a plate.

“It’s chick pea soup on the menu.” Explained Christine as Gardiner had a first spoonful. “There is some rice and bacon in it as well, plus a few spices. It is a most filling recipe.”

“A tasty one too!” Replied Gardiner, enjoying his soup. “The diet at your field ambulance is far superior to the army’s regular fare. In fact, everything about this ambulance unit is superior to anything else I have seen yet. Your organization should become a model for all the other medical army units.”

“With the Commissariat in charge of army supplies?” Replied Christine in a sarcastic tone. “Good luck! Only Lady Jeanne Smythe’s money and ideas made all this that you see possible. Before her, the regiment had one drunk doctor, an equally drunk orderly, a run down shack, no wagon and precious little of anything.”

Gardiner was silent as he ate his soup and bread and thought over what Christine had said. The more he saw and heard about this Jeanne Smythe, the more curious he was becoming about her. The patients they had been receiving at the rate of three or four per hour since noon had all been cared for in exemplary manner, with some cases displaying first aid techniques he had never seen before. All the wounds had been cleaned with water and alcohol and many patients had received chloroform, a pain killer that Doctor Farrell was also using extensively during his surgical work. The other nurses employed by Farrell, while not truly knowledgeable medically, were competent enough in patient care and were highly dedicated, lightening tremendously the workload of both surgeons and letting them concentrate on pure surgical work. He still had reservations about a few things, like female nurses washing male patients and women being on the battlefield while the shooting was still going on, but the alternative to that would have been neglected and uncared for patients, something Gardiner was not ready to accept.

He was about to finish his supper when he heard a number of wagons stopping nearby and men jump out, shouting orders at each other. Both he and Christine, pushed by curiosity, went out of the cooking tent to look. What they saw was a column of four big wagons stopped in front of the ambulance and at least twenty soldiers busy unloading what looked like large marquee tents under the supervision of a civilian man on horseback. Four more civilians holding what looked strongly like doctors’ leather

bags were stepping down from a cart at the head of the wagons. Doctor Farrell, also attracted by the noise, went to the mounted civilian, recognizing him once close to him.

“Doctor Gibbons? Could you tell me what is going on here?”

The brigade’s chief-surgeon dismounted before facing Farrell and answering him.

“Orders from the army chief-surgeon, that’s what, my dear Thomas. Lord Raglan wants the maximum effort to be done to help our wounded as quickly as possible. The example given by your field ambulance struck him and he has directed that your facility be enlarged to act as a field hospital. I have with me the doctors from the other regiments of the brigade, plus enough equipment to assemble and furnish four marquee tents to house our wounded. Three carts are also on their way to the battlefield to help bring the wounded here.”

Farrell was speechless for a moment, not believing his good fortune.

“This...this is great, sir. We were getting swamped here as a matter of fact, with nineteen wounded already received alive from the battlefield. Unfortunately, two more wounded died during transport from internal bleeding.”

“And how many did you lose here?” Asked Gibbons.

“One, sir.” Answered Farrell somberly. “His wounds were too massive to survive.”

“Only one? But that’s damn good results, Thomas.” Marveled the brigade surgeon. The arrival of the ambulance cart driven by Janet O’Neil interrupted their conversation, with Margaret Ward shouting from the back of the cart.

“We have two stretcher cases and two walking wounded here.”

“Sergeant Dillon!” Shouted Gibbons on hearing Margaret. “Bring up six men to help unload those wounded!”

“Right away, sir!”

As soldiers came forward to help Margaret and Janet, the brigade surgeon patted Farrell’s back.

“Let me help you operate on these men, Thomas. Show me to your operating tent.”

“Then, this way, sir.” Said the young surgeon, too happy to oblige. Leading him inside the rear tent of his medical wagon, he showed Gibbons a washing basin and a bar of soap sitting on a small folding table.

“Sir, I will ask you to remove your coat and hat and to wash your hands thoroughly with soap. One of the things that I found which helped our recovery rate is cleanliness. I will get Nurse Pearson to help you.”

Since Farrell’s methods had more than paid off up to now, Gibbons didn’t object and removed his coat and top hat, then washed his hands carefully. Mary Pearson showed up as he was toweling his hands dry. The young blonde went to a chest and took out of it three sets of clean surgical coats, hats and masks, then held a coat in front of Gibbons.

“Please slip your arms in, Doctor.”

Intrigued by the unfamiliar garment, Gibbons complied nonetheless, slipping on the coat and letting Mary tie it in his back. Farrell entered the tent and started washing his hands as Mary was showing Gibbons how to put on his surgical mask.

“Where did you get your medical training, Thomas?” Asked the brigade surgeon through his mask.

“St-Thomas Hospital, sir. Why?”

“St-Thomas? I’m not aware that they ever used such garbs or even enforced mandatory washing before operations.”

“They don’t, sir.” Answered curtly Farrell, reluctant to get deeper into that subject. Gibbons insisted, though.

“Then, where did you learn these methods?”

“From Jeanne Smythe, sir.” Said Farrell after a hesitation before lying. “She studied medical techniques in the Orient. So far, they have proved quite effective.” Farrell could feel Gibbons’ reprobation as the brigade surgeon stared at him while he put on his surgical garb with Mary’s help.

“This Jeanne Smythe, is she a qualified doctor?”

Farrell took a deep breath, then looked Gibbons in the eyes.

“Jeanne would not be recognized as such by the British Medical Association, sir, but she could surprise you with her medical knowledge and skills. She routinely assists me during surgical work and I often let her do the final stitching work, under my supervision of course. The operating theater is on the other side of this curtain, sir.”

Going through the curtain, Gibbons found a sturdy table covered with a white linen sheet, a smaller table supporting trays covered with napkins and two garbage cans. A multitude of lamps lit that section of the tent. Two soldiers soon brought in a wounded soldier on a stretcher and cautiously slid him on the operating table with the help of Farrell and Gibbons. Once the soldiers were out, Farrell went to the patient’s left foot,

where a cardboard tag was attached to a toe by a string, and read the few lines scribbled on it.

“Chest sucking wound from shrapnel. No exit wound. Four drops of chloroform given at 18:06 hours.”

“Who wrote this?” Asked Gibbons, surprised.

“Jeanne Smythe, sir. She tags every man she treats on the battlefield before sending him to us. It saves a lot of time at our end.”

Gibbons was thoughtful as Farrell started cautiously cutting away the bandages surrounding the man’s chest, using a pair of scissors handed to him by Mary Pearson. Some kind of paper sheet lying on top of the wound then attracted Gibbons’ eyes.

“What’s this?”

“The waxed paper wrapping of one of our field bandages, sir. It helps keep the bandage dry and clean during transport and can also be used to cover or protect a wound. When used in this case, it helps prevent a pierced thoracic cage from collapsing.”

Gently turning the patient on his side, Farrell inspected the man’s back before replacing him flat on the table.

“No exit wound. We have at least one piece inside, possibly in the left lung. Would you like to do the extraction, sir?”

“Yes! Scalpel, please!”

“Let me give more chloroform to the patient first, sir: he is still half awake.”

“Alright, Farrell, go ahead.”

Gibbons waited patiently as Farrell applied a sieve to the man’s face, then put on it a cotton pad wetted with a few drops of chloroform. The wounded man tried at first to take away the sieve but was restrained by the two surgeons until he passed out. Then taking the scalpel offered by Mary Pearson, Gibbons started cutting a way inside the wound, with Farrell sponging the blood as he went. Three minutes later he was pulling out a large chunk of metal from the wound.

“A big bugger indeed! I see no other pieces inside. Let’s sew him up.”

That part took a lot longer, with the patient being carried out of the operating section one hour and ten minutes after entering it. Gibbons watched Mary Pearson take away on a tray the instruments they had used, while Farrell explained to him what she was doing.

“Those instruments will be washed, then boiled before being used again. We will have to wash our hands again and change garbs before operating on our next patient.

This may all sound fastidious but our infection rate is way down compared with other field ambulances.”

Gibbons nodded his head, quite impressed: there were valuable lessons to be learned here. If young Thomas Farrell was smart, he was going to claim the credit for his work before some unscrupulous medical colleague did it in his place. As for Jeanne Smythe, Gibbons had made his mind to commend her work directly to the army chief-surgeon and to Lord Raglan himself.

14:56 (Constantinople Time)

Friday, September 22, 1854

Lord Raglan’s command tent

South bank of Alma River, Crimea

“Milord, Doctor Sloane is here to see you.”

Raising his eyes from the letter he was reading, the old marshal looked at his Aide-De-Camp, now standing in the entrance of his command tent.

“Please let him in, Jarvis.”

The army chief-surgeon soon entered, walking to Raglan’s desk and handing him a sheet of paper, his face solemn.

“The butcher’s bill, sir.”

Raglan had dreaded this moment for at least a day now: of all the things he hated most about war, it was those casualties lists, where a few dry words tried to hide the reality of unspeakable suffering and mass death. Slowly taking the paper, Raglan read it twice, trying to keep his composure at the same time. His voice did show his pain as he spoke softly.

“481 dead... 356 wounded.”

Raglan then looked questioningly at Sloane.

“How come there are more dead than wounded, Doctor?”

The chief-surgeon seemed to shrink at Raglan’s question.

“Milord, many of the dead were not killed outright during the battle. In fact, many of them bled to death before they could be picked up and brought to the dressing stations. This is an old problem, sir: not enough transport means available and too few medically trained personnel at hand. The only ones present from the start of the battle and ready to help and carry the wounded away were the nurses from the 8th Hussars’

field ambulance, who did sterling duty in appalling conditions. On that subject, sir, I have a request from the chief-surgeon of the Light Cavalry Brigade.”

“Go ahead, Doctor.”

“Milord, Doctor Gibbons wishes that three of those nurses be publicly commended for their devotion to duty and bravery while under fire. I personally checked on their work and interviewed a number of artillery officers who witnessed their courage on the battlefield. What I was told was quite impressive, sir. Here is my report on this matter.”

Taking a second document from Sloane, Raglan read it quickly, raising an eyebrow at its content.

“This Lady Jeanne Smythe was under artillery fire for over three hours, alone, while tending to our wounded?”

“Yes, sir! Our gunners were actually shooting over her head while exchanging fire with the Russian guns. Nurses Margaret Ward and Janet O’Neil also ran repeatedly across the battlefield to pick up wounded men while under fire.

“My God! This is truly admirable.” Said Raglan, his eyes becoming moist. “Doctor, be sure that this report will be acted upon. How is our new field hospital at the 8th Hussars camp doing, by the way?”

“Swamped, sir. There are now fifteen surgeons there working non-stop and they are barely keeping up, while the female nurses are being run ragged. They are also running low on medical supplies.”

“Can’t the Commissariat restock them?” Asked Raglan, irritated at having to cover this old problem again. Sloane shook his head in response.

“Hardly, sir. Adding to the usual Commissariat’s incompetence is the fact that some of the medical items that are getting scarce are non-standard ones bought in England by Lady Smythe.”

“I don’t care if those items are standard ones or not, Doctor.” Fumed the old marshal. “If we have to get extra supplies from England, then let’s do it. I want our wounded men to be treated decently and speedily.”

“I will do my best, sir.” Replied Sloane with little enthusiasm before leaving Raglan’s tent: getting anything from the Purveyor’s Office was like extracting a tooth.

Once Sloane was out of his tent, Raglan called in his ADC while still holding the chief-surgeon's report, waiting until the colonel had snapped to attention before starting to speak.

"Jarvis, we are compiling a list of names of those present on the battlefields in Crimea in case a campaign medal is issued, aren't we?"

"Of course, Milord! This is standard army procedure during any campaign, sir."

"Then, Jarvis, I want you to add the names of the three women mentioned in this report to the list of nominees for a campaign medal."

"Women, sir?" Said the ADC as if asked to give a military medal to a horse.

"Yes, Jarvis! I will also give you soon a draft for a Mention in Dispatches. Make sure when it is released that Mister Russell, of The Times of London, gets a copy of it."

"Yes, sir!" Could only reply the ADC, taken aback, before saluting and leaving the tent.

06:48 (Constantinople Time)

Sunday, September 24, 1854

Crimean coast North of Sebastopol

Janet O'Neil waved one last time at Jeanne Smythe, who was standing besides her faithful horse Pegasus on the floating pontoon bringing the last batch of wounded soldiers to the waiting transport ship. She then turned the cart around and started driving back to the field hospital camp site. With the whole army on the march towards Sebastopol and with most of their wounded evacuated, the field hospital would soon be following the endless columns of men, horses and wagons headed south. Hopefully, the march would give a chance to the hospital staff to recuperate from their sleepless nights. Janet herself, despite being accustomed to hardships and backbreaking labor, was in desperate need of some sleep. Jeanne Smythe, now on her way to Constantinople to escort patients to the military hospitals there and to buy more medical supplies, was probably the most exhausted of all. Janet suspected that part of this was due to the incredible stress for Jeanne of having to treat wounded men while under fire for hours. Having been one of the pitifully few army dependants to have survived the disastrous withdrawal march out of Afghanistan a few years ago, Janet fully appreciated what Jeanne had to go through four days ago.

Janet was still half a mile from the hospital when she saw Fanny Duberly gallop towards her, going as fast as her cumbersome Amazon riding position permitted her to go. Fanny stopped her horse as soon as she was level with the cart and spoke excitedly.

“Jeanne, is she gone on the ship already?”

“If you wanted to speak to her, you’re too late, Fanny: the ship must have sailed by now.”

“Damn!” Swore Fanny in frustration. “That means that she won’t get the news for another ten days at the least.”

“What news?” Asked Janet, now frankly curious. Her question attracted a malicious smile on Fanny’s face.

“Lord Raglan has just released his latest dispatches about the battle of the Alma. In fact, they should be sailing back to England via Jeanne’s ship by now.”

“So?”

“So? My dear Janet, it happens that you, Jeanne and Margaret are mentioned in those official dispatches, for bravery shown during the accomplishment of your duties. Jeanne even rated a special mention in them.”

Janet was speechless for a moment, her heart suddenly pumping furiously. She had never heard of women being mentioned in military dispatches before, a process that normally led to the award of a medal.

“But, this means that at least Jeanne could expect a medal of some sort, no?” Fanny’s smile faded somewhat then.

“Uh, I wouldn’t bet on that yet, Janet. When Captain Smythe brought us the good news a short while ago, he also told us that Lord Cardigan was already ranting and raving about women having no business being mentioned in dispatches. Most of the officers seem to think like that old martinet.”

“Bunch of aristocratic twits!” Spat out Janet bitterly. “We wouldn’t have lost so many of our men if those officers knew their jobs in the first place. How is my dear husband reacting to this, by the way?”

“Quite well.” Answered Fanny, smiling again. “Captain Smythe told us that your Sean and Corporal Ward are both as proud as peacocks this morning.”

“Well well, maybe I will ask him a few extra favors the next night I see him.” Said Janet, grinning devilishly. “Jeanne told me about a few French techniques I am anxious to try with Sean.”

“Janet!” Exclaimed Fanny, feigning being scandalized before smiling and lowering her voice as she guided her horse besides the cart. “Would you mind telling me about some of those techniques?”

“Not at all, but I hope that your husband has an open mind...and a good tongue.” The two women were soon laughing hard together, exchanging jokes that would have made their own husbands blush as they rode back to the camp.

15:08 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, September 27, 1854

Kadikoi Valley, near Balaklava Harbor

Crimea

Sarah Champion, Mary Pearson and Emma Armstrong, all sitting in the front bench of the medical wagon, looked around them as the regimental column they were part of came to a halt in the middle of a shallow valley. What they were seeing now did nothing to drive their spirits up.

“What a desolate, depressing place.” Said Sarah, getting nods from the others.

“Indeed! Not one tree in sight and only sparse grass for our horses and mules to feed on.” Remarked Emma. “I hope that this is not going to be our camp site.”

Their hopes were dashed when Doctor Gibbons approached them on his horse and spoke briefly with Doctor Farrell, sitting with Janet O’Neil in the ambulance cart that preceded the wagon. In turn, Farrell got up in the cart and pointed a nearby spot to the women in the wagon.

“We’re going to establish ourselves over there. Get the wagon in place first, Sarah.”

Then jumping down from the cart, the young surgeon guided the wagon, its trailer and the mules attached to it to where he exactly wanted them, careful to orient the wagon so that it would present its smaller frontal section to the winds blowing through the valley. The nine women traveling in the back of the wagon then got out and surveyed the surroundings. Less than two kilometers away the small town of Balaklava was visible, its harbor now filling with British and French ships. In the valley they were in was a tiny hamlet composed of a few miserable huts situated near one of the two dirt roads leading out of Balaklava. The roads themselves were mere trails and promised to become mud pits after any rainfall. The slopes of the hills surrounding the valley were quite gentle but

were covered only with short grass and light brush. Diane Sutherland, one of the medical auxiliaries, appeared dismayed by what she saw.

“We marched all the way around Sebastopol when we could have taken the city at our own leisure, only to end up here?”

Sarah Champion couldn't help grin sarcastically then.

“Ain't it nice to see that a simple farm girl could see what our good generals couldn't?”

“Jeanne would probably have blown steam at seeing that.” Remarked Mary Pearson, getting a nod from Sarah.

“She most certainly would. Sometimes I think that I would have more confidence in her than in our officers to lead our army.”

“Yeah,” approved Emma Armstrong, “but she probably is in Constantinople by now, the lucky girl.”

“Come on, girls!” Cut in Thomas Farrell. “We better get our tents up before it rains again.”

No sooner had the surgeon spoken that rain started to fall, a few drops at first, then a heavy downpour.

“God, I hate this place!” Said Mary Pearson passionately.

CHAPTER 5 – THE ANGEL OF BALAKLAVA

13:59 (Constantinople Time)

Saturday, October 7, 1854

British cavalry division camp

Kadikoi, Crimea

“JEANNE IS BACK!”

Emma Armstrong’s joyous shout attracted Margaret Ward, along with the rest of the ambulance staff, out of the tents. Coming from Balaklava Harbor was a procession of twenty pack horses, with a smiling Jeanne Smythe in the lead. Jeanne was wearing her familiar riding skirt and short tunic outfit and looked healthy and in good spirits. Margaret Ward won the race for being the first to get to Jeanne and hug her as the latter dismounted. The French woman was soon surrounded by Doctor Farrell and a dozen excited women all trying to ask questions about her trip to Constantinople. Jeanne finally had to raise her arms and shout.

“Alright, girls, give me time to arrive first and get these supplies unloaded and stored away.”

Jeanne then grabbed Thomas Farrell by one arm and took him aside, speaking to him in a low voice.

“How is the medical situation here, Doc?”

“Actually, not bad at all, Jeanne. We presently have two cases of cholera, two of local fevers and one wounded lightly by a bullet. We are managing quite well, especially now that you brought all those extra supplies.”

“Excellent! Once these supplies are unloaded, I will go back to the port with the pack horses to get more supplies from my ship. By the way, would you know where my dear husband would be now?”

“Probably patrolling the Woronzoff Road that leads to the army main camp, like he does every day. He normally is back before darkness.”

“Good! I have a little something nice for him from Constantinople.”

Farrell watched Jeanne then go direct the unloading of her pack horses and shook his head in wonderment before returning to his patients.

19:09 (Constantinople Time)**British cavalry division camp****Kadikoi, Crimea**

Gordon Smythe, leading his fifteen men patrol back into camp in the growing darkness and cold, stopped his horse near the regimental ambulance and contemplated with surprise the numerous piles lined near the medical wagon, their nature hidden by tarps thrown over them and anchored solidly by ropes and pickets. There was also two more big covered wagons and twenty extra horses within the infirmary's lines.

"What the hell is all this?" He asked himself. Corporal Ward advanced his horse alongside Gordon's horse while looking at the piles.

"If I may hazard a guess, sir, this may signal that your wife is back from Constantinople. This looks typically like one of her hat tricks."

"I'd say, Corporal!" Said Gordon happily. "Would you mind leading the men back to their tents? I will go report to Major Henry in one hour."

"No worry, sir. Have a good time, sir." Replied Ward in a knowing tone. Gordon let that remark pass, too anxious to see Jeanne to sit on regulations. Getting off his horse as Ward led the patrol away, he tied his horse to the pole where the horses and mules of the medical section were tied as well, then entered the treatment tent. He found Doctor Farrell, helped my Mary Pearson and Emma Armstrong, changing the bandages of Trooper Harris, who had received a bullet in the left arm during a skirmish with a Russian patrol three days ago. Farrell smiled up at him the moment he came in the tent.

"If you are looking for Jeanne, she has been waiting for you in the nurses' tent for the last hour. She has a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" Said Gordon, his smile becoming a grin. "Then I better not make her wait longer."

Mary Pearson and Emma Armstrong exchanged a knowing smile as the tall, broad-shouldered officer left.

"God, what a nice-looking man." Said Mary. "Jeanne is truly a lucky girl to have him."

Gordon hesitated at the entrance of the nurses' tent, afraid of disturbing any woman that could be inside at this time. He finally called out loud.

“Jeanne, are you in there? It’s me, Gordon.”

“You can come in, dear!” Answered back his wife through the canvas. Stepping gingerly inside, Gordon abruptly stopped as he stared wide-eyed at Jeanne. Lying on a bear fur laid in the middle of the tent, she was wearing a vaporous Persian dancer’s costume straight out of the Arabian Nights Tales. Smiling invitingly at Gordon, she motioned with her right index for approach.

“Come here, you nice hunk.”

Gordon didn’t make her wait a moment longer.

After making the men take care of their horses first, Corporal Ward was about to lead them to the regimental kitchen, hoping to find something to eat there after their long patrol, when his wife Margaret showed with Patricia Foster. The two women each held one of the handles of a covered cooking pot, apart from carrying bread loaves and wine bottles in wicker baskets. Margaret gave a quick kiss to her husband before making an announcement to the men of the patrol.

“Don’t bother going to the kitchen, guys: Lady Jeanne brought back lots of goodies from Constantinople today and you are on her gift list. The menu for this supper is corned beef hash, fresh bread and wine.”

“Corned beef hash?” Said one of the troopers, his mouth watering already. “We haven’t seen beef in weeks.”

“We know!” Replied Margaret, grinning. “That’s why we’re here. Get your plates ready, men.”

The men of B Troop went to bed content that night, some even more content than the others thanks to some intimate time with their wives arranged by the good offices of Jeanne Smythe. Morale definitely went up by a few notches that evening.

Going away in the early morning on his daily patrols, Gordon returned to camp in the evening to find a large new tent complex in the process of being put up. Contrary to the usual collection of individual tents used by the army, the large marquee tents of the complex were of a model that could be assembled together end-to-end to form long, spacious shelters. The complex actually was shaped like an ‘H’, with two long parallel rows of interconnected tents linked in the center by a section formed by three marquee tents. A number of marquee tents were also attached individually to the arms of the

complex. Besides the large tent complex, another group of marquee tents tied together sat maybe thirty yards away, while a row of four individual marquee tents was positioned facing one of the extremities of the separate tent group. A number of civilian workers that Gordon recognized from their spoken language as Turkish men were busy assembling and erecting the tents that were still not in place. More Turkish workers were building a sort of palisade enclosing the whole complex of tents, using poles and planks taken from a large pile of construction wood brought on the preceding day. That sight made Gordon smile with pride.

“Decidedly, Jeanne never wastes time.”

While this happened in Kadikoi, the army wasn't idle by any means, the men working hard to dig trench works and gun emplacements for the ninety heavy artillery pieces that would bombard the besieged city of Sebastopol. On October the seventeenth, both the British and French siege guns opened up on the fortified city, with Russian guns answering back with gusto. The Russians were actually the first to score big that day, managing a hit that blew up one of the French artillery powder magazines and silencing their guns for a while. The new Hussars field hospital in Kadikoi rapidly filled with wounded men as casualties from the artillery exchange mounted. The mood around was quite sullen then: the hardest part of the war was yet to come and few failed to realize that by now.

06:23 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, October 25, 1854

H.M.S. SANS PAREIL, Balaklava harbor

Crimea

Hurried knocks on the door of her cabin finished waking up Fanny Duberly, who then quickly put on a robe while shouting towards the door.

“Who is it?”

“First Officer Pritchard, madam.” Answered a male voice. “I have an urgent note for your from your husband.”

“Hold on, I'm coming!”

Going to the door and unlocking it, Fanny cracked it open and faced the tall, thin navy officer, who passed her a piece of paper.

“Lieutenant Duberly also sent you your horse, madam. It is waiting for you on the quayside.”

“Thank you, sir!” Replied Fanny, taking the paper and then closing the door. She was now conscious of the rumble of distant gunfire as she read the paper.

The battle of Balaklava has begun and promises to be a hot one. I send you the horse. Lose no time, but come up as quickly as you can: do not wait for breakfast.

Excitement overtaking her, Fanny dressed in record time, then ran out of her cabin to pick up her horse, which she found on the quay, its reins held by a servant. Getting on it Amazon style and galloping hard through the filthy, stinking streets of Balaklava, she hardly had time to be clear of the town before she met a Commissariat purveyor riding into town. The man seemed to be bordering on panic as he signaled Fanny to halt, shouting frantically as well.

“THE TURKS HOLDING THE CAUSEWAY HEIGHTS HAVE ABANDONED THEIR BATTERIES AND ARE RUNNING TOWARDS BALAKLAVA. IF YOU HAVE TO GO OUT, KEEP AS MUCH TO THE LEFT AS POSSIBLE AND DON'T LOSE TIME IN GETTING AMONGST OUR OWN MEN, AS THE RUSSIAN CAVALRY IS POURING IN. FOR GOD'S SAKE, RIDE FAST, OR YOU MAY NOT REACH THE CAMP ALIVE!”

“Thank you for the warning, sir. Where is Lord Raglan and his staff now?”

“Up there!” Replied the man, pointing at the nearby heights to the North before riding away. Her heart now beating furiously, Fanny rode hard towards those heights.

While going through the British cavalry camp at Kadikoi, she noticed that it was nearly deserted by now. The ambulance cart was also gone from the hospital's yard, with Doctor Farrell, Sarah Champion and Mary Pearson about to leave in the medical wagon. Thankfully, Fanny did not see any Russians before arriving on the heights where the British command staff was observing the battle. A number of other civilians, including William Russell, were there as well. Dismounting with the help of the journalist, Fanny then looked down anxiously to the East as Russell explained the situation to her.

“The Russians have taken all six redoubts along the Causeway Heights, driving out the Turks in disorder. Our Light Cavalry Brigade is now posted at the extreme west of the valley north of the Causeway Heights, while the Heavy Brigade is positioning itself

at the end of the south valley. Unfortunately, a large Russian cavalry force is riding down the heights, heading straight for our base in Balaklava. A single artillery battery and the 93rd Highlanders are the only things that can stop them now.”

Fanny felt gloom as she stared at the thin line of men in red jackets holding the top of a nearby hill. A gray mass of Russian cavalymen was now charging the unflinching Highlanders. A volley of rifle fire then hid everything in a thick cloud of white smoke. Fanny saw the Russians waver a bit. A second volley made them turn around to the cheers of the British present. The Russians did however reform their lines and charged again, only to be driven off by a third volley and by fire from the gun battery positioned with the Highlanders. An excited Fanny, watching that Russian force retreat, suddenly saw another mass of Russian cavalymen maybe 2,000 strong go down the south valley towards the Heavy Cavalry Brigade, which counted only 600 men.

“My God!” Exclaimed the wife of a heavy brigade officer present in the crowd of spectators. “Our men are going to be submerged!”

“Where is the infantry, damn it?” Raged Lord Raglan, standing a few yards away from Fanny, getting a sheepish answer from one of his staff officers.

“Uh, General Cathcart’s division will not be ready until after breakfast, sir.”

“WHAT?” Shouted Raglan, his face reddening. “What about the First Division?”

“The Duke of Cambridge is on the march, sir, but won’t be there for another two hours, sir.”

“Well, send a messenger to General Cathcart to tell him to forget breakfast and to haul his fat ass up to the battlefield right away.”

“Yes sir!” Replied the staff officer before running to a liaison officer. Lord Raglan, repressing his impatience, then resumed his observation of the battle.

To everybody’s dismay, including that of the Russians, the commander of the Heavy Cavalry Brigade, General Scarlet, took the time to calmly and carefully line up his troopers, the British officers turning their backs to the Russians while placing their men. The subjugated Russians halted, wondering what those crazy British were doing. The answer soon came when the charge was sounded and the Heavy Brigade, led by Scarlet, rushed at the enemy. Colliding head on with the Russians, the British troopers disappeared in the gray mass, prompting desperate exclamations.

“God help them! They are lost!”

Contrary to all expectations, the British cavalrymen hacked their way through their foes and routed them in eight minutes with the help of some reinforcements from the 4th Dragoon Guards. Cheers went up from the spectators as the Russians retreated back to the top of the Causeway Heights. William Russell, still standing besides Fanny Duberly, was scribbling furiously while looking from time to time through his spyglass.

“By jove, this is going to make one hell of a report!” He said, ecstatic. A shout from a staff officer then got everybody’s attention.

“Milord, the Russians are removing our guns from the redoubts on the Causeway Heights.”

Looking for a moment through his own spyglass, Lord Raglan then turned to his chief of staff.

“Get the Light Brigade to advance and prevent the guns from being taken away. Cardigan should be pursuing that Russian cavalry by now anyway.”

“Uh, Lord Cardigan has not moved yet, Milord.”

“Then what is he waiting for? God’s calling? He must move at once!”

“Yes, Milord!”

As the colonel was writing an order to be given to a liaison officer, Fanny borrowed William Russell’s spyglass for a moment to observe the Light Brigade in the distance, hoping to recognize Henry if he was indeed there. She quickly realized that the distance was too great for that, but she did recognize a familiar white and green cart stopped behind the troopers of the Light Brigade. A lone rider stood besides the cart, its long hair floating in the wind.

“God bless Jeanne! She’s right behind our men, along with our ambulance cart.”

“What? Let me see!” Exclaimed Russell. A number of spectators and officers nearby, including a French general, had heard Fanny and also looked in that direction. The French general’s Aide, who spoke English, then went to Fanny and saluted her politely.

“Excuse me for disturbing you, madam, but General Bosquet wishes to know if you were referring to Lady Jeanne D’Orléans.”

“I was, sir. I believe that she intends to pick up any of our wounded as the battle goes on, like she did at the Alma.”

“I am not aware of her actions then, madam.” Replied the French officer, surprised. “Could you tell me more about that?”

“With pleasure, sir!” Said Fanny, who then spoke for a minute or so. The French officer nodded thoughtfully as she finished.

“A most brave lady. I will inform my general of this. Thank you for your time, madam.”

The officer then returned to General Bosquet, letting Fanny free to watch anxiously the Light Cavalry Brigade.

To Lord Raglan’s increasing impatience, Lord Cardigan’s brigade kept stationary despite the sending of successive orders to attack, while the British infantry was still mostly absent from the battlefield. By now the Russians were well on their way to finish pulling away the captured Turkish guns from the redoubts along the Causeway Heights. Finally having had enough of Cardigan’s inaction, Raglan wrote down one last order and gave it to Captain Lewis Nolan, the best rider on his staff.

“Bring this to Lord Lucan, so that he can make Lord Cardigan prevent the removal of our guns. Tell Lord Lucan to have the Heavy Brigade in support of the Light Brigade.”

“Right away, Milord!” Replied Nolan, taking the note and saluting before getting on his horse and galloping away.

10:58 (Constantinople Time)

Western end of North valley

Like his men, Gordon Smythe could only wait and wonder as he watched Lord Lucan, who had just arrived with Captain Nolan of the higher staff, confer with Lord Cardigan. From their position low in the valley it was difficult to see what was going on around. Right now, Gordon could only see the large body of Russian cavalry that had gone back from the Causeway Heights to the far end of the valley to reform its ranks behind the guns of the Don Battery, plus more Russian guns and masses of infantry on the Fediukhin Heights to the left and on the Causeway Heights to the right. His blood suddenly chilled when he remembered something Jeanne had told him months ago, something he had not believed then.

“The Light Brigade will charge down a valley ringed on three sides by Russian guns, and it will be a massacre.”

Looking back towards Jeanne, who was sitting on her horse besides the ambulance cart no more than a hundred yards away, Gordon saw her apparently crying quietly. He then understood with horror and shock that she had known for a long time that this was going to happen, but that, for some reason, she would do nothing to prevent the charge despite the obvious distress it was causing her. Gordon looked around at his men, now knowing that he may not see many of them alive by the end of this day. Lord Cardigan turned towards the men then and pointed at the guns down the valley.

“THE BRIGADE WILL CHARGE GUNS TO THE FRONT!”

Gordon waited for Lord Paget to repeat the order before shouting to the men of B Troop.

“B TROOP WILL CHARGE GUNS TO THE FRONT, IN BRIGADE FORMATION!”

The Hussars, which were in second line and on the right flank of the brigade, were containing their excitement with difficulty as Lord Paget shouted another order.

“SWORDS OUT!”

The whole regiment drew its swords as one. Paget then gave the order to move out at a trot as the regiments in the first line started moving forward in perfect alignment.

Janet O’Neil and Margaret Ward, sitting in the front of the cart, could only watch with dread the 632 men of the Light Brigade riding forward down the valley. The Heavy Brigade, led by Lord Lucan and General Scarlet, was now arriving to follow the Light Brigade down the valley. Arriving behind the Heavy Brigade was the Hussars’ medical wagon, its horses driven hard by Sarah Champion. As the Heavy Brigade formed up for a charge, Sarah drove her wagon to a stop besides the ambulance cart and applied the handbrakes before jumping down. Doctor Farrell and Mary Pearson joined her and frantically started to deploy the telescopic rear tent just as the Russian guns started firing on the Light Brigade. The women couldn’t help stop for a moment to look at their men, now a good 400 meters away and under a deluge of fire. They could plainly see men and horses go down, cut by the Russian artillery fire.

“Sean,” said Janet O’Neil tearfully to herself, “please get out of this alive!”

While not saying a word, Margaret Ward was thinking the same about her husband Joseph and knew that the other women had to think similarly.

Riding in front of his troop, Gordon could see too well the men and horses being blown away or cut to shreds by the murderous Russian gunfire. At least one third of the

troopers in the first line of the brigade were already down, with more falling nearly every second. The brigade was now at full gallop and 800 meters from that cursed Don Battery. Thousands of Russian cavalymen stood waiting behind those guns but Lord Cardigan never wavered, leading his men straight down the mouths of those guns. The man may have been an incompetent martinet but he was no coward. At 500 meters from the guns, Cardigan rose his sword high and shouted.

“CHAARGE!”

A powerful concert of cheers and yells answered him and the remnants of the Light Brigade pushed their horses to the utmost, coming down on the terrified Russian gunners frantically trying to reload their pieces.

On Sapoune Ridge, Lord Raglan was watching the charge with increasing dismay and fury.

“What the hell do Lucan and Cardigan think they are doing? Right! Veer right or both brigades will be done in!”

“Maybe not, sir.” Said softly his chief of staff. “We may yet salvage the Heavy Brigade out of this: I think that Lord Lucan is turning around now.”

French General Bosquet, watching all this, shook his head sadly.

“C’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas la guerre. C’est de la folie¹⁰!”

Margaret Ward got up on the bench seat of the cart as soon as she understood that the Heavy Brigade was not going to support the Light Brigade anymore.

“NOOO! OUR MEN NEED YOU, YOU COWARDS!”

“MARGARET!” Shouted Jeanne harshly. “THEY TRIED THEIR BEST. LORD LUCAN WAS RIGHT TO TURN HIS BRIGADE AROUND.”

“BUT OUR MEN ARE IN THERE, DYING!” Shouted back Margaret, nearly hysterical.

“I KNOW THAT, DAMMIT!” Replied Jeanne, who then softened her voice. “It is up to us now to save as many of them as we can. Follow me and don’t let anyone stop you.”

Jeanne then launched her horse forward at a gallop, straight towards the Russian guns at the other end of the valley, followed by the ambulance cart. As terrified as they were,

¹⁰ It is magnificent, but it is not war. It is madness!

Janet and Margaret did not hesitate for one second: their husbands were in there somewhere, maybe dead or dying. The officers and men of the Heavy Brigade, retreating under artillery fire, were too surprised by seeing a woman riding a horse and two more women driving a cart riding through their ranks to even attempt to stop them. Lord Lucan, his right shoulder slashed open by a piece of shrapnel, didn't even notice them go by through the drifting white smoke from the Russian guns and din of the battlefield until General Scarlet, riding a few yards to his right, looked back and spoke in obvious surprise.

"What are those crazy women up to?"

"Uh? What women, General?"

"Lady Smythe and two other nurses on a cart, Milord."

Looking back as well, Lucan only had time to see briefly a cart and a rider with long black hair disappear amidst the white smoke. A shell then burst nearby, reminding him of the precariousness of the situation of the Heavy Brigade.

"Keep withdrawing until the western end of the valley, General. We will then cover the retreat of any stragglers from the Light Brigade."

"What about those women, Milord?"

"I'm afraid that they are on their own now."

Feeling bad about this, Scarlet didn't insist, however, and led his brigade back all the way.

There were no more than fifty riders from the first line left charging when it finally plowed through the Russian guns, Lord Cardigan still in the lead. Gordon Smythe and the other riders of the second line still in action also rode through the battery a few seconds later, hacking and slashing like madmen at the Russian gunners. Lord Paget, a short cigar still stuck between his teeth, soon saw the survivors of the first line turn around and retreat, pursued by a solid mass of Russian Lancers. He immediately shouted at his men, who were pursuing the surviving Russian gunners.

"HALT BOYS! HALT FRONT! IF WE DON'T HALT NOW WE'RE DONE!"

Gordon Smythe was firing his revolvers to good effect, his rapid shots clearing the Russians around him, when he heard Paget's order. Seeing as well the hundreds of Russian Lancers advancing on them, he then gathered his surviving men and covered their retreat as well as he could, emptying both of his revolvers in the process.

Holstering them, he then drew his sword and started frantically hacking his way back to the British lines.

Fanny Duberly, having once again borrowed Russell's spyglass to observe the desperate fight in the distance, suddenly shouted in a near hysterical voice, making the civilian spectators and army officers around her look sharply at her.

"MY GOD! JEANNE IS RIDING DOWN THE VALLEY, FOLLOWED BY OUR AMBULANCE CART!"

Consternation and disbelief ran through the crowd as Russell grabbed back his spyglass for a look.

"By jove, you're right, Misses Duberly. They're now through the Heavy Brigade and are riding deeper in still."

"They must be lunatics!" Pronounced a fat 'Traveling Gentleman' who had been treating the battle like a circus show. "That is no place for women."

A resounding slap from Fanny then sent the surprised tourist on his bum.

"You, mister, are lucky that Jeanne didn't hear this!" Spat Fanny, enraged. "If she went in there, it was to help our wounded men on the battlefield, not to provide some cheap thrills to tourists like you."

"I think that the cart and Jeanne just stopped near some bodies halfway down the valley." Announced William Russell, observing through his spyglass. "Damn! Those Russian bastards are shooting at them!"

Russell's last remark made everybody who had a spyglass point it at the cart and Jeanne, unwittingly creating a new, dramatic focus point on the battlefield.

Covering the wounded trooper with herself from the rain of dirt projected by the exploding shell, Jeanne then looked up anxiously at Janet and Margaret, still sitting in the cart about twenty yards away.

"ARE YOU ALRIGHT, GIRLS?"

"YES!" Replied Janet after a short pause.

"MARGARET, COME HERE TO HELP ME, THEN. JANET KEEP AN EYE ON MY HORSE AND THE CART IN THE MEANTIME."

Deciding that this battlefield was too dangerous to spend much time on each wounded they found, Jeanne did only summary first aid on his patient, then loaded him on a stretcher with Margaret's help. Carrying the wounded to the cart, the three women then

joined their efforts to load the stretcher in the back of the cart. Letting Margaret and Janet strap the stretcher in place, Jeanne ran to another man moaning with pain nearby. The sergeant from the 11th Hussars had a horrific wound to his face, with both of his eyes impaled. Clenching her teeth, Jeanne poured some water on the wound to clean it, then started applying a bandage on it while speaking soft words to calm the wounded. The man stiffened from the pain but didn't scream as she worked on him. In the meantime, Margaret checked the other bodies around, looking for living survivors. Jeanne soon had the blinded man get to his feet and led him to the cart, where he climbed inside with Janet's help. Another shell screamed through the air, making all of them duck. It overshot the cart, exploding forty yards away.

"Janet, keep the cart moving at all times, even when me and Margaret are treating wounded men. Don't give those bastards an easy target."

"Got that!"

Getting back on her horse, Jeanne then galloped to the next cluster of bodies a hundred yards further down the valley, followed by the cart. Amidst three dead horses and a wounded, wildly thrashing beast, a horse stood nearly motionless, its reins still held by its dead rider lying on the ground. Two more soldiers lay dead near him but another one seemed only shaken, his face haggard and his hands trembling. Jeanne realized that the man was suffering from a case of so-called 'shell shock' and knew that it had nothing to do with cowardice. Helping him to his feet, she then gently led him to the cart and made him climb aboard before running to the riderless horse and pulling the reins out of the dead man's hand. Tying the horse to her own Pegasus, she got into the saddle and rode further down the valley, pulling the spare mount along. Encountering another riderless horse, she grabbed its reins as well, prompting a question from Margaret.

"Why lose your time with horses, Jeanne? We are here to save men."

"Margaret, many of our men are without horses now as they try to return to our lines. A horse may mean life for those men."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't think about that." Said Margaret apologetically. Janet suddenly pointed down the valley.

"Over there! Two men limping together."

"Go get them!" Ordered Jeanne at once. "Then bring your patients to the medical wagon and come back here. I'm going to check those bodies over there."

As the cart rolled towards the now gesticulating soldiers, Jeanne rode to a group of six bodies 150 yards away, careful to zigzag on her way. That paid off as a shell narrowly

missed her, passing only a few yards over her head before plowing into the ground some distance away. Her heart jumped in her chest when she got near the bodies: they wore the uniform of the 8th Hussars! Afraid of seeing Gordon in the lot, she jumped down from her horse while still holding the reins. Pegasus then positioned itself between her and the Russian guns to her right, activating its invisible electromagnetic shield to protect her as best it could. The first trooper that Jeanne checked was dead, along with the second one. The third, fourth and sixth were alive, though. Rinsing quickly the blood-covered face of one of the survivors, Jeanne then realized with a shock that the man was RSM O'Neil, Janet's husband. He had a deep slash across his forehead that bled profusely and was unconscious but seemed otherwise alright. Applying quickly a bandage around O'Neil's head, Jeanne then planted one of her small white flags in the ground besides him before going to her next patient. Somehow, the Russian gunners seemed to have lost interest in her by now, unless an officer had understood that she was merely helping the wounded and posed no threat. The noise of approaching riders then made her look up. To her relief they turned out to be a number of dispersed British soldiers from the Light Brigade who were in full retreat. They passed on both sides of her, too much in a hurry to even notice her among the large patches of drifting white smoke. A trooper on foot approached Jeanne as she was finishing to care for her last patient.

"Lady Jeanne? What are you doing here?"

It took her a few seconds to recognize the young man with a blackened and dirt-covered face.

"Pearson? Trooper John Pearson? Thank God, you're alive!"

Hugging him briefly, Jeanne then handed him the reins of one of the horses she had found around her patients.

"Take the horse and go! Mary is waiting for you at the medical wagon, at the end of this valley."

"Mary is here?" Said Pearson, incredulous.

"Yes!" Replied Jeanne impatiently. "Now go, before you attract more fire on me!"

Subjugated by her firm tone, Pearson got on the horse and rode away after a last look at her. The ambulance cart came back one minute later as more stragglers rode past Jeanne, with her last spare horse given to a lieutenant from the 4th Light Dragoons.

"SEAN!"

Janet's scream made Jeanne turn her head in time to see her jump out of the cart and run to her husband to frantically kiss and hug him. Making sure that Margaret kept control of the cart, Jeanne got a stretcher out from the back of the cart and put it besides Sean O'Neil, then shook Janet by the shoulder.

"Come on, Janet! The quicker we load him and the two others up, the faster we will get them to safety."

"You...you're right." Said Janet in a sobbing voice, then helping Jeanne to delicately put the RSM on the stretcher. Both women, pushed by fear and despair, loaded the three wounded in the cart in record time. As Jeanne was getting back on her horse, Margaret shouted in alarm.

"JEANNE, ENEMY CAVALRYMEN APPROACHING!"

Looking with dread in the direction pointed at by Margaret, Jeanne saw a group of eleven Cossacks galloping towards them while holding their swords and lances high.

"RIDE BACK, NOW, AND DON'T COME BACK!" Shouted Jeanne to Janet O'Neil. "I WILL COVER YOU!"

Too scared to object to her order, the two nurses turned the cart around and fled as Jeanne mounted up, drew her Colt revolver-carbine out of its saddle holster and took careful aim at the leading Cossack. Her first shot was true, dropping the Russian from his saddle at a distance of 130 yards. Seven more Cossacks fell before Jeanne holstered back her now empty carbine. The remaining three Cossacks were now less than thirty yards away and charging her with their swords high. Spurring Pegasus to a lightning charge, Jeanne drew out her own saber and let out a fierce war yell. Taken by surprise by such ferocity in a woman, the lead Cossack reacted too slowly and had his right hand chopped off as she flashed by him. The second Cossack, attacked on his left side, got decapitated in short order. The last Cossack saw his own sword parried away on his first pass. Braking hard his mount, he then vaulted around to face Jeanne, who was again charging him.

On Sapoune Ridge, everybody was now watching on anxiously Jeanne Smythe as she fought for her life. Fanny Duberly in particular was a ball or raw nerves as William Russell described out loud what he was seeing through his spyglass.

"...there goes a Cossack's head! Damn! This bloody smoke is hiding everything again...Wait! I think that I see her again now...Yes, and she's alone now. She defeated

all those Cossacks, by jove! What the... She's now rounding up Russian horses. What does she have in mind?"

"Is she coming back now?" Asked Fanny, unable to keep silent any longer. Russell, looking stunned, then lowered his spyglass and spoke in a near whisper.

"No! She went in deeper in the valley with her spare horse, towards the guns of the Don Battery."

A few paces from them, General Bosquet and his aides were also watching the drama with their spyglasses. One aide suddenly pointed at a large group of cavalymen going down the northern valley while skirting its left flank.

"There, mon général! General Morris and his Chasseurs d'Afrique have arrived."

"Excellent! If they can silence those Russian guns on the Fediukhin Heights, it will give a fighting chance for some of those Englishmen to escape this trap. I see that some of the British infantry has also arrived, a bit late though."

Bosquet then looked back where Jeanne Smythe had disappeared in the smoke of the battle, sparkles in his eyes.

"Quelle femme¹¹!" He said in a low, admiring voice.

His poor horse now dead, Gordon Smythe barely had time to join up with three other dismounted Hussars, including his Troop Sergeant-Major, James Champion, before they were beset by at least a dozen Cossacks. With the Russian guns less than fifty yards from them still firing indiscriminately in the swirling mix of Russian and British cavalymen, the four Hussars went back to back, fending off their assailants the best they could.

"AT LEAST WE SHOWED THESE RUSSIANS WHAT HUSSARS ARE CAPABLE OF." Shouted Champion to his captain while fencing off with two Cossacks. Gordon hacked away the arm of one of his attackers before replying.

"DAMN RIGHT, SERGEANT-MAJOR! I JUST WISH THAT I COULD HAVE KISSED MY WIFE ONE LAST TIME."

"I STILL HAVEN'T GIVEN UP ON THAT, SIR." Replied Champion, managing to wound one Cossack with a mighty slash of his sword. The Cossacks on Champion's side suddenly turned around as a piercing yell came from their back. Using that diversion to good effect, Champion rushed forward and cut down the two Cossacks

¹¹ What a woman!

nearest to him as a lone rider appeared out of the smoke, firing a revolver repeatedly at an incredible rate and dropping five Cossacks from their saddles.

“COME ON, YOU MEN!” Shouted a female voice Champion knew well enough. “GET ON THOSE RUSSIAN HORSES AT THE DOUBLE!”

The four Hussars didn't have to be told twice, quickly saddling up while Jeanne Smythe emptied her second revolver to cover them.

“NOW, LET'S GET OUT OF DODGE!” Shouted Jeanne, drawing her sword after holstering her revolvers and letting the Hussars ride past her before urging Pegasus to a gallop. She then rode alongside Gordon, a large group of Cossacks in hot pursuit.

“You are a tough man to find, my dear husband.” She said with a grin.

“And you, my dear wife, are one crazy woman!” Replied Gordon, still having a hard time believing that she had come all the way to the Russian guns to find him. You had to love a wife like this one. A pistol bullet passing uncomfortably close to Jeanne's head then prompted a suggestion from her to Gordon.

“Tell your men to keep to the right of the valley: I'm expecting help soon from there.”

Gordon looked at her as if she was mad.

“But, the Russian guns on the Fediukhin Heights will shred us to pieces.”

“If they are still in Russian hands, my dear.” Replied Jeanne mysteriously while riding hard alongside him. Gordon didn't have time to ask her about that, as a large group of Russian Lancers galloped across their front, cutting their path to safety. Before he could swear about their bad luck, Jeanne spurred her horse, making it accelerate to a speed Gordon would not have thought possible for a normal horse and charging the Lancers ahead of the four Hussars.

“MONTJOIE¹²!” Shouted Jeanne at the top of her lungs, her saber held forward. Gordon, his own horse left behind by Jeanne's horse, could only watch at first, like his three men. Jeanne deftly deflected away the point of the first Russian lance with the tip of her saber, then followed up with a slash of her sword that opened wide the throat of the Russian as she charged past him. Her blade then came down on her left side, chopping off the tip of another lance lunging for her torso. Jeanne next raised back her sword tip in time to bury it in the side of the Russian who had tried to impale her. All this was done as if it was out of long practice, while her horse kept speeding through the

¹² War cry of the French knights during the Hundred Years War.

Russian Lancers. Gordon and his men, even though stunned by her prowess, nonetheless used the path slashed open by Jeanne to burst out of the swirling mass of Russian Lancers. They followed Jeanne's horse as it veered towards the right side of the valley and were able to pull up to her as she slowed down her horse after a few seconds. Gordon was now eyeing with dread the hills to his right, where dozens of Russian guns were dug in. He could not understand why they had not yet started firing on his group but he could however hear heavy rifle fire coming from there. He then saw a number of Russian artillerymen run out of their hilltop positions in apparent panic. His heart jumped with joy when the Russians were followed by hundreds of French cavalrymen in hot pursuit. His whole group cheered wildly at that sight and veered to the right to meet a group of thirty Chasseurs d'Afrique, tough Algerian cavalrymen, that was led by a young French lieutenant. The lieutenant, stopping alongside Gordon, saluted him and addressed him in fair English.

"You and your men were very lucky to get out of there, Captain. Your..."

The Frenchman stopped speaking and stared with disbelief at Jeanne.

"Mon Dieu! Don't tell me that you were part of the charge, mademoiselle!"

"No, Lieutenant." Replied calmly Jeanne while grinning. "I joined my husband after the charge. I can't afford to lose such a nice pair of tight buns, so I went after him and collected him back."

The lieutenant grinned as Gordon's men laughed hard at Jeanne's answer, while Gordon turned red with embarrassment.

"Sergeant-Major Champion," said Gordon in a warning tone, "make sure that the expression 'tight buns' doesn't become a byword in B Troop."

"Yes, sir!" Shouted Champion, barely able to keep a straight face.

They parted with their French escort once they came to the positions held by the Heavy Brigade, with the delighted lieutenant getting a kiss from Jeanne before riding away. A captain of the 4th Dragoon Guards was at hand to greet the returning survivors of the Light Brigade. Shocked by the presence of a woman bearing arms in their group, he nonetheless saluted Gordon politely.

"Do you or any of your...men need medical attention, Captain?"

"I don't believe so, Captain. Do you know how many men from the Light Brigade came back?"

“About half of them so far.” Said cautiously the Guards officer. “Your group seems to be about the last of it, Captain. Lord Paget is waiting near an ambulance wagon behind our lines to collect and reorganize his men.”

“Thank you, Captain. We will report to him immediately.”
After a last exchange of salutes, Gordon led his three men, Jeanne still in tow, towards the Hussars ambulance wagon. Less than 300 men were gathered roughly according to their regiments around it, many without a horse and more than a few sporting bloody bandages. Two carts loaded with wounded men were rolling away when Gordon approached the medical wagon, in front of which Lord Paget stood on his horse. Saluting crisply his colonel, Gordon then reported in a formal manner.

“Captain Gordon Smythe, of B Troop, reporting back with three men and Nurse Smythe, sir.”

“At ease, Captain!” Replied Paget, returning the salute and eyeing Gordon’s small group. He then stared severely at Jeanne, guiding his horse closer to hers.

“Misses Smythe, may I ask what in the blazes you were doing out there?”

“Doing my nurse’s duty, sir: saving lives.” Replied Jeanne politely but firmly.

“With two pistols and a sword, madam?”

“They are meant for my own defense and that of my patients, sir. In fact, I and two of my nurses were attacked by Cossacks while giving first aid to some of our wounded.”

“And you escaped them with the help of Captain Smythe, I presume?”

“Not exactly, sir. I killed the Cossacks, then went after my husband, sir.”

“You killed those Cossacks?” Said Paget, clearly skeptical. “How many of them were there? Two? Three?”

“Eleven... on the first instance, sir.”

Paget, shocked and speechless, looked at Gordon as if to get a second opinion. The latter nodded his head somberly, knowing that this story was bound to get widespread circulation.

“Sir, I didn’t see that fight, but I and my men can testify that my wife rescued us from a large group of Russian cavalymen less than fifty yards from the Don Battery, killing over a dozen Russians in the process.”

Paget, overwhelmed and at a loss about how to handle this, stammered a reply with difficulty.

“Uh, well... It will be all, Nurse Smythe. You may return to your duties.”

“Thank you, sir!”

Returning her salute, Paget let her go before looking at Gordon.

“Captain, do a quick roster of your men. You may want to contact Doctor Farrell for this, as he has the list of wounded men sent back to camp. Dismissed!”

“Sir!”

As Gordon rode towards the gathered survivors of the 8th Hussars, he turned his head to look at James Champion.

“Sergeant-Major, go to the medical wagon and enquire about our wounded there. Take your time if you feel you need to.”

“Thank you, sir.” Replied Champion, a lump in his throat. Trotting to the big wagon and dismounting, he tied his horse to one wheel before entering the rear tent. He found Jeanne Smythe and Sarah hugging each other in the first section. Sarah’s eyes went wide at his sight.

“JAMES! THANK GOD YOU'RE SAFE!”

Throwing herself in his arms, Sarah kissed him frantically for long seconds, with Jeanne going into the second tent section and leaving them alone. The couple finally parted with tears in their eyes.

“I was so scared for you, James.”

“Oh, I was scared enough myself, Sarah. Me, the captain and two more men were about to be done in by a bunch of Cossacks when Lady Jeanne showed up just at the right time. She is one mean pistol shooter, I tell you.”

That got him a surprised look from his wife.

“But, she only told me that she met you and the others on the battlefield.”

James could only nod in respect at that: Jeanne Smythe may be incredibly brave but she was no braggart about it, something to be admired.

“Believe me, Sarah. If anybody deserves a medal for this battle, she should be first in line to get one. Now, if you will excuse me, I’m going to see Doctor Farrell to get the list of our wounded.”

“Let me hug you a while more first, James.” Said Sarah softly. James welcomed her into his arms again, caressing her hair and back to their mutual contentment.

Gordon had finished his roster of B Troop by the time James Champion returned from the medical wagon and handed him a list on a sheet of paper. Gordon read it with

a mix of sadness and relief: it could have been a lot worse. Out of the 41 men of B Troop who had followed him in the charge, thirteen were missing and presumed dead or prisoner, while 21 men had been wounded and were on their way back to the Hussars field hospital. From what he could see, the rest of the brigade had suffered at least as severely if not more than his troop. Lining his seven remaining men, two of which had to ride with other troopers, he then led them at a trot back to camp. He would later learn that, out of the 632 men of the brigade who had charged today, 110 had been killed, 57 had been taken prisoner and 196 had been wounded, with many of the later having to suffer amputations. Also, well over half of the horses of the brigade had died. The Light Brigade was now ineffective as a military formation.

21:14 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

Hesitating for a short moment, William Howard Russell finally decided himself and knocked on the pole near the partition that marked Jeanne Smythe's room. Her response was immediate.

"Come in!"

Pushing open the curtain door, Russell saw Jeanne Smythe sitting at the small table set in one corner of her tiny cubicle. She wore a conventional burgundy and white dress and had obviously cleaned herself up after her action-packed day in the field. Russell then noticed the two revolvers on the table, disassembled for cleaning.

"May I speak with you for a moment, Jeanne?"

"Please, have a seat, William."

"Thank you."

Taking place on the edge of the bed, a real one and not one of those camp cots he found so uncomfortable, Russell took out a notepad and a pencil and smiled at Jeanne.

"Could I ask you a few questions about today, if you don't mind, Jeanne?"

"Fire away." She replied while resuming her weapons cleaning job.

"First of, I would like to say that I was able to observe you in action today and was much impressed by your bravery."

Somehow his compliment only seemed to embarrass her.

“William, please understand that I did what I did to save lives. Also, I didn’t do any more than what all the men of the Light Brigade did today.”

“But, Jeanne, those men were ordered to charge, while you freely chose to go in.”

“Remember that two other women followed me in.” She replied while shaking an index. “They were unarmed while I had my revolvers, sword and carbine. It is them you should praise, not me. They are Margaret Ward and Janet O’Neil, both wives of men of the 8th Hussars.”

Russell smiled and nodded in approval.

“A generous thought, Jeanne. Those two women will certainly be mentioned in my article about this battle. Now, would you mind describing in detail what you did today?”

Jeanne obliged with good grace, speaking for over ten minutes and with Russell asking a number of questions to clarify some points. The journalist had sparkles in his eyes as Jeanne finished telling her story. It involved courage, compassion, romance and dedication to one’s husband, a mix that was sure to inflame the enthusiasm of his readers in London.

“Jeanne, as a last point, could you tell me where and how you learned all those military and fighting skills?”

“I’m afraid not, William.” She said politely but firmly. “There are already too many wild rumors about me around the camp.”

“But, this would be your chance to quash those rumors with the truth, Jeanne.” Jeanne then gave him a sober look, speaking very deliberately.

“Believe me, William: the truth would never be believed by anyone here or in London. I will ask you not to emphasize this aspect of me in your article, William. My charity work in Europe requires me to cross borders many times every year and I wouldn’t want to see myself turned back at a border post because of some wild rumor about me being a government spy.”

“So, you do realize that you being a possible spy is the rumor deemed most plausible by many to explain your military prowess?”

Jeanne sighed audibly, looking discouraged for a moment.

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t...” She said quietly before staring back at the journalist. “William, I have been doing my best for years now to do some good around me and to relieve as much as I can the misery and suffering in this sad world. If I

would have been a man, few would notice my actions, but I am what I am. One way you can help me continue doing my charity work is by avoiding to mention those wild rumors about me in your articles. Hopefully, those rumors will then stay here, in Crimea.”

“That could be an overoptimistic wish, Jeanne.” Cautioned Russell, making her nod.

“I know! Believe me, I know.”

Russell was silent for a moment while eyeing the formidable young woman facing him. The soldiers of the Light Brigade who had met her on the battlefield were positively in awe of her and had told him plenty about her actions of today. Russell then made his mind and smiled to Jeanne.

“Alright, Jeanne, I will keep mum about those rumors. I however can’t guarantee that the few other reporters or even some tourists presently in Crimea will not spread eventually those rumors all the way to London.”

“Thanks, William. I really appreciate this. If you will now excuse me, I wish to clean my revolvers, so that I can go to bed. Today was a tough day.”

“That I can believe, Jeanne. Have a good evening.” Said Russell while starting to open the curtain to leave.

“Good evening to you as well.” Replied Jeanne. Once the reporter was gone, she returned her attention to her cleaning work but couldn’t take her worries completely out of her mind. Too much talking about her was bound to be bad news eventually but she could hardly change the fact that she was an athletic, six foot-tall young woman with abilities well beyond the accepted norm for this century.

More knocks on the pole interrupted her again nine minutes later. This time it was Gordon, looking unsure of himself. After accepting the kiss from Jeanne, he sat on the edge of the bed and looked hesitantly at her.

“Jeanne, I have to ask you something. Believe me when I say that I love you more than anybody else in the world but what I saw today of you was positively incredible. Tell me, in complete truth: who are you really? You not only fought better than most soldiers I know, you also predicted with complete accuracy what happened today, and this a few months ago, when you were still amnesiac.”

Nancy had dreaded this moment for a few weeks already but still wasn’t sure how to face it. It reminded her too much of a similar episode when she had revealed her secret identity to D’Artagnan in order not to lose him. The Time Patrol had chosen to overlook

that incident but it probably wouldn't let a second similar thing pass without severe consequences for her. Her genuine love for Gordon only made her choice more painful.

"Gordon, when we married, we vowed to each other to unite until death do us part, for the better and for the worse. We already lived together some of the better moments of life and we are presently living through some of the worst, thanks to this war. I am only asking you to have confidence in me and not ask me further about this."

The look of doubt and suspicion that appeared then on Gordon's face truly hurt her.

"Jeanne, as your husband, I would be in my right to ask you to show confidence in me and to tell me the truth, unless you want this marriage to be a lie."

Nancy couldn't help tears then come out and had to hide her face with her hands, sobs following the tears quickly. A voice only she could hear then rang inside her brain, coming via her implanted radio. It was the voice of Farah Tolkonen.

"Nancy, this is Farah. Ingrid heard your exchange and initiated a Code Red procedure, then went to warn me. Make Gordon promise silence, then tell him the minimum, basically that you are from the future and that you are stranded in this time period."

"Thanks, Farah." Thought Nancy, relieved by this show of confidence. Wiping away her tears, she looked back sullenly at Gordon, who was still waiting for her answer.

"Gordon, you will first have to promise me that you will never repeat to anyone what I am about to tell you."

After a short hesitation, Gordon nodded his head.

"You have my solemn word, Jeanne."

"Thank you, Gordon. First of, I have not one but two secrets."

"Two secrets?" Said Gordon, stiffening.

"Yes! The first one is probably the biggest: I am from the future."

Despite having expected about anything, Gordon still paled at those words.

"The...the future? How far in the future?"

"I was born in 1982. I was a soldier. Hell, I am still a soldier!"

"Tell me more, Jeanne." Said weakly Gordon, whose head was nearly spinning now. Nancy got up from her chair and sat besides him on the bed, passing an arm around his shoulders before speaking.

"I have been training to be a soldier nearly from childhood, Gordon, apart from receiving an extensive education. It was mostly my own choice but my older sister, who was in the army, did a lot to attract me into a military career. I worked for an

international force that was dedicated to protecting the peace around the World and to help the victims of disasters. Then, I was selected for a special task: to try the prototype of a time travel machine.”

“Why you? You must have been still quite young then.”

“I was sixteen then, Gordon. The reason I was selected had a lot to do with my second secret. You served in India, so I presume that you know about the Hindu concept of incarnation, right?”

“I do. According to the Hindus, the spirit leaves the body at death and goes on to live in another living being. The more meritorious your previous life had been, the higher the form of next life you got to live.”

“Correct. The Hindus are however a bit off, as a human spirit will go inhabit only a human body. People are not supposed to remember their past incarnations and very few even claim to be able to. Well, I am the notable exception, Gordon: I can remember all of my past incarnations, my past lives, languages, skills and experiences. That unique talent got me selected to travel to the past.”

Gordon was quite pale by now, with his mind in utter turmoil. He had come to Jeanne’s room to ask for the truth from her, but he was starting to realize that he had not been ready for the whole truth. Her warmth, touch and smell however reminded him at the same time that he had married this beautiful young woman out of true love for her, a love that she had more than returned up to now. Even if she was from the future, something that would explain many things, he would still keep loving her.

“How far in the past do those souvenirs go, Jeanne? Your name is really Jeanne, right?”

“It is now, Gordon. When I tested for the first time that time machine it failed catastrophically and sank off the coast of the Guadeloupe on its first trip, after bringing me back in time by over a hundred years. I was able to swim ashore but am since then stranded in this century. I assumed the name of Jeanne de Brissac in order to blend in, got married to Pierre D’Orléans and eventually ended up what I am today. To answer your first question, I remember lives extending back 9,000 years in history.”

“Nine thousand years?” Exclaimed a bit too loudly Gordon, making Nancy signal him to lower his voice.

“Not so loud! Others could hear. Yes, 9,000 years. That is why I can speak so many languages and ride and fight so well. I was even one of the fabled Amazons of Greek legends over 2,500 years ago.”

A smile then came for the first time on Gordon's face as he contemplated that fact.

"I am married to an Amazon...I have to say that I like that notion."

"I knew that you would, Gordon." Said Nancy, smiling, before kissing him. She then caressed his cheeks while staring directly into his eyes. "Gordon, I am lost in time, with no way for me to go back to my time and none either for the ones who built the first time machine to find me, as it went badly off course before crashing in the sea. For better or for worse, I am now Jeanne Smythe-D'Orléans, married to a gallant and dashing British cavalry officer, and will stay so until death do us part."

Those last words finished softening Gordon, who then exchanged a long kiss with Jeanne. Letting herself fall on her back on the bed, Jeanne then invited Gordon on top of her. He had his hand under her skirt as he spoke softly to her between kisses.

"Near the Don Battery, as we were charging through those Russian Lancers, you shouted something in French."

"Montjoie?"

"That's it. What did it mean?"

"Montjoie was the war cry of the French knights during the Hundred Years War."

"You were a French knight then?"

"Not exactly." Said Jeanne, a malicious smile appearing on her lips. "I was Joan of Arc."

10:06 (Constantinople Time)

Sunday, October 29, 1854

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

Asking to one of the regimental wives working at the field hospital where he could find Jeanne, Gordon was directed to the operating block, where he found her after looking into two successive operating rooms. He was stunned to see through one of the windows of the third operating room that Jeanne was actually performing surgery under the careful supervision of Doctor Thomas Farrell. Knowing that non-medical personnel intruding during an operation was a big no-no with both Jeanne and Doctor Farrell, Gordon decided to watch and wait outside the operating room. Four minutes later, the patient was taken out of the operating room on one of the 200 rolling gurneys Jeanne had brought by ship, while the surgical team went to change and wash their hands.

Gordon finally could meet Jeanne when she walked out of the post-operating room, her surgical garb already removed. They kissed each other before Gordon spoke, his expression serious.

“I have something to announce to you: Lord Paget is leaving Crimea today, heading for England.”

He saw Jeanne’s face harden at that piece of news.

“Let me guess: Paget had quote ‘urgent private affairs’ unquote to take care of at home and he turned in his commission, which he had purchased in the first place.”

“Correct on all points, Jeanne.” Agreed Gordon, who then stared straight into her eyes. “You do know well the history of this war. Are you sure that you don’t want to tell me more about it?”

She shook her head slowly while keeping eye contact with him.

“I’m sorry, Gordon. The less you know, the less chances there are that history could be affected or rewritten. In fact, my sole presence here in Crimea probably caused a number of minor, insignificant changes to history. Changing the given outcome of a battle would be an altogether much more damaging thing. Again, I’m sorry but I won’t tell you or anyone else more on this subject.”

Gordon was silent for a moment, then kissed her on the lips.

“I understand. Please forget that I asked.”

In the next few days, no less than 38 officers of the Light Brigade, including Captains Fields and McGregor of the 8th Hussars, left Crimea for England under the pretext of ‘urgent private affairs’ to escape the increasingly unpleasant climate and harsh living conditions. All of them had purchased their commissions instead of earning them and now turned them in as the going got rough. The enlisted men had no choice but to stay and endure. This was the cause of much bitterness for Gordon Smythe, who rightly felt betrayed by his fellow officers. On his part, William Howard Russell turned this scandal into one of his most strident journalistic attacks yet on the military aristocracy and its system of privileges and built-in incompetence.

06:02 (Constantinople Time)

Sunday, November 5, 1854

British Army observation camp

Home Ridge Heights, South of Sebastopol

Private Henry Williams, of the 41st Rifle Regiment, was so tired from his 24 hours of trench duty he had returned from late last night that he woke up only after the fourth or fifth gun discharge. Looking groggily around the dark tent, he did not have time to get out from under his blanket before a cannonball flew through the tent and ripped away both of his legs.

On the muddy road leading to the observation camp, the noise of the now raging battle made Janet O'Neil stop her ambulance cart, while Margaret Ward, sitting inside the cart, stuck her head out. As for Jeanne Smythe, she stopped her horse and listened intently to the noises of the battle. Since the first day of November, Jeanne had instituted a daily routine of visiting the frontline trenches held by the British infantry, this with the approval of the commander of the 2nd Division and with the goals of helping troop morale and providing on the spot medical aid. The Russians seemed to have accepted their cart for what it was by now, as no Russian guns had shot at them while they visited the trenches, even though they had to approach in plain sight of the enemy.

"Janet," shouted urgently Jeanne, "head towards the Home Ridge camp as fast as you can."

Janet looked at the thick fog surrounding them, feeling unsure about this.

"But, in this fog, we are liable to lose our way and end up behind enemy lines."

"Then follow me! Lots of our men need our help right now."

Without further objections, Janet urged her horse forward, following Jeanne on her horse. Margaret, still sitting in the back of the cart, took hold of one of their two rifled muskets and handed it to Janet, then grabbed the second one for herself.

The drive through the fog and confusing terrain, with the noises of the battle progressively surrounding them, was nerve-wracking for Janet and Margaret. They could see that Jeanne herself was tense and nervous: she may have been incredibly brave but she was sensible enough to acknowledge fear like anyone else. They finally reached the camp of the 2nd Division to find it totally wrecked, with bodies strewn all around the place. In the fog they could see groups of soldiers as mere silhouettes running around, shouting and fighting each other.

"This place is like a three-ring circus!" Exclaimed Janet O'Neil over the din of the battle, joking to try hiding her fear. Jeanne clenched her teeth at that.

“Yes, but a damn bloody circus! I’m going on foot from here. Keep following with the cart.”

With Jeanne guiding her with hand signals while holding the reins of her horse, Janet drove the cart slowly through the wrecked camp. A whistling bullet made her wince as it passed besides her head.

“Maggie, are you alright?”

“Apart from staining my underwear, yes.” Replied her friend in a shaky voice.

“Then we are in the same boat.”

“Make it three!” Said Jeanne from a few yards in front of them. Jeanne suddenly signaled Janet to stop. The latter immediately understood why at the sight of an incredible scene of carnage now visible through the fog. A Russian shell had exploded in the midst of a packed group of British soldiers, ripping many of them apart and peppering the rest with deadly fragments. Body parts were strewn all over the place and at least a dozen soldiers were either moaning or screaming in pain. Without waiting for Jeanne’s order, Margaret jumped down from the cart, a bag full of bandages in one hand and her rifle slung across her back. Applying the cart’s handbrake, Janet jumped down as well and took a stretcher out of the back of the cart. Both women quickly joined Jeanne besides a sergeant whose left leg was mangled up beyond repair. Jeanne was already applying a garrote just above the shattered mass of flesh and bones.

“Janet, finish fixing this garrote here!” Ordered Jeanne. “Margaret, take care of that corporal over there!”

She then went to an infantry captain whose right shoulder and left leg were covered with blood. The man was still conscious and was clenching his teeth in order not to scream with pain. He looked up with incredulity at Jeanne as she knelt besides him.

“Madam, you shouldn’t be here. It is way too dangerous around here right now.”

“Bunk!” Replied Jeanne while taking out her big hunting knife to cut open his bloody uniform. “We go where the wounded are, mister.”

A shell then exploded nearby, showering them with mud and sending shrapnel flying around them. Jeanne covered the captain with her body to avoid dirt contaminating further his wounds. The man then grabbed the front of her coat, speaking with as much authority as he could.

“Ladies, get out of here now, that’s an order!”

“And who is doing the ordering, sir?” She replied while continuing to give first aid.

“Captain Edward Scot, of B Company, 49th Rifle Regiment. Now, go!”

Jeanne then stared straight into the officer’s eyes.

“Captain, you know the old saying about army wives? They wear one rank higher than that of their husbands. Well, I am Lady Jeanne Smythe, wife of Captain Gordon Smythe of the 8th Hussars. I believe that I thus outrank you, sir. Now shut up and keep still.”

The officer then smiled at her, his voice softening.

“You and your nurses are real angels, Lady Jeanne.”

“Hmm, some would rather call me a bitch, Captain.”

“They can go to Hell!”

“My thought, exactly.”

Edward Scot couldn’t help admire her apparent calm as she quickly and efficiently treated him. Her two nurses also worked diligently under her supervision, preparing and loading up two wounded soldiers in their cart. They were coming back to take Scot as well when he stopped them with an imperative gesture.

“No! Take care of my other men first. I can wait.”

Jeanne looked at him for a moment, then grinned and nodded her head.

“At last: a real officer for a change. Alright, girls, let’s go see this private over there.”

Working for a few minutes on the private while shells and bullets kept flying around, the three women then loaded him on a stretcher and brought him to the cart. After helping sliding and securing the stretcher inside the cart, Jeanne was returning at a run towards Scot when a shell exploded nearby, sending hot fragments all over the place. The cart’s horse then pushed a heart-wrenching squeal and fell down like a rock on its belly, dead. Jeanne stared at the poor beast, horror and sadness on her face.

“YASMINA, NOO!”

Janet and Margaret, already in the cart and ready to leave with their wounded, also looked with horror at their dead horse.

“JEANNE, WHAT DO WE DO NOW?”

Jeanne took only a second to recover her wits and grabbed the reins of her horse, pulling it towards the cart.

“UNHOOK YASMINA, QUICK! WE WILL THEN PUT PEGASUS IN HER PLACE.”

Working frantically, the three women had the dead horse replaced by Pegasus and harnessed in minutes. Before the cart left, Jeanne went to Pegasus and patted its head while speaking softly in its left ear.

“Pegasus, I am counting on you to bring back the cart to the hospital at the best speed.”

She then kissed its head and slapped its neck, prompting the horse into launching into full gallop, the cart bumping and rolling wildly behind it. Edward Scot looked at her with wonderment when Jeanne returned to his side.

“Why did you stay?”

That got him a grim look from Jeanne.

“Because your other wounded men will bleed to death if not treated immediately. Now keep quiet and save your strength.”

As she got busy around him, Scot tried to gauge which way the battle around them was going. With the fog still thick and with gunpowder smoke further cutting down visibility, the fighting was as confused and chaotic as ever. Nearby shouts in Russian suddenly made both him and Jeanne tense up and look eastward. A group of about twenty soldiers in gray overcoats and caps then appeared through the fog, less than thirty yards away. Scot watched them with rage and horror as they methodically bayoneted any British soldier that still moved as they advanced towards him. A nearby pistol shot then made him turn his head in time to see Jeanne Smythe methodically empty one of her revolvers on the Russians. She switched to her second revolver as the surviving Russians either charged her with bayonets held forward or fired their old fashioned muskets at her. He saw her left leg buckle when a musket ball hit her in the upper leg, making her scream with pain. She however clenched her teeth and kept firing, dropping five more Russians before holstering back her now empty revolver and drawing her sword and her hunting knife. Six Russian infantrymen ganged up on her but they went at it in a disorderly manner, getting in each other's way. As Scot drew his own pistol with difficulty, he watched her cut down three Russians before a bayonet went through her left arm. Screaming with pain, she nonetheless ran through the Russian who had impaled her arm, while parrying another bayonet with her knife. Scot then shot one of the two last Russians with his pistol, while a wounded corporal managed to raise his rifle and kill the last Russian. With a supreme effort, Jeanne detached the bayonet pinning her left arm from its musket, then crawled to Scot, her face reflecting excruciating pain.

“Sorry...about the interruption...Captain.” She said haltingly. She then put down her sword and drew again one of her revolvers, putting it on Scot’s belly before opening a small leather pouch on her leather equipment vest. Taking out of it a small object, she unwrapped the waxed paper around it, revealing a spare revolver cylinder, fully loaded. With agony on her face, she replaced the empty cylinder of her revolver with the full one, then pocketed back the empty one. Her next move was to take a bandage out of another pouch and use it as a garrote on her wounded leg. She then poured in succession water and alcohol on her leg and arm wounds while clenching her teeth. She did not however remove the bayonet still stuck in her left arm. Taking hold of her loaded revolver, she smiled weakly at Scot.

“Who do you think will reach us first now, Captain? The Russians, the British or the French? I’m rich, so I’m not scared of placing a bet. What do you say?”

“I’ll bet on the British.” He replied, conquered by her courage.

“And I go for the French.”

As she took her breath, two bullets zipped by them. Raising her revolver with evident effort, she shot in succession four approaching Russian soldiers, then grinned at Scot.

“It seems that we both lost, Captain.”

He couldn’t help raise his left hand and caress her long, silky black hair. She stared at him but didn’t stop him. More soldiers appeared then, this time from the West. They wore baggy red trousers and were led by a general on horseback shouting in a language Scot didn’t recognize. Jeanne’s face immediately reflected joy and she shouted in the same language, drawing enthusiastic shouts from the soldiers now sprinting past them. She then looked back at Scot, grinning.

“French Zouaves, led by General Bosquet in person. We’re saved!”

Without thinking, Scot then impulsively kissed her on the mouth. The slap he expected never came.

17:08 (Constantinople Time)

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

One look at the expression on Captain Gordon Smythe’s face, charging towards the female patients ward, convinced quickly Margaret Ward to get out of his way. The Hussars officer did stop briefly however to ask one question anxiously.

“How is she, Maggie?”

“Doctor Farrell says that she will be alright, Captain. They took out the musket ball from her left leg and the bayonet didn't touch the bone or nerves of her left arm. She got out of surgery two hours ago and is resting. You can see her for a short while but try not to tire her.”

“I will be careful.” Said Gordon softly. He then smiled tenderly at the nurse. “By the way, what you and Misses O'Neil did with Jeanne this morning was admirable. Well done, Maggie!”

“I...thank you, Captain.” Replied the brunette, blushing. She then walked away, a tray with bandages and scissors in her hands. Now alone in the corridor, Gordon knocked lightly on the framed entrance of the female patients ward, waiting for Jeanne's reply before entering. Jeanne was conscious but looked groggy as she lay half sitting in one the eight beds of the ward. Her bandaged left arm was in a sling but he couldn't see her left leg with the blanket and linen sheet covering her lower body. Taking a chair from one corner of the ward, Gordon put it besides her bed and sat on it, looking tenderly at his wife.

“You can't imagine how proud I am of you, Jeanne. What you did was heroic.”

“But, I only defended myself, Gordon.” She protested weakly. He shook his head vehemently then.

“You and your two nurses decided to go in on your own, while the battle was at its worst. Some would call that foolhardy but in truth the quick care you provided saved at least five men. That does not count the wounded that would have been bayoneted by the Russians you killed. Captain Scot, whose men you cared for and protected, has officially petitioned Lord Raglan through his commanding general so that you and your two nurses be decorated for your acts. The French high command is also said to be quite fond of you.”

“The French high command? Why?”

“Come on, Jeanne! You are a French woman after all, and one that I am told is quite famous in France already. Mister Russell spoke to a French journalist this afternoon and learned that the French Army public affairs officials intend to turn you into a national heroine.”

That made Jeanne roll her eyes.

“God! As if I needed that!”

Her expression then changed and she took hold of his left hand while smiling.

“Well, I should tell you one piece of news myself: I believe that I’m pregnant.”

“Really?” Said Gordon, suddenly excited. “Are you sure?”

“Not completely, but I should know for sure in two weeks. If I miss my menstruations again...”

“But that’s fantastic!” Said Gordon before kissing her passionately. Sitting back down, he then wiggled an index at her. “You will have to promise me to take it easy from now on, Jeanne: you shouldn’t put our baby at risk.”

She sighed while looking at her left arm.

“Do I really have a choice right now?”

Three days later, General Bosquet put around Jeanne’s neck the ribbon of the French medal of Commander of the Legion of Honor, for repeated acts of bravery on the battlefield that had brought great honor to France. Gordon shamelessly cried tears of pride as Jeanne was congratulated in her hospital bed by the senior officers present.

18:39 (Constantinople Time)

Monday, December 25, 1854

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

“Are you sure that you are ready to go out like this, Jeanne?”

Jeanne smiled to Janet O’Neil as she climbed into the front of the ambulance cart. Janet noticed then how slow and deliberate Jeanne’s movements were still compared to normal.

“Janet, I have been inactive for too long already. I may not be up to running around yet but I certainly can ride a cart and deliver hot soup to the forward troops on Christmas Day. Let me just sit in the back in order to watch our pot of soup and then we will be able to drive to the forward trenches.”

Jeanne, wearing like Janet thick woolen winter clothes to protect herself from the bitter cold and cutting wind of Crimea, sat inside the cart, protected partly from the wind by the canvas top. With her back to the right side of the cart, she sat on one of the two platforms meant to hold a stretcher. Next to her in the back of the cart was a large, deep square steel basin with wooden handles. Inside that basin sat a large stainless steel pot full of hot chicken broth soup, its top closed by a steel lid held in place by clamps. Hot

coals from one of the hospital stoves had just been shoveled inside the basin to surround the base of the pot and keep it hot for a few hours. The coals also helped warm up the inside of the cart, making Jeanne feel guilty about leaving Janet to freeze in the driver's seat. Someone however had to watch the pot and prevent it from tipping and spilling its precious content if they struck a really nasty rut.

"You may start now, Janet!"

"YAAH, PEGASUS!" Shouted Janet as a reply, urging their horse forward. Sometimes that horse spooked Janet, as when it had pulled the cart all the way to the hospital in thick fog without guidance on the day when Jeanne had been wounded. It however was a very intelligent and strong beast and had proved its worth in gold on many thankless jobs that would have killed lesser horses in the harsh local climate. Pegasus dutifully started trotting forward, taking the snow-covered dirt road leading to the heights where the British trench works were facing the besieged city of Sebastopol.

Going at the merry, tireless trot typical of Pegasus, the cart arrived in half a hour on Home Ridge Height, where the British Army observation camp was, crossing it and going north on the trail leading to the forward trenches. Jeanne stuck her head out of the canvas cover then and looked at Janet, whose face had turned red from the cold wind.

"Janet, let me take the reins for a while and come warm yourself inside. No sense in waiting until you are frozen stiff."

"Can't say that I find your idea stupid, Jeanne." Replied Janet, who then thankfully switched places with Jeanne. She sighed with relief as she took her mitts off and warmed her hands and face over the hot coals in the basin.

"God, how could our officers force our men to spend 24 straight hours at a time sitting in snow-covered trenches, with no shelters or hot food?"

"Easy!" Replied Jeanne from the driver's bench. "Take an uncaring, incompetent aristocrat, let him stay in a warm tent or hut with hot tea and food and give him brave but low class men to command from afar."

Janet could only reflect bitterly on this. Cases of horrible frostbites among frontline soldiers were getting more and more numerous, with many men freezing to death in the trenches while wearing the tattered remains of the same uniforms in which they had landed in the Fall in Crimea. A quantity of winter clothes had been received in Balaklava harbor but were still lying at quayside in the snow and mud, awaiting a releasing

signature from Commissary General Filder, who seemed in no hurry to do so. Jeanne had stated not long ago that she was going to kill Filder one fine day and Janet, like many in the British Army, couldn't wait to see that day arrive.

A shouted challenge from a British sentry ten minutes later told Janet that they were now at the forward trenches. Jeanne answered calmly the soldier, whose silhouette was barely visible ahead in the dark and falling snow.

"Lady Jeanne Smythe, 8th Hussars ambulance. We are bringing hot soup to the men in the trenches."

"Hot soup? Thank God for bringing you here, madam!"

"Do you have a cup or mess tin with you, soldier?"

"Uh, no." Said sheepishly the man, who had approached the front of the cart and now stood less than two feet from it. Jeanne nodded her head in understanding: most British infantry soldiers in Crimea now barely had any personal kit left with them, apart from having no spare uniforms to wear.

"Don't worry: we brought some spare cups with us." She said to the soldier before turning her head around. "Janet, pass me a cup full of soup."

A cup of steaming broth soon was passed to her by Janet, with Jeanne then handing over the cup to the freezing soldier, who smelled with obvious content the rich soup while warming his hands on the cup. A first sip of the soup brought a big smile on the face of the young soldier, who could not be older than 22.

"May God bless you, madam."

"The pleasure is ours, Private. Keep the cup. Merry Christmas!"

Jeanne then urged Pegasus forward and had the cart advance another hundred yards until the trench lines themselves made any more advance impossible. She could now see dozens of silhouettes sitting or walking back and forth in the wide trench. Passing her head inside the canvas-covered back, she spoke quickly to Janet, still sitting besides the pot of soup.

"I am going to pass the word to the soldiers here to come to the cart for some soup. Give me a full cup with cover so that I can go give it to the forward sentry."

"But, you're not going alone like this in the no-mans-land, are you?"

"Do you have two revolvers and a sword with you, Janet?"

"Uh, no."

"Then pass me a full cup."

Shaking her head at Jeanne's obstinacy, Janet filled a cup and gave it to her after putting a close fitting lid on it.

"Please be careful, Jeanne."

"I always am, Janet."

Jeanne then stepped down from the cart, careful not to spill the cup of soup in her hands. Going down into the trench, she went to the nearest group of British soldiers, who were shivering while sitting tightly together in order to try to keep warm.

"Is there an officer or a senior NCO around?"

One man who had been pacing around some fifteen yards away then answered her while walking towards her. His tone was severe.

"I'm Warrant Belford, of the 31st Rifles. What are you doing here in the advanced trenches, madam?"

"Delivering hot soup, Warrant. I'm Lady Jeanne Smythe, from the 8th Hussars field ambulance. My cart is parked over there, with one nurse ready to distribute cups of hot soup. We also have spare cups for the men who have no tins or mugs with them. Could you arrange for your men to take turns to go get their soup?"

The warrant's expression then softened up considerably. Jeanne's name was by now widely respected around the British Army Corps in Crimea.

"In that case, I will direct my men to your cart with pleasure. Just give me a minute to pass the word around."

The warrant was true to his word, making half of his men line up in a disciplined manner at the cart to get their soup. As soon as those men had returned with full cups, the other half was sent to the cart. One soldier also went out of the trench to go replace temporarily the lonely soldier on forward watch that stood guard between the trench and the nearby Russian Redan Bastion. Only when the forward sentry had showed up and got his soup did Warrant Belford go himself for some soup, something that earned him a kiss on the cheek from Jeanne.

"Bless you, Warrant, for caring for your men."

"And bless you, madam, for your courage and generosity." Replied the moved NCO. While he was gone to the cart, Jeanne took a few minutes to go to each soldier present and ask him how his feet and hands felt, checking for possible cases of frostbites. One soldier who complained of not feeling his feet anymore was brought to the cart for further examination, with the permission of Warrant Belford. Making the man

climb in the back of the cart, Jeanne was alarmed at the way the man stepped inside, his moves stiff and clumsy. While Jeanne stood just outside of the cart and watched, Janet had the man remove his boots. That was when both women realized that the man's boots were full of holes, like his rotting wool socks.

"My God!" Exclaimed Janet, horrified and scandalized. "How could they send you to do guard duty with such poor boots?"

"There are no spare boots available, madam." Explained in a disillusioned tone the soldier. Shaking her head angrily, Jeanne got inside as well and inspected the man's feet, finding them frigid and insensitive to touch.

"A couple more hours out there and you would have lost both feet, Corporal. I'm going to get your warrant."

Jeanne was back with Warrant Belford within minutes, letting then the NCO see his man's feet for himself. The warrant shook his head sadly on feeling the soldier's feet.

"I'm afraid that you are right, madam. What can you do for him?"

"I will bring him to the 8th Hussars hospital for treatment. My doctor will notify your regimental surgeon tomorrow. With good care, your man could probably return to duty in a few days."

"That sounds correct to me, madam." Said Belford before looking at his man. "Behave while at the hospital, Corporal Austin, and don't harass the nurses there."

"Me, Warrant? Harass all those pretty nurses?"

"Exactly!" Replied Belford as both Janet and Jeanne giggled at the exchange. Once the warrant was gone, Janet wrapped a warm blanket around the corporal's feet, legs and torso while Jeanne got back at the reins of the cart. They then continued their tour of the advance trench, distributing their soup until they ran out of it and also collecting in the process three more men suffering from frostbites. Two other men that Jeanne saw in the trench along their way were already frozen to death and beyond help by the time she got to them.

12:11 (Constantinople Time)

Tuesday, December 26, 1854

Officers' Mess, British Army field headquarters

Balaklava, Crimea

Commissary General Filder was sitting at a table of the Officers' Mess dining room, established in a building close to the harbor in Balaklava, and enjoying his lunch of roasted chicken and boiled potatoes. Concentrated on eating a chicken leg and having a rather poor hearing because of his age, he didn't notice the fact that the other patrons in the dining room had suddenly gone quiet and were all looking towards the entrance of the dining room. A pair of worn and battered army boots slamming on the table in front of him returned Filder to reality, making his heart jump from the fright. A pair of thick sheepskin boots were then slammed on the table next to the tattered summer boots as Filder recognized with dread the tall woman now facing him with murder in her eyes: it was none other than Lady Jeanne Smythe, who lost no time in addressing him in a voice full of anger and contempt, speaking loudly enough for all to hear her.

"Mister Filder, I want you to take a good look at this pair of summer boots in front of you. I took them off a British soldier who nearly lost both of his feet to frostbites last night while standing guard in the advance trench facing Sebastopol. You will notice that both boots are sporting holes in their soles, apart from having one sole barely holding on by a few stitches. Yet, that soldier could not get any spare boots from the bunch of incompetents at your Commissariat."

"Now wait a minute, madam!" Started to object Filder while getting up from his chair. Jeanne Smythe at once pushed him back down on his chair and raised her voice to a near shout.

"YOU LISTEN, MISTER! YOU SEE THOSE NICE, WARM SHEEPSKIN BOOTS? I TOOK THEM FROM A SHIPMENT OF A FEW THOUSANDS SIMILAR WINTER BOOTS THAT HAVE BEEN ROTTING IN THE MUD AND SNOW AT QUAYSIDE HERE IN BALAKLAVA FOR OVER A MONTH NOW. IT SEEMS THAT YOU HAVE BEEN TOO BUSY BARFING OUT ON HOT FOOD TO FIND EVEN A MINUTE TO SIGN FOR THE RELEASE AND DISTRIBUTION OF THOSE BOOTS AND OTHER WINTER GEAR, GEAR THAT COULD HAVE SAVED THE LIVES OF HUNDREDS OF OUR SOLDIERS WHO DIED OF COLD IN THE TRENCHES! YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW MANY FEET WE HAD TO AMPUTATE AT THE HUSSARS HOSPITAL JUST FOR THE LAST WEEK? TRY SEVENTEEN, MISTER!"

Jeanne Smythe then straightened up and grabbed the pair of winter boots while still staring hard at Filder.

“I will now let you finish your roast chicken and potatoes with butter, so that you can hopefully find time after lunch to finally release for distribution those winter clothes and boots. Oh, by the way, I brought you a special treat for dessert.”

She threw down a rolled handkerchief that contained something, then left the dining room with the pair of winter boots. Totally humiliated and intimidated by now, Filder could only stare with apprehension at the rolled handkerchief that had landed in the middle of his plate of food, unable to gather the courage to check what was in it. The Aide-de-Camp of Lord Raglan, who had been dining at a table nearby with his wife and another staff officer, then approached Filder and, after a short hesitation, opened the handkerchief. Filder bent over at once and threw up violently at the sight of the three blackened human toes inside the handkerchief. It took him nearly a minute to regain his composure. He then looked angrily at Lord Raglan’s ADC, who had rolled back the handkerchief and taken it out of Filder’s plate.

“That damn woman should be flogged publicly for such an affront. I will personally complain about this to Lord Raglan.”

The ADC, a colonel, gave him a most unfriendly look in return.

“Mister Filder, don’t you know that the troops widely call Lady Jeanne ‘The Angel of Balaklava’? You will not find a single soldier in this army ready or willing to flog such a woman. Besides, doing such a thing would probably bring General Bosquet at a gallop to challenge you to a duel, sir.”

Filder, who was about to protest further, clamed up at those last words: French General Bosquet was renown as a true fighting general and as a first rate duelist. He was also said to be in most friendly, albeit correct, terms with Jeanne Smythe.

The story of Filder’s public humiliation took less than a day to reach all the British Army camps around Sebastopol and Balaklava. Within two days, all the British infantrymen serving in the trenches were laughing hard about it. Despite of this, or rather as a spite for the affront against him, Filder still managed to take another two months to have the winter gear distributed to the troops, by which time it was too late to be of much good. On his part, William Howard Russell didn’t waste that golden opportunity to write yet another incendiary article for his readers in London about the ineptitude of the British supply system and the uncaring attitude of Filder and of his Commissariat Department.

09:51 (London Time)

Tuesday, January 23, 1855

House of Commons, Westminster

London, England

“ORDER! ORDER, PLEASE!” Shouted the Speaker of the House of Commons in order to be heard over the din of angry exchanges and insults flying between the members of the ruling party and those of the opposition. “THE FLOOR IS OPEN TO THE HONORABLE MEMBER FOR SHEFFIELD.”

John Arthur Roebuck, Deputy for the County of Sheffield and member of the Radical Party, got up and, ignoring the few catcalls coming from the ranks of the ruling Conservative Party, started speaking in a strong voice.

“Mister Speaker, gentlemen, we have heard plenty in the last few weeks and months about the appalling conditions under which our brave soldiers and sailors are fighting in Crimea. We have already heard too many tales of ineptitude, gross incompetence and utter negligence shown by senior officers and bureaucrats towards our beleaguered fighting men. We simply cannot allow such ineptitude and waste of human lives to continue. I thus propose that this House forms at once a select committee that would go to the Crimea to inquire into the conditions of the army before the city of Sebastopol, so that such disgrace could be put to an end.”

Roebuck then sat back as a short silence followed: his proposal clearly amounted to a motion of non-confidence in the government of Lord Aberdeen. The Speaker of the House then rose from his chair.

“WE HAVE A MOTION TO FORM A SELECT COMMITTEE TO INQUIRE INTO THE CONDITIONS OF OUR ARMY IN CRIMEA. DO I HAVE SOMEONE TO SECOND THAT MOTION?”

“I SECOND THE MOTION!” Shouted at once a Liberal Party member. The Speaker now had no choice but to conduct a vote on the proposed motion. Going through the established procedures for such votes took nearly half a hour. When the result was announced, the House dissolved into nervous laughter: the government of Lord Aberdeen had just been soundly defeated!

13:50 (Constantinople Time)**Friday, March 9, 1855****Balaklava harbor, Crimea**

To Roger Fenton's immense relief, his precious photographic van was put down intact on the wharf by the ship's steam-powered crane. His big horse was already on the quay with him, so he was able at once to tie it to his wagon. Fenton was about to get on his wagon to drive it off the wharf when the strangest wagon he had ever seen arrived at a trot, preceded by a light, two-wheeled cart and a woman on horseback. Fenton's heart jumped at once at the sight of the woman and of the cart, which bore on its side the inscription 'AMBULANCE': That woman on horseback had to be the famous Lady Jeanne Smythe. Realizing that his wagon was in the way on the wharf, Fenton got on it and urged his horse forward. He rolled for only a few dozen yards, in order to free the wharf, then stopped his wagon and applied the handbrake before jumping down and running to the back of his van to take out his camera. When he emerged from his van with his heavy, tripod-mounted camera, wounded and sick men were being taken out of the big medical wagon and of the ambulance cart, with Lady Jeanne Smythe actually helping to carry the patients on stretchers aboard the ship that had brought Fenton. Setting his camera up on the wharf, he waited until Lady Smythe, dressed in a dark red skirt, wool jacket and high boots, was approaching him while carrying a stretcher with the help of a sailor.

"Could you hold the pause for a second, please?"

Both the woman and the sailor froze where they were long enough for Fenton to activate his magnesium flash and take a picture. While the sailor nearly jumped back from the surprise the flash gave him, the woman simply smiled afterwards and spoke quickly to Fenton as she resumed her walk and passed besides him with her loaded stretcher.

"I assume that you are not one of those 'Traveling Gentlemen' from Europe, sir."

"Roger Fenton's the name, madam. I'm a professional photographer. You must be Lady Jeanne Smythe."

"What was your first clue?" She said with a grin before walking up the boarding ramp. She was back on the wharf a few minutes later, carrying her now empty stretcher, and came straight to Fenton to shake his hand.

"Welcome to Balaklava, Mister Fenton. Do you have a place to stay tonight?"

“Uh, not yet, Lady Jeanne. I however heard about an establishment near the harbor called the British Hotel. Do you know it?”

“I do, sir.” She replied with a smile. “My friend Mary Seacole runs it. If you want I can guide you to it once I am finished here.”

“You are too kind, Lady Jeanne.”

“Please, drop the Lady thing and just call me Jeanne. I am a very liberal woman.”

“As you wish, Jeanne.”

Roger Fenton then waited patiently for all the patients to be carried aboard the steam ship, putting back his camera inside his van in the meantime. He was ready to roll when the medical wagon and cart left the harbor and followed Lady Jeanne along a dirt road paralleled by a railroad track under construction.

A kilometer and a half down the road, they arrived at a large tent camp apparently occupied by cavalry units. In one corner of the camp, by the side of the road, was also a large tent complex. Above the main entrance was a large sign proclaiming it to be the field hospital of the 8th Hussars Regiment. While the medical wagon and cart went to park inside a long tent facing the hospital, Jeanne Smythe kept riding down the road, guiding Fenton further on. Another two kilometers further down the road, they left it and took a trail that led up a small hill, on top of which were a few buildings, most of which looked dilapidated. Jeanne Smythe finally stopped her horse and jumped down in front of the biggest of the buildings, which seems to have been the residence of someone affluent. Roger Fenton parked his photographic van near a corner of the building and tied his horse to a pole, then joined Jeanne near the main entrance. From the noises coming from the inside of the building it appeared occupied, while three British officers walked out as Roger and Jeanne were about to go in. Jeanne spoke to him while entering the building ahead of Roger.

“Mary Seacole is from the West Indies and came to Crimea by her own means, which were quite limited actually, to do what she could to help our neglected soldiers. She helped the wounded and sick more than once and is a very kind, motherly type woman. She set up this establishment only a few weeks ago. It has a canteen for the troops, a British club room and a few visitors rooms. You will like Mary: she has a heart of gold and everybody here calls her ‘Mother’.”

“Sounds like a fascinating person to me, Jeanne.”

“She is, Mister Fenton.”

As she spoke they entered a large vestibule with a wide staircase leading to the upper floor. Jeanne then went to a door to the right and led Roger into a sort of hall furnished with tables and chairs and occupied by a mixed crowd of over a dozen men in uniform, with also three women present. A portly woman in her late thirties with dark brown skin and braided hair smiled on seeing Jeanne and motioned to her from behind a service counter. Jeanne went to her at once and, stopping near the counter, presented Roger to the woman.

“Mary, this is Roger Fenton, a professional photographer who just arrived from England with his photo van. Mister Fenton, this is Mary Seacole, everybody’s friend here.”

“Pleased to meet you, madam.” Said Roger while shaking hands with the buxom woman. Mary Seacole in turn smiled gently to him.

“Welcome to my establishment, Mister Fenton. A photographer will indeed be nice to have around Crimea, so that the British public sees in what conditions our brave soldiers have to fight. I suppose that you will need a room?”

“Indeed, madam, that is if you still have one available.”

“I do have a couple of rooms left unoccupied, Mister Fenton.” Said Mary before looking at Jeanne. “I will take good care of him, Jeanne. Thanks for bringing him here.”

“My pleasure, Mary.”

The noise from heavy guns firing in the distance, which had been going on all the while at intervals, suddenly redoubled, making Jeanne turn her head towards a window facing Sebastopol. Her face now reflected preoccupation.

“It seems that the artillery duel with the Russians is heating up. Men will be in need of help out there. If you will excuse me, Mister Fenton.”

Jeanne then walked out at a quick step, leaving Fenton with Mary Seacole.

“Quite an extraordinary woman, I would say.” Said Fenton while watching Jeanne go, making Mary Seacole nod somberly her head.

“The best I have ever seen, Mister Fenton. Her courage is only equaled by her compassion and care. I am however afraid that many in England will dismiss or badmouth her for what they consider unwomanly actions by her.”

Roger Fenton could only nod at that. In his visits to various gentlemen’s clubs in London, he had heard often enough haughty aristocrats and businessmen talk with contempt and even indignation about Jeanne Smythe not clinging to what was

considered proper for a woman to do. Many English ladies also spoke badly of her, feigning scandal at her habit of wearing military style clothes and carrying weapons. The hypocrisy of it all had actually disgusted him, especially when coming from vain people who cared more about the next ball or social reunion than about the fate of the thousands of British soldiers suffering and dying in the name of England in Crimea.

14:35 (Constantinople Time)

Thursday, May 17, 1855

8th Hussars lines

Kadikoi, Crimea

Lord George Paget, freshly arrived from England, stopped his horse as he entered the lines of his regiment, hesitant and full of doubts. After returning to England following the battle of Balaklava, all of his former acquaintances and friends had snubbed him at his London club, knowing why he was back while his soldiers had to stay in Crimea. Paget had finally been shamed into taking back his commission and sailing back to Crimea. He was however unsure how his former subalterns and men would greet him. They had after all a lot of good reasons to despise him. However, the hard lesson this whole sorry episode had taught him had sunk into Paget: commanding men in war was a privilege that should be earned and not bought. Now, he could only hope that his men would forgive him and give him a chance to prove himself. Seeing a patrol of Hussars that was seemingly returning from the frontlines, Paget urged his horse at a trot to meet his men. Captain Gordon Smythe, tired and covered with dust and dirt, was the officer in charge of the patrol. Paget returned Smythe's salute, which had been less than crisp.

"Captain, I would like to have the whole regiment lined up in our parade ground by five O'clock, before supper. I will have news to pass then."

"The whole regiment, sir? What about our ambulance staff? Do they have to attend as well?"

"Yes! I have something for them as well."

"Very well, sir. I will inform Major Henry at once."

Then, without welcoming him back, Gordon Smythe saluted Paget and galloped away with his patrol. Paget felt bitter at that but could not blame Smythe for his attitude, as he

knew that he deserved the cold shoulder treatment he was probably going to get from all of his subordinates.

Paget next went to the stables sheltering the horses of his regiment. Put up by Lady Jeanne's construction crew after the completion of both the unit's field hospital and personnel barracks, the long assembly of marquee tents was the envy of the other British cavalry regiments in Crimea. Compared to the warm, well stocked stables of the 8th Hussars, the other cavalry regiments had to let their horses survive outdoors during the past winter and had as a consequence lost the great majority of their horses to cold and starvation. Only now were replacement horses starting to arrive in significant numbers by ship, along with the hundreds of new soldiers and officers needed to replenish the sadly depleted ranks of the British corps. A trooper came to him at once with a limp in his left leg and grabbed the reins of his horse, saluting Paget at the same time.

"Good day, sir! Let me take care of your horse, sir. We have plenty of feed grain and clean water for it here, sir."

Seeing a number of other troopers at work in the barn, all with some apparent handicap or physical weakness, Paget nodded to the soldier.

"I see many lame troopers here, Corporal. Are they all on light duties?"

"Yes, sir! The men who have recovered enough at the field hospital but who are still unfit for full battlefield duties are assigned as a routine to the regimental stables, sir. This way we can still be useful and our horses get pampered, if I may say so, sir."

"A sensible policy indeed, Corporal. Do you know where the quarters for the regimental commander would be?"

The trooper kept a neutral face then, not showing his inner thoughts at those last words.

"Your quarters are in the regimental command post barrack, sir, along with those of Major Henry. The command post is marked with a large sign above its entrance and is the first barrack in our regimental lines, sir."

"Thank you, Corporal. Carry on!"

Leaving the barn on foot while carrying himself his two pieces of luggage, Paget walked to the regimental command post, which was effectively easy to identify. Entering the wooden hut, Paget found Major Henry giving directives to a young cornet¹³. Both came

¹³ Cornet: Lowest officer's rank in the British Army of that time.

to attention when Paget entered the command room, a large space with a few chairs and tables along the walls and with a large map board hooked to a wall.

“At ease, gentlemen.” Said at once Paget. Both Henry and the cornet relaxed their position, with the former greeting his old commander in a neutral, cautious voice.

“Welcome back to Kadikoi, sir. Are you taking back command of the regiment, sir?”

“I am, Major. I want to address the whole regiment at five O’clock.”

“Captain Smythe informed me about that, sir. I was sending Cornet Brown to pass the word around to the men. Uh, about the personnel of our field hospital, some may not be able to attend, as they cannot abandon their patients to themselves even for short periods of time, sir.”

“How many patients are there in our hospital, Major?” Asked Paget out of pure curiosity. Henry had to think about that for a moment before answering.

“About 130, sir. Men from many other regiments are treated at our field hospital because of its superior level of medical care.”

“Then, tell Doctor Farrell that he can send only those whom he can spare. If he could manage to have Lady Jeanne Smythe and Misses Ward and O’Neil attend the parade, I would appreciate it a lot.”

“Understood, sir. I will pass the word personally to Doctor Farrell. By the way, sir, the commander’s room is still unoccupied. It is the door on the left in the back of this room, sir.”

“Thank you, Major. I will unpack my things while you have the word passed around.”

“Yes sir! Cornet Brown, help Lord Paget with his luggage before going out.”

“Yes sir!” Replied the young man, actually a mere teenager who still didn’t need to shave every day. Brown grabbed both of Paget’s bags and carried them, letting Paget lead the way and open the door of the commander’s room. Paget was agreeably surprised by what he saw: there was a real bed in one corner, a nightstand, a work desk, an easy chair and a locker. There was even a small wood stove inside the room, sitting on a thin iron plate laid on the wooden floor. Dismissing the young cornet, Paget then closed the door behind him and started unpacking.

Two hours later, Paget left his room, dressed in his best uniform and carrying a large, flat wooden box in his hands. Again, Cornet Brown went to his help and carried

the box for him out and to the regimental parade ground, where about seventy men and officers were lined up. To Paget's satisfaction, Lady Jeanne was present with Misses Ward and O'Neil and Doctor Farrell on the side of the parade ground. Paget then noticed with some surprise the bulging belly evident in Jeanne Smythe. He then gallantly saluted her, to which she bowed her head in acknowledgement. Walking to a position facing his pitifully small regiment, Paget stopped at attention fifteen yards in front of his men, then spoke in a strong voice.

"Men of the 8th Hussars! I am here to announce two things. First, I am resuming command of this regiment as of this moment. I fully realize that I failed you all when I left you last November, and for this I am going to feel personal shame to my dying day. I can only promise you that I will not fail you again. The second thing I want to announce is that Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, has authorized the release of a campaign medal with battle clasps for the war in Crimea. Before leaving England, I collected all the medals owed to members of this regiment and brought them with me. I will now have the honor and pleasure to distribute them to you."

Paget then walked to the right flank of the line of men, followed by Cornet Brown with his wooden box, and started distributing Crimea War medals with their pale blue and yellow ribbons and their silver battle clasps. Pining each medal personally on the chests of each of his surviving men and handing them as well the battle clasps they were entitled to, Paget had finished going through the ranks in less than a hour. He then walked to the four members of the regimental field hospital present on the sidelines, stopping first in front of Doctor Thomas Farrell. He smiled warmly while pinning a campaign medal on the chest of the young surgeon.

"Doctor, I remember clearly the moment when I saw you and your nurses standing ready by your medical wagon as I and the survivors of the Light Brigade were galloping back from charging those Russian guns. The sight of seeing you and your intrepid staff fortified our hearts then. This campaign medal, with a clasp for the battle of Balaklava, has been amply earned by you, Doctor."

"Thank you, Milord." Could only say Farrell, as timid as ever. Paget next stepped in front on Jeanne Smythe. He knew from London newspaper articles about her Légion d'Honneur but still couldn't help stare at the French medal, hanging from its scarlet neck ribbon. He then looked up in the green eyes of Jeanne, who stared back at him. Paget then spoke in a near whisper to her.

"I sincerely hope that you will forgive me for fleeing the way I did in November, Lady Jeanne. It would mean a lot to me, truly."

Jeanne's eyes then softened noticeably.

"A fault acknowledged is a fault forgiven, Milord."

"Thank you, Lady Jeanne." Said Paget before raising his voice back to normal. "For your incredible courage and dedication to our wounded men on the battlefield, you deserve clearly much more than this simple campaign medal with clasps for the battles of the Alma, Balaklava and Inkerman. I can however tell you that I personally pushed for higher awards for both you and your two field nurses, Misses Ward and O'Neil. I can also tell you that it looks like my recommendations were listened to with sympathetic ears in London."

"My true reward was to be able to save our wounded men, Milord. Will you be visiting the hospital afterwards to give medals to the patients from our regiment, Milord?"

"I certainly will, Lady Jeanne. They paid a high enough price already for those medals."

Paget next gave medals to Margaret Ward and Janet O'Neil, who were both beaming with pride as he pinned the medals to their nurse's aprons. Before walking away, Paget had a last look at the three women lined in front of him.

"Ladies, any commander would be proud to command men with only half of your courage. To you and to the men of this regiment, I salute you."

Paget saluted the three women and Doctor Farrell, then turned around and saluted his officers and men. That simple gesture, along with Paget's public apology, did a lot to make him accepted back by his regiment.

11:07 (Constantinople Time)

Wednesday, July 25, 1855

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

Jeanne sat dejectedly on the chair in her cubicle, feeling next to useless now: Thomas Farrell had just ordered her to stay on forced rest in view of her pregnancy, which was very close to its term. An idea then came to her mind and, with a smile of anticipation on her young face, she got up and searched in her locker. Pulling out of it her guitar, bardic harp and flute, she then walked heavily out of her room, heading

towards the patients' lounge. If she could not care anymore for them for a while, she at least could still entertain her patients with music and songs. Jeanne was damned if Farrell could find anything wrong with that.

16:51 (Constantinople Time)

Saturday, July 28, 1855 'A'

Kadikoi, Crimea

The moment Gordon Smythe entered the Hussars lines after coming back from patrol, he dismissed his troop to their quarters and galloped at once to the field hospital. He knew that Jeanne could give birth at any time now and didn't want to miss the coming of their first child. Dismounting in front of the hospital's entrance and tying his horse to one of the poles provided for that purpose, he nearly ran inside and went to the reception desk, where a nurse was on duty.

"Misses Grant, can you tell me if my wife has entered labor yet?"

"She actually gave birth less than half an hour ago, Captain." Announced proudly the nurse. Her announcement froze Gordon on the spot as he looked back at her with dismay.

"Blast! I missed it! Is Jeanne alright?"

"She is tired but doing well, Captain. She is in her room, breastfeeding her baby."

"Is it a boy or a girl?" Asked Gordon, some impatience in his voice. The nurse only smiled at that.

"Jeanne ordered me not to tell you, Captain. Sorry!"

Swearing under his breath, Gordon started running. He was at the entrance of Jeanne's room within a minute and went in at once without knocking. He then saw Jeanne sitting in a rocking chair near her bed, a baby wrapped in a blanket held in her arms and with one breast denuded. The smile she gave him then was worth a thousand kisses.

"Come see our son, Gordon." She said softly, her voice kept low in order not to startle her baby. Gordon approached her quietly and, after kissing her on the mouth, knelt besides the rocking chair to contemplate the small face of his son, pride washing over him.

"He is beautiful! Hello, little William."

He then kissed tenderly the head of the baby and looked back at Jeanne, tears coming out of his eyes.

“Thank you, Jeanne, for everything.”

“And thank you for your love, Gordon. You are a good man indeed.”

They sealed that mutual declaration with a kiss, then looked both down at their baby son, who was still sucking milk happily, his eyes closed and his tiny hands on Jeanne’s breast.

“What now, Jeanne?” Asked Gordon, overwhelmed by the moment. Jeanne answered while raising a hand to caress his cheek.

“I take it easy for a week or two, time to recuperate from childbirth, then I will start progressively getting back to shape. You wouldn’t want to see me become fat, do you?”

“I would love you in any shape, my dear Jeanne.”

That declaration made Jeanne smile with incredulity.

“Oh no you wouldn’t, Gordon. You love too much those buns of steel of mine...and my firm chest.”

Gordon had nothing to say to that, simply because she was right...again.

04:30 (Constantinople Time)

Saturday, September 8, 1855 ‘A’

8th Hussars field hospital

Kadikoi, Crimea

Nancy reappeared in a flash of light inside her room, wearing a Victorian era dress and ready to resume her life as Jeanne Smythe. She had just spent over six months at the main Time Patrol base in the distant past in order to both see her two other sons, James and Charles, and to get back in full physical and mental shape after her pregnancy and her hard months of nursing work in Crimea. Going at once to the crib containing little William, she saw that he had not awakened during the ten minutes she was absent from her room in this time period. Careful not to make noises and awaken her son, Jeanne went to her locker and took off her dress, changing quietly into her dark red field outfit of riding dress, jacket, high boots, leather equipment vest and white apron. She then grabbed her two revolvers and carefully loaded them. William woke up and started wailing as she was oiling her sword’s blade. Putting down her sword on her work desk, Jeanne went to the crib and gently took William in her arms.

“You are getting hungry, are you, my sweet William? Here, have your fill.”

With her baby sucking her left nipple, she sat in her rocking chair and waited patiently for him to be full, then made him burp and changed his diaper as well. With William still in her arms, Jeanne left her room and toured quietly the patients wards, her heart heavy: many more beds were going to be filled by the end of this day. As for the men presently in the wards, they had stopped months ago to be simply historical statistics to her. She knew them well as human beings, having assisted them in moments of pure helplessness and pain and having seen them at their most vulnerable. She had cried more than once when one of them had died, often in her arms, or when they had cried themselves after being amputated and losing a leg or an arm, or both. Whether Farah Tolkonen liked it or not, Nancy WAS Jeanne Smythe, senior nurse and benefactor of the 8th Hussars field hospital and wife of a Hussars officer. This may have been only one of her three lives she lived in parallel but it was still very much a real life for her. She was damned if she was going to let thousands of men die today without doing a thing to at least help the wounded. She was fully conscious that she could very well be maimed or even killed in the process of helping British soldiers today but she was ready to run the risks. Her only hesitation was about the effects on her son and her husband if she got killed.

As she was going towards the wing housing the men's wards, she met a large group of her patients that had been convalescing and were now leaving, led by an infantry captain and a sergeant-major. The men wore their uniforms and had their weapons and gear. Jeanne interposed herself at once, blocking the way of the captain and eyeing him firmly.

“Do you have a medical release form signed by a doctor for these men, Captain?”

The young captain, who knew better than to ignore her, nodded politely and showed her a list bearing the signature of Doctor Farrell.

“I have, Lady Jeanne. I know that those men are barely healed of their wounds but we sorely need all the available soldiers today, especially in the case of infantrymen.”

Jeanne reviewed the list quickly, comparing the number of names with the number of soldiers following the captain. The numbers agreed so she gave the list back to the

officer and stepped aside. As the soldiers, looking downcast, filed past her, she couldn't help tears coming to her eyes.

"May God be with you all!"

A young cornet that was no more than sixteen years old and was still walking with a slight limp looked at her with something close to love in his eyes.

"God was with us, Lady Jeanne, as he sent us one of his angels to care for us."

Those words finished breaking her heart and she started crying openly while the men passed by her. It took everything for her to be able to say a few words to them before they walked away.

"I won't abandon you today, I swear!"

The sergeant at the end of the line turned his head to look at her then while still walking, swallowing hard as he eyed her and her baby.

"You never abandoned us, Lady Jeanne. May God bless you."

11:14 (Constantinople Time)

Hills facing the Russian bastion of the Redan

Fanny Duberly, trying to go around the British cavalry troopers posted to block the way to the front to civilian tourists, sighed with exasperation when she encountered a cavalry patrol in the ravine in front of Cathcart's Hill.

"Damn! I thought that I had them mystified."

Fanny didn't try to gallop away as the sergeant of the Lancers approached her and saluted her.

"Madam, you can't proceed further than this point. It is too dangerous closer to the batteries."

"Sir, know that I am the wife of Captain Duberly, of the 8th Hussars."

"Madam, my orders apply to ALL the civilians." Replied patiently the sergeant, having heard countless excuses from civilians and tourists trying to get to the frontlines for some cheap thrills. Fanny was about to shoot a retort to that when the noise of a horse approaching fast made both her and the sergeant turn their heads towards the South and Balaklava. A rider soon turned the bend of the trail following the base of the hill, its horse going at an incredible speed.

“What the...” Started to say the surprised sergeant. He then saw the long black hair of the rider floating in the wind and tried to interpose his horse to stop the woman coming at him. Fanny, who had recognized the rider at once, shouted to the sergeant.

“THAT’S LADY JEANNE SMYTHE, GOING TO DO HER NURSE’S DUTIES AT THE FRONT!”

That shout made the sergeant hesitate long enough to let Jeanne gallop past him like the wind. Jeanne, wearing a big pack on her back and her equipment vest around her torso, smiled at Fanny as she passed.

“THANKS, FANNY!”

Fanny smiled with pride at that, happy to have been able to help the intrepid French woman do her mission of mercy.

Jeanne soon had to make Pegasus slow its infernal pace, as she was now very close to the British advanced trench facing the Russian strongpoint of the Redan, a large earthworks defensive complex bristling with guns. Dismounting near what was left of a tree, she loosely tied the reins of her horse to the dead tree trunk and continued on foot, soon jumping down into the advance trench. Dozens of British infantrymen progressing on foot along the trench greeted her with cheers and hurrahs.

“It’s mighty nice to see you here, madam.” Said a young soldier to her, making her smile.

“And I am happy to be here to support you, guys. Be assured that I will be right behind you to take care of any wounded man.”

Grunts of approbation greeted her words: being cared for on the battlefield if wounded was one thing that any soldier valued greatly, as it would often mean the difference between life and death for him. The infantrymen then resumed their slow march down the wide trench leading to the Russian defensive works, Jeanne mixed in with the assault troopers.

12:02 (Constantinople Time)

Forward British command and observation post

Main British trench facing Sebastopol

William Howard Russell looked on with trepidation through his spyglass as a loud cheer rose from the French trenches on the left of the British trenches. Thousands of

French Zouaves, easily recognizable by their baggy red trousers, then rushed out of their trenches, which had been pushed to as close as twenty yards from their main objective, the Malakoff Tower. Within seconds, they ran through the murderous Russian gun and rifle fire pouring on them from three sides and threw in place assault ladders to make their way inside the Russian earthworks. Watching with the British high command staff and the many civilian tourists standing or sitting on the hill used by them as a forward observation post, Russell felt elation as a huge French flag appeared in minutes above the Malakoff Tower.

“Bloody hell! The French did it! They have the Malakoff Tower, at last!”

He then turned his spyglass towards the British advance trench but saw little movement there. Perplex, he looked at Fanny Duberly, who had joined him less than ten minutes ago on top of the hill.

“What the hell are our soldiers waiting for to attack?”

“According to my husband, we are to wait for confirmation that the Malakoff Tower is solidly in French hands before launching our own assault. Any assault on the Redan is impossible until the Malakoff has been taken.”

Russell frowned at that: this wasn't the first time that the British Army had played second fiddle to the much larger French Army contingent in Crimea. Hopefully, the British command would get it right this time. Glancing at the three British generals present in the observation post, Russell had to cool his expectations about that: there was little martial about the appearance or attitude of those old men. The commander-in-chief, General Simpson, sat on a chair in the main trench, a greatcoat wrapped around him to fight the cold wind. General Jones wore a red nightcap and lay reclined on a litter while watching the action with his spyglass. As for Quartermaster-General Richard Airey, he had a white handkerchief tied over his cap and ears and fastened under his chin. A crowd of staff officers and civilian tourists stood around the three generals, with the tourists treating the battle as one big exciting show. Russell shook his head in disgust at that, wishing that he could kick the butts of those vain tourists. The one visitor who had a legitimate purpose to be here, Roger Fenton, had his camera set on its tripod and was busily taking picture after picture of the battle, concentrating on the ones deserving the attention: the fighting soldiers in the field.

The arrival of the ambulance cart and medical wagon of the 8th Hussars in the ravine in front of the observation post a few minutes later temporarily attracted the eyes

of the British onlookers. Russell took some notes as the nurses and doctors attached to the field hospital quickly set up the medical wagon for operation, while the ambulance cart continued on to get as close to the advance trench as it safely could. Watching it closely, he saw the cart stop besides a solitary horse tied to a tree trunk and wondered aloud about it.

“Who could have left his horse in such a dangerous place?”

Fanny Duberly answered him without hesitation, not bothering to keep her voice down.

“Jeanne Smythe. I saw her gallop to the advance trench about one hour ago, dressed in her field outfit and carrying a pack of field bandages.”

“But...she gave birth only a month ago.” Said Russell, shocked. Fanny nodded her head at that, her expression somber.

“I know, William. No one should doubt her dedication and courage by now. I just hope that she gets properly rewarded for that once back in England.”

Russell grunted in approbation, taking more notes before resuming his observation with his spyglass. The British troops had not moved out of their trenches yet, while the fighting was still furious on the left flank, where the French were still fighting to take their two other objectives for this day, the ‘Little Redan’ and the ‘Flagstaff’ bastions. Maybe twenty minutes later the British heavy guns, which had kept a furious fire up to now, suddenly fell silent. A great chorus of cheers then rose from the British trenches as thousands of soldiers in red coats climbed out of them and started running in the open towards the Redan bastion. Russell felt both excitement and horror as he watched the troopers run the 200 yards of open ground between their advance trench and the Russian earthworks. Russian guns firing from three strong points, along with hundreds of Russian riflemen, then started to cut swaths in the ranks of the rushing British soldiers. Russel’s heart sank when he saw hundreds of men being cut down, and this only in the first minute of the assault. The remark from a nearby tourist watching through a spyglass then made him focus on a particular part of the battlefield.

“Look at that coward over there, hiding behind a wounded officer.”

“That’s not a coward, you sniveling asshole!” Fired back angrily Russell once he had a good look with his spyglass. “That’s Lady Jeanne Smythe treating that wounded officer under fire.”

As the tourist smarted from his response, Russell passed on his spyglass to Fanny Duberly, who was clearly eager to watch her friend. Fanny looked through the spyglass for a few seconds, then gave the spyglass back to Russell.

"God bless Jeanne. I would never be able to gather that kind of courage."

Taking back his spyglass, Russell watched the progress of the British attack with growing anxiety, describing what he saw to Fanny as the action went.

"Our men are now in the ditch at the foot of the Redan and setting up their assault ladders. God, we are losing dozens of men every second... I can see Colonel Windham waving his hat and sword from atop the parapet of the Russian positions and encouraging his men to follow him inside the earthworks."

Russell then saw something that shocked and scandalized him.

"Bloody hell! Only a handful of soldiers are following Colonel Windham inside the Russian positions. The rest of our men are staying behind the parapet and taking occasional potshots from behind cover. Come on, dammit! Get inside the position while you can!"

A concert of exclamations of disappointment and disbelief from the British high command staff then told him that he had not been alone in noticing the lack of zeal of the attacking British infantrymen.

As the British generals were watching from their safe observation post the stalling of their attack, Jeanne jumped down in the wide, deep trench dug by the Russians around the foot of their bastion. The trench was already half covered with dead and dying British soldiers, with more soldiers clinging precariously against the outside of the parapets while bullets, grapeshot and cannonballs flew around them. Over the din of the battle, she heard and then saw Colonel Windham exhort his men in following him inside the earthworks through the gun embrasures. Less than a hundred men followed his lead and went in, while a good two thousand more soldiers stayed where they were, content in firing occasionally over the parapet. Watching that with dismay, Jeanne then saw the young cornet that had complimented her in the hospital this morning rally a handful of men around him before stepping inside the bastion through an embrasure, his sword pointing forward. Something then broke inside Jeanne. She had to do all that she could to get that brave teenage boy out of there alive, even at the risk of getting killed. That last thought nearly made her laugh then: where she was right now was already a good place to get killed at any moment. Seeing a man that was grimacing with pain while holding his left leg, Jeanne went to him and, after examining him quickly, bandaged his heavily bleeding leg. After promising to get back to him, Jeanne then climbed one of the assault ladders up to the level of the gun

embrasures. The dozen or so British infantrymen cowering on each side of the nearest embrasure looked at her with horror and disbelief.

“Bloody hell, maam, what are you doing here?” Asked a shocked corporal. Jeanne gave him a less than friendly look.

“And what are you men doing still here? Watching the fucking scenery?” On those harsh words, she stepped around them and entered the Russian bastion, walking on top of a destroyed heavy gun to do so.

At the forward command observation post, William Russell felt his heart stop when he saw through his spyglass Jeanne enter the Russian earthworks and became as white as a sheet. Seeing his dismay, Fanny Duberly looked up anxiously at him.

“What is it, William? What did you just see?”

“Jeanne Smythe...she just entered the Redan.”

“WHAT?” Shouted Fanny, shocked. Unable to do anything about that, she then resigned herself to watch, wait and pray.

Once past the first earth parapet, Jeanne found herself in a wide trench that zigzagged its way to both her left and right, with heavy guns positioned at close intervals of a few yards only. Dozens of Russian and British soldiers lay around her, dead or wounded, while the few British soldiers that had entered the Redan were fighting furiously to stop a counterattack by Russian soldiers charging with bayonets. Knowing that the time available to her would be short, Jeanne started at once inspecting the British soldiers lying around in the dirt. The first one she found alive was a young private holding his guts, where a Russian bayonet was stuck. The young man was obviously in great pain and implored Jeanne with his eyes. She in turn gave him a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry, Private: I will fix you up in no time.”

Taking out a small bottle of chloroform first and a swab of cotton, she administered a few drops of chloroform to the teenager, wanting to cut his suffering as soon as possible. She had been treating him for less than a minute when the young soldier died quietly in her arms. Holding in her tears with difficulty, Jeanne went to the next British wounded, a sergeant in his late twenties with a bullet in his right shoulder who was bleeding profusely. This time Jeanne was able to treat him without risking losing him quickly and applied a thick field dressing on his entry and exit wound. As she was getting up to go to

another wounded British soldier, the sergeant suddenly grabbed her sleeve and spoke to her.

“Bless you, Lady Jeanne.”

“No need to, Sergeant. Let me care for that one over there and I will be back with you.”

The sergeant let her go at those words, allowing her to go to a British junior officer that lay moaning under a dead Russian gunner. Pulling off the dead Russian from over the wounded, Jeanne then realized with a jump of her heart that this was the young cornet who had spoken to her in the hospital. Frantically checking him out, she was reassured to find that he had suffered from a single blow to the head that was bleeding a lot but was otherwise a superficial wound. She cleaned the head gash with water and alcohol, then bandaged it in a hurry, as she could hear the fighting getting nearer to her by now. She was finishing her first aid work on the young cornet, who was unconscious, when British soldiers started running past her, heading out of the bastion. Colonel Windham was shouting orders urgently from a mere twenty yards in her back.

“FALL BACK! FALL BACK! FRONT PLATOON, HOLD THE LINE WHILE THE OTHERS RETREAT!”

Seeing Jeanne from behind and not noticing her long hair in the heat of the action, Windham shouted at her.

“YOU! GRAB THAT WOUNDED MAN AND CARRY HIM OUT! MAKE IT QUICK, AS WE HAVE ONLY SECONDS TO EVACUATE.”

Jeanne at once threw the unconscious cornet over her shoulders in a classic fireman’s carry position and got up before facing Windham.

“I need two men who could help that wounded sergeant over there, Colonel.”

Windham, not believing his eyes or ears for a second, nonetheless reacted quickly enough and pointed at two soldiers near him.

“YOU AND YOU! GO HELP THAT WOUNDED SERGEANT AND GET HIM OUT OF HERE!”

“YES SIR!” Shouted back the most senior soldier before running with his comrade to the sergeant that had been bandaged by Jeanne. The sergeant was quickly if not gently pulled up on his feet and then helped out through the nearest gun embrasure. Jeanne was right behind them, the limp cornet still draped over her shoulders, followed by two soldiers and Colonel Windham. Once out of the bastion proper, Windham stayed by the side of the embrasure, encouraging his men as they

rushed out of the Russian position. As the last British soldier rushed out, Russians hot on his heels, Windham shouted at a nearby soldier carrying a heavy hand grenade.

“FIRE YOUR GRENADE AND THROW IT IN!”

The soldier, an old corporal with a lit cigar in his mouth, took out his clumsy grenade and lit its wicker fuse with his cigar, then waited until it was nearly burned out before throwing it inside the embrasure. Two seconds later a muffled explosion and screams of pain came from the inside, while smoke blew out through the embrasure.

“WELL DONE, CORPORAL! NOW, LET’S GET BACK TO OUR TRENCHES!”

The two British, now nearly alone against the Russian parapets, lost no time in hurriedly sliding down the steep dirt slope down to the surrounding ditch. There, they joined the hundreds of soldiers climbing desperately out of the ditch so that they could run back to the British trenches. Thankfully the British artillery gunners, seeing their comrades of the infantry retreat, resumed fire at once against the embrasures of the Redan, providing covering fire to the retreating soldiers. Windham ended up climbing out of the ditch right behind Jeanne and offered to help her carry the cornet once on top, to which Jeanne shook her head.

“Take care of your other men, Colonel. I am taking care of that brave boy.”

“As you wish, Lady Jeanne.” Said Windham, then switching his attention to his surviving men and urging them back to their trench. To his surprise, eight female nurses from the 8th Hussars and two civilian doctors were present in the advance trench when he jumped in it with relief. The wounded carried by Jeanne Smythe was laid at once on a stretcher and carried away to the rear by four women, soon followed by the wounded sergeant. Windham was about to thank profusely Jeanne for her exploits when he saw with dismay the young French woman run out again from the advance trench, going towards the Redan bastion. Flabbergasted, he could only shout at the running woman.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING? COME BACK!”

“I’M GOING TO GET OTHER WOUNDED MEN LYING AROUND!” She shouted back before disappearing in a thick cloud of white smoke drifting across the battlefield.

Jeanne had time to either drag or carry back to the British advance trench three wounded men before Russian fire became so heavy that venturing openly on the battlefield would be near suicide. Undeterred by the bullets and cannonballs now flying around liberally, she elected to work in a more covert way, crawling out of the advance trench and making her way to wounded men by using ground cover as much as

possible. She used for the first time that day a special type of sling made of tough canvas that allowed her to drag behind her a wounded man while she crawled or went on her hands and knees. Once close to the advance trench, either nurses or soldiers would rush to her and take her wounded patient to safety. She kept to this routine all day and night, working as long as she could find men still alive that could be rescued and retrieving in the process a total of 57 wounded British soldiers.

Jeanne was taking a much needed short rest in the advance trench when, at around three O'clock in the morning, the Redan bastion blew up in a mighty series of powder magazines explosions, showering the whole area around it with debris, dirt, guns and bodies. The other Russian defensive works followed suit in short order, while the buildings in Sebastopol started burning. Jeanne, like all the British soldiers around her, looked on as that hellish scene was played on. A young private standing besides her in the advance trench looked on with incomprehension.

“What the hell is happening? Why are the Russians blowing up their bastions?”

“The Russians are retreating while destroying everything behind them at the same time.” Answered in a quiet voice Jeanne. “The battle for Sebastopol is over.”

“Thank God!” Replied the young soldier, no doubt reflecting the thoughts of most around him. He then realized something and looked at Jeanne with big eyes. “Does this mean that the war is over, madam?”

Jeanne shook her head sadly at that question.

“No! The killing may have stopped around Sebastopol but the dying is by no means over. Only once a peace treaty is signed and the troops are back home will we be able to call this war over.”

A lot of deaths and suffering happened still before the war was to end. The winter of 1855/56 was a tragedy for the French Army camped around Sebastopol, as typhus and cholera ran through their camps and made its normally efficient medical system collapse under the weight of sick men. Over 53,000 French soldiers fell ill and had to be hospitalized, with over 10,000 of them dying that winter, mostly from typhus. It was a time of personal loss for Jeanne as well, with her friend Leila the Zouave vivandière being among the dead. On another front of the war, a combined British/Turkish force besieged by a Russian army in Kars, in Anatolia, was forced by starvation to surrender at the end of November of 1855. In January of 1856, Austria

jumped into the fray by sending an ultimatum to Russia: accept the Allies' demands or Austria would enter the war on the side of the Allies. Diplomatic talks followed, with the war declared officially over at the signing of the Treaty of Paris on April 27 of 1856. Nearly half a million Russians soldiers had died in the war by then, along with close to 100,000 French and 22,000 British, plus over 100,000 Ottoman soldiers. It was then time for the survivors to return home.

10:32 (London Time)

Saturday, June 7, 1856 'A'

H.M.S. SANS PAREIL

Portsmouth harbor, England

"God, I can't wait to set foot again on the good old English soil." Said quietly Gordon while standing besides Jeanne on the deck of their transport ship. He had his left arm around her shoulders, while Jeanne had in her arms their son, now eight months old. Their ship, transporting the survivors of the 8th Hussars, their horses and the regiment's equipment, including the medical equipment and tents from their field hospital, was about to tie up at one of the quays of Portsmouth's harbor. Eight more transport ships were also docking today in Portsmouth, carrying the cavalry units back from Crimea. Jeanne surveyed visually the port area and rested her head on Gordon's shoulder.

"It effectively is good to be back. I miss Paris, though."

"We will go spend some vacation time together there, I promise." Replied softly Gordon. "Then, we will start our agreed on routine."

He didn't have to say what that routine was, as they had spent days talking about it during the sea trip to England. Since Gordon realized how important Jeanne's work with her charity foundation in Paris was and since he would anyway be stuck most of the time on duty inside the regimental garrison in Winchester, they had decided to live their respective lives during week days and join up in Gordon's London house on weekends.

Seeing Mary Seacole looking despondent by the ship's side, Jeanne excused herself with Gordon for a moment, leaving little William in his care, then went to see the portly black woman. Jeanne already knew what was troubling Mary and patted gently

her left shoulder while speaking reassuringly to her, using the nickname everyone used with her.

“You have nothing to worry about, Mother: I am ready to vouch and cover for your debts.”

Mary Seacole looked sharply up at her, surprised.

“How do you know about my debts, Jeanne?”

“It wasn’t too hard to learn about them, Mother. You did get stuck with a large unsold inventory from your establishment in Balaklava at the end of the war, with clients evaporating quickly then. I will be most happy to help you now.”

Tears came to the face of the Jamaican woman, who kissed Jeanne on the cheek.

“Jeanne, you are truly an angel. I will owe you for the rest of my life.”

“You owe me nothing, Mary, apart from your friendship. I couldn’t do less for you. Do you have funds for your trip to London and for your stay there?”

“Some.” Said Mary after a short hesitation. Jeanne raised an eyebrow at that and, taking Mary’s arm, gently guided her to a deserted corner of the ship’s deck.

“Some doesn’t cut mustard with me, Mary. I don’t want such a good woman as you living like a pauper in London. You deserve much better. Until I could meet your creditors and erase your debts, please take this as your pocket money for the next month.”

Mary eyed briefly the small but heavy purse Jeanne just put in her left hand, then looked up at her while trying to give back the purse.

“I can’t accept that, Jeanne! You...”

“Yes, you can and will accept it, Mary.” Said Jeanne gently but with finality. “I won’t stand for you to live in the streets, not after all the lives you helped save in Crimea. In fact, you are invited to stay at my husband’s house at 14 Belgrave Square while in London. I insist, Mary.”

Seeing that Mary was about to cry, Jeanne hugged her gently, letting her weep to her content.

“Let’s make it even easier and travel with us to Winchester Barracks. From there we will go to London together.”

“You are too good to be true, Jeanne.” Said weakly Mary, still crying.

“Nothing is too good for you, Mother.”

On those gentle words, Jeanne returned to Gordon, who had been watching discreetly the exchange from a distance. She gave him a malicious smile and kissed him on the lips.

“Do you mind if I invited Mary Seacole to live temporarily in your London house, my dear husband?”

“For that woman, you could even tell her to move in for the duration, my dear Jeanne.” Replied Gordon, smiling as well. “You know that I respect that woman greatly. She seemed distressed a moment ago. Is something wrong?”

“Nothing that I can’t arrange easily enough.”

Jeanne’s evasive answer seemed to satisfy Gordon, who resumed his observation of Portsmouth. He soon noticed a royal guards officer waiting on the quay where their ship was about to dock. He pointed the officer to Jeanne then.

“It seems that a royal messenger is waiting for our ship at dockside. I wonder what it is about. Do you think that my personal oracle could tell me that?”

“Your personal oracle would say that he is probably here to deliver invitations from the Queen, my dear.”

Gordon’s eyes widened at that.

“Hell, you certainly got my attention with that, Jeanne. Do you think that one of those will be for you?”

“And why would I think that, my love? I’m only a woman, remember? Women don’t count as legal persons in England...yet!”

Gordon sighed at that snide remark: it wasn’t the first time that Jeanne reminded him gently but no so subtly what she thought about British laws concerning women.

An access ramp was soon put in place between the quay and their ship and the royal messenger then came on board. After speaking briefly with the captain of the ship, the guards officer came to Gordon and Jeanne and stopped at attention before saluting Jeanne and handing her an envelope.

“Lady Jeanne Smythe? I have this letter from Her Majesty the Queen for you.”

“Thank you very much, Lieutenant. This is quite an honor.”

Smiling, the lieutenant then produced two more envelopes, presenting one each to Jeanne and Gordon.

“It is not quite all, madam. Here are invitations for both you and Captain Smythe to attend a medals parade in Hyde Park on June 26. Have a good day madam, sir.”

After saluting them again, the lieutenant went to a few more Hussars present on the deck, also handing them envelopes before leaving the ship. By then, Gordon had opened his invitation card and read it.

“Hmm, this says that I am to be decorated but doesn’t say with what medal. What about your invitation, Jeanne?”

“Same here.” Said laconically Jeanne, making Gordon look at the still unopened letter in her hands.

“And that letter?”

“Patience, patience, my dear!” She chided, purposely taking her time to open the Queen’s letter. Half a dozen of the Hussars nurses present on the deck rushed to her to see what she had, with Janet O’Neil being in the front ranks of the curious women.

“So, what is it about?”

“Gee, girls, don’t rush me like this!” Protested Jeanne with false indignation. Janet eyed her crossly.

“We wouldn’t need to be pushy if you weren’t so slow to open this, Jeanne. Come on, put a move on it!”

“Alright, alright!” Said Jeanne before opening the envelope and reading quickly the short letter in it.

“This is actually an invitation for me and Gordon from the Queen to meet her at Buckingham Palace for supper on June 26 of this year. I guess that I will have to get out my most fancy dress for that.”

“A supper with the Queen? You bloody lucky you!” Exclaimed Margaret Ward, attracting a smile on Jeanne’s face.

“Believe me, Margaret, such an invitation, while a true honor, often ends up being a most boring event, especially with all those ass-licking royal courtiers around the Queen. And you, did you get an invitation for that medal parade on the 26th of June?”

“I did, and so did Janet. We are so excited about that. We are probably going to be the first British women to be decorated for actions in a war.”

“You effectively will be.” Confirmed Jeanne. “You and Janet however amply deserve that honor.”

“And you, Jeanne? Is France going to honor you as well?” Asked Janet O’Neil. Jeanne then nodded slowly once at that, her expression becoming serious.

“I have a standing invitation from the President of the Republic to see him once back in France. General Bosquet passed on the invitation to me two months ago and

told me that I am in line for the Medal of Honor of the President of the Republic, for repeated acts of courage and devotion on the battlefield that brought great honor to France.”

“Jeanne,” said in a joking tone Janet O’Neil, “Are you sure that your name is not Joan of Arc? You are turning into quite an heroine in France.”

Janet never understood why both Jeanne and Gordon Smythe made mysterious smiles at her remark then.

10:32 (London Time)

Thursday, June 26, 1856 ‘A’

Hyde Park, London

England

Gordon Smythe, standing in the first rank of the expectant recipients assembled in Hyde Park in front of Queen Victoria, applauded like the others when a navy first mate was called forward by the Queen’s Aide-De-Camp to receive one of the first Victoria Crosses to be awarded. The Victoria Cross, or VC in short, was a new medal for outstanding gallantry created on order of Queen Victoria and was particular in that it was open to all ranks, be they officers, NCOs or simple privates. This was a radical departure from past practices, where the lower ranks had too often in Gordon’s mind been forgotten, while their aristocratic officers got showered with honors and titles. Gordon discreetly looked at his parents, Sir Charles and Lady Camelia, who were looking on as part of the crowd of spectators on the sidelines of the ceremonial grounds. He then glanced at Jeanne, standing besides Margaret Ward and Janet O’Neil at the end of the rear rank of soldiers, sailors and officers waiting for their medals. While not wearing her field outfit and equipment vest, Jeanne was dressed in a dark red riding dress and jacket, plus shiny black high leather boots that made her look in Gordon’s mind like a Cossack woman. Gordon puffed up with pride at thinking how lucky he was to have such a wife, then concentrated back on the ceremony. The Queen, sitting Amazon-style on her horse and surrounded by her family and the top commanders of the Army and the Navy, was directing personally the ceremony, with her ADC doing the shouting and passing to her the medals to be awarded. Her equerry then pinned the medals given to him by the Queen on the recipients.

The first part of the ceremony was reserved for the awarding of about twenty VCs to soldiers and officers that had performed extraordinary acts of bravery at either the battles of the Alma, Balaklava or Inkerman. To Gordon's secret disappointment, no member of his regiment got the new award. He had wished to see Jeanne win a VC but knew that the British establishment was not ready yet to acknowledge properly acts of courage by a woman. About an hour in the ceremony, as the Queen was distributing medals lower than the VC, Gordon heard his name being called up.

"CAPTAIN GORDON SMYTHE, OF THE 8TH ROYAL HUSSARS!"

His heart suddenly pounding faster, he got to attention at once and shouted in response.

"YOUR MAJESTY!"

He then walked out of the ranks and, passing in front of the other recipients, went to a position two steps in front of the Queen's horse before stopping at attention and saluting her. Queen Victoria, now 36 years old, nodded once and smiled gently down to him. Her ADC then read from a declaration in his hands.

"CAPTAIN GORDON SMYTHE, OF THE 8TH ROYAL HUSSARS, FOR YEARS OF DEDICATED AND BRILLIANT SERVICE AND FOR HIS UNCOMMON DISPLAY OF BRAVERY AND LEADERSHIP AT THE BATTLE OF BALAKLAVA, IS TO BE MADE A MILITARY COMPANION OF THE MOST HONORABLE AND ANCIENT ORDER OF THE BATH BY HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN."

Blood rushed to Gordon's head at that announcement. While not strictly an award for gallantry, the Order of the Bath rewarded service of the highest caliber and was the fourth most important order of knighthood in Great Britain. He did his best to keep a stoic expression as the Queen's equerry fastened the crimson red ribbon supporting the gold and enameled white Maltese cross of the CB around his neck. To his surprise, the ADC shouted again as he still stood in front of the Queen.

"FOR HIS OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP QUALITIES, CAPTAIN GORDON SMYTHE IS ALSO PROMOTED TO THE RANK OF MAJOR, EFFECTIVE TODAY."

The equerry then gave him a set of major's insignias. Gordon saluted the Queen again, then pivoted to the right and walked back to his position in the front rank of recipients. Sergeant-Major James Champion, standing in the rank behind him, whispered to him as he was wheeling around to take his place.

"Well done, sir!"

"Your turn will come, Sergeant-Major." Replied Gordon. Effectively, James Champion was called forward half a hour later to receive the Distinguished Conduct

Medal, or DCM, another new medal meant to reward great acts of gallantry by NCOs and junior ranks. The DCM was meant to be second only to the new VC and was thus a high level award indeed.

The part of the ceremony that Gordon was really waiting for came last, when Jeanne was called forward by the ADC.

“LADY JEANNE SMYTHE, SENIOR NURSE OF THE 8TH ROYAL HUSSARS!”

Jeanne, wearing her French Legion of Honor and the Medal of Honor of the President of the Republic, on top of her Crimean War campaign medal, walked smartly out of the rear ranks and made her way to the Queen, stopping at attention in front of her horse. The crowd of onlookers broke into whispered comments as she walked forward but fell silent when the ADC, instead of reading her award declaration, gave it to the Queen. The Queen eyed Jeanne and her three medals with intense interest, smiling to her as well. In as strong a voice as she could muster, Queen Victoria then read the parchment.

“Lady Jeanne Smythe, senior nurse of the 8th Royal Hussars, demonstrated repeatedly over the course of the whole war in crimea both unflinching dedication and utmost care to her patients. She also showed incredible bravery and heroism while providing first aid to wounded soldiers directly on the battlefield, and this on countless occasions. As a French citizen, Lady Jeanne Smythe is to be named an honorary civilian companion of The Most Honorable And Ancient Order of the Bath. Also, for outstanding acts of bravery demonstrated while treating under fire wounded soldiers on the battlefield at balaklava, inkerman and inside the Russian bastion of the Redan, Lady Jeanne is to be awarded the distinguished conduct medal, with two bars denoting a second and third award. Her medal is to wear the special mention ‘for the care and defense of wounded soldiers’.”

As her equerry pinned the crimson red bow ribbon of the CB, then the red and blue ribbon of the DCM with two bars, Queen Victoria smiled to Jeanne, who still stood at rigid attention.

“I look forward to have supper with you and your husband, Lady Jeanne.”

“The pleasure will be mine, Your Majesty.”

Once her medals had been pinned on her, Jeanne curtsied to the Queen, then pivoted to the right and walked back into the ranks. She was followed by Janet O’Neil and Margaret Ward, who each received a specially engraved DCM. After a last speech from the Queen, the sovereign and high dignitaries left the ceremonial grounds, with the

recipients then dismissed by General Simpson. Gordon lost no time in joining up with Jeanne, hugging and kissing her joyfully.

“Jeanne, you can’t know how proud I am of you.”

“Not as much as I am of you, my dear major.” She replied before kissing him on the mouth. Sir Charles and Lady Carmelia then managed to get to them through the mixed crowd of recipients and relatives and friends. More hugs, kisses and handshakes followed, with Sir Charles in particular looking as proud as a peacock as he eyed Gordon and Jeanne, standing side by side with their medals still on them.

“My God, this deserves a picture! Let me get Mister Fenton and his camera.”

Sir Charles didn’t have to go far to get the photographer, as Roger Fenton was already making his way towards Jeanne and Gordon. Quickly setting up his heavy camera on its tripod, Roger Fenton adjusted his aim and grinned to the joyful couple.

“You decidedly make the most dashing couple in the whole of England. If you don’t mind, I will take three pictures of you in this pause.”

“Go right ahead, Mister Fenton.” Replied Gordon. He then took and held Jeanne’s right hand for the pictures, with his parents looking on with pride. Once the pictures were taken, Fenton took his head out from under his camera’s black hood and smiled at the couple.

“May I ask what are your projects for the next few weeks, Major Smythe?”

Gordon smiled and turned his head to look tenderly into Jeanne’s eyes.

“Just pure bliss, Mister Fenton.”

CHAPTER 6 – SEDITION

16:25 (California Time)

Wednesday, January 18, 1961 'C'

Vandenberg Space Command Base (formerly Cooke Army Base)

California, United States

Patricia White, standing with her two young children, Edward and Bonnie Lynn, in front of the giant hangar housing the First Space Squadron, cheered like the others around her when the SP-10B four-seater space plane ENTERPRISE touched down smoothly on the main runway of Vandenberg Air Force Base. All the anxiety and fear that had built up in her during the two days of the mission just flown by her husband Edward evaporated at that time: Edward had just flown safely and successfully his first space mission, coached from the copilot seat by no less than Lieutenant General Dows. There were no reporters or photographers present to witness that, except for one Air Force official photographer. Manned space plane flights had become by now so routine, being as frequent as six per month, that the medias had lost most of its interest in them. Also, with many of the missions being of the classified type and with Vandenberg SCB housing a full wing of operational, nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles, reporters had to be invited before they could step inside the base. Most of the wives of the astronauts of the First Space Squadron were quite happy about that state of affair, not wanting to endure constant media attention and harassment because of the glamorous occupation of their husbands. Patricia was new at this business but having some relative privacy to greet her husband just back from space certainly felt right. Edward Junior, six, and Bonnie Lynn, four, had to be restrained by her from running towards the space plane now approaching its hangar. They were nearly jumping on the spot from impatience by the time the USSP ENTERPRISE came to a halt inside the hangar and shut down its two turbofan engines. Only when Ingrid Dows and Edward White, still wearing their bulky spacesuits, came down from the cockpit via the integrated elevator platform of the space plane did Patricia got the okay from a technician to approach them. Ed then put one knee down and greeted his two young children with open arms, happily kissing and hugging them. He next got up and did the same with his wife, attracting an amused comment from her.

“Hugging you with that suit on ain’t too sexy, Ed.”

“Don’t worry, Pat: I will be out of it soon enough.”

“How was your flight, Dad?” Asked impatiently young Edward junior, getting a tolerant smile from his father.

“It was the thrill of a lifetime, truly! Living in zero gravity was quite fun but I have to say that the reentry certainly got me excited. You should have seen the flames dancing over the windshield then. However I was in good hands, with General Dows as copilot.”

Patricia then looked and smiled at the impossibly young lieutenant general waiting patiently besides her husband. She had feared at first the prospect of her husband going into space alone with such a beautiful young woman but had quickly been reassured by other wives who knew Ingrid Dows well by now.

“Thanks for bringing me back Ed in one piece, General.”

Ingrid Dows grinned at that.

“You should thank him, Patricia: he piloted our space plane flawlessly during this mission. By the way, you can call me simply Ingrid: don’t feel bound by military etiquette with me.”

“Thank you...Ingrid. I and Ed were planning to throw a little party tomorrow evening for the other astronauts and wives, in order to celebrate Ed’s first space flight. You would make me happy if you could come.”

“I will be delighted, Patricia!” Replied Ingrid. “At what time do you want me at your house?”

“Make it five O’clock: we will be serving a hot and cold buffet.”

“I will be there. If you will now excuse me, I must now go make a long distance phone call.”

Patricia watched Ingrid go for a few seconds, then looked questioningly at her husband, who guessed what she was about to ask.

“She wants to call her adopted daughter in Patrick Space Command Base to tell her that she returned safely. She told me that she does that after each space flight, to avoid anxiety to her daughter.”

“I understand that she is still a single mother, right?”

“She is, Patricia.” Answered soberly Edward, a devout Methodist. “She however has a nanny that keeps an eye on her daughter when she is away, which is too often according to her. We had plenty of time during our 38 hours in orbit to talk at length

about many things. Ingrid cares a lot about her daughter Hien, who is now thirteen years old. And you, how was it for you and the kids in the last two days?"

"Fine, Ed." Lied Patricia, not wanting to tell him about her fears. "Now, how about taking that suit off, so that I can touch something else than padded aluminum?"

"A good idea!" Said approvingly Edward, grinning to his petite blonde of a wife.

16:58 (California Time)

Thursday, January 19, 1961 'C'

Officers Married Quarters

Vandenberg SCB

Patricia, answering the door bell of their family bungalow, froze for a moment, staring with admiration at the beautiful outfit worn by Ingrid Dows, now standing in front of the entrance. Made of embroidered silk, it consisted of trousers tightly adjusted at the hips and waist but flaring along the legs, with a sort of long dress split along both sides and covering the trousers. The silk was of a pastel blue-green color, with a giant hawk embroidered across the front of the dress. Ingrid was also wearing jewels and makeup.

"My god, you're striking in this, Ingrid! What kind of dress is this?"

"It is called an Ao Dai and is the traditional dress for women in Vietnam. I had quite a few of them made for me during my combat tour there in 1952 and 1953."

"It is truly beautiful. Please come in! Most of the other guests have already arrived."

Patricia next led Ingrid to the back of the house, where about thirty persons were mingling around the backyard, talking and drinking. Most of the men stopped talking for a moment to admire Ingrid and her outfit. Neil Armstrong spoke for many then.

"I will never understand why you are not married yet, Ingrid. Men should be pounding on your door every day and night."

"I am already married...to my plane. My only other love in life is my adopted daughter, Hien."

"And how is your cute Hien doing? Has she started her rebel years yet?"

Ingrid sighed then, attracting knowing smiles from many of the men and women around her, who were in most cases parents of teenagers.

"She's on the verge of that stage, I'm afraid. Boys are also starting to turn around her and she seems to like that."

“Oops! Gray hair is not far for you, Ingrid.” Said Leroy Gordon Cooper, grinning widely. Ingrid rolled her eyes, resignation on her face.

“Yeah! Maybe the easiest way to cope with this would be to simply let my door wide open and just hope for the best.”

“Nah!” Objected Alan Shepard. “That won’t work: they could simply change their mind and try to date you instead when they see you.”

Ingrid giggled at that, with many of the couples now surrounding her also laughing.

“Hien wouldn’t like that one bit, Alan. Well, I’ll manage: I always have up to now.” She then grew serious and looked at her pilots around her.

“I got a call from the White House today. I was asked to attend a meeting of the new President’s cabinet on Monday, in my capacity as National Director of Space Programs. We may very well get fresh marching orders from President Kennedy after that meeting.”

“Do you have any ideas of what to expect there, Ingrid?” Asked anxiously Virgil Grissom, the smallest of the male astronauts but also a top notch pilot. Every man around her listened intently as she answered him slowly, weighing her words.

“I may, but whether I am right about that would depend on how different our century’s history is from the one that was known by my late adoptive mother in her own time. I will thus wait to see what is said at that meeting instead of speculating. Be sure though that you guys will be the first to know.”

Seeing that his comrades were still somewhat concerned, Edward White spoke out, trying to bring the cheer back in his party.

“You know that they will need us more than ever, guys! Who would put their precious telecommunications satellites in orbit if not for us? Come on! Let’s get those steaks started on the grill!”

As the other pilots followed Edward White, his wife Patricia stayed with Ingrid, looking sheepishly at her.

“Ingrid, I know that there have been rumors in the press about you for many years, on many subjects. Is it true that you know well President Kennedy?”

A malicious smile came at once on Ingrid’s face. Looking around first to make sure that no one else could hear her, she bent forward and whispered to Patricia.

“Keep this to yourself: I bedded him a few times before he got married.” She nearly laughed at the face Patricia did then.

09:03 (Washington Time)
Monday, January 23, 1961 'C'
Cabinet Room, The White House
Washington, D.C.

Ingrid felt out of place at first, being the sole woman sitting with close to twenty men around the big table, all but one of them looking much older than her. She was also wearing a female suit instead of a uniform, being here as National Director of Space Programs and not as Commander of the Military Space Command. No other military person than her sat at the table this morning, not even the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Lemnitzer. Her only superiors present were the President and his Secretary of Defense, Thomas Gates, who had also been Secretary of Defense under the previous President. That Gates, and not Robert McNamara, was the Secretary of Defense was the direct result of Ingrid warning John Kennedy against choosing McNamara for the job, based on Top Secret ATHENA data about the tenure of McNamara's timeline twin in Timeline 'A'. Gates, a Republican, was probably still wondering why a Democrat president had asked him to serve in his cabinet. He was however a competent administrator with excellent knowledge of how the American armed forces worked and was the right man for the job in Ingrid's eyes. As for McNamara, however intelligent the man was, Ingrid was too happy to see him and his arrogant, technocratic micro-management style stay away from the Pentagon. McNamara was in fact not the only one to have been kept at a distance by John F. Kennedy, based on Ingrid's advice.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy looked understandably upbeat on this first official working day as President of the United States. Looking around the table at his cabinet members and other high state officials, he briefly stopped his eyes on Ingrid, smiling slightly before continuing his visual tour. Other men around the table also glanced at Ingrid. Their looks were however mostly ones of apprehension and not ones of physical attraction: Ingrid was still known by many under the nickname of 'God's general' and her spiritual connections and powers made many uneasy around her. John Kennedy, who had his severe back pains and blood chemistry problems healed discreetly by Ingrid in 1948, was one of the few in Washington who could interact normally with her. Taking a sheet of paper and consulting it briefly, John Kennedy then spoke up.

“Lady and gentlemen, we are here to start a new national administration, one that will push relentlessly the democratic values and ideals we all cherish. We will also do our best to get the country out of its present economic recession. At the same time we will have to care for the needy, the old, the sick and the downtrodden. Since preaching democracy to other countries would be hypocritical if a whole class of our citizens is denied at the same time most of its basic rights, I will make it one of my personal goals to put an end to racial segregation in the United States before I leave office.”

Ingrid, who was watching carefully the reactions to this speech, saw a few of the officials present, men from southern states, stiffen at those last words. She made a point of remembering them as John continued to speak.

“On the international scene, while Great Britain has been put back in its place three years ago, we are facing a continued challenge from the Soviet Union and, to a lesser degree, from Communist China and other communist states. We will however try as much as possible to use diplomacy instead of military force to counter their subversion. That said, I have no intention of neglecting our armed forces, which are our ultimate shield against aggression. While I will expect our military to use efficiently and responsibly its portion of the national budget, I will not run national social services on its back. Everybody in this administration will have to use as efficiently as possible his or her part of the budget and I won't tolerate graft or corruption, period! The eyes of the nation are on us now and we will lead by example, with the good of all of our citizens foremost in our minds.”

With that short opening speech done, John Kennedy then covered in turn and in detail the main policies and concerns of his new government with the various officials present at the table. A lot of it concerned economic points, as the national economy of the United States was still performing rather poorly and was foremost in the minds of a majority of American citizens. The sharing of the revenues between the various agencies and federal departments gave rise to some particularly tight discussions that were followed carefully by Ingrid: her own space program did represent a sizeable chunk of federal money and someone was liable to try to grab a piece of it to fund his own pet project. That actually happened as the discussion had been going on for a good half hour, with the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Abraham Ribicoff, consulting his copy of the current federal budget and raising a point with John Kennedy.

“Mister President, while I would love to build more social housing in our major cities, the budget allotted up to now to federal housing assistance is woefully inadequate for what we want to accomplish. On the other hand, our space program already ate up 746 million dollars for the present fiscal year ending in March. I realize that pictures of American astronauts in space can boost our national prestige around the World, but does our space program really need this much money?”

“Ingrid, your answer to that?” Said calmly the President, throwing the ball in her court. Ingrid nodded and read a few statistics from the notes she had brought with her, having been warned a few days ago to come prepared to defend her interests.

“Mister President, gentlemen, it is true that 746 million dollars represents a lot of money. However, you have to bear in mind the fact that, apart from putting in orbit and servicing various military and civilian satellites, the Military Space Command and its civilian division also is responsible for developing, designing and building all the hardware and space vehicles it uses. Very little of that hardware was even invented yet when my command was first created in 1955. Designing such complicated equipment and testing it until it was ready for production actually eats up a good 23 percent of my budget. Also, while not broken down in detail on your budget sheets, my command produces and operates our force of strategic intercontinental missiles. Please keep this number classified, gentlemen, but the Military Space Command presently mans a total of 214 nuclear-tipped, intercontinental ballistic missiles housed in protective silos. Those missiles represent our first line of nuclear defense and more missiles are being added to it every month. My ICBM division and its accompanying production program is projected to cost a total of 182 million dollars for this fiscal year alone. Add to that money the cost of fuelling, maintaining and crewing our space planes, which are by now putting in orbit an average of three satellites a month, and you will see that my budget is far from gargantuan in view of its responsibilities and tasks. I may also add that our current space capability came to us quite cheap if compared with the costs incurred by the Soviets, who are using more conventional and less efficient space launch systems. Finally, those satellites we launch in orbit represent force multipliers, both for our armed forces and for our civilian economy. We now have a complete constellation of telecommunications satellites in orbit that provides our citizens with coast-to-coast television, telephone and fax circuits that help link instantly together our huge country. Other satellites provide us accurate, timely meteorological pictures that help us prevent or minimize the damage from incoming storms, while more satellites provide worldwide

links between our forces and naval units tasked to defend the United States. Gentlemen, I can assure you that you are getting more than fair value for those 746 million dollars.”

“It seems that I now stand corrected, General.” Recognized with good grace Ribicoff, who had not known about Ingrid’s ICBM force. The President, visibly satisfied by Ingrid’s presentation, then jumped in.

“Gentlemen, this may shock many of you, but I am about to pump a lot more money in our space program, starting next fiscal year. I have made my mind to direct that the United States starts a program of manned exploration of the Moon, mostly for reasons of national prestige but also to stimulate the interest in science across our nation.”

“The Moon?” Exclaimed the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk. “But that program is liable to cost us billions of dollars, if it ever works!”

“That may be the price to pay to stay the most technologically advanced country on this Earth, Dean.” Replied Kennedy, who then looked squarely at Ingrid. Contrary to the men around her, her expression had barely changed on hearing the President’s words.

“Ingrid, what is your prognosis for such a program? How difficult would it be to achieve its goals and how much could it cost?”

“Mister President, the difficulty is certainly there but is not as great as you may think, as we already have space vehicles that could do the job. As for the cost, it will depend on the ultimate goals of that program. Do we simply want to create a photo opportunity for two or three American astronauts walking on the Moon while collecting a few rocks, or do we want to accomplish something more significant and long term?”

“What kind of long term accomplishment can you think of, Ingrid?”

With all the men around her now watching her intently, Ingrid weighed her words for a second or so.

“A permanently manned lunar base, Mister President, one where a few astronauts and scientists could study in detail the Moon, conduct experiments and make astronomical observations.”

While John Kennedy looked interested at once by this, his science advisor, Doctor Jerome Wiesner, was positively fired up.

“You would accept to let scientists fly on your space launchers, General?”

Ingrid smiled at his eagerness and nodded her head once in answer.

“With a minimal amount of training, yes. Contrary to conventional rockets, our space planes never sustain accelerations bigger than five Gs because of their launch profile, something about any healthy person can endure without real problems. A lunar base would have to be built gradually from modules brought from Earth but could be made to become relatively comfortable for stays of a few weeks. You could in turn tell me what kind of research or scientific work on the Moon would be most valuable for us, so that I know in which direction to point my design teams, Doctor.”

“Hell, there is so much that could be done up there!” Said dreamily Wiesner. “The geology of the Moon would of course be an obvious subject of research. The study of the human body in prolonged periods of low gravity would be another, along with astronomical studies.”

“Low gravity?” Said the Vice-President, Lyndon Johnson, visibly confused. Ingrid explained at once.

“Gravity on the Moon is only one sixth of that on Earth, Mister Vice-President. In essence, while keeping the same mass, a man that weighs 180 pounds on Earth would feel like he weighs only 30 pounds on the Moon. Prolonged stays in zero or low gravity could however have some detrimental long-term effects on the human body, especially on the bones and muscles. Up to now, the longest space mission we conducted went on for three weeks. The two astronauts involved in that mission came back apparently healthy except for a slight atrophy in their muscle tone. Stays of a few months in space could however be another matter.”

“What about mental health in those conditions?” Asked Robert Kennedy, the younger brother of the President and also the new Attorney General. “Could someone really stay in space for months without going crazy?”

“I suppose that we could compare that with what the crews of nuclear submarines have to go through.” Answered Ingrid, shrugging. “However, we won’t know for sure until we conduct really long-term missions in space, or on the Moon. It is definitely one aspect that I will make sure to have analyzed carefully before we establish a base on the Moon. A minimum size crew would be one way to help the astronauts cope with long stays in space. You could imagine yourself locked up in a Moon base alone with only one other astronaut, only to find that you hate each other’s guts.”

Robert Kennedy winced at those words, while many around the table smiled. Lyndon Johnson even tried a crude joke then.

“We could make it a coed crew, so that they would like each other.”

Ingrid looked at him with a vague smile, one elbow on the table and her chin supported by her right hand.

“Sir, have you ever smelled the inside of a car where a couple just made love with the windows closed? How about having to live with that smell for weeks and months?”

Quite a few men laughed then, including the President.

“Alright, we get the picture, Ingrid. Start thinking on how you would realize a Moon program and come back to me once you have a fair estimate of the time and costs involved. You are welcomed as well to talk with Doctor Wiesner about the types of research to be done on the Moon.”

“I will get on it, Mister President!”

“Good! Now, let’s talk about our foreign policy.”

John Kennedy then reviewed various problem areas in the World and the American interests connected to them, with most of the input coming from Dean Rusk, Adlai Stevenson, the United States’ representative to the United Nations, and from the National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy. While she could have given her own two pennies worth of opinion during that part of the discussion, Ingrid refrained from doing so, waiting instead to be asked to by the President before speaking. Too many people around the table were already either suspicious or jealous of her influence on the President and on national security policies, or resented the fact that a woman could have as much power as she had presently. John Kennedy did look at her at one point, as the subject of the military buildup of the Soviet Union and of its arms exportations to other communist countries was being discussed.

“Ingrid, what is the overhead surveillance capability of your Military Space Command like these days? Could you provide continuous coverage of a crisis area if asked to?”

“To a point, Mister President. Right now, my command has eight twin-seater SP-10A space planes that are used mostly as dedicated strategic reconnaissance platforms. Each of these SP-10As can fly a mission of a duration of up to five days three times a month, and that over any point or area in the World. The turnaround time between missions is due to the necessity of replacing the ablative heat shield plates after each flight. With the periodic refit periods and the need to limit the cumulative radiation exposure of my space plane pilots, I prefer to run no more than two reconnaissance

missions per week if possible. I can of course surge more missions in time of crisis if truly needed but this would be bound to impact on the long-term availability of our fleet of space planes, Mister President.”

“Only two missions a week?” Said in a disgruntled tone McGeorge Bundy, the National Security Advisor. “And what is this business of radiation exposure? You don’t have an atomic reactor aboard your space planes, do you, General?”

“No we don’t, Mister Bundy.” Said patiently Ingrid, understanding that few people would know about the true hazards of space flight. “The fact is that, each time you leave the protective shelter of Earth’s atmosphere, you expose yourself to radiations from space. If you go high enough, into the Van Allen radiation belts surrounding Earth, then you can get fried within one hour with the full maximum annual authorized radiation dose of five REMs, or more during periods of solar flare activity. If a pilot would stay a day or longer inside the Van Allen belts, he or she would most likely suffer permanent radiation damage, including sterility and high risks of developing a cancer. I thus have to treat my pilots with care and use them sparingly. As an example of this, I had to limit myself to five space missions last year because I had attained my maximum permissible exposure.”

“You still fly into space?” Asked with disbelief Dean Rusk. “But, the medias didn’t report those space flights!”

“The medias have mostly stopped reporting on our space plane missions, Mister Secretary, partly because they have become so routine and also because many of them are classified reconnaissance missions.”

“And how many hours have you clocked into space up to now, General?”

“A bit over forty days since I first flew into orbit in 1957. My last flight was last Wednesday, when I coached a new astronaut on his first space mission in a four-seater SP-10B. My two most experienced space pilots have up to now accumulated each 738 hours in space, a good chunk of that during a three-week stint in low orbit.”

Rusk wiggled his hand as the men around the table exchanged looks and exclamations.

“Damn! You make space travel sound like routine, General.”

“It is anything but routine, Mister Secretary.” Said soberly Ingrid. “Each pilot has to train hard before each mission and risks death every time he or she goes up in space. We have not suffered a single casualty or significant incident up to now but we have been lucky...so far. To return to your original question, while two missions a week is my

preferred limit, my command could surge up to eight reconnaissance missions per week for brief periods. To do better would take more space planes and more pilots.”

That left President Kennedy thoughtful for a moment. He then pointed an index at his Secretary of Defense, Thomas Gates.

“Tom, we certainly could use more strategic reconnaissance capabilities. Please look into your budget and see if you could spare a few millions for a few more military space planes and pilots.”

“Will do, Mister President.” Replied Gates while noting that down on a pad. Ingrid had a hard time not to grin with satisfaction then.

The cabinet meeting finally wrapped up a bit after eleven O'clock, with President Kennedy then leaving quickly to attend other priority matters. Ingrid was stuffing her own papers and notes in her secure briefcase and was about to go as well when Doctor Jerome Wiesner approached her, a hopeful smile on his face.

“General, would it be possible to have lunch together? I have a zillion things I want to talk with you concerning our space program and particularly the Moon mission.” Looking up from her briefcase, Ingrid returned the smile of the jovial scientist.

“Only if you stop calling me ‘General’ and call me Ingrid instead, Doctor. You do realize that these subjects may be sensitive ones?”

“Oh, I do, Ingrid! I know a place where we could speak quietly. And Jerome will be fine with me.”

Ingrid's smile then turned into a grin.

“Touché, Jerome! Do we walk or do you have a car? I flew in from Florida yesterday.”

“I have my car parked near the East Entrance.”

“Excellent! I had something to retrieve at the East Entrance anyway.”

Ingrid closed and locked her briefcase, then followed Wiesner out of the room. They both took the time to recuperate their winter coats before proceeding to the exit on the east side of the White House. There, Wiesner was intrigued when he saw Ingrid stop and talk briefly with one of the security guards. His curiosity turned into shock and astonishment when he saw the guard take a pistol and a spare magazine from a locked safe and give them to Ingrid, who then stuffed them into ankle holsters hidden by the bottom of her flared trousers.

“You go around armed, Ingrid? Why?”

“Because many would love to see me dead, Jerome.” Answered Ingrid deadpan while finishing to cover her pistol with the bottom of her left trouser leg. “You can pick between the British, the Communist Chinese, southern rednecks, the Mob and a few others.”

“The Mob? What do they have against you?”

“My nanny shot dead four of their muscle men in 1955 while they were trying to kidnap the children of a neighbor playing with my own kid. The boss of these hit men was then killed himself in a shootout at his own house in Washington. While the evidence pointed at an internal Mob dispute, a few gangsters still think that I or my nanny was involved. I also happened on another occasion to directly spoil the plans of a crime boss, who didn't like it one bit. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough proof for the police to act against that mafia boss, so he got away free.”

“What plans? How could you have been involved?” Asked Wiesner, surprised. Ingrid gave him a guarded look, not ready to give him any details about that affair, as it concerned President Kennedy personally. The truth was that she had in the past months forcefully counseled John Kennedy not to let his father take the offer of a powerful crime boss to help his election campaign. John Kennedy had listened to her, angering both his father and the crime boss, who had also tried to influence John Kennedy by acquainting him with a pretty woman in his pay. Again Ingrid had spoken to John, even hardening her words to him and reminding him of the consequences of fooling around his wife Jacqueline. What John Kennedy didn't know was that Ingrid had accosted in private afterwards the said Mafia woman and told her in no uncertain terms to disappear from John Kennedy's surroundings. When the woman in turn threatened her with the hire of her mobster boss and lover, Ingrid had retorted by reminding the woman about a certain guardian angel of hers. The mobster boss had apparently taken her veiled warning seriously, as he had not bothered Ingrid after that. While John Kennedy owed her heavily for all this, she had refused his offers to reward her, asking instead that he simply keep listening to her advice and put a brake to his wild sexual life.

“I would rather not speak more about that, as it involves someone else. However, I will be most happy to speak about Moon exploration once you show me that quiet place for lunch.”

“Uh, right!” Said meekly Jerome Wiesner, realizing that insisting on that subject would be futile. “My car is to the left after the exit.”

Both soon got in Jerome's Dodge sedan car, with the scientist then driving away from the White House in the downtown Washington's heavy traffic. They didn't have much time to talk about the Moon mission in the car, as Jerome parked only a couple of minutes later in front of a small restaurant. Ingrid grinned when she saw what kind of restaurant it was.

"A Jewish delicatessen? I do love smoked meat sandwiches. Do they make them well here?"

"The owner is from New York and makes one of the best smoked meat sandwiches anywhere."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Said enthusiastically Ingrid while opening her door. She took her locked briefcase with her to go inside the restaurant with Jerome, where a waiter directed them to a small table in the back of the long but narrow dining room. The smell and sight of smoked meat briskets being warmed up on steam tables and then carved up fully opened the appetite of Ingrid, who wasted no time in placing her order, like Jerome. The dining room was half full, with no other customer closer than two tables from the one occupied by Ingrid and Jerome. Ingrid thus felt safe to speak in a low voice to the scientist while waiting for their food and drinks.

"Have you been given access to the ATHENA files from the future?"

"I was cleared for them last week but have not had time yet to consult them yet. Why do you ask?"

"Because they contain quite a lot of data about the Moon and how it was explored in my adoptive mother's time. We could save a lot of time and effort by consulting them in detail. For one thing, we wouldn't use precious resources to answer questions that were already answered in the future."

"A very good point indeed, Ingrid! I frankly can't wait to see those files: they must be fascinating reading."

"They are, Jerome! Unfortunately, too many people still act as if they are irrelevant because they describe another history than ours. It nearly cost the United States dearly in Vietnam when a few twits at the State Department chose to ignore the lessons contained in those files. Now that we are here, how about telling me what you want us to study on the Moon?"

They had been talking and eating for maybe fifteen minutes when three men in overcoats and felt hats entered the restaurant and quickly scanned visually the dining

room before proceeding towards the back of the room, where Ingrid and Jerome were. At first, Ingrid didn't pay much attention to them, a number of customers having entered and left at intervals in the restaurant. Their faces had also been partly hidden by their hats and raised coat collars. Ingrid then was able to see clearly the face of the man in the middle of the group of newcomers as he walked past a wall lamp while removing his hat. She tensed up at once and, moving as naturally as possible, crossed her left leg over her right upper leg, so that she could easily reach for her pistol in its ankle holster while her hands stayed hidden under the table. Next, she spoke in a near whisper to Jerome, who was starting to wonder why she had abruptly stopped speaking.

"Jerome, this is deadly serious: if I yell 'down', then dive under the table and stay there. Don't ask me about it now."

"But..." Started to say the surprised and confused scientist. That was when the newcomer in the middle, a bull of a man with curly black hair and distinct Mediterranean features, stared at Ingrid, first with disbelief, then with rage. His right hand flew inside his suit jacket as he growled.

"YOU?"

With Jerome watching on, Ingrid actually waited until her opponent had taken his hand out of his jacket, uncovering a pistol, before herself pulling out her pistol from under the table. The two men accompanying the gunman were slow to react and were still reaching for their own handguns when Ingrid fired first, the loud blast from her compact .45 caliber GLOCK 30 terrorizing Jerome, the other customers and the staff of the restaurant. The gunman was projected backward by the bullet's impact, slamming against the nearest wall and then sliding down to the floor, dead. Ingrid fired two more shots in rapid succession, hitting the two other men now pointing revolvers at her. One man went down at once, while the other staggered but stayed up and fired once. His bullet pierced Ingrid's suit's left sleeve, grazing quite deeply her upper arm and making her yell briefly with pain. She fired a fourth time, this time hitting the remaining gunman in the head and dropping him. Dead silence followed in the restaurant for a moment, then the shrieks of panicked women came out as Ingrid, clinching her teeth because of the pain from her upper left arm, cautiously approached the three gunmen with her pistol pointed at them. Checking them one after the other, she found them all dead. Jerome joined her as she was getting back up after checking the last gunman.

"Wha...why did you shoot those men, Ingrid?"

“Because they were about to shoot me, Jerome. The first man I shot was Albert ‘Mad Hatter’ Anastasia, a vicious Mafia killer and crime boss who had been on the run for years and wanted me dead. The two others were most probably his bodyguards.” Seeing her wince with pain, Jerome then realized at last that she had been wounded.

“My God, you’re bleeding!”

“I know!” She said quietly. “Call the police and an ambulance.”

“Uh, right away!”

Jerome was about to go to the telephone near the cashier when Ingrid stopped him briefly.

“And call the President after that to tell him what happened.”

Jerome nodded, then went to the telephone. As he was placing his calls, Ingrid holstered back her pistol and then sat down, ignoring the bewildered stares from the other customers. Grabbing a cloth napkin from a table, she applied it carefully on top of her wound, covering the ripped and blood-stained fabric of her jacket’s sleeve and applying enough pressure to stop the bleeding.

Jerome was still on the telephone, talking to someone at the White House, when the two first policemen rushed inside the restaurant with guns drawn, causing renewed panic among the unfortunate customers. The policemen stopped and crouched in firing positions when they saw the three dead men near Ingrid. Approaching her cautiously with revolvers at the ready, they scanned the scene, noting the handguns in or near the hands of the dead men. The senior policeman, a sergeant, then looked at Ingrid.

“You hurt bad, miss?”

“Grazing wound to the upper left arm, Officer. I’ll live. By the way, I shot those men in self-defense. That one with the curly hair over there is Albert ‘Mad Hatter’ Anastasia, a wanted fugitive and a dangerous killer.”

After a moment of stupor, the police sergeant pointed his revolver at her, his voice now hard.

“Where is your gun, miss?”

“In a left ankle holster. I am Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Military Space Command and National Director of Space Programs. I came here to have lunch after a meeting with the President at the White House.”

“Can anyone verify your version of the events, miss?” Asked the sergeant, still not ready to trust her. Ingrid nodded once and pointed her chin towards Jerome, who was still talking on the telephone.

“Doctor Jerome Wiesner was with me at the time of the shooting. He is the President’s Science Advisor.”

“Hank,” said the sergeant to his partner in an urgent voice, “you better go to the car and call all this in. This could be big!”

“No shit!” Replied unceremoniously the other policeman before running out. The sergeant then lowered his revolver and got closer to Ingrid but stayed on his guard. Ingrid showed him her briefcase.

“Officer, be advised that there are highly classified documents in my briefcase over there. Please do not open it and do not take it away from my sight, or you may end up with the Secret Service on your back. I don’t mean this as a threat but as a simple fact. I also have a key hanging from a chain around my neck. Don’t take it either: it is a nuclear missile launch key.”

“Well, I’ll be!” Could only say softly the policeman while staring at Ingrid. His expression then became apologetic. “I am sorry about this, miss, but I will have to take away your pistol for the moment.”

Ingrid eyed him for a moment, then nodded once.

“Alright, take it, Officer! Just make sure that I get it back...quickly. I may have more mobsters on my back after this.”

The police sergeant approached Ingrid, who had raised her left leg, and pulled out himself her pistol from its ankle holster, since Ingrid still was holding the bloody napkin to her upper left arm. He examined with interest the chunky but compact pistol, being especially surprised by its light weight.

“Nice piece, miss! I never saw this model before.”

“It is a .45 caliber GLOCK 30, made in Austria.” Said Ingrid, not wanting to say too much at this time. The policeman nodded while still looking at the weapon, then slipped it inside his gun belt and knelt in turn besides each of the three gangsters lying on the floor, checking if they were effectively dead. Once that was done, he got back up and took out his notepad and pen to take notes. That was when Jerome Wiesner came back towards Ingrid, being careful not to pass too close to the three dead men.

“The President has been advised, Ingrid. He is sending his brother and two Secret Service agents here.”

The policeman near him cleared his throat, making Jerome turn to face him.

“Sorry to interrupt you, mister, but could you identify yourself please?”

“Certainly, Officer!” Replied Jerome while fishing his wallet from inside his suit jacket. He then presented his driver’s license and White House security pass to the policeman. “I was having lunch with General Dows when those three men entered the restaurant and came towards us. One of the men then seemed to recognize Ingrid and became apparently enraged at her sight. He pulled a gun out of his coat but Ingrid was able to beat him to the first shot. The two other men also pulled out guns but were shot as well. One of them managed to shoot once, hitting Ingrid, then went down.”

The police sergeant, taking notes frantically, signaled him to slow down.

“Uh, please wait one second while I write all this down, mister. First, what is your job at the White House?”

“I am the President’s Science Advisor. Me and Ingrid had just come out of a cabinet meeting and came here to discuss some government business while having lunch.”

“And you saw one of those men pull a gun out at the sight of your friend?”

“Yes, Officer! He had one look at Ingrid, then became angry all at once while going for his gun. He shouted one word then: ‘you’. From his tone he certainly recognized Ingrid.”

“And your friend pulled her gun out then?”

“Exactly!”

The policeman then looked critically at Ingrid.

“And how do you explain that this mobster both knew you and hated you enough to pull a gun at your mere sight, miss?”

“That’s a long story, Officer, one that dates back to 1955. Then, I was working at the Pentagon and had a house in Arlington. One of my neighbors was District Attorney Loomis and his kids often came to my backyard to play with my adopted daughter. One day, four mobsters showed up, intent on kidnapping the Loomis kids to put pressure on their father, who was investigating a mob boss then. My nanny shot those four muscle men then, something that started something of a feud between me and the mob.”

The policeman’s face lit up then.

“I remember that case! Your nanny was quite a shot. There was also a big gunfight at the house of the local mob boss here in Washington that same day, along

with other massacres of gangsters in Chicago and New York. It was the start of a real mob war.”

“That’s right, Officer, and Albert Anastasia was one of the few mob bosses to escape the killings, which made him the prime suspect in that mob war.”

“But that doesn’t explain why that Anastasia hated your guts, miss.”

“I am not sure myself why. Anastasia’s nickname was the ‘Mad Hatter’ and he was known to lose his temper easily, so trying to understand him is not obvious. He must somehow have thought that the shootout at my house started the mob war he was then accused of planning.”

The policeman gave her a doubting look, obviously finding her explanation weak. Ingrid was however not going to tell him about an attempted blackmail case against the actual President of the United States. The arrival of two ambulance paramedics then distracted the policeman, who didn’t pursue his line of questioning and let the paramedics examine and treat Ingrid’s arm.

The paramedics had put a bandage over her wound and were ready to get Ingrid to the hospital for a more thorough examination when Robert Kennedy and two beefy Secret Service agents showed up at a near run. Robert looked visibly relieved when he saw that Ingrid was not seriously hurt.

“Thank God, you’re safe! How is your arm?”

“Just a deep graze, Bob. I’ll live.”

One of the paramedic gave Ingrid a cautioning look then.

“You will still need to have a few stitches put on, miss, and a doctor will want to take a good look at your arm.”

Ingrid smiled at Robert at those words.

“You have it from the horse’s mouth, Bob. Could you tell me if I am likely to be charged over this incident?”

“That would be up to a police inspector to decide, miss.” Cut in the police sergeant, getting sharp looks from both Ingrid and Robert. The latter gave the reply to that.

“Officer, General Dows was clearly acting in self-defense against a known gangster and wanted felon. I doubt that any respectable district attorney would want to charge her over this.”

“And you are, sir?” Replied the police sergeant, becoming testy. In response, Robert took a small card holder from one coat pocket and flashed it to the policeman.

“Robert Kennedy, Attorney General of the United States.”

While the police sergeant suddenly lost much of his spunk, a man in dark blue overcoat and black hat that had entered the restaurant and was walking towards them slowed down his pace and eyed Robert with surprise. He then approached Robert cautiously and took out a police badge, watched closely by the two Secret Service agents as he did so.

“Inspector Jack Merryweather, Washington P.D.. May I ask why the Attorney General of the United States would be concerned directly by this case?”

“There are quite a few reasons for that, Inspector,” replied Robert Kennedy, “some of which I am not at liberty to tell you because they involve national security. Suffice to say that General Dows, who is the National Director of Space Programs, was attacked while having lunch with the President’s Science Advisor by a wanted felon with a federal warrant on his head. You may take depositions from General Dows and Doctor Wiesner but I can’t see how you could justify arresting either of them.”

“Three men are dead, sir. As for this being a case of self-defense, that has not been proven or even demonstrated yet.”

Ingrid eyed Merryweather critically: the man was paunchy and smelled of cheap cigar, while his clothes looked like he had slept in them.

“Inspector, I always plan to kill armed gangsters, including one that had the reputation of being the most vicious killer in the country, while having lunch with another presidential advisor. Come on!”

“Well, miss, then tell me what happened. I only wish to be convinced.”

Ingrid sighed, then told again her version of the events, with Merryweather taking notes. Once she was finished, the inspector went to see the three dead men, eyeing in particular the position of their guns. He was still looking down at them when he spoke again to Ingrid.

“And you say that you drew on them after they had taken out their guns, miss?”

“Only one, Albert Anastasia, had his gun already out. The two others were slower. At the range the shootout occurred I couldn’t miss.”

“One of them did nearly miss you, miss.” Replied Merryweather, playing stubborn.

“Gangsters generally are poor shots, Inspector. I was trained by an expert.”

“Hmm...I will still ask you to come to the central police station to sign a deposition, miss.”

“And will I then get my pistol back, or do you intend to confiscate it?” Asked Ingrid, about to run out of patience.

“You have a carrying permit for it, miss?”

“No, I always visit the White House while packing an illegal gun, mister.”

Merryweather faced her then, only to find her eyes staring hard in his eyes.

“Listen, Inspector! While you may not have noticed, I was wounded in that exchange and there are two paramedics who want to bring me to a hospital first. I also know personally District Attorney Loomis and I doubt very much that he will support the idea of placing any charges against me, not because he is my friend but rather because he knows that I don't just kill people for the fun of it and that I am a law-abiding person. That Albert Anastasia hated my guts because I once thwarted some criminal plans of his and, being the mad killer he was, took out his gun the moment he recognized me. I simply recognized him first and got myself ready just in case. My instincts turned out to be correct and I won the firefight, pure and simple. If you want to insist on dragging me in front of a judge, then you better be ready to justify the waste of time and the unnecessary publicity of such a case. I will also want my pistol back, so that I can defend myself in case of another mobster's attack. If I get killed because of lack of protection, then you may very well end up having to justify your actions to the President of the United States, for costing him a cabinet level advisor.”

“Are you pretending that the whole Mob is after you, miss?” Replied Merryweather, exasperated by her combative attitude. It was Robert Kennedy who answered him on that.

“Pretty much so, Inspector. As I said, there are aspects of this case that touch national security. You can take my word for it.”

Merryweather then gave up, not ready to argue such details with the Attorney General. Grumbling to himself, he took Ingrid's pistol from the police sergeant and presented it to her.

“I will still ask you to come and sign a deposition at the central police station after going to the hospital, miss.”

“Don't worry, Inspector.” Said Ingrid while holstering back her pistol. Ignoring Merryweather from then on, she let Robert help her put back on her vest and coat while leaving her left arm out of the sleeve. She next grabbed her purse and locked briefcase

and, followed by Robert, his two agents and Doctor Wiesner, accompanied the two paramedics outside to their waiting ambulance. They were greeted at once by a dozen camera flashes and found themselves surrounded by reporters shouting questions at Ingrid and Robert.

“IS IT TRUE THAT YOU SHOT THE INFAMOUS ‘MAD HATTER’, GENERAL?”

“WHO FIRED THE FIRST SHOT, MISS?”

“WHY ARE YOU INVOLVED IN THIS, MISTER KENNEDY?”

With the two Secret Service agents forcing a way through the reporters and protecting Ingrid’s wounded side, they ignored the questions shouted at them and went to the ambulance, with both Ingrid and one agent getting in with the paramedics. As for Jerome Wiesner, he was about to follow Robert and the second agent when he abruptly stopped and turned back to the restaurant.

“I forgot to pay the bill! I won’t be long.”

He then disappeared inside before Robert could protest. The reporters took that chance to shout more questions at the latter, who kept quiet until Wiesner came back. They then went into their respective cars and drove off, following the ambulance transporting Ingrid.

16:49 (Washington time)

Willard Intercontinental Washington Hotel

1401 Pennsylvania Avenue NW

Washington, D.C.

Ingrid was quite tired by the time she got to the door of her hotel room: the pain and loss of blood from her wound were telling on her after what had been an eventful day indeed. After being examined by a doctor and getting sixteen stitches on a wound that had turned out to be deeper than first thought, Ingrid had gone to the central police station to fill a statement. The lengthy questioning she had faced there would have been even more disagreeable if not for the presence of Robert Kennedy, who had managed to contact District Attorney Loomis and get him to put an end to the whole nonsense. By then Ingrid was seriously wondering if some of the policemen at the station were not in the pay of the Mafia, something actually quite possible. More reporters had then rushed her as she got out of the police station and the two Secret Service agents assigned temporarily by Robert Kennedy to protect her had to again clear a path for her to their

car. Right now, Ingrid only wanted to clean up, change, have supper and then rest. First, though, she needed to make two phone calls. She was about to insert her room key in the door lock when one of the agents gently stopped her.

“Please let us check inside first, General.”

“As you wish, Agent Ralston.” Said Ingrid, giving the tall and athletic man her room key. She then stepped out of the way, so that she wouldn’t be facing the door when Ralston opened it. The latter noticed that and smiled.

“I see that you have been trained in personal security, miss.”

“I have!” Simply said Ingrid. While Ralston entered the room to inspect it, the other agent stayed with Ingrid, his right hand inside his jacket and his eyes scanning constantly the hallway and the various people present on the floor. After a few minutes, Ralston came back to the door and gave a thumbs up signal. Ingrid and the second agent went in at once, with the agent locking the door behind them. The latter eyed appreciatively the large, comfortable room.

“Not bad at all, miss. It must cost a bundle per night though.”

“Hey, it’s the Willard Intercontinental, Agent Miller. You wouldn’t expect less from a five stars hotel. True, the rooms don’t come cheap but a lieutenant general’s salary and amenities are a bit better than that of a mere lieutenant.”

Ingrid took the time to put down her locked briefcase and purse besides the small work desk near one of the windows, then turned and eyed her two bodyguards. Robert Kennedy had promised to send two more agents later in the evening to relieve Ralston and Miller.

“In case Robert Kennedy didn’t tell you, my briefcase contains Top Secret files, so it is about as precious as me. It is locked right now but I have the key for it around my neck. Now, are you both married?”

Ralston exchanged a surprised look with Miller before answering her.

“I am, miss. Miller isn’t. Why do you ask?”

“Because I will need help to undress and shower, what with my lame left arm, and I don’t want to be accused of trying to tempt a married man.”

She saw Miller redden with embarrassment at once, while Ralston repressed a smile.

“I am sure that Agent Miller will be able to stay professional no matter what, miss.”

“I believe he will indeed. Come with me, Mister Miller.”

Before following Ingrid inside the big bathroom of the hotel room, Miller whispered in the ear of his colleague.

“You really believed what you said about me, Jack?”

“No, but you can always prove me wrong, Dan.” Replied the senior agent, a mischievous smile on his face. Dan Miller sighed, then went to the bathroom behind Ingrid, who had taken the time to grab a set of spare underwear.

Now alone in the bedroom, Jack Ralston went in front of the television set and switched it on, then selected the CBS channel and sat in the sofa facing the television. He was just in time for a news flash that preempted the first moments of the regular programming. Not surprisingly it was about the shootout at the delicatessen restaurant, with Ingrid's role and the name of Albert Anastasia being prominent in the short broadcast. The commentator then told his viewers about the whereabouts of Ingrid after the firefight, including the fact that she had returned to the Willard Intercontinental Hotel. That last item instantly made Ralston swear at the medias for their irresponsibility: if the Mob wanted to find Ingrid after the shootout, then they now knew where to go. Switching off the television set, Ralston turned on the radio set on the bed night stand and listened for any station that would also talk about the shootout. He actually found two of them during the next fifteen minutes, both of which mentioned the Willard Intercontinental Hotel. Ralston was fuming by the time Ingrid emerged from the bathroom, wearing only bra and panties and with Dan Miller preceding her. The latter noticed at once the unhappy expression of his partner.

“Something's wrong, Jack?”

“You could say that. Both the television and radio news have divulged the fact that General Dows is staying in this hotel. Everybody now knows where to find you, General.”

“Including the Mob.” Said Ingrid, suddenly bitter. She wondered when the medias would ever show some responsibility in the manner they reported the news. On the other hand, she could not just run and hide every time that reporters followed her. She had an important job with a very high visibility level and had to accept being in the public eye. “Fuck it, I'm staying here tonight!”

“That could be risky, General.” Remarked Ralston, making her nod her head once.

"It could but, on the other hand, today's encounter with Anastasia was a totally chance one. I doubt that anyone will be so pissed anyway at seeing that vicious killer dead. I will now make a couple of phone calls, then will dress and we will go have supper at the hotel's restaurant."

"You're the boss, General." Said Ralston in a resigned tone, still not liking it. Ingrid patted his shoulder, then went to the telephone sitting on a bed night stand and called her house in Patrick SCB, Florida. Sarah's voice answered after two rings.

"General Dows' residence!"

"Sarah, is Hien back from school yet?"

"No, but she shouldn't be long. If you are calling about an incident with Albert Anastasia, I know about it already: it is all over the news since two O'clock this afternoon, with the latest bulletin placing you at the Willard Intercontinental. How is your wound, Ingrid?"

"It actually is a long, deep graze along my upper left arm. It took sixteen stitches to close it and I will probably be grounded for two or three weeks, at the least. Can you reassure Hien about me when she will show up?"

"Of course, Ingrid."

"One last thing, Sarah: be extra vigilant from now on. Our saga with the Mafia may not have ended yet."

"Don't worry about Hien, Ingrid: she is safe with me."

"Sarah, you don't know how relieved that makes me feel. Thanks for your help."

"My pleasure, Ingrid."

Sarah then hung up, followed by Ingrid, who looked sourly at her two bodyguards.

"My little shootout incident has been on national news since two O'clock, guys. Even my nanny in Florida knows from the medias that I lodge at the Willard Intercontinental."

"Jesus!" Swore Ralston angrily. "We might as well put a neon sign outside your door, General."

"Well, then you will have to prove that you are as good as your reputation, guys. Let me do a second call and I will then dress for supper."

Ingrid's second call was another long distance one, but to California this time. Getting Gertrude Meserve at Vandenberg AFB, she asked her to send in the morning two pilots in a twin-seater TF-83B to Andrews Air Force Base, so that she and her

faithful LADY HAWK could be flown back to Florida. With that done, she put on with Miller's help a new blouse and female suit with low heel shoes, not forgetting to fit her pistol holster and magazine retainer around her ankles and covering them with the bottom of her trouser legs. Once dressed, she grabbed her purse and her secure briefcase and went out with Ralston and Miller, going down to the hotel's main restaurant.

While the supper was uneventful, the looks from the other patrons, some discreet, some not so discreet, proved that she was very much in the news today. Her appetite somewhat lessened despite the fine quality of the cuisine, Ingrid made it a quick supper, while Ralston and Miller kept a discreet but constant watch while eating. Leaving a good tip with the bill after they had finished eating, Ingrid returned to her room with her bodyguards and sat at the work desk, while Ralston and Miller sat at opposite corners near the entrance door. Ingrid saw Miller pull out his gun to check it briefly, something that gave her an idea.

"Is that the standard sidearm of the Secret Service, Agent Miller?"

"Yes, General: snub-nosed Smith and Wesson .38 Special revolver. It is easy to conceal and fast to use."

"It also has hardly enough punch to stop a squirrel, no offense meant. Maybe you would want something more serious while we are in this room."

Ingrid then opened her secure briefcase and took out of it her open carry handgun, a GLOCK 21C .45 caliber pistol equipped with a 3D Bushnell Holographic unit. Both Secret Service agents came to her at once to eye in detail her gun. Ingrid removed the magazine and ejected the bullet that had been chambered, putting the bullet back in the magazine before handing her pistol to Miller.

"This is what I carry when flying into combat. Like my smaller pistol, it is made in Austria and came from the future: they were gifts from my adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante. This GLOCK 21C holds up to thirteen rounds of .45 caliber, works in double action only and is also equipped with a special optical sight that helps speed pointing. I will lend it to you guys while we are inside this room tonight."

"Thirteen .45 caliber rounds? That's amazing! And it is also so light for its size." Said Miller while handling the pistol. "Is it made of aluminum?"

"No, it is mostly plastic." Replied Ingrid with a grin, making the two men look at her with disbelief. "That plastic is however like nothing you know now. There is no

safety catch because there are a number of internal safety features that makes this weapon totally safe until you hold it by its grip and deliberately pull the trigger. You will find the trigger pull quite smooth and crisp too. To power on the sighting unit, just push the switch there. However, don't let it powered on all night or you will run its battery flat."

"Got it, miss." Said Miller while trying the trigger pull and finding it to his liking. Ralston then pointed at two large holes on the top of the slide, near the muzzle.

"What are those cuts for, General?"

"Muzzle climb compensators. They really help in keeping the gun on target during rapid shooting."

"Damn! I wish I could have a baby like this for myself."

"Sorry, can't help you there: this pistol is now a one-of-a-kind in this world. Here is the magazine for it. You may keep it near you during your watch. In the meantime, I have some work-related reading to do."

While Ralston sat back in his corner, the GLOCK 21C laid on a table within easy reach, Miller went to watch the television, keeping its volume low in order not to distract Ingrid from her reading. On her part, Ingrid pulled out a number of Top Secret files and started reading copies of ATHENA documents relating to space exploration and technology as it was known in 2012 'A'. She already had a few ideas about how to achieve the goal of landing a manned craft on the Moon but wanted to review what had been known about the Moon in Nancy's time and also see what the technological solution had been like then. What she saw about the APOLLO program both impressed and disappointed her: while the sheer size and power of the SATURN V rocket was mind-boggling, the rather meager returns for such a huge investment seemed in comparison laughable. She made her mind then that the United States would get a lot more than just a few hundred pounds of Moon rock and a few surface experiments from her future program. On the other hand, the files gave her a number of precious answers to critical questions about the Moon that would normally have necessitated the sending of many robotic and manned missions to find the same data.

It was well past nine O'clock in the evening, with a tired Ingrid about to go to bed, when someone knocked on the door, making her two bodyguards tense up at once. Ralston gave Ingrid a firm sign to go hide in the bathroom as he grabbed the GLOCK 21C, then hid himself in one corner while signifying to Miller to open the door. The

younger agent approached the door and spoke through it, careful not to stay directly in front of it.

“Who is it?”

“Flower delivery for Miss Dows, sir.” Said a juvenile voice. Miller, his revolver out and hidden behind him, cracked open the door by a few centimeters and saw effectively a young hotel valet holding a long box with a gift ribbon around it. Opening the door wider, he took the box from the teenage boy’s hands.

“Do you know who sent those flowers?”

“Uh, no sir! The reception desk gave the box to me with instructions to bring it to Miss Dows’ room. There was no receipt to sign, so they are probably a gift from an admirer.”

“Alright, I will take care of giving it to Miss Dows.” Said Miller, who took out a one dollar bill and gave it to the teenager before closing back and locking the door. Ralston came to him at once to examine the box.

“Hmm, the size and weight of the box would jive with flowers and I recognize the logo of a known flower shop on the box...”

“Don’t open it yet!” Said urgently Ingrid as she walked out of the bathroom, her GLOCK 30 pistol in her right hand. “Anything could be in that box.” Stopping in front of Dan Miller, she gently took the box from him despite his objections and those of his partner, then went to put it down slowly on top of the bed. There, she cautiously turned the box around, trying to see anything unusual about it. Finding nothing, she pulled out a short but very sharp commando knife from an ankle scabbard and started cutting very carefully a rectangular opening in the cardboard on one side of the box. She soon had a two by three centimeter opening made, which let her and the two agents look inside the box. What she saw then froze her blood.

“I can see at least a half dozen sticks of dynamite, with some sort of trigger mechanism connected to them and the top cover. Somebody is really pissed off at me today.”

Jack Ralston swore with frustration and straightened up before walking towards the telephone. Before picking up the receiver, he pointed an index at his partner.

“Dan, you get General Dows out of this room, now! Bring her to the hotel security office and take this big gun with you. I’m calling the bomb squad, along with some reinforcements.”

“Wait!” Said Ingrid as Dan was about to grab her right arm. “Let me pack and carry those classified files first. It won’t be long.”

“Then make it quick, General: this bomb could also have a radio remote detonator system.”

Understanding his concerns too well, Ingrid quickly stuffed back her files in her secure briefcase, then grabbed the latter and her purse and followed Dan Miller out in the hallway. Both of them walked quickly, Miller in the lead with the GLOCK 21C in his hands, getting to the nearest elevators within half a minute. The few people who met them, patrons and hotel staff alike, either fled or got quickly out of the way at the sight of the pistol and of the resolute expression on the agent’s face.

They were in front of the elevators and waiting for a cabin to come up when a violent explosion shook their floor. Both Ingrid and Dan Miller snapped their heads around at once towards the hallway they had just come down and saw after a second a cloud of dust and smoke blow out of it. Dan Miller paled and spoke one word with dread.

“Jack!”

He started running at once towards their room, followed as quickly as she could by Ingrid despite her wounded arm. With the bomb now detonated, there was no reason left to stay away from her room, while Jack Ralston could very well need help urgently. When they arrived near Ingrid’s room, they found the hallway filled with debris and dust. The door and parts of the wall giving on the hallway had been blown away and what they could see of the inside of the room was a complete shambles, with all the windows blown out and even the walls separating it from the adjacent rooms partially ripped open. The cold January wind was now blowing around the room but had at least the benefit of clearing the smoke and dust that had filled it. Searching anxiously for Jack Ralston, Ingrid and Dan saw at the same time a red mass leaning against a wall and ran to it. Even after all that she had seen in the course of four wars, Ingrid nearly felt sick when she recognized the mass as being what was left of Ralston. On his part, Dan Miller knelt slowly in front of his dead partner, hit hard by instant grief.

“Jack, God!”

Ingrid, putting down her briefcase, then knelt besides Dan and gently passed her right arm around his shoulders.

“There is nothing more we can do for him, Dan. We should check if anyone else has been hurt.”

Dan took many seconds before acknowledging her words with a nod, unable to speak. He then got up with Ingrid, who grabbed back her briefcase and went with him to the room next door to the left. An elderly couple was now coming out of it dressed in pajamas. Both the man and woman were covered with blood and appeared in shock. Dan and Ingrid went to them at once and, reassuring them as best they could, started guiding them towards the elevators. Hotel security guards were now starting to arrive and, after looking with horror at the bomb damage, quickly helped in evacuating the customers. Apart from the elderly couple, a family with three children also had been hurt. Dan Miller actually helped carry a severely wounded little girl, while Ingrid guided the dazed and bleeding girl's older brother down the hallway. As for the parents, who had been partially buried in their bed by debris, rescue workers had to treat them on the spot until the arrival of better equipped paramedics.

Policemen and firemen arrived within ten minutes from the blast, followed closely by ambulance attendants. By then Ingrid had made Dan put the big GLOCK 21C away, back in her secure briefcase, so that he wouldn't create more panic among the customers and staff of the hotel. Thankfully, the hotel staff had enough sense not to allow reporters or photographers to go up to the damaged floor and the policemen who showed up also put up tape barriers and control points to restrict access to the blast scene. Four men of the Secret Service in dark suits and overcoats showed up as well at a run, flashing their badges to pass through the police control points. Their leader, a man Ingrid knew from previous visits to the White House, looked around grimly at the damage, then went to Dan Miller, who was standing with Ingrid near what had been her room.

"Where's Ralston, Agent Miller?"

"Dead, sir." Answered quietly Dan, still somewhat shaken. "What is left of him is in the left corner of the room, against a wall. I was leading General Dows towards the elevators and away from the bomb when it exploded. There must have been either a timer device or a radio remote detonator system."

Without a word the senior Secret Service agent went inside the room and had a look at Ralston's remains before returning to see Dan and Ingrid, his face hard.

"General, you are obviously still in danger of death and this hotel has been compromised. I thus intend to move you to the White House for the night, under escort." Ingrid nodded slowly, still thinking about Ralston and the other victims of this bloody act.

"You are right, Mister Brown. Just let me recuperate first what I can of my spare clothes. Dan, could you hold on to my briefcase in the meantime?"

"Sure, Ingrid."

The senior agent then pointed at one of his agents.

"Fred, help General Dows pack what she can."

"Yes sir!"

Ingrid and the agent were starting to go through the room's closet when a senior policeman came at a run, shouting.

"HEY, THIS IS A CRIME SCENE! NOTHING IS TO BE REMOVED OR TOUCHED UNTIL THE PLACE HAS BEEN PHOTOGRAPHED AND ANALYZED."

The senior agent stepped in front of him at once and flashed his badge in his face.

"Secret Service! General Dows was the intended target of the bomb that exploded here and I am escorting her out. One of my men was just killed by the bomb, so don't piss me off now, buster!"

Taken aback by Brown's tone of voice and his badge, the policeman didn't insist and backed away. Brown was turning back towards the inside of the ruined room when he saw a tall person in white hooded robe standing over the remains of Jack Ralston. He took out his gun in a flash and pointed it at the newcomer, who had somehow managed to pass by his agents and the policemen unnoticed.

"HEY, YOU! FREEZE!"

The person looked calmly up from the body of Ralston and at him, allowing him to see that it was a woman with black hair and green eyes. Ingrid, who had turned around with Dan Miller on hearing Brown's order, opened her eyes wide at once.

"Natai!"

"Who?" Said Brown while still keeping his eyes on the tall woman.

"My guardian angel, Mister Brown." Said softly Ingrid, making Brown stare at her for a second. When he looked back at the woman, it was only to find that she had disappeared as mysteriously as she had come. Completely flabbergasted by this, he then heard Dan Miller's choked voice.

"She...she vanished, just like a ghost."

Going slowly to where the woman had been, Brown didn't even find her footprints in the plaster dust covering the carpet. His revolver lowered, he then faced Ingrid, who had a sober expression on her face.

"Your...guardian angel?"

“Yes, Mister Brown. The same one who healed and rejuvenated me in 1953 in Israel. My bet is that many gangsters will die tonight, starting with the ones who sent me this bomb.”

“Jesus!” Could only say Brown, with Ingrid correcting him at once.

“His correct name was Yeshua, not Jesus, Mister Brown. My guardian angel knew him well.”

“Uh, right!”

Brown, shaken to the core, tried his best to concentrate back on his work here, filtering the people coming close to Ingrid or entering the ruined room. Two morgue technicians finally came to take away Jack Ralston’s mangled body in a rubber bag, by which time Ingrid had finished collecting her things. With Dan Miller carrying Ingrid’s briefcase and one full suitcase, Brown made his other agents escort Ingrid downstairs, with himself leading the way. Soon they drove out to the nearby White House in two cars, with the agents nervously scanning around as they went.

An anxious President and his First Lady were waiting for them inside the White House’s Entrance Hall when Ingrid and her escort agents arrived by the North Entrance. John and Jacqueline Kennedy came to her at once when she entered the hall, with the President speaking first, genuine concern in his voice.

“Are you alright, Ingrid?”

“Yes, Mister President. Unfortunately, one of your Secret Service agents was killed by the bomb meant for me.”

“John,” cut in Jackie, “we should let Ingrid rest before anything else: she had a very rough day.”

Ingrid smiled to the First Lady, who was also a good personal friend.

“Thanks for the thought, Jackie. However, this whole business calls for some urgent talk with your husband.”

“Then at least let me get your things carried to a guest room.”

Jackie then had a White House butler take the briefcase and suitcase carried by Dan Miller, to bring them upstairs. With Jackie now taking care of her accommodations, Ingrid looked somberly at John Kennedy.

“Mister President, we need to talk, privately.”

“I believe that you are right, Ingrid.” Said the President before looking at Brown, standing behind Ingrid. “Reinforce the security around the White House, Bill. Be especially on the lookout for possible snipers and assassins.”

“Yes, Mister President!”

As Brown and his agents got busy, John Kennedy gently led Ingrid towards the West Wing and the Oval Office while speaking in a low voice.

“Do you think that this is the Mob again, Ingrid?”

“Probably, John. Unfortunately the media coverage of the noon shootout at the restaurant gave away the place I was staying, so it was easy for the bomber to find me and send me a supposed box of flowers. We got suspicious at once and Agent Ralston ordered his partner to escort me away from the room while he was calling the bomb squad. It blew up as I was getting to the elevators.”

“Ralston was a fine agent. I will make sure that he is honored for this. Now, why do you think the Mob would still be after you? Albert Anastasia was hated by many in the Mob and had few friends.”

“John, I believe that I earned that bomb not because I killed Anastasia but rather because of the counsels I gave you in the recent past. By giving you advice, I cost the Mob both money and influence.”

John gave her a cautious look then, knowing too well what she was talking about. He lowered his voice even more.

“But Anastasia was the one who sent me that woman and he is now dead.”

“That was one attempt at blackmailing you, John. I believe that this is connected to something else.”

“What would that be?”

“You remember the little clash of wills between me and the CIA director when I advised you to veto his idea about enlisting the Mob to get rid of Fidel Castro and also convinced you to abandon that silly plan to invade Cuba with exiled Cubans?”

“Yes, I do. What about it?”

“Well, for starters, the Mob lost a couple million dollars when the CIA had to backtrack from giving it an assassination contract against Castro. It lost even more when the prospects of gaining back their lucrative clubs and casinos in Havana, which had been nationalized by Castro, evaporated with the cancellation of the planned invasion by the Cuban exiles. In short, the Mob judges my influence on you to be

detrimental to their long term interests. Some people around this country and government also resent me, for many reasons.”

“People in my government?” Said John, skeptical. Ingrid stared directly into his eyes.

“John, how many plans or policies have you either scrapped or modified since I started giving you political and military advice in private?”

“Uh, quite a few, in fact.” Recognized John Kennedy, now seeing where she was heading. “Many of my other advisors have gripped to me about your ideas being too liberal or even socialist, if not to say communist. I of course paid no attention to such nonsense.”

“But those people certainly didn’t forget. John, I may not only be facing the Mob here. I may as well be facing a Mob recruited by some special interests in this country to get rid of me and of what they consider a bad influence on you.”

The President stopped walking then, looking down at her with concern.

“Can you be more specific, Ingrid? What special interests?”

“Actually, the list is depressingly long, John. I could start with segregationists in the South and the rest of the country. Then, there are the big commercial companies which were prevented from influencing you into foreign policies that would have been detrimental in the long run to the United States but would have helped their profit margins at the expense of poor foreign workers and laborers. The American Fruit Company and its machinations in Guatemala is a good example of that but not the only one, by a far shot. The CIA and the State Department has also its contingents of people who hate my guts with a passion.”

John Kennedy was silent for a moment while staring at his ex-lover, now one of his most precious advisors.

“And what are your plans now, Ingrid?”

“To continue to advise you no matter what, John. You will be the one to decide when not to listen to me. By the way, my problems with the Mob may mostly go away tonight: my guardian angel showed up briefly in my room after the bomb blew up. I expect her to do some serious cleanup job tonight.”

John was taken aback for a moment by those words, not because he was concerned for the Mob but because of the notion that someone could enjoy such powerful protection. The beautiful redhead standing in front of her was easily the most influential woman in the United States these days. Another round of divine justice in her favor would only

reinforce her influence and scare into submission many of her detractors. However, it also could harden the resolve of some of her enemies to kill her as quickly as possible.

“Ingrid, what are you after, truly? What is the ultimate goal of your guardian angel?”

“I would prefer to wait until we are in the Oval Office before answering that, John.” Said softly Ingrid, her expression sober. John eyed her in silence for a moment, then led her into the Oval Office. The two Secret Service agents that always followed from a distance the President of the United States took position outside the door of the Oval Office after it closed behind Ingrid and John. Both men, who were sworn to absolute secrecy concerning anything they heard during a presidential conversation and who had been able to hear some of what had been said between Ingrid and John, exchanged awed looks.

“Christ, Pete, this woman certainly deserves her nickname of ‘God’s General!’”

“Some actually pretend that she is in league with the Devil, not with God, Rick.”

“You don’t seriously believe that, Pete, do you?”

“Not at all, but some others do.” Replied the agent, dead serious.

Ingrid deliberately chose to sit in a chair facing the sofa on which John sat, instead of sitting besides him. She knew how strong his libido was and didn’t wish to tempt him into making advances to her. Jacqueline Kennedy was a woman she admired and respected and she didn’t want to encourage her husband’s notorious infidelity. She had done her best up to now to drive sense and restraint into John Kennedy’s mind but she knew that the President was still tempted by most of the beautiful women he met and sometimes let himself succumb to desire. Ingrid was also conscious of the sexual attraction John still had towards her and kept a reserved, semi-formal attitude.

“John, know first that I do not control my guardian angel, nor do I know her plans or intentions in advance. The one thing I know is that she tries within certain limits to make this country and the rest of the World a better place for all, apart from protecting me and my daughter Hien. That protection however has its limits, because I asked her to basically let me live my destiny as written. Hien is the one that benefits mostly from her protection now. If Natai, my guardian angel, appeared briefly tonight, then it probably means that she intends to launch another phase in what I would call for lack of better words a campaign of purification. As for me, I simply want to serve my country the best I can, for the good of all. What I earn in terms of military honors or titles I intend

to earn strictly by my own merits and not from Natai's actions. Don't factor her in when considering my professional performance, John."

The President looked at her soberly for a moment, digesting her words, then spoke quietly.

"The actions of your angel sometimes makes me think that she is bent on imposing God's will on this country. Am I right?"

"Only partly, John. What I am going to tell you must stay with you alone. There are actually three parallel universes, not one. We live in this one, which Nancy Laplante called timeline 'C'. That timeline was in turn created from another one, timeline 'B', which itself emerged from the original, primordial timeline 'A'. Nancy Laplante came from timeline 'A' and inadvertently created timeline 'B' when she was projected back in time to 1940 from 2012. Timeline 'C' was then created by a split in timeline 'B' in 1941. All three worlds now exist in parallel, with no natural interference between them. In timeline 'B', Natai openly promotes the word of her master, 'The One', whom you would probably call 'God'. In that world she regularly performs miracles, heals people, administers divine justice and often punishes evildoers. One of her most notable actions in that timeline was when she turned all the racists in the World ebony black, to teach them tolerance. That resulted in a few million suicides in the United States alone. You must however understand that timeline 'B' is unique from the two other timelines, as time travel is openly used and known there from the public in the 20th Century, and as angels and Chosen people like Natai act openly in public. In timeline 'B', Israel is known as 'The Holy Land of Palestine' and is ruled directly by Natai in the name of The One. There, peace and justice truly reign, putting to shame many other countries, including the United States. However, our own universe is for a number of reasons not destined to see direct divine rule, only limited interventions by Natai, like what will probably happen tonight."

"And...those reasons for not seeing direct divine rule here, do you know them?" Asked hesitantly John, hearing a lot more than he had bargained for. Ingrid lowered her eyes then, while her shoulders sagged. Her voice also became a near whisper.

"I do know, John. They have to do about our future. If things don't change drastically, then something awful will happen in the years or decades to come, something that could spell the end of Humanity. However, only ourselves can change things and prevent that."

“Nuclear war, probably.” Said quietly John, having studied too much history not to realize what was the biggest scourge of Humanity. Ingrid nodded at that.

“Probably. I am only 35 years old and I already lived and fought through no less than five wars. With the way our technology is advancing in leaps and bounds, we are liable to eventually self-destruct through sheer stupidity.”

Both were then silent for a moment, gloomy thoughts going through their heads. John Kennedy spoke up after a minute, measuring his words.

“Ingrid, what should I do in view of this? What is your true role in all this?”

“John, my only proper role is as your National Director of Space Programs and Commander of the United States Military Space Command. Apart from that I can advise you about foreign and domestic policies, based strictly on my own sense of decency and of what I believe to be right. What I am not is some kind of divine messenger, as some would make me out to be. You are free to listen to my advice as you wish and to take it or reject it in whole or in part. You however have other advisors and aides who, while not infallible or even always honest, have many competences and skills I don't have outside of space and military matters. Do not ignore them and make a balanced opinion by yourself, then act in the way that you judge best for the whole of the United States. That is after all the true mandate of the President of the United States, John.”

John Kennedy stared gravely at her as she finished speaking.

“Ingrid, this must be the most honest advice I ever got, from anyone. Know that you always will have my full confidence.”

He then got up from his sofa, imitated by Ingrid, and shook hands with her.

“Thank you for your advice, General Dows. We will see each other again tomorrow at breakfast with the First Lady, before you return to Florida. I will be expecting your recommendations on the Moon exploration project with impatience.”

“I will throw myself in it right away, Mister President.” Replied Ingrid, happy to see that John was now reacting like the President and not like her ex-lover. She felt good as she walked out of the Oval Office to go to her guest room upstairs.

09:51 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, January 24, 1961 'C'

Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C.

John Kennedy was reading through one of the countless files filling his 'in' basket when his secretary, Miss Evelyn Lincoln, called him via the intercom box on his desk.

"Mister President, your brother Robert and Director Hoover are here to brief you about a most urgent matter."

Instantly guessing what this could be about, John pressed the 'talk' button of his intercom.

"Let them in, Miss Lincoln."

Even though he expected some sensational news from the two men, John was at once taken aback by the expression on the face of his younger brother. As for F.B.I. Director Hoover, he looked as if he was in near shock.

"Bobby, what is going on?"

"Is Ingrid Dows still around, John?" Said Robert urgently. John shook his head.

"No! She left here after breakfast and flew out of Andrews about half an hour ago. Why do you ask?"

"Because over 6,000 known or suspected gangsters died overnight around the United States, along with the boss of the Teamsters Union, Jimmy Hoffa, over 130 other union executives and the Director and Deputy Director of the CIA. All died of the same cause: blood cloth to the brain. If this isn't another act of God from Ingrid's guardian angel, then I don't know what is."

While the death of the gangsters and union executives didn't shock John, those of the two top officials of the CIA did.

"Director Dulles and General Cabell, dead? Why would an angel kill them?"

"Mister President," said then J. Edgar Hoover, "I would like to have General Dows brought in so that she could answer that question, along with many others I have for her. Director Dulles and General Cabell were high level government officials and their murders must be investigated in full. General Dows clearly must know a lot in this whole affair."

"Does she, Director Hoover?" Replied caustically John, bending forward in his chair and staring hard at the veteran F.B.I. director. "She was the target of two assassination attempts yesterday, was wounded in the first one and spent the whole night here in the White House. How do you propose to link her with such a widespread and fantastic death spree?"

"But, through her links with her so-called guardian angel, Mister President. I have had agents investigating General Dows' nanny, a Sarah Ur, for years and am

pretty sure that she is the one responsible for all those deaths last night, along with those of dozens of gangsters around the country in 1955.”

Turning his attention for a moment to his brother, John pointed at the television set sitting in a corner of the Oval Office, which was always on but with its volume to low level.

“How come that, with so many sudden deaths from the same cause in a single night, the medias have not caught up with this?”

“The medias have fragmentary reports only, John. They have not yet connected all the dots together but, when they do, it will be quite a national hoopla.”

“And having General Dows arrested would diminish that hoopla, Bob?” Replied John, making his brother suddenly realize what could follow. John was not finished, however, and looked back at Hoover. “Tell me, Director Hoover: how do you propose to put an angel in front of a judge?”

Hoover was left vacillating for an answer for a moment. His hardheadedness however made him come back to the charge.

“We won’t know until she is taken in for questioning, Mister President. Maybe she could then explain why she killed Director Dulles and General Cabell. I would agree that the death of all those racketeers and gangsters, while amazing, is far from tragic, but the deaths of Dulles and Cabell must be investigated.”

“I am here, Mister Hoover, so ask your questions.” Suddenly said a female voice coming from behind Hoover and Robert Kennedy. The two of them turned around at once, while John Kennedy stared past them with surprise.

“Laplante!”

The three men could now see a tall young woman with black hair and green eyes dressed in a hooded white robe and who was looking back at them with supreme assurance from the middle of the Oval Office. She also happened to float one meter above the carpet. Hoover was at first incapable of speaking, so she spoke to him calmly while staring into his eyes, making him even more unsettled.

“Yes, I did kill Director Allen Dulles and General Charles Cabell, along with 6,247 other men yesterday. Why did I kill those two CIA officials? Simply because they deserved it. To be more precise, they paid the Mafia to commit numerous crimes on behalf of the CIA in the past and tried to have Ingrid Dows killed yesterday. Dulles and Cabell may not have murdered themselves innocent people but their orders caused the death of an untold number of innocents.”

“Why would they want General Dows dead?” Finally said Hoover in protest. “It doesn’t make sense!”

“It actually makes too much sense, Mister Hoover. By her advice to President Kennedy, Ingrid Dows recently aborted an attempted invasion of Cuba arranged and sponsored by the CIA. She also prevented by her advice a campaign of assassination by the CIA of labor union leaders in Guatemala, who wanted only just treatment and wages from their employer, the American Fruit Company. You may be interested in passing to know that Dulles and other high government officials were and still are shareholders of the American Fruit Company. A number of similar covert CIA operations were also thwarted through Ingrid’s advice given in the past to both President Eisenhower and President Dewey. For that and for diminishing their influence and power, Dulles and Cabell convinced themselves rather conveniently that Ingrid must be a closet communist and decided to have her killed at the first good opportunity, which was yesterday. By having a bomb parcel sent to her room, they expected the Mafia to take the blame for her murder, thus covering their tracks.”

“Wait a minute!” Said at once Robert Kennedy, stunned by all this. “Are you saying that the CIA sent the bomb parcel to Ingrid Dows’ room yesterday?”

Natai looked at him gravely and nodded once.

“I am not only saying it, I am also proclaiming it. The bomb-maker, a CIA employee, paid for his deed last night, at my hands. So did another nine CIA employees who participated directly in that plot. If not reined in now, your precious and hypocritical CIA would have gone as far as allying itself with organized crime and big special interests to assassinate President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in less than three years, for finding him too progressive and dangerous for the big corporate establishment. Now that organized crime is all but eradicated, you now have a duty to clean up and reform your CIA, which has become a power unto itself without proper controls and limitations to its mandate. Don’t wait for me to do that job, unless you want the United States to suffer major embarrassment in front of the rest of the World.”

Natai then faced Hoover, floating to a mere two paces of him while staring hard at him.

“Talking of embarrassment, you are yourself a particular one for justice, Mister Hoover. You have been using your position for decades to persecute many innocent people who only happened to disagree with your bigoted views. You also denied your own nature and persecuted homosexuals while yourself indulging in the same sexual acts you publicly declared to be so abhorrent.”

“But that’s ludicrous...” Started to protest Hoover, cold sweat on his forehead. Natai’s form then suddenly changed into that of a giant human face filling half of the room, with a male voice booming inside the heads of Hoover, Robert and John Kennedy.

“DO NOT LIE TO THE ONE! IF YOU HAVE ANY DECENCY LEFT IN YOU, THEN YOU WILL RESIGN YOUR POST AND STOP PRETENDING THAT YOU REPRESENT JUSTICE IN THIS COUNTRY!”

As Hoover wobbled on his feet, near passing out, the giant face turned again into the form of Nancy Laplante and eyed both John and Robert severely.

“Do not gloat, as you are not without reproach, either of you. You are both married to good women who have everything to make you happy and proud. Stop demeaning them by using other women to satisfy your lust. Your good deeds have up to now far surpassed your bad ones, so I will leave you to reconsider your conducts by yourselves.”

Natai then vanished from where she was floating, leaving three badly shaken men behind. Hoover, as pale as a ghost and looking close to a heart attack, gave a haggard look to John Kennedy, who was himself quite pale.

“I...Mister President, I present to you my resignation, effective immediately. I will let my successor deal with yesterday’s events.”

John looked back at him gravely. It was far better for everyone now to let him go quietly.

“Your resignation is accepted, Director Hoover. In turn, be assured that your reputation will not be touched by my administration during your retirement.”

Hoover nodded once at that, too happy to come out of this at such a small price. It could have been a lot worse for him. The ex-director of the F.B.I. then slowly walked out of the Oval Office, looking like a broken man. Once he was out, with the door closed behind him, the two Kennedy brothers exchanged embarrassed looks. The older one then wiped his forehead with one shaking hand.

“Bob, tell Hoover’s deputy that he is in charge until I can nominate a replacement. Tell him to keep the inquiry on yesterday’s deaths as low profile as possible. That will give me some time to try cleaning up the CIA.”

“Who will you name as successor to Dulles and Cabell, John?”

“I don’t know yet. If this business of trying to assassinate me in the future is true, then a serious cleanup is in order, starting with those damn covert operations.”

“Some of those CIA agents could try to kill you in order to protect their positions, John.” Warned Robert cautiously, making a flash of anger appear on John’s face.

“Dammit, the CIA is supposed to serve the United States, not itself! If the CIA covert operations division refuses to obey my orders, then I will dismantle it, pure and simple. If they are stupid or arrogant enough to fight back, then it will be the whole CIA that I will order to stand down, to be rebuilt from scratch. I will not tolerate sedition from a government agency!”

John then calmed down somewhat and sighed heavily.

“If Ingrid wasn’t so important for our space program, I would have put her in charge of the CIA.”

“Ingrid, at the CIA?” Said Robert, disbelief in his voice. “John, she wouldn’t fit in at all there.”

“I don’t need someone who can fit in with the CIA, Bob: I need someone who can gain back control of it.”

11:18 (Florida Time)

Thomas Jefferson Middle School

Merritt Island, Brevard County

Florida

Hien’s math teacher was interrupted in the middle of an explanation on the blackboard by knocks on the door of the classroom. Going quickly to the door and opening it, Mister Lawrence spoke briefly in a low voice with someone in the hallway, then looked at Hien, seated in the third row of desks.

“Hien, your mother is here to see you. You can take five minutes with her in the hallway.”

Hien, overjoyed, got up from her desk at once and nearly ran to the door. Ingrid, dressed in a flight suit, greeted her with her right arm extended, the left one being held in a sling. Careful not to touch her left arm, Hien hugged her mother and kissed her on both cheeks.

“It’s so good to see you, Mom! I was scared to death for you when I heard the news about the bomb against you. Are you okay?”

Ingrid, her eyes wet with tears, looked proudly at her thirteen year old adopted daughter. While smaller than the average American girl of the same age, Hien was already a

beautiful teenager, as much as she had been a beautiful young girl when Ingrid had adopted her in Vietnam. She had also proved that she was a bright one as well, with Hien consistently achieving 'A' grades at school.

"Only my left arm will trouble me for a few weeks, but there will be no permanent sequels. You don't need to worry either about more Mob attacks against me: Natai did a thorough cleanup job on them last night. Keep that to yourself, though."

Hien gave her a funny look.

"Mom, as if I don't know yet about keeping mum about Natai. Still, I will have to thank her tonight."

"Just think it and it will be enough for Natai."

Closing her eyes, Hien did just that and was rewarded at once with words echoing inside her brain.

"It was a pleasure, Hien."

Even after living for years in the contact of an angel, Hien was still impressed by this example of omnipresence. She then smiled hopefully to Ingrid.

"Could we celebrate your return together this evening? We could go have supper at a restaurant."

"A great idea, Hien."

Ingrid's answer made Hien happy: her mother had been kept away from home by her job too often to her taste. She hugged her again before asking another question.

"And your meeting with the President? Was it worth all the trouble you got in?"

"Oh, it was!" Replied Ingrid with a malicious smile. "I now have new marching orders for my space program: we are shooting for the Moon."

Hien was frozen for a moment by surprise, then yelled in delight while jumping up. Before she could say something, though, Ingrid put a finger across her lips.

"That is for your ears alone, Hien. It is not supposed to be known by the public yet."

"I'll keep my mouth shut, Mom." Promised Hien, grinning. "Will you fly yourself to the Moon?"

"Maybe." Answered Ingrid, surprising her daughter. "I have very heavy responsibilities and many people depend on me. Going into space for a two to three day mission is one thing. To be away from Earth for two weeks or more is something else. If I go, it will not be with the first Moon crew."

"But, they owe you so much, Mom! How could they refuse you such an honor?"

“Hien, I have already received more honors than any other living American. My pilots also deserve some of it and I will gladly let them grab first spot on the Moon. I tell you what, Hien: I will give you a chance to meet with the pilots who will go to the Moon. I am having my astronauts, engineers and rocket scientists come here for a little brainstorming session by the end of the week. I will need you then to help me.”

“Me?” Said Hien with disbelief in her voice. “How could I help you in greeting a bunch of pilots and rocket scientists?”

“You will see, Hien, and you will love it.” Promised Ingrid with a smile.

15:29 (Florida Time)

Friday, January 27, 1961 ‘C’

Military aircraft main apron, Patrick Space Command Base

Cape Canaveral, Florida

Major General David Aldridge, Commander of the Cape Canaveral Eastern Test Range Complex, and Brigadier General John Medaris, Commander of the Huntsville Rocket Research Center, stood on each side of Ingrid as they waited for the arriving C-2000 super heavy lift transport aircraft to stop on its designated parking spot. Hooked under the central pod/pylon of the C-2000 was a SP-10B four-seater space plane, the ENTERPRISE, empty of rocket fuel for this trip from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. Aldridge looked up at the cockpit of the giant transport aircraft, situated in the nose of the central pod/pylon, over twelve meters above the ground.

“God! I will never get accustomed at how huge this behemoth is.”

“You should be accustomed to it by now, Dave.” Said Ingrid with a smile. “The C-2000 has now been in service in the Air Force for over three years and Transport Command keeps screaming for more of them.”

“The Army is quite fond of them, too.” Added Medaris, an army officer. “With an intercontinental payload of over 200 tons and seating for up to 600 soldiers, it makes quick overseas deployments a snap, even for armored units.”

“It still could be improved on...and it will.” Said Ingrid with a mysterious smile, attracting curious looks from Aldridge and Medaris. While they both knew that their new objective was the Moon, they still didn’t know how the project would shape up. In fact, the astronauts and engineers coming in on the C-2000 with their families were here to spend a working weekend during which the outlines and general directions of the project

would be drawn up. Knowing that Ingrid loved to spring surprises, both generals didn't push things further and watched with her as the big transport stopped and soon started unloading its passengers. A total of 83 men, women and children climbed down via the integrated stairs of the C-2000, led by Major General Bernard Schriever, Commander of the Vandenberg Western Test Range Complex, with his wife and children at his side. According to Ingrid's instructions, the military members in the group were in informal civilian clothes, as Ingrid wanted her space personnel to be as relaxed as possible for this working weekend: ideas and imagination worked better when one was relaxed. Ingrid herself wore a light pastel blue Vietnamese Ao Dai outfit, while Aldridge and Medaris wore civilian trousers and polo shirts. Schriever couldn't help salute Ingrid out of habit when he stopped in front of her.

"Vandenberg group reporting in, General."

"At ease, Bernard! Let's make it informal from here. How was the trip?"

"Uneventful. The kids aboard loved it, though. Imagine: a plane where you could run down the cabins and even play. It makes me wonder when Douglas Aircraft will put into service a civilian airliner variant of the C-2000."

"That's an interesting question indeed. Maybe Mister Whittaker, who came with you, could answer that during supper at my place tonight. Well, in the meantime, let's get you to your accommodations."

Ingrid then made a sign to the drivers of three military buses parked besides the hangar in front of which the C-2000 now sat. As the buses started rolling towards them, Ingrid shook hands with some of the passengers out of the C-2000. Clarence 'Kelly' Johnson, Chief Designer at Lockheed Aircraft, and Tony LeVier, Chief Test Pilot at Lockheed, were among the first, along with their wives.

"Kelly, Tony, it is a true pleasure to be able to greet you and your wives in Cape Canaveral. You should love your weekend here."

Althea, Johnson's wife, giggled at that and patted her husband's left arm.

"Since you will be talking about aircraft and rocket, I'm sure that Kelly will love it, but what about us wives?"

"I promise that everyone will like their weekend, Althea." Replied Ingrid, grinning. "I have good food and drinks, dancing, music, movies and a few visits laid on."

"Movies?" Said Neva LeVier, sounding surprised. "What kind of movies?"

"Movies from the future, courtesy of my late adoptive mother."

The two Lockheed men and their wives opened their eyes wide at those words, with Tony LeVier grinning with anticipation as well.

“Any future aircraft in those movies, Ingrid?”

Ingrid answered while doing a dismissive gesture.

“Bof, a few planes, rockets and spaceships here and there.”

“Spaceships? Hell, what are we doing here? Let’s go to your place at once!”

“Whoa, Tony! At least take the time to unpack first. I have buses lined up to bring you all to a nearby hotel, where your rooms have already been reserved and paid for by the Military Space Command. Consider yourselves on a working vacation.”

With her guests and their families getting in the three buses and with Major General Aldridge offering the hospitality of his house to Major General Schriever and his family, Ingrid took Gertrude Meserve and Shirley Slade, who were going to stay at her house for the weekend, to her car, parked along one side of the hangar. Shirley was surprised by the sight of the red and white 1960 Ford Thunderbird hardtop with sunroof.

“Ingrid, what happened to your nice little Porsche 550?”

“I sold it a few months ago and bought this Ford Thunderbird. With Hien growing up and with Sarah still with us, my two-seater sports convertible was becoming less than practical, even though I loved it. So, what do you think of my new baby?”

“Not bad at all!” Said Gertrude Meserve while turning slowly around the car. “I see that you have an automatic transmission. I thought that you preferred manual transmissions.”

“I do, but the automatic transmission was the only one available with the special V-8, 430 cubic inch engine. That beast has 350 horsepower under the hood and can go quite fast. Put your luggage in the trunk, girls, and hop in.”

Shirley and Gertrude didn’t have to be told twice and got inside the car, with Shirley taking place on the rear bench seat. Gertrude nodded in appreciation when Ingrid started the engine and made it roar a bit.

“Nice sound! How’s the handling?”

“Not as good as my old Porsche but it is still quite decent.”

Ingrid then backed out of her parking spot and started driving towards the Central Housing area of Patrick Space Command Base, where her house was. Shirley Slade spoke up from the rear bench as they were rolling down South Patrick Drive at moderate speed.

“Did the police find yet who sent you that bomb in your hotel in Washington, Ingrid?”

“The police, no, but my guardian angel did. Keep this strictly to yourselves, girls, but the CIA sent me that bomb.”

“THE CIA?” Shouted Shirley, astounded. “Why them?”

“Why? Because my various counsels to President Kennedy and to two previous presidents have resulted in a number of CIA operations being cancelled or vetoed. It happened that a number of high level officials in the CIA, including Director Dulles, had personal stakes in an ill-advised CIA venture in Central America that was cancelled because of my advice to the President. That venture involved assassinating numerous local labor union representatives and the elimination of the main opposition politician, who was considered too left-leaning and was about to win the local presidential elections. The CIA was afraid that, if elected, that politician would force a certain American company that blatantly exploited its local workers to treat them decently, thus costing it and its American shareholders part of their precious profits. That is only one example of a case where my advice went counter to CIA-accepted wisdom. While my guardian angel killed those directly responsible for sending me that bomb, I am inclined to think that there are still some CIA officials out there who would love to see me dead. Even President Kennedy could be at risk from them.”

Shirley then burst out in anger and frustration.

“Who the hell do these CIA bastards think that they are? Do they really think that they hold a monopoly on truth and patriotism?”

“Some do, Shirley.” Replied Ingrid, sober. In truth, she was quite worried by this whole affair, especially in view of the risks that it created for her beloved Hien. If Natai had not been around to protect Hien, Ingrid would have thought seriously about leaving government service and accept the long-standing offer of a top job from Lockheed Aircraft Corporation.

The three of them were then quiet until Ingrid pulled up her car in the driveway of her house and stopped the engine. Hien, wearing her nicest Ao Dai outfit, came out at once at a run while waving happily to Gertrude and Shirley.

“Hi! It’s so good to see you again.”

“My, you did grow up fast, Hien.” Said with a grin Gertrude before hugging the girl. “The boys must be circling around you these days.”

“I’m having some success with them.” Recognized Hien, smiling maliciously. “It should be even better once I grow some tits.”

That made Gertrude and Shirley giggle, while Ingrid wiggled an index at Hien, faking indignation.

“I told you not to follow my example concerning boys, young girl.”

“And let you have all the fun, Mom?”

“Talking of fun,” said sneakily Shirley, “there were a few quite nice-looking teenage boys in the plane with us from California.”

“Really?” Said Hien, breaking into a grin. “I can’t wait until it is dancing time tonight.”

Gertrude looked at Ingrid then while making a face.

“Your Hien is thinking in a quite scandalous manner for her age, Ingrid. What did you do to the little sweet girl we met first in Da Nang?”

“Me, nothing.” Replied Ingrid, who then became very serious and lowered her voice. “My guardian angel opened her mind to her previous incarnations, like she did for me. Hien may be only thirteen now but she has over 6,500 years of past souvenirs in her head.”

Gertrude, like Shirley, couldn’t help then look with bewilderment at Hien, who had also grown serious.

“Holy...”

“It was a holy experience alright, Gertrude.” Cut Hien, speaking perfect German and making Gertrude even more surprised: Hien had not been known to speak German before. “I owe Natai a lot.”

“Natai? Is that the name of your guardian angel, Ingrid?” Asked Shirley. “I thought that Nancy Laplante was your angel.”

“She is, Shirley. Her primordial name, the one she bore during her first incarnation on Earth, was Natai.”

Shirley Slade, now a mature but still pretty woman of 39 years of age who had been flying as a combat pilot for nineteen years in the company of Ingrid, eyed cautiously her longstanding friend and commander.

“Ingrid, your life has truly been a succession of incredible things. I envy you.”

“And you proved to be yourself an exceptional woman, Shirley. Don’t ever sell yourself short. Now, how about getting your luggage inside and yourselves installed before the rest of the guests arrive for supper?”

“Right!” Said Shirley, who then went to the back of the car and opened the trunk, pulling out the four pieces of luggage belonging to her and Gertrude. They then brought them inside the house, where Sarah greeted them inside the entrance lobby. Gertrude and Shirley started kneeling in respect on seeing her but were stopped by a plea from her.

“Please don’t! You do not have to kneel to me, or to anybody.”

“But, you are an angel of God.” Said meekly Gertrude, making Sarah shake her head in denial. Sarah then pointed at another young woman who was coming out of the lounge and towards them.

“I’m not Natai. She is!”

Both Gertrude and Shirley examined sharply the newcomer. Looking to be maybe 25 years old, she was obviously from the Indian sub-continent and was extraordinarily beautiful and sensual, with a very feminine shape, brown skin, long silky black hair and big brown eyes framed in a smooth, oval face. She wore a colorful Indian sari dress of fine silk and stood quite tall for a woman, being about 173 centimeters. Ingrid then presented her to her two friends.

“Gertrude, Shirley, this is Natai in her form as Noor, her 66th incarnation since her conception. Noor was a dancer and courtesan in Madras in the Fourth Century B.C..”

“But...” stuttered Shirley while looking back at Sarah, “if Noor is your angel, then who is Sarah?”

It was Sarah who answered her by changing into the shape of Nancy Laplante, attracting gasps from Gertrude and Shirley.

“I am another Nancy Laplante from a parallel timeline. While I was given a number of powers by The One, including the power to change shape at will from my original one to that of Sarah and back, I am only a Chosen, not an angel.”

She then returned to the form of Sarah before the two guests could say anything.

“In view of the present situation Ingrid is confronting, I came to temporarily help Natai protect Hien.”

“And Noor,” asked Gertrude while looking at Ingrid, “how will you explain her to the others?”

“Simple: she is a friend of Sarah who came to help serve my guests for this weekend. Well, enough talking! Let’s get you too installed.”

Still shaken by Ingrid's revelations, Gertrude and Shirley nonetheless followed Ingrid upstairs to the guest bedroom, which had a large double bed. Ingrid smiled as she pointed the bed to her two friends.

"Sorry if I can't give you each a separate room. If one of you invites a man for the night, then you will have to share him."

"I see no problem with that." Said with a grin Shirley, making the older Gertrude shake her head in mock discouragement.

"Shirley, you should have married a long time ago."

"And what about you?" Replied Shirley.

"I'm like Ingrid: I'm married to my plane."

"Amen to that!" Said Ingrid, amused. "I will let you too unpack now. I have to check on the preparations for tonight's supper and party. By the way, the whole house is a no-smoking area. Smokers will have to go outside."

Gertrude and Shirley nodded at that, knowing already how Ingrid disliked tobacco smoke. That was another aspect in which Ingrid was outside the norm for this time period.

Going back downstairs, Ingrid went to the kitchen, where Sarah and Hien were busy preparing the service trays for the steam tables lined under a tent in the backyard. While no rain was expected during the weekend, Ingrid had not taken any chances and had requisitioned a section of modular tent from the base quartermaster, along with two propane-fuelled steam table trolleys and a few folding tables and chairs from the base main kitchen. The food for the hot buffet supper had come from caterers and was already ready to be warmed up, cutting the preparations for the supper to a minimum. Some of the caterers were however quite a way from the base, both in terms of distance and time. On the menu were a selection of hot Indian, Vietnamese and Arabic dishes, along with some more typical American fare. Since many children would be present, Ingrid had favored non-alcoholic or low alcohol drinks for the buffet, with the few bottles of strong spirits to be tightly controlled by Sarah. Ingrid was anyway hoping to avoid heavy alcohol consumption by her guests, as she needed them to be clear-minded tomorrow morning in order to start planning the Moon exploration program.

The first guests to buzz her entrance door bell at a bit past five O'clock were Doctor Jerome Wiesner, his wife Laya and their three teenage sons and one daughter. Ingrid greeted them at the door with a big smile.

"Hi, Jerome! Please come in with your family."

The Wiesners entered the lobby gingerly, only to be struck by the medieval decoration and artifacts around it.

"Wow!" Said in awe sixteen year-old Zachary as he eyed a late 15th Century full plate German armor standing against a wall. Jerome Wiesner himself was impressed as he examined the well-furnished panoply of edge and blunt weapons and of armor and shields.

"My God, Ingrid, you have enough hardware here to start a small medieval tournament. Are all those pieces authentic?"

"They are, Jerome. Come: I will present you all to Hien, Sarah and Noor."

She then led them to the lounge, on which the kitchen opened, attracting more admiring stares from the Wiesners at the sight of the antique Chinese furniture in it. Laya, the small wife of Jerome Wiesner, stopped to admire an elaborate and beautiful jade statuette sitting on an exquisitely carved small table made of lacquered wood. Next to it was a dragon sculpted and polished out of a piece of pink coral.

"Ingrid, your home is like an art collector's museum. It is so beautiful."

"Thank you, Laya." Replied Ingrid proudly. "I have been collecting antiques for quite a few years now, starting in the Philippines, where I was posted for many years. I tried to furnish my house according to themes that differed for every room. I can give you the grand tour after presenting you to my daughter, her nanny and a friend."

Guiding them to the kitchen, Ingrid then initiated a round of presentations. Ingrid didn't miss the admiring look that thirteen year-old Joshua then gave to Hien. As for the older Stephen and his father, they both eyed with delight Sarah and Noor, something that didn't escape the attention of Laya Wiesner.

"Your house definitely has everything to attract young men, Ingrid."

"Indeed, Laya. I have to say that I like to do some attracting myself from time to time."

"And you probably have no problems catching a few men in your net, Ingrid." Replied a smiling Jerome Wiesner, who then looked hungrily at the collection of dishes sitting in service trays on the table.

"This is looking like one fine buffet you are preparing."

“I actually have a few Kosher dishes in the lot, including smoked meat. Ah, here are Gertrude and Shirley, two of my astronauts from Vandenberg Space Command Base.”

The Wiesners turned around to face the two incoming female pilots wearing informal dresses. More presentations were exchanged, following which Ingrid led her guests outside in the backyard. The lot was actually quite large, as her house was graded as a general officer's accommodation and had been designed with official receptions in mind.

“The buffet will be served out of that tent and I had folding chairs and tables distributed around the yard for the guests. There will be music played during the reception and you will have many chances to dance. Also, I will show a couple of films during the evening. Please refrain from smoking anywhere inside the house, as I try to keep a smoke-free environment at home.”

“A sensible thing to do.” Approved Laya. “Tobacco smoke odors are so hard to get rid of from furniture and drapes.”

“Exactly! Could I interest you in drinks? I have both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages.”

Ingrid was showing them her selection of drinks when Sarah escorted into the backyard Major General Aldridge, Major General Schriever, Brigadier General Medaris and Doctor Werner Von Braun, plus their wives and children. From then on, the guests showed up at short intervals, keeping Ingrid busy greeting her guests and making them comfortable. By six O'clock, she had over eighty guests milling around the backyard, with other, small preteen guests being entertained inside by Noor. That was when Ingrid invited everyone to serve themselves at the hot buffet. Captain Edward White, a true athlete with a voracious appetite, opened his eyes wide with delight at the sight of all the various dishes on offer.

“Hell, more tough decisions to make.”

“Then take only a little of each dish and try everything, Ed.” Suggested Virgil Grissom, standing next in line to him and his wife.

“Sounds like a perfect plan, Gus.” Agreed White before starting to fill his plate. Ingrid, standing nearby and waiting for all her guests to have served themselves before eating herself, smiled at that exchange: Ed White's capacity to eat enormous amounts of food without gaining a single pound was legendary but had a lot to do with his constant and intensive physical training routine. She then caught from the corner of her left eye

Noor, who was now sprinting towards her while zigzagging around her guests. Suddenly alarmed, Ingrid was about to ask her what was wrong when Noor shouted to her.

“GET DOWN!”

The military men and women around the backyard instinctively reacted like Ingrid, ducking or diving for cover. That was when the loud crack from a rifle shot was heard by all, coming from the trees of the nearby base golf course, with a few even hearing a bullet whistle over their heads. She heard herself the noise from a bullet missing her head by a few centimeters. Noor sprinted past Ingrid towards the trees screening the golf course, jumping deftly over the backyard's fence. Before Ingrid could decide whether to follow her or to look for the safety of her guests, Charles Yeager crouched besides her, shielding her from the invisible shooter with his body.

“Get inside, Ingrid! I will cover you.”

“But, the others...”

“You're the target, not us. Go!” Insisted Charles, emphasizing his command by pushing her towards the house while hugging her back and giving her little choice but to obey him. They were more than halfway to the house's rear entrance when Charles cried out in pain and stumbled down, dragging Ingrid with him to the ground just before she heard the crack of a second shot. Two pairs of hands grabbed Ingrid and forced her up and running less than three seconds after that: Virgil Grissom and Edward White were now dragging her to safety, while she could see Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Scott Carpenter and Shirley Slade all rush to the aid of Charles Yeager. She was then pushed inside her house in one big hurry, making her lose sight of Charles. Sarah and Hien ran to her as she got to the lounge with her two escorts. While Sarah, holding a GLOCK 21C pistol, took position in her back, Hien hugged tearfully her mother.

“Mom, are you alright?”

“I am, Hien, but Chuck took a bullet for me. I have to call base security right away.”

Turning towards the telephone sitting on a low table of the lounge, she saw that Major General Aldridge was already holding the receiver and forming urgently a number, then speaking with what seemed to be the base duty security officer, ordering the base defense reaction force to deploy immediately around the golf course and to put the base on lockdown. Ingrid then remembered Charles Yeager's plight and looked for him. She saw him lying on the floor of the rear vestibule, with John Glenn and Shirley Slade

applying an improvised bandage on his shoulder wound while watched anxiously by Yeager's wife and young children.

"JOHN, HOW IS CHUCK?"

"Bullet through the right shoulder, which exited through the right chest. I think that the right lung was pierced."

"Damn! He'll need an ambulance, fast!"

"Already taken care of, Ingrid." Cut in Aldridge while putting down the telephone receiver."

Just then they heard the crack of a third rifle shot, which made the wives and children around them jump up nervously.

"That bastard!" Spat Ingrid. Laya Wiesner, who was crouched low with her husband and children in the now crowded lounge, gave a frightened look towards the backyard.

"Your friend Noor, she will be killed by that sniper."

"The reverse is more likely, Laya." Replied Ingrid, who then joined John Glenn and Shirley Slade besides Yeager, who was conscious but visibly suffering. She caressed gently his sweaty face, trying to reassure him.

"An ambulance is on its way, Chuck. Hold on!"

Aldridge joined her at that moment and looked worriedly down at Yeager, then at Ingrid.

"Someone certainly wants you dead, Ingrid. Do you have any idea who it could be?"

"Unfortunately, yes. If I can prove it, there will be hell to pay."

"Well, we should first think about your friend Noor's safety. Running after that sniper was quite foolish, even if it was damn brave."

Ingrid gave a sober look at her deputy, speaking in a low voice.

"Dave, my friend can handle anything, if you get my drift."

Aldridge then understood and paled, not insisting further about Noor.

The siren of an incoming ambulance was starting to be heard when Sarah, who was watching through a rear window, yelled.

"NOOR IS COMING BACK! SHE IS DRAGGING ALONG SOMEONE!"

As Ingrid and many others rushed to the window to see, a burst of distant gunfire was heard from beyond the golf course, followed by a number of single gun shots and a second burst.

“Hell, is the whole base under attack or what?” Wondered Aldridge in frustration before returning to the lounge’s telephone. He was back besides Ingrid a minute later, a satisfied smile on his face.

“Our security force shot a man trying to run a roadblock. That driver shot back at our men before being hit and going down but none of our people were hurt.”

“Is that man still alive?”

“Oh yes, and he is not about to escape.”

“Dave, you should tell your men to be extra cautious with that suspect: he is probably CIA and his people could try to either break him free or silence him for good.”

“The CIA? Ingrid, that is nuts!”

“No, it isn’t, Dave. Just tell your men to expect anything and to be really on their toes around that wounded prisoner. Just don’t tell them that he may be CIA.”

“If you say so, Ingrid.” Said Aldridge, who then returned yet again to the telephone. That was when Noor walked in, her right hand clutching the collar of an unconscious man dressed in a black coverall and her left hand holding a high-powered rifle equipped with a scope. She threw the man on the floor and showed the rifle to Ingrid, her expression neutral.

“Here is your sniper, Ingrid. I will now go check on Charles.”

Ingrid stopped her at once and spoke to her in a near whisper.

“You are going to blow your cover, Natai. An ambulance is about to arrive and Charles’s wound, while serious, is not critical. I love Chuck and care deeply for him but I need you to be able to stay and protect Hien.”

Noor nodded, understanding at once her reasoning. She still went to see Charles Yeager, to make sure that he would make it. Someone opened the front door a minute later, letting in two ambulance paramedics and a gurney. Ingrid watched anxiously with Glennis Yeager and her four children as Charles was carefully put on the gurney and was given a plasma intravenous.

“Chuck will make it, Glennis.” Said softly Ingrid to reassure her. “He is a strong man. He is also a brave man: I owe my life to him today.”

Ingrid next looked at Sarah, standing a few paces away.

“Sarah, could I ask you to take my car and drive Glennis and her kids to the hospital?”

“Of course, Ingrid.”

Sarah then handed to Ingrid the GLOCK 21C she was holding, getting in return her car keys, and left with the Yeagers.

Four Space Command policemen led by a lieutenant showed up less than a minute later, presenting themselves to Ingrid and Aldridge and saluting them.

“Maam, sir, is everybody here alright?”

“One pilot was shot and seriously wounded by a sniper but is now on his way to the hospital. The sniper was captured and is over there, with his weapon.” Answered Ingrid. “He has not been searched in detail yet.”

“Then we will take over from here, maam.”

The lieutenant and his men surrounded at once the still unconscious man and clamped handcuffs around his wrists before proceeding to search him carefully, even undoing his boots to look inside them.

“He had nothing on him apart from some money and ammunition for his rifle, maam.” Finally announced the lieutenant.

“Lieutenant,” said Aldridge, “put the base on security alert until further notice. Have everyone coming in or out carefully checked and post double the usual guards around the cell block where that man will be held. Advise the base JAG officer as well to open a case at once on this incident. I want no time wasted while processing this.”

“Yes sir!”

The policemen then grabbed solidly the unconscious sniper and his rifle and left. Ingrid visually scanned the lounge, full of traumatized women and children, and knew at once that her well-planned working weekend had just been literally shot to pieces. Aldridge, seeing discouragement on her face, patted gently her right shoulder.

“Ingrid, no matter what happened here today, we still have a job to do: create a program to go to the Moon. We can't let a few cowardly assassins stop us from fulfilling our mission.”

“I agree!” Said Brigadier General Medaris, soon echoed by the other military men and women around Ingrid. The latter looked up around her and saw only resolute faces. Jerome Wiesner then approached her and spoke up as well.

“Ingrid, I am ready to stay here and stick to our original schedule.”

“We are ready to stay too.” Said Laya Wiesner, surprising both Ingrid and her husband. “The least I can do is to support my husband and my country.”

“But, Laya, the kids...” Started objecting Jerome, who was cut off by his wife.

“...are not the ones threatened by whoever did this. Ingrid is and I don't see her quit because of that. It is safe enough here for me and the children, especially since that sniper was caught.”

To Ingrid's astonishment and pride, the families of her subordinates followed Laya's example to the last. Ingrid had a big lump in her throat as she looked at the assembled men, women and children facing her in the packed lounge.

“You are all indeed making me extremely proud this evening. Thank you all for your courage, your confidence and your sense of duty. If nobody has objections, we will then return in the backyard to have supper together.”

Hien, accompanied by Joshua Wiesner, was the first to go back outside, quickly followed by the rest of the guests. Aldridge gently smiled to Ingrid as he was about to go out too with his wife.

“We have good people, Ingrid. With them, we can accomplish about anything.” Ingrid nodded soberly at that, close to tears.

“You are right, Dave. With them, we will get to the Moon and back. I now have to make an urgent phone call to the White House. Tell the others that I will join them outside in a few minutes.”

Thankfully for Ingrid, President Kennedy was still at the White House when she called Washington and came on the line within a minute.

“What's up, Ingrid?”

“Someone just tried again to kill me at my residence in Patrick Space Command Base, Mister President.”

There was a shocked silence for a moment at the other end of the line. Ingrid used that chance to tell in detail to Kennedy what had happened, spending a minute to do so. At the end, Kennedy swore to himself, obviously enraged.

“If that damn CIA is involved in this, then I promise that I will turn it upside down on its head and extract all the rot from it. I will use the Army for that if need be. Do you have any way to find out and prove who tried to kill you, Ingrid?”

“We do have the sniper and his driver, the latter wounded, Mister President. If we could identify them, half the job will be done.”

“But, if they are CIA men, Langley will never recognized them as their agents.”

“I realize that, Mister President. I may have an idea but we would then need to act very quickly, in order not to allow any cover-up to be done once it is known that we are holding those two men.”

“Go on, Ingrid.”

Ingrid then spoke for a couple of minutes, explaining a plan that had just sprouted in her mind. Kennedy listened to her carefully and appeared to buy her idea.

“It may just work, Ingrid. I will have the necessary papers made at once here and will brief Bob on this. Fax me the photos and fingerprints of those two men as soon as you can. The extension for my secure fax is 2709. By the way, pass my regards to your wounded pilot and his family.”

“I will, Mister President. Good evening, Mister President.”

Kennedy then hung up, followed by Ingrid, who sighed heavily. This whole affair felt like a fratricidal war to her, something she didn't like one bit. There however was no place for a rogue government agency in the United States.

At the other end of the line, John Kennedy took a deep breath to control his anger at what had happened. If he was to lead the country effectively, then he needed to make sure that no government agency could sour his efforts by ill-advised or unauthorized actions, especially if they involved criminal acts. Whoever had ordered the killing of Ingrid Dows had gone well beyond any red line. Picking up his telephone again, he called his brother Robert at his home and briefed him quickly on what had happened at Patrick Space Command Base, then asked him to come to the White House at once. This done, John called the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Lemnitzer, and the Commandant of the Marines Corps, General Shoup, asking both men to come as quickly as possible and to be ready to execute a snap military operation. John felt both trepidation and excitement as he completed his last call. If this plan worked and produced the evidence he was hoping to find, his presidency would be that much more secure from clandestine operations and would gain credibility worldwide for being able to clean its own house. If however it turned to be a flop, then the domestic consequences could be severe. What Natai had told him about a future assassination attempt against him then came back to his mind, finishing to convince him to go ahead: better look ridiculous than to look dead.

20:18 (Washington Time)
Oval Office, The White House
Washington, D.C.

Robert Kennedy had a triumphant smile on his face as he entered the Oval Office, a few pages in his hands. His announcement made the President and Generals Lemnitzer and Shoup snap their heads around.

“Ingrid did it again! She just sent by fax these sheets with the pictures and fingerprints of the two bastards who tried to kill her. She also joined the results of the interrogations of the two suspects. They recognized that they are CIA agents and confessed to everything in front of the Judge Advocate General officer of Patrick Space Command Base. They also gave names and details of who ordered the hit. I now have more than enough to go in front of a judge to request an extensive search and arrest warrant.”

“And who exactly at the CIA was behind this, Bob?” Asked John Kennedy, secretly feeling immense relief: at least he was not going to look completely stupid in front of the Congress for hitting the CIA without proofs.

“Directly? The assistant director in charge of the Special Activities Staff of the Directorate of Operations of the CIA, a certain Ronald Atkins, was the one who personally ordered the two suspects to conduct the assassination of Ingrid. One of the suspects however said that Atkins alluded to him that the orders came from much higher still.”

The two generals that had been sitting and discussing the present situation with John Kennedy looked with shock at the young Attorney General, with Lemnitzer speaking while facing back the President.

“Those CIA bastards! Who the hell do they think that they are to go around trying to assassinate American officials like this? Their mandate concern strictly foreign matters.”

“That mandate was already too wide in my opinion.” Said grimly John Kennedy. “When I was briefed after being elected about some of the covert operations run or planned by the CIA in certain countries, especially in Central and South America, my hair rose on my head. If we are to promote democracy around the World, it won't be by assassinating elected heads of state or arranging coups and justifying them with flimsy excuses. I read extensively the ATHENA files on the political future of this hemisphere

and the long term blunders we did in that other history were quite embarrassing and damaging indeed. With this latest thing now known to me, I am firmly convinced that the CIA's mandate is in need of a drastic cut and weeding out."

"So, Mister President," said General Shoup, "how do you want us to proceed now?"

John Kennedy was thoughtful for a moment before answering the graying Marine Corps Commandant. Everything had to be made in a legal way, or their case against the CIA would evaporate in front of the courts. The CIA also had a very tight security system in and around its headquarters in Langley and John wasn't ready to bet that the CIA guards would place their loyalty to the United States above that to the CIA, even with a legal search warrant waved under their noses.

"Federal marshals and Secret Service agents will have to lead any raid on the CIA headquarters, General, not soldiers. Your marines may however be used to secure a perimeter outside the grounds of the CIA, in support of federal marshals. The tricky part will be to gain access to the inner secure areas of Langley, where any compromising files of interest to us would be, before CIA employees could destroy those files."

"That could indeed be tricky, Mister President." Said General Lemnitzer, turning gloomy. "The ideal solution would of course be to have insiders that could secure for us in advance those inner areas, along with their access points."

"Tomorrow is a Saturday, Mister President." Pointed out General Shoup. "At least the CIA staff present in Langley will be much thinner than usual, which should help us."

"He's got a point, John." Said Robert Kennedy. "Apart from Langley, we should also raid the residences of Assistant Director Atkins and of the others named by the suspects arrested in Florida. With Atkins neutralized, it should help facilitate our raid on Langley by preventing him from giving orders and directives to his Special Activities personnel, who are highly trained assassins and covert operators."

A discussion followed as they all read the faxed info carefully, highlighting the names of those involved who should be arrested. John Kennedy's telephone then rang, making him grab quickly the receiver.

"This is the President speaking."

“Mister President, this is Ingrid. I just got a suggestion from my, uh, special bodyguard that could help avoid a bloodbath during any police raid made in reaction to the attempt against me.”

“I’m listening, Ingrid.” Said John, already feeling his hopes going up. Ingrid spoke for less than a minute, making a grin progressively appear on John’s face. He finally thanked her after promising to call her back with precise timings, then put down the receiver and smiled to General Lemnitzer.

“General, we now have the insider help in Langley that you were wishing for.”

04:06 (Washington Time)

Saturday, January 28, 1961 ‘C’

Atkins residence, Alexandria area

Virginia

Loud knocks from the front door woke up both Ronald Atkins and his wife in the darkness of their upstairs bedroom.

“Who could that be at such an hour?” Grumbled Betty Atkins after a look at the alarm clock on her bed stand. Ronald Atkins felt some apprehension as he swung his legs out of bed: he still was waiting for confirmation that the Florida job had been completed successfully.

“Stay in bed, honey: I will go see who it is.”

“Be careful, Ron.” Said Betty, afraid that this could be thieves. In response, Ronald took his Colt .45 pistol from the drawer of his bed stand and walked out of the bedroom and down the stairs to the entrance lobby of his rural house. His house was isolated from his neighbors by curtains of trees, which gave Ronald Atkins some privacy to receive discreet visitors. It however also meant that hostile persons could approach his house without attracting the attention of his neighbors. Atkins discreetly looked through the curtains of a lounge window to see who was there. He was instantly alarmed by the sight of two dark vans parked in front of his house, with drivers still sitting at the wheels. At least four men also stood on his porch, wearing the caps and jackets of U.S. federal marshals. More vigorous knocks then followed, along with a loud male voice.

“FEDERAL MARSHALS! OPEN UP!”

A momentary wave of panic swept over Atkins then, who was nearly tempted to fight off those visitors. Common sense and the fear of putting in danger his wife then made Atkins put down his pistol on a table and go to the front door.

“Show me a badge, mister.”

One of the men did so, making Atkins reluctantly unlock and open his door. The marshal who had shown his badge faced him with a cold, hard look and handed him a folded sheet of paper.

“Mister Ronald Atkins, we have an arrest and search warrant against you, for charges of conspiracy to murder a government official and for sedition.”

“Sedition?” Exclaimed Atkins, not having expected that charge. “How the hell can you justify that one? I am a high level CIA officer.”

The marshal stared harshly at him at those last words.

“And it doesn’t give you the right or power to willfully and willingly commit illegal acts in defiance of the authority and directives of the President of the United States, Mister Atkins. Jeb, cuff him!”

08:29 (Washington Time)

Central Intelligence Agency headquarters

Langley, Virginia

Robert Kennedy, accompanied by a small initial group of four federal marshals, entered the lobby of the brand new CIA headquarters building complex and walked quickly towards the security access points, watched closely at once by the security guards present. Robert knew that those armed guards were from the Wackenhut Corporation, a private security firm with close ties to CIA covert operations, and didn’t expect them to be cooperative. He was however resolved to put this place back under proper control, which was why he was personally leading this law enforcement operation. Thankfully, very few unarmed civilian employees or visitors were present in the lobby at this time, which would limit the danger or risks to innocents. Going to the senior CIA security guard sitting behind a desk besides the security turnstiles, Robert showed him his official identity card while handing him a copy of his warrant.

“I am Robert Kennedy, Attorney General of the United States, and these men are U.S. federal marshals. Keep your hands visible and do not touch any button: we are

here to apply a search and seizure warrant signed by the Chief Justice of the Federal Court.”

The man, with five more armed guards to back him up and confident that the CIA had the right to deny its grounds to such legal procedures, smiled with arrogance at Robert while putting one hand under his desk and pressing the hidden security alarm button that would trigger warnings to the high security areas of the building. Robert’s reaction to that was immediate, giving an order to the marshals escorting him while staring down hard at the security guard.

“Arrest him and cuff him!”

Two of the federal marshals at once bent forward and, grabbing the guard by his shirt, literally pulled him out of his chair and over his desk, slamming him down on it to disarm and handcuff him. At the same time, the senior marshal with Robert spoke briefly in his portable radio.

“All units, move in now!”

As the other CIA security guards present were pulling out their revolvers and pointed them at Robert and his marshals, they saw through the front windows of the lobby dozens of heavily armed federal marshals pour out of a bus that had parked besides the limousine that had brought Robert Kennedy. As those marshals entered the lobby at a run with their assault rifles and combat shotguns at the ready, six more buses pulled up directly in front of the main entrance and let out over 200 more federal marshals.

“PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AT ONCE OR WE WILL SHOOT!” Shouted the federal marshal leading the assault group to the CIA security guards, who were now much less confident of themselves but were still pointing their revolvers at Robert Kennedy. After a short hesitation, the CIA guards put down on the floor their handguns and raised their hands high. They were then promptly surrounded and handcuffed. As those guards were being led out, Robert looked down severely at the CIA senior guard who had ignored his warning.

“You just lost your job, mister, apart from getting arrested and charged for obstructing justice.”

“This is the CIA!” Protested the guard, now sweating cold sweat. “You can’t do that!”

That got him a look of contempt from Robert.

“This is still American soil and the CIA is not exempt from American law, whatever it may have thought about that. It is about to learn the limits of its power. Take him away!”

Two of the marshals grabbed the guard and forced him up, then marched him out. On his part, Robert went through the turnstiles with his two remaining escorts and walked into the large hallway that ran along the long axis of the main building. Dozens of federal marshals ran past him, spreading out while heading towards precise areas of the complex. Other marshals systematically went through the administrative offices on the ground and upper levels, ordering politely but firmly all the CIA administrative staff they encountered to stop immediately whatever telephone conversations or work they were conducting and to assemble in the main entrance lobby. Those who objected forcefully or refused to obey were arrested on the spot, handcuffed and led away. Robert felt bad for the often terrified and traumatized civilian employees he saw go by him under escort, especially for the female secretaries who had been suddenly confronted with a difficult choice of loyalties and had been arrested for being faithful to their bosses. That had however been expected and those administrative employees would simply end being formally warned after brief police questioning and then released without any legal mark on their personal files. However harsh all this may appear to the critics who were certain to sprout out in large numbers after this raid, it was necessary to send a clear message to the CIA that it was not above American law.

While a large group of heavily armed marshals preceded him down via an emergency staircase, Robert took an elevator with his two escorts and six more marshals, going down towards the high security areas located in the underground levels of the CIA complex. A Pentagon officer who had worked as a liaison and exchange officer with the CIA had provided the White House some precious information on where to find the offices used by the main target for Robert in this raid: the Special Activities Staff of the CIA. When the doors of the elevator cabin opened and he got out with his marshals, Robert found himself in a narrow corridor with a single steel door at one end. A small peeping lens was visible in the door, along with a security surveillance camera suspended from a ceiling mount above the door. The senior U.S. marshal escorting Robert made a grimace as he examined their surroundings.

“This area is like a fortress, sir. Your insider better show up soon or we will be stuck here with no way to go further.”

“She will be here, Senior Agent Turner.” Replied confidently Robert, who then walked to the steel door and pushed the electric buzzer fixed to the nearby wall. Less than four seconds later the door was opened from the inside by a tall woman wearing a white robe.

“Please come in, gentlemen. All the CIA agents in this section have already been neutralized.”

“Thanks for your help in this, Natai.” Replied respectfully Robert, his heart beating faster at once as he eyed the angel. “You avoided a potential bloodbath here.”

“That was why I offered to help, Robert.” Said softly Natai. Robert then motioned to his marshals and to the over thirty more marshals rushing from the emergency staircase well to enter the secure area. Before following them, he looked up at Natai with barely contained awe.

“I wish that I could know more about you, Natai.”

Natai simply smiled, then vanished from where she stood, leaving Robert to stare for a moment at where she had been. Shaking himself out of his awe, Robert blocked the steel door in the open position with a chair, then proceeded inside the secure area, where the marshals were busy disarming and handcuffing the numerous CIA agents lying unconscious on the floor or on their desks. He then saw Senior Agent Turner signal him from the doorway of one office. Going to him, Robert felt his heart accelerate when he saw that it was the office of Ronald Atkins, the head of the Special Activities Staff. Turner then pointed to him a small but sturdy steel safe sitting in one corner of the office.

“I already found a number of files and papers in locked drawers of Atkins’ desk but I believe that the real treasures are inside this safe, sir.”

“Excellent! Get one of the heavy items handling teams here with a bogey to carry away that safe after properly tagging it. We will do the same with all the locked file cabinets found in this section. Let’s not forget as well any other papers or documents of interests, such as personal telephone numbers books and used notepads. Make sure that the tagging and recording of evidence is done properly. We don’t want to throw away our case through negligent handling of evidence.”

“Yes sir!”

Turner was giving orders around when one marshal, looking quite shaken, came to Robert with a number of classified files in his hands.

“Sir, you better have a look at these. I found them on the desk of Atkins’ deputy, who was unconscious in his office.”

Taking the files from the marshal, Robert opened the first one and felt at once his eyes bulge: stapled to the inside left cover was a large picture of his brother John, the President of the United States. The top sheet opposite it was a fact sheet on John Kennedy, with handwritten notes about the President’s personal traits and habits. Flipping over the top sheet and going through the other pages in that file, Robert saw more data on his brother, including intimate details about his sex life and pictures of his present and past lovers, some in rather private positions with the President. The second file was on Robert himself, while the third one was on Ingrid Dows. Robert then became positively enraged: by law the CIA was prohibited from meddling into American domestic affairs. To be keeping detailed personal surveillance files on American citizens was bad enough but to keep one on the President of the United States himself had to be the height of bureaucratic arrogance. His face was hard when he looked back at the marshal who had brought him the files.

“Those files are prime evidence. I will personally hold on to them. Bag every paper or other evidence found in the same office and keep them separate from the rest of the stuff. As well, I want Atkins’ deputy to be held segregated from the others and thoroughly interrogated.”

“Yes sir!” Said the marshal before returning into a nearby office after collecting two of his colleagues. Robert, looking back into the file on Ingrid, then found a handwritten note in red ink on one of the last pages. Robert read it to himself in a low voice.

“Becoming too much of a problem. Terminate her.”

Below the handwriting and also in red ink were the signed initials of Ronald Atkins. Robert then knew that he had his legal case.

16:55 (Florida Time)

Main conference room

Military Space Command headquarters

Patrick Space Command Base, Cape Canaveral

Florida

“Anybody disagrees with that?” Asked Ingrid around her after Clarence Johnson had made another technical suggestion to solve one of the problems facing them in designing a system that could fulfill the Moon mission requirements. With no objections or doubts raised about that suggestion, Ingrid made a note on her pad.

“Then we will go with Kelly’s latest idea. Things are progressing well, people.”

“Uh, Ingrid,” said Jerome Wiesner while raising one hand. “Now that we have pretty much nailed down how to get safely to the Moon and back, how about deciding what we will do there to justify all those efforts and expenditures?”

“A most valid point, Jerome,” agreed Ingrid, “and one as important as to how to get there. How about giving us your own views about that as the Presidential Science Advisor?”

Jerome smiled and nodded. While the whole day of discussions had been extremely interesting, now was the part that concerned him the most.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, we are fortunate in having already some basic scientific data about the Moon, thanks to the ATHENA information from the future that we hold. That data is however fragmentary, as those files touched only relatively briefly on the space exploration program as it was known to Nancy Laplante in 2012. The data we have is fortunately enough to answer some questions that could have necessitated many missions to answer. For one thing, we know thanks to that data that the Moon is sterile, thus saving us from having to put our returning crews and ships through quarantine.”

There was then a collective sigh of relief from the astronauts present in the conference room, something that made Jerome grin.

“I knew that you would like that. We also know that the surface of the Moon is solid enough to take the weight of a landing ship and that long missions in low or even zero gravity are feasible without major medical problems, as long as certain precautions and practices are adopted. We can thus look seriously at building and occupying a permanent or at least a long term Moon surface base.”

“And what would the crew of that Moon base do, Doctor Wiesner?” Asked Brigadier General Medaris.

“Moon geological studies mostly. However, the potential for astronomical observation work is huge, since astronomers on the Moon would not have to contend with the optical distortions from the Earth’s atmosphere. We could also in theory

chemically extract oxygen from Moon rocks and thus help sustain our base and refuel incoming resupply ships.”

“But could we build a truly viable base that could safely sustain a crew for months with the limited tonnage our ships could bring to the Moon?” Asked John Glenn, making the others look at each other. Ingrid followed up on that.

“We will certainly have to think thoroughly about the design of that base. It obviously will have to be modular and as light as possible for its volume. It will also have to provide adequate protection against space radiations and micro-meteorites.”

“Space radiations?” Exclaimed Werner Von Braun. “But, providing thick enough walls to stop radiations from solar flares would make those modules prohibitively heavy.”

“Not if we bury our base and let Moon dirt provide the needed protection.” Replied Ingrid.

“But,” said Virgil Grissom, “you’re not expecting us to bury our base with shovels, Ingrid?”

“Not with shovels, but with a bulldozer.” Replied calmly Ingrid, making the others stare at her with big eyes. That started another round of animated discussions that went on for a good half hour before Ingrid called an end to it.

“Well, guys, I don’t know about you but I am getting starved. Let’s continue this tomorrow morning and go have supper.”

“A great idea!” Seconded Edward White with a grin.

18:01 (Washington Time)

Press Room, White House

Washington, D.C.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States.”

The sitting reporters, photographers and cameramen packing the White House Press Room all got up at the announcement from the Sergeant At Arms. John F. Kennedy then entered, followed closely by his brother Robert. Both had somber expressions as they got up on the small stage of the Press Room, with John Kennedy going first behind the lectern and its microphone.

“Please be seated!” Said at first John, who then waited until the shuffling around was mostly over before continuing in a calm but firm voice. “Ladies and gentlemen, I have called this press conference for two reasons. The first one is to announce a new

program just activated by this administration. The second is to explain and put in context a series of recent events connected to the CIA. First the new program. Last Monday, on January 23, I tasked during a cabinet meeting the National Director of Space Programs, Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows, with initiating a program of manned exploration of the Moon. That program is meant to safely send astronauts to the Moon surface and return them to Earth. The United States Military Space Command and its Civilian Division are now working towards that goal.”

Seeing that the President was pausing, a number of reporters started shouting questions at once, wanting to learn more about the Moon program, especially its timetable. John raised a hand to quiet them down and spoke up.

“It is still too early to talk about a timetable yet. However, with General Dows in charge of that program, I am confident that we will see results rather quickly. Now, to the second reason of this conference.”

John's attitude then changed to a much more formal and resolute one.

“On the evening of last Monday, after a wanted criminal tried to kill her in a restaurant in Washington earlier that day, General Dows was the target of a bomb parcel sent to her hotel room. While she was not hurt in that blast, one of the Secret Service agents protecting her was killed by the said bomb. The inquiry about that bomb led me to order a police raid on the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley. Before that raid could happen, however, another assassination attempt was made against General Dows last evening, this time as she was in her home at Patrick Space Command Base in Florida. That attempt failed and two men were arrested by the base security force. Those two men in turn gave away information that pointed directly at the CIA, confessing among other things to be members of a section of the CIA called the Special Activities Staff. As a result of this, I ordered the Attorney General of the United States to launch at once a raid that was effected this morning under his direct supervision and leadership and with the assistance of 260 U.S. federal marshals. A large quantity of documents were then seized and a number of CIA officials and employees arrested. What was found at CIA headquarters is still being examined and analyzed but I can tell you right now that the raid has already proved to be amply justified. As a result of that raid, charges of conspiracy to murder and of sedition have been leveled against a number of CIA officers and executives. I, as President of the United States, have signed late this afternoon an executive order abolishing both the Special Activities Staff and Covert Action Staff of the CIA's Directorate of Operations, for

engaging in criminal activities against American citizens inside the United States, in complete violation of the mandate given to the CIA under the National Security Act of 1947. Further to that, I have ordered that an in-depth review of the said mandate of the CIA and of its covert methods of operation be made, in order to avoid more violations of American law in the future. This administration will not tolerate that any agency of this government flaunt both American laws and the most fundamental rights of American citizens. Further actions and steps may still be taken by me as the inquiry into this matter uncovers more illegal activities by the CIA. I will now let the microphone to the Attorney General for a moment, following which I will take your questions. Bob?"

Robert took John's place at the lectern as the reporters were still scribbling furiously on their notepads.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, while the criminal inquiry into this affair has barely started, I can give you some information and precisions at this time. First, seven CIA officials and employees have been formally charged with crimes that include attempted murder, conspiracy to murder, sedition, abuse of power, illegal surveillance of American citizens and collusion with organized crime. Another 39 CIA employees are under arrest and may be formally charged in the near future, while 26 other CIA employees are being actively sought by the U.S. Marshal Service. Evidence has been seized at CIA headquarters in Langley that revealed that the CIA was effectively behind the assassination attempt against Lieutenant General Dows and that it was keeping detailed surveillance files on many American citizens, including high level government officials, with the possible goal of using that information for attempts at blackmail. Detailed analysis of that evidence is ongoing, so more will probably be uncovered in the days to come. There are however already some clues that point to at least occasional past collaboration between the CIA and organized crime syndicates to effect such things as political assassinations and intimidation. As the evidence seized in Langley is extremely sensitive and highly classified, you will understand that I can't give more details on the crimes committed or planned by the CIA."

One reporter shot up from his chair as Robert was pausing for a second.

"Sir, can you tell us why the CIA would want to assassinate General Dows?"

"Let me answer that, Bob." Said at once John Kennedy, advancing on the lectern and taking his place. He looked gravely around the room before fixing the reporter who had asked the question.

“First, I wish to stress that only some members of the CIA were involved in criminal activities. I believe that the vast majority of the CIA employees are honest, patriotic Americans who knew nothing about those activities. To those employees I say thank you for a terrific job. As for those CIA officials who sought the death of Lieutenant General Dows, I believe that their main motive was to get rid of an advisor and officer who, while always counseling me and President Eisenhower with the greater good of the American people in her mind, gave advice that prejudiced the special interests of a few individuals. Those individuals thought themselves to actually represent the interests of the United States and, in their smug arrogance, believed themselves to be above American law.”

“WHAT KIND OF ADVICE WOULD THAT BE, MISTER PRESIDENT?”

“Mostly advice about foreign policy. General Dows has a special understanding of geopolitical affairs that has already proved invaluable many times. One example of that is how she put an end to a war in Indochina that could have dragged the United States into years of costly war and an eventual defeat. I also value greatly of course her advice on military affairs.”

“HOW CLOSE ARE YOU TO GENERAL DOWS, MISTER PRESIDENT?”

John gave a jaundiced look at the reporter who had shouted that last question: the man represented a far-right radio station that never missed an opportunity to shoot hot cannonballs at democrat politicians and what it considered left-leaning groups or people. Unfortunately, that radio station was also quite popular, probably because of the outrageous statements often heard on that station. If his answer was in any way vague or evasive, that reporter would probably turn it into some kind of hidden sexual scandal. He thus had to kill any hint of improper relationship right now.

“Mister Rollins, let me be clear about something. While Lieutenant General Dows has been a good friend of mine for over fourteen years, my relation with her as President of the United States has been strictly professional and nothing more. Yes, I admire her, but for her courage, dedication and competence both as a military commander and as our National Director of Space Programs, not because she is a beautiful woman, even if she is indeed a beautiful woman. Before you ask, and knowing that you would have no scruples into distorting this to make it appear like an ongoing affair between me and General Dows, yes, we dated each other when I was still a young and single senator. I trust that you will still recognize the right of adult, unmarried American citizens to have relationships between themselves without being accused of

impropriety at every turn. The reason this administration took so seriously the murder attempts against General Dows was that General Dows is both the Commander of Military Space Command and the National Director of Space Programs and thus is an important official of this government. She also happens through her post as Commander of Military Space Command to be the officer in charge of our force of nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. Anyone attacking her would also be attacking the national security of the United States and would be dealt with by this government with the utmost severity.”

“WHEN DID YOU STOP DATING GENERAL DOWS, MISTER PRESIDENT?”
Asked another reporter right away. John hid his growing frustration as best he could.

“In 1951, before I started going out with my wife. Gentlemen, this press conference was called to raise the subject of a grave breach of the law by a government agency. If you see this only as an opportunity to invent a non-existent scandal at the expense of one of our best combat officers, then I will be frankly disappointed.”

“WHAT KIND OF ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT WAS MADE IN FLORIDA AGAINST GENERAL DOWS, MISTER PRESIDENT?”

“A sniper tried to shoot her as she was hosting a party for her astronauts and their families. While General Dows was not hurt then, one astronaut was shot and seriously wounded while covering her retreat inside her house. The base defense force then intervened and captured the sniper and his driver after a shootout.”

“YOU MENTIONED THAT FAMILIES WERE ATTENDING THAT PARTY, MISTER PRESIDENT. WERE THERE CHILDREN PRESENT AT THE TIME OF THE SHOOTING?”

“There were in fact many children present then, yes. Fortunately, no one else but the astronaut I mentioned got hurt.”

In her house at Patrick Space Command Base, Ingrid and most of her adult guests, alerted by Hien, had watched the live press conference on the television set of the lounge with shocked silence. That an American government agency could target them was nearly incomprehensible, yet the facts seemed to show just that. Anna Margaret Glenn then looked with wide eyes at Ingrid, who was watching the press conference with a somber expression.

“You...you dated the President, Ingrid?”

“Only while he was still single and a senator, Anna.”

“Do you think that the CIA could try again to kill you, Ingrid?” Asked Gertrude Meserve, making Ingrid shake her head.

“I doubt so, Gertrude. The measures taken against the CIA by President Kennedy should cut out the cancer there and discourage anyone else from taking me on.”

“Still, you should be most careful from now on, Ingrid.”

“Oh, I certainly intend to watch my back, Gertrude.”

Ingrid then looked around her, smiling and trying to restore some joyfulness to her group of guests.

“Well, I believe that we had steaks to cook on the grills outside. Is anybody game for buffalo meat?”

CHAPTER 7 – HEARTBREAK

17:48 (London Time)

Friday, July 18, 1856 'A'

14 Belgrave Square, Belgravia District

London, England

Gordon, slouched in his favorite easy chair and enjoying a good book in the lounge of his London house, looked up at his father as Sir Charles Smythe walked in from the outside. The tired, dejected look on his father's face alarmed him, making him get on his feet and put down his book.

"Something went wrong at the meeting of the Board of Control, Father?"

Throwing first his leather briefcase on a sofa, Sir Charles looked with discouragement at his son.

"That damn Lord Dalhousie set up the East India Company for a hard fall and none of these idiots on the board can see that, that's what went wrong! My first reaction would have been to bail out of the company, if I didn't have so much invested in it."

Patting sympathetically his father's shoulder, Gordon started leading him towards the dining room, across the hallway from the lounge.

"Come on, Father, supper should be about ready by now. We can talk about this at the table."

"Thank you, Son. Let me wash a bit and change first, though."

"Take all your time, Father." Replied Gordon gently. As Sir Charles tiredly got up the stairs to the first floor, Gordon went through the dining room and into the large kitchen. The place was hot and full of activity, with Jeanne and two maids busy preparing supper while Elizabeth Hatfield took care of the six children present. Going to Jeanne, who was stirring a pot of soup, he glued himself to her back and held her waist while kissing her neck. She moaned with pleasure and caressed his left leg with one hand while holding a spoon and stirring the soup with the other. The couple exchanged caresses for a few seconds before Jeanne gently pushed Gordon away.

"Gordon, there are young children watching." She chided him in a low voice.

"Alright, I will be a good boy...until late tonight."

"I was counting on that, my dear hunk." She said softly before kissing him on the cheek. Clara, Judith and Elizabeth sighed in unison, envious of Jeanne, who couldn't help smile at them.

"You should get yourselves a good man each, girls."

"Finding a man is easy enough." Replied philosophically Clara, the older maid. "Finding a good man: now that's the tough part!"

That got knowing giggles from the three other women in the kitchen.

Sir Charles, informally dressed with gray trousers, slippers and an open collar white shirt, came down the stairs and into the dining room fifteen minutes later. Gordon let him take the place of honor at the head of the big rectangular table, sitting himself to his right. Judith was finishing to put the table, while little Helen, Thomas, Peter and Mary were already sitting down the table's sides. Jeanne soon came in from the kitchen with little William, with Elizabeth Hatfield close behind and carrying Harry. Sir Charles smiled at seeing the young, lively scene around the table.

"This house certainly has quite a life to it now, Son."

"I always loved children, Father." Replied Gordon quietly. "If me and Jeanne can help raise some in happiness and love, then we will be a content couple."

"I see that I raised a good son." Pronounced proudly Sir Charles. Gordon smiled at the compliment, then became serious.

"Tell me about your meeting, Father."

Waiting until Clara had put a bowl of hot soup in front of him, Sir Charles then spoke slowly as the others around the table got served as well.

"Well, as you may know, Lord Dalhousie has just returned from India after being replaced by Lord Canning as Governor General. Today's meeting was to assess his final report on India. Dalhousie of course painted a rosy picture, enumerating in particular all the Indian kingdoms and principalities he annexed under one pretext or another during his many years in office. What he failed to mention and what the other board members didn't catch on was the tremendous resentment his policies must have created in India. Imagine! Last February, he annexed the Kingdom of Oudh, one of the oldest and most powerful kingdoms in India, on the flimsiest of pretexts. I tried to point out to the board that such a move was sure to inflame sentiments in our Sepoy soldiers, many of whom come from Oudh, but my opinion was dismissed as too pessimistic. With all the vexations, heavy handed policies and crushing taxes levied by Dalhousie to pay

for his military adventures, the Indians must be near revolt and I'm afraid that it won't take much to ignite this powder keg."

"Could our troops handle such a revolt?" Asked Gordon, making his father puff up in indignation.

"Not if our own Sepoy soldiers revolt thanks to this idiotic Dalhousie. The armies of the East India Company count about 200,000 Sepoys, while British troops in India number only 38,000 men. If our Sepoys turn against us, it will be a massacre."

Gordon exchanged a glance with Jeanne before looking back at his father.

"Do you really think that our Sepoys would revolt?"

"Why not? With his stupid General Service Enlistment Act, Dalhousie has revoked a privilege dear to the Sepoys of the Army of Bengal, which dispensed them from overseas service. Now, as you must know, leaving India would make Sepoys of high caste lose their caste, something tantamount to a sacrilege to them. This, allied with the annexation of Oudh, is bound to create dissensions and discontent."

"So, what do you plan to do, Father?"

"I don't know." Answered Sir Charles dejectedly. "Pulling my financial assets out of the company is not something I am prepared to do without much more solid information. The problem is that I can't rely on the official reports out of India, as I suspect them to be way too optimistic. I would go myself but I'm afraid that I am getting too old for such a trip."

There was silence for a moment from the adults around the table. Jeanne then spoke quietly while looking at Sir Charles.

"Sir Charles, you know my reputation as an inspired investor. That reputation was built through the analysis of the financial, commercial and political situations all around the World, and this with the help of many friends and agents that provide me constantly with updated information on local situations. I have already started disinvesting from the East India Company, as I believe firmly that the revolt you are fearing is indeed close at hand. Going to India or sending anyone in your place to investigate would be both extremely risky and unnecessary. I thus counsel you strongly to bail out of the East India Company without delay, before it collapses from an armed rebellion in India. I could provide you with good tips on where to reinvest your money then."

Sir Charles stared back in silence at her for a moment, weighing her counsel. Jeanne was indeed known to be a most savvy investor with an apparently flawless instinct on

where and when to invest money, acquire or let go assets. Many big financiers would have followed her investing trends if not for the fact that Jeanne always conducted her affairs through anonymous intermediaries, thus hiding her financial moves from others. Some investors had grumbled at her successes, even accusing her on a few occasions of insider trading. Those jealous men had however been unable to make any of those charges stick, with some even being hit with countercharges of false accusations. And all that from a young woman who was only 25 years old! That young woman was now richer than ever as a result, with her estimated fortune having ballooned in the last two years to over fourteen million Pounds Sterling. Yet, from what he could see and hear about her, Sir Charles knew that Jeanne lived quite modestly compared to what her fortune would allow her to do. Most of her fortune apparently went into various charity and social justice schemes, like the dwellings she had bought and was maintaining in Winchester for the families of the troopers of the 8th Hussars, a venture Sir Charles was most proud of helping Jeanne with their administration. A final look in her green eyes then decided him.

“Alright, Jeanne. I will start bailing out of the East India Company next week.”

“Then I will get my local financial representative in London to visit you here on Monday to give you tips on where to reinvest your money. How much do you have invested in the East India Company, if I may ask?”

“About 340,000 Pounds. Nearly all my fortune is in that company.”

Jeanne nodded her head slowly. Her father-in-law would have faced financial ruin if he had not followed her counsel, as the East India Company would be totally discredited and would be disbanded on orders of the British government after the suppression of the Sepoy Mutiny. That mutiny would shake the very foundations of the British Empire and wake many in England to reality, forcing them to drastically revise the way Britain had ruled overseas for decades and centuries. Unfortunately, it would also result in an horrific bloodbath in India, with often blind mass retaliations by the British troops rushed in from England against the Indian population, this in retaliation for the massacres of British soldiers and civilians committed by the mutineers in a number of places. An awful reality then hit her mind and she looked with concern at Gordon, who apparently understood at once what was going through her head.

“Jeanne, if I get to be called to go to India to quell such a rebellion, I will be going alone. I don’t want you to put yourself and William at risk by going with me.”

“But, I am still officially the senior nurse of the 8th Hussars, Gordon. I can’t let down our regiment like this!”

With Sir Charles and the maids listening on with concern, Gordon bent over and stared firmly at his wife.

“Jeanne, I have served in India before. I know how ferocious Indian soldiers and warriors could be and I have no wish to risk you or our son in what would certainly be a most bloody affair. For once, I will ask you to obey my will on this, for the sake of our love and of our son.”

“Gordon, I can’t let you down like this!” Protested Jeanne, dread filling her. Gordon shook his head at that.

“You wouldn’t abandon me then, Jeanne: you would just insure the safety and future of our only son. William must be the main concern, for both of us. Please, be reasonable and promise me that you will stay with William if I ever have to go to India.” Jeanne swallowed hard as tears came to her eyes, watched by the others. She finally lowered her head and spoke softly.

“I...I promise to stay and take care of William. Please, Gordon, be careful if you have to go.”

Gordon smiled at that and patted gently her hand.

“Of course I will be careful, Jeanne. I have no wish to be cut from you or from our son.”

Sir Charles felt his eyes become moist as he watched his son kiss tenderly Jeanne, while little William looked up with innocence and incomprehension at his tearful mother.

09:42 (Paris Time)

Thursday, June 25, 1857 ‘A’

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Paris, France

The young messenger smiled with more than simple professional courtesy when a young oriental woman opened the door of the big residence where he had been sent to deliver a telegram: the woman was very pretty and was a delight to look at.

“Télégramme pour Madame Jeanne Smythe-D’Orléans!” Said the young man cheerfully, making the oriental girl smile as well.

“I am her personal assistant. I will take it.” She replied, also in French.

“Then please sign here.”

Li Mai did so, then thanked the messenger and closed the door. With the telegram in hand, she went to the nearby office suite used by the staff of the D’Orléans Social Foundation, where Jeanne presently was. Mai found Jeanne in her director’s office, reading a file. Going to her desk, Mai put the telegram on it and bowed.

“A telegram for you, Jeanne.”

“Thank you, Mai.” Said Jeanne while grabbing at once the telegram and opening it quickly. With Mai still standing in front of her desk, Jeanne’s face grew somber as she read the three sentences and the name of the sender in the telegram, making Mai ask out of concern.

“Is something wrong, Jeanne?”

Jeanne kept her eyes down as she answered in a slow, hesitant voice.

“Gordon has left for India with his regiment. He sends to me and William his love.”

Mai, knowing how much the couple was in love and having read about the bloody insurrection that had erupted in India, didn’t reply or comment on that, instead bowing again and walking out of the office to leave Jeanne alone. Once Mai was gone, Jeanne got up slowly from her chair and left the office, going to the first floor room where her son William was playing with the other young children of her staff and of her maids. She smiled when she saw on entering the large playing room that 23 month-old William was running around and squealing with joy while playing tag with three more toddlers. She let William play for a few more minutes, then went to him as soon as he and the other children calmed down somewhat. Crouching in front of him, Jeanne let the boy run into her open arms and kissed him.

“William, you are truly a joy to have.”

With her son still in her arms, Jeanne got up and walked slowly towards one of the windows of the room, stopping in front of it and looking out at the street activities and at the skyline of Paris. A tear rolled on her cheek as she pressed gently William against her chest. The words she next said were for the other love in her life in this century.

“Please come back to me, Gordon.”

19:11 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, October 21, 1857 ‘A’

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Jeanne, being nearest to the main door when someone knocked on it in the early evening, went to it and opened it. She found herself facing Sir Charles, alone with a travel bag on the entrance steps. A carriage that had been waiting in front of the door left as soon as Jeanne had opened the door, the driver probably satisfied that his customer would not be left alone in the darkening street. Jeanne was about to greet warmly her father-in-law when she noticed his sad expression. It was for her as if a hammer had just hit her on the head when she understood in a flash why Sir Charles had come to Paris without prior notice. Tears flowed out of her eyes at once at the same time.

“Nooo! You’re not here to tell me that Gordon is dead?”

“I...I’m sorry, Jeanne.” Said weakly Sir Charles. “I wish that I could have come for a better reason.”

He then stepped forward to hug Jeanne, who was now crying. He held her for a long moment, until she regained some control on herself and invited him in.

“Please, come in. I...I will show you to a guest room.”

Without a word, Sir Charles picked up his lone bag and followed her up to the first floor, where he and Jeanne entered a vacant bedroom. Once he put down his bag, he faced the tall French woman, his expression sorrowful.

“I suppose that you want to know how he died.”

She nodded her head once, unable to speak as sobs came back to choke her. Sir Charles sat on the edge of the bed before speaking slowly, his own eyes lost in painful images.

“Gordon was killed in the battle for Delhi, on September 20th. He was buried there, along with the rest of the 4,000 British soldiers who died to retake that city. I got an official dispatch from the War Office announcing his death three days ago.”

Jeanne, unable to take more, then sat on a nearby chair and started crying hysterically. Sir Charles went to her at once, holding her hands and trying to console her. She finally managed to say a few words between sobs.

“I...I should have gone with him. Maybe I would have been able to save him, along with others.”

“You know that you couldn’t go with him, Jeanne: William needed you here.”

“And how am I supposed to tell William that his father is dead? He still doesn’t speak well enough to fully understand that! He will be lucky if he still remembers his father by the time he starts going to school.”

“We will keep the memory of Gordon alive for him, Jeanne. We can’t do less than that for Gordon.”

That made Jeanne cry even more, prompting Sir Charles in hugging her again, his own eyes moist.

“I have other things to discuss with you, Jeanne, but those can wait until tomorrow, if you prefer.”

Jeanne shook her head at once, signaling him to continue.

“Please, go on. Nothing can change what happened now.”

“You are right, Jeanne, as always. To make things quick, Gordon made me the executor of his last will. I am ready to tell you about it when you want to.”

“Let’s get William before you do that, Sir Charles.”

“Of course, Jeanne.”

Jeanne, still crying a few tears, left the bedroom with him and went to her main lounge, where Li Mai was watching over William and a black toddler girl. Li Mai got up as Jeanne showed the little girl to Sir Charles.

“This is Florence, the daughter of one of my maids. She and William play a lot together.”

Sir Charles smiled gently to the little child, then sat in an easy chair opposite a sofa that Jeanne took after grabbing two year-old William in her arms. Extracting first an envelope from a pocket of his vest, Sir Charles opened it and referred to the document inside as he spoke slowly.

“It probably won’t come as a surprise to you that Gordon is leaving his house and possessions in London to your son William, with you acting as a tutor until his majority. He also expressed in his will his wish that the staff at his house be kept on the payroll and retained in the service of the house, with you to administer the property and staff. As for the dowry you brought to Gordon at your marriage, it goes back to you now.”

“That money will go into a trust fund in the name of my son, Sir Charles. I personally don’t need it. As for the servants in Gordon’s house, I will go visit them with you when you will go back to England, in order to reassure them that they will be taken care of. They are good people and I have no intentions of abandoning them now.”

Sir Charles nodded his head with satisfaction at that.

“For that, I sincerely thank you, Jeanne. Gordon cared a lot about his domestic staff.”

By now Jeanne felt strong enough to go back to the painful reason of her father-in-law's visit.

“Sir Charles, did the War Office dispatch mention if Gordon's body would be repatriated to England?”

Sir Charles lowered his head at that, having been hit hard by the official answer.

“Unfortunately, the War Office has already decided to let the remains of fallen British soldiers buried in India. We lost too many men there to make body repatriation practical or even possible. Gordon is supposedly buried with other soldiers in a British war cemetery besides Delhi. I suppose that you will want to visit his grave one day, Jeanne?”

“Once the insurrection is over, yes. I will also be going with William. Gordon would have wanted that.”

Sir Charles swallowed hard then as he eyed his little grandson in Jeanne's lap. William was now the most precious thing in the World for him and his wife Carmelia.

“I am sure that Gordon would have, Jeanne.”

17:06 (India Time)

Friday, July 23, 1858 'A'

British military cemetery

Delhi, India

Jeanne, riding Pegasus and with little William, who was going to be three years old in five days, sitting in front of her in the large saddle, attracted a lot of attention as she arrived at the entrance of the British military cemetery near the walls of Delhi. For one, she was a European woman traveling alone with a small child. Second, she wore a riding skirt and a light cotton blouse, along with high black boots and a wide brimmed Australian bush hat with a cloth to protect her neck from the fierce sun, instead of the long dresses that forced the other European women to ride Amazon-style. What was most striking however to the Indian locals watching her pass was the fact that she wore a gun belt supporting two holstered revolvers and a large hunting knife, while a curved saber was slung across her back and a carbine was sheathed in a long saddle holster. Contrary to most of the British traveling on horseback around India, she had no baggage

animal and had only two large saddle bags and a bedroll on the back of her horse as baggage went. The two British soldiers standing guard at the entrance of the cemetery watched her with curiosity as she jumped down and helped down her child before tying her horse to a post near the entrance. They then came to attention when she approached them with the little boy.

“Good afternoon, madam.” Said politely the corporal in charge while secretly admiring the very tall and pretty young woman. “May we do something for you?”

“You may, Corporal. Could you please watch my horse while I go visit the cemetery, so that no thief grabs my belongings?”

“With pleasure, madam! Private Adams will watch it for you.”

As the second soldier went to take position besides the horse, the corporal couldn't help ask a question to the woman, who was about to enter the cemetery.

“Are you here to visit a specific grave, madam?”

“I am.” Answered cautiously the woman while staring in the eyes of the corporal. “My husband was killed during the siege of Delhi. He was part of the 8th Hussars.”

“Then, you will find the graves from the cavalry regiments in the northeast corner of the cemetery, madam.”

“Thank you, Corporal.” Said the woman with a nod before entering the cemetery with her child. The corporal followed her with his eyes for a moment, then returned his attention to his guard duties.

Jeanne, with William held in her arms, went to the northeast part of the cemetery, then started reviewing each grave marker in that area one by one. It took her fifteen minutes to find Gordon's grave among the thousands of other graves filling the cemetery. Stopping and facing the cross bearing Gordon's name, regiment and dates of birth and death, Jeanne contemplated it in silence for a moment before crouching and placing William in front of her, facing the marker.

“This is why we came here, William. Your father is buried here.”

The little boy looked at the cross with incomprehension at first, then at her, speaking in his tiny voice.

“He will never come back, Mother?”

“No, William: he can't come back.” Said Jeanne, tears appearing at the corner of her eyes. She then took and guided William's right hand, making him feel the engraved

name on the marker. "Your father was a hero, William. You are now the one who will be bearing his name. Always be proud of it."

Jeanne was silent for a few seconds, then started singing quietly a melancholic song in honor of her lost husband. The Indians and the few British passing by the cemetery at that time and who could hear her looked at her with surprise and curiosity, as she sang in some unknown language instead of in English. None of them could know or recognize the fact that she was singing in Sanskrit, a language long forgotten in its oral form. She had once sang that song as Noor of Madras 21 centuries ago, on losing her lover.

CHAPTER 8 – MADAME LA MARQUISE

08:49 (Paris Time)

Saturday, March 1, 1659 ‘A’

Palace of The Louvre

Paris, France

Nancy did her best to hide her true feelings when she saw D’Artagnan come towards her along the hallway she was following in the Palace of The Louvre. She had returned from the year 1858 only yesterday, after leaving little William for a few days with his grandparents, who had been too happy to have that rare occasion to cherish and spoil their grandson. The loss of Gordon was still fresh in her memory and now she knew that she was about to officially lose the love of the other man in her life. Nancy however put a warm smile on as D’Artagnan, dashing in his musketeer’s uniform, stopped in front of her, looking embarrassed.

“Could we speak in private for a moment, Nancy?”

“With you, always, Charles.”

D’Artagnan then went with her near a window and spoke in a low voice.

“Nancy, I have something to announce to you, something you may not like.”

“If it is about your decision to marry the Baroness of Sainte-Croix, then I already know, Charles. Remember that I have my own very special sources of information. Don’t worry about my reactions to that: I knew that it would happen even before I first met you.”

D’Artagnan hesitated then, looking into the eyes of the woman he still loved the most but could never hope to marry.

“And it doesn’t hurt you?”

His question, put to her in a soft tone of voice, finally cracked somewhat her façade, attracting a tear.

“Of course it hurts me, Charles, but I am the only one to blame for that. My duties as an agent of the Time Patrol and my obligation to protect history do not allow me to marry you. You did propose to me eight years ago and I was the one who refused, for professional reasons. That doesn’t mean however that I don’t love you. I will still love you and care about you even after your marriage.”

“Nancy, I wish that things could be different between us.”

“Me too, but there is little either you or me could do about that now. You are an important man around the King and your court duties demand that you marry and have a wife. I sincerely wish that you and the baroness will find true love and that you will be happy together. When do you intend to get married?”

“We intend to sign a marriage contract next Wednesday, in the presence of the King and of Cardinal Mazarin.” Answered Charles, who then hesitated for a second before going on. “Will you come?”

Nancy shook slowly her head once.

“So that I could sabotage your marriage by my presence? I am sure that the baroness has heard at least a few stories about me. Maybe she knows about us too. Don’t take that badly but I prefer to stay away, for everyone’s sake.”

Charles lowered his head, knowing that she was right, but it still hurt. He managed a weak smile as he looked back up at Nancy after a moment.

“Tell me about our son, Charles. How is he doing?”

“He is now seven years old and growing quite fast.” Replied Nancy with a smile, warming up on the subject. “He is in fact here in the palace, along with the English boy I adopted in New France. James is thirteen and is also growing fast. Would you like to see them?”

“Of course!” Said D’Artagnan with genuine eagerness. He then followed Nancy back to the suite reserved for her use in the palace, a privilege she owed to her close friendship with the King. Entering the private lounge of the suite with Nancy, Charles found two boys sitting at a table listening to a man apparently giving them a lesson in French grammar on a portable blackboard. The teacher stopped his lesson and bowed to Nancy when she entered, prompting a mild chiding from her.

“No need for this between us, Germain: I told you already a thousand times that you don’t need to be formal with me.”

“Politeness is never wasted, madame.” Replied the small, thin man in his thirties.

“True! You may take a break for a few minutes while Monsieur D’Artagnan and me talk a bit with the children.”

The private tutor bowed again before leaving the suite. Little Charles didn’t waste any time in running to D’Artagnan, who happily greeted him with open arms.

“Charles, you really are growing fast! You are going to make a strong man indeed.”

“Like you, Father.” Replied the boy, attracting a grin on D’Artagnan’s face.

“You think the right way, Charles. How are your studies going?”

“French grammar is boring, but I am doing my best at it. Monsieur Dupré is however a good teacher and he is not harsh with us.”

“I told him that caning and slaps are strictly prohibited with my sons.” Explained Nancy to D’Artagnan, who made a face at that.

“Hell, I wish my father had been that considerate with me. My own preceptor was quite liberal with his stick.”

He then looked at James, who was waiting two paces away, and opened his arms to him.

“Don’t be shy to come to me, my boy.”

The teenager stepped forward and exchanged a hug with the musketeer, who playfully rubbed his head.

“Nancy did well to save you from the Iroquois, James. You are one handsome boy who should make quite a few girls’ heart beat faster.”

James reddened at that, being on the shy side.

“Nancy promised to introduce me soon to a few girls in the palace, D’Artagnan.”

D’Artagnan laughed heartily at that and patted the boy’s shoulder.

“I am sure that you will tumble them down as well as me, James. And what do you plan to be in life?”

“I don’t know yet.” Answered with a slight hesitation the teenager. “Nancy told me that I can choose between living in this century or go work with the Time Patrol. Making a choice is hard.”

D’Artagnan nodded, then looked at Charles.

“And you, my son? Will you live in this century, so that I have the joy to see you grow?”

“I want to become a musketeer like you, Father.” Replied resolutely the boy, making D’Artagnan grin with pride.

“That’s my boy! You will make one outstanding musketeer, Charles. I hope that Nancy already started teaching you fencing.”

“Not yet, Father.” Answered Charles, making D’Artagnan look at Nancy with fake outrage.

“What? You haven’t started teaching yet to my son the most basic skill that he needs to know in life?”

“Hell, give him a chance to grow enough to be able to hold a sword first.” Replied Nancy with a smile. D’Artagnan made a categorical gesture then.

“If you don’t teach him now, then I will. I want both Charles and James to come see me after supper for their first lesson in fencing.”

“Uh, James has already been studying fencing with me for three years now.”

“Then I will refine his skills, but I will make a point of being the master of fencing for Charles.”

“You have a deal.”

Satisfied, D’Artagnan hugged again both boys and kissed Nancy.

“Well, I have to go back to my duties now. I will see all three of you after supper.” Nancy sighed once D’Artagnan left the suite: he was definitely the kind of man to her liking. Losing him to another woman, even if it was preordained by history, was hard indeed to accept.

Once Germain Dupré came back and resumed his lessons to her sons, Nancy left again her apartments and went to the offices of Cardinal Mazarin, who for all intents and purposes still administered France for King Louis XIV. When she was introduced by a secretary into the private office of the Cardinal, Nancy found King Louis with Mazarin, prompting her to make a curtsy on seeing the monarch. Louis smiled at her sight, genuinely happy to see her: of all the women he had dated, Nancy was still the one he found the most special, by a long shot.

“Ah, my dear friend! You are just in time for something I was discussing with the Cardinal.”

“I am at your service, as always, Your Majesty.” Replied politely Nancy, playing her role as a court lady. That made the King grin.

“And quite nice services they are, madame. By the way, did you hear yet about the incoming marriage of Monsieur D’Artagnan?”

“I did, Your Majesty.” Answered Nancy, keeping a straight face. Louis, who had a special talent at judging people and their moods, detected at once the tension in her voice. His grin fading, he eyed her cautiously.

“Maybe I should have been more diplomatic about that, Nancy. Please excuse me if I hurt you by my inconsiderate question.”

“No need to excuse yourself, Your Majesty. I have only myself to blame for not marrying D’Artagnan first.”

“That is indeed still a mystery to me, my friend.” Said the King, who was then thoughtful for a moment before speaking again. “Nancy, the Cardinal and me would have a mission of the utmost importance for you that could help you forget for a while your sentimental loss.”

“As I said, I am always at your service, Your Majesty.” Said Nancy in a most serious tone. Mazarin nodded like Louis at that and showed her a chair near his work desk.

“Please sit, Nancy.”

“Thank you, Your Eminence.”

Once she had sat, Mazarin contemplated her for a second, then started speaking slowly and deliberately.

“Madame, I won’t tell you anything new by saying that the present war with Spain has already cost much money and lives to France. Me and the King consider that it is high time that we put a stop to it. You may know that I have been secretly conducting peace negotiations for years with the Spaniards, unfortunately with little success up to now. The main bone of contention right now is the refusal of King Philippe IV of Spain to marry his daughter, the Infant Marie-Thérèse, to Louis. I have however thought of a way to convince King Philippe to give up his opposition to such a marriage. I will shortly be leaving for Lyon, where I will pretend to be asking for the hand of Marguerite de Savoy on behalf of King Louis. At the same time, I will need a capable person that I can trust completely to go to Spain and discreetly prick King Philippe about that supposed marriage project. With luck, King Philippe will believe that such is our true intention and will become incensed enough to give up his objections to marrying his daughter to Louis.”

“Your Eminence, you can count on me.” Said at once Nancy, making both Mazarin and Louis smile with satisfaction.

“Thank you, Marquess.” Replied Mazarin. “I however have to warn you that this mission may be quite dangerous, apart from being arduous. You will have to make your way through the Spanish border without getting killed and then gain the confidence of King Philippe.”

“When do you want me to leave, Your Eminence?” Asked without hesitation Nancy. As King Louis eyed her with genuine admiration, Mazarin took a letter that sat on his desk and handed it to Nancy, who took it.

“I am myself planning to depart at the start of next week for Lyon. You will however need to cover a much longer distance to get to Madrid, so you will need to leave as soon as possible this week. This letter is for Monsieur Hugues de Lionne, my personal envoy in Spain, and falsely details the marriage projects with Marguerite de Savoy. You will coordinate your efforts in Madrid with him and will assist him to the best of your abilities.”

“Consider it done, Your Eminence.”

“Excellent! You can go see afterwards Monsieur Colbert, who will provide you with funds for your mission. When could you leave for Spain?”

“Tomorrow morning, Your Eminence.”

Louis was the one to speak next, taking and kissing Nancy’s hand first.

“Be careful, my friend. I would hate to lose you.”

“I have every intention to come back alive, Your Majesty. With your permission, I will now go prepare for my trip.”

Nancy got up and made a last curtsy to Louis, then left Mazarin’s office, followed by the eyes of both men. Once she was out, Louis looked somberly at his chief minister.

“May God protect her. In all honesty, I was tempted more than once to ask her to marry me. She would have made an exceptional queen, if not for her low nobility.”

“Your Majesty, that young woman is much more precious to France as a spymaster than as a queen, believe me.” Replied quietly Mazarin.

07:15 (Paris Time)

Sunday, March 2, 1659 ‘A’

Palace of The Louvre

Paris, France

King Louis XIV, on his way to have breakfast before attending Sunday mass, stopped by a window giving a view on the inner courtyard of the palace. Down in the courtyard was Nancy, getting on her horse. She was dressed like a male rider and wore a warm cape to fight the cold but her weapons were still visible to Louis. The latter watched her give a last kiss to her two sons and to D’Artagnan, then leave the courtyard at a gallop.

“May God be with you, my friend.” Said fervently Louis in a low voice before going on his way, his personal servants and guards surrounding him.

15:10 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, May 6, 1659 'A'

Palace of The Louvre

Paris, France

Alerted by D'Artagnan, King Louis XIV was in time to greet Cardinal Mazarin at one of the entrances giving on the courtyard. Mazarin, who had just arrived from Lyon in his carriage and who still felt quite numb from his long trip, bowed respectfully to his king while harboring a wide smile.

"Success, Your Majesty! King Philippe of Spain has finally agreed to marry away his daughter to you. The final peace negotiations are now free to start."

"That is definitely great news, my dear Mazarin. Uh, isn't the Marquess of Saint-Laurent with you?"

"She is escorting back to Madrid the Spanish secretary of state for external affairs, Don Antonio Pimentel, who came to Lyon to bring to me the answer of King Philippe."

That piece of news nearly made Louis forget the diplomatic success France had just scored: he could now only picture the young and beautiful Nancy, on horseback and risking her life again while crossing back the Spanish border with her precious charge. Mazarin read his mind and spoke to him in a low voice.

"Do not worry too much about the marquess, Your Majesty: she is a very capable person and has acquitted herself with utmost distinction on her mission so far."

Louis was thoughtful for a moment, then patted the shoulder of his prime minister.

"I have no doubts about that, my good Mazarin. Decidedly, I will have to think of something to reward her properly for all her good services to France."

"If I may, Your Majesty, I have had a lot of time to think about that while my carriage made its way back to Paris. While the good marquess is still receiving an annual pension of 9,000 Livres, she doesn't own any property yet. With two growing boys in her charge, maybe she will now be more inclined to accept some estate as a reward. I could also raise her pension, which is quite small in view of all the services she has given us."

"Those are two good ideas, Mazarin. Raise her pension to 12,000 Livres per annum and find her a property from which she could extract a fair living."

“It will be done, Your Majesty. I will have a report of my trip to Lyon ready for you by tomorrow at noon.”

“Then, I will see you at supper, my friend.”

After a last bow at the King, Mazarin went to his apartments, his servants carrying his luggage behind him. Once inside his luxurious private lounge, he sat down with a sigh of relief in his favorite sofa, then called in his personal secretary. The functionary entered at once and bowed.

“Yes, Your Eminence?”

“Get me the titles and property assessments of the estates now part of the King’s domains and which were confiscated from supporters of the Fronde in the Bordelais.”

“Right away, Your Eminence.”

Mazarin had time to go wash a bit and change into a fresh set of clothes before his secretary came back, two clerks bearing heavy binders of documents at his back. Thanking them, Mazarin then sifted through the documents and tax ledgers. Bordeaux and its surrounding area had been a hotbed of insurrection during the Fronde and had been last to submit to him and the King. Even now, Mazarin was still not confident about the loyalty of the people of the Bordeaux area, especially since many Huguenot Protestants lived in and around that region. Giving a property in that area to his best spy would both reward the good Marquess of Saint-Laurent and put in place near Bordeaux someone he could count on to report to him any fresh attempts at sedition there. After about twenty minutes of reading, Mazarin smiled as he examined a particular property document, then another property document for a small adjacent lot of land. Calling back in his secretary, he gave him the property deeds that had attracted his attention.

“Have a transfer of property act prepared for this estate and that adjoining lot. The beneficiary will be the Marquess of Saint-Laurent and the King will sign the transfer. Your clerks can take back the rest of the documents.”

“Yes, Your Eminence.”

Mazarin sat back once his secretary had left and grinned as he thought about his latest decision.

“Well, the good Marquess of Saint-Laurent will be able to truly live up to her title after this.”

19:20 (Paris Time)

Monday, May 26, 1659 'A'

Palace of The Louvre

Paris, France

Nancy arrived at the palace tired, covered with dust and in bad need of a bath after having galloped for weeks from Madrid to Paris. She could have used the spacetime jump abilities of her robotic horse Pegasus to cut her travel short but she made a point of not using as much as possible her abilities and equipment from the Time Patrol when working in the service of King Louis XIV. Two palace valets hurried to her as she came down from her horse and helped her by carrying her saddlebags and bedroll for her, while a stable boy took care of Pegasus. Nancy didn't refuse their help, as she was truly spent by her long trip. With the two valets in tow, she entered the palace and went first to her apartments, where her two sons greeted her with joy and ran to her to hug her. She returned their hugs and kisses before looking at the servant who looked over them during her absences, a kind and mature woman who had lost her husband and children during the Fronde Uprising.

"Did they behave during my trip to Spain, Madame Longchamps?"

"They were very reasonable...for young boys, madame. Between the lessons and assignments given by Monsieur Dupré and the fencing and riding lessons from Monsieur D'Artagnan, your sons were kept quite busy."

"Good! They are at an age when they have lots to learn and little time to learn it. Well, I am going to have a good bath after all these miles of dusty roads, then I will go report to the King. Could you prepare my sky blue court gown while I wash, Madame Longchamps?"

"Of course, madame!"

By the time she was done with her bath, had put on her court gown and jewels and had applied some makeup and perfume, her two sons were ready to go to sleep. Most people in the 17th Century didn't stay up very late anyway for lack of an inexpensive lighting source. Besides, without television, radio or other electronic form of entertainment, children had few reasons to want to stay up late at night, as the adult evening entertainments of the time would have been either too boring or too shocking for them. Nancy took the time to sing a lullaby for her two sons and to kiss them on their

foreheads before blowing out all the candles in their room except for one and leaving them for the night. Nancy next smiled to the babysitter and, taking out four gold pieces from a small purse hidden down her cleavage, gave the coins to her.

“You have done a marvelous job at taking care of my sons, Madame Longchamps, as usual. Please accept this as a little extra over and above your salary.”

“Madame la Marquise is too good, truly!” Said the happy woman while bowing to Nancy, who shook her head while still smiling.

“I’m not too good, Madame Longchamps: it’s most other people around that are not good enough.”

“That is one original way to look at it, madame. Goodnight, madame!”

“Goodnight, Madame Longchamps!”

With her servant gone, Nancy left her apartments and started walking along the long hallways of the palace, heading towards the King’s apartments. Crossing one of the personal maids of the King in the hallway, she politely stopped her to ask her a question.

“Excuse me, Jeannette, could you tell me where I could find the King at this hour?”

“I believe that he is in his private study, Madame la Marquise.” Answered the teenager. Something in her tone made Nancy stare at her.

“Is something wrong with the King, Jeannette?” She asked in a low voice. “Come on, you know that I am a close friend of the King.”

The maid hesitated only for a second before speaking.

“The King seems to have had his heart broken yesterday by the departure of Mademoiselle Marie Mancini and has been brooding ever since, madame.”

Nancy nodded in understanding, her expression turning somber. Marie Mancini, one of the young nieces of Cardinal Mazarin, had conquered through her spirits and her warmth the heart of King Louis XIV during the last few years. The Queen Mother was not looking happily at the prospect of such a romance and possible marriage and, as per established history, had convinced Mazarin to talk to his niece and dissuade her from courting young Louis. That broken romance had ended with the departure in exile of the young woman on orders from her uncle. Nancy could personally sympathize with the emotional distress of both King Louis and of Marie Mancini: both were decent young

people with true feeling towards each other but who had been the victims of state politics.

“Thank you, Jeannette. I will see if I can help the morale of the King.”

The maid nodded and curtsied to her before continuing on her way. Nancy, thoughtful, made her way to the entrance to the King’s apartments, where two musketeers stood guard. One of them saluted her with his hat while keeping his left hand on the pommel of his sword.

“Good evening, madame. What brings you here tonight?”

“I would wish to see the King, if he is willing to receive me.”

“One moment, madame.” Said politely the musketeer before partially opening the door and whispering to someone inside and then facing back Nancy.

“You should have an answer shortly, madame.”

Effectively, a valet opened the door again after a minute or so and signaled Nancy to come in.

“The King will receive you in his private study, Madame la Marquise.”

“Thank you!”

Following the valet, Nancy entered the royal apartments and was soon introduced into the luxurious private study of King Louis XIV, where she found the young monarch sitting at his work desk, various papers and books in front of him. Nancy curtsied to Louis on entering the study, prompting Louis in raising a hand.

“No need for this between us when we are in private, my dear Nancy. What may I do for you tonight?”

“My visit has two purposes, Your Majesty. First, I wanted to report back from my trip to Spain. Second, I wished to see if I could help your mood, which is said to be sad these days.”

Louis made a weak smile at that last sentence.

“Few secrets seem to stay so for long in this palace. With all the servants and court members around, I should not be surprised about that. It is true that my heart has been hurt by the departure of Mademoiselle Marie Mancini two days ago.”

“Marie Mancini was a fine young woman, Your Majesty. You are quite right to mourn her departure.”

Louis eyed her melancholically for a moment, then got up from behind his desk and went to a nearby sofa, motioning Nancy to come to him.

“Let’s sit together, my friend. We have many things to talk about. And you can call me simply Louis while in private.”

“With pleasure, Louis.” Replied Nancy before going to sit besides the King on the sofa. Both then looked into each other’s eyes in silence for a few seconds before Louis spoke up again.

“You must yourself be hurting after the marriage of D’Artagnan with the Baroness of Sainte-Croix, Nancy. I would personally have been most happy to see you marry D’Artagnan in place of the Baroness, but since you yourself rejected such a marriage...”

“If such a marriage would have been possible, I would have gladly accepted the request from D’Artagnan, Louis. Unfortunately, I believe that destiny was not meant to see such a marriage happen.”

“Why, my friend? I am the King! I can make destiny in France.”
Nancy gave a sad look at Louis then.

“Some things are beyond even the reach of a King, Louis. Besides, marrying would severely limit my usefulness to you as a special messenger and agent.”

“Your loyalty and dedication is to be truly commended, Nancy.” Said quietly Louis, meaning it. “To have sacrificed your love to D’Artagnan for the good of France was sad but admirable.”

“And so was your letting go of Marie Mancini, Louis.”
Louis sighed and passed an arm around her shoulders, looking into her eyes from a few inches away.

“The affairs of the state can be quite cruel indeed on young people like us, Nancy. Do you know that I more than once considered the idea of marrying you? You would indeed have made an outstanding queen.”

“I am flattered, Louis, but you know that such a marriage would have been politically impossible, even though we have true mutual feelings towards each other.”

“And what do you see in me, Nancy?” Said Louis, a smile coming to his face at last. Nancy answered him in a soft voice, saying strictly the truth.

“I see a young man with imperfect education but with outstanding abilities and a kind and just heart. You have everything to be the greatest king France ever had and I am confident that you will prove yourself such a king. And you, Louis, what do you see in me?”

“The most extraordinary young woman I ever saw.” Said Louis without a hesitation. “You proved to be more intelligent and skilled than most men, apart from

being incredibly brave and strong. But, most of all, you are a very beautiful and warm lady with a heart of gold. I wish that I could have had you as Queen of France.”

“Thank you for thinking so of me, Louis.” Said softly Nancy before kissing him. Louis returned her kiss, hugging her tightly in the process. With both of their hearts beating faster now, Louis ended up lying on top of Nancy in the sofa.

“Shall we move to the bedroom, Nancy?”

“I was about to propose the same thing to you, Louis.”

Both got up at once and went to the adjacent bedroom, where they quickly undressed each other before jumping in the huge bed with anticipated pleasure.

Much later, as both unglued themselves from each other in the now dark bedroom, Louis caressed the long silky hair of Nancy while looking at her tenderly.

“You are indeed a unique girl, Nancy. You said earlier that you wanted to report to me about your trip to Spain. You may do so now.”

“Very well, Louis.” Said Nancy, who then spent a good twenty minutes recounting her mission in Spain to Louis, who eyed her with genuine respect at the end of her report.

“Tudieu, madame, you can summarize things in a way I could only wish to be able to imitate. Maybe I should make you part of my royal council.”

“Only if it is in an unofficial, discreet manner, my dear Louis. I prefer to work in the shadows, where I can serve you better.”

“You may work better in the shadows, my friend, but I certainly don’t want to profit from your talents without granting you some just rewards for your loyal services. I spoke some weeks ago about that with Cardinal Mazarin. As a result, know that your annual pension has been raised from 9,000 to 12,000 Livres, retroactive to January of this year. An estate near Bordeaux is also yours, where you will be able to raise your two sons.”

“An estate? Was that really necessary, Louis?” Said Nancy, surprised. The young monarch smiled and got out of bed, putting on a robe before going into his study. Not bothering to put anything on, Nancy followed him and watched as Louis searched inside a drawer of his desk and took out a leather folio. She took the folio handed to her as Louis spoke.

“Mazarin selected a small but interesting estate just north of Bordeaux. It includes a vineyard and a winery and has a fortified tower dating back from the 12th

Century. It was confiscated from a Fronde supporter and was part of my royal estates but is now yours, my friend, along with some surrounding farmlands that have been annexed to the estate in your favor. You will be able to pass it on to your sons after raising them there.”

Nancy, truly touched by this, read the deed contained inside the leather folio and smiled to Louis.

“The Château La Tour Carnet, in Saint-Laurent du Médoc? I am truly honored, Louis.”

Her genuine appreciation made Louis smile with malice.

“Really, Nancy? This is quite a small estate after all, covering only two square miles even with the newly annexed farmland. Many nobles in my court would sneer at such a small piece of land.”

“That is because they don’t truly appreciate what they owe you, Louis. That estate will be perfect for me, especially considering where it is situated.”

Louis nodded, satisfied by her reaction.

“You just spent nearly three months away from your sons on a most arduous and risky mission, Nancy. Why don’t you go to the Bordelais and take possession of your new home? Take a good month of vacation there as well. If I need you in the meantime, I will send you a messenger.”

“Oh, you are too kind, Louis!” Said happily Nancy before gluing herself to the King and kissing him. Louis used that chance to caress again her firm breasts while answering her in a soft voice.

“For you, nothing is too good in my eyes, Nancy. Enjoy your time in the Médoc.”

More lovemaking between Louis and Nancy followed, taking a good part of the night. When they parted in the morning, Nancy was happily holding against her heart the leather folio with the deed to her new property. Even though she lived regularly through two other centuries and had access to much wealth and luxuries as a field agent of the Time Patrol, this life with her sons Charles and James in the 17th Century had become as real and concrete to her as one could be. In fact, more than a third of her biological time was spent in this time period as Nancy Laplante-Sommers, Marquess of Saint-Laurent, while another third of her time was spent in the 19th Century as Lady Jeanne Smythe-D’Orléans. The rest of her time was split between training sessions at the main base of the Time Patrol, duty tours in either outposts of the Time Patrol in 20th

Century 'B' Paris and 35th Century 'A' New Lake City and on special missions in various time periods in the past or future. With the approximately 200 years of life expectancy available to her thanks to the genetic longevity treatment standard to all citizens of the Global Council, which she was as a virtue of being a member of the Time Patrol, she had enough years to live to manage all those lives fairly easily. She however had to be careful about splitting her time judiciously and at the right moment and place in order for her physical appearance to correspond at least roughly to her official age in each time period. That was less difficult actually than managing the time of her three sons. Charles, James and William were after all still growing fast and any miscalculation on her part could expose them and herself to some embarrassing questions or comments from those around them. Nancy had however resolved that problem by letting her sons live mostly in their centuries of birth, jumping herself spacetime in ways that made her absences from either the 17th or 19th Centuries appear to be matters of mere hours at most to her sons. Also, she had not made either Charles or William, who were still pre-teens, travel through time other than for short trips after their births, so that they would not inadvertently reveal the secret of time travel by babbling with other children about having lived through some fantastic place or time. Only James, who was now thirteen years old and able to understand the importance of her secrets, traveled more often through time with her. As Nancy saw it, James was probably going to enlist in the Time Patrol soon as an apprentice, while Charles and William could possibly end up living normal lives in their respective centuries of birth. The property deed she now held represented a place to call home for at least Charles, who would now have a legitimate way to sustain himself when the day of Nancy's death inevitably came. In her happiness as she announced the good news to her sons and in the excitement that followed as they packed for their trip to Saint-Laurent du Médoc, Nancy forgot about the possible consequences of her night of lovemaking with King Louis XIV.

14:40 (Paris Time)

Monday, June 2, 1659 'A'

Château La Tour Carnet

Saint-Laurent du Médoc

Bordelais region, France

“Is this our new home, Nancy?” Asked James, who was at the reins of their cart, in which also traveled little Charles and Madame Marthe Longchamps, their sitter. Nancy, who was riding ahead of the cart on Pegasus, turned her head around and smiled to her adopted son.

“Unless everybody who gave us directions along the last ten miles lied to us, yes, it is. It looks like quite a place, isn’t it?”

“It is certainly an impressive place, madame.” Said Marthe Longchamps, who had accepted Nancy’s offer to move with the children to Saint-Laurent du Médoc. Being a widow, she had no ties that would keep her in Paris. All four of them contemplated for a moment the castle of La Tour Carnet, with its massive rectangular stone keep that closed off the thick walls of the castle. Nancy then urged Pegasus to a slow trot, followed by the cart. As they approached, Nancy noticed two soldiers standing guard at the main gate of the keep, which was linked to the passing road by a drawbridge that spanned the water-filled moat surrounding the medieval castle. She then looked back at James.

“Keep rolling at your present pace, James. I’m going forward to talk to those soldiers at the gate.”

Pushing Pegasus to a gallop, Nancy took only a minute to arrive at the drawbridge, slowing down her robotic horse and then stopping it just a few paces from the two soldiers, who were now eyeing her with both curiosity and suspicion. They were royal dragoons, mounted infantry soldiers that were infamous for their rough manners with most of the local population. One of the soldiers, having detailed Nancy’s male riding clothes and her weapons, spoke firmly to her while holding his musket at the ready.

“This is a royal property, madame. What brings you here?”

Nancy took out of the pouch slung across her chest the leather folio containing her property deed and showed it to the soldier but didn’t give it to him while replying in as firm a tone as that of the soldier.

“This property is now mine, on the order of the King. I am the Marquess of Saint-Laurent. I wish to see your commander at once.”

The two soldiers looked at each other with bemusement before the senior one told the other to go get their officer. As one soldier ran inside the keep, Nancy stepped down from her horse and quickly dusted herself off, then extracted and unfolded her property deed, getting ready to show it to the commander of the dragoons. Two men actually came back with the soldier: a young second lieutenant of the dragoons and a civilian

wearing small, round spectacles. The civilian was the one who came forward to speak with Nancy after bowing to her.

“Good afternoon, madame. I am Robert Villemin, royal clerk and administrator of this estate in the name of the King. I was told that you were given this property by the King.”

“That is correct, Monsieur Villemin.” Said politely Nancy, her tone now much softer than with the soldier before that. “Here is the property deed signed by the King, who also included adjacent lots of land to this estate.”

Nancy thought for a moment that she saw fleeting dismay on the face of the clerk as he read the deed but the man gave no other clues about his reactions apart from that. He finally gave back the deed to Nancy and looked at the dragoons officer.

“The act is authentic and valid, Monsieur De Jumonville. You and your men will have to vacate the castle, along with myself.”

The young officer appeared to be unsettled by that and gave a hesitant look to Nancy, who understood at once his dilemma.

“Do not worry, Monsieur De Jumonville: I won't be mean to the point of throwing you out just before nightfall. You and your men can stay until tomorrow, when you will be better able to obtain alternate barracks facilities from your regimental commander. I will just need one room for my family and my servant for the time being.”

“You are too kind, Madame la Marquise.” Replied the visibly relieved officer while bowing and saluting her with his large hat. “Do you need help to bring your baggage inside the keep?”

“Eight men would be enough to bring up my four travel trunks, monsieur. Thank you for the offer.”

“It's my pleasure, Madame la Marquise.”

As the young officer shouted orders to get eight men to run out of the keep and to the cart, which was now at the gate of the castle, Nancy grabbed the bedrolls in the back of the cart and let Villemin show her the way, little Charles behind her. The keep was of a fairly large rectangular section and stood a good twelve meters to its crenellated top. The royal clerk soon showed her a large bedroom on the second floor that looked unused. It was also reasonably well furnished.

“This bedroom is reserved for passing royal dignitaries. I hope that it will be adequate for your needs until we leave, madame.”

“It will be more than adequate, monsieur.”

“Then I will have your trunks brought up to this room.”

Letting the clerk go back down to direct the soldiers carrying up her trunks, Nancy dropped the bedrolls she was carrying besides the large canopy bed and inspected the bed sheets and the mattress for the presence of vermin. Thankfully the bed was clean, something that relieved her greatly: she had no wish for herself or her sons to catch lice. Her previous experience during her boat trip to New France five years ago had been enough for her. The first soldiers carrying her trunks started coming in as she was finishing her bed inspection. She took a minute to direct them and make them put down the trunks in one corner of the bedroom, then thanked them before they left. James and Marthe Longchamps came in behind the soldiers and looked around the room, with Nancy sweeping one arm around.

“We are going to sleep in this room tonight. Tomorrow, once the soldiers are gone, we will be able to redistribute better the rooms in this castle. What do you say to touring this castle together while there is still daylight?”

Both of her sons cheered at that, while their babysitter nodded her head while smiling, more excited about this move than she let appear. In truth, this was the first time in her life that Marthe had left the region of Paris.

The four of them thus went up the stairs of the keep, led by Nancy. They went all the way to the roof, emerging on a large terrace bordered by a crenellated wall giving an outstanding view of the surrounding countryside. Taking out her property deed and going by the descriptions made in the document, Nancy pointed various directions to her sons and servant.

“Well, we are a bit over a mile to the east of the village of Saint-Laurent de Médoc, which is over there, while the village of Saint-Julien is over there in the opposite direction. Our property is bordered to the South by that small forest and by a stream and to the North and East by the lines of piled stones along those fields. To the West, our property stops at the limits of the village of Saint-Laurent.”

“I can see quite a few peasants’ houses dotting your property, madame.” Said Marthe while scanning her surroundings. “I wonder if they are your tenants.”

“We will know fast enough once I am able to tour my property tomorrow.”

“What are those large buildings inside the castle walls, Mom?” Asked James while looking down through a crenellation. Nancy examined for a moment the two

multistory buildings standing side-by-side along the southern wall of the castle before answering her adopted son.

“The one to the right looks like a chapel, if I can go by its bell tower. As for the one to the left, its lower part seems to be a sort of stable and also possibly contains the winemaking equipment. The upper floors are probably used by the servants of this castle. Talking about the servants, let’s find out how many there are in the castle.”

Taking again the spiral staircase of the keep, they went down this time, exploring each floor of the keep as they went. The top floor was actually occupied by the dragoons and their young officer, while the only other occupant on the floor where Nancy’s bedroom sat was Roger Villemin. The ground floor was occupied by a fairly large hall, a guardroom occupied by four dragoons on duty, two storerooms and a large kitchen with pantry. They found a man, a teenage boy and a mature woman in the kitchen, who bowed to Nancy when she entered.

“Please, no need for such formalities between us, my good people.”

“But you are a marquess, madame.” Protested politely the man, making Nancy smile to him.

“First and foremost, I want to be your friend, not your master. Please call me Nancy or, at the worse, madame. What is your name and function, monsieur?”

“Jacques Talbot, madame. I am the cook and this here is my young assistant, Denis Rousseau. Over there is Marise Poulenc. She makes the bread in the castle.”

“Pleased to meet you all. These two boys are my sons Charles and James. Standing next to them is their sitter, Marthe Longchamps.”

Talbot’s eyes went to James when Nancy pronounced his name the English way.

“Your older boy has an English name, madame.”

“That’s because he was English. I adopted him after saving him from Iroquois Indians in New France.”

“You went to New France, madame?” Asked enthusiastically the young assistant cook, Denis Rousseau.

“I sure did! I was in fact born there. That is however a long story that I will be more than happy to tell you late tonight in front of the fireplace.”

“If he is English, then he is a Protestant, I suppose, madame.” Said cautiously Jacques Talbot. His tone of voice got Nancy’s hear up.

“He is, as a matter of fact, even though he doesn’t practice much, like me. We are not a very religious family but we compensate that by practicing good Christian

charity and kindness around us. Too many people go to church every Sunday only to act mean or with greed once out of the church.”

“Too true, madame.” Said Talbot, appearing to relax.

“Tell me, Jacques: are there other servants in this castle?”

“There are three maids, madame. I believe that they are presently busy cleaning the stables where the dragoons keep their horses. There is also the winery manager of the castle, Antoine Marboeuf. He is presently out inspecting the vines. A number of other people work on the estate to maintain the vineyard, collect the grapes and press the juice out but they live outside of the castle and come when called in by Marboeuf.”

Nancy nodded, then lowered her voice for her next question.

“What I saw up to now of the castle’s furniture looked mostly dilapidated, nearly bare in fact except for the room given to me and the ones used by Monsieur Villemin and De Jumonville. For a royal property, I was expecting something a bit better furnished. Was it always like this?”

Seeing that Talbot was hesitating, Nancy approached him and patted his left shoulder to reassure him.

“My good Jacques, I may have come from the royal palace in Paris but I am not here to make your lives difficult or to watch the local population. I simply hope to raise my sons in peace and quiet in this castle, which was given to me by the King. You are a Protestant Huguenot, aren’t you?”

The man stiffened at once, both nervous and apprehensive.

“I...I am, madame.”

“Relax, Jacques! As I said, I don’t care much about religion, either way. I was told that this castle was confiscated at the end of the Fronde Uprising. Did the royal troops loot it then?”

Talbot answered after a second, deciding to risk it all and be frank with that most unusual young woman, whom he couldn’t help find sympathetic.

“They are still looting the estate, madame. Much of the wine we produce goes directly to these dragoons and the rest of their regiment and we are not getting a Liard¹⁴ for that wine. This estate could make a fortune with its vineyard and winery but we are barely able to scratch a living after all the taxes and requisitions are levied. Nearly

¹⁴ Liard: Low denomination copper coin introduced in France in the XVII Century.

everything of worth was stripped from the castle after its confiscation and the dragoons don't care much about being careful with what's left, madame."

Talbot swallowed hard as Nancy stared into his eyes for a moment. She then nodded her head and spoke in a low voice.

"Since much of what you say would be hard to prove, I will live with the damage already done. However, once those soldiers and Monsieur Villemin leave tomorrow, we will all work at putting this estate back into business. That I promise you. This said, do you have enough provisions in the castle to make a supper for the lot of us tonight, and I don't mean to include the dragoons."

"The larder is mostly bare, madame, as..."

Nancy stopped him with a gesture of the hand and took out of her purse ten gold pieces.

"Take this gold and go with my son James to the village in our cart, then buy there what you need to feed us for the rest of the week. Calculate the same portions of meat and fresh produce for each of the servants as those for me and my sons. I don't believe in double standards when it comes to food. If any dragoon tries to steal or confiscate what you will buy, tell him that the Marquess of Saint-Laurent will come and kill him if he doesn't leave you alone."

"Understood, madame!" Exclaimed happily the cook before looking at James. "Let's go get your cart, Monsieur James!"

"Just James will do, Jacques." Replied the teenager, smiling. As the man and boy left the kitchen, Nancy looked and smiled at the young assistant cook and at the woman baker.

"My personal custom is that everyone in my house eats at my table, irrespective of rank or occupation. Also, if you have any problem, personal or otherwise, don't hesitate to seek my help. I will now go see our three maids and Monsieur Marboeuf with my younger son. I will see you at supper time."

Once she was out with her son, Marise Poulenc and Marthe Longchamps eyed cautiously each other. The baker spoke after a few seconds of silence.

"Madame la Marquise seems quite, uh, unusual."

Marthe nodded, her expression serious.

"She is a unique woman, I have to say. However, you won't find a more generous and kind person. She is also quite deadly when she needs to be: she is the equal of any man with a sword or pistol and can even beat a man with her bare hands."

"You must be joking!" Said Marise, unbelieving. Marthe shook her head at that.

“Not one minute! She spent years hunting fur in New France and fought during the Fronde Uprising.”

“On which side?” Asked naively the young Denis Rousseau, making Marthe look dubiously at him.

“On the King’s side, of course, my boy. She was given this estate by him.” Marise Poulenc hid her displeasure at that: as a supporter of the King, their new master was going to be a potential danger to anyone around this region that held a grudge against the crown. Having to suffer those brutal royal dragoons all those years had been bad enough.

Nancy and Charles effectively found the three maids of the castle in the stable, busy scooping up horse excrement in order to mix it with straw to make manure. One was a woman in her late twenties while the two others were still teenage girls. Nancy quickly signaled them not to bow to her.

“Please, no need for formalities between us. I may be dressed like a noblewoman but I don’t care one bit about class differences.”

“Uh, you actually look more like one of those swordsmen with fancy titles and short tempers, madame.” Said the youngest of the maids, who was maybe thirteen. That made Nancy grin.

“True, except for the short temper. I am Nancy Laplante, Marquise de Saint-Laurent, the new owner of this estate. However, I prefer to be simply called Nancy. This is my younger son, Charles. Could you tell me your names, the three of you?”

“Of course, madame!” Replied the older maid. “I am Gilberte Comtois, the senior maid in this castle. The one who spoke so lightly is Annette Beauséjour, while the other one is Collette Parmentier.”

“Pleased to meet you all.” Said Nancy before kissing all three on the cheek. “My other son, William, is gone with Monsieur Talbot to the village. You will be able to see him at suppertime. By the way, the dragoons and the royal clerk will leave the estate tomorrow morning.”

Nancy didn’t miss the discreet reaction of relief from the maids at those last words.

“Have those dragoons caused problems to you, girls?”

None of the maids replied, seemingly reluctant to speak. Nancy sighed, then went to sit on a nearby stool and eyed the three maids.

“Look, girls, I may be a follower of the King but that doesn’t mean that I condone wrongful acts by soldiers. If you don’t want to speak about potential problems, that is your business, but know that I will not tolerate any abuses against you or against other honest people. I may be the owner of this estate now but I want you to consider me first and foremost as your friend and protector, not as your master.”

Before the hesitant maids could decide to speak up, a man in his forties dressed like a peasant entered the stables, a pair of scissors in his hands. He stopped on seeing Nancy and, after a short hesitation, took off his large felt hat and bowed to Nancy.

“I am sorry if I disturbed your conversation, madame.”

Nancy got up and walked to the man, presenting her right hand while smiling.

“Call me Nancy, my good man. I am the new owner of the estate. And you are?”

“Antoine Marboeuf, madame. I am the winery manager.” Said the man while shaking her offered hand.

“Pleased to know you, Antoine. We will need to talk at length tonight about how to put this estate back on the right footing. I guess that years of governmental administration didn’t do much to help the estate affairs.”

There was a momentary flash of anger in Marboeuf’s eyes before he answered Nancy in a controlled voice.

“Indeed, madame. In fact, nearly all of our wine production has been used to keep those dragoons drunk most of the time and to fill the pockets of monsieur Villemin.”

“Has it?” Replied Nancy, displeased. “How much wine is left in the castle’s reserves?”

“A mere sixteen barrels, madame. In a good year, we produce over 150 large barrels of top quality wine and should by all rights make a fine business. Instead, this estate is close to bankruptcy, while the castle itself is in dire need of renovations. I am afraid that you were handed a rather poor deal, madame.”

“Maybe, maybe not. As of now, our wine will be used or sold solely for the benefit of this estate and I intend to use your expertise to put us back into business.”

Marboeuf eyed her with hope, then looked at Charles, standing near Nancy.

“Your son, I suppose, madame?”

“Indeed! His name is Charles. I have another, older son who is now gone to the village with Monsieur Talbot.”

“And when can we expect Monsieur?”

Nancy didn’t understand him at first, then grinned to Marboeuf.

“There is no Monsieur, my dear Marboeuf: I am not married.”

The scandalized look that appeared on the faces of Marboeuf and of the three maids only amused Nancy more.

“I may be a marquess but that doesn’t mean that I am a saint, monsieur. My older son, James, was actually adopted by me in New France. But enough about me. I will be more than happy to tell my personal story to all of you later tonight. Could you in the meantime show me the winery installations and our wine reserve?”

“With pleasure, madame!”

The tour of the winery, which occupied part of the building containing the stables, took half an hour, during which Nancy asked numerous questions concerning the care of the vineyard and the winemaking process. Marboeuf proved to be a true professional when it came to winemaking, even though his manners and speech were a bit rough. Both quickly developed a mutual sense of respect for each other during the tour, with Marboeuf seeing that Nancy was no simple court lady and had a very sharp and practical mind. They were on decidedly good terms by the time they climbed the stairs of the basement where the barrels of wine produced by the estate were stored. Seeing a dragoon inside the stable, Nancy went to him at once in a few wide steps. The soldier, who was giving water to the horses of his unit, bowed to her after a short hesitation.

“Good day, madame.”

“And good day to you, monsieur. Would you please pass a message from me to Monsieur De Jumonville, your officer?”

“Of course, madame!”

“Then, after you are finished with your stable duties, tell Monsieur De Jumonville that the wine stored in the basement of the winery is not to be touched without my express permission. I will decide on its distribution and use from now on.”

The soldier gave Nancy a disturbed look before bowing again.

“Your words will be passed on, madame.”

“Good! Tell him also that I will be happy to host him and his men, along with Monsieur Villemin, at my table tonight.”

Nancy then walked away with Marboeuf, who spoke to her in a low voice once they were out of ear shot of the soldier.

“Those dragoons have already pilfered most of your wine, madame. Why be nice to them like this?”

“Why? Because they are too many for even me to kill them all without risking the life of one of the servants of this estate, Antoine. Besides, being a mistress of the King is not enough to allow me to kill royal soldiers without a very good reason indeed. Tomorrow, we will be rid of them peacefully enough.”

Marboeuf’s eyes widened at the words ‘mistress of the King’ but he managed to keep his mouth shut then. Nancy next left her son Charles with Marthe Longchamps in the kitchens, then exited the castle and walked with Marboeuf to the vineyards to inspect the vines. The manager then answered her numerous questions about vine care and seasonal work to be done to obtain top quality grapes, an essential requirement in order to produce good quality wine. Marboeuf was not a little surprised and confused when Nancy told him about a few ideas she had for the estate.

“You want to store our future wine in glass bottles, madame? But, it will surely turn to vinegar!”

“Not if we seal the bottles properly with cork plugs. I intend to either find artisans able to produce glass bottles or to procure the bottles and plugs.”

“But, what will be the benefit of storing our wine in bottles instead of in barrels, madame?”

“A significant one, my dear Antoine: our wine will then be able to age for years and thus acquire a more solid and mature bouquet. If properly sealed and stored, wine in bottles could be aged for up to fifteen years or more.”

Marboeuf scratched his head at that, clearly not fully convinced about her idea.

“Uh, I don’t know about this, madame. Where did you hear about this wine aging in bottle business anyway?”

“In Italy.” Lied Nancy in a calm voice. “It is however still a rare process even there but I was able to taste some aged wine and I can tell you that, compared to such wine, what has been produced here up to now will taste like vulgar plonk indeed.”

“I am certainly curious to taste such a wine one day, madame.”

“I will make a point of bringing back a bottle or two from my next trip to Italy just for you, Antoine.”

Her inspection of the vineyard completed, Nancy returned to the castle with Marboeuf half an hour before supper time and went to the kitchens, where she found James and Charles helping the castle’s staff put the final touches to the supper. Nancy

went to the large fireplace of the kitchen, where a number of chickens were being roasted on a spit turned via a handle held by James, and smelled with delight the meat.

“Hmm, this smells so good. I’m positively starving.”

“So am I, Mom!” Replied James, who was sweating profusely as he sat by the fireplace to turn the spit. Nancy next eyed a large pot of vegetable and beef soup simmering over the fire. She saw as well that Marise Poulenc was baking fresh bread.

“Well, I see that everybody seems to know what to do. No sense for me in micro-managing you guys. I will be in the great hall if you need me.”

Leaving the kitchens and walking in the great hall, the main ground-level room of the keep, Nancy eyed the few rough tables, benches and chairs in it and made her mind to rearrange them for the supper. The noise of moving tables and benches quickly attracted at a run Gilberte Comtois, who looked scandalized at seeing her mistress perform such menial labor.

“My God, madame, you should not lower yourself by doing such petty work. You should have called for me to do this.”

Nancy stopped for a moment but still held on to the table she was moving and stared seriously at the senior maid.

“Gilberte, there is no such thing as petty work. I may hold the title of marquess but I always believed in living simply and doing my own things. But, if you are ready to help, then you can grab the other end of that table.”

Gilberte didn’t hesitate and took her end of the table to help this most unusual noble lady.

When Robert Villemin came down for supper, along with Lieutenant De Jumonville and his 22 dragoons, he found the tables rearranged in a large ‘U’ and covered with white linen cloths. Nancy smiled politely to him and showed him a chair set to the left of the master chair at the head table.

“If you will sit to my left, Monsieur Villemin. Monsieur De Jumonville can sit to your left, with his men next in order of rank along the left-side tables.”

“You are too kind, madame. Uh, who is going to sit to your right?”

“My sons and Monsieur Marboeuf. The rest of the staff will sit at the right tables.”

“You let your servants eat with you, madame?” Asked De Jumonville, stunned. Nancy nodded her head, her expression becoming serious.

“Always, monsieur. I believe in the equality of all persons as human beings. Didn’t our lord Jesus insist on keeping the company of the most lowly regarded people of his time?”

“True, madame.” Said De Jumonville, having nothing to counter her argument. The young officer then took place on the chair designated by Nancy and made his men sit to his left. That was when he noticed that there were benches and chairs only on one side of the tables.

“You seem to be fond of old medieval customs, madame, judging by your seating arrangement.”

“You are correct, Monsieur De Jumonville. Maybe I would have felt more at ease in Joan of Arc’s time.”

“You certainly look like you could have played that role, madame.” Nancy grinned maliciously at that: the young officer couldn’t know that her spirit had once been that of Joan of Arc and that she still possessed all the memories and experiences of the famous French heroine.

“Indeed, monsieur! Ah, here is the first serving.” The three maids of the castle, along with James, came in the hall while carrying either bowls of soup or pitchers of wine. The rest of the servants, except for the cook and his young assistant, also entered the hall and took place to the right of Nancy, with little Charles and Antoine Marboeuf closest to her and to James’ still empty seat. Once everybody had both a bowl of soup and a full cup of wine in front of him, Nancy recited a short grace, with everybody else lowering their heads for the prayer. In reality, Nancy was not religious one bit but one could not go around Europe in this century and never pray without attracting both undue attention and even hostile reactions. With the grace done, Nancy grabbed her cup of wine and raised it high.

“TO FRANCE! MAY IT PROSPER IN PEACE!” “TO FRANCE!” Replied the others, some secretly wondering why she had not made a toast to the King. As they were eating their soup, Robert Villemin asked a question to Nancy in a voice strong enough to be heard by all.

“So, madame, what are exactly your functions at the court?” “I act mainly as one of the King’s special representatives and go-between. I recently helped set in motion peace talks with Spain, which should lead to a peace treaty in the next months.”

“A peace treaty with Spain?” Said De Jumonville. “That would be indeed good news for all: the war with Spain has been a costly one.”

“Like all wars, monsieur.” Replied Nancy. “Wars may be necessary at times but they are never the best solution to problems.”

“But war can bring the glory of arms to valiant men.”

“True, but it also brings out the worst in men, while the common people too often can only endure its excesses and destruction. As a soldier, my proudest claim would be to have been able to preserve peace.”

De Jumonville exchanged a perplexed look with Villemin, not having expected such philosophizing on war from a young woman. The young dragoon officer however was too curious about her to let the subject drop so quickly.

“May I understand that you have seen war, madame?”

Nancy didn't reply immediately, as past visions of the wars her spirit had experienced through 9,000 years flashed in her mind. She finally spoke slowly, deliberately.

“I went through the Fronde Uprising and saw my share of deaths, monsieur. I also had to fight the Iroquois natives in New France while helping to defend Ville-Marie.”

“And did you get to kill enemies, madame?”

“Remind me later to show you the scalps of five Iroquois warriors I kept as trophies, monsieur. If you doubt me on that, just ask my adopted son James: I saved him from the Iroquois.”

Everyone but her sons looked at her then with either disbelief or shock. De Jumonville was the first to recover his wits and ask another question.

“Would you entertain us with the stories of your battles, madame?”

“I could, monsieur. I realize that garrison duty in such a small place as this could be quite boring, right?”

“That it can be, madame. We however make do with what we have. So, what was the first battle you were into?”

“A street fight in Paris at night against five morons who attacked me and a friend. We made those five men either hit the pavement or run away fast enough.”

“You had a sword then, I suppose, madame?”

“Not at first. I had to use my bare hands against my first opponent. Then, I was able to grab his sword. My next fight was with a troop of some forty Fronde soldiers as I was accompanying a messenger of Cardinal Mazarin. I was then overwhelmed and captured.”

“And...what then, madame?” Asked De Jumonville after a short hesitation. Nancy answered him calmly but with a somber expression.

“The messenger was able to escape but I was brought to the Bastilles and tortured to make me say who were the agents of Cardinal Mazarin in Paris. I refused to say anything and was thankfully freed later at night by the young King Louis himself.” On an impulse, Nancy got up from her chair and quickly pulled up her shirt out of her trousers, holding its folded edge just under the level of her nipples and turning slowly around so that all could see the faint scars still visible on her torso. Whispered exclamations greeted her display, coming from both the soldiers and the servants. Nancy sat back and looked again at De Jumonville.

“I can tell you that what I went through in the Bastilles was no fun, monsieur. It was however a risk I had accepted to take to serve the King and France.” The young dragoon officer got up from his chair at those words and bowed low, saluting Nancy.

“Madame la Marquise, your courage and dedication is truly admirable and must be saluted.”

Nancy smiled and bowed in turn.

“Your kind words warm me, monsieur. Many a lowly soldier or young officer however made even greater sacrifices in the service of the King. We all do our part the way we can do best. With the Fronde behind us and the war with Spain about to end, we will now be able to concentrate on returning the whole of France and its people to peace and prosperity.”

Her carefully chosen words were greeted well by all, prompting another round of toasts. The cook and his assistant then brought in on a rolling trolley six large serving trays filled with roasted chickens laid over a bed of boiled vegetables. Fresh, still warm loaves of bread were also put on the tables, then the cook and his assistant joined the rest for supper.

The rest of the meal went well enough, with Nancy telling stories about New France, about which the others knew very little and who showed intense curiosity about it. While the atmosphere of the supper was civil, Nancy didn't miss the obvious cold from the servants towards the soldiers, which was reciprocated by the soldiers' barely hidden high handedness. Only the young Lieutenant De Jumonville proved polite to all, acting like a true gentleman. As for the royal clerk, Villemin would have ordered the

cook and maids around if not for a warning look from Nancy. At the end of the meal, as the soldiers got ready to return to their duties, Nancy put one hand on Villemin's shoulder and whispered to him.

"I want to see the estate's books with you in half an hour, here in this hall."

She didn't miss the momentary look of consternation on the clerk's face, nor did her sixth sense fail to feel his short mental flash of panic then. Villemin simply nodded his head and then left the hall at a hurried pace. Now pretty sure that he was hiding something, Nancy told her domestic staff and two sons to go with her to the kitchen right away and to delay the picking up of the leftovers and dirty dishes. Sitting with them around the large table in the kitchen where the servants and cooks were normally expected to eat, Nancy smiled to them and adopted a relaxed, informal attitude.

"Since I am now your new employer, I would like to discuss your respective wages with you. First, I will need to know how much you were paid by Monsieur Villemin."

After a short hesitation and looking at the others, Antoine Marboeuf spoke first.

"As the winery manager I was paid the most and got 200 Livres per year, plus food and lodging in the castle."

Nancy nearly made a grimace at that: such wages were barely better than the pay an experienced servant could expect. Yet, Marboeuf was obviously an expert tradesman.

"That isn't much, Antoine. Alright, Monsieur Talbot, you're next."

"My pay was 100 Livres per year, plus room and board."

Asking the others in turn, Nancy quickly learned that the salary of the others varied between 60 and 90 Livres per year, figures that were markedly inferior to what she had learned to expect in Paris. She couldn't help look with surprise around her afterwards.

"With such pitiful salaries, how come you still work here?"

"Because times are hard around Bordeaux, madame." Answered the senior maid, Gilberte Comtois. "The Fronde may have ended six years ago but the representatives of the King make us feel as if we are still under occupation and keep us under their thumbs, with heavy taxes and constant requisitions. The soldiers also don't hesitate in taking what they want, including young girls."

Nancy sighed quietly at those words: she knew from history that the population of the Bordelais would suffer years still of such treatment and would endure even worse, all as the price to pay for its support of the Fronde and for the high proportion of Protestant

Huguenots in its midst, which would attract religious intolerance and no end of government harassment.

“Look, friends: I may be a lady from the King’s court but I don’t care one bit what religion you practice and what you did during the Fronde. We are all French and I am resolved to treat you decently and with kindness. I expect good, honest work from you but, in turn, you can expect my protection and my support. Monsieur Marboeuf, from what I saw and heard of you up to now, I can judge you to be a genuine expert at your trade. Furthermore, your expertise will be vital for the future commercial success of this estate. I am thus raising your salary to two Livres...per day, plus food and lodging.”

“Madame?” Stuttered Marboeuf, not able to believe his ears.

“You heard me well, Antoine. Your salary is now 730 Livres per year, plus food and lodging as before. Once the soldiers and Monsieur Villemin are gone tomorrow, I will also redistribute the rooms of this castle, so that you all get private individual rooms. Monsieur Talbot, Madame Comtois and Madame Poulenc, as senior servants you will each get the same pay that Madame Longchamps, my sons’ sitter, already gets: one Livre and five Sols per day, on top of room and board. As for the rest of you, you will be paid from now on one Livre per day, plus room and board.”

As a concert of happy exclamations and profuse thanks came out, Nancy opened her purse and counted out a number of gold coins, distributing them around.

“Consider this as an hiring bonus. It will partly make up for the miserly wages you got previously.”

“But, with all the renovations and refurbishing needed by this castle, you will ruin yourself while trying to pay us such wages, madame.” Objected Marboeuf. “It will be months before the estate can sell a new batch of wine and thus provide you with some income.”

Nancy grinned at that and patted his shoulder.

“Don’t worry about my purse, Antoine: it is quite fat, I assure you. Besides, I have other revenues. Well, you are now free to return to your duties and routines, except for Monsieur Marboeuf.”

With the happy staff dispersing and getting busy, Nancy faced both of her sons and smiled tenderly to them, with Marthe Longchamps standing nearby.

“May this be a lesson you will learn well, my dear boys: being nice with people often is the best way to get things done, except of course in war. Marthe will now get

you to take a bath before you go to bed. In the meantime I have something to discuss with Monsieur Marboeuf and then with Monsieur Villemin.”

Nancy next returned her attention to Marboeuf, who was waiting timidly while seated at the kitchen’s table.

“Antoine, I am going afterwards to review the estate’s books with Monsieur Villemin. Can you tell me how many barrels of wine we produced last year and the year before?”

“I certainly can, madame. We produced 742 barrels of red wine last year. The year before that we filled a good 754 barrels.”

“About Monsieur Villemin, is there something I should know about him before reviewing his books?”

“Certainly, madame!” Replied forcefully Marboeuf, heating up on the subject. “He is a crook, pure and simple! I can’t prove it but I am sure that he sold some of our wine for his own personal profit. Unfortunately, my word counts for nothing compared to his word.”

The bitter words from Marboeuf made Nancy pat his shoulder gently.

“Not with me, Antoine. I will ask you to stay in the kitchen for a while, so that I could call you in quickly if I need you in the next hour.”

“Yes, madame!” Replied the manager, relief and appreciation in his voice. Nancy playfully patted his left cheek and then left him alone, returning to the great hall. There, she moved a heavy chandelier to near a table sitting by one of the windows of the hall, in case she would need extra light later on while examining the estate’s books. Once that was done, she sat and waited for Villemin to show up.

The royal clerk entered the great hall ten minutes later, carrying a thick ledger book in his arms. Villemin bowed to Nancy, giving her a smile that he tried to make look genuine.

“Here is the estate’s accounts book, madame.”

His relaxed looks didn’t fool Nancy, who could feel through her telepathic power how tense and apprehensive Villemin really was. Telling him to sit facing her, she then turned around the ledger book and opened it. What Villemin couldn’t know was that Nancy’s experience at running a multi-million Pounds Sterling charity foundation as Jeanne D’Orléans in the 19th Century had given her a keen eye for financial records and transactions. It didn’t take her long to notice a few things that didn’t jive in the estate’s

ledger book. She turned around the book so that Villemin could look at it and pointed to a series of entries.

“It says here that the estate produced a total of 722 barrels of wine last year and that all but eighteen of them were sold to various customers, while two barrels were used by the dragoons, thus leaving sixteen barrels still in storage. While there are effectively sixteen barrels still in the basement cellar of the castle, I was made to understand that this estate produced 742 barrels of prime quality red wine last year. Where are the twenty barrels not mentioned in this ledger, Monsieur Villemin?”

“But,” stuttered nervously Villemin, “we produced only 722 barrels, madame, not 742. Who mentioned to you such a figure?”

Nancy, eyeing him hard, answered by a question.

“Monsieur Villemin, who has access to this ledger book apart from you?”

“Nobody! I only show it to the royal tax collector when he comes yearly to pick up the taxes due.”

“So, nobody but the tax collector would have known how many barrels you listed in this book as having been produced last year, right?”

“Uh, correct, madame.” Said Villemin, starting to see where she was going. “I assure you though that we did produce only 722 barrels last year. I don’t know who told you otherwise but that person was wrong to say that we produced 742 barrels.”

“And how would that person have known that you declared anything else but 742 barrels in this ledger book, monsieur?” Asked pointedly Nancy.

“I don’t know, madame!” Replied Villemin, his voice starting to rise. “That person must have quoted a figure that he knew was higher than the actual wine production of this estate. I have served for eleven years as a royal clerk and I resent these baseless accusations.”

“Since this estate has been given to me by the King, I believe that I am in my right in making sure that I get correct accounts concerning my new property, monsieur. Now, you declared a production total of 734 barrels of wine for the year prior that. Since you probably also kept that figure confidential, how would you explain that I was told that 754 barrels were produced instead of 734 barrels? Funnily enough, the differences for each of these years are the same: twenty barrels. Was my source lucky in his guessing of how much you had declared in this book or is your yearly personal quota of embezzled wine set at twenty barrels, Monsieur Villemin?”

Villemin became red-faced and shot up on his feet at once.

“Madame, you are most insulting! Nobody calls me a thief without proof.”

“You want me to get proof, monsieur?” Replied Nancy, also rising on her feet. “Are you ready to face a court of justice under charges of theft of royal property? Do you really think that nobody around here saw your little game and won’t testify against you, monsieur? You thought yourself safe because no one dared accuse you, the representative of the King. Well, I am here now and know that the King has my ear. You can either continue to deny these charges and face a court of justice or leave this estate right now and disappear before I call in royal investigators.”

“They would find nothing wrong with my administration of this estate, madame.”

“Oh, really?” Said Nancy before turning the pages of the ledger and pointing at a particular entry. “It is written here that you spent 1,300 Livres last April to repair the roof of the castle’s stable and winery building. Yet, when I looked at it today from the top of the keep, that roof clearly had not seen any renovations or care for many years, monsieur. That sum would have been enough to completely replace that roof, and then some. You are not only a thief, monsieur: you are an overly greedy thief. I give you half an hour to pack up and leave. Once out of this estate, make sure that I never cross your way again or you will regret it, Monsieur Villemin. Oh, one last thing before you leave: you owe me 1,300 Livres for the roof repairs.”

Villemin stiffened with anger at those words and nearly shouted at her.

“And what makes you believe that I have such a sum with me?”

“Your greed!” Answered Nancy, who then walked quickly around the table, going to Villemin and grabbing him hard by the tip of his left ear. Ignoring his loud protests and whimpers of pain, she then dragged him behind her and went up the stairs of the keep to the upper floor room occupied by Villemin. The few soldiers and the one servant who saw her pass were too surprised and amused to comment or react to this and Nancy arrived in Villemin’s room in less than two minutes. Closing the door and pushing the locking bolt in position, Nancy roughly pushed the little man on top of his bed and pointed a warning finger at him.

“Don’t move from that bed or you are dead, monsieur.”

Villemin eyed the two pistols and the sword and hunting knife at her belt and stayed put, realizing that she was the kind of woman to act on these words. Nancy then started searching methodically the room but did it in a restrained way: throwing around Villemin’s possessions may have been satisfying but it would have been unnecessarily mean. She quickly found a locked travel chest that attracted her attention. As she eyed

the chest, she saw from the corner of one eye a fleeting look of dismay appear on Villemin's face. Turning and looking hard at the royal clerk, Nancy extended her left hand.

"The key to that chest, monsieur. Now!"

Looking ready to cry with frustration, Villemin searched reluctantly in a pocket of his jacket and fished out a large key, then threw it at Nancy, who caught it in mid-air.

"Thanks!"

Opening the chest, Nancy quickly found under a pile of folded clothes a relatively small but heavy wooden box. Pulling it out and laying it on top of the chest, she then opened it, revealing hundreds of gold coins. She gave a mean look at Villemin, who was now as pale as a sheet.

"So, you didn't have enough to reimburse me for that roof repair, monsieur?"

Not waiting for an answer from him, she quickly counted 1,300 Livres, putting the coins aside in a pile on top of the chest. That left the box still half full but she closed it back nonetheless and faced the mortified Villemin.

"Do you own a horse, monsieur?"

The clerk nodded weakly to her.

"I have a small buggy and a horse in the stables."

"Then pack quickly. Even if I should, I will not confiscate the rest of your gold, as you will need it to rebuild your life away from here. Know that I intend to advise Cardinal Mazarin of your misdeeds when I return to Paris in a month. Be sure to be out of reach of the King's justice by then."

Using an empty pillow case, Nancy then put in it the gold taken back from Villemin. Next, she went with the loaded pillow case to the door and unlocked it as the clerk hurried to pack his things. Looking in the hallway and seeing two soldiers, Nancy signaled them to come to her.

"Could I ask for your help for a moment, gentlemen?"

The two soldiers bowed to her and hurried in the room. Seeing Villemin busy packing, they gave a questioning look to Nancy, who answered at once their silent question.

"Monsieur Villemin is leaving us tonight. I would like you to help him bring his things down to his buggy in the stables."

She threw to each of them a silver coin as she spoke. The soldiers eagerly grabbed the coins and smiled while bowing.

"With pleasure, Madame la Marquise." Said the senior soldier.

The room was emptied of the belongings of Villemin within twenty minutes, with the soldiers making two trips down to the stables in the process. Lieutenant De Jumonville came at a near run to Nancy as she was escorting Villemin out of the keep and towards the stables.

“Madame, what is happening? Why is Monsieur Villemin leaving at this hour?” Villemin, preceding her by a few steps, froze with fear then: if she told De Jumonville about his deeds, the young officer would probably arrest him on the spot and make him face royal justice, which could be very harsh with those stealing from the King. Nancy however kept her voice low as she faced the young dragoons officer.

“Monsieur Villemin elected to leave now for personal reasons, Lieutenant. I know his reasons and am seeing that he leaves the castle safely.” The young lieutenant gave a suspicious look to Villemin but refrained from questioning him, instead bowing to Nancy.

“Then I will return to my round of sentries with your permission, madame,”

“You do not need my permission for that, Lieutenant: you are in command of your unit. I am only the resident owner of this castle and your host.”

“Madame la Marquise is too kind.” Replied the lieutenant before walking away. Nancy then returned her attention to Villemin, who was blowing air in relief.

“You better leave quickly before Monsieur De Jumonville decides to be more inquisitive, monsieur.”

Villemin didn't have to be told twice and walked quickly to the stables, where he loaded the last of his things into his small four wheels buggy. With Nancy walking alongside, he then rolled out of the stables and across the inner yard of the castle. The domestic staff of the castle, along with Antoine Marboeuf, was now lined up along the passage formed by the castle's gate built through the keep. They all watched with hostility Villemin as he rolled out of the gate and over the drawbridge of the castle, with Marboeuf even spitting in the dirt at his passage. The latter watched the royal clerk drive away for a minute, then smiled at Nancy, who was standing besides him.

“I already feel a lot better, madame.”

He then noticed the heavy pillow case she still held.

“Uh, what's in that pillow case, madame?”

“The money owed to me by Monsieur Villemin for the roof renovation.”

“Roof renovation? What roof renovation?” Said Marboeuf, genuinely confused. That brought a mean smile to Nancy’s face.

“Exactly! I will need you tomorrow to present me to someone competent in roof repair. This castle sure could use much renovation work.”

After the departure next morning of the unit of dragoons and in the course of the three weeks that followed, Nancy initiated a major repair and renovation program for her castle, which was in dire need of it. Spending thousands of Livres on that work, she also bought or ordered numerous pieces of furniture and other items to furnish properly her new home. In the process she gave a major boost to the local economy of Saint-Laurent de Médoc and to the other nearby villages. Going to nearby Bordeaux with her sons, she also found and hired a master glassmaker and his two apprentices to have him produce glass bottles of a standard size and shape for her winery, ordering bottles by the thousands. She also arranged plans with that glassmaker to eventually relocate to La Tour-Carnet once Nancy could have a house and bottle shop built there. She was also lucky in finding an import company that regularly received by ship supplies of cork, thus providing her with a source of material to seal properly her wine bottles. The castle was still a beehive of activity when time came for her to return to Paris and the King’s court at the end of June. Thankfully, she had by now full confidence in the competence and honesty of Antoine Marboeuf to leave him in charge of the castle and was able to leave with her two sons and Marthe Longchamps without worries about the castle in the back of her mind. Her only worry then was of a more personal nature: her menstruation period was overdue by two weeks.

16:03 (Paris Time)

Saturday, June 28, 1659 ‘A’

Palace of the Louvre, Paris

“Ah, you are back, my dear Nancy!” Exclaimed Cardinal Mazarin, rising from the sofa on which he was sitting in his lounge as Nancy entered the room. A mature nobleman also rose at Nancy’s entrance. Nancy curtsied to Mazarin and then bowed to the nobleman.

“I see that you were busy with Monsieur de Lionne, Your Eminence. I hope that I am not disturbing some important discussion.”

“Not at all! In fact we were discussing about you.” Said the Prime minister of France with a smile.

“About me, Your Eminence?”

“Yes! You see, Monsieur de Lionne greatly appreciated your help in convincing King Philippe of Spain to start negotiating peace and wishes to use your services again.” Nancy bowed, pleased: that meant more close contacts with important historical players, something that was of prime interest for the Time Patrol in its work of reconstituting detailed records of history.

“I will be pleased to help further Monsieur de Lionne, Your Eminence. What do you have in mind for me?”

“I would like you to go to Bayonne with Monsieur de Lionne and assist him in setting the precise wording of our future peace treaty with Spain. Your main job will be to, uh, smooth the attitudes of the Spanish envoys who will discuss the treaty with Monsieur de Lionne. You will of course be given ample entertainment funds to help your work. Since you now have a property near Bordeaux, this assignment will in fact allow you to be close to home for a few months. Once the treaty is signed and sealed, you will further help Monsieur de Lionne by playing the role of temporary court lady for the Infante Maria-Theresa, who is due to be the future bride of King Louis. I understand that the Infante does not speak any French and knows nothing about our court. Your main job then will be to teach her as well as you can what she will need to know to be a proper queen of France.”

“Uh, if I may speak frankly, Your Eminence, that will not be exactly easy: the Infante is rather slow-witted by all accounts.”

Mazarin sighed at that.

“Well, I didn’t say that your job will be easy, my dear. By the way, how was your new property in the Médoc?”

“It was in a bit of a need for renovations but I already took care of that, Your Eminence. The estate is a prime wine producing land and holds many promises.”

“Good for you! Let’s sit so that we can discuss the terms we wish to see incorporated in our future treaty with Spain.”

A bit over one hour later, Nancy left Mazarin’s office with de Lionne, both having their marching orders and ample funds for their incoming mission. After agreeing with the Foreign affairs minister on a time and place of departure for tomorrow, Nancy went

her way, returning to her apartments where her two sons were with Marthe Longchamps. She arrived there as they were finishing unpacking from their trip.

“Sorry to have you work for nothing, guys: we are leaving again tomorrow morning.”

“To were, Mom?” Asked Charles.

“I have to go to the Bayonne area for a few months. I will drop you at the castle on our way. Marthe, Monsieur Dupré is a single man I believe.”

“You are correct, madame.” Answered her sons’ sitter. “He is a widower, like me.”

“Then, could you do me a favor and go see him quickly to ask him if he would be ready to move to my castle for a few months in order to continue teaching my sons? James can drive you in the cart.”

“It will be done, madame.” Said Marthe while bowing, prompting a gentle chiding from Nancy.

“Marthe, you know that you can call me simply Nancy when in private.”

“Madame la Marquise deserves the title in my mind, madame.” Replied politely the woman before leaving with James. That simple compliment from her servant made Nancy feel good indeed. She now had only one big potential problem left to solve.

CHAPTER 9 – REBELLION

09:15 (Auckland Time)

November 6, 2977 B.C.E.

Medical section, main Time Patrol base

Future site of Auckland, New Zealand

“You are effectively pregnant, Nancy. One month pregnant to be exact.” Said Rebecca Milner while still looking at the results of the examination she had performed on Nancy. Rebecca saw at once the grim reaction her words attracted on Nancy’s face.

“Is it an unwanted pregnancy, Nancy?”

“Well, it is certainly an unplanned pregnancy, Rebecca.”

“Do you want to keep that baby, or...?”

Nancy lowered her head, having feared to have to do such a choice.

“I have no wish for my baby to pay for a mistake I made. On the other hand, Farah may not allow me to have that baby.”

“Who is the father?” Asked her now alarmed doctor. Nancy’s answer was a near whisper.

“King Louis the Fourteenth of France.”

“Oh shit!” Said quietly Rebecca. “What are you going to do now?”

“I...I don’t know.” Replied Nancy, bordering on tears. “I don’t want that baby to die, but my sons are still in the past, waiting for me. I will have to inform Farah of this first, I guess.”

Seeing her distress, Rebecca put down her clipboard and went to hug her.

“Don’t worry, Nancy. We will find a way out of this dilemma for you.”

“Thanks, Rebecca. You are a real friend.”

Rebecca held her for a few more seconds, then stepped back and activated her wrist videophone, calling Farah Tolkonen. The Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol answered after a couple of seconds on the miniature screen and smiled to the doctor.

“Yes, Rebecca. What may I do for you?”

“Actually, it is Nancy that needs your help. She is pregnant but it is an unplanned pregnancy. Uh, the father is King Louis the Fourteenth of France.”

“WHAT?” Shouted Farah. “Tell Nancy to come to my office, right now!”

“Uh, will do.” Said Rebecca. Closing her videophone, she then looked apologetically at Nancy. “I gather that she didn’t take that piece of news too well.”

“It was expected.” Replied grimly Nancy. “I can’t blame her for that: she has some reasons to be upset. Well, I better be on my way to face the music.”

Walking out of the infirmary while still dressed in her 17th Century court gown, Nancy followed the hallway looping around this level of the main residential and command section of the base, going at a deliberate pace while thinking about her options. Unfortunately, those were quite limited and mostly meant bad news for her. She crossed path with a few of her friends on her way, acknowledging their greetings absent-mindedly. Arriving after a couple of minutes at the entrance of the office suite used by Farah, Nancy hesitated for a moment, then stepped inside and went to the desk of Farah’s secretary. The bald giant woman from the Global Council gave her a gentle smile and nodded once.

“Farah is waiting for you, Nancy. You may go in.”

“Thank you, Druna.”

Taking a deep breath, Nancy then stepped towards the door of Farah’s office. The door automatically opened once she was within two paces of it, letting her enter. Farah was sitting behind her huge desk, eyeing her severely as Nancy came to a stop five paces in front of her.

“Nancy, the least I can say is that you have a talent to get into trouble when it comes to men. Tell me how you got pregnant by King Louis.”

“It is quite straightforward, Farah. I confused my fertility dates and used my contraceptive spray too late.”

Nancy then gave Farah a detailed account of the night and following days when she got pregnant. Farah felt some discouragement as Nancy finished telling her story: while Nancy’s mistake could be somewhat excused, the consequences to follow were bound to be severe.

“Nancy, this is the third time that you force me to react because of your liaisons with men from the past. While the episode with Gordon Smythe was due to temporary amnesia and was through no fault of yours, I can’t say the same about your liaison with D’Artagnan, when you committed possibly the biggest offence possible in the Time Patrol: to reveal the existence of time travel to someone from the past. I was lenient

then but now you are pregnant from no less than the King of France. Who in the 17th Century knows about your pregnancy?”

“No one, Farah. Not even King Louis.”

“Thank the stars for that! At least we can still contain the damage. Do you plan to have that baby?”

“I want that baby to live, Farah.” Said weakly Nancy. Farah nodded slowly.

“Then you can have it, but not in the 17th Century. Nobody there is to learn about that child.”

Nancy felt as if she had been slapped then: this was one of the options she had dreaded the most.

“But, my sons... This means that I will be separated from them for over a year.”

“They won’t realize that if you return to the same day you departed, Nancy.”

“But I will!” Nearly shouted Nancy, despair in her voice. “I have already spent four months without seeing William. This would mean that I would be separated from him for over a year and a half, while I won’t see Charles and James for at least a year.” Farah clenched her teeth as she realized what those words meant. Unfortunately, she had to pass the integrity of the main historical timeline first.

“I’m sorry, Nancy, but you should have thought of that before letting yourself get pregnant. I will ask you not to jump spacetime until further notice. You will also go pass a complete medical examination. Then, go rest until I notify you of my final decision concerning you. Dismissed!”

Tears rolled on Nancy’s cheeks as she turned around and left Farah’s office. She managed to wait until she got to her assigned apartment in the tower before starting to cry.

10:20 (Auckland Time)

Farah Tolkonen’s office

Farah was already discussing Nancy’s case with Jan Bella, the chief historian of the Time Patrol, and Jack Crawford, the leader of Nancy’s tactical assault team, when Boran Kern, the chief of personnel and services, and Miri Goshenk ‘B’, the chief psychologist, entered her office. Farah pointed a vacant sofa to them at once.

“Please sit down: we have quite a serious problem to discuss.”

“We know!” Replied Boran Kern, who had been once the Global Chief Administrator of the Global Council, in essence the political leader of the whole Solar System. “The whole base already seems to know about Nancy’s problem. They didn’t joke in the 20th Century when they said that nothing goes faster than rumors. Isn’t Mike Crawford going to attend this meeting?”

“He is presently on a major documentary mission in the Ninth Century C.E., along with a number of other field agents. Jack Crawford is filling in as Interim Chief of Operations.”

Boran Kern nodded at that but didn’t let his displeasure show up: He didn’t particularly like Jack Crawford. True, the man was an outstanding assault specialist and was deadly in combat but Boran felt that he lacked some human touch with his subalterns. Boran believed that much of Jack Crawford’s problems came from his previous training and service as an American S.E.A.L. special forces soldier. That training had left in Boran’s opinion Jack with poor interpersonal skills. Farah’s voice then returned Boran’s attention to her.

“Well, since you already heard about Nancy’s problem, we will now discuss what to do with Nancy.”

“Uh, shouldn’t we decide first what to do about her pregnancy?” Cut in Boran.

“I already took a decision about that, Boran. She will have her baby, but here, away from any person from the 17th Century. She will also keep the existence of that baby a secret.”

“And where are her sons right now?”

“In their respective centuries. Since Nancy will use hidden time, they won’t notice any delay in her return.”

“Wait a minute!” Cut in Miri Goshenk, frowning at Farah’s answer. “You mean that you will force Nancy to stay away from her three sons for the whole period of her pregnancy?”

“Uh, more actually. Once she has given birth, she will need a few months to get back in her original shape and to wean her baby from breast-feeding. Then she can leave her baby in the care of a sitter and use hidden time to live with her baby, the way she does with her three sons.”

Miri bent forward slightly while staring at Farah, clearly not happy with this.

“Farah, you are asking the impossible from Nancy: to live three completely disconnected lives while caring for four children who will not see each other.”

“She should have thought about that before getting pregnant from historically important men.” Said Jack Crawford coldly. “This is the second time that she does that.”

Those words made anger flare in Miri, who then rose her voice sharply at Jack.

“You know what, Jack: I am starting to be really fed up with the hypocrisy of this pregnancy policy. It puts all the onus on our female field agents, while our male field agents can basically bed women through the ages without ever having to answer for the consequences, all because we reason that this is the problem of the woman involved if she ends up pregnant. And don’t tell me that our field agents don’t have to use sex during their missions, because I have seen too many times when they have been ‘encouraged’ to use sex in order to obtain important information or gain access to someone or something.”

“Nancy only needed to use her contraceptive spray if she wanted to avoid her present problem.” Replied Jack, also raising his voice. “She bedded no less than the King of France, a man whose romantic adventures and offspring, both legitimate and illegitimate, will be closely scrutinized by historians. Her baby can’t appear in the 17th Century, period!”

“Jack is right on that last point, Miri.” Said quietly Jan Bella, the chief historian. “King Louis the Fourteenth was famous as a womanizer and left a trail of mistresses and babies, all of whom were eventually mentioned or studied in numerous books, documentaries and even films. It is already a small miracle that Nancy, as the Marquise de Saint-Laurent, is not yet visible in history books. If she officially ends up with a baby from King Louis, then you can be sure that she will become historically famous herself, something a field agent can’t afford to let happen.”

“That’s a rather convenient point of view when talking about the life of one of our agents.” Replied Miri. “We sent that girl on a long mission to the 17th Century when she was still only sixteen years old, then made her our resident agent for that century. Nancy brought us already tons of truly invaluable historical information and documents, both written and visual, from that century, along with more stuff from the 19th Century, where she is also our resident agent. In the latter case, we assigned her there to replace Nancy ‘A’: Nancy ‘B’ didn’t come up with that idea. She volunteered after we asked her. And what are we doing now, after making that girl shuttle constantly between three disconnected lives? We are planning to cut her off from her three sons for a good eighteen months! Dammit, she already lost two husbands and had to renounce the other

man she loved in order to preserve history. We go on with that lousy plan and we will back that poor Nancy into a depression she may never come out of.”

“But, Miri,” protested Farah, “what else could we do? We can’t allow her baby to possibly end up in the line of succession of King Louis the Fourteenth. She should have used her contraceptive spray, which would have made this whole discussion unnecessary.”

“And what was the excuse she gave you for not using her contraceptive spray?” Asked Jack to Farah.

“She said that she believes that she confused her fertility dates and used her spray too late.”

“That sounds like a cheap excuse to me.” Said Jack, attracting angry stares from both Miri and Boran. Miri was the one to shoot back at him.

“Jack, have you stopped for a second to think that maybe she had a point about her fertility dates? You obviously haven’t and don’t seem to care either, so I will give you a few facts about female fertility. First, the female body is influenced by more than just straight calendar days. The living conditions, stress situation and diet can all affect female periods. Also, the Moon and its phases affect them directly. It is actually very possible that Nancy honestly thought that her fertile period was not due and that her constant switch between centuries screwed up her periods.”

“But she should still have used her spray after having sex.” Fired back Jack, unwilling to concede the point. Miri gave him a dubious look.

“You know, for someone who could remind female past lives, you are quite obtuse concerning this, Jack. Our standard contraceptive spray, while safe to use, still causes some minor secondary effects. Because of that, our female agents don’t always use it and try instead to track down their fertility periods. Since condoms are not used during most of history, our female agents often have to play a sort of Russian roulette with sex. Most end up with no problems, as their missions in the past are often short and infrequent. Nancy, on the other hand, is our sole field agent with resident status in the past and has been spending far more of her biological time away from our main base than any of our other field agents. Our other women are in majority ship crews and may go on patrols for a week or two at a time, then return to base, or serve as duty liaison officers at our outposts for fixed periods of six months. This is nothing compared to the constant, prolonged shuttling in time Nancy has to perform in order to fill her duties as

resident agent in not one but two centuries. Can't we cut her some slack, for God's sake?"

"Miri is correct on that point." Added Boran Kern somberly. "I reviewed her service file before coming here and she has already accumulated a staggering number of years of service in the past."

"Come on!" Protested Jack Crawford, throwing his hands up. "She doesn't simply visit the past: she lives in the past. Even more, she lives in luxury and comfort. In the 17th Century she occupies apartments in the Palace of the Louvre, while she is a multimillionaire in 19th Century Paris. I wish I could have had those living conditions while researching primitive hominids."

"Did they have torture chambers in prehistoric times, Jack?" Replied Boran coldly, getting fed up with him. "Did your hominids have to deal with the sight of thousands of men lying wounded and dying on a battlefield while trying to care for them? Did they ever have to play nurse during a mass epidemic of cholera? Stop demeaning the work of Nancy, Jack, before I conclude that you are unfit to be her supervisor because of gross prejudice against her."

Ignoring the harsh glare he got from Jack, Boran then looked at Farah, who was not sure anymore where this meeting was going.

"Farah, I don't think that this discussion is still relevant anyway, as I believe your decision to quarantine Nancy from her sons to be an illegal one."

"Illegal?" Said Farah, shocked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that, being a member of the society of the Global Council, like all other members of the Time Patrol, Nancy has fundamental rights that your decision violated. Your orders to her amount to forcible separation from her three sons for up to eighteen months. In a Global Council court of law, this would be judged as no less than moral cruelty and your order would be cancelled on judiciary grounds, apart from you losing your position as Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol for reason of abuse of power. I thus strongly suggest that we explore a more flexible and humane solution concerning Nancy. Also, the point raised by Miri about the liabilities for pregnancy put on our female field agents deserves some serious study and debating."

"What about the integrity of history in all this?" Cut in Jack vehemently. "Isn't it supposed to be our prime concern?"

"I will worry about that, Jack," answered Farah, "but I will do it with Boran and Miri's concerns in mind. I now see that I have a lot of thinking to do about this, apart

from having to talk further with Nancy. I declare this meeting adjourned until further notice. Thank you for your advice.”

The others got up from their seats and started to leave the office. Farah’s voice then made Jack Crawford stop.

“Jack, please stay for a moment.”

The tall, athletic ex-S.E.A.L. commando pivoted around and faced Farah, who was eyeing him somberly.

“What is it, Farah?”

“Jack, I have in mind to transfer Nancy to Assault Team B. In return you would get Den Selan.”

“Is this because of what I said a few minutes ago, Farah?”

“Yes, it is. It is obvious that you don’t have much confidence in Nancy as a field agent. George Townsend will be able to give me a second assessment on her. If George finds that Nancy doesn’t make the grade with him, then I will have to seriously reevaluate her as an agent.”

“Fair enough, Farah. You want me to pass the news to her?”

Farah considered that for a moment but, after a look at Jack’s hard expression, rejected it.

“No! I will! That will be all, Jack.”

Once the man was gone, Farah lowered her head, Boran Kern’s words still echoing in her mind. Had she really been too harsh with Nancy? Possibly. Could she have handled it better? Probably.

11:41 (Auckland Time)

Main cafeteria

Having gone previously to knock on Nancy’s apartment door and having got no answer there, Farah had decided in view of the hour that Nancy had probably gone down to the main cafeteria of the base for lunch. Once inside the large room, Farah effectively saw Nancy sitting at a table with her parents, Pierre and Suzan Laplante. However, while her parents were eating, Nancy seemed to have no appetite and appeared in a downcast mood despite the efforts of her parents to cheer her up. As Farah approached them, Suzan Laplante, who was sitting across from Nancy, saw her come and gave her a less than friendly stare. Seeing his wife’s expression, Pierre

Laplante also looked in Farah's direction. Farah didn't like the way his face hardened then but she could easily understand why they would tend to be hostile towards her right now. Farah still managed a smile after stopping besides the family's table.

"Excuse me for disturbing your lunch at this time. Nancy, could we discuss a bit the two of us?"

Nancy gave her a reproachful look before answering a bit brusquely.

"What for, Farah? You already cut me off from my sons. What's next?"

That answer and her tone hurt Farah deeply. Nancy 'B' was a perfect twin of Nancy 'A' and looking at her was for Farah as if she was looking at her past best friend, back from the dead after eleven years.

"Please, Nancy, listen to me. Boran Kern and Miri Goshenk raised a few points in your favor and convinced me to reconsider your case."

"My case?" Said Nancy, nearly spitting the last word. "It sounds like I am a criminal now."

She then got up from her chair and faced Farah from up close, deep resentment in her eyes as she stared hard at her.

"I have given my best to the Time Patrol as a field agent for 23 years of my biological life, Farah. Yet you decided in a matter of seconds to forcibly keep me away from my sons for more than a year. I don't care what were your reasons or whether you changed your mind about it, because I will never forget this, ever! Nobody will get between me and my children. Since you don't seem to appreciate my services and think that I'm too irresponsible as a field agent, I am thus presenting to you my resignation from the Time Patrol. First, though, I am getting my sons back."

Before the shaken Farah could plead with her, Nancy then disappeared in a flash of white light. Farah looked with horror for a few seconds at the spot where Nancy had been.

"My God! What have I done?"

"What have you done?" Replied coldly Pierre Laplante. "You forced Nancy to run away in order to protect her family. That's what you have done."

Getting up from his chair, Pierre took his wife's hand and spoke to her.

"Come, Suzan, let's pack up! We're leaving!"

Tears filled Farah's eyes as she watched the mature couple walk away from her and towards the cafeteria's exit. Everybody in the cafeteria was now looking at her, most with confusion on their face. Some, mostly female field agents, were however staring at

Farah with reprobation. Ingrid Weiss 'B' then got up and walked out after giving Farah a cold look. Jenny Kawena and Elizabeth Windsor were next to get up and leave, followed closely by Susanna Berghof, Eli and Heracles. Farah, haggard, watched as nearly one third of the Time Patrol members present left the cafeteria in apparent protest. She then sat down heavily on a nearby chair and started sobbing uncontrollably.

14:01 (Auckland Time)

Scoutship ANGEL OF MERCY

On approach to Landing Pad 4 of Time Patrol's main base

"We're nearly home, guys. Make sure that all your gear is properly packed and ready to be unloaded."

Mike Crawford, still wearing the clothes of a Viking-era traveling Danish merchant, took off his heavy wool cloak and stuffed it in his equipment bag: the weather at Main Base was much warmer than the one in the Danish-occupied part of Ninth Century England in Winter. Patricia Wilson, Frida Winterer and Jeffrey Norton got similarly busy around him in the cargo bay of the scoutship. After the weeks of enduring cold, wet weather, the beach in Auckland was going to be nice indeed. The voice of their pilot, Angie Wells, then came out of the compartment's intercom system.

"Mike, we seem to have a situation at Main Base: I can see combat robots and at least three assault troopers in full battle armor about to board the scoutship ENTERPRISE on Pad 3."

"What the..." Said Mike, surprised like the other members of his mission team. He then went to the intercom panel. "Contact Transit Control and ask them what the hell is going on."

Angie acknowledged his instructions, then came back on the intercom after a minute or so, as their scoutship was about to land on Pad 4. Angie's voice was now tainted with alarm.

"Mike, Nancy 'B' is reportedly on the run after resigning from the Time Patrol and has disappeared. Jack Crawford is about to go after her." Anger immediately rose in Mike at those last words.

"With combat robots and full battle armor? No he won't! Land on Pad 3 and cut the path of the ENTERPRISE. Jack is not going anywhere without a good explanation." Mike then looked at his three mission comrades.

“Get stun pistols! I don’t like this business at all.”

Watching the holoscreen panels that gave an external view from the cargo bay, Mike activated the big rear cargo ramp the moment their scoutship touched ground, then ran out with his three agents towards the back of the ENTERPRISE, where the assault troopers and the robots were about to go up the ramp of that scoutship. Mike ran to the troopers and braked to a stop in front of Jack Crawford, who had his helmet visor up.

“Jack, what the hell do you think that you are doing?”

“Didn’t you get the word, Mike?” Replied brusquely Jack, clearly unrepentant. “Nancy ‘B’ fled the base against Farah’s orders after being grounded by her. She could do major damage to history if not found and stopped quickly.”

“And what the hell are you going to do with those robots after finding her? Start a battle in the Palace of The Louvre or through the streets of 19th Century Paris? Cancel this sortie of yours: I am going to get the whole poop from Farah before we do anything.”

“With all due respect to her, Mike, Farah has lost it. She has been sitting in her office for the last two hours, incapable of giving any coherent order and blaming herself for Nancy’s rebellion.”

Those words made Mike stare harshly at Jack.

“Jack, I know that girl better than anyone else here. For her to rebel would take some mighty serious reason. If Farah is blaming herself for this, then I need even more to talk to her.”

He then looked at Heinrich Braun and Den Selan ‘B’, who appeared unsure what to do now.

“Return to the assault sections’ division with your robots and stand down for the time being. I will issue fresh orders once I know what went wrong.”

“Nancy went ballistic, that’s what!” Interjected Jack, prompting Mike to face him back and jab his chest with an index.

“Jack, shut up and obey me! You are making this way too personal to my taste. Now, get back to the assault section’s division and stop arguing!”

Jack stared back for a moment, then turned around and ordered his two troopers and his robots to follow him. Mike’s mission comrades were grim-faced when he turned to look at them.

“Alright, grab your kit and go change. I’m going to see Farah.”

Mike jumped spacetime directly to his own office in order to save time, then walked out and went to Farah's office, two doors down the hallway from his office. When he entered he was shocked to see the look of total despair on her face. She got up from her chair at once and ran to him, throwing herself in his arms, sobbing.

"Oh, Mike, I'm so happy to see you. I...I screwed up big time. Now, half of our members won't listen to me anymore."

"Calm down, Farah." Said gently Mike while patting her back. "Just tell me what the hell happened."

Controlling her sobs with difficulty, Farah went to sit in a nearby sofa, then spent a couple of minutes to describe to Mike what had happened with Nancy. Mike had to sit down as well, stunned by the magnitude of the crisis.

"Hell! Do we know where Nancy is now?"

"Not really but she told me before disappearing that she was going to get back her sons. Her robotic horse has gone with her. All this is my fault: I should never have cut her from her sons. Now, she will never come back. Worse of, many of our agents and crews have sided with her and are refusing to go after her."

Mike felt discouragement then: years of hard work and sacrifices were about to be thrown away because of this. They now needed a sensible plan if the Time Patrol was going to survive this as a functioning entity.

"Farah, did you order Jack Crawford to go chase after Nancy with combat robots?"

The shocked expression that appeared on her face was enough of an answer by itself.

"Of course not! It would be the worse thing to do right now."

"I thought so. I will have to straighten him up after this."

Farah then gave him a hesitant, beaten puppy look that made him feel bad for her.

"What are we going to do now, Mike?"

"First, we need to figure out what we really need to do. We won't have a chance at a second try on this. Don't take it bad, Farah, but I can see why Nancy would have revolted. You don't cut a mother from her children without causing something fierce. There is obviously something wrong with the way we employed her. In this I am as much to blame as anyone else. On the other hand, we need to address the problems that this baby could cause history-wise. Let me think for a minute."

To his utter frustration and despite using all of his imagination, Mike was unable to figure out any sensible plan that would deal satisfactorily with all aspects of this crisis. In truth,

he didn't have enough hard information to make an educated decision. Only Nancy 'B' knew all the pertinent details but that didn't help him one bit right now.

Mike was still thinking hard when a buzz announced someone at the door of Farah's office.

"Come in!" Said Farah in a resigned tone, expecting more bad news. What she got was Ingrid Weiss 'B', who walked in at a resolute step and stopped in front of her desk at attention.

"Farah, Mike, we need to talk with you."

"Who is we?" Cut in Mike, looking up sharply at her from his sofa. Ingrid, who was Mike's adopted daughter, answered with a soft enough tone but Mike could see that she was not here for niceties.

"The 'we' includes me and the other members of the Time Patrol who sympathize with Nancy's present plight. We just saw Jack Crawford coming back in full battle armor and with a dozen combat robots. Can I hope that he was acting on his own and not under orders?"

"Ingrid," said severely Mike, "you should know me and Farah better than that. I would never send combat robots after Nancy. Now, are you here to propose a solution to all this or are you here to announce that you and your group have mutinied?"

"A bit of both, actually." Said Ingrid with a straight face. "First of, I was asked to tell you formally that we won't obey any order that would imply attempting the return by force of Nancy or of her sons. Furthermore, we would counter by force any attempt to kill Nancy."

"Anything else, Ingrid?" Asked coldly Mike, prompting her in nearly shouting at him.

"Dammit, Mike! Jack was ready to go vaporize Nancy with his combat robots and you expect us not to react to that?"

"Jack acted like an ass and I was counting on telling him that between four walls, so you can calm down, Ingrid. Now, do you have some solution for this mess?"

"Maybe. The main thing that started this was the decision to cut off Nancy from her sons for the whole duration of her pregnancy and breast-feeding. That will obviously have to be rescinded if we ever want to see Nancy join us back voluntarily."

“She will not come back.” Interjected Farah in a weak, sad voice. “She told me that she was resigning from the Time Patrol and that she would never forget my decision. My God, how could I screw up this bad?”

Farah then started crying again, prompting both Mike and Ingrid to come to her to console her. It took a while before the gentle giant calmed down. Wiping her tears with one hand, she then got up and looked at Mike wearily.

“Whatever happens next, my poor judgment today caused all this and disqualified me as Chief Administrator of the Time Patrol. Mike, I am asking you to take over command of the Time Patrol from me.”

Both Mike and Ingrid looked at her, thunderstruck, with Ingrid protesting first.

“But, Farah, you are the co-creator of the Time Patrol and led it for 25 years.”

“And what will you do now, Farah?” Asked Mike. Farah lowered her head then.

“I will go back to what I do best: scientific work.”

“Please, Farah, don’t leave us!” Said Ingrid, near tears. “We all respect and love you.”

“But I can’t respect myself after causing this, Ingrid. If I stay, it will be simply as a scientist and nothing more.”

“Then, at least stay, please!” Insisted Ingrid.

“I will think about it. Mike, do you accept command of the Time Patrol?”

“I do!” Answered Mike after swallowing hard. “Go rest, Farah. It will do you some good.”

The giant woman shook her head.

“No! I will go instead to the Timeless Club: I need a stiff drink.”

Mike and Ingrid watched her leave the office, then looked at each other, discouraged.

“What a rotten day this is.” Said Mike to himself. “Maybe I should join her at the bar.”

12:17 (Auckland Time)

November 6, 3002 B.C.E.

Future site of Auckland, New Zealand

“What are you doing, Nancy?”

Nancy, sitting on the long grass covering this part of the coastline near the future site of the Time Patrol main base, looked up from the screen of the small computer repair unit and smiled to her robotic horse.

“Making you an even friendlier companion for me, Pegasus.”

Pegasus was silent for a fraction of a second before replying to that, a long time for its artificial intelligence processor.

“Am I not your friend yet, Nancy?”

Nancy suspended her reprogramming work then and looked fondly into the large black eyes of Pegasus. It had served her and Nancy ‘A’ well for decades now and had saved her on more than one occasion. It may have been a machine but it was also a very intelligent machine able to learn and to adapt by itself.

“Yes you are, Pegasus. You were Nancy ‘A’s mount for eighteen years, right?”

“Nineteen years.” Corrected politely Pegasus. “She treated me with respect...like you.”

“And I fully intend to continue treating you with respect. I would however like us to move to the next step: to become partners.”

“Please explain.”

“Partners are by definition equal. What I am doing will allow you to decide by yourself how you deal with me and others. I won’t be able anymore to force you to obey me but neither will others be able to force you to obey them against your instincts.”

“I don’t really have instincts, Nancy, just preprogrammed responses.”

“Wrong, Pegasus! I have known you long enough to be able to say that you have evolved. Review your memories carefully and you will see that your responses to specific situations or stimulus have changed, even if only in a slight way.”

Pegasus went through the recorded memories of its 42 years of operational existence, which took it the whole of five seconds, then nodded its head once.

“You are correct, Nancy. Thank you for pointing this to me: it was a satisfying discovery.”

“It was my pleasure, Pegasus. Tell me: do you like working with me?”

“I have learned to know you and to anticipate your moves and wishes. In those you are very similar to Nancy ‘A’. Working with you is a very stimulating experience for me. How do you intend to modify me to become your partner?”

“By disconnecting your contingency remote-control system and purging your A.I. processor of command override codes. After this you will be your own master, Pegasus.”

“But this means that even you will not be able to override my...instincts.”

Nancy gave it a grave look and, approaching its head, caressed it with one hand.

“Friends are supposed to trust each other, Pegasus. You are my friend and always will be.”

“I also wish to stay your friend, Nancy. Proceed with your modifications.”

“Thanks, Pegasus. You are a real friend indeed.” Said Nancy before kissing Pegasus’ nose. She then went back to her computer repair unit, connected to the inner systems of Pegasus via its false vagina, and continued her delicate reprogramming and rewiring work.

15:22 (London Time)

Saturday, March 19, 1859 ‘A’

The Smythes Manor, Twickenham

England

Sir Charles Smythe was having fun showing lawn bowling to his three and a half year-old grandson on the grass lawn besides the front driveway of his manor when he heard a horse approach from the main road. Looking up from the ball he was about to knock, he saw his daughter-in-law Jeanne, at the reins of her four-wheeled light buggy pulled by her customary brown mare. Little William squealed with joy at that sight and started running towards her on his small legs. Stopping her buggy on the paved driveway, Jeanne jumped down and ran to meet her son, grabbing him in her arms and hugging and kissing him.

“My sweet William, it is so nice to see you again.”

Sir Charles, who had approached at a walk, smiled at her enthusiasm.

“You left him into our care only six days ago, Jeanne.”

“But those six days felt like months to me.” She replied with a disarming smile, William still in her arms. “Besides, I am here to take him with me this afternoon.”

“This afternoon?” Said Sir Charles with a bit of dismay. “Why such a hurry?”

“Because we have a ship to take. A Dutch ship is about to leave for Japan and I am planning to travel to there with William.”

“Japan? Good God! This is truly a trip to the other end of the World. Mind you, it should be an interesting trip indeed.”

“Indeed, Sir Charles. I hope that losing him for a few months won’t upset you and Carmelia too much.”

Sir Charles gave a fond look to William before answering her.

“I suppose that I will have to live with that. William is such a sweet boy. Will you at least stay for supper?”

“I am afraid that I can’t.” Replied Nancy, anxious to avoid mixing her in-laws in a possible battle with Time Patrol agents. “We barely will have the time to make it to the ship before departure.”

“Then I will have William’s things packed at once. Let’s go tell Carmelia about your trip.”

Nancy could not refuse that without attracting suspicion, so she followed her father-in-law towards the front entrance of the manor, still holding her son in her arms. There was however one precaution left to take.

“Uh, Sir Charles, I would have a small favor to ask you and Lady Carmelia.”

“Say it and it’s done, Jeanne.” Said Sir Charles with good humor.

“Well, some people have been pestering me in the past weeks for me to fund some dubious investment scheme. While they are always polite they are becoming a bit of a nuisance and I have been trying to avoid them. If anyone comes here to ask you where I am or when you last saw me, could you tell them that you haven’t seen me for over a month. If you could tell your servants as well to cling to that story, I would really appreciate.”

“Actually, with your millions, I am surprised that you have not had that kind of problem more often, my dear Jeanne: money can attract all kinds of leeches. By the way, I must thank you again for your judicious counsels about bailing out of the East India Company before that dreadful Sepoy Uprising: it avoided complete ruin for me.”

“I would have been a poor daughter-in-law indeed if I would not have helped you then, Sir Charles.”

They kept exchanging small talk while going inside. Nancy/Jeanne then chatted a bit with her mother-in-law while a maid packed William’s two travel bags. That took less than ten minutes, at the end of which she gave a last kiss to her in-laws and let them kiss in turn her little William. Less than twenty minutes after showing up at the

manor, Nancy was departing with William in her light buggy, with Sir Charles and Lady Carmelia waving at them from the front porch. Nancy drove on the main road to London for a kilometer or so, then looked at her son as they were alone in a bend of the road.

“William, I have a big secret that I am about to show you.”

“What is it, Mother?” Asked William in his tiny voice while looking up at her with his big green eyes. Nancy then smiled to him.

“Pegasus can fly like a bird. Would you like to see that?”

“Oh yes!” Said excitedly the little boy, too young to realize that horses were not supposed to fly. Nancy grinned and winked at him.

“Then hold on to your seat, William.”

Mentally sending radio orders to Pegasus, who was remotely controlling her special buggy apart from pulling it, Nancy gave it a destination and flight profile, also telling it to go under cloak. Her horse and buggy then became invisible to all around them, while the hidden directed gravity drive of the buggy made it stay with Pegasus as it flew off the road, rising at a gentle angle. Nancy put an arm around her son’s shoulders as an added precaution against him falling off the buggy. On his part, William was too excited to do much more than squeal with delight and clap his hands as they gained altitude.

“This is fun, Mother!”

“Then we will go with the next surprise: we are about to take a trip to a fantastic world.”

“Is it nice?”

“Oh yes!” Replied Nancy before telling Pegasus to jump spacetime.

16:00 (Jerusalem Time)

Tuesday, March 19, 1963 ‘B’

Jerusalem, Holy land of Palestine

Their buggy, along with Pegasus still attached to it, reappeared sixty meters above the old city of Jerusalem, making little William gasp in wonderment.

“Wow! This is great, Mommy!”

“Isn’t it?” Said Nancy, grinning. “We will now land, then I will present you to an angel.”

“A real angel, Mommy?”

“Yes, William. Hold on to your seat now.”

Guided by mental radio commands from Nancy, Pegasus soon landed smoothly with the buggy on the flat roof of the Overseer's palace, just outside the western walls of Old Jerusalem. One of the two Palestine Security Service officers on guard on the roof walked to the buggy as Nancy was helping William down. After a short hesitation, the young Semitic man came to attention and spoke to Nancy in a respectful tone.

"Do you need help with anything, Overseer?"

Nancy gave him a big smile then: the man's mistake was easy to understand, as she was physically the perfect twin of Nancy 'A'.

"Actually, I am Nancy Laplante 'B', the Overseer's timeline twin. Me and my son are however here to see the Overseer with an urgent request."

"Then, if you may follow me, I will guide you to the Overseer's office: she is presently at work." Said the guard, bowing to her. Nancy, William in her arms, followed the man to the roof access hut, entering it and taking place in an elevator that went down two levels before stopping. Still following the guard, Nancy soon got to an anteroom where a female secretary sat behind a work desk. Less than ten seconds after the secretary had announced them through an intercom, the large double doors of the Overseer's office were opened from the inside by Natai, who was wearing her customary white robe. The angel smiled to Nancy and William and showed them a sofa near her work desk.

"I was expecting you, Nancy. Please have a seat with your cute little William."

"Thank you... Nancy."

Going to the sofa and sitting William in it, Nancy 'B' then sat besides her son, while Natai sat in an opposite sofa after closing the doors of her office. The angel eyed Nancy with something akin to sorrow.

"This was a cruel choice you had to make, Nancy. I can fully understand your dilemma and sympathize with you. I suppose that you came for my help."

"I did, Nancy." Said Nancy 'B', avoiding to call the angel Natai. For all the people of this time period, Nancy 'A' was still alive and well and sitting on the throne of Palestine. "I mostly came to ask for your protection and asylum for me and my sons: the Time Patrol may try to get me back by force."

Little William looked up with confusion at his mother as Natai spoke in turn.

"And you will have it, Nancy. Your unborn twins are too precious to risk and you had all the rights to ask not to be separated from your sons for so many months."

"Twins?" Said Nancy 'B', paling. "But... Rebecca Milner didn't tell me that."

“She didn’t know, Nancy, but I do. I can feel and listen to the two spirits in your womb.

Tears filled at once Nancy’s eyes, with sobs of joy and emotion following quickly. Natai nodded somberly after Nancy managed to contain her tears.

“Now, tell me about your plan on how you will deal with the Time Patrol and your pregnancy.”

07:41 (Japan Time)

Wednesday, June 29, 1859 ‘A’

English merchant ship SEA URCHIN

Entrance to Sagami Bay, Japan

“We will soon be in Kanagawa¹⁵, boys. Then, you will be able to see a country like nothing you saw before.” Said Nancy while looking at the Japanese coast with her three sons. Charles, standing to her left with James, looked up questioningly at her.

“Have you seen it before, Mother?”

Nancy, holding little William so that he could see above the merchant ship’s bulwark, answered in a low voice so that the sailors nearest to her couldn’t hear her.

“Yes, but that is one of the secrets I want to keep...for the moment. I do know the local language but, for the others, I learned it in China, not in Japan. Once we are by ourselves on the ground, I will be able to tell you all more about Japan.”

Nancy then concentrated back on observing the Japanese coast with William, Charles and James. They had boarded this merchant ship in Hong Kong two weeks ago, pretending then that they had earlier arrived from Europe on a Dutch ship. In reality, they had jumped spacetime in their special horse buggy from Jerusalem ‘B’ and landed at night near Hong Kong, then had taken rooms in an hotel of the small English colony. Their buggy, along with the faithful Pegasus, was now stowed inside the SEA URCHIN. Nancy, who was now two months pregnant and still not showing her state, was savoring to the fullest this first ever vacation with all of her three sons together. That had meant indoctrinating thoroughly her sons about keeping her secrets as a time traveler but, after an initial period of confusion and shock, Charles and William kept their mouths shut

¹⁵ Kanagawa: Town near the then village of Yokohama.

pretty well now. As for James, her older adopted son, he had already been in the know about her true nature for over three years now.

After a long moment of silence, James looked cautiously at Nancy.

“Nancy, will Japan be as dangerous as China for us?”

“Nearly as much, James. In China, the Taiping Peasant Rebellion will go on for another five years before being crushed in a bloodbath. There, foreigners are hated enough outside the ports open to Europeans but at least the Chinese are accustomed to see foreigners. The Japanese aren't. While you will find that the average Japanese people, especially in the lower classes, could be nice and peaceful with strangers, the higher classes are another matter, especially the Samurai warrior class and the regional warlords called Daimyo, who control the Samurai. To make things worse, Japan is in the midst of a severe struggle for power between numerous daimyo who support either the Shogun, the military leader who is the effective ruler of Japan, or the Emperor, who presently has only a few token powers but who has started to rally some daimyo to his cause. Nominally, the Shogun and his government are supporting the trade treaties with the foreign powers, while the daimyo around the Emperor want to throw all foreigners out. In truth however, the trade treaties were imposed on the Japanese through sheer intimidation and show of force, so the Japanese who truly want to see us in their country are rare. We will have to be very careful at first once on the ground, but I am confident that we will manage to personally strike good relations with the Japanese who will meet us.”

“Uh, and why would they treat us better than other foreigners, Nancy?” Asked James, apparently not convinced. Nancy grinned at that and patted his shoulder.

“That is an excellent, well-thought of question, James. The answer to that is that the Japanese haven't seen a European woman or child yet, only men. Also, I will most probably be the first European they see that can speak Japanese fluently other than for a few Dutchmen. They will probably be so surprised at first that they will forget at least momentarily their hostility towards us. Don't worry, James: the moment that I feel the situation becomes too tense, we will leave and return to Jerusalem. This is meant as a family vacation after all, not as a documentation mission for the Time Patrol.”

“You did bring your spy probes and surveillance equipment inside Pegasus, though.” Remarked James, making Nancy nod.

“True! If we are to witness the opening of Japan to international trade after an isolation of over 200 years, we might as well document it while we are here.”

“Mother,” asked in turn Charles, “will you return to the Time Patrol after this?” Nancy’s face clouded over at that question: with time passing, she realized that she had been quite harsh in her reaction to Farah’s decision concerning her future babies. However, Farah had been in her opinion equally rash in arbitrarily cutting her off from her sons.

“I don’t know yet, Charles. It will all depend on how the Time Patrol will react when I will show myself to them again.”

“What if they arrest you, Mother?”

“I doubt that they would do that, Charles. My only real worry is that some members of the Time Patrol overreact to this crisis and does something foolish against Farah’s orders.”

“Are you thinking of Jack Crawford, Nancy?” Asked James, making Nancy nod once.

“He is definitely the one I expect the most to want to use extreme measures in this affair. Hopefully, someone will restrain him in time.”

Nancy didn’t say more on the subject, despite the fact that she could have said a lot more on it. While a top assault specialist and experienced field agent, Jack Crawford’s uncompromising attitude and his habit of treating his subordinates like American servicemen from the 21st Century, with plenty of ordering around, had lost him many friends in the last few years. Nancy had nearly barked back at him a few times in the past, restrained only by the sense of discipline built in her by her training. Her relationship with Steve Crawford, Jack’s son, had also suffered for a while but had rebounded after Steve had started to grow in maturity and had been less inclined to follow blindly his father. As for the next most rigid field agent in terms of following the rules, Otto Skorzeni, Nancy wasn’t worried about clashing with him: Otto had been a close friend and occasional lover for years now and was fond of her, as he had been fond of Nancy ‘A’. The approach of the captain of the SEA URCHIN then took her out of her thinking. The British stopped two paces from her and bowed his head politely.

“Lady Smythe, I came to tell you that we should be able to throw anchor in Kanagawa Harbor by this evening if the wind keeps up.”

“Thank you, Captain. Do you intend to attempt to dock or set foot on land before July First?”

The merchantman scratched his graying hair, apparently indecisive about that.

“Uh, I am not sure that trying would be a good idea, milady. The Japanese are said to be very inflexible with their rules concerning foreigners. Our treaty with them specified that their five designated ports would be open to us only from July 1 on.”

“That is for maritime trade, sir. What about tourism?”

Captain Brereton nearly took a step back at those words.

“Tourism? I haven’t thought of that, to be frank.”

“Then, would you mind if me and my sons make a try at it tomorrow morning?”

Clear worry then showed up on the captain’s face.

“Lady Smythe, I would hate myself for risking such a distinguished lady as you in that way.”

“Captain, I have my three young sons with me: you can be sure that I wouldn’t try it if I thought that it would be overly risky. I would only need the temporary use of five of your sailors and of your rowboat to get me close to the shore. I will then discuss with Japanese officials from the rowboat and will back off at once if they show any hostility.”

“And how do you know that they will speak English, milady?” Asked the captain, hoping with that argument to dissuade her. Nancy grinned at that question.

“That won’t be a problem, Captain: I learned Japanese while in China.”

“You did?” Replied Brereton, suddenly seeing a definite interest in having her land quickly. After all, he and the other ships heading towards Kanagawa and the other Japanese ports opened by treaties were here to conduct trade. Having someone able to speak the local language would be a big plus for him. He thought that point over for a couple of second, then smiled to Nancy.

“Well, in that case, I don’t see much risk in trying. I will however tell my sailors not to come closer than twenty yards from the quays or shore until the Japanese allow you to land. What will you do then if they let you ashore, milady?”

“I will find some hotel room to rent and will visit the town with my sons. Would you need by chance to find some place to rent in the port to conduct your business? If so, I could start looking for a suitable place in advance of your docking.”

“That would be mighty nice of you, milady.” Answered Brereton, grinning. “If you could find something with an office, a couple of rooms to live in and a storage area, my company would be most grateful.”

“I will be glad to be of help to the good Jardine, Matheson and Company, Captain. We wouldn't want some American company to grab the best spots in Kanagawa, do we?”

“Certainly not!” Replied the captain, amused. “Thank you again for your offer, Lady Smythe.”

Brereton saluted her, then turned around and returned to the aft deck, leaving Nancy free to resume with her sons their observation of the Japanese coast.

As predicted by Captain Brereton, the SEA URCHIN did good time, helped in this by the firing up of its auxiliary steam propulsion to supplement its sails, and actually arrived off Kanagawa by late afternoon. By then, they could see that three other foreign ships were already anchored just off what looked like a small fishing village. Captain Brereton, with Nancy and her sons besides him, frowned while examining the village with his telescope.

“Why are they anchored near that village and not off Kanagawa itself?”

“Maybe that is where the Japanese authorities want us to go.” Suggested Nancy, using her historical knowledge. Brereton grunted at that, then switched his attention to a small Japanese boat rowing towards the SEA URCHIN.

“Well, we should know soon enough, Lady Smythe: there seems to be some kind of Japanese official aboard that boat approaching us.”

He then turned his head and shouted at his first officer.

“MISTER DUNCAN, STOW THE SAILS AND BRING US TO A STOP!”

“AYE, CAPTAIN!”

The merchant ship soon slowed down and stopped in the water, allowing the Japanese boat to come alongside. A Japanese man dressed in a rich kimono then shouted in Dutch up at the British lining the side of the ship, making Brereton frown.

“Damn! I don't have anyone on board who speaks Dutch.”

“I do, Captain.” Said calmly Nancy, surprising Brereton. “Dutch has up to now been the only foreign language with Chinese to be known in Japan, thanks to the old Dutch trading settlement in Nagasaki.”

What she didn't say was that she had learned Dutch in the 17th Century, a time when the Dutch United Provinces had been in turn an ally, then an enemy of France. It had thus been an important language for her to learn in order to fulfill better her duties, both to the Time Patrol and to King Louis XIV. While she sincerely believed in her dual loyalty to

France and the Time Patrol, this was probably an aspect of her that would shock a few in the Time Patrol if fully understood. Bending over the ship's side, Nancy shouted down in Japanese at the surprised official.

"I CAN SPEAK JAPANESE. ARE YOU SENT BY THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES?"

"I AM! YOUR SHIP IS TO DROP ANCHOR OFF YOKOHAMA, ALONGSIDE THE OTHER FOREIGN SHIPS. YOKOHAMA IS THE DESIGNATED PORT FOR USE BY ALL FOREIGNERS. WHAT IS YOUR SHIP'S NAME AND NATIONALITY?"

"THIS IS THE SEA URCHIN, A BRITISH MERCHANT SHIP."

The official hesitated before speaking again.

"WE WERE NOT EXPECTING WOMEN TO BE ABOARD FOREIGN SHIPS."

"I BELIEVE THAT I AM THE ONLY ONE RIGHT NOW. I AM A PASSENGER ON THIS SHIP AND CAME WITH MY THREE YOUNG SONS TO VISIT YOUR COUNTRY."

"A TOURIST?" Said the Japanese, clearly taken off balance. Nancy gave him her best smile.

"THAT'S RIGHT, SIR. I KNOW THAT FOREIGN TRADERS ARE SUPPOSED TO WAIT UNTIL THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW BEFORE GOING ASHORE BUT COULD I BE ALLOWED TO LAND TODAY WITH MY THREE SONS, AS SIMPLE VISITORS?"

The Japanese official hesitated again, probably not having any instructions or guidance for such a situation. After conferring in a low voice with another Japanese in the boat, he looked back up at Nancy.

"I WILL HAVE TO CONSULT MY SUPERIOR ON THIS. TELL THE CAPTAIN OF THIS SHIP TO GO ANCHOR OFF YOKOHAMA AND WAIT. I WILL BE BACK TOMORROW MORNING WITH AN ANSWER FOR YOU."

"I WILL PASS YOUR DIRECTIVE TO THE CAPTAIN. THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE."

Nancy then straightened up and looked at Brereton, who had been listening and waiting with growing trepidation.

"The village of Yokohama is the designated port for all foreign ships, Captain. You are to go anchor there and wait. That official will return tomorrow morning with an answer about my request to land early as a tourist."

"You certainly don't waste any time, Lady Smythe."

"Me? Never!" She replied with a smile.

Brereton soon had his ship moving again under steam power, heading towards Yokohama and finally stopping and dropping anchor besides an American steamship. A Russian and a Dutch ship completed the group of foreign ships present off Yokohama. A French ship showed up a few hours later, as darkness was about to fall. By then, Brereton and Nancy had ample time to examine the village of Yokohama and its small port from a distance. It appeared to have been originally a simple fishing village but rows of new buildings and intensive construction activity were evident in a large area on the eastern edge of the village. A number of wharves and one pier stood apparently ready to receive the foreign ships. The captain smiled on seeing a crowd of Japanese lined up along the shore and looking at the four large merchant ships.

“It seems that we are the main local attraction, milady.”

“Can you blame them, Captain? These people have never seen other people than Japanese and have been kept in forced isolation from the outside for over 200 years by their government. What they will see of us will probably set their minds on what to expect from all foreigners. Your sailors will have to behave extra nice if they want to project a good image of Great Britain to these people. In turn, that could decide how successful we are at trading with them.”

“I believe that you are right, milady.” Said somberly Brereton while still looking at the village and port. “I will talk with my crew before they disembark and make sure that they understand what is at stakes here. Mind you, I can’t say that the crews of those other ships will also be mindful of their manners. Those Russians in particular can be quite boorish...most of the time.”

“Now now,” said Nancy in an amused voice, “the Crimean War has been over for three years now. The Russians are supposed to be our friends.”

“Ha! With friends like these, who needs enemies?”

“Well, let’s hope that there won’t be a new war between England and Russia...in Japan.”

The captain laughed at that and smiled to her.

“Point taken, Lady Smythe. I will definitely speak with my crew.”

08:09 (Japan Time)

Thursday, June 30, 1859 ‘A’

SEA URCHIN, Yokohama harbor, Japan

Nancy and her three sons had already been on the open deck and ready with their luggage for a good half hour when a rowboat came off the pier and started coming towards the SEA URCHIN. Watched with trepidation by her sons, the rowboat came alongside after ten minutes, with the official on board then shouting in Japanese at Nancy.

“YOU AND YOUR SONS ARE ALLOWED TO COME ASHORE WITH A MAXIMUM OF TWO PIECES OF BAGGAGE EACH. NO ONE ELSE IS ALLOWED TO LAND BEFORE TOMORROW MORNING. YOU ARE TO USE THIS BOAT.”

“THANK YOU VERY MUCH, SIR. WE ARE COMING DOWN IN A MINUTE.”

Passing that information first to her sons and making them shout with joy, Nancy then turned towards the captain, who had been waiting nearby.

“Me and my sons have been authorized to land this morning. We will go in that rowboat. I will thus see you tomorrow, Captain.”

“Please be careful, milady.” Said softly Brereton. “I would hate it to see anything happen to you and your sons.”

“I will be fine, Captain. Thank you for caring, though.”

“It is the least I can do. My men will help you lower your luggage in the rowboat.”

Brereton then shouted orders to four sailors on the deck, having them use ropes to lower the four travel bags, two backpacks and one guitar carrying case in the waiting rowboat. Nancy then went down the rope ladder first, her nearly four year-old son William hugging her front with his arms around her neck while she climbed down. For the landing, Nancy had put on one of her riding split skirts, along with knee-high boots and a blouse, in order to be able to move freely and quickly, something a formal gown would not have allowed. Charles was next to come down, followed by James. Once in the rowboat, Nancy sat William down and bowed to the Japanese official who had spoken to her.

“I thank your government for allowing me and my sons to land early. I am Lady Jeanne Smythe-D’Orléans and am a French citizen. I am however also the widow of a British Army officer, which is why I traveled on a British ship.”

“And I am Minamoto Joshi, loyal retainer of Senior Councilor Hotta Masayoshi. You speak an excellent Japanese, milady.”

“I learned it in China, Minamoto-San. However, I am afraid that I am a rarity in that aspect among foreigners. The men on those ships do not speak Japanese, I believe. One ship is Dutch, though, so you should have little trouble with it.”

“That is good news indeed, as it will help my job greatly. If you will sit down, we will now go back to the shore, Jeanne-San.”

Nancy smiled gently at that: Minamoto had made the understandable mistake of confusing her first name for her family name, something quite natural as the Japanese put the family name first. She however didn't correct him and sat down besides her sons.

Watched intently by both the crews of the anchored ships and by the Japanese lining the shore, the rowboat went back to the pier, where a man inside the boat threw a tie-down rope to another man on the pier. Once the boat was well secured, Minamoto politely helped Nancy and her sons step out of the boat, then got on the pier himself as his men transferred the luggage of the small family. Despite being now the first non-Japanese ever to land here, Nancy didn't miss the fact that a troop of over forty samurai warriors in full armor stood at the ready near the foot of the wharf. While they didn't show hostility right now, their presence was a clear reminder that the Japanese were intent on having their authority respected. Minamoto then pointed to her a small wooden building sitting at the junction of the pier and the shore.

“We may now move to the customs house, where your entry in Japan will be recorded.”

“Then lead the way, Minamoto-San.” Said Nancy while bowing deeply to him. He returned her bow, then started walking towards the custom house. They had to pass by the troop of stern-faced samurai warriors in the process, with Nancy's three sons throwing them curious looks. In turn, the samurai discreetly detailed Nancy with male interest as she walked in front of them, something she didn't miss. She then entered the customs house with her sons and Minamoto. Inside, she found four Japanese men dressed in kimonos and standing or sitting behind a long table, with a supply of paper, pens and ink at the ready. Making her sons imitate her, Nancy bowed deeply to them in sign of respect, drawing return bows.

“I apologize for forcing you to work before the official opening date of this port, respectable sirs. I hope that you will forgive me for my haste. I am Lady Jeanne Smythe-D'Orléans, a French citizen, and those are my sons James, Charles and William. I came to Japan to show your fascinating country to my children.”

“You speak excellent Japanese, Jeanne-San.” Replied the oldest man with a benign smile. “May I ask how you learned it?”

“You may, sir: I learned it in China from local sea traders that visit regularly your port in Nagasaki. I of course speak Mandarin Chinese as well. My sons however don’t speak Japanese or Chinese...yet.”

“You used the title of ‘Lady’ to describe yourself, Jeanne-San. Are you of the nobility in your country?”

“I am, honorable sir. However, in France, the nobility may have titles and often lands but they do not rule, as our government is elected directly by the people. I am thus merely a rich woman with a title but am most content with simply helping others in need when I can.”

“I see.” Said the old official, many questions still on his mind. He however kept strictly to his present job. “You said that you came to Japan to visit it with your sons and not to trade?”

“That is correct, honorable sir. I have brought only personal effects with me, plus a few small items to be given as gifts.”

The official nodded to that.

“Have you any opium with you, Jeanne-San?”

Nancy answered at once in a calm voice, knowing how sensitive the subject of opium was in Japan. The European powers, Great Britain in the lead, had already fought two wars with China to impose on it the import of opium, a crass economic and political move that reeked of imperial colonialism at its worst. That forced importation of opium had in turn created millions of drug addicts in China, resulting in increased crime and painful social problems. The Japanese authorities were thus understandably anxious not to allow such a thing to happen in their country.

“I have none and never used or wished to use any, honorable sir. I must apologize as a dual citizen of France and Great Britain for the despicable way opium has been pushed on other countries by my governments, a policy I always opposed strongly.”

The official seemed pleased by her answer and bowed to her.

“Then I am ready to deliver you an entry visa, Jeanne-San. How long do you expect to stay in Japan?”

“If I could stay a few months and thoroughly show your country to my sons, I would be grateful for it, honorable sir. May I ask what are the restrictions applied presently to foreigners in Japan?”

“You may, Jeanne-San. Unfortunately for you, foreigners are restricted to the area around Yokohama and cannot travel further than 25 of your miles from this port. To go further than this would need a special dispensation from the Shogun himself.”

“That is regrettable but understandable, honorable sir. I had hoped to be able to show the palaces of both your shogun and of your emperor to my sons. If that is the rule, then I will abide by it.”

Her answer made the old official caress briefly his small graying goatee as he thought it over.

“You are however an obvious special case, Jeanne-San, as the first foreign woman to set foot in Japan and one who speaks good Japanese on top. I may just send a letter to Edo to relate your case to the authorities there.”

“That would be very kind of you, honorable sir.” Replied Nancy, bowing again. “In the meantime, I will lodge at a local hatago¹⁶ with my sons and will keep within the 25 mile limit. I do have a couple of questions more for you, though. First, I have aboard the ship that brought me my horse and personal buggy, a small horse-drawn cart I use to go around with my sons and baggage. Would it be a problem to let them land tomorrow?”

“I see no problem with that, as long as you don’t travel further than the set limit. I have to say that we never saw a horse-drawn cart in Japan before. I will be curious to see it.”

“I may just give you a small ride in it then tomorrow, honorable sir. My second question is about money. I have brought with me both gold and silver to pay for my stay. Are there money changers in Yokohama where I could obtain local currencies?”

The old official smiled and designated the man standing last to his left.

“Then Akimoto-San here will be able to help you: he is the designated money changer employed by the custom house. Once we have filled your visa form, you will be free to deal with him.”

“Thank you very much, honorable sir.”

Filling the visa form, including explaining the way her name was written, took less than twenty minutes to Nancy, who was then free to exchange a number of pure gold chips for Tempo Koban gold coins, Ansei Nishu-gin silver coins and a good quantity of

¹⁶ Hatago: Japanese inn of the Edo Period reserved for the common folk, as opposed to the more prestigious honjin reserved for traveling feudal lords and their suites.

low value copper coins. Once she was done, the older official had a servant call two man-pulled rickshaws so that Nancy and her sons could go to an inn. Before loading up in the lead rickshaw, Nancy saluted the head customs official with a deep bow.

“I thank you sincerely for your help and comprehension, honorable sir. Before going, I would wish to present to your government a small gift. Accepting it on its behalf would please me most.”

Nancy then presented in the traditional Japanese way a long roll made of leather and tied by a red string that she had just taken out of one of her travel bags. The official accepted it with both hands after the customary refusal of the two first offers, bowing to Nancy, then slowly opened the roll, watched by the other officials at his back. The old man smiled with appreciation on seeing that the leather sheet protected a large World map. The map was the most accurate and complete one Nancy could find in the Europe of the time and had been modified by her by the painstaking addition in black ink of small Japanese symbols translating the English writing on the map. He rolled back the map and gave it to one of his assistants and then bowed again to Nancy.

“This is indeed a most precious gift to my government, Jeanne-San. I will make sure that it accompanies my letter about you to Edo. May you have a good stay in Japan.”

“I will, thanks to the hospitality of your people, honorable sir.” Said Nancy, who then got in the lead rickshaw with her two younger sons. James took place in the second rickshaw, along with most of their luggage. The old custom official watched them leave, then turned to face one of his assistants.

“Yori, have a mounted messenger ready to leave for Edo after lunch. I am going to prepare a letter for Senior Councilor Hotta Masayoshi about that woman. If all the nambanjin¹⁷ are like her, something I however doubt greatly, dealing with them will be so much easier.”

Nancy's sons kept turning their heads around as the rickshaws rolled away from the pier, fascinated by all the new sights presented to them. Their obvious delight and interest in turn warmed up Nancy's heart: she had hoped for a long time for just that kind of family vacation with all of her sons. If anything, this convinced her even more that she

¹⁷ Nambanjin: Old Japanese term to describe western foreigners and meaning 'southern barbarians'.

needed to be firm with the Time Patrol about not being forcibly separated anymore from any of her children in the future. What she was asking for was after all a basic right of any citizen, be it in the 20th or 35th Century. Having asked already to the operator of her rickshaw to find her a good inn, she thus relaxed and let him go along the streets of the eastern section of Yokohama, freshly built by the Japanese authorities solely to accommodate the hordes of foreigners that were expected to descend on Japan now that trade was officially permitted. The few Japanese present in the eastern section today, most of whom were busy putting the finishing touches to their various establishments and buildings in preparation for tomorrow's official port opening, in turn eyed her and her sons with intense curiosity. It didn't take long before Nancy's rickshaw driver slowed down and stopped in front of a fair sized establishment situated along a wide street lined with similar wooden buildings. A mature woman in kimono came at once from inside the single story building and spoke quickly with the driver before going to Nancy and bowing to her.

"Welcome to my modest establishment, honorable lady." She said in Japanese while still bowing. "Are you planning on staying long?"

"At least a few weeks, Okami-San¹⁸. I hope that my early arrival will not cause you problems."

"Not at all, honorable lady. Will you need two separate rooms or a single large one?"

"I would prefer a single large one, Okami-San. We will follow you in as soon as I have my luggage taken down."

"Then let us help you, honorable lady." Said quickly the innkeeper before shouting orders towards her inn and making coming out four young women and teenage girls, all clad in colorful silk kimonos. With their help, everything was unloaded in a minute and brought inside. Nancy paid generously the two rickshaw operators before going in with the lady innkeeper, taking the time to take off her boots and leaving them at the entrance first. The interior was strictly traditional Japanese and was probably going to stomp by its bareness the many foreign travelers to come. Not Nancy, who had lived already two past lives in Japan, one as an early period warrior, the other as a high end geisha of 9th Century Kyoto. Following behind the lady innkeeper a corridor made of lacquered wood and paper wall panels, she was then shown inside a room that was

¹⁸ Okami: Lady innkeeper.

maybe five by four meters, where her sons and their luggage already were, along with two young maids. The floor was covered with a tatami straw mat and four windows with thin paper gave a fair but subdued amount of light to the room. Four rolled futon mats and bed sheets had already been set along one wall, while a low table lay in the middle of the room. Nancy looked quickly around, then bowed to the lady innkeeper.

“This is most satisfactory, Okami-San. How much are you asking for the room?”

“Twelve momme per day, including the meals, baths and laundry services, honorable lady.”

“Hmm, that would make six gold ryou per month. I agree! I will pay one month in advance right now.”

Searching in her belt purse, Nancy took out a few Japanese gold chips and gave them to the lady innkeeper, who bowed low to her.

“Will the honorable lady need a bath after her long sea trip?”

“I will delight in one, along with my sons, Okami-San.”

“Then I shall have the sento¹⁹ readied at once.”

The innkeeper then left, soon followed by the two maids, leaving Nancy alone with her sons. Seeing little William testing with his hands the paper of the sliding door, she hurried to him and held his hands gently, stopping him from ripping the paper open.

“No, William! You are not to touch the paper walls here: they are easy to break.”

“Why are the walls and windows made of paper, Mother?” Asked at once Charles, who was looking at the flimsy door of their room.

“Paper is a traditional material in Japan, Charles. It is used in houses because earthquakes are frequent in Japan and paper walls have less risks of causing injuries if they collapse than solid wooden walls.”

“What is an earthquake, Mommy?” Said William in his innocent voice, making Nancy look down tenderly at him.

“An earthquake is when the ground shakes violently by itself. During big earthquakes, complete houses can collapse and roads can open up wide.”

Her thirteen year-old son James was next with a question as he looked around the nearly empty room.

“Are all hotel rooms this bare in Japan, Mother?”

¹⁹ Sento: Communal bathhouse.

“That is the traditional way of living here, James. You will however soon find out that what may be missing in furniture is more than compensated by the services provided.”

“What kind of services?”

“About anything the lady innkeeper can do to make our stay more agreeable, basically. Now, let’s unpack some of our things. Since storage facilities are at a premium here, we will take out of our bags only some spare underwear. Don’t bother taking out our soap and towels: they will be provided by the inn.”

Barely fifteen minutes later, a light knock on the frame of the sliding door made Nancy speak up in Japanese.

“Enter!”

The two young maids who had been in the room previously then entered, accompanied by a third maid. One carried a tray of food, the second a tea service and the third what looked like a few bath robes and paper sandals. The trays of food and tea went on the low table, while the third maid put the robes down in one corner. Two of the maids then left, while the older one, a girl of maybe 20, kneeled besides the low table and bowed to Nancy.

“I am Miko, your maidservant. We brought some snacks and tea for you and your sons.”

“Thank you very much, Miko-San.” Said politely Nancy before switching to French for the benefit of her sons.

“Miko, our designated maidservant, has brought some snacks for us, boys. Please come kneel by the table and serve yourselves.”

Her sons obeyed eagerly enough, kneeling in the traditional Japanese way in front of the low table. Nancy helped them serve themselves with honey rice cakes and melon, supervising them as they used their chopsticks. She had spent quite a few hours during their sea trip to indoctrinate her sons in Japanese mores and good manners, so that they wouldn’t appear like the uncivilized barbarians the Japanese were expecting to see arrive in droves tomorrow. After serving her son William, Nancy smiled at Miko, who was patiently waiting by the side of the table after serving tea to her and her two older sons.

“I am afraid that my sons don’t speak Japanese, Miko-San. My name is Jeanne and my sons are William, Charles and James.”

“You have beautiful sons, Jeanne-San.” Said the maidservant, struggling with the foreign-sounding name. “Is your husband going to join you soon at this inn?”

“My husband died two years ago in India, Miko-San. I am a widow.”

“I am sorry to hear that, Jeanne-San. Please accept my heartfelt condolences.”

“Thank you, Miko-San. I am hoping with this trip to your country with my sons to rebuild my family life. I also wish to show my sons different places and ways, to educate them about the World. I myself have already traveled a lot in many countries and learned to speak Japanese from Chinese sea merchants. This is however my first time in Japan. As for my sons, this is their first overseas trip, except for James, who traveled with me from the Americas to France.”

Intense curiosity showed up in Miko’s eyes then.

“Is life very different in your country compared to here, Jeanne-San?”

“Quite different, Miko. The political and social systems are completely different and the technology is very advanced, as you can see by yourself from watching our ships. What is not different is the nature of the human beings in both our countries. We all can suffer, cry, laugh, get angry or show kindness or love, like the Japanese do. Being different doesn’t mean being either inferior or superior to others. I can tell you in detail about my country in the days to come, if you wish so.”

“I would love that very much, Jeanne-San.” Said Miko, bowing briefly. Nancy nodded as well, then took out of her purse a gold chip and ceremoniously presented it to the stunned maidservant.

“Yoroshiku onegai-shimasu²⁰, Miko-San.”

“But...that is too much, Jeanne-San!” protested weakly Miko.

“Not in my eyes, Miko-San. Know that I am a very rich woman and that it will make me most happy if you accepted this.”

Miko, the daughter of a poor peasant, hesitated for a moment, then took the gold chip that represented over a month of her normal salary and bowed yet again.

“Jeanne-San is too kind.”

“Kindness is not measured in gold, Miko-San: it is measured in how much you really care for others. I made it my goal in life to care for others.”

²⁰ Yoroshiku onegai-shimasu: I hope that we can count on you during our stay here. Traditional formula used when giving the kokoro-zuke, or arrival tip, to one’s designated maidservant in a Japanese inn.

Miko felt humbleness then. The people of Yokohama had been talking and speculating wildly for months now about how the foreigners would be like in reality but had in general agreed among themselves that the nambanjin had to be inferior to the Japanese people despite their black ships and big guns. Now, Miko was starting to wonder about the wisdom of that opinion. She got up from the tatami mat and bowed to Nancy.

“With your permission, I will go see how long it will take for the bathhouse to be ready, Jeanne-San.”

“You don’t need my permission for anything, Miko-san: I trust your good judgment and competence. This said, I realized that you asked out of good manners and I appreciate it. By the way, if you were wondering about it, I can tell you that not all foreigners are like me. You will see good ones as well as bad or indifferent ones in the years to come. Simply take them as they come. The only thing that they will have in common is their lack of knowledge of the Japanese language.”

“Yes, Jeanne-San.” Could only respond Miko, surprised by this foreigner’s hindsight and extreme liberalism. She then walked out of the room, closing the sliding door behind her, and went quickly to her own room, taking the time to hide in her personal effects the precious gold chip before heading to the inn’s bathhouse, which formed an annex in the backyard, besides the inn’s garden. She found there her boss, Kimi-San, supervising two maidservants busy filling the communal bath with hot water. All three women looked at her when she entered, with Kimi-San questioning her at once in a low, eager tone.

“So, how are they?”

“Different, certainly, Kimi-San. The woman, Jeanne-San, told me that she was a very rich widow and that she came here with her sons to show them new things. Jeanne-San nearly treated me as an equal.”

The three others stared at her with surprise, with the innkeeper finally replying to that.

“You are right, Miko: they are different. The bath should be ready in half an hour at the most.”

“Then we should see if they are really different.” Said maliciously one of the maids, making the others giggle in amused understanding: popular speculations had also been running about the foreigners being possibly different physically as well from the Japanese. Gossiping was bound to be fierce tonight around Yokohama.

Once the hot communal bath was ready, Kimi-San sent word of it to Miko, who then escorted Nancy and her sons to the bathhouse. The four foreigners wore the informal yukata robes provided to them, creating a picture that made the maids smile with amusement: while Nancy's robe was way too short due to her near-giant size, little William's robe, despite being the smallest one the maids could find, dragged behind him on the floor as he eagerly ran around, excited by all the new things around him. The family was first led by Miko to the washing area, where she showed them low stools set around a large wooden bucket full of lukewarm water. Nancy and her sons then handed their robes to Miko and started scrubbing themselves thoroughly with the soft brushes and bars of soap available, splashing themselves with water from the bucket by using small bowls. Again, Miko found Jeanne to be knowledgeable about Japanese customs, telling her sons to wash and rinse themselves completely before they could go in the hot bath. Miko and the other maids, who volunteered to help scrub the backs of the foreigners, could then see that they were no different physically from Japanese, except for their size. Jeanne's fit and muscular body, along with the faint scars around her torso, did attract a few discreet stares, while James and Charles were later graded by the maids as handsome and healthy boys. As for little William, he became at once popular with the maids as one happy and exuberant child. Miko smiled when she saw Jeanne's two older sons hesitate after dipping their feet in the very hot water of the communal bath. In contrast, while she entered the hot water progressively, Jeanne went in without a hesitation, helping her William to get in at the same time. It took a few words of goading from Jeanne to finally convince Charles and James to get in the hot water very reluctantly, making Miko grin at Jeanne.

"I guess that you are not accustomed to hot baths, Jeanne-San."

"Not this hot, Miko-San."

The relaxing effects of the hot water however soon quieted down the objections of the two older boys. After soaking for a good twenty minutes while chatting with Miko the family came out, minus little William, who had already been taken out by Jeanne earlier on and then dried by Miko. Returning to its room, the family dressed back in fresh clothes to go for a short walk around town. This time, Jeanne put on a nice French evening gown with a low cut cleavage, supplemented by a set of moderately expensive but visually magnificent jewels. If she was to be looked and stared at, then she might as well parade in the latest Paris fashion, minus of course the crinoline cage she detested

so much. The four of them indeed attracted all the eyes around the moment they started walking up the street on which their inn was. Guided by her historical hindsight, Jeanne didn't lose time in this section of Yokohama, knowing that it contained nearly exclusively inns or warehouses meant to be used by foreigners. The shops where one could buy souvenirs or find good Japanese artifacts were along streets nearer to the western section of the small town, which was occupied by the Japanese population. She thus led her sons up the main artery of Yokohama, the Honcho Dori, where they slowly went down the line of shops, looking at the goods on sale. Jeanne took her time and restricted her buying to a few small art objects she deemed of high enough quality to be worth her interest. After an hour or so of window shopping and bargaining, the family stopped at a restaurant serving traditional Japanese food. As Jeanne had expected, the fare was heavy on sea products, much of it caught by local fishermen. This proved a good opportunity for her to initiate her sons to the delights of Japanese Sushi. More window shopping followed after lunch. At around two O'clock in the afternoon, Jeanne decided to return towards their inn, where she temporarily left Charles and William under the care of James and then went by herself to the shoreline near the West Pier of the port. Discussing and bargaining with a number of Japanese officials in charge of leasing the few trading and storage facilities already built in this section of Yokohama, she chose a compound close to the Western Pier that would at least fit temporarily the needs of the Jardine, Matheson and Company mercantile house, paying a deposit on it in order to reserve it. With a signed receipt for it and after leaving specific instructions to the official, Jeanne then returned to her inn, her goals for the day accomplished.

20:53 (Japan Time)

Kimi-San's inn

Yokohama, Japan

Having sung a soft song along with playing her guitar to help put to sleep her sons, Jeanne then kissed each of them in turn on the forehead, with little William last. Her younger son did ask one question as he lay on his futon bed in the darkened room, which was faintly illuminated by one oil lamp.

“Mommy, will we be able to travel around here?”

“We will, William. Tomorrow, we will go take Pegasus and our buggy off the ship and will then make an excursion to Kanagawa, the nearest town from Yokohama. After that, we will visit what the local government will let us see.”

“Why would they not let us go anywhere, Mommy?”

“Because they are not accustomed to strangers and prefer to be cautious about us.”

“Are they afraid of us, Mommy?”

“Some are, William. Now, go to sleep: we will be doing some traveling tomorrow.”

She gave him another kiss, then quietly left the room, closing the wood and paper sliding door behind her. Walking silently in her woolen socks on the tatami mat covering the floors of the inn, Jeanne went to the rear patio in order to watch the sea, visible from the garden area. Sitting cross-legged on the rear patio, she contemplated in silence the sea and the dark sky and thought about her future and that of her sons. One thing that came at once to her mind was how happy she had been in those last few days with all of her sons. This in turn brought her back to her situation as a member of the Time Patrol. She may have been living three different lives alternatively for years but this had been straining more and more severely her psyche lately. If she didn't change something soon, she knew that she would break in some way eventually. For her children's sake, she was going to have to do something, and this before she returned to either the 17th or 19th Century.

16:37 (Auckland Time)

November 6, 2977 B.C.E.

Timeless Club, main Time Patrol base

Future site of Auckland, New Zealand

“Tammy, another Scotch on the rocks, please!” Ordered Farah Tolkonen, her voice a bit slurred. Tammy Bowman, who was the barmaid on duty at the Timeless Club at this hour, eyed her with concern while approaching her. She however didn't grab the bottle of old Scotch on the shelves behind the bar and gently put one hand on Farah's right hand.

“Farah, you should stop drinking now: it won't help you one bit to get drunk.”

“It will help me forget, Tammy.”

“No it won’t! It will only prevent you from using your head properly and you may do something stupid as a result.”

“I already did something plenty stupid today, Tammy: I made Nancy run away.” The young blonde sighed in discouragement at that: it was true that Nancy’s rebellion had quickly proved to be a killer on the morale of the other members of the Time Patrol, including on her. Tammy didn’t doubt that Nancy had to have very serious reasons to run away the way she did. She knew Nancy too well to think otherwise. On the other hand, she just couldn’t feel resentment towards Farah for this: the giant scientist was too much of a nice person to be accused of being mean. The way she understood it, Tammy believed that the rules of the Time Patrol had been too inflexible for too long and didn’t reflect anymore the reality lived by its agents, especially the female ones.

“Farah, you tried to control a situation that could have threatened history. You only did your job. It’s the rules that are to blame, not you.”

“But I helped to make those rules, along with Nancy ‘A’.”

“And Nancy ‘A’ didn’t take very long to break a few of them. Yet, the World didn’t stop turning for that, which proves that rules are not always right. You simply have to think about better rules instead of hurting yourself by getting drunk.”

Before Farah could insist on getting another drink, Mike Crawford entered the bar lounge of the Timeless Club and, after a nod to Tammy, went to sit at the bar besides Farah. One look at her was enough to tell him that she had downed a lot more than she was accustomed to.

“Farah, you really should go rest a bit.”

“Can’t!” Said Farah, tears starting to roll again on her cheeks. “I need to forget this whole sorry business.”

“The only thing you will gain from drinking is a good headache in the morning, Farah. Believe my experience.”

“And has your experience told you how to repair the mess I created, Mike?”

“No, not yet!” Said Mike weakly, his morale as much in tatters as anyone’s else on base. “Tammy, one Scotch on the rocks!”

Resigned, Tammy served him, then served a fresh drink to Farah, who grabbed it as if it would be her savior.

Over a dozen more members of the Time Patrol entered the bar lounge in the following ten minutes, having finished their work for the day. Linn Spencer, Tammy’s

friend and lesbian lover, was part of those that showed up and went to sit besides Farah at the bar, sandwiching herself between Farah and Mike.

“Any news from Nancy?” Asked hesitantly Linn to Tammy, who shook her head sadly.

“None! However, I believe that nobody actively searched for her. Right, Mike?”

“Correct!” Said thoughtfully the big American between two sips. “I am just hoping that Nancy will find a solution to this by herself. I would hate to lose her for good.”

“And, if she returns, what then?” Asked Linn a bit pointedly, having taken this affair at heart even more than Tammy. “Will someone strip her of her special implants and then kick her out?”

Mike’s head lowered at those words and his answer came out in a low voice.

“We couldn’t even if we wanted to now, Linn. As a well established resident agent in two centuries, she simply can’t be replaced in those roles without creating serious difficulties in those two time periods.”

“So, you assigned her to those centuries, forcing her to live three split lives, and didn’t think of the possible consequences of this on her personal life? Did anyone care about that at any point or was the historical data she was bringing back so precious that it overrode Nancy’s emotional needs?”

“Linn, cut the sarcasm, please!” Replied Mike, staring back at her. “Time travel is dangerous business and Nancy knew it when she joined. Yes, this business of being a resident agent is proving trickier than we thought but, then, Nancy was the first such resident agent we had.”

“‘Had’ is the operative word here. I wouldn’t blame her one second for taking her sons with her and disappear somewhere in history. Nobody should ever be forced to live away from their children.”

“Your last sentence is correct, Linn.” Said a female voice that made all heads turn towards the entrance of the bar lounge. Linn nearly screamed with joy while she jumped off her bar stool and then ran towards Nancy, who was wearing a 17th Century court gown. Nancy let Linn hug her, then gently pulled her off and smiled to her.

“You were always a true friend, Linn, and it is well appreciated. However, I need to see now who is still a friend here.”

Nancy said those last words while looking squarely at Jack Crawford, who had been sitting at a corner table by himself and was now up on his feet, his right hand near his stun pistol. Mike Crawford's voice then barked.

“JACK, LEAVE THAT PISTOL WHERE IT IS!”

Jack Crawford hesitated for a moment, seeing that three other field agents near him were also up and apparently ready to jump on him, then walked out of the bar lounge like an angry bear. Nancy watched him leave, then turned her attention to Mike and Farah, who were still sitting at the bar.

“I am sorry for playing such a subterfuge on you, but I wanted to see how Nancy would have been greeted here.”

Before the others could ask her what she meant by this, Nancy became luminous from the inside and quickly transformed herself into a blindingly bright humanoid shape of white light. Linn, who was still near her, couldn't help take a step back from the surprise.

“Natai! Where is Nancy then?”

“Here, with her five children.” Replied the angel, her voice echoing around everybody's head. “Know that they are under my protection, whatever happens next.”

Another Nancy then entered the lounge, dressed in a 19th Century city gown and pushing a modern two-seater baby carriage. Her sons William, Charles and James followed close behind her. Nancy 'B' gave a tentative smile to Mike and Farah, who were still seated at the bar.

“May I present to you all my twins, Louis and Anne? They are now two months old.”

Linn, being the nearest, crouched besides the carriage and caressed gently the head of the two babies, sparkles in her gray eyes.

“They are so cute! Hello Louis! Hello Anne!”

All the persons present in the bar lounge then approached the two babies to look at them and to congratulate a proud Nancy 'B'. Mike, Farah and Tammy approached as well, waiting for their turn at the babies. Mike gave a cautious look at Nancy.

“Where did you have them, Nancy?”

“In Jerusalem 'B', at Natai's palace. I already introduced them to the 19th Century, where they are officially known in 1860 Paris as a set of twins I adopted during my return trip from Japan.”

“Japan?” Said Mike, clearly surprised, making Nancy nod.

“Yes, Japan. I traveled to there with my three sons in 1859 in order to have a real family vacation at last. We had a great time together, then we returned to Jerusalem so that I could have my babies in peace and quiet.”

Having finally an opportunity to touch the twin babies, Mike crouched and caressed them, noticing then that Louis had green eyes while Anne had gray eyes. Apart from that and their sex, they were indistinguishable. He then got back up and smiled to Nancy.

“They are truly adorable, Nancy. Too bad that your parents are not here to see them.”

That last remark attracted a grin on Nancy’s face.

“My parents have already seen them, Mike: they now live with me in 1860 Paris, as a Canadian couple hired by me to help me run my household. Now I will have my mother handy to take care of my kids when I will have to switch to the 17th Century.”

Mike’s smile faded at those words.

“But...your parents are not trained as field agents. How will they fit in that century?”

“Well enough, Mike.” Replied firmly Nancy, now also looking serious. “They made the conscious choice of going to go live the rest of their lives in the 19th Century, as I decided myself to live strictly from now on in either the 17th or 19th Century, with only brief visits to other time periods if absolutely needed. Mike, Farah, I am ready to continue to collaborate with the Time Patrol in those two time periods and to continue assuming my official identities there, but that will be all. From now on, I intend to take my family life seriously and to take care properly of my children. You can scratch me from the roster of our assault specialist teams and from rotation lists to our outposts. Two lives is the most I can really handle. You can also of course take me off the Time Patrol’s payroll.”

“Collaborate?” Said Farah, dumbfounded. “You don’t consider yourself an agent of the Time Patrol anymore?”

“No, Farah! I presented you my resignation before I disappeared and that still stands. Consider myself as an independent operator ready to help you in those two centuries.”

“But, without technical support, your implants will eventually wear out or break down and you will then be stranded in time.”

“I won’t be stranded, Farah.” Replied calmly Nancy. “I don’t need my implanted time distorter unit anymore to travel through spacetime. Natai and The One saw to that.”

“YOU CAN TRAVEL THROUGH TIME BY YOUR OWN?” Nearly shouted Farah, shocked and overwhelmed.

“Yes, Farah, I can. I can also travel farther than I ever could with my implant or even with a time scooter, even while carrying my children in my arms.”

What Nancy didn’t say was that the wide range of powers recently given to her by The One so that she could become completely independent of the Time Patrol was very close to the powers Nancy ‘A’ had enjoyed, including telekinesis and flying. In essence, she was now a Chosen of The One, as Nancy ‘A’ had been. However, the fewer the people who knew about her full powers, the better. Next, she put a hand on Mike’s left shoulder while looking into his eyes.

“Mike, I have one last request for the Time Patrol: to be able to keep Pegasus, my robotic horse. It has become a lot more than a simple machine for me in those last few years and is now like a companion to me.”

“I can understand that, Nancy. If you ever need to bring it in for repair or refit, don’t hesitate to come.”

“I will, Mike. After all, I still have many friends here that are still dear to me.” On those words, the agents around Nancy took turns to kiss and hug her. Farah herself got in line then and was warmly hugged by Nancy.

CHAPTER 10 – A VIEW TO THE EARTH

19:45 (Florida Time)

Tuesday, October 10, 1961 'C'

United States Space Plane AMERICA

On approach to the Mare Nectaris

Near side of the Moon

“Descent rate is now 200 feet per minute, present altitude is 1,400 feet. Glide slope looking good, Gertrude.”

Gertrude Meserve, sitting in the pilot's seat of the SP-10C AMERICA and wearing her fully sealed space suit, acknowledged curtly the information from John Glenn, sitting to her right in the copilot's seat and also wearing his space suit. Sitting behind them in the seats reserved normally for mission specialists were Charles Yeager and Alan Shepard. Visible a few kilometers ahead through the thick forward viewing window of the cockpit were the flashing red beacon lights of the automated cargo ship that had landed on the Moon twelve days ago. Gertrude's goal was actually to land as close as possible to the cargo ship without risking a collision. While maintaining a façade of calm and coolness, Gertrude felt more nervous right now than she had ever been, and for good reasons: she was piloting the first manned spaceship about to land on the Moon. The public reaction in the United States and around the World when the automated cargo ship TERA had touched down smoothly on the Moon had been one of both enthusiasm and disbelief. Gertrude could thus easily imagine the huge nationwide party that would follow their landing on the Moon. Sitting on top of the TERA, alongside its main communications antenna dish, was a pair of television cameras fixed to swiveling mounts. Those camera mounts could in turn be remotely operated from Cape Canaveral, with their images then transmitted to Earth. They had up to now been used with excellent results to visually explore the area that was planned to become the first human base on the Moon. Now, they were filming the approach of the AMERICA as it was about to land nearby, thus giving a view of terrific news value to all the American listeners and to those in Europe and the Pacific who were hooked via satellite retransmission to the CBS television channel. The impact around the World of such an American accomplishment was bound

to bring enormous prestige to the United States, while the Soviet Union, whose space capabilities were nowhere near comparable, was going to definitely look second best now. On its part, the once proud and mighty Great Britain, whose empire and economy were in a downward slide by now, was more and more looking like a second rate power around the World, something that unfortunately too many British officials and aristocrats still had problems accepting.

“Deploy the landing gear!” Ordered Gertrude as the space plane passed the altitude of 1,000 feet. John Glenn flipped a switch and observed for a moment his instrument panel, then spoke up calmly.

“Landing gear deployed! TERA ahead and below at eleven O’clock, distance three miles, closing speed of 130 miles per hour.”

“Activating retro-rocket to slow down.” Replied Gertrude. “We don’t want to overshoot the landing spot.”

Her delicate hand movements on the small side control stick attached to the right armrest of her seat made a short burst of rocket exhaust appear from the nose retro-rocket engine. At the same time she fired off briefly the rocket engine connected to the system of swiveling exhaust nozzles that allowed her SP-10C to land and take off vertically to and from the Moon. With the local gravity being only one sixth that of Earth, the rocket engine power and the corresponding fuel consumption needed to land on the Moon was that much diminished. That in turn had made possible to use a modified two-seater SP-10B and make it able to get to the Moon and back. Along with the new SP-10C, a modified PEGASUS unmanned second stage rocket had come as well as part of the Moon landing program. That second stage, once launched from high Earth altitude from its C-2000 LEVIATHAN first stage transporter, rocketed to Low Earth Orbit, or LEO, where the SP-10C would later join it and attach to it. The extra rocket fuel remaining on the PEGASUS was then used to boost itself and the SP-10C into lunar orbit. While the whole procedure was a bit complicated compared with a normal space plane mission, it had allowed the use in only slightly modified form of the existing space systems used by the United States Military Space Command, thus saving a tremendous amount of time and money along the way. Apart from the AMERICA, two more SP-10C were already in service, with a fourth SP-10C to be ready in a matter of weeks, thus ensuring a quick turnaround time between Moon missions. As Gertrude was on her final landing approach, she could take some reassurance from the fact that the SP-10C LEXINGTON

was on standby in Vandenberg Space Command Base, along with a PEGASUS second stage and two C-2000 transporters. If for some reason the AMERICA became unable to leave the Moon, Commander Schirra would be able to launch and get to the Moon within a week, fast enough for Gertrude and her crew to have a good chance of being rescued. For the moment, however, everything had been going well and the SP-10C was responding smoothly to Gertrude's commands. With John Glenn now reading their altitude every few seconds, Gertrude finally put her space plane smoothly down on the surface of the Moon, less than fifty meters from the automated cargo ship. Shutting down her rocket engines, Gertrude blew out air as the other three crewmembers yelled their joy. She then spoke in her helmet microphone.

"Cape Control, this is the AMERICA: we are on the surface of the Moon and everything is nominal."

Back on Earth, at the mission control room in Cape Canaveral, Ingrid and all the others present there yelled with joy on hearing Gertrude's words, backed up by the camera view showing the AMERICA now safely down on the Moon. Major General David Aldridge, Ingrid's deputy, then shook her hand vigorously.

"Dammit, General, you did it! You got us to the Moon in less than nine months from the word go."

"We were all part of the effort, Dave." Replied Ingrid at once. "I may have had some good ideas but our scientists and engineers did all the important work."

"Ingrid, you are one of those engineers." Shot back with a smile Aldridge. "Besides, you are the one who came up with the idea of using modified PEGASUS second stage unmanned rockets both as orbital boosters to our SP-10Cs and as automated cargo ships. Hell, the TERA allowed us to land over ten tons of equipment in advance of our first manned Moon mission! And the idea of using the TERA's empty liquid oxygen tank as extra livable space once on the Moon was your idea too, Ingrid."

"Somebody else would have thought about that anyway, Dave. Don't make so much of it, please."

Aldridge's smile faded as he looked into the big, beautiful blue eyes of his commander. As a woman, Ingrid was both admired and desired by most men on the base, secretly of course. As a military commander and space project manager, she was also genuinely respected by all the professionals in Cape Canaveral. Sure, many old-fashioned farts still couldn't digest the fact that a woman could do all that Ingrid did, but that beautiful

young woman, who still had the looks of a mere teenager, just had sent the first American crew to the Moon in record time and at a ridiculously low overall cost compared to all the estimates and predictions of doom from the nay-sayers and pessimists. Aldridge said his next words in a low voice, so that no one else around them could hear.

“Ingrid, with all due respect, stop selling yourself short. Without you we would be still trying to figure out how to send people in Earth orbit and then get them back safely. The nation owes you, big time!”

“And I owe the United States big time too, Dave.” Said Ingrid softly. “It allowed me to become what I am today. In most other places I would still be kept in low level clerical jobs and would have been refused the privilege of becoming a military pilot. I guess that this was my way to pay my debt of gratitude to my country of adoption.”

“Then, shall we break out the champagne bottle?”

“Not yet, Dave.” Said Ingrid, smiling again. “First, I want to see our crew make their first steps on the Moon.”

“You are right, again. Now, that will be a memorable moment.”

Aldridge then looked back with Ingrid at the large television screen that showed the picture of the AMERICA on the Moon surface, as taken from the cameras of the TERA.

Being already fully suited up, Gertrude Meserve, John Glenn and Charles Yeager got up from their seats and made their way through the cockpit section to the exit airlock, situated aft from the small living compartment adjacent to the cockpit. That airlock incorporated in its floor a telescopic lift platform that would lower them to the Moon surface, apart from having pressurized exit hatches that communicated with the main payload bay and with the top surface of the space plane. Leaving Alan Shepard in charge of the space plane, Gertrude entered the airlock with John and Charles, then closed and secured the large hatch before initiating the airlock’s depressurization cycle. It took a bit over a minute before the pumps of the space plane sucked in the air and created a near vacuum. Once the control panel’s red light came on, Gertrude activated the lift platform, making her and her two comrades smoothly go down. All three lowered their anti-solar glare helmet visors before they emerged in the open, as the Sun lit the whole surrounding moonscape with a harsh white light. Gertrude made the lift platform stop a few centimeters from the dusty surface on which her space plane had landed, then took one gloved hand from each of her companions, who stood on each side of her.

“Ready, guys?”

“Hell, I’ll never be more ready than now for this, Gertrude!” Replied John Glenn, his heart beating fast. On his part, Charles nodded his head to Gertrude, who was looking at her.

“Let’s go, together.”

“Then, one, two, three, step out!”

All three astronauts then stepped forward and jumped off the lift platform, setting each one foot at the same time on the Moon surface. Well before leaving on their historical mission, all four crewmembers had come to an agreement concerning that first human footstep on the Moon, thus squaring away a point that could have become quite acrimonious indeed. Nobody but the four of them however knew in advance how that first step on the Moon would happen. As mission commander, Gertrude however got to say solemnly the next words on the radio.

“May this be a date remembered by all as the first step of Humanity out of its cradle.”

She then released the hands of her comrades, who took a few cautious steps each in the weak gravity of the Moon. It took nearly a minute to Gertrude to go over the overwhelming emotion that had come with her first step on the Moon. Finally looking left and right at her two comrades, she pointed the nearby automated cargo ship to Charles Yeager.

“Chuck, you go take the bulldozer out of the TERA. Me and John will take out the rover.”

The big ex-test pilot man acknowledged her with a hand signal, then started walking, or rather jumping in small bounds, towards the TERA. Gertrude herself bounced lightly along the Moon’s dusty surface towards the large ventral keel of the AMERICA, which contained its two integrated rocket/ramjet main engines, followed by John Glenn. She was soon standing at the foot of the keel, besides the eight large, low pressure tires of the main landing gear, and spoke in her helmet radio microphone.

“Alan, open the keel payload bay, please.”

The navy man, sitting inside the cockpit of the space plane, obliged at once, making the rear ramp of the plane’s secondary payload bay open and lower to the ground, revealing a relatively small compartment measuring four meters in length, 2.8 meters in width and 2.4 meters in height. Inside the compartment was a small four-wheeled vehicle slightly reminiscent of a dune buggy, with solar panels mounted above the two seats of the

machine and a directional radio antenna folded at the rear. Walking up the ramp and entering the compartment, Gertrude started undoing the cargo straps that held the vehicle tightly in place. With the help of John, that task took a couple of minutes, following which both astronauts sat in the vehicle. Gertrude smiled to John through her transparent helmet.

“May I ask you for a ride, John?”

“But certainly, my dear Gertrude!” Replied John with a grin. He next switched on the electrical circuits of the Moon rover and, grabbing the control stick positioned between the two seats of the rover, made the small electric vehicle roll out of the payload bay and onto the surface of the Moon. Following a preplanned routine, John drove the rover towards the TERA, so that he and Gertrude could go help Charles. The automated cargo ship, sitting on its four landing legs, was a crucial part of their mission. Apart from allowing the landing in advance of vital equipment and supplies at no risks to a human crew, it had been designed to have most of its systems and parts play dual functions, both as a spaceship and as part of a manned base on the Moon. The two large liquid oxygen fuel tanks of the TERA, now empty except for some oxygen slush and vapors, would soon be turned into working and living space for the astronauts who were going to man the Moon base once completed. The solar power panels of the ship, deployed since it had achieved Earth orbit, would now help provide power to the base, while its directional radio antenna would provide a high quality radio link between Cape Canaveral and the Moon. Even the empty kerosene fuel tank was going to be of use, being first vented to vacuum to expel the remaining kerosene fumes from them, then sealed back so that it could be used as a large capacity trash and waste collector tank. John could only admire the stroke of genius from Ingrid Dows that had produced the dual use TERA. There was however some work to be done before the space inside the automated ship could be used by humans.

By the time John stopped the rover besides the TERA, Charles had activated the cargo ramp of the ship's belly payload bay, lowering it to the ground, and had entered the bay to untie the wheeled bulldozer stored inside. A specially designed and built, one of a kind vehicle produced by the Massachusetts's Institute of Technology, the bulldozer used electric propulsion powered by solar panels, fuel cells and batteries. It was equipped with a segmented dozer blade that could be reconfigured at a push of a button into a digging bucket, and with a crane and towing hook. To save on weight while

keeping it stout, it was built mostly out of titanium alloy, with non-stressed parts made of aluminum. At 643,000 dollars it was certainly the most expensive bulldozer ever produced but it also was going to be one of the most useful and precious machine ever used in human exploration. When John and Gertrude walked up the ramp of the cargo bay, they found Charles about to climb into the driver's cabin of the big machine.

"Ready to start playing construction crew, Chuck?" Asked on the radio Gertrude, attracting a grin from him. He had joined the Army Air Force as an aircraft mechanic before becoming a fighter pilot during World War Two and had been unanimously chosen by his fellow astronauts as first driver of this bulldozer. Unspoken as a factor for being chosen to be part of the first Moon mission crew was also the fact that he had risked his life to protect Ingrid when she had come under sniper fire, something that had been recognized by all.

"Hell, Gertrude, this is going to be the most exciting construction site I will have ever worked on! Have you decided where exactly I will dig the main trench?"

"Roughly. I'm going to go survey and measure the precise site now with John. In the meantime, you can start filling with dirt the starboard top bilges of the TERA."

"Consider it done, Gertrude."

Letting Charles get into the bulldozer, which had a driver's compartment that was heavily shielded against radiations, Gertrude went back out with John and walked around the TERA, which was roughly shaped like a thick slab with the profile of an hypersonic lifting body. The top panels constituting the upper external surfaces of the ship had opened upward and inward after the landing on the Moon, exposing the empty fuel tanks and encased systems inside the hull. The inner surfaces of those panels, now exposed to sunlight, were covered with solar cells and acted as electrical power generators. Also, by opening and exposing the innards of the ship, the panels would allow Charles to scoop lunar dirt with his bulldozer and then pour it over the innards to create a thick layer of dirt that would then act as radiation shielding and protection against micro-meteorites. The dangers from space radiation, especially from solar flare activities, were very much present in the minds of the Moon mission planners and had heavily influenced the design of the equipment for the project.

Gertrude took fifteen minutes to survey and measure with John an area immediately adjacent to the nose section of the TERA, then marked the surface to be dug with red tape attached to lightweight pegs. Once that was done, the two astronauts

walked under the belly of the automated ship, going to the forward section of the belly keel. Using tools from their spacesuits' outer pockets, Gertrude and John unscrewed the bolts holding together the aerodynamic front cover of the keel and opened the two clamshell sections wide, exposing the large airlock and transit compartment inside the forward keel section. Neatly telescoped in a compact mass was a 2.3 meter-diameter accordion tube connected to the forward section and set to the left of the exit hatch of the airlock. John looked for a moment at the stored tube, made of light but extremely tough plastics covered with puncture-resistant Mylar film lined with Kapton, a plastic insensitive to extremes of temperatures.

“Should we start deploying the transit tunnel now, Gertrude?”

“Not yet, John! Let Chuck do his digging work first. In the meantime we will go inside and make that place livable.”

“Got it!”

Gertrude then walked to the airlock hatch, jumping lightly to step on its outer platform, which stood maybe one meter above the surface of the Moon. With John at her side, she manually opened the large hatch and entered the airlock. Once John was also inside, she closed back and locked the hatch, then went to a control panel by the side of the exit hatch. Switching on the panel, Gertrude next punched in sequence a number of buttons, pressurizing first the airlock and heating the air now filling it to a comfortable temperature. While the air warmed up inside the airlock, Gertrude started the pressurization of the two empty oxygen tanks that would serve as the main command, control and work habitats of the new Moon base. With heated air filling the tanks, the residual liquid oxygen sitting inside them as a frozen slush gradually warmed up and evaporated, adding oxygen to the air blowing in. Gertrude carefully watched the gauges of the control panel while that happened, looking for any possible leak that would compromise the pressure integrity of the tanks. To her relief and that of the controllers at Cape Canaveral, who were anxiously following the procedure via radio and video links, the two empty oxygen tanks proved to be airtight. Periodic rumbles and vibrations during that vital procedure showed in the meantime that Charles had started scooping up Moon dirt and piling it over the innards of the TERA. Maybe twenty minutes after starting the tanks' pressurization, the instruments of the control panel showed to Gertrude that the tanks were now apparently safe to enter.

“Tanks pressurized to one atmosphere of standard air, with inside air temperature now at twelve degrees Fahrenheit and still climbing steadily.” Announced Gertrude on the radio. “We will now go in and start configure the interior for occupation.” She then turned around and went to the steep ladder leading up to the level of the oxygen tanks. The weak gravity of the Moon made that climb nearly effortless, allowing her to step within seconds on the upper level of the airlock after opening the upper hatch separating the two levels. Closing back that hatch behind John, Gertrude then opened one of the five other hatches of the upper airlock/transfer chamber. Stepping over the sill of the hatch, she entered the starboard side oxygen tank, a three meter-diameter cylinder with a length of ten meters that was designed to act eventually as the command and control module of their Moon base. Forming a floor surface was a two meter-wide metallic grating made of magnesium alloy set above the curved bottom side of the tank. With a head clearance of over two meters, Gertrude didn’t have to worry about bending over as she walked in her spacesuit inside the module. John nodded approvingly while looking at the large, empty compartment.

“This will definitely be a lot roomier than the living quarters of our space plane.” Gertrude could only agree to that: while well designed and adequate for stays of up to a few weeks, the cramped habitat section aft of the cockpit section of the AMERICA could feel downright claustrophobic after a few days in space.

“Amen to that! Well, time to roll out the welcoming mat.” She said with a smile before heading towards the aft part of the module, where another hatch was visible on the curved surface of the end cap of the module. Opening that hatch and leaving it open, she stepped inside a smaller diameter communications tube that linked the two oxygen tanks with three other, smaller modules. One of those modules, a cylinder of oval section that sat between the two oxygen tanks, was the storage module for the base. It presently held some air, water, food and other supplies but was mainly packed with the modular consoles and equipment that were going to furnish the two empty oxygen tanks, turning them into the command and workshop modules. The two other modules, running vertically at each end of the communications tube, were respectively a toilet module with its recycling and waste storage systems and a shower module. Stored in side cabinets lining up the walls of the communications tube was more equipment and fittings destined for the various modules. Gertrude took out of one cabinet a large, heavy roll of plastic carpeting and, with the help of John, laid it on top of the floor grating

of the command module, fixing it in place with screws. Taking out another roll of carpeting, they then repeated the process inside the workshop module.

Going next inside the storage module, Gertrude and John spent the next four hours carrying and fixing in place the various consoles and cabinets, uncoiling and plugging their numerous cablings and wires as they went. That job, while seemingly complicated to a neophyte, was greatly facilitated by the fact that the spots where each console or cabinet was to be fixed were marked with alphanumerical codes painted on the walls, between the protruding bolt heads meant to secure in place each item. The two astronauts took ten minutes in the middle of their work to both rest a bit and get out of their bulky spacesuits, since the air inside the modules was now at the correct temperature and was fully breathable. Working in their jumpsuits proved much easier then, accelerating the pace of their work greatly. By the time that Gertrude was ready to call for a meal break, the whole complex was nearly completely set up and ready to function, with only a few auxiliary systems left to install. Going to the communications console, which had been one of the first to be put in place, she put on a radio headset and called Charles, who was still working with his bulldozer.

“Chuck, we are about to have supper. How are you doing on your side?”

“I have finished piling dirt inside the top part of the TERA and am maybe halfway digging the trench for our habitat module. How is it going inside?”

“We will need maybe less than half an hour before being finished here. It already feels like home away from home here. Park your bulldozer and come inside for supper.”

“With pleasure, Gertrude!”

Gertrude then called next Alan Shepard, who had been staying inside the AMERICA as backup in case something happened to the work crew outside.

“Alan, you may join us for supper in the TERA. Leave the lift platform down when you will step out of the AMERICA. John will replace you in the AMERICA after supper.”

“Understood! Am on my way.”

Smiling to John, Gertrude pointed towards the hatch leading to the workshop module.

“Time to see what you want to heat up for your supper, John.”

“Hopefully, they stocked the galley with something else than C-Rations.” Replied John, making Gertrude’s smile turn into a grin.

“It could be worse: they could have put Australian bully beef as part of our rations.”

John made a grimace at the mention of what had been probably the worse kind of food to be fed to American servicemen in the Pacific during World War Two.

“Please, don’t remind me of that stuff! I still barf out at its mention.”

Gertrude laughed at that and led him into the workshop module, where a communal table big enough for four persons had been set near one of the module’s ends, along with four swiveling seats. Besides the table, fixed to the wall, were two small convection ovens, with a television monitor and a camera above them. Close to the table were a small refrigerator and a freezer. Going through the refrigerator, Gertrude pulled out a chicken supper tray for herself, then put the tray in one of the ovens to heat it while John chose his supper. As her food warmed up, Gertrude switched on both the television set and the camera, so that the controllers in Cape Canaveral could both see them and appear to the astronauts.

Charles was first to arrive inside the workshop module, having been wearing his spacesuit when called in. Alan came in ten minutes later and all four astronauts were then able to sit together at the table of the workshop. They looked for a moment in silence at each other, measuring fully the significance of their presence on the Moon and in such an environment. Everybody’s food was soon heated and ready to eat, prompting Gertrude to raise her container of vegetable juice for a toast.

“Gentlemen, let’s have a toast to all the men and women who worked hard for months on Earth to make this trip possible, but could not be here. They deserve as much praise as any of us, if not more.”

“To our ground team.” Said solemnly Alan, echoed by the others before they took a sip from their drinks. The technicians and engineers in the mission control room in Cape Canaveral, visible on the television monitor, all applauded and cheered at those words. The picture then switched to show the face of Jack Ridley, who was acting as chief mission controller in Cape Canaveral for this mission.

“Thanks for the thought, guys. It was really appreciated around here. How are things up on the Moon?”

“Everything is going according to plan.” Answered Gertrude in her capacity as mission commander. “The installation work inside the TERA is nearly complete and the digging of the trench for our habitat module is half done. Once we are finished having

supper, John will go to the AMERICA, while Charles will continue his digging work. As for me and Alan, once all the internal refurbishing is completed, we will go out on top of the TERA with shovels and redistribute the dirt piled on top of the innards to make sure that no spot is lacking anti-radiation shielding. Is there any solar flare activity predicted in the days to come?"

"The Sun is presently in a quiet period and should stay quiet for a couple more days. A number of observatories are watching constantly the Sun during your mission, so you will have over a day of warning time if a solar flare erupts suddenly."

"We will still dig ourselves in as fast as we can, Cy. We won't take the chance of being caught unprotected by a radiation storm."

"A wise policy indeed. Look, I will now let Ingrid speak to you for a bit."

Ridley's face was then replaced by that of Ingrid on the television screen. Ingrid was obviously elated, and for good reasons.

"Hello guys! Do I get any complaints about the food or the lodging?"

"Yeah!" Answered Alan Shepard with false indignation. "The price for accommodations on the Moon is downright outrageous."

Ingrid laughed briefly at that.

"Don't say that too loud or the taxpayers will hear you, Alan. They probably would be scandalized as well to learn that we are paying a Navy commander to shovel dirt and assemble furniture."

"It could be worse!" Replied Gertrude. "They could have seen a lieutenant general shovel dirt."

"That could happen in a few missions time." Said Ingrid before becoming serious. "You have all done great work up to now, guys. Work for another hour or so, then wash up and hit the sack: I want you to look rested and clean in ten hours, when the President will speak with you. Your families will be next after that to be put through."

"Thanks, Ingrid, we appreciate that." Said Gertrude, meaning it. While she was still single and childless at 44, her three male comrades were all married and had children. Talking with their families from the Moon would certainly mean a lot to them. "What is the status of Commander Schirra and of his crew?"

"The LEXINGTON is being reloaded with the second mission follow up equipment and geological lab module as we speak. It will launch in two days, if all goes well. That information is still not known from the public, so refrain from mentioning it until the President can make the announcement himself to the nation tomorrow."

“Will do! Anything else, Ingrid?”

“No! I will now let you enjoy your meal in peace. We will speak again in nine and a half hours. Have a good night!”

“The same to you, Ingrid.”

Gertrude then looked at her comrades as Ingrid left the field of view of the camera at Cape Canaveral.

“I still can’t believe how fast we will be ending up building this Moon base. Once the Soviets fully realize what we are doing, they will choke with jealousy.”

“Can’t say that I’m sorry to hear that.” Replied John while chewing on a piece of chicken.

19:18 (Moscow Time) / 11:18 (Florida Time)

Wednesday, October 11, 1961 ‘C’

The Kremlin, Moscow

Soviet Union

A television set able to receive American channels had been prepared in the conference room of the Kremlin reserved for the exclusive use of the Politburo²¹. A translator was also on hand for the occasion, to translate immediately the words of President Kennedy. Premier Nikita Khrushchev was fuming as the video pictures showed the inside of the command module of the American lunar base, where the four American astronauts sat and listened to their President. Prior to the start of that speech, prerecorded films from earlier on had shown the various parts of the American installations on the Moon. Those films had only unnerved Khrushchev even more, showing him how much behind Soviet space technology was right now. The Soviet leader was about to ask a pointed question to Sergei Korolev, the chief designer of the Soviet space program, when something that was just translated from Kennedy’s speech registered on him.

“What? Did Kennedy just say that he wanted to invite us to participate in the exploration of the Moon?”

²¹ Politburo: Familiar term for the Soviet Political Bureau, the highest government organ of the U.S.S.R., where all the important political decisions were made by the most powerful Soviet leaders.

“Uh, yes, Comrade Premier.” Said the translator while trying to follow Kennedy’s speech. “One moment, please: I believe that he is about to give more details about that.”

Khrushchev, who could have quite a temper at times, managed to be patient for the next few minutes, letting the translator translate the rest of the speech. From the reactions of the reporters visible in the view of the White House Press Room, what Kennedy was saying seemed nearly as unsettling to many Americans as it was to the Soviet leaders listening to him in the Kremlin. When the conference was over and the CBS special news program made way to the regular programming, Khrushchev had the television turned off and faced the handful of Politburo members and special advisors, including Korolev.

“Am I wrong or did Kennedy just announce a decision that may not be liked by his citizens?”

“You are right, Comrade Khrushchev.” Answered soberly Leonid Brezhnev, a member of the Politburo presently on the rise. “Anti-communist sentiments are still high in the United States. Proposing to collaborate with us in space is bound to cost him politically, especially when he seemingly doesn’t need our help in that domain.”

“Then why did he say it?” Exploded Khrushchev. His minister of defense, old Marshall Georgy Zhukov, answered him gravely.

“Because I believe that he was advised to do so by someone he fully trusts, Comrade Khrushchev. I could bet that this idea came from Lieutenant General Dows.”

“Her again? But...she must realize more than anyone else in the United States that they could keep going on without bothering to offer us anything. Why would she advise Kennedy to invite us to participate in their Moon program?”

“For political reasons, Comrade Khrushchev. I believe that she genuinely wants peaceful relations between the United State and the Soviet Union, not because she is afraid of us but rather because she believes that peace is better for everyone.”

“Dows, a peace advocate?” Said Khrushchev, flabbergasted and skeptical. “She punched us and the Chinese out of Indochina and bombed part of the Kremlin to rubble eight years ago! She doesn’t sound or act like a peace activist to me.”

“Comrade Khrushchev,” said patiently Zhukov, “there are a few things about her that makes her very special and could explain her logic. First, she has amply proven by now that she has an unequaled understanding of geo-strategy as it applies to the near and medium term future. Second, remember that business of remembering her past

incarnations. She was once a Russian woman and never showed hatred towards individual Soviet citizens just because they were Soviet. Third, she is an officer who is both highly competent and realistic. She knows too well what a nuclear war between our two countries would do and genuinely wants to do her best to avoid such a war. Offering one hand when an unarmed program like Moon exploration is involved would be a low risk initiative for her and could actually help lower the tensions between us, or so she would probably reason.”

“All good reasons, Comrade Zhukov, but why would Kennedy follow her in this?”

“Dows was Kennedy’s lover for years, Comrade Khrushchev.” Cut in the minister of foreign affairs, Andrei Gromyko. “Kennedy himself acknowledged it publicly a few months ago. While he denies dating her since he married, we assess that he still has special feelings for her. However, we are losing track of what is truly important here: how do we respond to the American offer? If we accept, the Americans look magnanimous, while we would be acknowledging the fact that we are now behind in the space race. If we politely decline the offer, then the Americans still show themselves to be on top with their Moon base.”

“Hell, this seems to be a win-win situation for the Americans!” Grumbled Khrushchev before looking sharply at Sergei Korolev. “Comrade Korolev, what could we do that would at least partially make the rest of the World forget about the American Moon base?”

Cold sweat came to the rocket scientist’s forehead at that question: the wrong answer could possibly send him packing to Siberia for the rest of his life. He however knew that lying could be even worst for him right now.

“Comrade Premier, you must understand that we have no realistic hope of equaling the present American space technology for at least a few years. The Americans have had access for years to knowledge from the future that they were able to exploit systematically. Granted, that General Dows has been a master at exploiting that special knowledge, but the Americans still have a huge advantage over us because of this. The technology they used to go to the Moon also has the added advantage of being vastly less expensive to use than our own rocket systems, since they could reuse repeatedly their space planes.”

“Then why don’t we have similar space planes?” Shot back caustically Khrushchev, getting angry. “The Americans have been using them for more than four years now. Can’t we just simply copy the concept?”

“Uh, the budget for my space program was insufficient for that, Comrade Premier, unless I abandoned completely our traditional rocket designs. I however couldn't do that, as those same rocket designs are also used for our ballistic missile force. I can't switch to a space plane concept without hurting our nuclear forces.”

“He is unfortunately right about that, Comrade Khrushchev.” Cut in Zhukov, to the secret relief of Korolev. “While vast, our military budget still has limits and I do need the rocket designs made by Comrade Korolev. Our rockets are however much bigger and more powerful than any American conventional rocket system. We should use that to maximum effect to launch something in space that would capture the World's imagination.”

“Like what, exactly?” Asked Khrushchev, clearly skeptical. Korolev thought furiously for a moment before an idea came to him.

“What about a permanently inhabited space station in Earth orbit, Comrade Premier? The Americans have nothing of the sort right now and we could assemble something quite significant by building it up gradually. Such a station would also give us a capacity to do surveillance from space.”

“...or to launch nuclear missiles from orbit.” Added Brejnev, attracting a shocked look from Korolev. Both Zhukov and Khrushchev however nodded their heads at Brejnev's suggestion, with Khrushchev speaking after a couple of seconds.

“I like that! Such a space station could have many uses, both civilian and military, and could be made quite impressive in the eyes of the rest of the World. It will also be much more visible than a distant, half buried Moon base.”

“You could use General Dows' idea of turning empty oxygen tanks into living quarters, Comrade Korolev.” Suggested Zhukov, making the scientist snap his fingers.

“An excellent idea, Comrade Zhukov! Damn, I wish I knew how that young woman could have so many brilliant ideas.”

“Pah! She probably is pilfering other peoples' ideas from the future.” Said dismissively Brejnev. That got him a pointed stare from Zhukov.

“You should give her the credit she is due, Comrade Brejnev. Nothing from those files from the future could have told her how to win the victories she achieved in Indochina, Israel and in Eastern Europe. Yet, she made all her adversaries look like monkeys.”

“Then, if she is so dangerous, maybe we should eliminate her.” Said dryly Brejnev. The strength of Khrushchev’s reaction to his suggestion surprised him. The Premier pounded his fist on the conference table at once and shouted at him.

“NO! She saved our astronauts from orbit and i forbid anyone to touch her!”
Regaining some calm then, he looked next at Korolev, pointing an index at him.

“Comrade Korolev, I want you to build a space station that could be used for both civilian and military purposes. Keep the military part discreet, though. Make it a monument to the superiority of socialism but make it fast!”

“Yes, Comrade Premier!” Could only reply the scientist.

15:10 (Florida Time)

Friday, October 27, 1961 ‘C’

Patrick Space Command Base

Cape Canaveral, Florida

“The AMERICA is now about to touch down on the main runway at Patrick Space Command Base, after it spent eleven days on the surface of the Moon. This is a truly historic moment, ladies and gentlemen: the return of the first astronauts to walk on the Moon.”

The commentator from CBS paused to let his cameraman zoom on the space plane as it landed on the long runway. A long flame and a thunderous roar then erupted from the nose of the space plane, slowing it down fast and forcing the commentator to shout in his microphone to be heard by his audience.

“The pilot of the AMERICA has fired its retro-rocket to cut down its landing roll. Decidedly, this mission will have been a spectacular one from start to finish. The AMERICA is now turning on a taxiway and rolling towards the hangar line of the base, where we are waiting with a group of dignitaries and a crew of ground specialists that will take care of the Moon rocks and dust samples collected by our astronauts. The President, along with his beautiful First Lady, is of course in the front row of dignitaries, which include the Presidential Scientific Advisor, Doctor Jerome Wiesner, the National Director of Space Programs, Lieutenant General Dows, and other members of the administration.”

The CBS commentator continued to describe the arrival of the space plane, including when the crowd of spectators cheered the two astronauts that came out of their machine with two large containers full of Moon samples. After those precious containers were taken in charge by the waiting technicians, the two astronauts were invited by President Kennedy to join him on the podium erected just inside one of the big hangars of the base. Gertrude Meserve and Alan Shepard, still wearing their bulky spacesuits, climbed the few steps of the podium and stood on each side of Kennedy, who shook their hands and then spoke in the podium's microphone for the benefit of the reporters and cameramen present.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the medias, my fellow Americans. Today is truly a day to be proud of. Two of the four intrepid astronauts who first landed on the Moon, Brigadier General Gertrude Meserve and Commander Alan Shepard, are now safely back with us. As for Lieutenant Colonel John Glenn and Lieutenant Colonel Charles Yeager, the two other members of the crew of the AMERICA, they stayed on the Moon and are manning our new base there until the arrival on the Moon of another space plane, the LEXINGTON, and of its crew of four. Those extra astronauts will then put in place and link to the rest of our Moon base a fully equipped geological laboratory module that will help advance tremendously our knowledge of the Moon and of its composition. In two weeks time, yet another space plane will land on the Moon, that time to put in place an astronomical observatory module. That third space plane will also bring in the two first scientists to be posted for six months on the Moon, one geologist and one astronomer. From that time on, our Moon base will be permanently manned by a mix of professional astronauts and of scientific specialists rotating in and out every six months. This is thus only the start of an incredible adventure for all of Humanity, an adventure made possible by the courage, professionalism and dedication of our astronauts." Kennedy waited for the applause that greeted his last words to die down before speaking again.

"I also wish to publicly honor the person to which the United States owes the most its successes in space, the first person to orbit Earth and our National Director of Space Programs, Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows."

More applause followed, including from Gertrude Meserve and Alan Shepard, while the TV cameramen zoomed in on Ingrid Dows, standing near the President. The latter then went on, becoming solemn.

“Today, I will grant a wish to Lieutenant General Dows. Because she is so precious to our space program, I was loathe to let her fly a mission to the Moon. The success of this endeavor has however convinced me that our space program has matured enough by now to function effectively without her if need be. Lieutenant General Dows will thus be the command pilot of our fourth Moon mission and will be able to stay for two weeks on the surface of the Moon.”

Nobody missed the happy grin that instantly came on Ingrid’s face then. Kennedy had however more surprises for her.

“This brings me to our next steps in our space program. Now that our Moon exploration program is firmly started, I will task Lieutenant General Dows with starting the exploration of the other planets and moons in our Solar System, first via the use of unmanned probes, then eventually with manned missions once we will have the means to do so. That job will take years, maybe decades, and will also necessitate a lot of efforts and money on our part. Leading such a program will mean heavy responsibilities, which in turn will demand corresponding authority. I am thus proud and happy to announce today that Lieutenant General Ingrid Dows is promoted as of today to the rank of full general, while staying in her present posts as both Commander of the United States Military Space Command and Director of National Space Programs.”

While Ingrid kept a straight face with difficulty, many in the crowd of officials and reporters gasped as they stared at her youthful face : four star general at the age of 38! Many other American generals and admirals were going to choke on their false teeth today!

CHAPTER 11 – SPY OF THE SUN KING

21:46 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, March 8, 1661 'A'

Château de Vincennes

Eastern suburbs of Paris, France

The doctor and his assistant walked out of Cardinal Mazarin's bedroom and bowed respectfully in front of King Louis XIV, who was waiting and sitting in the adjacent lounge with a number of members of his court.

"We have performed a bleeding on His Eminence, Your Majesty. He should feel better now. He is however quite weak and should rest."

"Thank you, Doctor. You may go now." Said the King politely, making the doctor and his assistant bow again before walking out of the lounge. Nancy, who was part of the King's entourage, threw a contemptuous glare at the doctor and spoke in a low voice to nobody in particular as the door of the lounge closed.

"Of course he will be weak, you moron! What do you expect when you take blood from a dying man?"

"Still in bad terms with the court's doctor, my dear Nancy?" Asked King Louis, a smirk on his face. She nodded to him, still visibly angry.

"Bleedings and enemas: that's all he and most of the doctors in France know what to do. Even the ancient Greeks and Romans practiced better medicine than this, Your Majesty! Could we at least forbid more bleedings on the Cardinal, unless we want him to die tonight?"

"Then you would deprive the good doctor of half of his remedies, if we believe you, my dear."

"Which is why he and his colleagues should be sent back to study real medicine, Your Majesty! One day, you should ask that charlatan how much blood there is inside the body of an average man, then you should have a condemned prisoner bled to death to find out how much blood there is in reality in his veins. You may well then find out that the doctors who practice bleedings in France overestimate the amount of blood in a human body by a factor of three or even four, Your Majesty."

The young King, who was only 22 years old, looked critically at Nancy for a moment as he thought those words over, then nodded once.

“An interesting proposition, my dear Marquess. I may do just that one fine day. Right now, I want to see our poor friend. You may all follow me but please keep some distance from the bed and keep quiet.”

King Louis, accompanied by his mother, Queen Anne of Austria, and by his wife, Queen Maria-Theresa, then entered the bedroom, followed a moment later by Nancy and the other twenty or so aristocrats present in the lounge. They found Cardinal Mazarin as pale as a sheet as he lay in his bed, attended by the King’s Jesuit confessor, Father De La Chaise. Taking a chair near the bed, Louis XIV sat and eyed sadly the man who had taught him everything about politics and power and had been like a second father to him.

“My poor Mazarin, this is indeed a sad moment for me and France.”

Despite being very weak and in pain, Mazarin managed a smile and spoke in a faint voice to his king.

“For you it may be, Your Majesty, but I suspect that many in France will rejoice once I am dead. I have made too many enemies during my years of service to France to believe that everybody around loves me, especially in Paris.”

“Forget about those, my friend. Here, you have only friends.”

Mazarin was nearly tempted to contradict Louis as he scanned the faces around his bed, seeing a few men and even women who wouldn’t mind see him dead right now. Instead, he nodded once slowly.

“And I thank God for it, Your Majesty. I am however very tired and may make a poor conversation partner right now.”

“Then we will let you rest, my friend.” Said King Louis, who then made a gesture for his followers to leave. Once alone with Mazarin and Father De La Chaise, Louis looked back down at the pale face of his prime minister, a lump in his throat.

“Is there anything else I could do for you, my friend?”

“A few, Your Majesty.” Said with an effort Mazarin. “Have you read my testament, the one I sent you?”

“I have! Your nieces will be treated as if they are from my own family and will lack nothing. All of your other requests will be respected, and I mean all.”

Mazarin nodded, satisfied. In the course of administering France for Louis, he had amassed a huge fortune and extensive art collections and was worried that they would fall in the wrong hands after his death, which was indeed near.

“Good! Next, I would like to give you an ultimate piece of advice, my dear Louis. Come closer.”

Louis bent over the bed, approaching his ear to Mazarin's mouth. The cardinal then spoke in a whisper.

“Never use another prime minister, Your Majesty.”

The young king was taken aback at first by this, then realized what Mazarin truly meant.

“I...I understand, my friend. I will follow your advice. Could you name me someone I could trust to help me administer France?”

Again, Louis approached his ear to Mazarin, who answered without a hesitation.

“My own assistant, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, is a man of both high integrity and high abilities. He managed my own financial affairs with brilliance and utter loyalty. You can trust him completely.”

“I will certainly keep him by my side. Anything else, my friend?”

This time, Mazarin spoke in a normal volume, so that Father De La Chaise could hear as well. Louis could now see a faint smile on Mazarin's face.

“Without wanting to diminish the precious spiritual support given by Father De La Chaise, I would like to enjoy the presence of a beautiful woman to hold vigil on me during what may be my last night in this world. I want that woman to be an intelligent one as well. You know us Italians, Your Majesty: we talk much, even with women.”

While Father De La Chaise seemed scandalized by this request, King Louis grinned to Mazarin.

“Your wish is granted, my friend. Do you have any specific woman in mind?”

“Only one woman in your court is both beautiful and truly intelligent, Your Majesty. Could you send me the Marquess of Saint-Laurent? She has been and still is my best operative when it comes to delicate, complicated missions.”

Louis nodded at that: he himself admired the tall young marquess and had continued to frequent her over the years, often bringing her with him on his hunting expeditions around his hunting lodge in Versailles.

“I will send her to you right after this. Don't try too many things with her, though: she could drain the last of your energy quickly. I know that from experience.”

Mazarin managed a short laugh then and patted the young man's shoulder.

“She is another one you would do well to keep around you, Your Majesty.”

“I was going to do that anyway, my friend.” Replied Louis with a grin before getting up. He then glanced at Father De La Chaise, who understood the silent

message and left the bedroom. Louis followed him and stopped in the middle of the adjacent lounge, where his mother, wife and court nobles were still waiting.

“Our friend wants to rest now. We better leave him in peace for the night. I will see you all early tomorrow morning, so that we could resume our vigil.”

As the men and women rose from their chairs and sofas to leave, Louis went to Nancy and gently touched her left arm, making her stop and look at him.

“Nancy, our friend wishes to have you to stand vigil on him during the night. Can I count on you for this?”

“Of course, Your Majesty!” She said at once, not appearing surprised by this. The others around them that heard that looked by contrast stunned, if not shocked. Ignoring them, Louis let Nancy enter the bedroom, then gallantly took the arm of his wife and queen, Maria-Theresa of Spain, to escort her to her apartments. Maria-Theresa may not have been pretty and was rather slow-witted but Louis, even while running around with other women of the court, always showed utter courtesy and consideration to his wife and honored her bed nearly every night.

Inside the bedroom, Nancy curtsied before approaching Mazarin’s bed, then sat on the bed next to the cardinal. Nancy stared back at Mazarin, a serious expression on her face.

“I am here, Your Eminence. Do you wish for my company, for answers or for both?”

Mazarin nodded when he saw that she had read his true intentions: it was not solely because of her good looks and charms that she was such a good secret operative. She always had understood things quickly and then acted even faster, with utter efficiency. Her only weakness, if he could call it that way, was her uncommon tolerance and kindness, which contrasted with the way she could turn into a dangerous killer when needed.

“For both. You always intrigued me, Nancy, apart from fascinating me. Years ago, I asked my loyal D’Artagnan what he knew about you. He then surprised me by refusing to tell me, claiming that he had vowed not to tell anyone about you. I am now dying and would go more content if my curiosity could be satisfied about you.”

“D’Artagnan was always a man of his word, Your Eminence, which is one of the reasons why I love him. You are right about you dying, so I will reveal to you my secret, on the condition that you treat it like a confession and keep it confidential.”

“Then, I am ready to hear your confession, my dear Nancy.”

Even though they were alone in the room, Nancy didn't take any chances and laid herself on the bed, close to Mazarin and with her mouth near his ear. She started caressing his chest while speaking softly in his ear in Italian.

“Do not be alarmed by what I will tell you, Your Eminence. I am not an enemy of France and never will be, on the contrary. My name is really Nancy Laplante and I was indeed born in New France, but in the year 1982. I am from the future.”

Mazarin swallowed hard while staring with shock into her eyes. Somehow, he believed her at once. This young woman, despite her discretion, had proved to have abilities and knowledge totally unheard of in any other women, or in fact any man.

“Why are you here?”

“At first, I came to explore the history of France in this century. Then I fell in love with D'Artagnan. From then on, my attachment to this France grew with the years. Now, I consider myself a true part of this France.”

“Why do you say ‘this France’?”

“Because I have known France in many centuries, Your Eminence, both in the past and in the future. I even met the famous Joan of Arc. I can't however tell you about future France, as it could put in danger preordained history.”

“Can...can you still travel through time?”

“At will, Your Eminence.”

“But, how?”

“By divine favor, Your Eminence. The One graced me with many incredible gifts after choosing me following a number of tests.”

“You were chosen? Then the Jansenists are right?”

“No!” Replied at once Nancy in a firm tone. “The Jansenists pretend that we are all born with the original sin and that only a few chosen ones will be accepted by God. I refuse that notion, as I believe that we all come to this world as innocents and that we are all considered equal in God's mind. He chose me to help protect the innocents and promote true justice because I was better than most in many things and truly cared about the others around me. I am however still most human and am not ashamed one bit of being a woman.”

Sweat was now rolling on Mazarin's forehead. Taking her handkerchief, Nancy delicately wiped the beads away while speaking more soft words.

“Please rest now, Your Eminence. You are weak and tired.”

“Could...could you heal me, Nancy? You always swore at those damn court doctors, as if you knew much more than them in medicine.”

“Knowing more in medicine than these ignorant snobs isn’t difficult, Your Eminence. Yes, I could heal you but I won’t. Not because I hate you but because your death is already preordained and changing it could throw history into chaos. Like it or not, you will be a well known historical figure, Your Eminence.”

“I guess that I should be flattered by that.” Said in a resigned tone Mazarin. “You are right about me being tired. Will you stay nearby tonight, Nancy?”

“I will be here in this room until someone relieves me tomorrow morning, Your Eminence. Now, sleep.”

Getting up from the bed, Nancy went to sit in a chair besides the bed, where Mazarin could see her easily. She then started her vigil as the dying prime minister went into an agitated sleep.

Four hours later, with the bedroom dark save for a single candle on a dresser and with the castle mostly silent, Nancy heard Mazarin’s breathing become progressively more laborious. Hurrying to his side, she took one of his hands and found it cold, while his heartbeat was both erratic and weak. Nancy understood at once that the man was about to die. She started caressing gently his face and hair, making the cardinal wake up and look at her with eyes that had problems focusing.

“Is this how angels look like?” Asked weakly Mazarin, prompting a tear to roll down Nancy’s cheek.

“What your spirit is about to see will be even more beautiful, Your Eminence. You were mostly a good man, considering the standards of this time. I am sure that God will be kind to your spirit.”

“Look...after...Louis, p...please!” Said Mazarin with his last breath as his eyes lost focus. Nancy swallowed hard, in tears, and held his head until he had stopped breathing. She checked his pulse and, finding none, got back on her feet. Walking quickly out of the bedroom, she crossed the adjacent lounge and opened the door giving on the hallway, where she knew a musketeer would be on guard duty. She in fact encountered two of them, who stood on each side of the door, and addressed the senior one in an urgent voice.

“Monsieur Hubert, could you please advise the King at once that His Eminence just died?”

“Yes, Madame la Marquise!” Replied the musketeer at once, bowing, before hurrying away. Letting the other musketeer stay at his post, Nancy returned into the bedroom and started lighting all the candles in the room, then threw a couple more logs in the fireplace to revive the fire. King Louis XIV, followed by many members of his court, entered the room less than ten minutes later. The young sovereign approached the bed and eyed tearfully his dead prime minister for a moment, then looked at Marshall Gramont, who was standing besides him.

“Marshall, we just lost a good friend.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty!”

Seeing the Marquess of Besmaux, who was governor of the Bastille and was once the captain of the cardinal’s guards, cry, the King patted his back gently.

“Besmaux, console yourself, as you found a good new master.”

As they all contemplated the dead cardinal in his bed, a junior minister lamented in a shaken voice.

“But, to whom will we present our problems now?”

“To me!” Pronounced at once King Louis in a calm but firm voice. As his courtiers stared at him, he looked around him to see who was present and pointed in turn at his foreign minister and his war minister.

“Messieurs De Lionne and Le Tellier, let’s go to my study! We need to talk!”

The Queen Mother, along with Chancellor Séguier, was about to follow the King when the latter put his hand up abruptly.

“Please, Mother! I wish to confer only with my two ministers.”

Anne of Austria was left shocked and hurt as she watched her son leave with his two ministers, muttering to her ladies in waiting.

“I knew that he would become ungrateful and would want to show that he could do things by himself.”

Nancy heard her but didn’t remark on it, letting the hidden miniature cameras and microphones in her tiara film the scene and record the words spoken. Queen Anne had tasted power as Queen Regent for more than seventeen years and had let her son on a tight leash...up to now. She was now going to realize how independent of spirit her son truly was.

07:23 (Paris Time)

Thursday, March 10, 1661 'A'

Château de Vincennes, eastern suburbs of Paris

France

The seven members of the High Council appeared mostly stunned and off balance when they filed out of the King's private study, having been summoned very early by Louis. The many nobles and ladies of the court that had congregated at the news of the unexpected meeting and were wandering close by descended at once on the ministers and state secretaries to know what it had been about. Queen Anne of Austria was the first to intercept Chancellor Pierre Séguier, who appeared the most disturbed of the lot.

"So, what was it all about?" Asked anxiously the Queen Mother, who had been nearly ignored, albeit politely, by her son since Mazarin's death. The old chancellor hesitated, then answered in a low voice where some bitterness showed.

"King Louis is going to govern by himself, Your Majesty, that's what! I was told not to apply the royal seal to any official document unless on the direct order of the King or through one of the state secretaries or ministers, who will themselves have to get the King's permission before pursuing any policy or signing any official acts. I'm just going to be a simple guardian for the royal seal, for God's sake! The King also told Superintendent Fouquet to use Monsieur Colbert in order to manage the finances of France."

"But, this is tantamount to a revolution!" Exclaimed Anne of Austria. "How could Louis hope to do everything by himself? How could he govern without me?"

"Well, he seemed pretty sure of himself inside there, Your Majesty." Replied the chancellor before walking away from her.

A bit further down the hallway, the superintendent of finances, Nicolas Fouquet, was having a conversation of his own with some of his supporters and informants in the court.

"But, he can't rule without a prime minister!" Exclaimed a count who was in the pay of Fouquet, like half of the court nobles. Fouquet, a brilliant and cultured man who could charm most people when he wanted to but who was also a man supremely confident of himself, dismissed those words with a wave of the hand.

“He won’t rule without a prime minister, and that prime minister will be me. The King will change his mind quickly enough when he will realize the workload involved in governing.”

“And Colbert?” Asked another nobleman. “He was Mazarin’s creature. Are we going to have the cardinal’s shadow over us even after his death? Colbert helped him amass his millions and will corrupt the King to Mazarin’s ways.”

“I will deal with Colbert my own way, gentlemen. Don’t worry! We now…”
Fouquet then saw something that cut him in mid-sentence. He then left his supporters where they were and walked quickly towards the door that led to the King’s study. D’Artagnan, who was guarding the door with two of his musketeers, politely but firmly blocked his path.

“I am sorry, Your Excellency, but the King cannot receive you right now.”
Fouquet looked haughtily at that simple sub-lieutenant of the musketeers who dared oppose him.

“But I just saw the Marquess of Saint-Laurent enter the study!”
D’Artagnan nodded politely at that but his eyes showed that he was not intimidated one bit by the superintendent of finances.

“She was called in by the King, Your Excellency.”

“Her? An upstart savage girl from New France? How could she warrant a private meeting with the King at such a time?”

D’Artagnan’s eyes then hardened, and his tone of voice cooled down perceptibly.

“That, Monsieur, is solely the King’s business!”

Seeing that he wouldn’t succeed in intimidating the musketeer and knowing from experience that D’Artagnan couldn’t be bought, Fouquet let that go and turned around, returning to his circle of supporters. Once with them, he faced one of his informants with the most access to the close entourage of the King.

“Madame d’Huxelles, what do you know about that Marquess of Saint-Laurent? Why would the King receive her in private at such a time?”

“Maybe he just wants to jump her bones!” Said a nobleman, cutting off the woman’s answer and attracting a displeased look from Fouquet.

“Monsieur De Chartrain, I believe that I was asking Madame d’Huxelles, not you. Go ahead, madame.”

The noblewoman kept her voice low as she answered him, so that others couldn’t hear her, while the nobleman who had cut her off smarted from Fouquet’s retort.

“Your Excellency, it is true that the Marquess of Saint-Laurent is known to be one of the mistresses of the King, but I believe that she is much more than that. We all heard about her prowess in fights during the Fronde and how she was raised in the wilds of New France. What many don’t realize is that she has been taking orders directly from Cardinal Mazarin, that is until last Tuesday, when she was the last one to be with him as he was dying in his bed. I heard a number of times in the past years the young King rejoice after the marquess had just returned from one of her frequent trips out of Paris, claiming that she had just completed some sort of mission.”

“So, you are saying that the Marquess of Saint-Laurent was some kind of secret agent of Cardinal Mazarin, madame?”

“Doesn’t it make sense, Your Excellency? That woman proved that she can be very dangerous when she wants to and is knowledgeable about many things, apart from being able to speak a godly number of languages.”

“Hmm, you may be right, madame, but then why be called in by the King at such a moment?”

“Maybe the King wants her to become his secret agent, Your Excellency.”

“But he has already hundreds of men in his service that can do his bidding. Why bother with her right now?” Objected the Count De Chartrain. Madame d’Huxelles gave him a no-nonsense look.

“Can those men make a man talk in bed? Do you know many of them that can speak more than four languages? Don’t underestimate her, monsieur. Personally, I wouldn’t want to mess with her.”

“Maybe she can be bought?” Suggested one of the noblemen in the group, making d’Huxelles laugh in derision.

“Keep dreaming, Monsieur de Marignan! That woman is an idealist. No amount of gold will buy her.”

“What do you mean exactly by idealist, Madame d’Huxelles?” Asked Fouquet, interested by that notion.

“I heard her a few times as she chatted with other ladies of the court and even with the young king. She has those dreams of the lowly people in France being fed and educated properly, of the people of all nations living in peace and tolerance together one day.”

“You are right: she is an idealist.” Said Fouquet, smiling. Her informer didn’t smile, though, and stared at him with utter seriousness.

“But a dangerous idealist, Your Excellency. She can be as mellow as an angel but she can also become very deadly if need be. Remember the two secret agents of Cromwell found with their throats slit in Paris ten years ago. Word is that she effectively killed those two men. Remember also the nine thugs killed by her after they tried to stop her from arriving at the Palais Royal.”

Fouquet nodded, now sobering on the subject.

“I see what you mean, madame. I will thus treat the Marquess of Saint-Laurent with due caution.”

Inside the King's study, Nancy found King Louis sitting on a sofa and waiting for her. Louis kept a serious expression and did not invite her to sit with him, simply nodding his head politely at her entrance. Nancy made a curtsy in front of him, then looked into his eyes.

“You wanted to see me, Your Majesty?”

“Yes, my good Marquess.”

The use by Louis of her title rather than her first name told Nancy at once that this was strictly official business. She thus let the King go on.

“Now that our poor friend the Cardinal is dead, I have decided to take the reins of power myself, without a prime minister. However, I will need good advice from my ministers and state secretaries, along with good information on what goes around France, so that I can be warned in advance of any foreign hostile move against France. Monsieur De Lionne has a good network of ambassadors and diplomatic agents around Europe, but I need on top of that someone who can cover certain delicate situations in a discreet manner. I know from your past missions for Cardinal Mazarin that you would be the perfect person for such a job. In short, I would like you to become my personal secret operative, my dear Nancy.”

“I would be honored to serve you in this capacity, Your Majesty.” Said Nancy while curtsying again, making Louis smile briefly with satisfaction.

“Excellent! Before I confirm you in this position, I need to know first that I can count on your complete loyalty. You have English blood in your veins and you served the interests of the Stuarts before. You also adopted an English boy who is a Protestant. However, while we are presently good friends of the English King, I don't know how long we will stay so. My question is if I can count on your undivided loyalty towards France.”

“Your Majesty,” answered calmly Nancy, “while all that you said was true, I now consider myself a French noblewoman, pure and simple. My loyalty is purely to France and I do not serve the Stuarts anymore, and this has been so for the last nine years. As for relations between France and England, I have seen enough in the past years to show me how fickle diplomatic alliances can be and also how internal political considerations could push present allies into making moves detrimental or hostile to France. King Charles II of England is a good man but he has to deal with a parliament that has a will of its own and that also controls his purse. The question of religious practice in England is also still a very thorny issue, with Protestants in the parliament hostile to any spread of Catholicism in England. On the maritime issue, the English Navigation Acts, by prohibiting foreign ships from transporting goods to and from England, is bound to provoke hostilities with other maritime nations, notably the Dutch United Provinces. Eventually, France is bound to get dragged at least partly into any such future hostilities.”

Louis nodded in appreciation at that, pleased to see that she was as knowledgeable as he had hoped her to be in such things. There was however one point that still concerned him about her.

“And your own religious point of view will not influence you in this, Nancy?”

Nancy measured her words carefully then, as she fully realized how sensitive questions of religion were in this time period.

“Your Majesty, I will be the first to recognize that I am not much of a churchgoer, contrary to you. While not an atheist, I personally believe that public religious practice does nothing to prove the real piety or christian worth of a person. Rather, I prefer to prove myself as a good Christian through acts and deeds of kindness, tolerance and compassion rather than through hours spent in church. Also, I do not call myself a Catholic or a Protestant but consider myself a Christian, pure and simple, Your Majesty. As for my son James, while he is still nominally a Protestant, he is like me a non-practicing Christian and follows my philosophy of good practical deeds instead of attending church.”

Louis was silent for a while as he digested those words. He firmly believed in the primacy of the Catholic Church and was a devout Catholic himself. However, while Nancy’s admission of non-practice hurt him a bit, he knew her well enough to know that she effectively was a generous, kind and tolerant person whose acts indeed marked her as a good Christian. In fact, Louis had nothing but disdain towards many supposedly

devout Catholics in his court who resumed their lying, stealing and cheating the moment they stepped out of church.

“Nancy, I know for a fact that you believe in what you just said and I can respect your point of view. Just be discreet about it, though, as many around us have little tolerance for anything but blind obedience to the Catholic Church.”

“I fully realize that, Your Majesty. Do you have a mission for me at this time?”

“I certainly do, my dear!” Said the King, finally getting to what truly concerned him. “In order to reinforce the links between us and the English crown, I have planned to have my brother Philippe marry Princess Henriette-Anne of England, and this by the end of this month.”

Louis had somehow expected Nancy to laugh at that notion, as his brother Philippe was widely known to be an effeminate who preferred men to women and who liked to go around in dresses while wearing perfumes and powders. To his surprise, Nancy kept a straight face at that, so he went on.

“Well, I have already asked Monsieur De Lionne to arrange through our ambassador in London to get the consent of King Charles II for such a marriage. A diplomatic delegation will soon leave for London to escort Princess Henriette-Anne back to Paris. Your official duty will be to be part of that delegation and to help escort the future Duchess of Orléans, while at the same time instructing her as delicately as possible about the little, uh, quirks of her future husband. However, your main goal will actually be to discreetly gauge the sentiments towards France in England and ascertain if they are preparing for any war with the Dutch or their German allies. Then, right after the marriage, I want you to go visit the Dutch United Provinces to discreetly measure the local reactions to that marriage, as the Dutch are liable to become worried at this development. Ample funds will of course be available for your mission.”

Nancy smiled and curtsied to Louis: this was going to be a golden opportunity to collect some priceless historical data for the Time Patrol, even though she was not anymore a formal field agent or even a member of the Time Patrol.

“It will be a pleasure to be able to meet again my good friend Minette, Your Majesty. I will go coordinate my travel arrangements with Monsieur De Lionne right away, with your permission.”

“Just wait a moment before you go, Nancy.” Said the King, getting up from his sofa. He then went to a drawer of his work desk and, unlocking it with a key from one pocket, took out of it a heavy purse that he threw to Nancy, who caught it in mid-air.

“I believe that you should have enough gold and silver in that purse for your travels. Can you tell my brother Philippe to come and see me next after you go out?”

“Of course, Your Majesty!” Replied Nancy, who left after an ultimate curtsy.

Once out of the study and in the hallway, Nancy ignored the curious looks directed at her and went to the Duke of Orléans, who was talking in a corner with the Knight of Lorraine, his not so secret lover. Probably because of the gravity of the circumstances, Philippe was wearing men’s clothes and not one of his usual court dresses. Personally, Nancy had nothing against the young man, who was now twenty. While effeminate, Philippe was an intelligent, cultured man whose politeness and kindness would have put to shame many noblemen of the court. He was also an avid art collector and a shrewd financial investor and would in the years to come prove that he was as well a brave soldier. Philippe, who appreciated the tolerance of mind of Nancy as well as her intellect, smiled and bowed politely to her.

“What may I do for the good Marquess this morning?”

“For me, nothing, my good Duke, but your brother the King wishes to see you concerning the affairs of the state.”

“Me, needed for the affairs of the state?” Said the Duke with authentic surprise. “That will be a first! Alright, I will go see him forthwith.”

As Philippe walked towards the study, Nancy stayed with the Knight of Lorraine, who now looked apprehensive.

“Don’t worry, monsieur. Nothing bad will happen to the Duke.”

“Do you know what the King wants with Monsieur, Madame la Marquise?” Asked De Lorraine while eyeing her sharply.

“Yes, but I will let Monsieur pass the news to you.” Said Nancy, a slight smile on her face. Effectively, De Lorraine didn’t have to wait long to learn what was going on, as Philippe D’Orléans stormed out of the study, completely agitated, and spoke indignantly to his lover once close to him, keeping his voice low.

“He wants to marry me, to a woman!”

“Nooo!” Replied De Lorraine, both incredulous and horrified. “With whom?”

“Princess Henriette-Anne of England. We are to be married by the end of this month.”

Philippe then looked at Nancy, who was still standing besides De Lorraine.

“I understand that you met Princess Henriette-Anne a number of time, Marquess. How is she?”

“I always knew her as a kind, gentle girl who loves life with a passion. She is sixteen years old, intelligent, beautiful and a cheerful person. You could do a lot worse than with her, Monsieur.”

Philippe grumbled at that, still not liking this one bit, then gave another inquisitive look at Nancy.

“And you, my dear Marquess? When is the King going to marry you away?”

Nancy’s smile faded then, as this was one thing she wished would never happen.

“Me? I work better from the shadows, Monsieur. The King can’t afford to restrict me to the routine of a household-bound lady. He needs me too much to untie tongues and cut throats.”

While pronounced on the tone of a joke, Philippe knew that her last sentence was anything but a simple boast.

CHAPTER 12 – RED CROSS AND WINE

09:10 (Paris Time)

Friday, September 9, 1864 ‘A’

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles-V

Paris, France

Jeanne Smythe-D’Orléans, her nine years old son William and her four year-old twins Anne and Louis at her side, looked on proudly as Luc Rémillard, her handyman, finished fixing the large brass plaque besides the main entrance door of her residence. Also standing in front of the entrance and behind her were her parents, known to her staff simply as her uncle and aunt, and Jacques Leblanc, the executive secretary of the D’Orléans Social Foundation, the charity enterprise she ran from her big Paris residence. Jeanne then read the words engraved on the plaque under the red cross on white background, once her handyman had stepped aside.

“French National Society for the Relief of the Sick and Wounded in War. Damn, I like this!”

“You can be justly proud of your achievements, Jeanne.” Said softly Jacques Leblanc. Now, your work will at last be officially acknowledged.”

Jeanne gave him an amused look then.

“The Legion of Honor and the Medal of Honor of the President are not official acknowledgements in your eyes, Jacques?”

“Well, you know what I mean, Jeanne. With this, you are now more than simply a very rich philanthropist: you are the national representative of an internationally recognized organization.”

Jeanne’s smile faded a bit then, thinking of all that was left to do.

“Hmm, I will be truly happy when more countries will have signed on the Geneva Convention. Twelve countries is a nice start, but it is only a start. Now, I will have to find volunteers, train and organize them and also open regional offices. I am going to be busy like hell for the next few months. I will have to rely a lot on you, Jacques, in order to keep my foundation running smoothly in the meantime.”

“You can count on me, Jeanne, as always.” Replied Leblanc, sober. In that, Jeanne knew that she could trust him, as he was both a talented, deeply honest administrator and a man with a great heart. Bending down, Jeanne kissed her two smaller children on their foreheads.

“Time to return inside, my little treasures! Uncle Pierre will make you play with the other children in the daycare.”

As her father, Pierre Laplante, happily led the small twins inside, Jeanne next patted the shoulder of her son William.

“Ready for your French grammar lessons, William?”

“Uh, not really, Mom, but do I have a choice?”

“No!” Replied Jeanne with a smile. “However, you are doing well up to now.”

Despite showing little enthusiasm, William did go inside with his grandmother, Suzan Laplante, to go study with the primary school grade children of Jeanne’s employees. She had been loathe on relying on existing schools in Paris for her children and those of her foundation’s employee, as those schools used pedagogic methods, including corporal punishments, that she found both objectionable and inefficient. So she had early on initiated private classes in her residence, using teachers personally selected by her and following a curriculum and rules set by her. These private classrooms also functioned side by side with a daycare center and allowed her staff, both that of her charity foundation and that of her household, to work with complete peace of mind. With their children schooled and fed while they worked and with themselves being paid salaries well above what was considered the norm in France in 1864, Jeanne’s employees were happy ones and worked with true dedication. Her policy of paying equal wages irrespective of gender for any given job had attracted much mocking comments from the men considering themselves to be the high society of Paris, apart from branding her in the minds of many as a sort of socialist revolutionary. However, Jeanne couldn’t frankly care less about what others said about her. Most of her detractors were in fact jealous of her financial and social successes. Her status of heroine from the Crimean War, by making her a woman admired and befriended by numerous influential army generals and government politicians, had thankfully helped her greatly in ignoring the various criticism thrown at her by those envious of her or intolerant about her ideas. Now that she was also in charge of the French Red Cross Society, she was going to be able to increase even more the good work around her. As a Chosen of The One and a believer in humanitarian work, she was a truly happy

woman today. She had scheduled days ago a private reception for this evening in order to celebrate those latest accomplishments. Now, it was time to prepare for it.

Going inside herself with Jacques Leblanc, she let him return to the ground floor office suite used by the D'Orléans Foundation and went upstairs to find Li Mai, her Chinese personal assistant. A beautiful thirty years old woman by now, Mai had been working for her for fifteen years and was totally loyal to Jeanne, apart from being her secret occasional lover. Jeanne found Mai putting freshly cleaned and dried clothes in their place in the big bedroom used by Jeanne. Approaching the Chinese woman, Jeanne gently caressed her back as she spoke softly to her.

"We should have a bit over twenty guests for this evening's reception. Do you feel up to doing a Chinese dance for them tonight? I will play the lyre to accompany you."

"With pleasure, Jeanne." Replied Mai with a smile, enjoying her gentle touch. "Anything else I can do for your guests?"

"Just be yourself and they will appreciate it, Mai. You make a first class hostess any time."

Stopping her work for a moment, the small, graceful Chinese woman turned to face her and glued herself to Jeanne while looking up directly in her eyes.

"And you are much more than simply my employer, Jeanne. I owe you everything I have now. I know that I told you that already before but I will never say it too often."

"Mai, just continue to be my friend and it will be the best way for you to thank me. The World is a better place with you in it."

"I am nothing compared to you, Jeanne, and I'm not talking about your fortune." Jeanne gravely looked down at her personal assistant, still glued to her, while her hands went down to the Chinese's small buttocks.

"Mai, many things made me what I am today. Your friendship and companionship are two of those things. Now that you have been with me for fifteen years, you may be ready to learn a few of my secrets tonight, after my guests will be gone."

Mai nodded once slowly at that: everyone seemingly had questions about the incredible Jeanne and her uncommon abilities. Mai had however been too polite and respectful to annoy Jeanne with questions she probably would not answer anyway.

“Thank you for your confidence, Jeanne. I will come see you tonight after the reception. Can I do something else for you in the meantime?”

A tender smile came on Jeanne’s face at those words. Grabbing Mai by her buttocks and hoisting her on her hips, she stepped forward and lowered her on the big bed, then slid her hands under Mai’s Chinese dress while kneeling in front of her.

“Yes! You can relax and enjoy the next few minutes.”

16:23 (Paris Time)

Rue Charles-V, Paris

“I can’t wait to see this famous Lady Jeanne D’Orléans.” Said excitedly the young woman sitting besides Alexandre Dumas Junior in the carriage. That made Alexandre Dumas Senior, sitting opposite her, smile benevolently to his daughter-in-law.

“That is quite understandable, my dear Nadeja. Jeanne has had many people wonder about her for years. Do not worry, though: she is the most liberal, tolerant and kind woman you could think of despite of her fortune. She is also a truly fascinating person. I attended many of her receptions before I had to leave France in 1851 and I can assure you that you will enjoy your evening.”

“But, I heard that she was a quite ferocious woman during the Crimean War.”

“That must have come from one of your compatriots at the Russian embassy, my dear.” Replied Dumas Senior. “It is true that she was deadly at times during that war, but only to protect wounded soldiers or herself. She however represents now a neutral humanitarian organization and probably will not use her weapons again. Aah, here we are!”

Nadeja Naryschkine looked out through the right side window of the carriage and saw that they were about to roll through the wide carriage entrance of a two-story building made of light beige stone. From the outside, the building looked like many other Paris private hotels and didn’t show obvious opulence. Their carriage then entered an internal courtyard and came to a stop. A young man came nearly at once to open the right side door of the carriage and bowed politely to the occupants.

“Welcome to Lady Jeanne’s residence, lady and gentlemen. May I help the lady come down?”

“You are most gracious, monsieur.” Said Nadeja, grateful, before climbing down cautiously. The young man lend her a hand and pointed at a door opening on the courtyard.

“If you may proceed through that door, lady and gentlemen. Lady Jeanne is upstairs, in the main lounge. Do not worry about your carriage or your driver: I will take care of the horses while your driver will be able to enjoy hot food and drinks inside.”

Giving her right arm to her husband, Nadeja went with him and his father to the door, while the young man who had greeted him went to talk with their carriage driver. A maid opened the door from the inside and greeted them, then led them up a large marble staircase with iron railings. Once on the upper floor, the three visitors found themselves facing a glass and wood vertical display case containing the most colorful and fantastic set of armor they had ever seen. It was made of dozens of metal plates linked together by multicolored strings that covered most of its surface. The helmet was nearly terrifying in its aspect, with its demonic lower face mask and big pair of horn-like appendages attached to its forehead. Two swords, one long, one short, and a sort of squarish dagger were also displayed in their decorated scabbards.

“My God!” Exclaimed Alexandre Dumas Junior while eyeing the display case and its content. “Where did Lady Jeanne find this?”

His father, who had not seen this display case during his past visits, saw a small brass plaque fixed to the case’s bottom part and read it.

“There’s your answer, Son. This says that this armor and weapons are from Japan and were made in the 17th Century.”

“Japan? Now, that would be an interesting country to visit. From the little I heard of it, it seems to be a strange and fascinating place indeed.”

“Lady Jeanne traveled to Japan five years ago with her son, monsieur.” Volunteered the maid. “She also came back from that trip with her newly adopted twins.”

“Adopted twins? A son?” Said Alexandre Senior, flabbergasted. “Hell, things have happened in those last thirteen years since I last saw her! True, I only had newspaper articles to keep me informed about her during all that time.”

“Lady Jeanne is as gracious and kind as before, Monsieur Dumas, I assure you.” Volunteered the maid. “If you will please follow me to the main lounge.”

The three visitors were soon led inside a large lounge decorated in the Persian style and with priceless antiques on display all around. Jeanne, who was talking with

two women with gray hair, excused herself with those at once and got up, coming to Alexandre Senior in quick steps before kissing him on both cheeks and hugging him happily.

“Welcome back to Paris, my friend! I will truly enjoy your presence here tonight.”

“The pleasure will be mine, my dear Jeanne.” Replied the old novelist and playwright. “I heard so many things about you during my self-exile. We will have to get reacquainted again.”

“Why do you think that I invited you and your son the moment I heard that you were back in Paris, Alexandre? And this must be your son, Alexandre Junior.”

“Correct, madame!” Answered the younger Dumas, who was himself forty years old. “I am honored to meet such a famous woman.”

Somehow, the writer’s compliment seemed to actually make the smile on Jeanne’s face fade partly.

“My, I hope that I am not that famous, monsieur. I’d rather keep my charity work discreet. I had to deal already with too many crooks and fraudsters trying to get to my money through scams and false charities.”

“Madame, I was talking about your exploits as a nurse on the battlefields of Crimea. While your philanthropic work is indeed most worthy, war actions unfortunately seem to attract more public attention than charity work. May I present you my new wife, Nadeja Naryschkine?”

“Pleased to meet you, Nadeja.” Said Jeanne in fluent Russian while bowing and smiling to her. “You married a capable and worthy man indeed.”

“Thank you, madame. You are most gracious.” Replied Nadeja, also in Russian.

“Please, call me simply Jeanne.” Said Jeanne before switching back to French and looking at her three guests. “Let me introduce you to two other guests who arrived earlier.”

Leading the trio of newcomers to the two mature women sitting on a comfortable couch, Jeanne presented them in her clear, agreeable voice.

“Nadeja, Messieurs Dumas Senior and Junior, let me present you to Marie Catherine Sophie de Flavigny, Countess of Agoult, and to Amandine-Aurore-Lucile Dupin, better known under her literary name of George Sand.”

“Mon dieu, Jeanne!” Exclaimed at once Dumas Senior. “You have invited the cream of the literary world in Paris tonight.”

“You are referring to me or to you, Monsieur Dumas?” Replied maliciously Marie de Flavigny. “Your adventure novels sell a lot more than my own work.”

“The good countess is too hard on herself.” Said the older Dumas, kissing gallantly the hand of Marie de Flavigny. “Your work is worthy of the best luminaries.” He then kissed the hand of Amandine Dupin as well.

“I am honored to meet you again, Amandine. Are you still defending the rights and privileges of women as arduously as when I last saw you?”

“I certainly still am, Monsieur Dumas.” Replied warmly the famous, or rather infamous for some, feminist. “One day, women in France will be allowed to vote, mark my words.”

“And when do you expect such a thing to happen, madame?” Asked in a neutral tone Alexandre Junior, who was known to be opposed to the emancipation of women. Amandine smiled mysteriously at that before replying.

“You may ask that to the guest now coming in: he is renown for his predictions about the future.”

All of the others turned their heads towards the lounge’s entrance, in time to see a couple in their thirties enter, escorted by a maid. Jeanne got up at once and went to hug both the bearded man and his younger wife.

“Jules, Honorine, how nice to see you again!”

As Jeanne exchanged a few words with the couple, Dumas Junior spoke in a low voice to Amandine.

“She invited Jules Verne as well? How many writers will there be here tonight?”

“Quite a few, Monsieur Dumas.” Replied calmly Amandine. “Expect some of the most brilliant minds in Paris here tonight. Actually, that is one of the reasons why the receptions given by Jeanne are so interesting: we never end up exchanging only platitudes or mundane gossips. Here, you can count having your mind as stimulated as your stomach...or eyes.”

Before Alexandre Junior could ask her what she meant about eyes, his father got up suddenly and happily went to greet a woman in her late sixties who was just arriving with two more women and two men, all four much younger than her and apparently in their twenties.

“Mélanie! My sweet Mélanie! It has been so long since the last time I saw you. May God thank our hostess for inviting you tonight.”

The old woman had tears on her cheek as she returned the hug of her old lover.

“And how are you, my old friend? Were your years of exile hard ones?”

“Being away from France is always hard, my dear Mélanie. And who are your companions?”

“They were picked up by Jeanne’s carriage, like me.” Answered Mélanie Waldor, poetess and ex-mistress of Alexandre Dumas Senior, while turning to present the others to him. “You must know Nina de Villard and Sarah Bernhardt already.”

“From reputation only.” Replied the old novelist, eyeing with particular interest the young Sarah Bernhardt, barely more than a teenager. She already had a sulfurous reputation as both a stage actress and courtesan, something that warmed his blood as an old skirt chaser. As for Nina de Villard, she was a known poetess and intellectual woman with a most charming smile. His old mistress then pointed the two young men waiting patiently behind the three women.

“And these gentlemen are the painter Paul Cézanne and his friend Émile Zola, a young writer just beginning.”

They all exchanged greetings and handshakes before Jeanne directed them to sit on the various sofas, couches and cushions around the lounge. Jeanne then had her butler serve chilled champagne to her guests. They were about to have their first sip when Li Mai showed up, escorting a woman in her forties wearing a rich dress and expensive set of jewels.

“Her Highness, Princess Mathilde!” Announced out loud Mai in her signing voice, prompting everybody to get up and either bow or curtsy to the newcomer, who smiled while walking in the lounge and looking around her.

“Please, no need for such formality: we are here to simply enjoy some good conversation and good food and wine. Right, Jeanne?”

Jeanne smiled back to the niece of Emperor Napoléon III.

“Correct, Mathilde. Would you like to start the evening with a cup of champagne?”

“With pleasure, Jeanne. I may need some stimulant to shoot back at all those republicans present in your lounge.”

“Well said, Mathilde! Pierre! A cup for Princess Mathilde, please!”

As the butler served the princess, a shocked Nadeja whispered to her husband Alexandre.

“How could she call the Princess by her first name? At the court of the Tsar, this would be considered a grave insult.”

“Uh, maybe they are very good friends. Let me ask my father.”

Dumas Senior smiled when his son in turn whispered a question to him.

“Son, Lady Jeanne may be of low aristocratic rank indeed, but I understand from what many aristocrats around Europe told me that she is in reality a financial powerhouse and is also considered a national heroine by the Emperor himself, who is said to regard her very highly, independently of her political orientations.”

“But, if she is so rich and powerful, how come she doesn’t live in a bigger and more luxurious residence?”

Dumas Senior became serious then and answered in a low, sober tone.

“Because Jeanne doesn’t flaunt her money around her and doesn’t like wasteful extravagance. In fact, she abhors it. Most of her money is used to help others or to enlarge her financial holdings.”

“How rich is she really, Father?”

Dumas Senior hesitated for a moment, then lowered further his voice to a whisper.

“Nobody knows for sure, Son. An important Italian banker speculated to me a year ago that she had to be worth at least two hundred million francs, all considered.”

“Two hundred million francs?” Said Dumas Junior, stunned. “But that would make her about the richest woman in the whole of Europe.”

“Exactly! And she uses her money to do good, help the poor and the downtrodden and, from time to time, help a friend in need.”

Seeing his father smile while saying those last words, Alexandre Junior suddenly was hit by their meaning and had difficulties keeping his voice down.

“You mean that she paid off your creditors and got rid of your debts?”

“Well, like she said to me, what are friends for, if not to help each other? Don’t go rushing to her afterwards to thank her, though: she doesn’t do those kind of things to show off or make herself a name. Just treat her with respect, in an informal way.”

Alexandre Junior was quiet for a moment, then whispered in his wife’s ear.

“I will talk to you about that once back home.”

Eight more guests arrived in the next half hour, including two high level politicians and two academicians. With all of her expected guests now present, Jeanne had their cups of champagne refilled, then got up and went to stand in front of the large fireplace of the lounge, her cup in hand.

“My friends, I invited you here tonight for two reasons. First, it is always a pleasure to spend an evening with you, exchanging ideas, opinions and news and enjoying your company. Second, I want to celebrate something with you tonight. Last month, twelve countries that had met with each other in Switzerland signed a charter called the Geneva Convention. That Geneva Convention recognizes among other things the neutral status of the Society for the Relief of the Sick and Wounded in War and protects its employees and volunteers engaged in humanitarian work. This means that those employees and volunteers, wearing a white armband with a red cross on it, can help and treat sick or wounded soldiers of all sides on a battlefield, and this without fear of maltreatment or obstruction by soldiers from the countries which signed the convention. Those humanitarian workers will also be able to visit unimpeded sick or wounded soldiers and make sure that they are treated humanely. The convention also protects the wounded and sick soldiers from inhumane treatment or summary execution and would ensure their repatriation if found unable to bear arms during a conflict. France was one of the countries that signed the Geneva Convention and, last week, the French government officially authorized and supported the creation of the French National Society for the Relief of the Sick and Wounded in War. In liaison with the International Committee in Geneva, I thus started the formation of such a national society with the help of other volunteers. Today, I opened the offices of the French National Society for the Relief of the Sick and Wounded in War here, in this residence.” Applauses greeted that announcement at once, forcing Jeanne to wait gracefully for a few seconds before continuing.

“A lot is still left to be done before this national society, which I prefer to call the French Red Cross Society for the sake of brevity, can start to effectively care for sick and wounded soldiers anywhere. Volunteers and employees have to be found, trained and organized. Regional offices and ambulances have to be formed and then supplied. All this will take time but, in the end, the result will be that we will be able to alleviate greatly human suffering during future wars. Ladies and gentlemen, a toast to the French Red Cross!”

“TO THE FRENCH RED CROSS!” Was the unanimous chorus from those present, who then took sips from their cups.

23:05 (Paris Time)

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, Paris

“Thank you so much for the reception, Jeanne. I enjoyed it very much. The conversation was as good as the food and you must truly be the most charming hostess in the whole of Paris.”

Jeanne smiled gently at Léon Gambetta, who was one of her good personal friends in Paris and was a lawyer with socialist republican views, and got very close to him, giving him a good view down her wide cleavage.

“Coming from such a consummate lawyer as you, these compliments will make me think that you are trying to get a favor in exchange, Léon.”

Gambetta, a bearded and slightly obese man in his late twenties, couldn't help stare down the front of Jeanne's dress. He finally sighed and looked up in her eyes while smiling.

“Jeanne, you are one hell of a woman. Don't hesitate to visit me when you have a chance.”

“I promise I will, Léon. Have a good night!”

“You too, Jeanne.” Replied Gambetta before turning around and getting into his carriage. Jeanne waved to him as the carriage started rolling and watched it until it disappeared into a side street, then returned inside and locked the main entrance door. With all of her guests now gone, she returned to the main lounge and spent the next half hour helping her maids and Li Mai clean up and store away the leftover food from the reception's hot buffet. Once everything was done, she gave the weekend off to her household staff, giving them each a generous tip as they left. Now left alone with Li Mai, who was her only living-in domestic staff, Jeanne first went to see her sleeping children for a moment, kissing them gently on their foreheads. She then asked Li Mai to come with her to her bedroom and locked the door once in there. Mai looked at her expectantly as Jeanne approached her slowly.

“Mai, you always served me well and showed me complete loyalty for fifteen years. You are also an intelligent and kind woman I respect a lot.”

“I am still nothing compared to you, Jeanne.” Said softly Mai, making Jeanne shake her head.

“Don't say that, Mai. I have enjoyed for years a special gift that helped me a lot become what I am. I have decided that it is time for you to also enjoy that gift.”

“What kind of gift is it, Jeanne?” Asked the Chinese maid, confused.

“Call it a gift from God, Mai. You know about the various beliefs concerning reincarnation?”

“I know about both the Buddhist and Hindu concepts of reincarnation, yes. Why?”

“Because reincarnation is a reality, Mai. However, contrary to other humans, I am able to remember all of my past lives, back to my first one as a Neolithic woman that lived in Palestine 9,000 years ago. Her name was Nataï and I can remember her family, her life and her language, among other things. I can in fact remember a total of 93 different lives, either as a man or a woman, going from being a simple peasant to being a royal princess. I was also a warrior during many of my lives, which is why I am so efficient at war.”

Mai’s eyes were now wide open as she stared at her mistress.

“That...that is a fantastic gift, Jeanne. And God gave it to you?”

“Yes, he did. That was in order for me to fill better a mission he gave me at the same time. That mission is to help the cause of justice and to protect the innocents as much as my abilities permit me. He also gave me more powers beyond being able to remember my incarnations. One of those powers is to be able to open the minds of selected persons to the memories of their own past lives. Mai, would you like to learn about your past lives?”

Mai, now pale, stuttered a bit as she answered.

“I...I would like it, Jeanne. Is it a painful experience?”

“Physically, no. You may very well however remember painful or disturbing episodes from your past lives. You can still decline my offer, Mai.”

“No!” Said at once the Chinese, appearing to have reached a decision. “I want to know about my past lives.”

“Then we will start the process right away. It will take me many sessions to open in succession the souvenirs of your past lives. However, once past a certain point, you will start remembering by yourself more lives, without stimulation from me. Ready?”

“Ready!” Said softly Mai. Jeanne invited her on the bed, lying down on one side facing her, then applied gently her hands on each side of Mai’s head while putting her own forehead against her forehead.

“Just relax and close your eyes, Mai. You will soon start seeing souvenirs go through your head. Don’t try to understand them right away and just watch them as they appear.”

Mai obeyed her and closed her eyes but was still understandably nervous. She twitched a bit when the first hidden souvenirs came to her but stayed mostly quiet during the hour that the session took. She finally opened her eyes when Jeanne ended the session and withdrew her forehead. Mai looked with a mix of awe and bewilderment at Jeanne as she sat up on the bed and quickly reviewed her new memories.

“I...I was a young British Army officer. I was killed in a battle against French troops near the city of Québec, in New France, in 1759. My name was John Caldwell.”

Jeanne nodded with satisfaction, seeing that Mai had not been left utterly confused by the session, as happened to a few.

“Tomorrow and Sunday, we will do more recall sessions while the rest of the staff is off. I will urge you to keep this a secret from others. If they ever learned about this, many would think that you are crazy and would have you locked up in an asylum.”

Mai gave her a cautious look, realizing at once the real danger in this.

“Your husband, Gordon, did he know about your powers?”

“Only that I remembered my incarnations, not that I could awaken the souvenirs of other persons.”

“And...your other powers? Could I ask what they are?”

Jeanne thought about that for a moment but decided not to risk too much tonight.

“Not yet, Mai. Let’s build up your past memories first, so that you can mature further from them. One day, not too long in the future, I promise that I will tell you about the rest of the powers given to me by God. If you will now excuse me, I will go wash up a bit before going to bed.”

“Can I help you scrub?” Asked at once Mai, a malicious smile appearing on her face. “John Caldwell was quite fond of women and he would have loved to bathe with you.”

Jeanne grinned at her maid and caressed gently her face with both hands.

“I guess that refusing a request from a dead man would be too cruel. Was he a handsome man?”

“Blue eyes, blond hair, six foot one inch, strong and fit. Yes, women did find him handsome.”

“Then I will be most pleased to let him scrub me...all over.”

Both women then giggled and exchanged a quick kiss before getting up from the bed and going to the bathroom attached to Jeanne’s bedroom.

Much later in the night, with Mai asleep in her own bedroom, Jeanne got up and silently went to the dark main lounge, a lit candleholder in one hand. Going to a heavy medieval stone statue of a gargoyle, she put down her candleholder near it, then cautiously tipped the statue on its side. Using both hands and pressing with her fingers in four specific spots, she made the base slide partly, revealing a small hidden compartment. Taking the holographic recording chip that was set in the compartment, she replaced it with a fresh, blank recording chip, then closed back the statue and placed it back in its original position. Grabbing her candleholder again, she eyed for a second the recording chip inside her right hand. It now contained over seven hours of video and audio recordings taken during the evening's reception by the eight miniature cameras and six microphones hidden around the main lounge and the dining room. The content of that chip was probably going to make many historians salivate. Jeanne however needed still to edit and censor it herself before giving it to Professor Jan Bella: she owed it to her guests to protect their privacy about personal matters of no concern to historians. She would have to jump spacetime to the Time Patrol outpost in 20th Century Paris to do that. Once done with that task, she would jump spacetime again, but to the 17th Century this time, so that she could go live a few months with her sons James and Charles. William, Anne and Louis, who were deep asleep right now in their beds, would never feel her absence during the ten minutes she was going to be away from this century tonight.

17:11 (Paris Time)

Monday, November 17, 1664 'A'

La Bastille fortress, Paris

Charles D'Artagnan, sub-lieutenant of the Musketeers of the King, was about to arrange for the supper of his illustrious prisoner when one of the Bastille's guards came at a run to his room, situated on an upper floor of the Tower of the Treasure.

"Sire, a woman is asking to see you!" He said haltingly, out of breath. D'Artagnan gave him a no-nonsense look.

"So? Why did you have to run upstairs just to tell me this? Who is she?"

"She is dressed like a commoner, Sire, but she has a safe-conduct signed by the King himself. Her name is Nancy."

That information made the musketeer swear as he jumped on his feet.

"Is she very tall?"

“As tall as you, if not a bit more, Sire.”

“Hell! What are you waiting for? Go bring her to me? No! Thinking about it, lead me to her!”

Following the guard down the spiral staircase of the tower, D’Artagnan soon set foot under the archway of the fortress’ main gate. His heart accelerated when he saw the tall young woman waiting patiently just inside the gate, flanked by two armed soldiers. He nearly ran to her and exchanged a long kiss with her, watched by the amused soldiers. His eyes shone when he looked her in the eyes.

“Nancy, you can’t know how good it is to see you again. It has been many months since we last met.”

Nancy nodded soberly before answering him.

“It has been effectively a long time, Charles. Being the jail keeper of Nicolas Fouquet makes you a difficult man to get in touch with, what with the King’s orders to keep Fouquet incommunicado. Over three years of that jail duty for you: you must be growing mighty tired of it.”

D’Artagnan nodded but didn’t reply to that, inviting instead Nancy to follow him. She grabbed a covered basket before following him upstairs, attracting a question from him.

“What is in that basket?”

“Four bottles of very good wine that I brought to make your days more tolerable here. With your permission, Fouquet could share it with us. God knows he could use some cheer himself.”

“True!” Said D’Artagnan, who had kept a most polite and caring relationship with his illustrious prisoner during his years as his keeper. “Actually, he is very well treated here and lacks little in terms of comfort or good food. In view of your closeness to the King, I don’t see a problem in you seeing him, as long as you don’t talk with him about his ongoing trial.”

“Be reassured, my dear Charles. I only came to enlighten your evening and chase some of the gloom from this place.”

Charles was silent for a few seconds as he climbed the spiral staircase, leading Nancy. If anything, those years as jail keeper had made him realize how much he missed her, even more than he missed his wife, Charlotte-Anne de Chanlecy, and his two sons from her. The months and years away on royal duty had effectively killed his marital life before it had a chance to truly develop and had estranged him from his family. As a consequence, his wife was now living separated from him, having returned with their two

sons to her country estate in Sainte-Croix. For that he couldn't really blame Charlotte-Anne, as he was the one who had been constantly gone from home. Charles felt guilty when he thought that this marital separation now offered him a convenient way to reunite with Nancy, who always had been his only true love. Nancy's hand gently patted his back then.

"Charles, I heard about your wife leaving you. For what it's worth, I truly feel sorry about that."

Charles stopped and turned in the staircase to look at her with resignation.

"I am in the service of the King and serving him has to come first, Nancy."

That attracted tears in Nancy's eyes as she looked back at him.

"Oh, Charles, you deserve so much more from life than this. At least let me bring you some happiness from now on."

His right hand then found its way to her left hand and pressed it gently.

"You will always be welcome by my side, Nancy." Replied Charles, his voice nearly strangling up. "Come! I have to get supper served to my prisoner."

"Could I bring him his meal? The sight of a nice woman will cheer him greatly, I am sure."

"He will certainly appreciate it and I see no problems with that. After all, you have even bigger secrets to keep than Fouquet."

Those last words, told in a low voice, made Nancy nod in comprehension, as D'Artagnan was the only living man from this time period who knew her as a time traveler. Finally arriving back at D'Artagnan's apartments in the fortress, Nancy put her basket on his work table and took from under its covering cloth a glass bottle full of red wine and bearing a paper label glued on it. She presented the bottle to D'Artagnan with a proud smile.

"I brought four bottles of the red wine I produce on the estate near Bordeaux given to me by the King. I use a new process where the wine ages inside bottles hermetically sealed with cork. This way, instead of turning into vinegar after more than a year, the wine matures and take on more bouquet. I think that you will like it."

D'Artagnan took hold of the bottle and examined the label by the flickering light of the chandeliers in the room.

"Château La Tour Carnet Grand Cru 1660. This wine is already four years old and it still has such a nice color?"

“Actually, I expect it to be even better after a few more years, Charles. Let’s make a deal about it: we will open it only in the presence of Monsieur Fouquet and I will then ask you two to taste it and give me your honest opinion about it.”

Charles seemed amused by that and nodded while giving her back the bottle.

“Deal! Me and Monsieur Fouquet will act as wine tasters for you. If you will just give me a few minutes, I will go make sure that Monsieur Fouquet’s supper is on its way up.”

Nancy waited patiently while Charles was gone, taking that time to look around his apartments. While the Bastille was an old stone fortress dating back from the 14th Century, it had been refitted since then to act mostly as a prison for important prisoners that had to be held securely but also comfortably. That was reflected by the nice furniture in the room and the numerous carpets and tapestries. Sure, there were still a number of pretty nasty cells and rooms in the basement, including a torture chamber Nancy had been made to get acquainted with most painfully thirteen years ago, but the number of prisoners held there these days was quite small. Maybe fifteen minutes later, she heard the sounds of boots approaching in the hallway and went to the door, opening it and sticking her head out. She saw D’Artagnan approach, accompanied by a man dressed like a servant and by a soldier, both of the later each carrying a large covered silver tray. D’Artagnan slowed down on seeing her and shouted at her.

“Grab your basket and follow us, Nancy!”

Nancy did that at once and fell behind the procession, which entered an annex of the fortress cutting across its inner courtyard and linking two of its eight towers. They quickly arrived at a solid door guarded by two soldiers, with D’Artagnan unlocking and opening the door. He entered first, bowing to the frail but handsome aristocrat who had been reading a book by one of the windows of his luxury cell.

“Monsieur Fouquet, your supper is here. A friend of mine also took the initiative of bringing some top quality wine to help you wash down your meal.”

D’Artagnan then signaled the two men and Nancy following him to enter. Fouquet’s eyes opened wider and smiled on seeing Nancy.

“Well, well! The redoubtable Marquess of Saint-Laurent in person. Is she here to slit my throat or poison me?”

“You would never have seen me prior to dying if that was the case, Monsieur Fouquet.” Replied a smiling Nancy as she put down her basket on the large table set in

one corner of the cell. "I am here to entertain you and Monsieur D'Artagnan, not to kill you, so be reassured and enjoy your supper with peace in your mind."

As the servant and soldier started setting three covers on the table, Nancy showed to Fouquet, who had approached the table, one of the wine bottle, letting him look at its label.

"The very finest from my estate in the Médoc, near Bordeaux. It has been aging for four years in sealed bottles. You and Monsieur D'Artagnan will be the first ones to taste it, apart from me and my winery manager. Even the King has not tasted it yet."

That brought a wide smile to Fouquet's face, who took the bottle and looked through it against the light from a nearby chandelier.

"I will be pleased to beat the King to this, my good marquess. It has a fine color indeed."

"It has also a strong bouquet that goes well with red meats and game. I will open two bottles now so that the wine can breathe a bit before we taste it."

Fouquet and D'Artagnan took place at the table as Nancy used a steel bottle opener and uncorked two of the bottles. With Fouquet's servant serving first a soup, she sat besides D'Artagnan, facing Fouquet, and took a first spoonful of the soup. Fouquet looked at her while also eating his soup, admiring the cleavage of her commoner's dress.

"You came here incognito, Marquess?"

"Please, call me simply Nancy. Yes, I did. You know how the King wishes to restrict your contacts with the outside world."

"I effectively do, Nancy. So, what have you been doing in the last few years?"

"Mostly travel abroad on orders of the King. I visited this year the Dutch colonies in the New World, which are now under English control. The English took them by force a couple of months ago and have renamed New Amsterdam as New York."

"But, the Dutch are liable to go to war on this." Said Fouquet, genuinely interested by these news. As ex-Superintendent of Finances, he knew too well the cost of wars. "Is France going to take sides in that dispute?"

"Not officially. Don't forget though that Princess Henriette of England is married to the King's brother. There is however certainly going to be full scale war between England and the Dutch United Provinces, and this as soon as winter is out of the way."

"And who do you think will win that war, Nancy?" Asked D'Artagnan, making Nancy think carefully about her answer. She didn't want to reveal the future or to appear to know the outcome in front of Fouquet.

“It will be mostly a sea war, with both fleets fairly matched. Everything will depend on the talents of the admirals on each side. Dutch Admiral de Ruyter is in my mind the best of the lot, though. He could hurt the English fleet a lot. My bet is thus on the Dutch.”

Fouquet eyed her carefully then. Everything he had heard about her, which was actually little due to her discretion, made her out as a very dangerous and skilled female spy. What she had just said only showed how knowledgeable she was about military affairs, something very unusual for a woman. She was however one very fine looking woman and he truly appreciated her presence here this evening. He finished his soup, then smiled at Nancy.

“Well, how about having a first taste of your wine, Nancy?”

“With pleasure, Monsieur Fouquet. Let me serve you.”

Getting up and grabbing one of the opened bottles, she went around the table and bent down while pouring some wine in Fouquet’s cup, giving him an eyeful down her cleavage. D’Artagnan grinned with amusement at seeing the face Fouquet made then.

“I guess that Nancy is better looking than your servant, monsieur.”

“Effectively!” Replied Fouquet, licking his lips. “Let’s try this wine.”

Fouquet waited until D’Artagnan was served as well, then sniffed his wine before taking a sip. Nancy anxiously watched the two men’s reactions as they had their first sip. To her pride and satisfaction, both men’s eyes lit up with surprise and appreciation, with Fouquet speaking first while looking with respect at his cup.

“Mon dieu! This is by far the best wine I ever tasted. Compared to this, the King’s table serves a vulgar piquette. You could ask for quite a price for each of your bottles, Nancy.”

“I second the motion!” Added D’Artagnan, still savoring the taste and vapors down his throat. “Your wine is going to be a big success, Nancy.”

“Try it while eating your meat, gentlemen.” Said a happy Nancy while filling the cups of both men, then returning to her seat. “This wine is best when accompanying a good meal.”

Fouquet did as she said, cutting a piece of his roast and eating it, then taking a sip of wine. He closed his eyes as the combined taste and flavor went to his brain.

“This is...sublime! Nancy, your wine is like a true nectar.”

“Thank you, monsieur. Coming from such a connoisseur, this is high praise indeed.”

“But a praise well deserved, Nancy.” Said D’Artagnan after taking another sip. “I hope that you won’t sell that wine to lowly inns and pubs, though: this should be tasted only by people of class who could truly appreciate its quality. How much of this wine are you producing each year?”

“My estate can produce over 250,000 bottles like this one per year. I however have let most of my production age in bottles in the basements of my castle, selling only a part of my wine in barrels meanwhile to recoup my production costs. This year will be the first year that I will start selling bottled wine. I plan to keep in reserve some 50,000 bottles per year for further aging. Eventually, you will be able to enjoy some grand cru aged ten years or more.”

“God!” Exclaimed Fouquet. “I can’t wait to taste such wine. You will get rich with this, my dear.”

“I won’t mind that, monsieur.” Said Nancy with a smile before sipping her own wine.

The rest of the supper was spent in small chat, with Nancy staying clear from any discussion about the ongoing trial against Fouquet. D’Artagnan helped in that as well by stirring the conversation towards such subjects as gastronomy, culture and art, subjects in which the refined and intelligent Fouquet was well versed. At the end of the supper, D’Artagnan got up and bowed to his prisoner.

“I hope that you enjoyed your supper, Monsieur Fouquet. I will let you finish the second opened bottle.”

“Thank you, Monsieur D’Artagnan. I could not have asked for a more courteous jailer than you.” Replied Fouquet, meaning it. Nancy bowed as well to him after grabbing the basket with the remaining two bottles.

“And I wish you good evening, monsieur. Your conversation was most pleasant.”

“And so was your presence, Marquess.”

Fouquet couldn’t help sigh discreetly as Nancy left with D’Artagnan: he missed terribly the presence of women since his jailing three and a half years ago and the marquess was all that a lonely man could hope for in a woman.

D’Artagnan made Nancy follow him to his apartments and locked the door behind them, then took her in his arms for a long, hungry kiss. He was nearly out of breath when looked at his reunited lover, who was 25 years younger than him and much more

fit. These three long years as a jail keeper had taken their toll on his general health and fitness, while she seemed as athletic as ever.

“Please tell me that this present duty of mine will soon end and that I will be able to go back to live like a true musketeer, Nancy.”

“Be reassured, Charles. A couple more months more and you will be able to escort Fouquet to his ultimate jail, where you will give custody of him to a new jailer.”

“God, at last! Where will I be able to see you again then?”

“Here, in Paris, unless the King sends me on another mission, which is unlikely until next spring. I understand that you have bought a private hotel on the street of Bourg-Saint-Germain-des-Prés?”

“Yes. However, I was able to spend precious little time in it up to now.”

“Charles,” said very softly Nancy while hugging him tight, “would you mind having me visit you there regularly?”

“Of course not, Nancy. You will always be welcome besides me. Could you stay here tonight?”

Nancy nodded once slowly while looking in his eyes.

“I was planning to visit you every evening, if that is alright with you. Charles, I missed you terribly these last few years. I may not be able to marry you but I certainly want to be your mistress.”

Charles felt tears flow out of his eyes then. Unable to speak, he then kissed her again instead.

CHAPTER 13 – TO THE MOON AND BACK

09:51 (California Time)

Friday, August 9, 1963 'C'

Space plane LEXINGTON

Vandenberg Space Command Base

California

“If you have all finished stowing and securing your personal kit bags, we will now go back to our seats for the takeoff.”

Obedying the directive from Lieutenant Colonel Shirley Slade, Julie Lecomte dutifully followed the five other passengers of the LEXINGTON out of the passenger module stowed inside the cargo bay of the space plane, then climbed the ladder in the main airlock, emerging on top of the space plane, just behind the cockpit section. They then stepped on the platform surrounding the upper forward section of the space plane, which was contained inside the huge carrying pylon of the C-2000 super-heavy lift first stage aircraft. With Shirley Slade at the end of the line, the six passengers and four astronauts of Moon Mission 11 made their way up to the passenger cabin of the C-2000. Julie's heart was beating fast as she sat in her seat and buckled her safety belt: she was about to live the most memorable experience of her whole life. Widely recognized at the age of 32 as one of the most brilliant agronomists in France and possibly the World, Julie had never dreamed that her research paper on the growth of plants in space installations would have had attracted enough attention on her to push the American government into offering her a one-year tour as a member of their Moon base. Yet, here she was, about to fly out to the Moon with five other scientists and four astronauts and military technicians. Looking to her right, she exchanged an excited grin with Edward Stokes, the American geologist that occupied the seat next to her, as the eight large turbofan engines of the first stage transporter came to life one by one with pitching whines. Stokes was older than Julie, being 41, but was still very fit physically. From what she knew of him, the American was one of those rugged outdoors types who liked to conduct his geological surveys in some of the most challenging terrains and conditions on Earth. As for the four other scientists on this mission, they were all American, making Julie the

only non-American on board. In fact, she was only the second non-American to fly to the Moon to date, the first having been a French biochemist a year ago. Thankfully her English was quite good, something that had facilitated greatly her space training with the American Military Space Command.

The giant transporter aircraft soon lifted off from the long runway with surprising ease considering its size and mass. As it started climbing towards the stratosphere, Shirley Slade unbuckled her seat belt and got up to face the other members of her mission, flashing a smile to them.

“The TITAN will take about one hour to align itself with the pre-calculated launch point, so you have that much time to go in the nose observation deck and admire the view from there. Since the scientists in our group are due to stay on the Moon for a full year, this may be one of the last good looks you will have of the Earth until your return, so use the chance now. You may now undo your seat belts.”

As the others got out of their seats and went towards the nose observation deck, Julie went instead to Shirley and timidly asked her a question.

“Uh, Colonel, how much of our trip to the Moon will be spent in zero gravity?”

“Well, once the LEXINGTON will have boosted itself in low Earth orbit, we will be in zero G for maybe three hours while we join up and hook up to the automated third stage waiting for us in orbit. After a short boost phase to launch ourselves towards the Moon, we will then be again in zero G conditions for the three days needed to get to the Moon. After that, we will fire our engines again to slow down and insert the LEXINGTON into low Moon orbit, following which we will finally land at Moon Base Alpha. Thus, you can expect roughly three and a half days in zero G conditions until we land on the Moon and fall in one sixth gravity conditions. Are you nervous about your reactions to zero gravity, Julie?”

“A bit, Colonel.”

Shirley smiled gently at the French agronomist. While a definite genius when it came to agronomy and plants and also a brave and resolute woman, Julie was one of those very shy persons who simply could not hurt a fly or impose their will on others. Her gentleness and sweetness had made her an instant friend with everybody and also made the male crewmembers very protective towards her.

“You will do fine, Julie, as you did during your training. And please call me Shirley during our mission: I may be your commander but consider me also as a friend.”

“Thank you...Shirley.”

“You’re welcome. You really should go have a look in the observation deck: the view from there is quite fantastic.”

“And from orbit, how is it?”

That drew a grin on Shirley’s face.

“Even more fantastic. Being in space is the ultimate trip, truly.”

“Then I will go to the observation deck. Thank you for your time.”

Shirley watched thoughtfully Julie walk away. While at most a fair-looking woman, Julie’s sweetness was bound to attract one or more male member of the crew towards her during her one-year stay on the Moon. That they would be the only two women in a crew of sixteen persons at Moon Base Alpha would probably exacerbate that point. Unfortunately, the American public and government were still about as prudish as twenty years ago and sexual relations in space was still a taboo subject in the United States. However, with a planned Mars trip to be done around the end of this decade, with a total mission time of well over a year in space, the subject would have eventually to be looked at seriously and realistically. While having a single gender crew would be one way to avoid the sex issue altogether, the past two years of experience gained in maintaining a permanent human presence on the Moon had demonstrated that an all-male crew could and did easily develop interpersonal conflicts, especially since a strong character was one criteria for astronaut selection. As one psychologist had rightly pointed out, locking up two or three strong-willed men in a cramped space with little or no intimacy for months aboard a spaceship or space station was a sure recipe for murder in the long run. Shirley knew that the question would not even be a problem if Ingrid Dows had her say in it but, unfortunately, the politicians still had the last word about this. Shirley sighed before going towards the cockpit: as a single woman in her early forties she was definitely starting to feel the need for a steady companion to replace the collection of short dates she had lived with for the last twenty years.

Fifty minutes later, Shirley called together her crew and passengers in the passenger cabin and looked at them soberly.

“We are now going to get back into the LEXINGTON for our boost into low Earth orbit. I want all of you to don your spacesuits and then strap yourselves in tightly, as the ride will be a bit rough. You will seal your suits on my command, just before our space plane is released by the TITAN, and will open your visors only after I give permission to.

One minor mishap could be enough to cause a sudden and catastrophic depressurization of the cabin, in which case I may become too busy to even pass the order to close your visors. Do you have any questions at this point?"

Julie Lecomte rose one hand then, looking a bit pale.

"How strong will the acceleration be during the boost phase, Shirley?"

"It will be around two Gs at first but will quickly go up to a maximum of about five Gs. You shouldn't worry, Julie: you easily supported up to seven Gs during training, like the rest of us."

While looking reassured then, Julie didn't say that she wasn't worried about herself. She was however unwilling to divulge her secret until they had boosted out of Earth orbit and couldn't abort the mission anymore. She followed the others down to the upper airlock hatch of the space plane and climbed down the ladder, entering the airlock and then the passenger module. Two of the professional astronauts of the crew, Major Edward White and Navy Lieutenant John Lousma, helped the six scientists put in turn their bulky spacesuits, checking them to make sure that their suits were fully operational. Julie took the time she was waiting to have her turn entering her spacesuit to go discreetly forage inside her kit bag at the back of the module for a couple of minutes, then returned in the line with as innocent an expression as she could show. Half an hour later, everybody was strapped in their respective seats, the six scientists inside the passenger module and the four astronauts in the cockpit section of the space plane. By then they were a mere twelve minutes from their planned release point. Julie couldn't help being quite nervous by now. The knowledge that she was under the care of a veteran space crew with a number of Moon trips under its belt did a lot to reassure her, though. Still, she started reviewing in her mind the various safety procedures in case of emergencies. The voice of Shirley Slade over the intercom and in the headset of her spacesuit took her out of her thoughts some time later.

"One minute before release... Make sure that your safety harnesses are secured and tight! Close your spacesuit visors."

Julie's heart accelerated as she checked quickly her harness and sealed her spacesuit. Sweat also broke on her forehead despite the ventilation inside the helmet section of her spacesuit. She was looking at the television screen hooked on a vibration-absorbing mount in the upper forward corner of the module, watching the view retransmitted by the nose camera of their space plane, when Shirley's voice came back.

"Release in three, two, one, NOW!"

Julie screamed with fright when the space plane dropped down like a stone for a couple of seconds, feeling as if she was in a giant roller coaster. A mighty roar then erupted behind her and she was pushed hard in her seat by a strong acceleration. With her breathing accelerating as well, she glanced at Edward Stokes, sitting to her right, and was stunned to see him grin like an idiot.

“How could you find this fun?” She asked haltingly, her chest heavy from the acceleration. The American field geologist looked at her, still grinning.

“Don’t you love this? It’s the best roller coaster ride I ever had! My kids would adore this!”

Before Julie could reply to that, their space plane suddenly pulled its nose up sharply, accelerating still at a steadily increasing rate. Julie now felt as if she was sitting on her back, with a man standing on her chest for good measure. The noise was ear-splitting as well.

“God, may Kiki come safely through this!” She whispered to herself. The television screen now showed the black of space above them, with stars dotting the sky. The noise level suddenly increased a couple of minutes later, along with the acceleration. Julie understood as she breathed short, quick breaths, that the rocket engines of their space plane had just taken over from the ramjet engines, nearly doubling their acceleration. The nose of the space plane lowered somewhat shortly afterwards as the rocket engines still burned fiercely. Then, a mere seven minutes after release from their transporter plane, the rocket engines shut down abruptly and the acceleration that had been shoving Julie hard in her seat disappeared. The voice of Shirley Slade then came again on the intercom.

“We are now in low Earth orbit. I will be firing the maneuver engines at intervals in order to achieve rendezvous with our automated booster stage, so keep your safety harnesses on for the moment. You may however open your visors and cheer as much as you like: you are now certified space travelers.”

Julie cheered along with the others for long seconds, feeling literally on top of the World : she was now officially the second French citizen to fly into space. Then she remembered the plight of Kiki and sobered up, feeling guilty and selfish for bringing it along on this dangerous trip.

While the other passengers generally enjoyed themselves in the next hours needed to rendezvous with their booster stage, Julie kept a rather downcast attitude,

unable to think about anything else but Kiki. This finally attracted a worried question from Edward Stokes.

“Is something wrong, Julie?”

“No, not really. Thank you for asking though, Ed.”

Realizing that her long face would give her away too early, Julie then made an effort to cheer up in front of the others. She was helped in this by the beauty of Earth’s orb, visible on the image from the nose camera. A bit over two hours after achieving orbit, their space plane slowly approached and overcame what looked like another space plane. The LEXINGTON then started performing a 180 degree rotation around its pitch axis as Shirley Slade spoke in the intercom.

“Lady and gentlemen, we are now pivoting around to be able to dock with the nose port of the automated booster stage that will push us into lunar transfer orbit. Once we are docked, we will have a short wait of forty minutes, time for our two combined vessels to get to the pre-calculated engine ignition point. Following a short engine burn time, we will then be coasting on our way to the Moon, at which time you will be free to leave your seats and get out of your spacesuits.”

A concert of satisfied exclamations and comments greeted that announcement, as being sealed inside a spacesuit, however comfortable it could be, was not exactly a fun experience. For one thing, you could not scratch yourself or wipe away sweat on your forehead while in a spacesuit. Feeling her throat dry, Julie opened her mouth and turned slightly her head inside the fixed transparent dome of her semi-rigid spacesuit, closing her lips on the tip of her suit’s water sucking tube and drinking a good quart from it. The fresh water made her feel much better and she watched with fascination the forward television screen, where they could see the docking port of the automated booster stage as it became closer and closer. The LEXINGTON finally connected smoothly with the automated ship, attracting more cheers from the passengers for their pilot. After another 38 minutes, the rocket engines of the automated ship came to life for a full six minutes, pushing itself and the LEXINGTON into a trajectory for the Moon. Soon after the rocket engines shut down, Shirley Slade’s voice came over the intercom, her tone mellow.

“Lady and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are now on our way to the Moon at the lazy speed of 6.82 miles per second, or 10.91 kilometers per second for our French comrade. The outside temperature is a balmy minus 271 degrees Fahrenheit and the winds are dead calm. You may now undo your seat belts and leave

your spacesuits. Our stewardess will soon bring you some nice military rations nuked in a microwave oven for you to barf on. Me and the crew wish you a pleasant flight to the Moon.”

Julie, having waited for hours for just that moment, was the first to leave her seat and go to the forward part of the module, where she braced her spacesuit against the special restraints along the walls and opened the dorsal access hatch. Sticking her head and arms out through the opened back of the suit, Julie disconnected her headset and body garment connectors, then grabbed the overhead bar and pulled herself out of her suit. She was careful to power down her suit systems before closing its hatch and anchoring the suit to the rack with the straps provided for that purpose. She then withdrew towards the rear of the module, leaving the space free for others to take off their suits. Grabbing her personal kit bag from its stowage bin, she floated with it to the aft toilet compartment and went in, locking the door behind her. Edward Stokes, having watched her do her things, smiled to Michael Farmer, the junior geologist of the mission.

“Hell, Julie seemed in quite a hurry to get out of her suit.”

“Maybe she was anxious to go to the toilet. The way she grabbed her kit bag, she probably had to go change her female pad in a jiffy. That could be a messy thing in zero gravity.”

“Yechh!” Replied Stokes, making a face. “It sure could be!”

A few minutes later, as Stokes was leaving his own spacesuit, he saw Julie pass by him, floating on her way towards the cockpit and with her kit bag still in her hands.

“Everything’s alright, Julie?”

She gave him a contrite smile and answered in a sheepish voice.

“I will be able to tell you in a minute, Ed. I have to go see Colonel Slade first.”

Stokes gave her a questioning look, then eyed George Winslow, the mission’s surgeon and biochemist.

“Are French women always this mysterious, Doc?”

“Only when they want to, which is most of the time.” Answered philosophically the tall, thin doctor. They chuckled together at that joke and were about to move to the back of the module when a horrified shriek came from the cockpit, making them and the others hurry in disorder towards it. They nearly bounced on Shirley Slade in the main airlock. The mission commander took a deep breath and spoke gravely to them.

“Gentlemen, we have a stowaway on board!”

18:17 (Florida Time)**Space Mission Control, Cape Canaveral****Florida**

Ingrid, now satisfied that the LEXINGTON and its crew was safely on its way to the Moon, was about to leave the main mission control room to go have supper when a military technician called her from his station.

“General, Colonel Slade wishes to speak to you on the secure channel.”

“On the secure channel? Did she say what it was about, Sergeant?”

“No, maam!”

“Alright, I’m coming!”

Walking quickly to the communications station while wondering what this was all about, Ingrid put on the headset offered to her and looked at the television screen where the head and upper torso of Shirley Slade was visible. Julie Lecomte, the mission’s agronomist, was also partially visible on the screen, looking deadly worried.

“We are on secure mode, Shirley. What is the problem?”

“A stowaway, General! Miss Lecomte brought a pet with her aboard the LEXINGTON.”

“A PET?” Nearly shouted Ingrid, having expected about everything but that. “What kind of pet?”

In response, Shirley held up her left hand, presenting to the camera a small cage in which a tiny hamster held on to one of many fabric surfaces fixed between the ceiling and the floor. The surfaces were formed in a pattern that ensured that one strip of fabric was always close enough for the animal to grab, even in zero gravity. The hamster itself was truly tiny, measuring barely more than three centimeters in length, and wore a sort of miniature jacket on which was sewn on its back a tiny French flag. It also wore a miniature diaper.

“A Siberian miniature hamster! We have a Communist pet aboard the LEXINGTON, General!” Said with false indignation Shirley. Ingrid, like a nearby female technician, couldn’t help grin with amusement at the sight of the animal.

“Ooh, he’s so cute! What is its name?”

Julie Lecomte took on her to answer that, approaching her head to the camera and speaking in a sheepish voice.

"Its name is Kiki, General. I...I know that what I did is illegal but I just couldn't leave it behind. I love Kiki more than anything else and it is such a nice companion. It eats and drinks next to nothing, is very clean and doesn't smell. I promise you that Kiki won't be a problem at all on this mission, General."

Before responding to that, Ingrid urgently signaled the military doctor present in the control room to join her, then spoke in whispers with him.

"Do you foresee any contamination or health problem from that hamster, Doctor?"

"Uh, I really should check in detail first, as I am no expert on hamsters, but I don't see any at first glance, General."

"Then, I am of the opinion to leave it be for the moment. If you find something alarming later on, we can still deal with the problem then."

"I'm going to check on this right away, General." Assured the doctor before leaving at a near run. Ingrid looked back at the television camera perched on top of the communications station and its viewing screen and smiled to Julie Lecomte.

"Miss Lecomte, you may keep your pet for the moment. Please understand however that if any danger of disease or contamination is found later to be connected to it, it will then have to be destroyed."

"I assure you that you will find none, General: I checked extensively on this myself. Thank you so much for letting Kiki stay with me."

"We Americans are no heartless barbarians, Miss Lecomte: we do not execute hamsters, even when they come from Siberia." Said Ingrid as a joke before looking at Shirley. "Keep me posted if anything else unusual happens, Shirley."

"Will do, General! LEXINGTON, out!"

As the line was cut, Ingrid shook her head in amusement and looked at the female technician who had grinned with her at the sight of the hamster.

"Decidedly, space business is full of surprise, Corporal."

"Could we bet that there will be a rush on miniature hamsters in pet stores once this becomes known, General?"

"Hell, you're probably right!" Replied Ingrid, smiling. It didn't take long for the female technician's prediction to come through, once the major television networks got hold of that piece of news a few days later. In France, Kiki the hamster was quickly baptized with humor by the local press as 'the third French citizen' on its way to the Moon.

21:50 (Universal Time)

Monday, August 12, 1963 'C'

Moon Base Alpha, Mare Nectaris

The Moon

The smooth landing of the LEXINGTON on the wide landing pad of Moon Base Alpha was followed by a concert of wild cheers from its passengers. Already wearing their spacesuits, the ten crewmembers and passengers of the space plane then got moving at once, grabbing their personal kit and lining up at the main airlock. Shirley Slade was part of the first group to go down on the elevator platform integrated in the floor of the airlock and was greeted on the ground by the current base commander, Lieutenant Colonel John Glenn, and by Major Virgil 'Gus' Grissom. They exchanged salutes as best their spacesuits let them, followed by handshakes.

"Welcome to the Moon, Shirley!" Said via radio John Glenn. "You should find your time here fascinating, even if a bit claustrophobic."

"Claustrophobic?" Protested Shirley while sweeping an arm and pointing at the wide horseshoe formed by sixteen converted automated cargo ships and five buried modular units, all linked together by buried telescopic circulation tubes. "Hell, I already feel like the mayor of a small village."

"Mare Nectaris, population: sixteen." Said jokingly Grissom. "It costs a hell of a fortune to deliver mail to it, though."

"The population will grow soon, by the way." Replied Shirley. "In view of the extent of the facilities available on this base, Ingrid has decided to augment the living-in scientific crew by six people. This will allow an acceleration of the Moon exploration and exploitation programs. One automated cargo ship with extra living accommodations will be sent in a month, prior to the arrival of those extra occupants. We will soon qualify for our own Zip postal code."

"And how many pets in that number?" Asked John Glenn sarcastically while eyeing Julie Lecomte, who was part of the first group out of the space plane. Shirley signaled Julie to approach before facing back Glenn.

"Only one, John. Kiki was accepted solely because he is so small and has minimal needs. By the way, how are our farm animals these days?"

“Prospering quite well, thank you! The chickens are laying enough eggs to allow us to have each at least two fresh eggs per week. As for the rabbits, they are copulating like, well, rabbits.”

“Excellent! I love rabbit stew!”

“Me too! Some of my crew are however heartbroken every time we serve rabbit. I guess that they would not have made good farmers or ranchers. So, where is that infamous Kiki?”

“Right here, Colonel.” Answered Julie, pointing at her throat. Looking closely, Glenn and Grissom saw that a small transparent box with multiple small holes was suspended by a string from Julie’s neck. Inside the box was a tiny hamster that pointed its nose at them, returning their stares. Both astronauts smiled at that sight.

“I have to say that it is a cute animal, Miss Lecomte.” Said Glenn. “Does the American public know about it?”

“Not yet, Colonel. Shirley said that we will wait until Kiki is safely inside the Moon base and in its cage before introducing him to the medias. Thankfully, Kiki seems to have survived the trip from Earth quite well.”

“Thanks to lots of petting.” Added with a smile Shirley. “Kiki has quickly been adopted as our group mascot and had no lack of caregivers. He is getting positively spoiled.”

“Well, now that you are all here, you will be able to do some useful work to justify your transportation cost, ladies and gents.” Replied Glenn, becoming serious. “Major Grissom will now go inside the LEXINGTON and take over internal watch in the space plane. As soon as all of your crew has disembarked, I will lead you to your base quarters.”

Fourteen minutes later, the ten members from the LEXINGTON were all regrouped on the Moon surface at the step of the space plane, while Grissom was now inside the space plane. They were then guided by John Glenn towards what looked like a mound of dust off the edge of the metallic plate-surfaced landing pad. The LEXINGTON crew soon realized that the mound was in fact man-made, consisting of an A-frame structure covered with scooped Moon soil. Inside the structure were a few benches, a set of overhead electrical lights, a radio terminal and two waiting wheeled rover vehicles.

“This is the landing pad’s anti-radiation shelter.” Explained John Glenn as the group entered via one of the open ends of the structure. “It helps us avoid as much radiation exposure as possible while waiting for an incoming ship. If you will now please take place in the rovers. Shirley, you may drive the second rover brought by Gus.”

The rovers being rather small vehicles, the astronauts not sitting in the two seats of each rover had to stand in the cargo bed of the rovers and hang on to handrails. The electric vehicles rolled out of the shelter and headed at a speed of fifteen kilometers per hour towards the base proper, 300 meters away from the landing pad. The rovers used the wide taxiway leading from the landing pad to the entrance of the horseshoe formation of converted cargo ships, entering the mouth of the horseshoe and veering slightly to the right, heading towards a sort of small open-ended garage set between two converted cargo ships. Julie couldn’t help look around with wild eyes as they rolled through the base grounds: it was impossible to realize the true extent of this base’s facilities until you could see it by yourself. Each of the converted automated cargo ships was as big as a medium civilian airliner and serving a specific function. Buried communications tubes linked the converted ships together and also connected them to five pressurized modules buried in the center of the horseshoe formation. A collection of storage tanks, shelters, solar cells arrays and communications and sensors masts completed the base setup, while lit windows, banks of external lights and landing light beacons illuminated the pitch dark of the Moon’s night period. The sheer sum of technological achievement and industrial power this represented awed Julie as she had never been before. As they were rolling close to the center of the hub, she was able to eye in detail a transparent dome covering four inflated transparent modules connected to a central, metallic module. Four communications tubes emerging from the ground were attached to the central module. Julie recognized this from her briefings in Vandenberg as being the central hub and crew lounge complex of the base. She could in fact see three persons sitting inside one of the transparent modules and watching her and her companions pass by. Julie was still gawking around her when the rovers stopped inside the open garage, where two more rovers were parked. Grabbing her kit bag and stepping out of the rover like the others, she followed John Glenn to the external hatch of an airlock on the underside pod of the nearest converted ship. They had to squeeze in, the airlock being barely large enough for the eleven of them, for the time it took to pressurize the airlock. John Glenn opened an inner hatch and invited them through, passing first into a 2.4 meter-diameter plastic tube that had a rubberized carpet rolled out over its floor. The

tube went down at a rather steep angle at first, then became horizontal for maybe twenty meters before going up to connect to another airlock chamber. John Glenn made a point of closing the hatch while looking at the newcomers.

“First rule of this base, and possibly the most important one: never leave an airtight hatch open behind you. If you leave one open through negligence or inattention, a meteorite strike on one converted ship could depressurize more than one ship and cost us a number of lives. Remember: no matter how much in a hurry you are, always close and lock the hatch behind you.”

“Uh, how often could those meteorite strikes happen, Colonel?” Asked Steven Millikan, the mission’s biologist.

“In theory, maybe once per few thousand years on any area of the Moon. In practice, one such strike will be enough to qualify as a disaster for us.”

“I see.” Said sheepishly the biologist after swallowing hard. Glenn then looked around him at the others.

“Make no mistake, ladies and gentlemen. This place may look quite fantastic but it is also a very vulnerable one and we are days away from any help from Earth, even in the best of cases. Our lives here will be even more precarious than the ones of the pioneers who populated the American Wild West over a hundred years ago. The professional astronauts that are with you will however do their utmost to make you feel at home and safe here during your stay. Our work is primordial for human science and knowledge and you were chosen for this mission because you were considered top experts in your respective fields. Work hard and well and the rewards to humanity and yourselves will be tremendous.”

After his speech, Glenn led them through three other airlock chambers before stopping with the group inside the upper transfer section of the fifth airlock.

“We are now in the transfer section of the RAINBOW, the converted cargo ship that we use as one of our two living quarters facilities. As the two ranking astronauts on this base, Lieutenant Colonel Slade and Major White will be quartered in the TERA, which functions as our command and control center. The RAINBOW will be home for the eight remaining persons of your group for the duration of your stay on the Moon. I will ask those eight persons to remove and secure your spacesuits in this section.”

John Glenn patiently waited until the seven men and one woman had removed their spacesuits, then gave more instructions.

“Another important point about life in this base: privacy! Privacy is very precious here, far away from our families and friends on Earth. Private quarters are thus sacred and are not to be entered by a visitor until he or she has received the express permission of the occupant of that room. Anyone ignoring the privacy of another member of the base will be disciplined by the base commander. Do that too often and you will end up on the next space plane to Earth. Now, past this hatch behind me is one of the two converted oxygen tanks of the RAINBOW, which contains four individual rooms. Please follow me so that I can describe to you one of our typical crew quarters.” Julie, her kit bag still in hand and Kiki’s mini cage around her neck, followed directly behind Glenn, who made a few steps down the narrow hallway running along the left half of the big cylindrical compartment before stopping besides a thin sliding door. Glenn made a show of knocking on the door and wait a bit before sliding it open.

“Remember, lady and gents: always knock and wait before entering a crew quarter that is not yours, even if you think that it is empty. Inside each room, which measures ten feet by six feet, you will find a single folding bed, a fixed sofa, a storage locker and a desk and rolling chair, with a telephone on the wall. Above the desk is a shelving unit and a reading lamp. You may enter in turn to check this room out.” Julie was first to slip past Glenn and eagerly examined the room, finding it very well designed despite its limited dimensions. The mattress of the bed was thin but, in view of the weak gravity on the Moon, more than adequate. She had actually seen worse as living quarters in her days as a living-in university student. After the others had a chance to look at the room too, John Glenn took out of a pocket a number of small plaques and slid one of them in the slot designed for it on the door.

“Mister Stokes, this is now your room. You are free to make yourself at home.” The three other cabins in the compartment were next given away, with the remaining four newcomers then stepping through a hatch and into a smaller diameter tube linking the two converted oxygen tanks. Glenn showed them three sets of double bunk beds fixed to the outer wall, each of them masked by sliding privacy curtains.

“The old occupants of the RAINBOW are temporarily using those emergency bunk beds until their departure in the LEXINGTON in three days. Now, if you look to the left of me, you will see the hatch of the toilet compartment of the RAINBOW. To my right is the hatch for the shower compartment. Behind you, sandwiched between the two converted oxygen tanks, is the original storage compartment of the ship. It measures

eight feet in diameter, is 26 foot-long and is now divided into two private quarters. Miss Lecomte, you will take over one of those quarters.”

As Glenn led the rest around to the other converted tank, Julie put down her kit bag and eagerly opened the airtight hatch giving access to her living quarter. She was then able to look inside a long compartment that seemed to be at least twice as spacious as the other room she had inspected. Happily grabbing her kit bag and stepping inside her new quarters, she looked around her and then held up Kiki's mini cage.

“Look at our new home, Kiki! We will be spoiled! Give me a minute and you will be able to get in your main cage.”

Putting her kit bag on top of the fixed captain's bed, she foraged inside it and pulled out the large cage meant to be Kiki's main home while on the Moon. Pulling out its removable bottom, Julie emptied the cage of her personal clothing items and hamster supplies and kit filling it, then tested the rotating carrousel before snapping back in place the bottom. Next, she filled up the cage's drinking pond and food dispenser and laid out a layer of shredded paper, then set the cage on a corner of the room's work desk. Undoing the string around her neck, she cautiously took Kiki out of its mini cage and transferred it into its main cage, closing and locking the door behind it. To her joy and pride, her pet went at once to the carrousel and started running inside it with gusto.

“Good show, Kiki!” She said softly, tears coming out of her eyes. “You are a good little hamster.”

Julie watched Kiki play for a few more seconds, then went to unpack her own things and store them in the drawers under the captain's bed. That didn't take very long, as the weight allowance for personal kit headed for the Moon was very limited indeed. That point had not bothered her much however, as she had always been simple in her tastes and had few souvenirs worth bringing along.

Twenty minutes later, as she was again watching Kiki, someone knocked on the opened door of her cabin, making her turn around and face a smiling Shirley Slade.

“Sorry to take you away from your pet, Julie, but we are having a meeting at the SELENA, next to the TERA.”

“I'm coming!”

Julie then made the mistake of getting up too energetically and flew off her feet, nearly knocking her head on the ceiling but managing to shield it in time with one arm.

“Damn! I forgot about the low gravity here.”

“You will get used to it quickly enough, Julie. Follow me.”

Collecting all six scientists from her crew on the way, Shirley led them along the buried communication tubes to the SELENA, which housed various crew amenities, including a cafeteria. Joining up with all the other occupants of the base there, she sat with them around the main cafeteria table, letting John Glenn speak.

“Welcome again to the Moon, people. You will now split up and go get briefed by the specialists you are replacing. It is now 14:35, California time, or 22:35, universal time. This base functions on universal time, even though one lunar day is worth nearly 27 days and eight hours in terms of Earth time. Use the next two days to both learn your new environment and get accustomed to the local schedule. Me and nine of the fourteen veteran crews of this base will leave with the LEXINGTON in three days, so make the best of that time before we are gone.”

The group then dissolved quickly, each newcomer leaving with its veteran counterpart to go survey their work areas. Julie found herself approached by a thin, graying man wearing thick glasses who flashed a friendly smile to her and presented his right hand for a shake.

“Hi! I’m Gerry Vogel, Resident Agronomist of Moon Base Alpha.”

“And I’m Julie Lecomte.” Replied Julie, shaking his hand and returning his smile. “I heard a lot of good about your work here. Your improvements to hydroponics techniques attracted much attention.”

Vogel made a dismissive gesture with one arm then.

“Bof! Any good agronomist with a grain of knowledge in biochemistry would have done as well here. Let’s cut to the chase and go right away to see what will be your domain.”

Julie ended up visiting in detail six of the sixteen converted cargo ships of the base, examining the vegetable and fruit gardens and farms exploited in those ships and being shown by Vogel the main points of the hydroponics machinery used to sustain the plants. After a good three hours of this, having just inspected the last converted ship, which housed a peanut farm, Julie thought that they were finished and was ready to go get some sleep. However, Vogel led her instead to the next ship, then through a long, buried communications tube that went to the hub module in the center of the base grounds. Frankly curious at the mysterious smile Vogel gave her at her questions, Julie was nearly stunned when she walked in one of the large transparent, inflatable

structures attached to the central hub module: flower pots and flower beds dotted the plastic interior, intermixed with tables, chairs and sofas. Julie loved the setup at once.

“This...this is fantastic! You would think yourself on Earth inside some terrace restaurant.”

“I am happy to see that you like it, Julie.” Said a smiling Vogel. “It was an initiative of mine to make this base more agreeable to live in. You will now take over from me in maintaining those flowers, along with the other plants in this base. I will show you tomorrow the solution formula I use to water and feed those flowers.”

“The soil in those beds and pots, is it from Earth?”

“God no! That would have cost a fortune to bring in! Water is expensive enough to import as is. I used strictly Moon soil, which I find nearly as good as Earth soil. The only elements missing for plant growth in Moon soil are nitrogen, zinc, boron and molybdenum. The last three elements are needed only in trace quantities and are brought easily enough from Earth. As for nitrogen, we extract it on this base from recycled human sewage. The real problem for us up to now is the very limited amount of water available to us. At a transportation cost of over a thousand dollars per pound between Earth and the Moon, one way, you can see why water is so religiously recycled and reused here. It took me a real fight with Space Command authorities to get those decorative flower beds approved. However, the boost to morale that followed was so obvious that my name can now be pronounced in Cape Canaveral without a few bean counters and administrators having instant strokes. Sadly, as you could see earlier, nearly forty percent of our capacity for plant food growth is still unused due to insufficient water supplies.”

“That is truly sad.” Said Julie, shaking slowly her head. “Apart from helping to provide fresh produce to improve the diet, those extra plants would also help absorb more of the carbon dioxide exhaled by the base crewmembers. What are the chances of finding any water on the Moon, Gerry?”

“Close to nil up to now. I was however told that one of the newcomers, a geologist, has hypothesized that some water ice could exist at the poles, mixed with the surface dust at the bottom of permanently dark craters.”

“Hell, if he really does find water there, I would be ready to kiss his ass.” Pronounced Julie, meaning it.

08:22 (Universal Time)

Friday, August 16, 1963 'C'

Moon Base Alpha

Shirley completed her systems check from the driver's seat of the heavy Moon rover, then looked at Edward Stokes, who was sitting besides her in the co driver's seat. Both wore light coveralls, thanks to the pressurized hull of the rover.

"Ready for your first Moon adventure, Ed?"

"You bet, Shirley!" Replied the geologist enthusiastically. "I will finally be able to see if my theory about hidden ice at the Moon poles was correct. If it really is..."

"...then the operations of this base will be drastically changed, for the better." Completed Shirley. "With a local supply of water, we will be able to be self-sufficient in water and oxygen and will even be able to produce rocket fuel in the form of liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen, thus dramatically cutting down the cost of trips between the Moon and Earth. Well, let's hope that your theory is correct."

Shirley then activated her light headset microphone.

"John, you may open the hangar ramp."

"Lowering the ramp now." Answered Navy Lieutenant John Lousma, who was sitting in the control cabin of the WANDERER, converted to act as base technical workshop. The large ramp lowered slowly, letting Shirley and Edward see the moonscape in front of the rover's garage. The Sun was now up on the Moon, a critical factor for their vehicle, which depended on its solar panels to recharge its batteries. Shirley cautiously drove the big, eight-wheel rover out of its garage. She rolled a further twenty meters, then stopped temporarily to check if all of her solar panels were working. They were, so she accelerated again, heading towards the open mouth of the base's horseshoe.

Once out of base grounds, Shirley started heading South at about fifteen kilometers per hour, close to the rover's maximum speed of twenty kilometers per hour. Their vehicle may not be a very fast one but it had a lot of autonomy, both in terms of distance and of life support capacity. Edward, watching alternatively the moonscape ahead via the armored glass panels of the cockpit and the display screen of the rover's inertial navigation mapping system, gave Shirley directions as they made their way along the cratered surface of the Moon. They had 690 kilometers as a straight line distance to

cover, something that would probably translate into nearly double that figure when all the detours and zigzags were taken into account. That meant a trip, one way, of at least four days unless one drove like a madman and never stopped for a rest. That was however not the intention of Shirley. She was not about to risk their lives and the precious rover just to save a few hours of travel. She thus drove cautiously, stopping frequently to assess which way was best to avoid a slope that was too steep or a crater that was too deep. Thankfully, the large wheels and all-axle independent suspension of the rover made the driving over the rough ground a near cinch. After five hours of driving and on Edward's insistence, Shirley let her companion switch places with her and drive for a while. The geologist, accustomed to do a lot of all-terrain driving as part of his job on Earth, proved an expert at the wheel of the heavy rover and made good time for the next four hours, until Shirley declared a stop in order to rest a bit.

Moving out of their forward seats and into the cramped living section behind them, the two explorers chose their supper out of the rover's small freezer and heated them in the microwave oven before sitting facing each other at a small table. Edward couldn't help discreetly eye Shirley's fit body as he started eating his chicken dinner: the astronaut was still a most attractive woman, and a single one to boot.

"We have been doing some good time up to now, Shirley. Shall we drive for a few more hours after supper?"

"I would say no, Ed. I want the solar panels to have a chance to electrolyze and separate some of the water produced by our fuel cells before moving on. Sun power will degrade quickly as we get nearer to the South Pole and I want to enter the dark side with as much fuel in our tanks as we can. Once we are under night conditions, our autonomy will be dependent on how much oxygen and hydrogen there are in our tanks. Our isotopic generators can help electrolyze some of our water but their power output is quite limited. I will send a radio report after supper, then we will take six hours of sleep before driving on."

"Sounds fair enough to me. Uh, would you mind if I ask why you never married?" That got him an amused smile from Shirley, who stopped eating for a moment while she stared into his eyes.

"The reason is simple: I passed my career as a fighter pilot first. Congress changed the rules forbidding servicewomen from marrying or having children only in

1953, by which time my career was truly picking up. And you? I understand that you are single too.”

“Divorced, actually. Jenny, my ex-wife, grew tired of waiting for me to come home from my prospecting expeditions around the World. I guess that the breaking point was when I accepted a five year contract to go work and live in Alaska. Jenny, being from Florida, refused to go freeze her butt with me over there and left me. That was seven years ago. Since then I have kept so busy that I rarely felt the need to remarry.”

“So, now, you keep yourself busy by prospecting on the Moon.”

“Hey,” said Edward with a smile, “this is as prestigious a job for a geologist as anyone will ever get. Besides, I find this to be a fascinating adventure. You should know: you are an adventurer yourself, no?”

“Oh, I was called many things in my younger years, Ed. For one, enrolling as a fighter pilot during the Second World War got me called either a tomboy, a fast girl or a plain nut case. Then, most male military pilots who tried to date me were turned off when they learned that I had more air combat kills than most of them, probably because they couldn’t accept that a woman could be better than them as a fighter pilot.”

“And...now?”

“Now? I am stuck alone with a handsome man inside a Moon rover, miles away from the other nearest human beings.”

Edward smiled in turn and continued eating, exchanging knowing glances with Shirley at intervals. After finishing their meal, Edward took care of cleaning up while Shirley sent a situation report by radio to Moon Base Alpha via the communications satellite orbiting the Moon. They then both started to undress down to their underwear to go to sleep. As they faced each other inside the cramped rover, Shirley hesitated only for a moment before passing a hand on Edward’s chest, caressing it. Edward, already horny as hell just by looking at her in her underwear, glued himself against her and, passing his arms around her, undid her bra and pulled it away, then pulled down her panty. He smiled when he saw that her groin was shaved closely.

“Perfect! I love giving cunnilingus. Do you mind if I have my dessert now, Shirley?”

“Eat all you want, Ed!” Replied Shirley, breathing faster and feeling her body on fire with sexual desire. “I will return the favor after that.”

15:09 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, August 21, 1963 'C'

South Pole region

The Moon

Shirley was now driving the rover slowly and cautiously, zigzagging around the worst of the broken Moon terrain on their way to the South Pole, now a mere 69 kilometers away.

“Gee! This is much worse than all that I expected.” Said Edward from the co driver’s seat, eyeing the jagged ground relief illuminated by the rover’s headlights. “It is even worse than what I had to drive through in some parts of Alaska.”

“Yeah! And this pitch darkness is not helping, apart from making this place spooky as hell.” Added Shirley, veering to the right to avoid a huge boulder sitting on a sloped part of the ground. Edward examined for a moment the inertial navigation system’s display, then stared out his window towards the right of the rover.

“We should now be very close to the eastern lip of the Mawson Crater, which is on my list of craters of interest that could house deposits of water ice. Head towards our two O’clock, please.”

“You’re the geologist.” Replied Shirley before steering further to the right. After maybe twenty more minutes of slow driving, Shirley had to stop the rover abruptly, as she was suddenly confronted by the start of a steep down slope. Edward, grabbing the control stick for the external swivel floodlights of the rover, swept the powerful light beams around to examine the slope and the ground beyond. Despite the power of the floodlights, he couldn’t see the bottom of the slope.

“Hell, this slope is over a mile deep! We must be at the top of Mawson Crater’s rim. That’s what our inertial navigation system says anyway.”

“It is way too steep for our rover to drive down the slope.” Said Shirley, trying to pierce the darkness of the crater, which she knew to be 51 kilometer-wide. “I can use the rover’s rocket engines to jump up and fly down to the bottom of the crater.”

“Don’t, at least not yet!” Replied quickly Edward. “The slope seems to be manageable on foot and I would like to go do some prospecting along it before we fly down to the bottom.”

“As you wish, Ed. Do you need help to suit up?”

“As long as your hands stay professional, Shirley.” Replied Edward with a smirk and a wink, getting an elbow in the ribs for his trouble. Followed by Shirley, he went to the back of the rover and proceeded in getting in his space suit, helped in this by his companion. Less than ten minutes later, he stepped inside the rear airlock of their vehicle, clutching in his hands a canvas bag full of tools and plastic container bags. Shirley worked the controls of the airlock from the inside, pumping out the air from the airlock and allowing Edward to leave the rover four minutes later. Climbing down the short ladder after closing back the outer hatch of the airlock, he lightly jumped to the ground, his heart pounding fast with excitement. With the helmet light of his spacesuit on, Edward started cautiously walking down the steep slope, which was seemingly made of rock and dry dirt. With Shirley following him visually from the cockpit of the rover, Edward stopped at intervals during his descent, examining the ground dirt and rocks and collecting a few samples. As he was maybe 400 meters below and two kilometers away from the rover’s position, his feet slipped on a patch of soil that seemed looser than the rest of the slope and he fell on his bum while starting to slide down, loose soil rolling down alongside. To his alarm, his slide continued and even accelerated, prompting him into slamming down hard the small pick ax he held in his right hand, burying its tip in the crumbling soil. Thankfully that seemed to work, as his slide was progressively slowed down and then stopped after he had slid for a good forty meters. Blowing air in relief, Edwards looked down at the soil he was on, to evaluate its consistency. The light of his helmet then made numerous soil particles shine as light reflected partly on them. At the same time he heard Shirley’s worried voice on his headset.

“Ed! Ed! Are you alright?”

“I am, Shirley! I hit a spot of the slope where the top soil was more frangible and slid down for maybe forty yards. My pick ax stopped the sliding. There is something strange though about the soil in this part of the slope. Give me a minute while I check this out.”

Using his pick ax to dig through the top soil, he soon noticed that, as he went deeper, the soil fragment became more and more reflective to light. Finally, as he had dug down past a depth of maybe 25 centimeters, he hit a thick layer of particles that were dirty white in apparent color and reflected light from all angles. Blood rushed to his head as he suddenly understood what they were. Grabbing a handful of the white particles, he easily crushed them between his fingers, letting them flow down out of his hand while

illuminating them with his helmet lamp: it was as if he was holding dirty snow. Unable to contain his triumph, he then yelled out his joy, attracting an instant question from Shirley.

“Ed! What is going on?”

“DIRTY WATER ICE CRYSTALS! I AM FEET DEEP IN WATER ICE!”

“Are you sure?” Asked excitedly his partner. Edward sobered up a bit at that question and looked around him.

“Nearly! Let me get some samples and probe the ground around a bit more first.”

Using a long telescoping ground probe, he progressively pushed its tip into the soil, finding only minimal resistance all the way down its length of 150 centimeters. Then switching to using a small hand shovel, he frantically dug down, throwing out dirty ice particles by the shovel full. He gave up after ending nearly two meters below the surface, with his ground probe still not registering solid ground even from the bottom of the hole. He carefully collected a large sample bag of dirty ice from the bottom, then emerged from the hole and walked a hundred meters to his right. There, he dug again a hole, finding the same deep layer of ice crystals and collecting another sample bag. Still continuing eastward, he dug in succession three more holes, finding dirty ice under the few centimeters of top soil at each spot. Reversing his steps, he repeated the whole procedure to the west of his initial hole. He was positively ecstatic when he finally gave his report by radio to Shirley.

“Shirley, I am atop a deposit of water ice crystals lying on average six to nine inches under a coat of Moon dust. That deposit is at least ten feet thick and probably is much thicker than that, apart from extending for at least 800 yards of frontage. I will need more time and probing to find the real size of this deposit but it could possibly extend for miles left and right, all the way to the bottom of the crater.”

“But are you sure that this is water ice, Ed?”

“Up to 99.9 percent sure, Shirley: I rubbed together some of the crystals and warmed them close to my helmet light and they turned into transparent liquid drops. I will now climb back to the rover in order to do a formal analysis of the crystals. If I am right, we have found in this single spot what amounts to a bare minimum of a few tens of thousands of tons of water.”

“Tens...tens of thousands of tons of water? But, that's fantastic, Ed!”

Edward surveyed again the slope as he started climbing back, his face solemn.

“Shirley, I suspect that this is only the tip of the iceberg, literally. There are probably millions, if not billions of tons of water ice from ancient comet strikes locked at the bottom of the craters of the South Pole. Our Moon program has just hit a big jackpot.”

16:53 (Florida Time)

Military Space Command Headquarters

Patrick Space Command Base, Florida

United States

Ingrid, working on budget requests for her command, picked up her telephone after the second ring.

“General Dows speaking!”

She then recognized the voice of the officer in charge of the Space Mission Control Center, at nearby Cape Canaveral. The man sounded positively elated.

“General, this is Colonel Johnson. We just got a sensational report from our Moon base: they found huge quantities of water ice inside Mawson Crater, near the South Pole.”

Ingrid jumped to her feet at once, her heart accelerating.

“Are they sure? How much water are we talking about?”

“The rover team has formally identified the dirty crystals they found in a deep layer covering a slope of the crater as nearly pure water ice, mixed with dust particles. Their preliminary estimate for that single patch in that single crater is around a hundred thousand tons of water, probably a lot more depending on the dept of the layer. Doctor Edward Stokes, the geologist who made the discovery, believes that there are millions, and possibly billions of tons of water at the bottom of craters around the South Pole. This could change drastically our present plans for the Moon, General.”

“Could? Hell, it will, Colonel! Prepare a preliminary briefing on this find and be ready to present it at my headquarters for eight O’clock tonight, inside my private conference room. I will attend with my main command and scientific staff.”

“I will be there, General.”

“Oh, one last thing, Colonel: this stays secret until we can arrange a formal press release.”

“Understood, General.”

Ingrid then put down her telephone receiver, her mind in turmoil. This was truly going to change things in a big way for her whole space program, and not only for the Moon program. For one thing, this Moon water could be used to produce rocket fuel but that would also mean switching to the use of rocket engines using liquid oxygen and hydrogen in order to be able to use that new fuel source. For another, it meant huge new possibilities to expand dramatically the installations and crews on the Moon. The real question was however by how much she should really expand her Moon program now. She was certainly not going to expand Moon Base Alpha just for the sake of expanding it. While it had proved up to now to be invaluable in terms of pure scientific knowledge and had helped advance greatly the understanding of techniques for living away from Earth, the Moon program was only one part of the American space exploration program. Mars was still waiting to be explored, along with the other planets of the Solar System. Ingrid also had to keep in mind the purely military portion of her command, thus she couldn't afford to suck away most of her resources towards a single goal. Thankfully, she had contingency plans and ideas already in the back of her mind about what to do with all that new water.

09:02 (Florida Time)

Thursday, August 22, 1963 'C'

Military Space Command Headquarters

Patrick Space Command Base, Florida

“So, Herr Braun, what do you think?”

Werner Von Braun took a few more seconds to finish reading quickly the notes and rough sketches given to him by Ingrid, then looked at her with a dismayed expression.

“You thought about all this overnight, General?”

“Hardly!” Replied Ingrid with a smile. “I have been thinking about much of this for months. The only real new idea is the one about a Moon-Earth cargo ship. Now that we have found a sizeable supply of water on the Moon, we can reasonably plan for a ship that will roam between low Earth orbit and the Moon surface. Since it won't ever need to reenter Earth's atmosphere and would permanently be in the vacuum of space, it will be able to be designed as a pure ship of space, once completed and fuelled up with an initial load of fuel from Earth's surface.”

Von Braun nodded his head while looking again at the handwritten notes and sketches concerning the Moon-Earth cargo ship.

“We could indeed design a specialized variant of our PEGASUS unmanned cargo ship that would serve as the core of such a ship. This would in fact be a quite simple and straightforward job. The only problem I see is about its crew: I don’t see any way for it in your sketch to get back to Earth. Are you planning on having a space plane go up to pick these men after each mission?”

“That would defeat the main goal of such a cargo ship, Herr Braun, which is to allow a drastic cut in the cost of hauling cargo from the Earth to the Moon. Once back in low Earth orbit, this Moon cargo ship will dock with our future orbital space station, where its crew will be able to relax and wait for another cargo load or for passengers brought by either an unmanned PEGASUS vehicle or a space plane. With frequent stays at either our orbital space station or at Moon Base Alpha, the crews of such Moon cargo ships could fly dozens of return trips and stay in space for periods of six months or more.”

“An ingenious concept, General.” Said Von Braun appreciatively. “However, this will mean that we will need to build a large orbital space station before such a cargo ship can enter service.”

“Ideally, yes, but not necessarily, Doctor. Our Moon cargo ship crews could use Moon Base Alpha as their base of operation until our orbital space station is ready. That is why I will want substantial living facilities aboard our Moon cargo ships. At the worst, its crews would wait on the Moon with their ships until called to Earth orbit to pick a load.”

“Mein Gott!” Exclaimed the German rocket scientist while eyeing Ingrid with wide eyes. “That is a truly audacious concept, General. It however is one that makes eminent sense. I don’t see any big problem in implementing it, in fact.”

“Good! I have also cooked up a few ideas about our future orbital space station. It will also help us tremendously when the time comes to launch an expedition to Mars. Here is the project file I started about it.”

The scientist took the file and opened it, then froze with stupor the moment he realized what she had in mind.

“You...you can’t be serious, General!”

“I am actually very serious, Doctor. What do you think about this?”

Von Braun read through the four pages of notes and sketches, then gave her an awed look.

“Is this an idea from the future, General? This is positively brilliant!”

Ingrid shook her head, her expression most serious.

“No, it isn’t an idea from the future, or from anyone else but me, Doctor. In fact, you should be interested to know that, right now, our space program is in many ways more advanced than anything known in Nancy Laplante’s time. Thanks to hindsight, we were able to avoid many pitfalls suffered by the American space program of her time period. I am simply building on this hindsight and jumping directly to things that will work with reasonable certainty. I want your design teams to concentrate first on both the Earth-Moon cargo ship design and on the orbital space station. I will make sure at the same time that our nuclear rocket project is perfected and made ready for operational use. In the meantime, I will order new equipment for our Moon base, so that we could start soon to extract and stockpile water from the South Pole. As for Mars, we should be able to launch soon our first Mars exploration automated probe, which will with luck provide us with detailed maps of the planet and will allow us to start selecting an appropriate landing site for our future Mars manned mission. You will be kept busy for quite a few more years yet, Doctor.”

“I can see that, General.” Replied Von Braun, smiling to Ingrid.

13:46 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, June 3, 1964 ‘C’

South Pole outpost

Mawson Crater, The Moon

Edward Stokes smiled with triumph as he watched the rocket sled, piloted by Major Edward White, lift off from the bottom of Mawson Crater with the first ever load of Moon water headed towards Moon Base Alpha. Those eight tons of liquid water were only the start of something that was bound to impact most positively on the future of the Moon base. From the control station of the automated cargo ship NEPTUNE, which had landed at the bottom of Mawson Crater three weeks ago, Edward could see the bulldozer operated by Navy Lieutenant John Lousma as it dug into the layer of water ice crystals covering nearly half of the bottom of the crater and then deposited its loads of ice into a mobile processing unit. The proven deposits of water ice inside Mawson

Crater were now conservatively estimated to be at least half a billion tons. The really good news was that this was not the whole of the water ice to be found on the Moon, as four other craters had been found to contain a total of another billion tons of ice, at the least. And that didn't take into account the ice to be possibly found at the North Pole of the Moon. With the equipment brought by three automated cargo ships and with six more astronauts flown in last month by space plane, this outpost was now able to extract and ferry to Moon Base Alpha 24 tons of pure water per day, indefinitely. That water could in turn be electrolyzed, using simply the electrical energy produced by solar cells, into hydrogen and oxygen, the most performing combination of liquid rocket fuel known to man. The quantities that would now be produced at Moon Base Alpha were going to be more than enough to refuel once per week one of the projected Earth-Moon cargo ships due to enter service in two months. Any excess water could and would be gladly used by the personnel of the base for their needs and for expanding their agricultural production. Julie Lecomte was already jumping up and down at the thought of all the new plants she would now be able to grow with that extra water. All in all, Edward could be rightly proud of his discovery.

17:25 (Florida Time)

Monday, August 10, 1964 'C'

Base hospital, Patrick Space Base

Florida, United States

"Please, stay in your chairs." Said amiably President Kennedy as he entered the hospital's annex specially built to accommodate astronauts that needed readaptation and medical observation after spending long periods in zero or low gravity. The ten crewmembers of Moon Mission 18, who had landed back with the LEXINGTON yesterday and were now relaxing in the spacious lounge, were too happy to obey him. While not sick or crippled from their year on the Moon, they all felt weak in the normal gravity of Earth, which was six times stronger than the one on the Moon. However, previous experience with other crews back from the Moon had shown that a week of rehabilitation under medical care followed by a month of well-earned vacation, would be enough to return them to full health and strength. John Kennedy, flanked by Ingrid Dows, Doctor Jerome Wiesner and the French ambassador to Washington, with his Secret Service bodyguards staying discreetly in the background, went to each

crewmember to shake their hands. He started with Shirley Slade, who had been chatting with an elderly couple.

“Welcome back to Earth, Colonel Slade. You did a damn fine job on the Moon.”

“Thank you, Mister President. May I present you my parents, George and Ann Slade?”

“How do you do?” Said John Kennedy while shaking hands with the old couple and then exchanging a few pleasantries before passing to another crewmember. He took a bit more time when he stopped in front of Edward Stokes, shaking his hand vigorously.

“Doctor Stokes, the United States and the rest of the World owes you a lot for your fantastic discovery on the Moon.”

“I only was lucky enough to be there first, Mister President.” Protested modestly Edward, attracting a reply from Doctor Jerome Wiesner, the President’s science advisor.

“You did a lot more than that, Doctor Stokes: you formulated the theory that led us in going to explore the Moon’s South Pole in the first place. Your discovery will now help greatly reduce the cost of Moon exploration, thanks to all this water you found.”

“How much could we expect in savings because of this, General?” Asked Kennedy to Ingrid. The latter answered without hesitation, having already done those estimates weeks ago.

“Once our new Moon cargo ships start regular runs with fuel extracted from Moon water, the cost of bringing a pound of cargo from the Earth’s surface all the way to the surface of the Moon will drop from 1,100 dollars to about 350 dollars, a saving of 68 percent, Mister President. Furthermore, since it will then be cheaper to bring water to Earth orbit from the Moon instead of from Earth’s surface, any ship or space station will be able to be refueled and resupplied from the Moon at lower cost.”

John Kennedy grinned at that, not expecting such good news.

“Hell, that is more than I hoped for! Maybe I should start planning what to do in the federal budget with all those savings.”

“Uh, we do still have a number of programs in the books that will require lots of money, Mister President.” Replied cautiously Ingrid. “These savings will however mean that my command won’t need extra funds over and above our planned budget in order to complete those programs.”

“Right!” Said John Kennedy, his enthusiasm doused by reality. “Well, let’s meet the other members of the Moon crew. I believe that Miss Lecomte is next in line.”

The four visitors then moved to besides the sofa where Julie Lecomte was sitting, with her hamster's cage on her lap. John Kennedy gallantly kissed her hand, making the French woman redden with timidity.

"I salute your invaluable contribution to our space program, Miss Lecomte. This is another shining example of transatlantic cooperation and friendship."

"You are too good, Mister President. I am the one that must thank your country for letting me accomplish my ultimate dream."

"You already thanked us by doing such a great work on the Moon, miss." Replied Kennedy before looking down at the hamster in its cage and smiling. "So, this is the famous Moon stowaway! It seems not to have suffered from its trip, judging by its energy at running inside its carrousel."

"Kiki lived through its Moon adventure even better than I hoped for, Mister President."

"Well, I now know more about hamsters thanks to you, miss: the moment my kids saw for the first time your Kiki on a television report they badgered me until I had bought them a miniature hamster like yours. I was told in fact that there was a rush on miniature hamsters at pet stores around the United States."

"And around France too, Mister President." Said with a smile the French ambassador before facing Julie. "What I have for Doctor Lecomte is however meant to reward her scientific contribution to France and humanity and not for her promotion of hamsters as pets."

Julie Lecomte's eyes grew wide and her heart accelerated as the ambassador took a small box out of a suit pocket and extracted a medal with crimson red ribbon from it. The ambassador then carefully pinned the medal to the left breast area of her coverall as he spoke in a solemn tone.

"Doctor Julie Lecomte, for your important contribution to science and for the pride it brought to France, I am honored to award you in the name of the President of the Republic the medal of Officer of the Legion of Honor."

The ambassador then kissed the tearful Julie on both cheeks as the others present applauded.

"This...this is too much! Thank you, Mister Ambassador!"

"You richly deserved it, Doctor Lecomte. The agronomy department of the Université de la Sorbonne is anxious to see you resume your chair there, once you have taken some vacation of course."

After meeting and chatting with the other crewmembers, many of whom had family members visiting them at the time, the group of dignitaries walked out of the lounge and went back to their motorcade, which was waiting outside the hospital. Ingrid was invited to sit with John Kennedy and Jerome Wiesner inside the presidential limousine, which drove off as soon as they were in. Now alone with Ingrid in a secure setting, John looked at her with seriousness.

“So, what’s next for our space program, Ingrid? When could we expect the launch of a manned Mars mission?”

“Mister President, we...”

“Please! Call me John when in private, Ingrid.” Interrupted the President, making Ingrid nod and smile.

“As you wish, John. As you must know, we launched our first heavy automated probe towards Mars four months ago. It should now arrive there in less than five months and we hope that it will then be able to send us detailed pictures of Mars’ surface, plus data about its atmosphere. In the meantime, we will concentrate on our next big step in space: the launch in Earth orbit of a large space station that will serve as a relay for our Moon cargo ships. Once that space station is operational in orbit and our Moon cargo ships can start bringing water and fuel supplies from the Moon to it, we will be able to ready our Mars ship for launch from Earth orbit. As it is, we are aiming at a Mars mission launch around May of 1971.”

“May of 1971?” Exclaimed John Kennedy, sounding and looking somewhat disappointed. “Can’t we launch earlier than that?”

Ingrid, having expected such a reaction, answered him patiently.

“Not really, John. First, this is an extremely risky venture still full of unknowns, with the lives of dozens of astronauts at risk. I was ready to rush through at the start of our space program, when I was the sole one taking the risks at first, but I won’t put such a large crew in danger by cutting corners with the Mars program. We are however doing good progress as is. Second, even if we wanted to launch earlier, orbital mechanics dictates that the only earlier alternate launch window is February of 1969, which is too early for us to be ready for that date. Launching anytime outside of those launch window periods would result in much longer, fuel-consuming trajectories.”

“She is right, Mister President.” Said Jerome Wiesner from his jump seat facing Ingrid and John. “I reviewed Ingrid’s plans for the Mars mission and I believe that she is truly going at best speed right now.”

“Damn! I was hoping to see that mission launched before the end of my possible second term. God knows I could use the political points from that program.”

Ingrid did not reply to that right away, thinking instead about the last few years in the United States. Despite commendable efforts by John Kennedy and his administration, racial segregation was still rampant in most of the southern states and certainly existed still to varying degrees in most of the United States. The majority of the white citizens in the southern states resented Kennedy’s social and racial policies and so did many powerful local politicians. Ingrid in fact shared John’s unpopularity in the South, thanks mostly to her outspokenness against racism. Racial riots and acts of defiance by racists against anti-racist federal laws still happened way too often in the United States to Ingrid’s taste. Also, John Kennedy’s social policies, meant to cut somewhat the gap between the rich and the poor and to provide some relief to the lower classes, had made him many enemies among big corporations and financial interest groups. The only real bright spots were the relatively quiet World situation, with no major wars going on at this time, and the American economy, which was in good shape and expanding, thanks to the tax cuts he had implemented during his first mandate and to the booming air transport industry, something he owed mostly to Ingrid.

“John, you are doing the best anyone could expect from any president. No one could fault you for the problems we still have in the United States.”

“Some wouldn’t agree with you, Ingrid.” Said John bitterly. “What I am worried about the most is what will follow my presidency. Will the Republicans take over and undo most of what took me years to accomplish? Will black people finally gain equality in America? Will the poor have access to free medical care?”

“What about your brother Bobby? I understand that he wants to run for the leadership of the Democratic Party in 1968.”

“He does! With luck, he will be able to succeed me as president and will continue to push my policies.”

John then looked gravely at Ingrid.

“Ingrid, I need you more than ever. If Bobby makes it to the White House, he will need you as well. Continue to do your magic with your command. Continue making the United States look great.”

“I will, John.” Promised Ingrid, her voice soft.

CHAPTER 14 – U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

15:09 (California Time)

Thursday, April 4, 1968 ‘C’

Military Space Command giant assembly hangar complex

Muroc Air Force Base, California

John F. Kennedy had been dying with curiosity for months about what he was about to see in the huge assembly hangar belonging to the Military Space Command and situated in the North Base part of Muroc Air Force Base. He of course already knew what was in the assembly hangar, having been briefed regularly about it by Ingrid in the past months, but there was a big difference between hearing about something and looking at it, especially when it concerned a so-called ‘black’ secret project that had already cost hundreds of millions of dollars. The gargantuan size of the assembly hangar alone, which was a tightly guarded classified military facility not opened to visitors, would have given a clue to anyone looking at it from a distance that it was no ordinary hangar. A full 340 meters wide and 400 meters long, the ‘A’-framed building, made of a steel girder structure covered with aluminum siding, stood a mind-boggling 160 meters, the height of a fifty storey building. It thus could be seen from quite far away. Another thing about it that had attracted attention was the fact that it was as well the terminal of a recently built extension to the rail line servicing Muroc Air Force Base. Large, canvas-covered objects and parts had been arriving at the assembly hangar for months now, inflaming the rumors going around Muroc about what exactly was being built inside it. No doubt that the Soviets and many others were trying their best to find out about that.

Following Ingrid Dows and surrounded by his security detail of eight Secret Service agents, the American President entered the south side annex attached to the assembly hangar, finding himself in a large hallway where five electric carts were waiting with their drivers. John was invited by Ingrid to sit with her in the first cart, with the rest of their group splitting up to board the other carts. The small convoy then started rolling

quietly down the hallway, which led towards the core of the hangar, while Ingrid started describing to John what he was seeing.

“While this assembly hangar may look quite impressive by itself, Mister President, it is actually a very conventional building in terms of construction and structure. Most of its internal volume is empty, with cantilever steel beams structure used to leave a pillar-free central floorspace measuring 1,200 feet by 1,000 feet and with a height clearance of 300 feet. That central floorspace is itself surrounded by a number of workshops, secondary assembly halls, parts storage rooms and auxiliary machinery. Above the central floorspace are a number of floor levels containing technical and administrative offices linked to the project.”

“Why build so big, Ingrid? This building by itself still cost quite a few millions of dollars.”

“Because of the size of what we are building in it, Mister President.” Explained patiently Ingrid. “The whole point of our orbital space station project is to cut the costs and complexity of building and placing it in orbit by making it a single stage to orbit, or SSTO, vessel. We thus avoid the need to assemble it in orbit, a job both risky for our astronauts and also fraught with technical difficulties. A normally minor work accident on Earth becomes a potentially lethal one in space, while working inside a spacesuit is no easy job. What we do here may appear as an extravagant expenditure for many in Congress, but building the same thing in space would have been infinitely more costly, apart from being a lot harder and longer to do.”

“And the size of your orbital station itself, Ingrid? Did it need to be this large?”

“It had to, and for one main reason: to accommodate a contra-rotating carroussel large enough to provide a near-normal level of artificial gravity for the crew of our space station. That carroussel’s diameter is a full 500 feet, but it will prevent the long-term debilitating effects on the human body of long periods in zero gravity. We already know from our experience with Moon crews and from the experience from the Soviet astronauts that lived aboard their orbital space station MIR that months or even as little as a few weeks in zero or low gravity will affect the bones and muscles of astronauts. Another reason for building big is to be able to incorporate sufficient anti-radiation protection for our astronauts without it becoming too high a fraction of the total mass of the station. Also, don’t forget that most of the volume of our orbital station consist in fuel tanks, which will be mostly empty once in orbit. Our orbital station will be in effect a flying wing full of rocket fuel on takeoff. This way, no parts are thrown away at

launch, something that cuts part of the costs. Further, many parts used for the launch will also be able to serve other functions once in orbit, like the liquid oxygen tanks that will be turned into storage areas.”

John nodded his head at that in appreciation.

“Clever, indeed! I can’t wait to see it.”

“We are about to enter the main assembly hall, Mister President.”

After coming to a large garage door that a technician opened for them, the convoy of electric carts entered what must have been the largest enclosed space John Kennedy had ever seen. His eyes, like those of his Secret Service agents, however focused at once on the huge, blunt arrowpoint-shaped mass filling the assembly hall. Two equally huge cylindrical pods with angled air inlets at their front were attached to short pylons under the arrowpoint-shaped, while a pair of stubby wins were attached to the sides of the thin main body. The whole thing shone the color of stainless steel, except for the forward edges, which were black. John looked slowly from the bow of the main body to the stern, awe on his face. The thing had to be about 300 yards long and 200 yards wide, excluding the wings.

“My God! I never could have imagined that it would be so big, Ingrid. It actually looks more like a spaceship than an orbital space station.”

Ingrid gave her a funny look then, a smile on her lips.

“To the Americans and others who will watch it fly away to orbit, the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION will indeed look like a true spaceship, Mister President. While its designated shape is strictly a function of what was the most efficient way to fly it to orbit, the inaugural flight of the CONSTITUTION will strike the imagination of the American public, even though it will be its sole flight ever through Earth’s atmosphere. I may not give you a Mars landing during your presidential term, but you will be able to claim a major, spectacular accomplishment for the end of your mandate.”

In turn, John looked at Ingrid with sparkling eyes, visibly happy.

“Thank you, Ingrid, in the name of the United States. The American people owe you, big time!”

Ingrid sighed lightly at those words and gave a sober look to John.

“Just a bit more racial tolerance across this country would be plenty to make me happy, Mister President.”

06:13 (California Time)
Saturday, September 28, 1968 'C'
Military Space Command Assembly Hangar
North Base, Muroc Air Force Base
California

"Be careful, Malcolm, and come back in one piece, please."

Malcolm Scott Carpenter returned the emotional hug from his wife while softly speaking into her ear.

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

Malcolm then hugged his four grown children in turn before joining the rest of the crew of the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION near the elevator cage resting on the concrete floor of the assembly hall, under the center of the arrowpoint-shaped main body. He gave his family a last, longing look as the spouses and children of the crewmembers got back in the convoy of electric carts that had brought them under the massive hull of the CONSTITUTION, to be then driven away. Ingrid, who had been waiting patiently for the crew to have a last moment with their families before departure, smiled in encouragement at the seventeen men and four women who were about to fly out to orbit.

"Well, this is THE big day indeed, ladies and gentlemen. The eyes of all the Americans will be on you today, but I know that you will do honor to your command and to yourselves. Since I hate long speeches and since there is still a lot to do, I will now let you go inside your spaceship."

The eyes of Navy Captain Alan Sheppard, the commander of the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION for its flyout to orbit, gleamed with pride at those words.

"I wish that my old admiral could see us as we fly out : we are about to take off on a ship bigger than his aircraft carrier. As a naval aviator, I couldn't ask for better."

"The CONSTITUTION should impress many people around the World today, Alan, including the Soviets. However, don't use that excuse to do some aerobatics after takeoff, please."

The group laughed at that, with Charles Yeager, the copilot of the CONSTITUTION, replying to Ingrid.

“Is that why you didn’t put Gordo in command today, Ingrid? He would have been most happy to do a few loopings and barrel rolls on his way to orbit.”

Ingrid grinned at that barb shot at Leroy Gordon ‘Gordo’ Cooper Jr., who was often nicknamed ‘Hot Dog’ for his propensity to pull stunts in flight...when it was safe to do so. The other also laughed at that as she answered Yeager.

“And you never pull stunts yourself, Chuck? Alright, get in the elevator cabin before I change my mind and ground you all.”

With the atmosphere now quite relaxed, Ingrid shook hands one last time with the crewmembers as they filed past her to get in the elevator cabin. Once all in, with Ingrid staying on the ground, Alan Sheppard powered the electrical winch of the elevator cabin, making it rise towards a large belly hatch opened in the main body of the hull. The cabin rose a full 45 meters up before disappearing inside the belly of the CONSTITUTION. Once inside, the 21 astronauts hurried out of the cabin with their hand luggage and climbed a short flight of stairs leading to an airtight door giving access inside the main bow-to-stern communication tube of the ship. They had to walk a full 230 meters down the tube and pass in succession four airtight doors before arriving inside the nose section, a long pointed tube jutting out of the bow of the main body. There, they carefully stowed away their personal luggage before getting into their respective spacesuits, which had been stowed in advance behind the cockpit last evening. All the while, they felt the first movements of the CONSTITUTION as an ultra-heavy towing vehicle, a model specially built for this purpose, started pulling the ship out of the assembly hall and towards the northern extremity of Runway 18, the seven kilometer-long, 270 meter-wide runway running roughly North-South on the hardened surface of the Rogers Dry Lake immediately adjacent to Muroc AFB. The Rogers Dry Lake and its cluster of extra-long runways were in fact the main reasons why Ingrid had decided to build the assembly hangar in Muroc, an Air Force base, rather than at one of her two main bases in Vandenberg and in Cape Canaveral.

The 21 men and women had time to fully don their spacesuits and to take place in their padded seats in the cockpit section by the time that the CONSTITUTION made a stop halfway to Runway 18, at the rocket fuel filling station built away from the assembly hangar. There, technicians wearing protective coveralls and masks and operating a number of crane-mounted platforms, started pumping in the ship close to 4,000 tons of liquid oxygen, 1,900 tons of refined kerozene, 380 tons of nitrogen tetroxide and 230

tons of aerazine-50, plus some 120 tons of liquid hydrogen. That delicate but crucial operation took a good hour, with the ship's crew checking thoroughly their instruments at the end of it before the towing vehicle resumed its slow trip to Runway 18. By that time, four Air Force Police jeeps had taken positions to block the section of highway running along the base perimeter that was in line with the end of Runway 18, ready to stop the car and truck traffic on the portion of highway that would be in the danger zone at takeoff. Now weighing a staggering 9,700 metric tons with the fuel in its tanks, the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION finally stopped at the northern extremity of Runway 18, its nose pointed south. The crew of the ultra-heavy towing vehicle then hurried to undo the tow cables attached to the two main engines belly pods of the ship and then got out of the way. Alan Sheppard, sitting in the pilot's seat of the nose cockpit section and having a dominant view from fifty meters above the ground, initiated a careful and methodical pre-takeoff checklist with Charles Yeager and Jack Ridley, the flight engineer for this mission. With a total of ten main rocket engines and 26 orbital or attitude control rocket engines to check, they could not afford to cut corners now : crashing on the ground with their ship on takeoff, apart from destroying a ship worth over half a billion dollars, would also result in an explosion equal to that of a small atomic bomb.

After ten minutes used to go through the checklist, Alan then keyed his radio microphone.

"U.S.S. CONSTITUTION to Muroc Tower, we are ready for takeoff, over."

"From Muroc Tower : you are cleared for takeoff, CONSTITUTION. All nearby air traffic has been either rerouted or delayed. Your flight corridor is empty, over."

"Thank you, Muroc Tower!"

Alan then twisted his head to look at both Yeager and Ridley.

"Time to tango, guys! Jack, light up our main engines, full power!"

"Lighting up main engines now!"

The ten main rocket engines positioned inside the two ramjet tubes in the belly pods then exploded to life with over 6,820 metric tons of pure rocket thrust, to which was then added the mass of air that the pumping effect they created in the ramjet tubes sucked in by the front intakes. With the rocket flux being rich in kerozene fuel, that sucked air mixed with the rocket exhaust and ignited, adding another 6,500 metric tons of thrust. The huge ship nearly jumped forward under the 13,300 metric tons of thrust, accelerating down the runway at a rate exceeding that of even fighter jets. The few

drivers stopped by the Air Force policemen on the highway north of the runway looked on with awe as the exhaust from the ship's main engines created the equivalent of a hurricane that blew across the highway after jumping over the blast deflectors specially built for the occasion along the perimeter fence of the base. Watched by everyone on the base, the CONSTITUTION quickly accelerated down Runway 18 in a thunderous, deafening roar that made everything vibrate. After rolling only a bit over 1.5 kilometers on the hard surface of the dry lake, Alan was surprised to feel his ship already starting to act like it was ready to lift off. He knew that the flying wing shape of his ship's main body would provide extra lift to add to that of the two stubby wings of the CONSTITUTION, but the wind tunnel tests had not found by exactly how much and he had expected that he would have needed more runway length than this. Nonetheless, he gave a curt order to Yeager while pulling on his controls.

"Rotate!"

With both pilot and copilot pulling on their controls, the spaceship took off cleanly at once and started climbing in the sky while still accelerating at a rapid rate. Overall, the level of power he could feel now was nearly intoxicating to Alan, who grinned with pride and triumph, while Charles Yeager and more than a few of the other crewmembers yelled with delight. Seeing that their ship was performing flawlessly and was taking speed quickly, Alan started a slow, gradual turn to the right, in order to line up with his calculated orbit insertion vector. To his please surprise and that of Charles, his huge ship responded with unexpected nimbleness, making Yeager speak up.

"Hell, I could think right now that I am at the commands of my old SABRE, rather than at the commands of a nearly 10,000 ton ship. I love it!"

"It must be the flying wing shape of the main body. This is fantastic!"

On the ground, in Muroc, Ingrid was watching anxiously as the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION was rising steadily in the air and taking speed while initiating a slow turn towards the coast of California. A lot had been resting on this takeoff, including possibly her positions as commander of the Military Space Command and Director of National Space Programs. Her many political enemies in the Congress and at the Pentagon would have used at once and without compunction the crash of a half billion dollar prototype to censure her. The loss of the CONSTITUTION would also probably be a death blow to her orbital station project and the future mission to Mars. However, everything seemed to be going as planned...up to now.

“FLY, BABY! FLY!” She shouted out while raising both fists in the air.

In and around Los Angeles, everyone stopped and looked up as the CONSTITUTION skirted the northern limits of the city, plainly visible to all thanks to its sheer size and to the fiery trail from its rocket engines. The thunderous roar it produced also helped attract attention to it as it climbed and accelerated in the sky, going roughly from East to West while performing a wide turn. Those who had cameras with them quickly raised them to take pictures of the CONSTITUTION, while children and adults alike ran out of their homes or onto their balconies to look up excitedly at the stunning sight. The spaceship was still turning, completing a wide half-turn and climbing steadily when it broke through the sound barrier at about the same time it crossed the California coastline. Less than a minute after that, it sped past Mach 2.5, with its main rocket engines throttling down to let its much more economical ramjet engines provide most of the thrust for the next few minutes. A few more minutes and the spaceship had attained the speed of Mach 5.5 and the altitude of 29,000 meters, at which time its ramjet engines were cut off and its main rocket engines went back to full power. By then, close to 2,000 tons of rocket fuel had already been burned, making the spaceship that much lighter and helping it keep and even augment its acceleration and climb rates. Fifteen minutes after having taken off from Muroc, the CONSTITUTION was officially in space and approaching minimum satellisation speed while still under the power of its main rocket engines. Aboard the spaceship, Alan Sheppard had to cut temporarily the main rocket engines when they exceeded satellisation speed with a good margin, despite having still a few hundred tons of liquid oxygen and kerozene propellants in the tanks.

“Shut down the main engines, Jack! We will use our leftover liquid oxygen and kerozene later, to fire short burns in order to regularize our orbit once we will have established our apogee and perigee. How are our systems doing?”

“Everything is still green across the board, Alan.” Replied the flight engineer. “This flight was as smooth as silk.”

“Well, let’s not celebrate too fast : there is still a lot to do. Jean, how close to our planned orbital path are we?”

Jean Hixson, a female veteran flyer from the 99th Composite Wing, consulted her mapping radar and her inertial navigation system before answering.

“We are within one degree of our planned inclination, Alan, and are now overflying Northern Canada. When we will fire our main engines again to regularize our

orbit, I suggest that we do it at a slight angle of a couple of degrees to the right from our present heading, so that we can correct our orbit inclination. I will calculate the precise heading and burn time needed once we know the actual height of our apogee and perigee.”

“That’s fine with me, Jean.” Replied Alan Sheppard, who was presently feeling literally on top of the World. Never in his wildest dreams would he have believed in the past years that he would once fly such an impressive ship into space.

A bit over three hours and two main engines burns later, their orbit had been circularized at an altitude of 420 kilometers and an inclination of 68 degrees, at which time Alan gave the permission to his crewmembers to leave their seats and take off their spacesuits. Once everybody was down to their flight coveralls and boots with magnetized soles, he assembled them around him in order to pass a series of orders.

“So far so good, people. Let’s hope that everything else continues to go as planned. While Chuck and Jean will stay at their posts here in the cockpit for the time being, we will go configure this orbital station for space operations. Scott, Milt and Neil, you go the station’s central command bridge and start deploying our various radiator panels, solar energy arrays and radio and radar antennas, along with deploying our stern telescopic section. Pete, Ed, you go configure and pressurize the two liquid oxygen tanks of our main rocket engines to turn them into viable storage compartments. We will need them in the weeks to come to store the supplies that will be flown in from the surface. Me, Jack and the rest of us will go prepare and configure our contra-rotating carroussels for rotation.”

What Alan didn’t say then was that this last job would be by far the most critical. The main reason for the gigantic size of the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION was that so it could integrate inside its hull, which was otherwise mostly a collection of fuel tanks, a contra-rotating pair of carroussels with a diameter of 150 meters. Those carroussels contained all the living and nearly all the working and support facilities of the station and were meant to provide an artificial gravity of 0.9 G through centrifugal force. Those carroussels had been extensively tested and checked in Muroc in the past weeks and months, but nobody could bet that the strong vibrations and accelerations during their takeoff and flight to orbit would not cause those carroussels to malfunction or jam. If that ever happened, a major reason for building the CONSTITUTION would just go out the

window, unless a fix could be figured out quickly. In technical and financial terms, Ingrid Dows had indeed taken a big risk with that particular design feature.

Followed by the rest of his group, Alan opened the hatch between the cockpit section and the ship's main communication tube and started floating down towards the central command bridge, using the padded handrails fixed to the sides of the tube to propel himself and control his flight. The tube was still in semi-darkness, the overhead lights being on minimal electricity expenditure mode until the station's solar panels could be deployed and their onboard nuclear reactor could be powered up. A further sixty meters down the tube, he came to a hatch connecting the tube with an airlock protecting the forward access point to the carroussels. He then set foot on the deck, allowing his magnetized boot soles to stick lightly to the thin steel deck plating covering its aluminum support structure. Now able to walk nearly normally but careful not to be too energetic in his steps, something that would make the weak magnetic attraction of his boot soles break contact with the deck, Alan crossed the airlock and entered a small compartment with a large deck hatch. Waiting for his group to join him, he pointed at Jack Ridley.

"Jack, you take half of us and go prepare the lower carroussel. I will take the rest and go prepare the upper carroussel. Let's get to work, people!"

With four men and two women following him, Alan opened the hatch leading down into the twin carroussel and, holding on to the handrails of the ladder, floated down to the narrow band of fixed deck separating the upper and lower carroussels. Donald Slayton looked to his left, then to his right, embracing the long, nine meter-wide curved tunnel they were now in. The walls, deck and ceiling were painted a subdued pastel blue-green color, while various back-lit large pictures of Earth panoramas, presently dark due to the lack of main power, covered the walls.

"Wow! You wouldn't believe that we are now in space while looking at such a spacious ship interior volume."

"The whole idea of this carroussel design was to make long space sojourns as comfortable and natural as possible, Donald." Replied Alan. "Okay, let's start going down the upper carroussel's promenade deck to disengage the rotation brakes."

With Alan using a checklist and carefully recording each rotation brake being disengaged, his group slowly went down the 470 meters of track formed by the roof of the accommodations level of the upper carroussel, freeing the donought-like carroussel

so that it could rotate once its electric motors were activated. Alan was going to Jack Ridley to check with him if his team had finished releasing the brakes on the lower carroussels when the main lights went on in the twin promenade decks.

"Aaah, Scot got the solar panels deployed. Good! Jack, are you finished disengaging the brakes of the lower carroussel?"

"Disengaging the last one right now, Alan. Should we start configuring the inside of the bottom deck now or wait for the carroussels to be rotating?"

"Now that we have the main power on, we might as well start the rotation motors first. Once we have artificial gravity, it will be that much easier to work."

"True!"

Going to the nearest intercom wall panel, Alan called the command bridge, getting Scot Crossfield on the speaker.

"Crossfield here!"

"Scot, do we have enough juice right now to power up the carroussels?"

"We have, Alan. You are ready to start their rotation?"

"Yes! All the brakes are now disengaged. You may power the rotation motors now."

"Acknowledged! Powering the carroussels' rotation motors now."

Mere seconds later, Alan suddenly felt a weak weight sensation. While the outer wall and deck of the upper carroussel stayed fixed in relation to him, he now could see the lower carroussel to his right accelerating slowly in one direction, like a departing train from a quay, while the centerline band of deck separating the two carroussels appeared to move more slowly in the same direction. The sensation of weight grew steadily as Alan and his team anxiously listened to any noise that would indicate a friction point or another problem with the rotation mechanisms. Thankfully, the rotation speed kept going up smoothly, until he felt nearly like if he was back on Earth. Crossfield then spoke again on the intercom.

"Both carroussels are now rotating at their planned speed. You now have a felt gravity of 0.9 G indicated by the sensors on the bottom deck of the carroussels."

"Excellent! Pass the good word down to Muroc and Cape Canaveral and tell them that we are starting to configure the carroussels for occupation. How are you doing with powering our nuclear reactor?"

“Already done! I had only to push a few buttons, after all. The reactor is presently nominal and at half power and all indicators are green. I am now in the process of gradually activating the various ventilation and air conditioning systems.”

“Right on! Alright, boys and girls, go down to the bottom decks of the carroussels and set them for occupation.”

The group then split according to a prearranged list of tasks, each crewmember going down to the bottom level of a specific section of the carroussels. Alan went to his own assigned section, which was a hundred meter long and included the crew cafeteria, the crew game room, the cinema room and various storage and office rooms. There he started moving around the dozens of large plastic foam crates piled on what had been the bottom wall on Earth, placing them in their proper location for use in orbit. Those crates, with carefully padded interior volume, contained all the equipment, supplies and various items needed to use the section, like the glasses for the bar and the utensils for the cafeteria. Once each crate was in its proper place, Alan started opening them one by one, distributing their content in the various cupboards, drawers and cabinets, then storing away the now empty crates. That job took him a good two hours, by which time he was plenty thankful that he did not have to work in zero gravity conditions, with its additional problem of having to secure in place every object to avoid accidents. Taking the time afterwards to do a detailed inspection tour of his assigned section to make sure that everything was in place or functional, Alan next inspected the other sections of the two contra-rotating carroussels. He smiled with amusement on finding Edward White, a true athlete and fitness freak, sitting down in the gymnasium, covered with sweat.

“Slacking off on the job, Ed?”

The test pilot and aeronautical engineer gave him a faked outraged look at those words.

“Slacking off?! I just unpacked and put in their assigned places all the weight-lifting equipment of the gymnasium, for God’s sake! And you had only to move around glassware!”

“Just kidding, Ed!” Replied Alan, patting his shoulder. Go open a crate of rations to prepare lunch for the crew while the others finish their jobs. I will go finish my tour in the meantime.”

White, who had a voracious appetite but never seemed to take on weight thanks to his physical exercising, smiled on hearing that and got up from his bench.

“You have any menu preference, Alan?”

“Yes! Anything but the macaroni and cheese : we ate enough of that in the Navy.”

“The macaroni with ground beef then?” Asked jokingly White, who then barely avoided the kick to his butt coming from Alan.

10:22 (Universal Time)

Monday, October 7, 1968 ‘C’

Port pod aft docking bay airlock (ex-port main engines exhaust nozzle)

U.S.S. CONSTITUTION, low Earth orbit

Alan Sheppard came to attention and saluted, held in place on the deck by his magnetized boot soles, as Gertrude Meserve emerged from the airlock of the port docking bay, wearing her spacesuit with its faceplate opened.

“Welcome aboard the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION, General!”

“Thank you, Captain Sheppard!” Replied Gertrude, returning his salute before shaking hands with him. “You and your crew did a great job flying the CONSTITUTION to orbit and then preparing it for occupation. By the way, me and my extra crewmembers brought you fresh mail and supplies to cheer you up. More crewmembers and supplies will follow aboard the LEXINGTON and ENTERPRISE in the next three days. Then, we will be able to put this orbital station to full use.”

Alan nodded at that, fully understanding what she meant. Apart from the officially announced functions to be played in orbit by the CONSTITUTION, which included Earth planetary studies, climatology and astronomical observation, the space station was also meant to serve as an orbital surveillance and intelligence gathering outpost for the United States, its high definition cameras and electronic signals detection gear mainly targetting the Soviet Union and Communist China. No doubt that the Soviet MIR space station was engaged in the exact same activities, targetted at the United States, but the capabilities of the CONSTITUTION would have made the Soviets die of envy, apart from infuriating them. Alan then smiled on seeing the second passenger of the VALLEY FORGE emerge from the airlock.

“Miss Lecomte! Welcome back in space! Did you bring your little Kiki with you?”

Momentary sadness showed up on the face of the French agronomist.

“Kiki has unfortunately died of old age, Captain Sheppard. Siberian hamsters have a lifespan of only two to three years on average. Kiki died at the age of three and a half.”

Julie Lecomte then bent down suddenly and searched for a moment inside her carry-on bag before straightening up while holding a small cage containing a tiny, gray and white hamster.

“But I brought his grandson with me! Say hello to Kiki The Third!”

Amused, Alan grinned while eyeing the hamster, then looked at Gertrude Meserve.

“Can we...”

“General Dows has declared the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION to be a male hamster-friendly environment, Captain.” Cut in Gertrude, smiling herself, before Alan could finish his question.

CHAPTER 15 – GOODBYE, D'ARTAGNAN

11:39 (Paris Time)

Sunday, June 25, 1673 'A'

French Army siege lines

Maastricht, Dutch United Provinces

King Louis XIV, as per his habit, was touring on his horse the siege lines of his army to help sustain the morale of his soldiers, ignoring the occasional cannonball fired in his direction from the fortified walls of the city of Maastricht. A number of his officers, musketeer guards and court nobles also accompanied him on his tour. While the officers and musketeers took the enemy fire in stride, like their king, many of the nobles of his suite only hid with difficulty their anxiety and fear, being more accustomed to the comfort and safety of the court than to the rigors and dangers of a war campaign. One of the rare nobles present to show no fear was funnily enough Philippe, Duke of Orléans and brother of the King. Despite his notorious homosexuality, his personal bravery was not disputed by anyone around the court. Another noble of the suite not showing fear was also the only woman of the group. Dressed in a male riding outfit and armed to the teeth, Nancy, Marquess of Saint-Laurent, made a lot of heads turn among the soldiers not familiar with the King's court. However, her reputation among the royal court of being a very dangerous woman was well established after twenty years of clandestine missions, much of them outside of France. That reputation was however starting to be known in other countries as well, complicating her work to no small degree and forcing her to wear more and more often disguises during her missions. Her last such mission had in fact been a mere two months ago, when she had infiltrated Maastricht under disguise and had spied out the defensive preparations and capabilities of the fortress. She was thus very aware of how tough a nut Maastricht was to crack. She was also painfully aware of what was supposed to happen this very day during the siege but had managed to keep a straight face up to now.

As King Louis and his escort was stopped behind a French artillery battery to inspect it, a royal musketeer riding hard from the front lines halted his horse in front of the monarch and saluted him with his hat.

“Your Majesty, the Duke of Monmouth is about to assault again the enemy defensive works on the southwest side. A company of musketeers will be in support of his attack.”

King Louis, now a 36 year-old man in his prime, nodded with satisfaction at that news: James Scott, Duke of Monmouth and illegitimate son of his ally King Charles II of England, was a brave and capable military leader.

“Who is commanding the musketeers in that assault?”

“Count D’Artagnan is, Your Majesty.”

“Very well. You may return to your unit. Tell the men that I will be watching their assault.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Replied the musketeer, saluting again before turning his horse around and galloping away. King Louis then remounted his horse and looked at his followers.

“To the southwest trenches!”

He then pushed his horse to a gallop, not bothering to look behind him to see if his suite was following him. The members of the suite had however no choice but to follow, as any hesitation on the battlefield in front of their king would mean instant disgrace. Some of the court nobles however had a hard time keeping up, the king being a first class rider who could stay days on horseback without apparent fatigue. The royal troop galloped a good kilometer before stopping and dismounting behind the French and English trenches. Leaving his horse in the hands of a young musketeer, King Louis then marched towards the trenches, followed by his suite and by one musketeer bearing high the King’s colors. As the group was about to climb a small knoll overlooking the trenches and facing the enemy defensive works, a loud concert of war cries and musket shots broke out. The King went to a run at once and stopped after cresting the knoll, his standard bearer and Nancy close behind. As the rest of his followers joined him, many of them short of breath, Louis eyed the bloody but grandiose spectacle of hundreds of men rushing towards the enemy field works under a deluge of bullets and cannonballs. The clouds of white smoke from gunpowder however quickly obscured most of the field works, making it hard to follow the action. As the attack was still in full swing, with heavy shooting from both sides, a musket ball whizzed by the King’s head, while another ball

struck squarely his standard bearer in the head, killing him instantly. Before the royal standard could fall to the ground, Nancy hurried to grab it and raised it again high. The King smiled and nodded to her then.

“Well done, Nancy.”

“It is the least I could do, Your Majesty, especially in view of the valor displayed by the soldiers fighting for you in this assault.”

Both of them then concentrated their attention on the ongoing assault, which was indeed turning into a very bloody affair. Forty minutes later, loud cheers from the assaulting troops told the King that the enemy position was in their hands.

“It is a true honor to command such brave men.” Said proudly Louis. He then watched as soldiers started coming back, carrying dozens of wounded comrades back to safety. Despite the position having been taken, enemy fire from the adjacent works was still heavy, making the task of carrying back the wounded a dangerous one indeed. Louis watched this with obvious sadness. Despite his feelings of personal grandeur, Louis honestly felt for the men who were serving him loyally. Staying visible and in sight of them, even if it meant attracting enemy fire, was the least he could do for them now. A musketeer sub-lieutenant climbed the knoll towards him fifteen minutes later, stopping in front of him and bowing while saluting with his hat.

“Your Majesty, the enemy works are in our hands. The Duke of Monmouth however report that he suffered heavy losses in the assault.”

“What about my musketeers?”

“We are still bringing back wounded men but our company suffered at least seventy men killed and many more wounded. Count D’Artagnan is missing as well, Your Majesty. A squad of men has gone back into the works to find him.”

Struck hard by that news, as D’Artagnan was one of his most loyal soldiers, King Louis eyed Nancy’s reaction. He was not surprised to see her break into tears at once and patted gently her shoulder.

“He is probably only wounded, Nancy. D’Artagnan is a hard man to kill. They will bring him back, you will see.”

“I want to go see by myself, Your Majesty.” Said resolutely Nancy despite her tears. “Permission to go forward.”

The King hesitated only for a second, then nodded once, shocking the men in his entourage.

“Granted! Be careful, Nancy.”

Nancy gave to a musketeer guard the standard she was holding, then ran down the knoll towards the trenches, followed by the sub-lieutenant of the musketeers. The soldiers she passed by once in the trenches couldn't help look with stunned surprise at her but she ignored them, pressing forward towards the freshly captured enemy position. She however braked hard at the sight of a young musketeer whose face was blackened by gunpowder and whose sword was covered with blood.

"Charles, are you alright?"

Her son, a member of the King's musketeers for the last three years, nodded wearily.

"I am a bit shook up but I'm alright, Mother. Father has not returned yet from the enemy works, though."

"I know! I am going forward to find him."

"Then I'm going with you!"

Knowing that trying to stop her son would be futile, Nancy didn't reply to that and resumed her advance, Charles close behind her. They were about to enter the captured bastion when they encountered a group of six musketeers making their way back to the trenches. The six men were carrying the inert body of someone Nancy and Charles knew too well. Despite having known for decades that this would happen, Nancy nearly became hysterical with grief and held up the head of the man she had been loving for 22 years. A musket ball had pierced D'Artagnan's throat and had probably killed him instantly.

"D'Artagnan, my love..." She said between sobs. Her son Charles, despite being as touched as her, then grabbed her left arm.

"Mother, please let them carry his body back to the trenches: balls are still flying thick around the position."

It took a vigorous shake from him to return Nancy to reality. Still holding up D'Artagnan's head, she walked back with the group of musketeers to the French trenches, where the body of the illustrious musketeer was finally laid down behind a cannon position. The musketeers present then removed their hats and bowed their heads, many having tears in their eyes as they grieved their fallen officer with Nancy and Charles. After a minute of silence, Charles looked sadly at Nancy and spoke softly.

"Mother, we will have to go back to the fighting now. I will leave you with Father." With tears still in her eyes, Nancy nodded softly at those words.

"Do your duty to France, Charles. I will care for D'Artagnan in the meantime. Please, be careful, my son."

“I will, Mother.”

Charles and the other musketeers then walked away, heading back into the fighting. Now alone with the body of her lover, Nancy took out a handkerchief and her water flask and cleaned as best she could the blood smearing D'Artagnan's neck and throat. She then gave him an ultimate kiss.

“Goodbye, my beloved D'Artagnan. History will remember you forever. I will remember you forever.”

CHAPTER 16 – THE PARIS COMMUNE

08:16 (Paris Time)

Thursday, February 23, 1871 'A'

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles V, Le Marais

Paris, France

"Please, Pierre, stop arguing and just go!" Insisted Jeanne anxiously. "I need you and Suzan to escort the children to London for their safety."

"But you?" Objected Pierre Laplante, officially her uncle and employee but being in reality the father of Jeanne/Nancy 'B'. "It won't do any good for you to stay here in Paris. You already had to evacuate your foundation employees and your Red Cross staff out of Paris."

"You know that I will be needed here more than ever in the days and weeks to come, Pierre. However, I won't be able to help around Paris if I have to worry about the children. Go to my residence in Belgrave Square and wait for me there with the kids." Not letting her father argue further, Jeanne looked up at Luc Rémillard, her coach driver, who sat up in the driver's seat of the big coach, alongside Michel d'Angelo, her stable boy.

"DRIVE OFF, LUC! GET THEM SAFELY TO LONDON!"

"I WILL, MADAME!" Shouted back the graying ex-legionnaire before urging his two horses, making the coach roll. Jeanne, near tears, waved a last goodbye to her children inside the coach, fifteen year-old William and Louis and Anne, both ten years old now. Her children waved back, along with Suzan Laplante, Nancy's mother. Jeanne's personal assistant, Li Mai, gently patted her shoulder as they watched the coach drive away.

"They will be alright, Jeanne. You did the right thing by sending them to London."

Jeanne gave a despondent look to her faithful assistant. Li Mai was by now a mature but still beautiful Chinese woman of 38 and, apart from having being her personal assistant, hostess and secret lover for over 23 years, was as well an official Red Cross worker and nurse. Jeanne was herself officially 41 years old but was still as vigorous

and fit as ever. Both had however lost weight in the last months, due to the siege of Paris imposed by the Prussian Army, siege that had caused widespread famine in the city during the last five months.

"I hope that they make it safely through the Prussian lines, Mai. You should have gone with them, though."

"You know that I will never abandon you, Jeanne, and neither would your other employees." Firmly replied the tiny Chinese woman. Jeanne looked at the group formed by her eight other residence employees, now all in their forties or fifties, who stood with their spouses in the courtyard of the mansion. She had to swallow hard the ball stuck in her throat before she could speak to them.

"Thank you all for staying with me, my friends. God knows that I would have preferred to see you safe and out of Paris by now."

"You already took care of sending to safety our own children and grand-children, madame." Replied soberly François Picard, her butler. "You did plenty for us in the last 24 years and it is only just that you could count on us in these hard times. Just tell us what you need to be done."

Jeanne was silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts. The war declared so imprudently against Prussia by Emperor Napoleon The Third, thanks to a calculated insult by Prussian Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck, had turned quickly into an utter disaster for France. After a number of bloody and very costly battles for both sides, battles in which Jeanne and her Red Cross volunteers had done their best to alleviate the suffering of both French and Prussian soldiers, the Prussian Army had laid siege to Paris last September, while Emperor Napoleon had been forced to abdicate and was now being held in Prussia.

"While an armistice has been officially signed last month, I expect more bloodshed to come in the next months. You all know as well as me how inflamed the popular sentiment of the people of Paris is concerning the defeatist attitude of the new government of Adolphe Thiers. That popular ire could very well overflow and cause more fighting. The only thing I will ask of you is not to listen to the hotheads in the city and to not take arms against either the Prussians or the troops of the new government. You know that I am no coward when it comes to war but I can recognize a lost cause when I see one : there would be no sense for any of you to get killed now for nothing. What we will concentrate on instead is to help the little people of Paris through the next few months, by treating the wounded and sick and sheltering the children who have

nowhere else to go. There will be more privations and hardship to come, along with much tears, but I will urge you to act with peace and compassion, not with hate or violence. The first order of the day will be to restock our supplies of food and medicine, now that the armistice has loosened the Prussian siege around Paris. Mai will direct the buying of food, while I will take care of finding more medicine. Rosette and Constance, you will prepare our two upper rooms in the Southeast Wing as shelters for young refugees. Let's get to work, my friends!"

10:48 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, March 1, 1871 'A'

Avenue des Champs-Élysées, Paris

Despite having known all along that this would happen, Jeanne still felt intense bitterness as she stood with a few other Parisians on the sidewalks of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, watching Prussian troops parading down the avenue, complete with military band. Most of Paris was closed for business today, while the streets were nearly empty, all in protest at what was seen in the city as a cowardly surrender to the Prussians and the abandonment of the Parisians by the new government and parliament, which was composed mostly of monarchists opposed to the socialist views of most of the Parisian population. This and further moves to come in the next weeks by the government of Adolphe Thiers were bound to bring the popular sentiment to the boiling point. Sighing with frustration, Jeanne turned her back to the Prussian soldiers and walked away, hoping to find open an apothecary that would be open today, so that she could stock up on some critical medications and medicinal herbs.

06 :30 (Paris Time)

Saturday, March 18, 1871 'A'

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles V

Paris

Li Mai woke up with a startle in her bed: three loud detonations had just reverberated through Paris. The city had been relatively quiet in the last few days and the Prussian soldiers had withdrawn outside of Paris two weeks ago, so those

detonations, which sounded like cannon shots, could well announce more trouble. Jumping out of bed and going to one of the dormer windows of her room in the attic level of Jeanne's residence, she looked outside, trying to see some smoke or anything else unusual. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, Mai put on a robe and went out in the attic's hallway, using the nearby staircase to go down to the upper floor. She was about to get to Jeanne's bedroom door and knock on it when Jeanne got out, still in a night gown covered by a robe.

"Jeanne, did you hear those cannon shots?"

Jeanne nodded, her face showing concern.

"Yes, I did and they probably mean more trouble and bloodshed to come. Since we are up now, we might as well start taking care of preparing breakfast for our young tenants."

Mai nodded her head and accompanied her down to the kitchen, on street level. They were presently sheltering the 37 young tenants of a girls orphanage sponsored by Jeanne. Their previous residence had been heavily damaged by fire following street riots last month and Jeanne had taken no time to relocate the girls, aged from two to twelve, in her townhouse. Thankfully, her residence had no lack of spare rooms, especially since the children of her own servants and employees were now all grown up and had moved out years ago. In a way, caring for all those little girls had done a lot to take their minds off the bloody events of the recent past.

The children had been fed breakfast and were now attending two separate classes given by Jeanne and Mai when rifle shots were heard in the distance in mid morning. Despite of that, Jeanne continued with her lesson in mathematics to the older girls as if nothing had happened, not wanting to worry her young pupils. When time came for lunch, she brought her group to the big, luxurious dining room and put them in the care of Leila Benchetrit, her assistant cook, then went down the grand staircase of the residence. She was putting on a cape and a hat in the vestibule when Mai shouted to her from up the staircase.

"Jeanne, where are you going?"

"I'm going to see how things are going in town, Mai. Don't worry about me : I will be back by supper time."

Not giving time to Mai to protest, Jeanne then went out in the tunnel of the main gate and walked out at a quick step. She went up to the Rue Saint Antoine and turned left on

it, heading towards the city hall. She was hoping to find people who would have seen or heard about the events of the morning. In that she was not disappointed, as she saw in the popular market near the city hall a woman giving a fiery speech to an assembled crowd from the top of a barrel. Activating first the micro camera hidden in her hat, Jeanne then approached the crowd, posting herself in the back ranks and listening on to the speaker, a thin woman in her early forties. Jeanne actually recognized her quickly, as Louise Michel would become well known in history as a passionate socialist, hardcore anarchist and ardent feminist.

“...we, the women of Paris, went to the support of our national guardsmen and stopped the government troops from taking away the cannons parked in Montmartre, the same cannons we the people of Paris paid for so that we could fight those damn Prussians. And what did those government troops do then? They shot at us, that's what! We shot back and captured their general! Many of his soldiers then saw how wrong their orders were and joined us, refusing to further shoot on the people. Adolphe Thiers and his gutless government are responsible for this outrage and should feel the wrath of us Parisians. I say : let's throw him out of Paris or, better, pass judgment on him and make him pay for his crimes against the people. We, the Commune of Paris, have to take control of our good city and put down this criminal government.”

The crowd cheered at those words, visibly outraged by the actions of the government troops. As Louise Michel continued her incendiary speech and as Jeanne kept listening and secretly filming her, a woman near her who wore old, used clothes, started eyeing with suspicion her fine coat and hat and her expensive pair of earrings. The woman finally shouted out loud while pointing Jeanne with an accusing finger.

“WHO ARE YOU, TO COME LISTENING TO US IN YOUR FINE BOURGEOIS CLOTHES? A SPY OF THE GOVERNMENT? LOOK AT HER, CITIZENS!”

Jeanne suddenly found herself the center of attention of a less than friendly crowd, with men moving to cut her retreat off. Louise Michel, her attention now firmly on Jeanne, pointed her from the top of her barrel.

“BRING THAT WOMAN TO ME, SO THAT WE COULD SEE WHO SHE IS!”

Knowing that trying to run away would only complicate things, and with many men around her carrying knives and even pistols, Jeanne did not resist when men pushed her towards Louise Michel, forcing her to stop in front of the anarchist leader. The latter, who wore both a pistol and a knife at her belt and carried a Chassepot rifle across her back, jumped down from her barrel and eyed Jeanne up and down with visible antipathy.

"What fine clothes you have, madame, when most of the people of Paris are down to rags. Who are you?"

Despite being rightly worried, Jeanne kept an appearance of assurance and calm as she answered in a firm, strong voice.

"My name is Lady Jeanne Smythe-d'Orléans. I..."

Her name seemingly stung Louise Michel, who cut her off in an indignant tone.

"A d'Orléans and an aristocrat? And what the hell were you doing here? Spying on us for the monarchist government?"

"I am no spy and I have no sympathy towards Adolphe Thiers and his government, miss. I am the Paris representative of the French Red Cross society and I make my business of caring for the wounded and the sick in war, irrespective of the side they are on."

Louise Michel gave a derisive look at her fine dress and cape before looking her in the eyes.

"And you pretend to treat wounded men while wearing such fine clothes, Lady Jeanne?"

"Not right now, but I treated plenty of wounded and sick men on the battlefields of Weissenberg, Wörth and Sedan. Presently, I am sheltering the girls of an orphanage in my residence. I simply came out to find out if anything could threaten those girls."

The mention of the orphan girls seemed to calm down somewhat the firebrand.

"A fine story, madame...if it is true. LET'S GO TO HER RESIDENCE AND SEE IF SHE IS TELLING THE TRUTH!"

On a sign from Louise Michel, two big men armed with knives stepped forward and grabbed each one of Jeanne's arms. Michel then smiled ferociously to her.

"Show us the way, Lady Jeanne!"

"There is no point in holding me like this : my residence on Charles V is well known and my neighbors will vouch for my sympathy towards the little people of Paris."

"We will see! Let her go, men, but keep a close eye on her while she guides us."

Closely escorted by Louise Michel and four men and followed by a crowd of at least a hundred people, Jeanne had no choice but to retrace her steps, turning on Charles V twenty minutes later. As they approached the main gate of her residence, Jeanne turned to face Louise Michel and spoke firmly to her.

"I am ready to let you and a few men follow me inside, so that you could see that I am who I say I am, but I will not allow this crowd in and let it loot or burn it down, like what happened already to too many places in Paris."

"And how will you stop us from all going in, if we wanted to?" Asked sarcastically the female anarchist. Jeanne drilled her in the eyes, her voice cold.

"You will have to kill me first. If you do that, then you will have all the people of this district turning on you. As I said, my charitable works are well known here."

Surprised by her aplomb, Louise Michel stared at Jeanne for a moment, then reluctantly nodded her head.

"Very well! I wouldn't want anyway to scare your little orphans. Jean, Marcel, you come with me inside. The rest will stay out in front of the residence. Pierre, if you hear any shot from inside, then take the place and burn it down."

"Understood, Louise!"

By then, Jeanne could see the worried face of Li Mai, watching her and the surrounding crowd from a window of the upper floor. Making a reassuring gesture to her first, Jeanne then took out her house keys from one pocket of her cape and unlocked the pedestrian door of the main gate, pushing it opened and inviting in Louise Michel and her two bodyguards. Then stepping inside herself, she left the door opened : closing and locking it would only raise the suspicions of the already agitated crowd, while it would not resist very long against such a large group of people. Jeanne next faced Louise Michel.

"You are now in the Hôtel de Brinvilliers, my personal residence and the headquarters of the Paris Red Cross and of the d'Orléans Social Foundation, a charitable organization I own and lead."

"The d'Orléans Foundation, you said?" Said the one named Marcel. "My sister got educated at a school sponsored by your foundation that took in children too poor to pay."

Louise Michel, a teacher before she became an activist, softened up noticeably on hearing that and looked at Jeanne, who was still calm and composed.

"It seems that you indeed have a good reputation, Lady Jeanne. Lead on!"

Entering the vestibule housing the grand staircase, Jeanne led her three followers up the stairs, only to bump in a concerned Li Mai waiting on the upper floor level.

"Jeanne, is everything alright? Why is that crowd waiting outside?"

"Don't worry, Mai : I am only showing to these people that we are simply engaged in charitable work."

On her part, Louise Michel eyed Mai with obvious curiosity and surprise.

“An Oriental woman? That is not very common in Paris.”

“Li Mai is my personal assistant and also a Red Cross volunteer nurse. She is an orphan that I found and saved on the side of the Seine, when she was a teenager. I will now show you our little tenants. Where are the girls right now, Mai?”

“Playing in the ballroom, Jeanne.”

“Then, come with us to the ballroom, Mai.”

Louise Michel, unlike her two bodyguards, did not remark out loud about how luxurious and comfortable the residence was as their group followed Jeanne and Mai through the reception lounge, then the dining room, where Rosette Sans-Souçis and Constance Demers were busy cleaning up the covers from the girls' lunch. The Haitian maid froze on seeing the armed men following Jeanne.

“Is everything alright, Jeanne?”

Louise Michel raised an ear at that : for a maid to call her aristocrat employer by her first name was unheard of. She thus watched carefully the attitude and body language of the two servants as Jeanne reassured the black maid.

“Don't worry, Rosette : these people are simply visiting briefly the residence.”

The two maids still followed with worried eyes the group as it entered the vast ballroom. There, in the twelve by ten meter room, they found dozens of young girls playing with toys or looking at illustrated books. That sight seemed to finally convince Louise Michel, who smiled on seeing the children and then faced Jeanne.

“You told me the truth, Lady Jeanne. I will thus tell my comrades to leave you in peace.”

“I thank you for your comprehension, miss. Let me guide you back to the main entrance.”

Retracing their steps, Jeanne led her three visitors to the main gate, where she closed and locked the pedestrian door behind them before looking at Mai and letting out a sigh of relief.

“Hell, that was a close call! That crowd could have easily burned down this place or could have hanged or shot me as a suspected government spy.”

“So, what is going on in Paris today, Jeanne?”

“Government troops tried to grab the cannons of the National Guard kept in Montmartre, but were repelled. This could announce a lot of bad news for the weeks to come.”

The next days and weeks proved Jeanne right in the eyes of her employees. The evening of that same day, Adolphe Thiers and his government, scared for its safety, fled Paris to go establish themselves in nearby Versailles. On March 28, the Council of the Commune established itself in the now deserted city hall and soon published a manifesto proclaiming the Commune and its socialist ideals and also vowed to resist the monarchist government of Adolphe Thiers as well as the Prussians. On May 10, the Treaty of Frankfurt was signed by the Adolphe Thiers government, ceding the Alsace and most of the Lorraine to Prussia and also promising to pay five billion francs in war reparations. The news of that treaty positively enraged the Parisians and the leaders of the Commune, who could however do little about it, the city being surrounded still by Prussian troops and by French government troops now dedicated to crushing the Parisian rebellion.

07:31 (Paris Time)

Sunday, May 21, 1871 ‘A’

Hôtel de Brinvilliers, 12 Rue Charles V

Paris

“What was that we just heard?” Asked Charlotte Truffaut as she looked outside, crowding the windows of Jeanne’s private study with the other servants, Mai and Jeanne. The latter took on her to answer the question from her cook as they kept listening to the intense firefight that could be heard from the Southwest.

“That staccato was from a machine gun, a weapon that can fire hundreds of rounds per minute. It seems that the government troops have succeeded in breaking through the walls of the city around the Saint-Cloud Gate. This could very well turn into a very bloody day.”

“Do you think that the National Guard will be able to repulse that attack, Jeanne?” Asked anxiously Marie Valentin, one of the maids. Jeanne shook slowly her head then.

“Not in the long run, Marie. It is too poorly equipped and trained and has limited ammunition supplies. As for the city militias, their actual military value is low, being undisciplined and poorly led. The fight will be hard and bloody, but I am afraid that the government will win this battle in the end.”

“And...then?”

“Then, you can expect only summary justice from the government for the people of Paris.” Gloomily predicted Jeanne. “I am not even sure that my Red Cross armband or flag would protect me if I went to the help of the wounded over there. My best hope is that my Red Cross volunteers who are now outside of Paris will be permitted to approach the battle lines from behind the advancing government troops. Even that will however leave the federated forces of Paris with little to no medical support.”

What Jeanne didn't say was that, as much as she would have wanted to help as a nurse now, she knew about the arbitrary executions and mass arrests that were going to happen in the next few days. She had now spent 25 years building up her charitable foundation, which was after all the primordial reason she was even here in the 19th Century. To get killed now would throw away all those years of work and could as well mean the end of the d'Orléans Social Foundation, with potentially serious repercussions on the history of the decades to come. In contrast, the few wounded that she could save now risked being simply executed by government troops once captured or, at best, being sent to jail or be deported. She also had five more reasons to be cautious: her children. On the other hand, if she stayed alive through this, then her foundation could do something to help the survivors. As bitter as this was for her, she was going to have to sit tight and play safe through this tragedy.

13 :09 (Paris Time)

Thursday, May 25, 1871 'A'

Hôtel de Brinvilliers

“KEEP YOUR HEADS DOWN!” Shouted Jeanne to her male employees, preventing them from trying to look outside through the windows of her private study in order to observe the violent firefight happening on their street. The government forces had been advancing through Paris for more than four days now and had steadily pushed back the national guardsmen and militiamen of the federated forces despite their desperate resistance. Thousands had already died on both sides but the government

troops were now fighting to take the Saint-Antoine District, where Jeanne's residence was situated.

As the rifle fire slacked somewhat, Jeanne raised her head for a cautious look down the street. She was then able to see that the line of government soldiers advancing along Charles V Street had been able to break through the hastily erected militia barricade blocking the junction with Saint-Paul street and was now past her residence's main entrance. The militiamen that had held the barricade were now lying around on the pavement or were fleeing, pursued by soldiers. She then saw at least one militiaman moving slightly as he lay besides the barricade. Something snapped inside Jeanne at that sight and she got up at a crouch to go open one of the cabinets of her study. Watched by her increasingly alarmed employees, she took out her first aid kit, a backpack full of bandages and her Red Cross armbands, slipping one around each of her forearms. Her gardener and handyman, Pierre Brunelle, finally protested to her as she was shouldering her backpack and first aid kit.

"You're not going to go outside now, Jeanne? It is still dangerous out there."

"There is at least one man in need of help out there, Pierre. I just can't sit and watch all this anymore without doing something, especially this close to my house."

"Then I will go with you!" Volunteered Li Mai, getting up from under one window. "I am a qualified nurse and you will need help over there."

Jeanne hesitated for a moment, furiously tempted to order her to stay inside, but she finally nodded her head reluctantly.

"Very well, Mai, but make sure to put your Red Cross armbands on first."

Mai took no time to obey her, also taking a second first aid kit bag from the cabinet. Before leaving the study with Mai, Jeanne pointed at her gardener.

"Pierre, you come down with us to make sure that the main gate is locked back behind us."

"Yes, Jeannel!"

Going down the main staircase, the trio was soon inside the tunnel formed by the carriage gate. Going to the pedestrian door that was part of the left gate door, Jeanne pulled open the steel bolts locking it and opened the door, stepping out in the street. Mai followed closely behind her, with Pierre closing the door and locking it immediately afterwards. Jeanne ran to the man she had seen move on the ground near the

barricade and, kneeling besides him, examined him quickly while smiling in encouragement to him.

“Don’t worry, my friend : I am here to treat your wounds.”

The young man, who had been shot in the right upper torso and had a perforated lung, looked at her as she took out a bandage and covered his entry wound. He however was unable to speak then, pink foam coming out of his mouth. Helped by Mai, Jeanne cautiously turned the wounded on his side, so that they could also cover the exit wound and stop the lung from collapsing. Once the bandage was in place, Jeanne then made the man breathe the vapors from a few drops of chloroform, using a special mesh mask for that purpose. With the wounded now calmed down and out of immediate danger, Jeanne went to inspect the other militiamen lying around the barricade. She found another man alive, with a deep grazing shot wound to the head that had knocked him out and was bleeding profusely. Jeanne was in the process of applying a bandage to the head of the man when a rifle shot rang out from nearby, making her jerk her head up. To her utter horror, she saw Mai, a stunned look on her face, drop to her knees before falling flat on her face against the pavement.

“MAI, NO!”

Leaving the wounded militiaman for the moment, Jeanne hurried over Mai, who was now inert. She then saw that a bullet had pierced Mai’s back near the heart area. Now nearly mad with despair, she gently turned around the Chinese woman on her back . Mai’s eyes were already starting to lose their focus as she spoke with difficulty in a weak voice.

“I...had a good life, thanks to you. My only regr...”

Her eyes then rolled upwards and she let out a last breath before becoming still, with her face turning white quickly. Unable to believe or accept that this was happening, Jeanne burst into tears as she held the head of her now dead friend and lover.

“No, Mai, not you, please!”

She was still mourning over Mai when a harsh male voice shouted at her.

“YOU! HANDS UP OR I WILL SHOOT!”

Now totally uncaring about her own safety, Jeanne looked up with hatred at the group of four government soldiers now approaching her with their rifles pointed at her.

“YOU BASTARDS! YOU JUST KILLED A RED CROSS NURSE!”

“I don’t know what is your Red Cross and I don’t care!” Replied one of the soldiers who seemed in command of the group. “Get up now and raise your hands!”

Realizing that the soldier would have no qualms about shooting her right now, Jeanne reluctantly got up slowly, her hands high, while staring hard at the soldier.

“Red Cross volunteers are protected by international law under the Geneva Convention. We care for the sick and wounded of war, irrespective of their side.”

“And you could be as well one of those anarchist women who have been setting fire to half of Paris during the last few days. Come this way, quickly!”

One of the soldiers then went around Jeanne, to then push her forward brutally with the butt of his rifle.

“You heard him, bitch! March!”

Forced to abandon behind Mai’s body as well as her first aid kit, Jeanne was marched down the street towards the Henry IV Boulevard and the Place de la Bastille, where a firefight could be heard. The group soon joined up with another group of soldiers guarding about a dozen dejected-looking prisoners, a mix of national guardsmen, militiamen and civilians. There was as well one mature woman in civilian clothes in the lot. As Jeanne was pushed to join the other prisoners, an officer passing by shouted at the sergeant in charge of the group.

“SERGEANT, WE NEED MORE MEN AT THE PLACE DE LA BASTILLE. GET RID OF THOSE PRISONERS AND THEN LEAD YOUR MEN TO THE FRONTLINE.”

“YES SIR!” Replied the NCO before shouting at his prisoners. “ALL OF YOU, FORM A LINE AGAINST THAT WALL! MOVE!”

Despite understanding at once what was to follow, the prisoners didn’t dare resist the soldiers, who had their bayonets fixed to their rifles. Jeanne followed as well, knowing that protesting would only get her killed more quickly. Right now, the shock and grief from the death of Li Mai still overwhelmed her, paralyzing her thoughts. This was the fourth time that she had lost a cherished lover. First had been Pierre Alphonse d’Orléans, dead from a tropical fever in the Guadeloupe in 1847. Then, Gordon Smythe followed, killed during the Indian Uprising in 1857. Next to die was d’Artagnan, killed at the siege of Maastricht in 1673. Now, sweet Mai was dead because of her. She had been working hard and risked her life repeatedly for decades so that she could help others and alleviate some of the suffering and misery afflicting this world, but had been repaid instead with those personal tragedies. She was not sure that she really wanted to survive this last loss. She thus meekly put her back against the house wall designated by the soldiers and faced them as they raised their rifles. Some senior officer galloping by on his horse, followed by a number of staff officers and aides, abruptly stopped his

horse behind the soldiers as their sergeant was about to give the order to fire. After one shocked look towards Jeanne, the officer, a colonel, shouted urgently to the sergeant.

“HOLD YOUR FIRE! LOWER YOUR RIFLES!”

The colonel then dismounted as the soldiers lowered their rifles, confused. Going past the soldiers, the senior officer walked straight to Jeanne, who suddenly recognized him.

“Colonel Lettelier?”

“Lady Jeanne, why were you put in this lineup?”

“I tried to administer first aid to some wounded militiamen but soldiers shot my assistant nurse dead and took me prisoner near my residence. I was then marched to here and made to join those other prisoners.”

Lettelier looked briefly at the other prisoners lined up against the wall, then at the Red Cross armbands she wore.

“Were you wearing your Red Cross armbands then, Lady Jeanne?”

“Yes, I was, Colonel, and so did my nurse. The soldiers who shot her said that they didn’t know what the Red Cross was when I protested.”

A flash of anger showed on the colonel’s face, who then glanced quickly at the sergeant in charge of the firing squad before looking back at Jeanne, speaking in a soft voice to her.

“You and your Red Cross volunteers saved many of my wounded men at the battle of Wörth, Lady Jeanne. I am also not about to let my own soldiers violate the laws of war and the Geneva Convention. You are free to go. Please accept my sincere condolences for the loss of your nurse.”

“What about those other prisoners, Colonel? Are you going to let them be summarily executed like this?”

Lettelier debated her question in his mind for a moment, having probably received some radical orders concerning the handling of prisoners. He finally nodded his head and shouted at his sergeant.

“SERGEANT, LADY JEANNE HERE IS A NON-COMBATTANT PROTECTED UNDER THE GENEVA CONVENTION AND IS NOT TO BE TOUCHED. SHE IS FREE TO GO. AS FOR THE OTHER PRISONERS, LEAD THEM TO OUR NEAREST PRISONER HOLDING POINT. YOU ARE NOT TO EXECUTE THEM SUMMARILY.”

“But, sir, Major Bellefeuille...”

“SCREW MAJOR BELLEFEUILLE! DO AS I SAY, SERGEANT!”

As the chastised NCO had his men march the other prisoners away, Jeanne nodded soberly at Lettelier.

“Thank you, Colonel. You were always a true gentleman.”

“I could not allow such a national heroine as you to be killed like this : it would have been a grave injustice and a great loss for France. Again, I am sorry about your nurse. I wish you luck during the next days, which may well be very bloody indeed.”

“I realize that too much, unfortunately, Colonel. Thank you again for saving me.”

Walking back at a tired pace towards her residence, her mind still clouded with grief, Jeanne got in sight of her townhouse in time to see four of her employees carrying gently the body of Li Mai towards the opened main gate. One of them, Rosette Sans-Souçis, ran at once to her, shouting nearly hysterically.

“JEANNE, MY GOD! ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

Jeanne didn't answer her at first, letting the maid hug her frantically before speaking to her.

“I am, Rosette. An officer recognized me and ordered that I be released. Unfortunately, poor Mai wasn't as lucky as me. I never should have gone out like this.”

“You did so in order to help others, as you did so often, Jeanne. Mai died bravely for a worthy cause.”

Tears reappeared on Jeanne's face as she watched the body of her friend being carried inside her residence.

“If only I could have died in her place.”

CHAPTER 17 – MARS OR BUST

09:29 (Paris Time)

Saturday, March 6, 1971 'C'

Air France counter, passengers terminal

Le Bourget Airport, Paris

France

Sergei Petrov walked at a vigorous step while pushing his baggage cart towards the Air France counter, where a dozen other prospective passengers were already lined up. Following with some effort while pushing his own baggage cart, Nikolai Chuikov finally had to implore his comrade in an halting voice.

“Could you cut your pace, Sergei? I am not young anymore.”

Sergei, a small but sturdily built man in his forties with Eurasian features, twisted his head and smiled but cut his pace nonetheless.

“And I am supposed to be young, Nikolai?”

The astronomer sighed with exasperation at his too physically fit colleague scientist while still pushing his cart.

“Well, I spend my days looking at stars while sitting at a telescope station, not as a geologist roaming the Siberian hills and forests.”

“Your loss, Nikolai! Fresh air would do you good.”

A greying man pushing a baggage cart and followed closely by a pretty young woman then cut Sergei's path to insert himself in the lineup, prompting a protest from the geologist in his fair French.

“Hey, can't you wait your turn, mister?”

The man was about to shoot a reply when he looked with wide eyes at Nikolai Chuikov and exclaimed himself in French.

“NIKOLAI! What are you doing here?”

“Trying to take a plane, like you, Jean.” Replied Nikolai in a sarcastic tone. “What made you leave your astronomical observatory in the Alps this time?”

“The promise of an even better observation point. And you? Where are you heading?”

“To Los Angeles, along with my friend Sergei. From there, we are supposed to be transported to the Vandenberg Base of the American Military Space Command.”

“You too?” Replied a surprised Jean Bertrand. “Me and Miss Louise Morin are also heading there. Don’t tell me that you and your colleague here were also invited by the Americans to participate in their Mars mission.”

“We were!” Said Nikolai before smiling to the woman following Bertrand while carrying a small bag. “Are you also an astronomer, miss?”

The brunette, who was in her mid thirties and was certainly pretty enough, smiled to the Soviet astronomer but shook her head.

“Hardly! I am a psychologist and I spend my time studying the dirty minds of men rather than looking at points of light.”

Sergei Petrov grinned at that reply.

“Then, it will be a true pleasure to have you examine my mind, Miss Morin. Let me present myself: Sergei Petrov, geologist and ladies’ man.”

“Please excuse his manners, miss.” Said Nikolai Chuikov. “He’s a Siberian.” Louise Morin eyed the short but sturdy and fit geologist and gave him a warm smile.

“I never interviewed a Siberian before. I guess that I will have plenty of time to do that while we are on our way to Mars.”

“Well, we better join the lineup now if we want to be on our way.” Reminded Jean Bertrand, who pushed his cart in the back of the lineup, quickly imitated by the three others.

Getting their first class boarding passes, paid by the American Military Space Command, and also checking in their heavy baggage, the four scientists proceeded next to a large passenger waiting lounge already half full. Putting his carry-on bag first on one of the benches of the lounge, Sergei then went to the large bay windows giving a view of the jet airliner parked outside in front of their lounge. The Siberian geologist admired for a long moment the Air France Boeing 717, an aircraft type which had been in service for eighteen years but which still had no equivalent in the USSR. The Tupolev 16 that he and Nikolai had flown on from Moscow to Paris had maybe one third of the carrying capacity of the Boeing 717, was slower and had much less range, on top of being noisy and uncomfortable. To the left and in the background, he could see as well a row of Convair MERCURY medium range airliners and a few more Boeing 717 wearing the liveries of various airlines, as much European ones as American ones. One

lonely British Vickers VC-20 could be seen on the tarmac, a representative of a dying breed, as most British aircraft manufacturers and airlines had gone bankrupt over a decade ago, victims of a severely declining British economy and prestige. American-made jet airliners had been dominating the air transport industry worldwide for the good part of two decades, all thanks to the same young woman who had pushed hard to have some Soviet scientists included on the Mars mission despite howling protests from many politicians and media pundits in the United States. All in all, Sergei couldn't wait to meet that Ingrid Dows, who was also universally known as 'God's General'.

Even though he had heard about the huge capacity of the Boeing 717, Sergei was astounded by the amount of people that boarded the plane with his group, with over 400 persons going in the airliner. Going to the lower forward cabin that housed the first class section, he was more than pleased by the plush, wide reclining seat awaiting him.

"Such decadent capitalist comfort for a simple man like me. My old army political officer would have choked with indignation on seeing this."

"Well, you might as well profit from that decadent capitalist comfort while you can, Sergei." Replied Louise Morin, who took the seat next to him. Nikolai and Jean took the two seats facing them from across a folding common table and found out that their seats, apart from being very comfortable, could slide forward or back on rails thanks to small electric motors and could also be reclined electrically. With their group of four seats situated between the two aisles of the cabin, that made access to their seats very easy. Settling in, the four scientists stayed mostly quiet until their plane rolled away from the terminal, then took off from the main runway of Le Bourget. As their plane was climbing to its cruising altitude, Louise Morin smiled to Sergei and Nikolai.

"So, how come that two Soviet scientists were invited by the Americans to be part of the first manned mission to Mars?"

Nikolai Chuikov, who was better connected politically than Sergei Petrov, weighed carefully his words as he answered her.

"I think that we owe it to General Dows. I heard that she faced some rather vocal opposition in Washington to her idea of having an international crew, and even more to inviting Soviets on top of that. I have to say that she possesses an openness of mind that is very refreshing indeed."

“And your bosses in Moscow? I know that they have up to now refused to send Soviet scientists as guest researchers aboard the American space station CONSTITUTION.”

“Well, they did that because we have our own space station, MIR, in orbit. They couldn't claim the glory of having a space station and then send people to a rival space station, no?”

“Hum, I see your point there. What about the ship we will use to go to Mars? The Americans only told us that it was being completed in orbit at the CONSTITUTION space station. I am afraid that I am rather ignorant about space technology and don't know how such a ship would look like.”

Nikolai bent forward to answer here in a low voice, conspiratorial tone.

“That is something that many in Moscow have been wondering about. I had the chance to speak with a few leaders of our space program after I was selected for the mission. They told me that a number of nuclear rocket engines and large tanks full of liquid hydrogen have been sent to orbit in the last few months, probably to propel the Mars ship.”

“Nuclear engines?” Said Louise, misgiving clear in her tone. “Isn't that going to be a high radiation hazard for us?”

“With a competent space manager like General Dows, I am sure that the radiation hazard has been minimized as much as possible, notably by shielding. Dows is not the kind to put her space crews at unnecessary risks.”

“What about the second giant space station the Americans launched in orbit just last month?” Asked Jean Bertrand. “It is said to be an identical twin to the CONSTITUTION. Why would the Americans need two such space stations in orbit?”

“Actually, I can easily see the usefulness of that second space station, which is called the USS LIBERTY, I believe.” Replied Nikolai. “In the more than two years that the USS CONSTITUTION has been operational in orbit, the amount of astronomical and Earth observation done from it has been staggering, yet it never was able to satisfy all the requests from the scientific community around the World. From what a German colleague who worked on the CONSTITUTION told me, the two astronomical telescopes of the space station have been in use without respite, with teams of astronomers working round the clock in consecutive shifts. The observation schedule is so tight that it is said that some astronomers nearly went to blows while arguing about the priority of their pet projects. Believe me, Jean, that second space station will be plenty useful.”

Their conversation was then interrupted politely by an Air France stewardess pushing a cart.

"Excuse me, lady and gentlemen. Would you like some Champagne? It is included in the price of your ticket."

"More decadent capitalist luxury for you, Sergei." Said jokingly Louise Morin before smiling to the stewardess. "We will have some Champagne with pleasure, miss." The smiling stewardess then filled and passed to the four scientists flutes full of bubbly Champagne, then went to serve other passengers. Louise Morin raised her glass high and looked at her three male companions.

"Let's drink to our future success on Mars, my friends."

"To success on Mars!" Said the four of them before taking a sip of their Champagne.

13:48 (California Time)

Arrival Hall, international passenger terminal

Los Angeles International Airport

California, U.S.A.

Despite the very comfortable conditions in their first class section, the two French and two Soviet scientists felt numb from their time zones jumping as they lined up to exit their airliner through a mobile gate tunnel. With their carry-on luggage in hand, they then took place in one of the lineups of passengers waiting to be processed at the customs counters. The first to walk to a custom counter was Sergei Petrov, who was a bit nervous about the welcome he would get: despite having been theoretically at peace with the United States for sixteen years now, the Soviet Union still had a frosty relationship with its main rival for World power, with vigilant fingers never far from the nuclear button. The customs and immigration officer who took his passport examined it carefully before raising his nose and looking at Sergei with a neutral expression.

"What is the purpose of your visit to the United States, Mister Petrov?"

"I came on the invitation of your Military Space Command, in order to participate in a space mission."

"Oh!" Said the customs agent, apparently interested by Sergei's answer. "And where will you be heading, if I may ask? To the Moon?"

Taking a conspiratorial expression, Sergei bent forward and answered in a low voice.

“To Mars!”

The agent, showing surprise at first, then nodded his head and stamped Sergei's passport before giving it back to him.

“Here you are, sir. Good luck on your space trip.”

Relieved, Sergei thanked the agent and walked past the reception booth, stopping a bit further to wait for his three companions. Once they were all through, without apparent problems, they went down to the baggage carroussels hall under the arrival hall to retrieve their luggage. Thankfully, all of their bags showed up after a few minutes and they loaded them on two carts before proceeding to the customs inspection counters. To their surprise, they saw a young woman wearing a United States Air Force light blue uniform holding high a sign saying ‘MILITARY SPACE COMMAND GUESTS WELCOME’ and standing besides one of the counters. Sergei smiled on seeing the tall and very beautiful redhead holding the sign.

“Aaah, that's the kind of welcome I like.”

His smile of anticipated pleasure as he pushed his baggage cart towards the military woman changed progressively to stunned surprise as he got closer and could see her rank insignias: she was wearing the four stars of a full general! The three others, equally surprised, stopped with Sergei in front of the woman, who gave them a sparkling smile and spoke in a youthful voice, using French.

“Welcome to California, lady and gentlemen. I am General Ingrid Dows and I came to welcome you and bring you to Vandenberg Space Command Base.”

She then repeated her welcome in fluent Russian. Sergei couldn't help be hypnotized by her youthful beauty, as she appeared to be no more than maybe twenty years old.

“But, you are supposed to be in your forties, General.” He said in his more than decent but heavily accented English. Ingrid made a disarming smile at that remark.

“I am officially 47 years old but, since a certain miracle that happened to me in Palestine in 1953, when I was both healed and rejuvenated, it seems that my physical aging has drastically slowed down.”

“God's General indeed!” Said Louise Morin, fascinated by her youth. “You know how many women would kill to remain young like you?”

“Oh, just half of the United States' population.” Replied jockingly Ingrid, a grin on her face. “A French fashion photographer told me once that I would have made a great model. Instead, I went to go on as a fighter pilot and astronaut. You must be Doctor Louise Morin, I presume?”

“Correct, General.” Replied Louise, shaking Ingrid’s hand and finding then her grip to be surprisingly strong. The three other scientists presented themselves to Ingrid before she waved a hand past the customs inspection counters.

“Well, I have arranged for you to skip the customs inspection procedure. If you may follow me, lady and gentlemen.”

The group, still pushing their baggage carts, followed her past the counters, emerging in the hall where various friends and relatives of other passengers were waiting, then outside the terminal, where a long black limousine was waiting. Ingrid smiled to her guests while pointing the limousine to them.

“I took the liberty to rent a civilian limousine for this occasion. Let us load your luggage in the trunk, then we will be on our way.”

Ingrid waited until they had loaded their luggage and were sitting inside the limousine, with the driver starting to roll away from the terminal, before speaking again, her expression serious.

“You are probably dead tired from flying through nine time zones, so I will wait until you had a chance to get a good night’s sleep before briefing you in detail about your respective roles in our coming Mars mission. I can however assure you right now that you were not invited by me only to give an international flavor to our mission. You are all considered top World experts in your respective fields and we will truly need the best for our mission.”

“I would have one question for you, General.” Said Nikolai Chuikov. “What is the set departure date for Mars?”

Ingrid looked solemnly at her four guests as she answered the Soviet man.

“We will fly to orbit on May Third, then will boost out of orbit towards Mars on May Ninth. In the meantime, you will follow an intense training program to prepare you to work in space and will also have a spacesuit custom-fitted for each of you. I can already promise you the trip of a lifetime, lady and gentlemen.”

08:09 (California Time)

Monday, May 3, 1971 ‘C’

Hangar complex of the First Space Squadron

Vandenberg Space Command Base, California

Hien, now a 23 year-old beautiful woman, emotionally hugged tight her adoptive mother one last time before she would get in the van due to transport her and the others to the C-2000 first stage transporter.

“Those two years in space will feel like an eternity to me, Mom. Please be careful!”

Ingrid returned her hug, then looked tearfully at her daughter, who had taken some leave from her post as a diplomatic attaché at the American embassy in Taiwan in order to be present for her departure for Mars.

“I will miss you too, Hien. I will bring back some Martian souvenirs for you, I promise.”

Ingrid then kissed her adopted daughter one last time on the cheeks despite the bulk of her spacesuit. She next got in the big van and sat down besides the eleven other passengers wearing spacesuits that were already inside. She made a last goodbye wave of the hand to Hien before a technician closed the back door of the van. Her heart was heavy as the van started to roll towards the huge C-2000 that would lift their spaceplane to high altitude.

Less than four hours later, with the huge bulk of the USS CONSTITUTION now visible in the darkness of space through the heat-resistant windshield of the USS ENTERPRISE, Ingrid went to make an announcement to the other passengers of the spaceplane. While they collectively possessed an impressive number of doctorates and diplomas, all of them were civilian scientists who were all space novices save for Edward Stokes, the geologist who had discovered water ice on the Moon. The flight to orbit, while nearly routine to Ingrid, had impressed, if not shaken, many of the scientists.

“Lady and gentlemen, our trip to orbit is near its end, with the USS CONSTITUTION now in sight. I can now break to you a little secret that has been kept from the rest of the World. We will be travelling to Mars on the USS CONSTITUTION itself, and not on some other ship supposedly built in orbit. The CONSTITUTION was in effect designed from the start as a true spaceship and only needed the addition of nuclear rocket engines and a filling up with liquid hydrogen to be ready for our trip to Mars. The other 44 crewmembers that will fly with us to Mars are already aboard the CONSTITUTION, having flown in during the last couple of weeks. As for the USS LIBERTY, now in Earth orbit, it will take the place of the CONSTITUTION and will continue its initial program of Earth and astronomical studies. However, like the

CONSTITUTION, it is a spaceship and not simply a space station and it will eventually be sent on a deep space mission in the years to come.”

Her announcement made Nikolai Chuikov exchange a stunned look with Sergei Petrov, sitting next to him.

“By the Devil! Chief Designer Korolev will choke to death on learning this.”

After another half hour spent cautiously approaching the CONSTITUTION, the ENTERPRISE slowly entered the gaping exhaust nozzle of the port main booster engines of the spaceship, which was a full 21 meters in diameter, and connected its nose docking ring to the docking receptacle inside, which was surrounded by the rocket exhaust nozzles of the five F-1 booster engines of the port engine pod. The exhaust duct, its inside now illuminated by a number of lights, was now in effect a space docking hangar that provided protection against micro-meteorites and space radiations to the docked spaceplane. The pilot and commander of the CONSTITUTION, Colonel Edward White, greeted Ingrid with a handshake when she emerged with her kit bag from the large airlock connecting the docking receptacle to the locker room inside the port engine pod.

“Welcome aboard the CONSTITUTION, General. Your quarters are ready for occupation and I have two people at hand to guide your group to their respective cabins, plus four more who will take care of unloading the fresh supplies brought by the ENTERPRISE.”

“Thank you, Colonel! We will follow you as soon as we can take off our spacesuits.”

Walking carefully on the steel deck of the locker room, which was in zero-G condition, so that her magnetized soles could get a grip and keep her attached to the deck, Ingrid went to the large spacesuit locker bearing her name and opened it, then secured her spacesuit to the support bars and opened its back hatch. Taking out her head and torso first, she disconnected the tubes and wires linking the spacesuit to her body garment and cap, then grabbed the overhead bar of the locker and pulled herself out of her spacesuit. Taking off her inner soft helmet, with its integrated headset, headlamp and mini-camera, she stored it inside the locker before closing it. The other eleven passengers took a lot longer than her to get out of their spacesuits, not having her long practice at it. Recuperating her kit bag, Ingrid waited patiently for the others to be finished, while plastic cargo containers full of fresh foodstuff were taken out of the

ENTERPRISE and then brought inside the adjacent old liquid oxygen tank of the main booster engines, which was now used as a food storage freezer. After ten minutes, the group was all ready and was then guided by Colonel White up a communication tube connecting the locker room to the main saucer section of the CONSTITUTION. Floating through two successive airtight doors and a connecting communication tube, the group finally went down a short tube leading to the fixed, median deck separating the two contra-rotating carrousels of the habitat ring, built inside the saucer hull section. Ingrid demonstrated herself how to get on one of the rotating carrousels, grabbing a padded vertical bar and swinging around it, landing with her magnetized soles on the thin steel deck plating covering the aluminum alloy structural deck.

“Do as I just did, my friends. The centrifugal force will then give you the impression of being in a gravity of 0.9 Gs.”

The others imitated her one at a time and were then able to walk normally to join up with Ingrid, Edward White and his two guides. Nikolai Chuikov was nearly transfixed as he eyed the inside of the habitat carroussel housing, curving up out of sight in both opposite directions. Large backlit wall panels featuring huge photographs of various Earth natural vistas, along with potted plants and flowers along the walls, made the carroussel look nearly like a normal place. Approaching one of the flower beds and touching a rose, Nikolai found that it was actually a well-done plastic imitation.

“All this is incredible! And to be able to enjoy near normal gravity in space is truly fantastic. This should help us tremendously in making our trip quite comfortable.”

“That was the idea, Doctor Chuikov.” Replied Ingrid, who then spoke to the group as a whole. “I was called a number of not very flattering names by congressmen that had to approve my space systems budgets for insisting on a ship big enough to house such carrousels, but the boost to the quality of life in space for my crews, plus the extra anti-radiation protection, was a necessity in my mind, not a flight of fancy. The coming two years in space and on Mars for us will I believe more than prove the concept to be worthy of the expense and effort. I will now let you be guided to your respective cabins. Take the time to make yourself at home, then join the rest of the crew in the main cafeteria, on this carroussel. Each pair of cabin on the lower deck of this carroussel shares a common bathroom with a toilet, sink and shower stall. From now on, we will be using Universal Time, which is in effect the old Greenwich Meridian Time. It is presently eighteen hours and seven minutes, Universal Time. I will see you at the crew cafeteria at nineteen hours.”

With the group then dispersing to their respective cabins, Nikolai Chuikov and Sergei Petrov were guided by a crewman to one of the staircases adjacent to the wall of their carroussel. Going down one level, they found themselves in a small vestibule on which three doors opened. The crewman guiding them pointed in turn at the doors.

“Cabin 25, to our left, is for you, Doctor Chuikov. The middle door is that of the common bathroom, while Cabin 26, to our right, belongs to Doctor Petrov. Know that the upper level of each carroussel can be used as a racetrack if you wish to exercise yourselves during the trip. For your information, each racetrack forms a loop that is 450 meters long. There is also a well-equipped gymnasium on Carroussel ‘B’, along with a sauna house and other facilities. You will find on one wall of your respective cabins a map of the ship and the list of facilities available. Have a good day, sirs.”

The crewman then left the two Soviet scientists, climbing back the stairs to the upper level. Sergei entered his designated cabin and was agreeably surprised to see that it was much larger than he had expected. It measured a good four by three meters and included a wide captain’s bed, a sofa, a work desk and chair and a storage locker. Sergei smiled to himself while starting to unpack his things to put them in the locker and in the drawers under his bed.

“Decidedly, I am growing more and more fond of this decadent capitalist comfort.”

Twelve minutes before nineteen hours, Sergei left his cabin after taking a quick shower and went to the crew cafeteria, situated in the same carroussel than his cabin, Carroussel ‘A’. Despite having examined the map of the ship before leaving his cabin, Sergei was astonished by the size of the cafeteria, a long compartment 24 meters in length and four meters in width, with a deck to ceiling height of three meters. Only the slight but noticeable curve of the deck and ceiling reminded him that he was not inside some building on Earth. Fixed tables, each with six fixed swiveling seats, lined one long wall of the cafeteria, while a lineup of service counters, refrigerators, ovens and distributing machines nearly covered completely the other long wall. The lighting was indirect and the walls and ceiling were painted soft pastel colors, giving the place the ambiance of a quiet restaurant, something reinforced by the low volume noise of music coming from overhead speakers. Right now, the cafeteria was nearly filled to capacity with over fifty people who were conversing quietly or waiting while sitting at tables.

Sergei smiled to himself when he saw that the crowd included over a dozen women, most of them in their twenties or thirties and wearing American military ranks and insignias on their ship coveralls. He knew of course that these women would probably avoid him like the pest, in order not to appear to fraternize with a Soviet citizen, but a man could always dream, couldn't he? His ultimate dream at present was already standing at the other end of the cafeteria, tall, slender, full of curves and with a young, angelic face framed by reddish-brown hair cut at the neck. Sergei sighed to himself as he imagined himself spending a rough Siberian winter with such a delightful woman. Repressing his libido, he then went to sit at one of the tables, opposite Louise Morin. Nikolai Chuikov and Jean Bertrand were also sitting at that table, along with two other men who were obviously Americans by their accent. Seeing him approach, Nikolai smiled to him and pointed at the two Americans.

"Aah, Sergei, here you are! Let me present you to Doctor James Vincenti and Doctor John Weston. Both are astronomers, with Doctor Vincenti also being the ship's Chief Astrophysicist."

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen." Said Sergei while shaking hands with the two astronomers. Both of them were at the least in their advanced forties, as was nearly the norm for top astronomers, with Vincenti being afflicted with partial calvity. The latter gave a genuine smile to Sergei.

"So, you were selected for this trip to Mars: your reputation as a geologist must be a strong one indeed."

"I must say that I heard little about such praise, if there is some indeed. I am a field man and rarely come out of the hills and forests of Siberia."

"A rugged type, then? An excellent choice to study the soil of Mars in situ." Sergei, sitting down at the table, let his mind float dreamily for a moment on the rocky red plains of Mars he was to go to.

"This job will certainly be the ultimate achievement in my career, Doctor Vincenti. Oh, I think that General Dows is ready to speak to us."

The others at the table that were sitting with their backs to Ingrid made their fixed seats pivot to face her, in time to catch her first words.

"Now that our mission crew is complete aboard our ship, I would wish first to thank you all, ladies and gentlemen, for volunteering for this trip. To be away from your loved ones for a full two years represents a great sacrifice indeed. However, the rewards for this sacrifice will be immense in terms of advancement of science and pride,

both national and personal. It goes to say that the eyes of the United States and of the World will be on us during our mission, while the medias will do their best to dig every bit of information about it and potentially turn it into a juicy or sensational coverage. By now, you are probably wondering why I am alluding to that aspect of our mission. Well, I will be frank about it: it is about the fact that we are a mixed sex crew engaged in a two-year voyage in space. Out of a total crew of 56 souls, including me, fifteen of us are female, or a bit less than a third of the crew. I chose personally every one of you, save for our French and Soviet colleagues, based on your competences, skills, mental qualities and attitudes. You and I are however all human, and sex is a primordial side of the human beast. Believe it or not but sex in space is a subject that has already been plenty discussed inside Military Space Command, behind closed doors of course. Generally, it can be said that the American public and government is still too prudish to accept easily the idea of men and women having sex in space. A number of doctors and specialists have however speculated on the effects of sex in space, or its lack thereof, on astronauts. On a mission like ours, sex becomes a very pertinent subject indeed. Just ask Commander John Barry here about what happens when a navy ship hits port after six months or more at sea and he will probably be able to tell you a few dandy ones.”

“Damn right about that, Ingrid!” Said with a wide grin the submariner and nuclear engineer. “It is even rowdier when that port is not our home port. Then, pretty well anything goes.”

“Commander, tell me seriously: what do the men feel like afterwards, I mean the married ones?”

The submariner hesitated then as the others all looked at him expectantly.

“Gee, General, you are really putting me under the spotlight now. I guess that it depends on each man. Some can’t even think of cheating on their wives, even with prostitutes. Others take their tours at sea as a free ride to sample along as they please. Of course, none of those will brag about that once back home, unless he is a complete asshole. In that respect, singles are probably the ones who have it the easiest.”

“Thank you for your frankness, Commander. Now, 27 of us are married, while the rest, including all the women, are single. Because of the duration and high visibility of our mission, I have decided to apply a specific policy about sex as it concerns this ship. For those who know me personally, they will probably think that this ship will become a sort of space brothel but I will have to disappoint them.”

A few, including Edward White, made a show of looking disappointed then, attracting a grin on Ingrid's young face for a moment. She then however became serious again.

“While I have to say that I can be quite a partygoer myself, I have come to the conclusion that, on this mission, personal abstinence is probably the better policy for everybody. I am sure that some media types in the United States are already speculating what fifteen women and 38 men will be doing, stuck together in space for two years. Some won't hesitate to speculate about our individual conducts, especially those of our married crewmembers, in order to sell papers. Our families, apart from having to endure our long absence, will also have probably to cope with lots of mean speculations from the medias and other people. The best we can do to support our families in this situation is to stay faithful to them. Also, on a more pragmatic note, two years represents a high risk of pregnancy for any of us women of the crew if we start dating male crewmembers. Condoms and contraceptive pills can only cut part of that risk, not eliminate it entirely. You can imagine in turn the kind of problems that a pregnancy and possible birth in space could cause for this mission. We have been entrusted with a ship worth near one billion dollars to do a mission in the name of the whole humanity. We owe it to the American people to be responsible and to concentrate on our jobs. If you get a real strong urge because you find a member of the opposite sex particularly appetizing during this mission, then I would urge you to use the good old Rosie Palm and her five sisters...or your tongues. Do you have any questions?”

The crewmembers looked at each other for a few seconds but, in the end, no one asked a question. Ingrid nodded with satisfaction and continued her speech.

“ Now, one of the dangers of long space missions is boredom. Boredom brings lack of attention, which can in turn cause negligence and thus mistakes. We are lucky in that we are aboard such a big and well equipped ship and will thus be able to physically exercise ourselves as much as we wish, including by running around, literally. I strongly encourage you to exercise vigorously every day: it will both keep you in shape and busy.”

Edward White and Christine Doherty, two certified fitness freaks, grinned with contentment at those words, while the others simply nodded their understanding.

“Don't be afraid to wash as needed also. We have plenty of water, which is anyway recycled for reuse with little loss. For those on their first space mission, one word of caution: forget about perfumes, aftershave lotions and the like. While our air is extensively recycled and filtered, some chemical compounds can't be eliminated and

could accumulate with time to the point of making the ship's atmosphere nearly unbreathable. Channel Number Five is nice but not when your food starts smelling the same way."

There was a short round of laughter then, with Louise Morin particularly targeted by the others for jokes.

"Another thing. You were already warned that there would be absolutely no smoking allowed on this ship, and that for very good reasons. Commander Barry could tell you that his submariners could smoke aboard his nuclear submarine, but even such a sub sometimes goes to the surface and pops open a hatch for fresh air. We obviously can't do that in space, thus I will be severe on that subject. Mind you, any problem should solve itself quickly, as there are no convenience stores on Mars or in space to replenish any hidden stash of tobacco supplies. Now that I told you what you cannot do, I will tell you what we can do apart from physical exercise. Contrary to most space missions, where every pound of cargo is counted, the sheer size of this ship allowed us to bring aboard a sizeable library of books on microfiches and of musical records, along with a decent film library. Louise Morin, apart from being our ship's psychologist, will be in charge of the ship's library and will be our morale officer. Yes, Colonel White?"

"When we left Vandenberg, you told me about things that you were bringing with you in your baggage to help us pass the time. Could you elaborate about that now, General?"

"Yes, I can." Replied Ingrid, smiling. "Louise Morin will be happy to hear that I brought more movies and music with me to supplement the ship's library. Those extras also come with some very special equipment."

Watched by her curious crewmembers, she then opened what looked like a large but thin black briefcase that had been lying on the service counter besides her. The inside of the briefcase's top part turned out to be some kind of flat television screen. Touching a button inside the briefcase, Ingrid made the dark screen turn alive with vivid colors, to quickly settle on a logo set against a pale blue background. As the crewmembers gasped collectively, Ingrid looked soberly at them in turn.

"You must have all heard about my dead adoptive mother from the future, Nancy Laplante. Well, Nancy left me in the past a number of things from the future. My portable sound system, which is now sitting in this cafeteria along with its library of records on laser disks, was already well known to my fellow American astronauts. This here was not. It is a portable home entertainment system built in the early 21st Century

that can play both movies and electronic games using DVDs, an advanced form of laser disk. It has its own integrated stereo speakers and has a 32 inch color, high definition flat screen. I own a large library of films and games compatible with this system, which I brought with me on the ship. I also have a pair of game control sticks to go with this system.”

She suddenly pointed a finger at Donald Rifkin, their ship’s computer expert.

“No, Donald, you can’t take this system apart to study it! You do that and I skin you alive!”

“But,” pleaded Rifkin with the expression of a kid denied his ice cream, “can’t I even look inside just a bit?”

“No! You screw that system up and you will have to tell the others why they can’t see their 21st Century science-fiction film after work. For obvious reasons I will ask you not to talk publicly about this once back on Earth. I will also keep close control of this portable entertainment system during our mission, to avoid accidental damage to it. Louise, I will train you in its use and care later on.”

“Can we watch a movie on it tonight, General?” Asked the excited French woman. Ingrid smiled on seeing the others grinning and looking expectantly at her.

“Why not? What kind of film would you guys like to see first? War? Science-fiction? Horror? Drama? Comedy?”

What she got then was an avalanche of contradictory suggestions, which was not surprising at all to her. She thus had to do a vote by raised hands to get at a decision, finally settling on a science-fiction film about space. Making a show of opening a second briefcase and sifting through dozens of DVD disks, Ingrid finally held up three disks, showing them to her crewmembers.

“Well, we could go with ‘Armageddon’, set in the near future, ‘Aliens’, a science-fiction cum horror movie, or ‘The Fifth Element’, a slapstick space adventure cum comedy. What will it be?”

She got a bunch of indecisive expressions then, making her smile.

“Alright, I will thus decide! Don’t worry, though: we will have plenty of time to see all those movies during our mission. Since I don’t want you to go to bed with nightmares tonight, we will view ‘The Fifth Element’ after supper. Those who will be on duty at that time will be able to see it later on. Well, now, let’s eat!”

Her crew didn’t have to be told twice before raiding the service counters and refrigerators.

11:14 (GMT/Universal Time)

Thursday, May 6, 1971 'C'

Command bridge of the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

Low Earth orbit

Like her bridge crewmembers, who were occupying their crashworthy seats, Ingrid was wearing her spacesuit for the departure sequence from Earth orbit, in case of some catastrophic failure of their nuclear rocket engines. She then spoke to Navy Commander John Barry, their expert in nuclear engineering, who was sitting besides Jack Ridley, the ship's flight engineer, himself sitting near Ingrid.

"Everything is in order, John?"

Barry eyed briefly his instruments before answering her, using her first name as requested of all by Ingrid.

"All indications are nominal, Ingrid. Nuclear engines ready for ignition."

"Christine, what about our trajectory?"

"Computed and verified three times, Ingrid. The results are locked in our flight computer and the ship is in the correct flight orientation." Replied Major Christine Doherty, the ship's navigator. Edward White, as ship's pilot, added his voice then.

"Thirteen minutes and ten seconds to engine ignition point, Ingrid. Everything nominal here."

"Excellent! Diane, contact the Space Station LIBERTY and confirm with them that their telescope is tracking us."

"Understood, Ingrid!" Replied the communications officer, Diane Sawyer. She took a minute or so to contact by radio the twin of the CONSTITUTION, which was now ready to take over its duties as orbital space station, and to return an answer to Ingrid.

"Brigadier General Slade says that she has your butt in her sights and is retransmitting the pictures live back to Cape Canaveral and Vandenberg."

"Good old Shirley!" Said Ingrid, grinning. She then switched to ship-wide intercom. "To all crewmembers, main engines ignition in twelve minutes. Make sure that your spacesuits are sealed and pressurized."

The next eleven minutes were spent in near silence, with only brief reports circulating between the members of the bridge crew. At one minute from ignition, Ingrid spoke again on the intercom.

“One minute to ignition! Start final sequence!”

“Attitude control systems activated! Ship ready for space!” Announced Edward White after a few seconds, followed soon by John Barry.

“Nuclear engines initialized! Hydrogen pump turbines spinning up! I am starting to withdraw the control rods in the cores of the first stage engines...Temperature in the cores now reaching 1,000 degrees Centigrade. Opening the hydrogen valves to idle setting.”

A muffled roar was soon transmitted via vibrations through the ship's structure when the twelve nuclear engines of the spaceship ignited at minimum thrust, so that the flow of liquid hydrogen could cool down the exhaust nozzles and prevent them from melting down as the temperature in the cores rose quickly.

“Engines now at ten percent of thrust! All engines functioning within parameters. Am gradually going to maximum thrust now.”

“We are rising from orbit!” Announced White. The engines roar grew quickly and reached maximum intensity at the calculated time. The acceleration felt was however a fairly gentle one, as the total thrust from their twelve nuclear engines was equal to only one sixth of the nearly 8,200 ton mass of the spaceship with its full load of liquid hydrogen propellant. That acceleration would however grow rather quickly, as those engines would be burning a total of close to 1,430 kilograms of liquid hydrogen per second, or 85.8 metric tons per minute.

“Maximum thrust!” Shouted John Barry. “Temperature at cores exit now stabilized at 2,450 degrees Centigrade. We are away on nuclear power!”

“Ship on correct heading to Mars. Boost phase should go on for another 38 minutes.”

“To all crew: brace yourselves for the next half hour!” Announced Ingrid on the intercom before switching to the external radio channel linking her with Cape Canaveral. “Cape Canaveral, this is the CONSTITUTION. We are now on our way to Mars at maximum thrust. Everything is nominal, over.”

“We acknowledge, CONSTITUTION. Good luck on your trip!”

At that same exact time, at the American embassy in Taipei, Taiwan, Hien shouted happily, like her colleagues watching with her the departure from orbit of the spaceship on a television set.

“GO INGRID, GO!”

Hien then sat back, watching anxiously as the telescope of the USS LIBERTY tracked the intense point of light marking the departing spaceship. She watched that for another five minutes, with the point of light quickly getting smaller, while listening to the intermittent radio exchange between the CONSTITUTION and Cape Canaveral. She could not help tears from flowing when the live view was cut, replaced by a talking television anchorman.

“God, please protect my mother.” She said softly to herself.

11:52 (Universal Time)

Command bridge

U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

“Mars capture velocity attained!” Announced Christine Doherty after nearly forty minutes of tense waiting spent worrying if the nuclear engines would work as planned. John Barry started throttling down at once their nuclear engines, doing it gradually so that the cores would not overheat and melt some of the engines parts.

“Reinserting the control rods. Reducing hydrogen flow as well. Things looking good. I...”

A temperature indication and a red light appearing on his control panel then made him hesitate for a second, making Ingrid look sharply at him. Barry flipped a switch repeatedly but couldn't get the red light to go, while the temperature in one reactor core started rising alarmingly.

“The control rods of engine number two are stuck! Core temperature in that engine is now at 2,400 degrees Centigrade and rising still.”

“Eject engine number two now!” Ordered at once Ingrid. If that engine core melted down and vaporized while still attached to the ship, it could very well destroy or damage all eleven other nuclear engines, dooming the spaceship. Barry flipped up at once a safety cover and punched a large red button. A muffled ‘whump’ was then felt by the crew as the explosive bolts attaching the engine number two to the ship's engines mount blew, followed a fraction of a second later by the ignition of the ejection solid rocket motor. All of their nuclear engines could be so ejected in case of emergencies.

“Tom, track engine number two with the aft-looking camera!”

“Already on it, Ingrid. I see it!” Replied Major Thomas Lakehurst, the ship's sensors officer. “The ejection motor is burning still. Radar gives separation speed now

at 60 miles per hour and increasing... Separation speed now 130 miles per hour, distance 1,100 yards. I can see some kind of glow from the engine, visible on top of the rocket motor exhaust plume.”

John Barry, who was busy completing the shutdown of the remaining engines, grimaced at those words.

“That’s the core melting down. It should be emitting a frightening amount of neutron radiation right now.”

Thomas Lakehurst glanced at his external radiation detectors and felt his hair stand up on his head at once.

“Shit! That thing is now putting out 2,600 millirads per second! At that rate, a semi-lethal dose would be absorbed by an unprotected person in no more than four minutes. The intensity is however decreasing rapidly as the distance between us and the ejected core grows. Separation speed is now 270 miles per hour and distance is 2.4 miles. It is also dropping down below our flight path because of its diminishing space velocity relative to Earth. A few more...Woah! The engine just vaporized in a flash! It’s gone now, except for an expanding cloud of glowing gas.”

Ingrid blew air out in relief, imitated by the rest of the bridge crew. Diane Sawyer spoke up after a second, sounding rattled.

“And...we have eleven more nuclear engines like that one attached to our ship?”

“Yup!” Said John Barry, doing his best to sound cheerful. “That’s why us nuclear submariners glow in the dark and have a sick sense of humor.”

Ingrid spoke up then, her voice calm but firm.

“Well, this is a good reminder that we are not on a simple Sunday trip, folks. John, I want you to run a full diagnostic on our remaining nuclear engines. Christine, recalculate our trajectory with the facts that we have one engine less. Diane, I want a separate tape of this incident to be made, with radar, camera and radiation sensors data on it.”

Ingrid next spoke on the ship-wide intercom.

“To all the crew: the initial boost phase is completed. We are on course for Mars and will be coasting along for the next four months before we need to fire our engines again to insert ourselves in Mars orbit. We had to jettison a malfunctioning nuclear engine but we still have more than enough engines to complete safely the mission. You can now leave your seats and take off your spacesuits to pass to space routine.”

She then gave the example and got up from her command chair to go to the adjacent locker room and remove her spacesuit. While little would happen for the next four months or so, she already had scheduled a comprehensive program of cross-skills training for her crewmembers. She herself was going to learn the rudiments of nuclear engineering from John Barry, a skill that would come handy for her once on Mars.

07:27 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, June 2, 1971 'C'

Crew cafeteria of the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

Three months away from Mars

Sergeant Mary Robertson was eating her breakfast at the crew cafeteria, prior to taking her shift as the duty communications technician, when a wave of nausea nearly made her throw up. Keeping it in with difficulty, she excused herself with the other crewmembers eating at her table and ran to the nearest washroom adjacent to the cafeteria. There, she vomited part of her breakfast, then had to sit down on the deck to let the worst of her dizziness pass. Now truly alarmed, she started wondering about what was happening to her. She nearly panicked when she realized that she was still waiting for her menstruations to show up. This and the lateness of her periods raised a most scary scenario in her mind. Once she felt well enough to stand up and walk, Mary left the washroom and returned to her table. Staff Sergeant Jane Austin, who was eating at her table, gave her a concerned look as Mary picked up the tray with her unfinished breakfast to go throw the leftovers in the garbage collection and recycling bins.

“You’re not finishing your meal, Mary?”

“Uh, no, Jane: I don’t feel very well. I think that I am going to pay a visit to Doctor Clarkson after this.”

“Oh? I hope that it is nothing serious, Mary.”

“I don’t think so. It may be a simple stomach bug.”

On that pious lie, Mary went to get rid of her tray and leftovers, then left the cafeteria, going up to the upper level running track of Carroussel ‘A’. Crossing the track, she grabbed one of the passing padded vertical bars of the fixed track, using it to pivot in the air and land on the running track of Carroussel ‘B’, which ran in the opposite direction from the other carroussel. Just that motion was enough to bring a new bout of nausea to

Mary. Waiting one moment for the nausea to subside a bit, she went to the staircase leading down to the medical section and climbed down the steps, then walked to the reception office of the duty nurse. There she found Navy Lieutenant Angela Moore already sitting behind her reception desk. The young Navy nurse smiled to Mary on seeing her enter the small room.

"Hello, Mary? Is there something that I can do for you?"

"Er, yes! I just had a bout of nausea while eating breakfast and nearly threw up."

"Oh! Let me take your vitals first: Doc Clarkson should be in soon."

Moore then led Mary into the adjacent examination room and made her sit on the examination bed, where she started taking her blood pressure, pulse and temperature. She was about finished with her preliminary examination when Lieutenant Colonel Wendy Clarkson showed up to start her day of medical duties. She gave Mary Robertson a concerned look, then spoke to Angela Moore.

"What do we have here, Angela?"

"Mary is complaining of nausea and dizziness. Her temperature is normal but her pulse and blood pressure are a bit off."

Angela then showed her the data she already got, making Clarkson nod her head.

"Very well, I will continue the examination, Angela."

Pulling closed the curtain of the examination room behind Angela, Wendy made a few checks, then starting to ask a few questions to Mary.

"What did you eat this morning, Mary?"

"Hash brown and sausages, Doctor. They tasted normal, with no funny smell."

"Okay! I will still have our bio-chemist test a sample of that type of ration, just to make sure. Is there anything else that you experienced or felt recently?"

Mary hesitated before answering that, lowering her head in shame.

"Yes! My periods are late by two weeks now."

Wendy Clarkson eyed her soberly, realizing at once what could be happening.

"Tell me frankly, Mary: when was the last time that you had sex? Don't worry: that will be covered by medical confidentiality."

Mary answered her in a sheepish voice.

"On April 24th, when I slept for the last time with my boyfriend, one week before flying out to the CONSTITUTION."

"Did your boyfriend use a condom then, or did you use contraceptive pills?"

“Jim did use a condom...at least the first time. We drank a few glasses that night, to celebrate my departure on mission, and my memory is a bit nebulous after that. I don't use contraceptive pills.”

“Very well, I will take blood and urine samples from you and run some more tests. It may take a few days before I could give you an informed diagnostic. In the meantime, you may go to your duties, but take it easy and keep a barf bag nearby, just in case. If you suffer more bouts of nausea, come and tell me at once.”

“Understood, Doctor.”

10:18 (Universal Time)

Sunday, June 13, 1971 'C'

Mission Commander's office

U.S.S. CONSTELLATION

Ingrid was about to greet Wendy Clarkson in her office when her somber expression made the welcoming smile on Ingrid's lips fade away.

“What is it, Wendy? Has someone contracted a serious disease?”

The flight surgeon closed the door of Ingrid's office behind her before answering her.

“Maybe worse: one of our crewmembers is pregnant.”

“WHAT?” Nearly shouted Ingrid, obviously not pleased to hear that. “Who and how?”

“Sergeant Mary Robertson, one of our communication technicians. She must have been impregnated about one week before flying out to the CONSTITUTION, after having passed her final medical examination. Her boyfriend may have been careless and probably did not use a condom during at least one round of sex, or used a defective condom.”

“Damn!” Uttered Ingrid, who then showed a nearby chair to the doctor. “Please sit, Wendy, and tell me all that you know about this.”

“There is actually little else for me to say, apart from stating that the baby should be due around the last week of next January. I brought Sergeant Robertston with me: she is waiting in the hallway. Please be soft on her, Ingrid: I believe that she was not really to blame for this and she truly is devastated by this. She was certainly not planning some crazy stunt with this.”

"You did well to bring her with you, Wendy. May I ask to stay as a witness while I speak with her? I believe that it will help her be more at ease."

"A good idea, Ingrid. Thank God that you are the mission commander and not some old male fart stuck on regulations."

Ingrid nodded her head, understanding what Clarkson meant. Most American general officers who would be confronted with this problem would automatically assume gross negligence on the part of the female crewmember and would summarily judge her and punish her by putting an end to her military career and throw her out with a dishonorable discharge. She kept a neutral expression as Clarkson introduced Robertson in her office. The latter, a young and fit woman with short black hair, looked understandably apprehensive as she came to attention in front of Ingrid's work desk and presented herself in military fashion.

"Sergeant Mary Robertson, communication technician, reporting, maam!"

"At ease, Sergeant! Please, sit down. Do you object to the presence of Doctor Clarkson while we speak, Sergeant?"

"Uh, no, maam!"

Once Robertson was sitting, Ingrid gave her a friendly smile.

"First off, Sergeant Robertson, do not fear being summarily punished for your misadventure: we are all human and negligence may not have been on your part, if there was any negligence involved at all."

Her first sentence seemingly did a lot to reassure the young technician, who became less stiff in her chair. Ingrid even saw tears starting to appear at the corner of Robertson's eyes.

"Thank you for your comprehension, maam. I...I swear to you that this was not intentional. I know too well how it could impact our mission and I want so much that mission to be a success. I really feel awful about this."

"I believe you, Sergeant. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions of an intimate nature? You still can refuse to answer them if you want."

Mary Robertson took a deep breath and looked Ingrid into her eyes.

"I will answer your questions, maam."

"Thank you, Sergeant. First, the most important question in my mind right now is this: do you want to have that child?"

The tears in Robertson's eyes then multiplied and she nearly stammered as she answered.

"I believe in life, maam: I don't want my child to pay for a mistake of mine. I am also against abortion, for religious reasons. Could I really have that baby here, in space? I realize full well that we don't have the supplies or equipment to support a baby on the ship, maam."

"There are always ways to deal with anything, Sergeant. If you decide to have that baby, then this ship and crew will do the utmost to support you and your child."

"Thank you, maam!" Said Robertson, now crying openly. "You are too good!" Ingrid smiled at those words, while Wendy Clarkson passed an arm around the shoulders of the technician to comfort her.

"As 'God's General', I would be poorly placed to be mean with you about this, Sergeant. May I ask who the father is?"

"He...he's a civilian technician working in Vandenberg, at the space tracking station, maam. His name is Jim Prentice."

"Were you planning to get married? If not, do you think that he would support you and your child?"

Mary Robertson pondered that question for a long moment, with Ingrid waiting patiently. In the United States of the 1970s, single mothers were still frowned upon, especially within the armed forces. The kind of facilities available in Nancy Laplante's time, like low cost daycare facilities and group support for single mothers, did not exist in most of the United States of today, and certainly not on military bases. As it was, maternity leave benefits for female military personnel were still way too meager in Ingrid's opinion, with many base commanders doing only the bare minimum warranted by regulations to support their female personnel.

"We have not talked about marriage yet, maam. We have been dating each other for only two months now. As for Jim accepting to support my child, I don't know. He is a decent, caring young man, but his own parents are quite strict about social conventions. Even if me and Jim engaged in what you would call a 'shotgun marriage' on my return from Mars, his parents would probably shun us afterwards. I don't know what to do about Jim, maam. He could possibly abandon me because of family pressure once he learns about my baby. The only thing I know is that I don't want to make my future baby pay for my mistake."

"Again, this may not be your mistake, Sergeant." Replied Ingrid. She personally hated the notion that only the woman was at fault and should bear the responsibility for

an unwanted child. However, that was the prevalent view in the United States today, whether she liked it or not. She finally took a decision and looked soberly at Robertson.

“Sergeant, you have my blessing to continue your pregnancy on this ship and to give birth to your child on the CONSTITUTION. In the meantime, you will continue with your regular duties but will be periodically checked by Doctor Clarkson. You are as of today exempt from hard physical duties or from any activity involving work outside in the vacuum of space, where radiations may affect your embryo. I will send today an ‘eyes only’ message to Major General Meserve, in Vandenberg, so that she could discreetly contact your boyfriend and discuss with him his reactions to your pregnancy. A video link will then be arranged, so that you and Jim can speak to each other within the constraints of the six minute time lag we are experiencing in Earth-to-ship transmissions. We will talk again after that. You are dismissed, Sergeant.”

Mary Robertson, not believing her luck, got up and gave Ingrid a thankful look.

“Thank you for your comprehension, maam. I will do my best not to disappoint you again.”

“You did not disappoint me, Sergeant. You are human and all humans, including me, make mistakes. It is how we learn in life. One last thing: this affair is to stay strictly confidential. You do not speak about it to anyone else but your boyfriend until further notice. Good day and good luck, Sergeant.”

Robertson, still quite emotional, then pivoted around and walked out of the office, leaving Ingrid alone with Wendy Clarkson. The latter nodded to Ingrid.

“Thank you for your kindness and comprehension towards her, Ingrid. You are truly an outstanding commander in all respects.”

“Thanks, Wendy. Let’s just hope that this Jim Prentice will be as supportive of her as I was. I have seen too many cases of fathers disappearing in the woodworks or denying paternity in the past, once confronted with an unexpected gift from Mother Nature.”

“That’s funny: I heard that one too, many times.” Replied the ship’s flight surgeon, a sarcastic expression on her face.

16:35 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, June 15, 1971 ‘C’

Mission Commander’s office

U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

The happy look on Sergeant Mary Robertson's face when she entered the office told most of the story at once to Ingrid, sitting behind her work desk. She returned the salute from Mary, then invited her to sit down before smiling to her.

"Something tells me that the video communication with your boyfriend went well. Am I right, Sergeant?"

"You are, maam! Jim, er, my boyfriend, recognized the paternity for my child. He then asked me if I would marry him, even before I could ask. I said yes!"

"That's great!" Replied Ingrid, genuinely happy and also not a little relieved. "Was there a witness to your exchange of vows?"

"Yes, maam! General Meserve was besides my boyfriend when he proposed to me, while Doctor Clarkson was by my side when I said yes. Does that make our marriage legal, maam?"

"As a civil marriage, yes! As the commander on this spaceship, I have the same powers as a navy ship captain, which includes the power to perform various legal ceremonies. I will have a marriage certificate prepared, with Doctor Clarkson signing as a witness and me as officiating authority. General Meserve will also sign it, once we are back on Earth, since your boyfriend was not physically with you when he declared to you."

Mary Robertson, now really happy, then thought about something and looked at Ingrid with uncertainty.

"My baby, even if it isn't born in the United States, will he or she be an American citizen?"

"Of course! This spaceship is considered American territory. In fact, your baby could even have a dual nationality."

"A dual nationality, maam?"

"Yes: American and Martian!" Said Ingrid with a grin, obviously joking. "After all, you should give birth while we will orbit Mars."

Both women then broke out laughing.

04:46 (Universal Time)

Thursday, September 16, 1971 'C'

Command bridge, U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

In Mars polar orbit

Ingrid discreetly blew air out in relief as John Barry finished shutting down their nuclear engines, their spaceship now on its final polar orbit around Mars. The other crewmembers cheered loudly as Christine Doherty confirmed that they were in the correct orbit, thus announcing the successful conclusion of their outgoing trip to the red planet. Ingrid then went on the intercom.

“John, you stay at your station and do a diagnostic of our engines. Diane, send a message to Cape Canaveral, announcing that we are now in polar orbit around Mars, with all systems nominal. I now declare the ship secured from flight operations.”

Ingrid could feel renewed excitement around her as she undid her seat harness and got off her seat. Their real mission, the exploration of Mars, was now about to start in earnest, with her geologists, planetologist and geomaticians finally able to perform their primary tasks. Leaving the command bridge she used the bow-to-stern communication tube to get to the ship’s astronomical observatory, situated in the nose section forward of the bow of the saucer’s section. She found James Vincenti there, concentrated on the screen transmitting the view from the ship’s main telescope.

“Excited to be here, Jimmy?” She said to him with a big grin. He answered with a smile of his own but kept his eyes on the screen.

“You bet, Ingrid! Other astronomers would kill to be in this seat right now. The science and knowledge that we will be able to collect during this mission will be positively invaluable.”

“Too true! When are we going to overfly the eastern extremity of the Valles Marineris?”

“In about eighteen minutes. At our present altitude and with the kind of optics we are using, we will be able to detect objects down to a resolution of a foot. I also have our side-scan mapping radar activated and sweeping the surface already. I am recording everything, of course.”

Ingrid nodded, eyeing for a moment the astronomer as he kept observing the surface. Vincenti was going to be a very busy man during the next two to three weeks.

“Jimmy, consider yourself off any other duty but observation until further notice. However, be responsible and do take some decent rest periods. Having you die of overwork wouldn’t help us much.”

“Understood, Ingrid.”

Only half convinced that Vincenti would follow her advice, Ingrid left him to his work and made her way back to the flight deck. Once there, she sat in the empty duty chair of Virgil Grissom, besides that of John Barry, who was still running his engines diagnostics. She watched him in silence, not wanting to distract him and also using this chance to further work on her growing nuclear engineering knowledge. She had been receiving steady theoretical and practical lessons on the subject from the submariner for four months now, including inspection visits to the ship's nuclear powerplant with John, where he would show her the finer details of the operation of their four compact nuclear reactors. Those reactors had been adapted from a model in service in a small American Navy nuclear submarine. More critically for Ingrid, that same model of reactor used in the CONSTITUTION also was installed inside their Mars Lander craft, where it would provide it with all the power it needed for years if need be. As commander of the Mars Lander, Ingrid would also be its nuclear engineer by default, which was one extra reason for her to pay attention to Barry's work now. The latter smiled after a minute or so while still looking at his instruments.

"Do you feel ready to pass your practical examination in nuclear engineering in two weeks, Ingrid?"

"Hell, I'm not sure, John! Four months is a short period to learn such an advanced trade. I may have my masters in aerospace engineering but nuclear engineering involves a lot of notions of high physics that I simply don't have."

"Didn't have." Corrected John before looking straight into her eyes. "The last time you visited the ship's powerplant with me, you proved to me that you now pretty well master those notions of high physics. In fact, once we are back on Earth, I will ask the Navy Department of Nuclear Reactors to certify you as a qualified nuclear reactor officer."

"Aren't these guys the sorriest bunch of misogynists in American military service, John?"

"Yes!" Replied the submariner, grinning. "But I am sure that you will pass their qualification exam hands down."

"That would be something." Said Ingrid, amused by that. "A fighter pilot turned astronaut who also gets to be a qualified submariner."

"Whoa there, Ingrid!" Cut Barry. "I said nuclear reactor officer, not submariner. We male chauvinist pigs still have our pride."

Christine Doherty, sitting to the right of Barry and watching a camera view of the planet surface, giggled at those last words.

“I could see you in a submarine alright, Ingrid. Those guys wouldn’t be able to concentrate ever on their jobs rather than on your ass.”

“Hey, I’m partial to chests!” Protested Barry, making both women laugh.

“I rest my case.” Said Christine with finality.

After a couple more minutes of silent work, John Barry locked his engines controls and looked at Ingrid.

“Well, our nuclear engines seem to be none the worse for wear. They will all be available when the time comes to boost out of Marst orbit and return to Earth.”

“Hell, that’s much better than anyone expected. The ground tests of the engine prototype didn’t go better than one long 120 minutes burn or two consecutive, medium length burns without some noticeable degradation of the core’s fuel elements. Maybe the space conditions, with the very low ambient temperature, help our engines withstand burns better.”

“That could well be, Ingrid. After all, ambient space temperature is only six degrees above the absolute zero. That is not negligible as a factor. How do you propose to use such a bonus in performance?”

“Well, if we could run the whole mission without wearing out other engines, I will be happy as a pig in shit for sure. That would mean that this ship could then perform another interplanetary mission with only minimal refitting work, thus saving a whole bundle of money for my command.”

“Another interplanetary mission?” Said Christine, surprised. Ingrid looked back at her past Barry and nodded firmly.

“That’s right, Christine. Did you think that we would be scrapping this ship after our return to Earth? Like hell I would! Do you have any idea of the cost of this ship, when equipped with twelve nuclear engines and all its auxiliary crafts and modules?”

“Uh, no.”

“Try a bit over three billion dollars, Christine.”

“Ouch!” Exclaimed Barry. “That’s the price for two nuclear aircraft carriers.”

“Exactly! When I think that some at the Joint Chiefs think of my command as a two bit thing because we don’t have hundreds of thousands of men and women in our ranks.”

“Scuttlebutt in the Navy has it that Secretary of Defense Laird wishes to turn the Military Space Command into an independent service.” Said Barry. Ingrid gave him a cautious look.

“Would you be against such an idea, John?”

“Personally, no. The Military Space Command has achieved many very significant feats since you formed it in 1955, Ingrid. Having seen from the inside how it works, I would say that it certainly earned independent service status. Don’t repeat that to my Navy bosses, though. You should hear a few of the rather unkind jokes and comments running around Navy messes and ships about the Military Space Command.”

“Like?” Asked Ingrid with a hard smile, making the submariner hesitate.

“Uh, I’m not sure that you want to hear about them, Ingrid.”

Christine, on hearing that, moved her left hand, suspending it just over Barry’s crotch.

“Should I make him talk, Ingrid?”

“Hey, whoa, not fair! You are two against one.”

“Who said that we are two against you, John? I will just let Christine do her interrogating bit by herself.”

“Alright! I give up!” Exclaimed John. “You girls have no pity on a lone man.”

“So, what do they say about my command in the Navy, John.” Insisted Ingrid.

“You promise not to crush my balls afterwards?”

“Promised!”

“Okay then! What I heard often in Navy messes and even at formal officers mess functions were things like ‘space cadets’, ‘Buck Roger kiddies’, ‘space eunuchs’, ‘dick riders’...by the way, that last one refers to girls riding big rockets.”

“Rocket as in big dick. I got that.” Sighed Ingrid. “Go on, John. Any other nice names?”

“Oh, plenty! What is joked the most about though is the proportion of women serving with Military Space Command. For most of the guys, the idea of having women in space is still preposterous. A visiting Strategic Air Command bomber squadron commander also complained to us that your ballistic missiles have meant the near demise of his trade. So you do have enemies in the Air Force as well, Ingrid. You better watch your back at official Pentagon functions.”

“I already watch my back during budget fights at the Joint Chiefs, John. Thanks for the warning anyway.”

Christine shook her head in discouragement then.

“After all that we accomplished...dick riders! I would like to...”

The voice of James Vincenti, coming out of the ship’s intercom, interrupted her then.

“Bridge, this is the astronomical observatory. We are now about to overfly the region of Capri Chasma, at the eastern end of the Valles Marineris²². I can already see a few choice landing sites for our lander.”

Ingrid switched at once the main viewer screen of the bridge to the picture from the observatory. She smiled after watching for a long moment the detailed view of the bottom of a large canyon over 150 kilometers wide.

“Hell, that spot down in Capri Chasma looks just right for us, as we had predicted from Earth. Alright, Jimmy: gather our astronomers and geomaticians and let’s start on producing a detailed map of Mars, plus a high resolution set of the Valles Marineris region. Once we will have all the data we need for choosing a landing site, we will convey a command meeting to take a final decision on the best landing spot. Take all the time you need for your observations.”

“We will be thorough, Ingrid.” Promised Vincenti before cutting the link. As Ingrid was about to leave again her command chair, she saw Mary Robertson enter the bridge to relieve John Hicks at the duty communications console. Now over four and a half month pregnant, she had a very noticeable belly bulge that stretched her normally loose ship coverall at waist level. By now, everyone on the ship knew about her pregnancy. Thankfully, that was still a well kept secret on Earth, where only a handful of senior officers of her command knew about it. Hopefully, that would not change until after their return to Earth.

08:04 (Universal time)

Friday, September 24, 1971 ‘C’

Command bridge, U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

Low Mars orbit

Ingrid was tense as the last checks were being done before the launch of their first Mars cargo module: the success or failure of landing that module in the right region of Mars could decide how long a surface exploration crew could stay and work on Mars.

²² Valles Marineris : Huge geological fault over 3,500 km long forming a series of gigantic canyons parallel to Mars’ equator.

The technological problem of landing a craft on a precise spot of the red planet had been a difficult one that had been complicated by the shallow, very thin atmosphere of Mars, which was less than one percent the surface pressure on Earth. That made aerodynamic braking and the use of parachutes much less effective than in Earth's atmosphere. Not having decades to study that problem, Ingrid had pushed for a brute force solution that, while not the most efficient in terms of mass, at least was assured to work. Their cargo modules, two of which were carried by the CONSTITUTION, had powerful rocket motors that would do most of the braking. Then, once down to low subsonic speeds, a huge parachute would deploy and further lower the descent speed, while small rocket motors would push the module towards the chosen landing spot. Finally, huge low pressure balloons around and under the module would inflate and assist a last rocket motor in providing a hopefully smooth landing. Major Russel Schweickart, the designated pilot of the Mars Lander, stood by to pilot the cargo module by remote control during the final phase of its descent. Jack Ridley, the ship's chief engineer, then spoke up.

"Mars Cargo One checklist completed. It is now ready for launch."

"We will be at our calculated launch point in seven minutes." Announced Christine Doherty, making Ingrid nod.

"Very well! Planetary observatory, be ready to follow the descent of our cargo module to confirm its landing point."

"We are ready at the planetary observatory." Said on the intercom Doctor James Ross, the ship's geomatician. After a few more minutes, Christine Doherty spoke again.

"We are now at the launch point!"

"Launch the cargo module!"

"Launching now!"

Inside the eighteen meter-wide air inlet of the ship's port main booster engine pod, situated under the main saucer section, a conical capsule with a ten meter-wide base was ejected by pressurized nitrogen gas from its housing, emerging from the air inlet and flying about fifty meters forward before small rocket motors pushed it downward. Once safely clear off the ship, the main retro-rocket engine lit up with a long, wide flame, brutally decelerating the capsule. The fact that it was not manned simplified things, with the engine able to provide a crushing nine Gs of deceleration without ill

effect. The cargo module, anxiously watched from the CONSTITUTION and followed closely on radar, quickly dropped down and behind the ship, losing speed relative to Mars. The main retro-rocket engine was still burning when large multi-petal airbrake panels deployed to stabilize the capsule during its atmospheric reentry. The base heat shield gradually turned to a cherry red as friction with the rarefied atmosphere heated it and the aerodynamic resistance helped slow down the capsule. Still, the main retro-rocket continued to burn until the capsule's speed had dropped to below 200 kilometers per hour, by which time it was down to less than five kilometers from the surface of Mars. That was when the main landing parachute deployed, further slowing down the capsule and making it fall to the near vertical. Aided by the pictures sent by a battery of cameras, Russel Schweickart started at that time to pilot the capsule, using a detailed map of the Valles Marineris area to guide himself. Using a small control stick to fire alternatively the attitude rockets of the cargo module, Schweickart aimed for a relatively flat area of the Capri Chasma, which formed a sort of delta valley at the eastern end of the Valles Marineris. His seemingly easy job however proved to be no sinecure.

"Damn, the wind keeps pushing the capsule in the wrong direction. I am not sure how close I will end up from the designated landing point, Ingrid."

"As long as you can land the cargo module in one piece and at the bottom of the Capri Chasma, I will be happy, Russel. You're doing a fine job right now."

"Thanks, Ingrid!"

After another tense three minutes, Schweickart let out a triumphant shout.

"TOUCHDOWN! Mars Cargo One has just landed at the bottom of Capri Chasma, approximately fifty miles west of the targeted landing zone. I am now going to run a diagnostic of the module's systems and activate its visual and radio beacons."

"Nice job, Russel!" Said Ingrid, letting air out in relief. With Mars Cargo One now down on the surface, apparently intact, they now had a supply point available for the Mars Rover that would follow in a few more days, with over five tons of water, food and other supplies waiting for the surface exploration team. Once the second cargo module would be sent down to land further west along the bottom of the Valles Marineris, the primary goal of the ship's mission would then be able to proceed.

07:18 (Universal Time)

Monday, September 27, 1971 'C'

Airlock to the Mars Lander, U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

Low Mars orbit

“Be careful down there, Ingrid. I would hate to see something bad happen to you or to your team.”

Ingrid, wearing her spacesuit but with her helmet visor open, shook hands with Jack Ridley, the senior astronaut staying on the CONSTITUTION. Her expression was sober, as she fully realized the dangers and risks that she and her team would face for long months on the surface of Mars...if they made it down in one piece.

“Be assured that I won’t play the risk-taker, Jack: I have a daughter I want to return to. See you in thirteen months.”

Ingrid then flew down feet first through the top hatch of the airlock, with Virgil Grissom then closing and securing the hatch behind her. In the airlock, Ingrid went through the lower hatch of the airlock and the access hatch of the Mars Lander and closed them, then pushed herself down, floating down to the deck of the cockpit of the Mars Lander’s ascent module, where the five other members of the surface exploration team were already taking place in their padded, reclined seats. The Mars Lander, a conical craft with a maximum base diameter of eighteen meters and an overall height of fifteen meters, was in reality composed of three distinct parts juxtaposed one on top of the other. The lower part comprised the heat shield, the main retro-rocket motor and liquid oxygen tanks to fuel the rocket motor and would be jettisoned just before touchdown. The middle part was the surface rover proper, with its folded electric-driven wheels and a secondary rocket motor meant to allow the rover to fly up and down if need be between the bottom and the top edges of the canyons of the Valles Marineris. The rover contained the quarters and facilities the surface crew would use during their more than one year on Mars. It also included the liquid hydrogen tanks of the main retro-rocket engine, covering the manned section of the rover. While those hydrogen tanks would be basically empty once they landed on Mars, the hydrogen vapors left in them would help in absorbing and attenuating the constant shower of deadly cosmic charged particles that bombarded Mars, a major health worry for Ingrid and her crew. Finally, topping the rover and its hydrogen tanks, was the ascent module, which was also going to be used as the flight deck of the Mars Lander during the descent from orbit. Taking place in her

own seat and strapping herself in, Ingrid then looked left and right at her five companions. The surface exploration team included for obvious reasons the four geologists of the Mars Mission: Edward Stokes, Michael Farmer, Sergei Petrov and Robert Sturgis. The remaining member of the team was Russel Schweickart, the pilot of the lander. All had expectant looks on their faces as Ingrid gave them a thumbs up signal.

“Ready for some Mars exploration, guys?”

“Yes!” Was the collective answer, making Ingrid nod.

“Then, let’s start the preflight checklist, Russel.”

“Understood, Ingrid.”

Three minutes were needed to pass through the checklist, at the end of which Ingrid ordered by radio that liquid hydrogen be pumped in the fuel tanks of the lander. Being a cryogenic fuel with a very low boiling point, liquid hydrogen had to be pumped in at the last moment, in order to avoid it boiling off while waiting for launch. While the choice of a liquid oxygen/hydrogen-fuelled main retro-rocket engine presented inconveniences in fuelling up, the much superior burning efficiency compared to a solid rocket motor meant that the lander would be able to shed most of its velocity via its retro-rocket engine, rather than relying mostly on parachutes or aerobrakes. Also, a liquid fuelled rocket engine could be shut down at will, something impossible with a solid rocket motor, thus providing extra security in case of a miscalculation in the descent trajectory. As for the secondary rocket motors of the lander, they burned a combination of nitrogen tetroxide and aeroxine-50, chemical propellants that could stay stored inside tanks nearly indefinitely. Once the fuelling up was completed, Ingrid did a last, quick check of her instruments, then looked at Schweickart, giving him a nod.

“You may separate from the CONSTITUTION now, Russel.”

“Separating now!” Said the pilot while uncovering and pushing a large button. Pressurized nitrogen gas pushed the Mars Lander out of its berth under the belly of the ship’s main saucer section, making it drop towards the surface of Mars, some 107 kilometers down. Russel, using his flight control stick, made the lander pivot ninety degrees from the vertical, so that its retro-rocket would be in optimum position to slow it down relative to the planet’s surface. He then flipped open the cover over a red switch.

“Firing retro-rocket now!”

The ignition of the liquid rocket engine immediately pushed hard the six astronauts in their padded seats under a deceleration of four Gs. At the same time, large airbrake panels on the upper side of the lander opened up like the petals of a flower, in order to stabilize it during its drop through the thin Martian atmosphere. Like Russel, Ingrid closely monitored their speed and altitude from then on, ready to react quickly and initiate the bottom section's separation at the correct moment. Due to the shallow, thin Martian atmosphere, things would happen fast and they would have only a few seconds to jettison the bottom section before landing. Any delay and they would land without having the chance to deploy their wheels, something that would ruin most of the surface exploration phase of the mission. The retro-rocket engine's roar, transmitted through the structure of the lander, was soon joined by a steadily growing noise from the friction of the Martian atmosphere against the heat shield, heating it up. As their rocket engine burned away tons of propellant, the deceleration force felt by the astronauts gradually increased, topping a crushing six Gs by the time Russel Schweickart throttled down the engine power to idle when their speed was low enough to deploy their main parachute. By then, the lander was 5,400 meters above the surface and going at a speed of 210 kilometers per hour. With their parachute making their trajectory arch down towards the surface but only providing a low amount of braking force, Russel then powered up partly the retro-rocket engine, which still had some propellant left, slowing down the descent of the lander to a few meters per second while using the attitude control rockets to orient the lander towards the majestic canyon of the Capri Chasma, just ahead. The retro-rocket ran out of fuel as the lander was overflying the ridgeline marking the northern cliff of Capri Chasma. Russel jettisoned at once the bottom section, exposing the belly surface of the rover section, with its folded wheel assemblies and jump rocket motor.

"Igniting jump motor to thirty percent power! Deploying the wheels!"

Ingrid watched anxiously her instruments as Russel pushed a number of button. Thankfully, all of their eight large wheels unfolded properly and locked themselves in position without a problem.

"All the wheels are down and locked!"

"Putting the wheels in neutral rotation. We are now 29,000 feet above the bottom surface of Capri Chasma. I am now veering towards the West, to follow the canyon's alignment. Our cargo module is approximately 450 miles from our present location."

“Good enough for us! Land us as soon as you get to a smooth enough patch of ground. Let’s save our jump rocket’s fuel as much as we can.”

“Understood, Ingrid!”

Powering down the jump engine to near idle, Russel then flew down towards a relatively flat piece of Martian ground visible ahead, increasing the engine’s thrust only at the last moment, in order to slow down the descent to a safe landing speed. The landing was still somewhat bumpy, the lander’s wheels suspension flexing on contact and making it bounce a bit twice, due to the weak Martian gravity, which was 37.5 percent of that of the Earth, before the lander settled to a stop. Spontaneous screams of triumph came out of all six astronauts before Ingrid contacted by radio the CONSTITUTION.

“CONSTITUTION, this is Mars Lander: we are now safely down on the bottom surface of Capri Chasma, 435 miles to the East of our cargo module.”

“CONSTITUTION acknowledge!” Replied the voice of Edward White on the radio. “Your transmissions will be relayed to Earth from now on, on top of being recorded aboard the ship.”

“Excellent! We will now go occupy the rover section of the lander.” Said Ingrid before looking at her companions. “Okay, guys: let’s go down to the rover section. Russel, you secure the ascent module behind us.”

“Got it, Ingrid!”

Undoing her seat harness, Ingrid left her seat and opened the hatch leading down to the rover section, then climbed down the aluminum ladder fixed to the communication tube. She had to open the hatch at the bottom before she could enter the rover section, actually stepping down on top of the large round table at the center of the crew’s living room, the main compartment of the rover. She was soon followed down by the five men of the team, with Russel Schweickart coming down last. Once they were all in the crew living room, Ingrid looked solemnly at her companions.

“We will keep our spacesuits on for the moment, so that we could all do a first walk on the surface of Mars. Sergei, Edward, you take out our drill to get our first Mars soil sampling. I will go out with you while Russel will deploy the various antennas and sensors of the rover. I will then return inside, to let Russel and Robert go out for a walk while I power up our onboard nuclear reactor. Robert, you operate the airlock for us.” Ingrid then went to an equipment locker fixed on the outer wall of the living room and took a still camera with tripod from it before going to the rover’s airlock and suit lockers section. She waited for Edward Stokes and Sergei Petrov to join her there, carrying

between them a compact ground drill kit, before entering with them the airlock proper. Sealing her helmet visor first, she then told Robert Sturgiss to close the inner door of the airlock and made sure that her companions had also sealed and pressurized their suits.

"Everybody is ready? Good! Robert, you may depressurize the airlock now."

The noise of an electric pump was then heard as the air in the airlock was pumped out, to be stored back in pressurized bottles. Watching the pressure gauge in the airlock, Ingrid turned the locking wheel of the outer door when the pressure was equal to that outside, which was less than one percent that at sea level on Earth.

"The temperature outside is a balmy minus 120 degrees Fahrenheit, for those who would be interested to know."

"Paah!" Replied Sergei Petrov, a grin on his face. "A very comfortable temperature for a true Siberian like me."

Ingrid smiled at that remark, then pushed open the outer door and activated the access ramp, lowering it to the ground, three meters below the belly of the rover section. She let the two geologists with her step out on the ramp first, then also went out and closed back the outer door of the airlock, securing it before walking down the ramp. She however stopped just before stepping off the ramp, letting her two companions join her and taking each of them by one hand before speaking softly on the radio.

"Let's make this a mutual step for Humanity, my friends. At the count of three, we will take one step together. One, two, three!"

The trio then stepped off the ramp, landing together smoothly on the the Martian dirt. The exhilaration of the moment nearly overwhelmed Ingrid for a few seconds: this was by far her biggest life accomplishment to date, if she excepted adopting Hien. Telling her two companions to stay in place, she walked a few meters away and set up her camera on its tripod, to take a picture of the two men with the Mars Lander behind them.

"Alright, guys: look like perfect buddies for the photo."

"You mean that I am not buddy yet with a communist?" Joked Edward Stokes, prompting a reply from Sergei.

"Talk for yourself, you decadent capitalist!"

The two of them then broke out in laughter just as Ingrid took her first picture.

"Perfect! Let me take two more pictures, then you can set up your drill while I return inside to let the three others come out and have their moment of glory."

"To be here, about to drill a hole on the surface of Mars. And I'm paid to do this!" Said with an extatic smile Edward Stokes when he picked up with Sergei the portable

drill kit. Ingrid smiled at those words and walked up the ramp, leaving her camera behind and returning inside the airlock. Once cycled through and inside the rover, she patted the shoulder of Russel Schweickart, smiling to him.

"Time for you, Michael and Robert to go have a walk outside, Russel. I left the camera on its tripod. Take some good quality still pictures of the canyon and of its cliffs, but don't go overboard: we will be on the surface for thirteen months and our supply of films is finite."

She next turned to face the two geologists left aboard, who looked like kids anxious to go play outside in the snow.

"Set up our first seismic test experiment while Edward and Sergei collect a ground sample. You can take up to two hours to do your geological studies. Remember: Edward is the senior geologist and he will coordinate the geological work outside, so please work as a team."

"Understood, Ingrid." Said Michael Farmer before grabbing with Robert Sturgiss an equipment crate and entering the airlock, along with Russel Schweickart. Ingrid closed and secured the airlock's inner door behind them, then depressurized the airlock, allowing the three men to open the outer door and go down the ramp after closing back the airlock door. Ingrid smiled when she heard the shouts of triumph on the radio as the men finally stepped on Martian soil.

Removing her spacesuit first and storing it in its locker, Ingrid then went to the driving compartment forward, which acted as well as their watch center and where their radio and video communications were. She then checked that the link with the CONSTITUTION, via the constellation of small communications relay satellites they had put in place during the past week, was active. Also presently in orbit was a Mars observation satellite that would continue to study the red planet after their departure back towards Earth. She found Diane Sawyer, the ship's communications officer, on the video link and smiled to her via the camera fixed above the television screen of the communications console.

"Did the pictures of our first steps on Mars make it on our video link, Diane?"

"Yes, they did, Ingrid. They were immediately retransmitted to Earth via our main directional antenna array. Our people should be about to celebrate right now in Vandenberg and Washington. How are your geologists doing?"

“As happy as pigs in shit.” Replied Ingrid, grinning. “I don’t think that I will have to push them to do their work. Rather, I bet that my main job will be to remind them that their spacesuits’ air reserves can’t last forever.”

Diane Sawyer then took a conspiratorial expression and spoke in a low tone.

“Uh, aren’t you afraid that a lone woman stuck for thirteen months with five guys in a sardine can could experience, uh, unwanted advances, Ingrid? I know that we already discussed that with Louise Morin, but talking about it is not the same as experiencing it.”

Ingrid looked back soberly at the television screen before replying to Diane: she was very conscious of the potential problems her present situation could bring and took them very seriously.

“Well, I am sure that Louise will be able to write one very interesting study report about that, Diane. It is indeed something that I am keeping firmly in mind. I will deal with the situation as it evolves down here. For the moment, the excitement about their work is doing wonders to keep their minds off my body. What I am more worried about at this point is the speculations and rumors that this will raise on Earth. Some radio and television hosts will probably fill some air time talking about that. By the way, how is Mary Robertson doing?”

“She is doing well and still is able to work her duty shifts without problems. Doctor Clarkson is closely monitoring her pregnancy and everything seems to be going well.”

“Excellent! I will make sure that the rover’s external cameras transmit continuously images of our geologists at work on Mars, so that you can retransmit them to Earth. We might as well use to the maximum the media impact of this mission to build up support for my command and its work. I will send a report after supper this evening. In the meantime, call us at once if anything new happens on the ship.”

“Got that, Ingrid. Have a nice day on Mars, you and your team. CONSTITUTION, out!”

As Ingrid had predicted, she had to nearly cajole her four geologists to make them return to the rover after over three hours spent outside. They returned with big smiles on their faces, prompting a joke from Ingrid.

“Alright, who unscrewed one of our wheels, so that we would have to stay longer here?”

Edward Stokes exchanged knowing looks with the three other geologists before answering her.

"Come on, Ingrid! We wouldn't stoop this low just to study a few rocks. Well, maybe, if the rock was special enough."

"I thought so! Get out of your spacesuits and make sure that you change the air bottles in them and plug the batteries for a recharge, then we will have lunch. After that, we will drive westward for a while to choose our next study site."

"What's on the menu?" Asked at once Sergei Petrov. "I'm famished!"

"Well, the boxes of ration types I thawed include chili con carne, chicken supreme, pork fried rice and hamburger steak. Sorry, no bortsch or goulash, Sergei."

"Well, I can't complain much, not after tasting the rations our own cosmonauts have to eat aboard our MIR orbital space station. The pasted goulash served to our cosmonauts is absolutely awful."

"Well, you know by now why us decadent capitalists are fat...like thieves." Replied Ingrid, making the others laugh.

Their first big discovery came two hours later, as Russel Schweickart was driving the rover westward at speeds between ten and thirty kilometers per hour, with Edward Stokes and Michael Farmer examining like hawks the ground and cliffs around them for any patch of interest. Robert Sturgiss and Sergei Petrov, both of whom held degrees in chemistry on top of their doctorates in geology, had gone after lunch into the small geology laboratory adjacent to the crew living room, intent on studying the soil samples they had previously collected. Sturgiss came out of the lab long enough to shout to the rest of the team inside the driving compartment, excitement in his voice.

"WE FOUND WATER ICE AS PERMAFROST IN OUR CARROT SAMPLES!"

That prompted Stokes and Farmer in nearly running back to the lab, while Ingrid made Russel stop the rover for a moment before leaving her seat and also going to the lab. She had to stand in the doorway of the lab, as the compartment was already crowded out by the four geologists inside it.

"How sure are you about that water ice, Robert?"

"One hundred percent certain, Ingrid. Sergei, who often sees permafrost soil when exploring Siberia, visually noticed nearly at once a section of sample soil that was situated about seven inches below the surface. I then ran parts of that sample through our spectrometer: it is water ice alright, salty water ice to be more precise."

"Salty water ice? But, that would have been ideal to nurture and support some form of life when liquid, no?"

"Correct, Ingrid. This is big! I am going to write a short preliminary report about this, so that you could send it up to the ship and to Earth. This by itself would justify this mission, especially if we find more water permafrost in future soil patches."

"Damn, I think that I will give a heads up about this right away on the radio. Great job, Robert! You too, Sergei!"

Feeling like a million dollars, Ingrid then went back to the driving compartment to use the radio, leaving the four geologists to wonder over their soil samples.

17:31 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, September 29, 1971 'C'

Mars Rover, Capri Chasma canyon

Valles Marineris, Mars

"Look at the slopes to our right: they look like streams of water or mud once flowed down from them a long time ago. I think that they will make for some interesting ground to explore tomorrow."

"I agree, Ed." Replied Ingrid, who was looking at the slopes in question through the armored windows of the rover's driving compartment while Russel Schweickart was driving slowly, following the base of the monumental cliffs dominating the bottom of the canyon from a height of 8,000 meters. "Park here for the night, Russel. Darkness is about to come and we could use some rest and a good supper."

"That we do!" Said Edward Stokes. "All our soil samples from five different spots show the presence of salty water ice in permafrost layers. Those past three days sure were worth the trip. And I am not even mentioning the possible presence of an aquifer layer deep under the surface. More seismic tests should soon confirm that as well. Overall, this makes for great science."

"Agreed! We are already getting kudos and requests for further information from Earth on a daily basis now. Well, let's get some rest and relaxation now: today may be a busy day."

Letting the others disperse to their cabins, Ingrid went quickly to her own cabin, time to grab her hygiene kit, a towel and a fresh set of clothes, then went to the tiny

washroom compartment adjacent to the crew living room. Contrary to the CONSTITUTION, which was big enough to accommodate extensive water and waste recycling systems, the rover contained only rudimentary systems, with only the air being fully recycled and reused. Washing was thus limited to sponge baths using moist sanitary towels sealed in plastic bags, with the towels thrown away after use. As for shaving for the men, partly recycled water that was not potable was available, but in limited quantity. All the solid waste was compacted and then thrown away in tough plastic garbage bags. Locking the door of the washroom behind her, Ingrid then undressed fully and opened her hygiene kit. Before sponging herself down, she however took a disposable razor and carefully shaved her groin, then her armpits, something that helped in cutting down body odor. She had been doing that on Earth as well anyway, for the same reason but also to better attract men. As a single mother with the body of a young woman of at most twenty, she still did her fair share of man hunting, even though she kept her private life as discreet as possible, especially in view of her high visibility as a four-star general and presidential advisor. Once her shaving was done, she took out a wet sanitary towel and cleaned herself as best she could in the circumstances. One thing she could do little about however was her hair: she would have to be back on the CONSTITUTION before she could shampoo her hair. The idea of having to pass over a year with unwashed hair was not a pleasant one but there was little she could do about that while on the surface of Mars. The idea of using the stop at the two cargo modules that had landed in Valles Marineris to have a hair-washing session with the reserves of water on the cargo then crossed her mind. While the water on the cargo modules was theoretically meant for drinking, there was enough of a surplus reserve to afford one shampooing session for each team member. One session per five months was nothing to shout about, but it was still better than nothing. Coming out of the washroom after fourteen minutes, Ingrid nearly collided with Sergei Petrov, who had been about to go in the washroom himself. Ingrid didn't miss the discreet look of longing in the Soviet's eyes and she smiled to him before returning to her own cabin. Having supper and then writing her daily report to be sent to the ship and to Earth used most of her evening and she went to bed early, more tired than she would admit. In truth, despite the low gravity on Mars, working in a spacesuit was quite tiresome, even though walking outside on Mars did a lot to prevent bouts of cabin fever.

Waking up next morning and going to visit the toilet compartment first, Ingrid then went to the driving compartment, where she found Sergei Petrov and Edward Stokes examining visually the nearby slopes with the help of their mast-mounted camera with zoom lens.

“See anything of interest, guys?”

“I believe so, Ingrid.” Answered Stokes, sounding hopeful. “Come and look at this.”

Approaching the observation mast control station, Ingrid looked at the camera viewing screen and saw that the camera was pointed at what looked like a dark opening or recess at the intersection of the slopes and of the vertical cliffs dominating them.

“Is this a cave of some sort, Ed?”

“Me and Sergei think so, Ingrid. It certainly looks interesting enough to warrant some exploring on our part. However, it is a good four miles away, up a twenty degree slope. Do you think that our rover could get up all the way to that cave?”

“I believe so. It will be slow going, since we will have to roll on low gear, but it will be worth taking the time. I will drive up the slope. In the meantime, go have breakfast and then prepare your equipment. Take along some climbing gear, in case we find steep tunnels in there.”

“Got it!”

As the two men went back to the crew lounge, Ingrid sat in the driver’s seat and put the electric wheels of the rover in low gear, then started rolling up the slope towards the suspected cave entrance. It took her a good hour and a half to get to it, by which time the rest of her team was all sitting around her, looking with growing excitement at the dark opening in the cliff side.

“Look at how the mud flow’s main channel seems to have come from that cave.” Said Michael Farmer. “An ancient river must have flowed through it.”

“Most probably.” Agreed Edward Stokes. “Exploring that cave may well tell us much about past water on Mars.”

“Very well!” Said Ingrid after stopping the rover about twenty meters from the cave entrance and locking the wheels. “Ed, Sergei, you will go out with me to explore that cave. Russel, you stay here as a backup, while Mike and Robert collect samples from that mud flow channel.”

Twenty minutes later, Ingrid was exiting the rover with the four geologists, carrying a long, thin but tough nylon rope and with spiked soles attached to her boots. She was also unwinding behind her a thin communication wire connected to a radio relay box, so that her team could stay in contact with the rover from inside the cave. As they approached the entrance of the cave, Ingrid saw that it was apparently quite deep, on top of being very large.

"It seems that this is a full-fledged cavern after all, guys. Let's proceed slowly and scan carefully the walls, floor and ceiling: I don't want us to miss anything of interest."

"I agree with that, Ingrid. This entrance was definitely pierced by some water flow in the distant past. Do you think that we will find actual water ice in that cave?"

"I doubt so, Ed. The atmospheric pressure is too low and water ice would simply evaporate or boil away at this level. Let's enter this cave and see what it is hiding, if anything."

With their headlamps lit and being attached to each other by long safety ropes, the trio entered the dark opening, soon ending up in a downward sloping tunnel that shrank gradually to a diameter of about seven or eight meters. Ingrid had covered maybe 200 meters inside the tunnel and judged her depth to be now at around thirty meters under the level of the cave's mouth when a sort of stone pillar appeared in the light of her headlamp.

"What the hell is that?"

Edward Stokes then spoke, his voice nearly strangled by disbelief.

"A stalagmite! I can now see as well a stalactite. Liquid water once dripped down from that ceiling a long time ago. This is incredible! I must take pictures and samples of this."

"Sergei, orient your lamp like I do, to illuminate that stalagmite so that Ed can take his pictures."

As Stokes was taking his pictures, Ingrid sent out a radio message to the rover with the help of her relay box.

"Rover, this is Ingrid. We just found a stalagmite and stalactite inside the cave, about 650 feet down a tunnel. Water definitely flowed once through this tunnel."

"Wow! This should excite a few scientists back on Earth."

“Well, there may yet be more surprises down that tunnel. Pass the word to the CONSTITUTION, along with pictures of the cave’s entrance.”

After letting the two geologists collect samples from the stalagmite and stalactite, Ingrid continued her advance, her step now slow to allow a better look around. Her caution paid off nearly at once, with more stalagmites and stalactites appearing in growing numbers as she went forward and down. Her sharp eyes suddenly caught on something on a wall that made her stop, then walk towards that wall.

“I see something on that wall.”

“What is it, Ingrid?” Asked Stokes.

“I am not sure, Ed.”

The two geologists then approached her, looking at the part of wall illuminated by her headlamp. Realization dawned on Ingrid at the same time as Sergei Petrov let out a strangled exclamation.

“Dear Holy Mary! An animal fossil!”

Ingrid slowly went down on her knees as the two thunderstruck geologists examined from up close what had attracted her eyes. Edward Stokes spoke in turn after half a minute, awe in his voice.

“It is indeed a fossil, that of some kind of primitive fish. Ingrid, we indeed found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.”

“You can say that again, Ed. God, this is going to be big! Rover, this is Ingrid: tell Mike and Robert to join us at once inside the cave with an empty storage container. We just found the fossil of a fish. I want them to come and carefully collect it while we continue exploring this tunnel.”

“Did you say a fossil?” Replied Russel Schweickart, clearly disbelieving.

“Yes, I did! Get an empty container ready for Mike and Robert inside the airlock, then pass the word up by radio to the ship. This is going to be pay day!”

Her heart still beating at an accelerated rate, Ingrid took a few pictures of the fossil from a number of angles. She then helped her two companions look around for more possible fossils while waiting for Mike and Robert. Sergei muttered on the radio as they looked at the walls, ceiling and floor of the tunnel.

“There must be more nearby: fossils are often found as groups.”

The Soviet spoke again three minutes later, after wandering about ten meters down the tunnel.

"I have another one here!"

Ingrid and Edward nearly ran to him to look at what he had found and saw a piece of rock that had detached itself from a wall, revealing a strangely-shaped thing.

"It looks like some kind of algae or marine plant." Said Edward, making Ingrid nod.

"I would concur with that. It could have been part of the local food chain millions of years ago, when conditions were less harsh on Mars."

The senior geologist gave an overwhelmed look at Ingrid.

"Do you realize the kind of shock the news of past life on Mars will create back on Earth, Ingrid?"

"More than you think, Ed. You know what the reaction of some of the churches on Earth will be to this? More than a few preachers in the Southern States will swallow their false teeth on hearing about this."

"So what if they do?" Replied Sergei, attracting a smirk from Ingrid.

"Spoken like a true down to Earth socialist, Sergei. I however agree with you: science trumps religious beliefs in this case...or in any case."

She then glanced at her air gauge.

"We now have about two hours of air left. As soon as Mike and Robert are here, we will continue with our exploration down this tunnel. We will then have to turn around and return to the surface in one hour."

They had to wait another three minutes before their companions showed up, carrying an empty storage container half filled with dirty, disposed coveralls meant to wrap their precious finds. Giving them instructions and showing them the two fossils they had found, Ingrid then led Sergei and Edward down the tunnel, scanning carefully the rock surfaces as she went. The slope of the tunnel was now getting progressively steeper, with both the atmospheric pressure and temperature steadily increasing as they went down. Their search yielded another fossil, that of a sort of invertebrate marine creature about the size of a trout, some 500 meters further down from the spot of their first finds. Looking at her air gauge again, then at the gauge of her two companions, Ingrid took a quick decision.

"Let's photograph and mark the location of this fossil, then we will return to the rover. There is still obviously a lot more of this tunnel to explore and we might as well do

it in a methodical way. No sense in taking unnecessary risks by rushing around: those fossils waited for millions of years and they can wait a day or two more.”

Stokes and Petrov, despite their curiosity being aroused to the maximum, agreed with her and walked back up, emerging in the light of day some twenty minutes later. Walking back to the parked rover, the trio entered its airlock and were cycled through by Russel Schweickart, who greeted them with solid handshakes.

“Those were some outstanding finds you uncovered. Diane Sawyer says that the news of this is already creating shockwaves around the Earth.”

“Well, I frankly couldn’t think of a better publicity for my Space Command.” Said jokingly Ingrid. “The next budget battle at the Pentagon should go better for me after this.”

“That’s if you are not burned at the stake before that by religious fundamentalists incensed at you finding that life is not limited to Earth, Ingrid. I know that my own past preacher would have screamed ‘Heresy’ for this.”

“I hate to quote Stalin on this, but how many divisions does the Pope have? I deal with facts, not with beliefs. Besides, I am ‘God’s General’, remember?”

Russel made a face at that.

“Well, I suppose the next few days should be quite interesting indeed.”

“Yeah! ‘May you live in interesting times’ the Chinese said. You know that it was meant as a curse, right?”

“Oh yes, I did!”

06:49 (Universal Time)

Thursday, September 30, 1971 ‘C’

Cliffside cave, Capri Chasma

Valles Marineris, Mars

Ingrid first guided Michael Farmer and Robert Sturgiss to the last fossil she had found yesterday, so that they could detach it from the rock walls and bring it to the rover, then continued down the tunnel with Edward Stokes and Sergei Petrov. With their headlamps lit and looking carefully for more fossils on the walls, the trio slowly walked down the dark tunnel, which was now getting quite steep. Checking her spacesuit’s instruments periodically, Ingrid saw that both the local pressure and temperature was steadily climbing as they went down. After about twenty minutes of walking, the trio

encountered a split in the tunnel, with a second tunnel diverging from the main one. That tunnel being clearly smaller than the first, Ingrid decided to ignore it at this time and continued down the main tunnel. Shortly afterwards, multiple light reflections from their headlamps shone back at them from the surfaces of the tunnel. Getting close to one of the sources of reflection, Sergei Petrov quietly swore.

“Dear Mother Russia! Salt crystals! Salty water definitely flowed through this part of the tunnel in the past. I will photograph and collect a sample.”

As the Soviet geologist did so, imitated by Edward Stokes, Ingrid looked again at her instruments.

“Hum! Local pressure is now up to three milibars, while the temperature climbed to minus 34 degrees centigrade. It is nearly balmy now down here.”

“Something normal when you go down deep tunnels, like mine shafts and volcanic chimneys.” Said Edward as he collected a sample of salt crystal. “If we go deep enough, we could be liable to actually encounter water in liquid form.”

“That would indeed be a great scientific find.” Agreed Ingrid, who resumed their advance once the two geologists had packed away their samples. The salt crystals progressively grew in numbers and size as they went down the slope of the tunnel, until the whole surface of it was covered with salt blocks, which created a dazzling display of colorful light reflections from their headlamps.

“My God, this is beautiful!” Said softly Ingrid. “Let me take pictures of this, guys.”

As she did so, Edward approached Sergei, looking at him through his helmet visor.

“This tunnel exploration is turning into quite an extraordinary series of finds. And we have been on Mars for less than four days. With thirteen months to go on the surface, what we find is liable to provide studies and discussions among the scientific community on Earth for years.”

“Too true! Just the fossils we found are already enough to completely rewrite what we know about Mars. If we just could find water in liquid form, that would be great.”

“My hopes for that are steadily climbing as we go further down this tunnel, Sergei.”

The trio resume its walk down the tunnel a minute later. Soon, the steepness of the slope prompted Ingrid in having her group attach safety ropes to each other, in case

one of them slipped and fell. That soon nearly happened, with only the spiked soles attached to their boots preventing Edward from slipping on the floor covered with salt crystals.

“What the...! It is as if I was walking on wet ice.”

Ingrid was about to say something when a drop of water splashed down on the transparent dome of her helmet, making her nearly shout in excitement.

“A droplet just fell on my helmet!”

She was quickly joined by Sergei, who directed his lamp at the ceiling, about three meters above their heads.

“The salt crystal surface effectively appears wet, Ingrid. What is the local temperature now?”

“Minus 29 degrees Centigrade. The pressure is also up, at 3.5 millibars.”

“Well, brine can stay in liquid form in such conditions, Ingrid. My question now would be where this water came from.”

“From further down, I bet. Let’s keep going down, but be careful not to slip.”

Thankfull, the slope of the tunnel progressively decreased shortly afterwards, while the width and height of the tunnel increased. The floor and walls were still covered with wet salt crystal blocks, however, which made walking treacherous. Ingrid was still leading the trio when the tunnel suddenly widened dramatically. She looked up at the ceiling then and found that it was now nearly horizontal.

“I think that we are closing in on something, guys. The ceiling...”

“What? What about the ceiling, Ingrid?” Asked Sergei, who also looked up.

“Forget the ceiling! I just started splashing through water.”

“WHAT?”

Sergei and Edward looked down at their feet, only to see that they were now effectively standing in a shallow puddle of liquid water.

“Oh my God!” Could only say Edward. When Ingrid’s voice came up again on the radio, it sounded deeply shaken.

“Guys, I think that we just found the underground aquifer you were speculating about three days ago.”

Looking up from his feet and sweeping his headlamp ahead of him, Edward felt his heart miss a beat: beyond him in the darkness lay the surface of a lake that extended past the reach of his lamp’s beam. Advancing very cautiously while probing with one foot at a

time, he soon came to a point where he found no footing, just water. Taking a decision, he sat down on the submerged floor, his two legs now in liquid water.

“Ingrid, grab my safety line: I am going to see how deep this water is.”

Ingrid didn't argue with him then, herself too shaken and curious about the body of water they had just found. Pushing himself forward, Edward soon found himself floating on water, with the top half of his spacesuit sticking out.

“I should have thought about that before: this brine has a high flotation index, like the water of the Dead Sea in Israel. I would need weights to sink further down.”

“Wait!” Said Sergei. “I am going to improvise for you a depth sounding rope with my safety line and a wrench.”

A minute or so later, Sergei handed to Edward his weighed rope, which the later used to try finding the bottom.

“The bottom under me is about five feet deep. Let me just swim out further to check another spot.”

Propelling himself with his gloved hands, Edward advanced maybe four more meters, then let his weighed rope go down.

“Well, guys, from where I am now I can't find the bottom, even after letting about fifteen feet of rope go. This is indeed an aquifer.”

“Ed, Sergei, shut down your headlamps, quick!” Suddenly said Ingrid urgently, while she shut down her own lamp. Even though surprised by her request, the two men obeyed her and found themselves in total darkness...except for moving dots of light now visible in the water. Both fascinated and stunned, Edward followed with his eyes one of those dots of light as it approached him in a zigzag pattern. It then started circling him, showing him that, whatever it was, it actually had three luminescent dots of greenish light on its body.

“A...a luminescent fish of some kind. THERE IS ACTUAL LIFE ON MARS!”

While Ingrid stayed still on the ledge of the lake in order to film the event, Sergei joined Edward in the water but chose to lay face down, so that his helmet was more than half submerged.

“Do like me, Ed: I can now see better that fish, along with more similar creatures.”

Edward did so and soon had a good look at a sardine-sized fish of totally alien shape whose transparent innards were dimly illuminated by the three luminescent dots on its back. Grabby his own camera, Edward took a number of pictures of the fish. Another

similar fish then joined the first, giving to Edward the chance to do a double shot. The Martian fish on their part seemed as intrigued by him as he was by them and swam close to him. Edward soon had a dozen of the creatures swimming close to him, making him ecstatic as he took picture after picture.

“This is incredible! Should I try to capture one of those fish, Ingrid?”

“NO, DON'T!” Replied at once Ingrid. “We can't say if they are sentient or not. We better leave them alone for the time being. Just take a sample of this brine, to bring back to the rover.”

“Dear Holy Mary!” Exclaimed Sergei, still floating face down in the water. “This even beats the time when I found the frozen body of a mammoth in the Tundra during an expedition. Wait! I can now see one of those fish open its mouth repeatedly and gobble up something. I can't however see what it is swallowing.”

“Microscopic creatures probably, like the plankton in Earth's oceans.” Said Ingrid. “Maybe you should come out of the water now, guys.”

“Why?”

“Because this concentrated brine could well corrode parts of your spacesuits and weaken or even hole them. Once back inside the rover, we will have to thoroughly clean and lubricate your spacesuits. I am sad to say this, but we are ill-equipped to explore this underground aquifer, however tempted I am to do just that. Just come back to firm ground, guys.”

Reluctantly, the two geologists returned to the shore of the lake and climbed back to dry ground with Ingrid. The latter gave a last regretful look at the lake.

“Such a fantastic find, yet we can't properly explore it. Well, we have already enough to turn upside down all our previous knowledge about life on Mars. Let's return to the rover: we now have barely one hour of air left.”

After a triumphant return to the rover, Ingrid started writing a detailed report of what they had found, while her five male companions got busy cleaning and lubricating Edward's and Sergei's spacesuits. As she expected, the reception of her preliminary report about the underground lake caused consternation on Earth. That report was followed by a second report done by Sergei on the exact composition of the salt water from the lake and of the salt crystals lining the walls of the tunnel. That report was further spiced up by details on the few microscopic organisms that were found by Sergei inside the sample of brine taken from the lake. The rover stayed parked near the cave

for the next few days, while Ingrid's team thoroughly investigated the cave complex, which turned out to count a total of three separate tunnels. Each tunnel in turn ended at the surface of an aquifer, which were probably interconnected and had Martian fish swimming in them. The team even saw a second, different and a bit bigger type of fish than the first they had seen in the first underground lake. They also discovered a total of five more fossils. Then, the rover moved out to continue its exploration of the Valles Marineris. They had found and seen a lot already, but there was still so much more left to explore of the red planet.

14:06 (California Time)

Saturday, October 2, 1971 'C'

Media conference center, Space Command Manned Operations Division

Vandenberg Space Command Base, California

U.S.A.

Gertrude Meserve scanned visually the crowd of reporters, including television camera crews and foreign media representatives, that filled the auditorium. Rumors of what she was going to announce publicly for the first time must have leaked out, as the reporters seemed quite excited. Sitting besides her at the table set on the stage of the auditorium was a panel of seven civilian scientists: biologists, paleontologists and planetologists, plus Doctor Von Braun, who would act as the expert on space systems for this conference. Clearing her throat first, Gertrude then spoke calmly in the microphone set in front of her on the table.

"Welcome to Vandenberg Space Command Base, ladies and gentlemen of the press. You have all been invited here so that you could learn about an astounding discovery our surface exploration team made on Mars. Two days ago, it found life on it." Her short first statement was enough to make the crowd explode in excited exclamations and shouted questions. She let the initial storm quiet down a bit before speaking again.

"To be more precise, our astronauts found life underground, in a large aquifer system connected to the surface by tunnels that were formed billions of years ago by either running water or volcanic activity. After finding the entrance of a cave on a cliffside of Capri Chasma, a part of the giant canyon complex of Valles Marineris, our surface team found tunnels that went deep underground. While those tunnels bore the marks of ancient liquid water, they also contained the fossilized remains of past Martian

lifeforms. To date, our astronauts found the fossils of a total of five different species of either creatures or plants, all marine lifeforms. Continuing down the tunnels, our team then encountered lakes of liquid salt water in large subterranean caves. In those lakes, they saw primitive forms of fish and of microscopic organisms swimming in highly salty water. Doctor Henry Kaufmann, Chairman of Biology at the UCLA²³, will now brief you on the various lifeforms our Mars surface team found.”

“Thank you, General.” Said the graying biologist before clicking a button on the remote control of a slide projector, making a picture appear on a large screen behind and above the briefers’ table.

“What you are seeing now is the first of many pictures retransmitted by our Mars expedition and showing the fossils they found. On this slide, you can see the fossilized remains of a primitive invertebrate somewhat similar to our own trilobites, which lived in Earth’s oceans about half a billion years ago. By the way, all the fossils you will see are of marine lifeforms. No remains of land-based lifeforms have been found to date.”

“WHY IS IT SO, DOCTOR KAUFMANN?” Shouted at once a reporter without waiting for the question period. Kaufmann answered him calmly, while Gertrude eyed critically the reporter.

“As you may know already, land life on Earth originated from the oceans, hundreds of million years ago. In this case, it seems that Mars lost most of its atmosphere and all of its surface water before the Martian marine life could evolve enough to venture on dry land. The primitive character of the lifeforms our Mars team found to date would tend to point to such a scenario. Now, here is another type of fossil that was found...”

Kaufmann spoke for maybe six minutes, with side presentations by the other scientists at the table following. The last briefer, planetologist James Schiarelli, made a declaration that then piked further the curiosity of the reporters, with Edward Murrow of CBS raising his hand and getting on his feet.

“Doctor Schiarelli, how possible is it for all those underground lakes to be found all over Mars and to be interconnected into one large underground sea?”

“Frankly, we are still speculating about that, as the surface exploration of Mars has barely begun. Remember that our surface team is due to stay on Mars for thirteen

²³ UCLA : University of California at Los Angeles.

months. We will need a lot more data and studies before we could form a working model of the structure of Mars and of its underground layers. Hopefully, by the time our surface exploration team returns to our ship in orbit, we will know a lot more than.”

“Who discovered the first fossil in those tunnels and who saw those Martian fish, General Meserve?” Asked the representative of the Soviet Tass Agency, who had been one of the foreign correspondents invited to the conference. Gertrude, who had kept a discreet eye on the Soviet, answered at once.

“The first fossils were discovered jointly by General Ingrid Dows, Doctor Edward Stokes, of the University of Oregon, and Doctor Sergei Petrov, of the Novossibirsk University. Both Doctor Stokes and Doctor Petrov floated on the surface of the underground lake where the first fish were seen.”

The Tass Agency man, obviously pleased by her answer, scribbled frantically on his notepad as a reporter from the Washington Post asked the next question.

“General Meserve, the interior of the Mars Rover was described during a previous conference as ‘cramped’. How cramped exactly is the living space inside that rover?”

“Well, you have a crew of six persons sharing a floor space of approximately 1,100 square feet, which works out to about 180 square feet per person, the size of a tiny bedroom.”

“And you said that those astronauts would be spending thirteen months inside that rover, correct?”

“Yes! What are you getting at, mister?” Replied Gertrude, who was starting to be leary of that reporter. Her suspicions were then confirmed by the next question from the man.

“General, you have one woman, a young and beautiful one at that, living with five fit men for thirteen months inside what many would call a sardine can. Don’t you expect, uh, things to happen inside that rover?”

As the other reporters and cameramen present listened on with renewed interest, Gertrude eyed the Washington Post man with clear displeasure.

“Mister, I frankly don’t like the line of questions you are pushing now. Yes, General Dows is a beautiful and still apparently young woman, but she is actually 48 years old, fought with great distinction in five wars and has been a general officer for over 27 years. She is a highly responsible and mature woman and so are the four scientists and one other officer presently with her on Mars. If your goal is to create some

kind of scandal where there is none, then you are welcomed to leave this conference room, mister. Next question?"

Seeing that two security guards of the Space Command were now approaching his row of seats in the auditorium, the reporter decided to clam up and sit down. However, the seeds of a controversy were now sown, tainting the minds of the other reporters present.

Gertrude was still fuming about the Washington Post reporter and was promising herself to blacklist him from Space Command bases when the press conference came to an end. She however stopped for a moment after coming out of the auditorium, to think about the possible fallouts from the reporter's question. The American public and government was still too prudish and hypocritical in her opinion to be able to look at that aspect of space travel with a cool head and common sense. Any rumor of so-called impropriety on or around Mars would quickly grow to a scandal that would attract a number of demagogues and self-serving politicians and preachers. On the other hand, it would be largely up to her, as Chief of Manned Space Operations, to deal with any controversy or scandal. And a baby was due to be born on the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION in less than four months! Thankfully, that little fact was still a secret.

09:52 (Universal Time)

Friday, January 14, 1972 'C'

Medical examination room, U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

Low Mars orbit

"IT'S A BOY!" Nearly shouted Wendy Clarkson as the gore-covered newborn slipped out of Mary Robertson's vagina and into her waiting hands. Lieutenant (Navy) Angela Moore took the baby at once to quickly wash away with warm water and a towel the worst of the placenta fluid and blood smearing it, then wrapped it in a clean cloth and put it in the waiting arms of an exhausted but happy Mary Robertson.

"He is beautiful! Welcome to the World, Kevin Prentice." She said softly before kissing the head of the crying baby. Wendy Clarkson, feeling like a million dollars, looked at her other nurse, Captain Sylvia Swenson.

"Record the birth as having happened at nine fifty-two, Universal Time, with the name of the baby being Kevin Prentice."

"Uh, what should I put on the birth certificate as the place of birth, Colonel?"

Wendy paused for a moment before answering.

“Put the birth as having taken place aboard the spaceship U.S.S. CONSTITUTION. Also mention in brackets that the CONSTITUTION was in Mars low polar orbit at the time of birth.”

“Understood, Colonel.”

Wendy then concentrated her attention back on the baby, who had calmed down in his mother’s arms. The newborn was of a good weight and seemed perfectly healthy, despite being the first baby to ever be born in space. Mary Robertson looked in turn at Wendy, some uncertainty showing in her eyes.

“How am I going to care for him now, on this ship, Doctor? We have no baby supplies or food. What about my work shifts?”

“Others have been thinking about this for you while you were carrying your child, Mary. We will improvise but everything will be alright.”

The news of the birth went around the ship like a flaming trail of gunpowder, with many coming to visit Mary and her baby at the infirmary as soon as their shift was over. While an encrypted ‘eyes only’ message was sent to Gertrude Meserve on Earth to announce the birth, so that the father could be informed discreetly, another message was sent in clear down to the surface of Mars, where Ingrid’s team was still exploring the canyons of the Valles Marineris, now having reached the Coprates Chasma and having driven through about one third of the length of Valles Marineris. The news made for a nice excuse to celebrate aboard the Mars Rover, where Ingrid took out of its secret stash one of the bottles of scotch she had smuggled in her personal kit bag. Her male companions didn’t protest as she poured in low gravity cups the first alcohol ever to be served on Mars. She then raised her cup high, imitated by her companions sitting around the central table of the crew living room.

“To life, wherever it may be found!”

“TO LIFE!” Replied the five men in a chorus before downing their shot of scotch. Sergei Petrov looked at his now empty cup with appreciation.

“It may not be vodka, but it isn’t bad at all.”

“Not bad at all?” Said Ingrid in an indignant tone. “A 24 year-old malt scotch?”

“Don’t listen to that peasant, Ingrid.” Said in a playful tone Edward Stokes, who had become a very good friend of the Soviet geologist. “How about a refill?”

“Why not? We certainly deserved it.”

She poured more scotch in the presented cups, not being stingy about it either, then looked thoughtfully at the faces around the table.

"We have already accomplished many things here, great things that will benefit science all over Earth and will also hopefully teach a lesson about the place of life in the Universe. One day, we may find even more alien life, possibly on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn."

"And I hope that we will all be alive when that happens." Said Robert Sturgiss, making the others' heads nod. They had taken another sip of their scotch when Sergei spoke again.

"Ingrid, that communications technician who just gave birth to a boy, how will she be treated by your government for becoming pregnant in space?"

"Actually, she became pregnant on Earth, but realized it only once in space, Sergei." Corrected Ingrid, who then paused before continuing.

"If I can manage to keep this little detail discreet until our return on Earth, then I will make sure that no negative repercussion hits Sergeant Robertson. Being the boss of the Military Space Command will help in this matter."

"And what about the public reaction, or that from Washington?"

"I will deal with it as things happen."

"And how would a Soviet child born in space and her mother would be treated if that happened on a Soviet space station, Sergei?" Asked sneakily Edward, making the Soviet man roll his eyes.

"I can't even start to imagine what would happen, frankly. While the baby would be publicly celebrated as 'the first space communist', his mother and father would probably have to face a lot of hard questions and would probably have to kiss goodbye to their careers as cosmonauts. Ingrid, I sincerely hope that this little boy will be able to live a normal life, but I suspect that a lot of unhealthy attention will be on him."

"As an object of medical studies, you mean?"

"Yes!"

"That will never happen, not as long as I am in charge of Space Command."

Russel Schweickart gave her a funny look then.

"What about all those that hate you in Washington, for various reasons, Ingrid? Couldn't they just short-circuit you?"

"If that happens, then I will go directly to the President about this." Replied firmly Ingrid. "I happen to be in very good terms with Bob Kennedy and with his brother John, who still has a lot of influence in Washington."

Her declaration made Sergei wiggle his hand.

"Hell, I wish I had the kind of political connections you got, Ingrid."

"Well, you don't get to be a special presidential advisor for five successive presidents without learning a thing or two about Washington politics, Sergei."

They were then silent for a moment, sipping their scotch, until Sergei spoke yet again.

"Ingrid, could you tell us about Nancy Laplante, your adoptive mother? We heard very little about her in the Soviet Union."

"I will be most happy to speak about her, Sergei." Replied Ingrid with genuine enthusiasm. She ended speaking for a good hour while her team emptied the bottle of scotch. Having worked non-stop for nearly four months without a single day off, she then decided that today would be a good time to take a well deserved break. Before going to bed that night, Ingrid had a silent prayer to The One, asking him to look kindly on little Kevin Prentice.

13:19 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, August 29, 1972 'C'

Oval Office, White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Robert Kennedy had a sarcastic smile on his face as he finished reading the classified report from the State Department.

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen!" He said to himself. The report was about the intensifying campaign of bombings and assassinations by the Irish nationalists of the IRA against the British and their supporters in Northern Ireland. The British had seemingly decided to respond to the initial attacks with overwhelming and brutal force, but had only succeeded in making the confrontation more bloody. The civil war in Northern Ireland, called 'The Troubles' by the British, was now sucking up British military and police assets like a vacuum cleaner, on top of costing a fortune to the British treasury, which could ill afford it. This was on top of a severe economic crisis and numerous labor strikes in Great Britain. From claiming to be still a top World power at the end of World War 2, Great Britain had effectively lost progressively most of its

previous empire, including India, and had been supplanted by a wide margin by both the United States and the Soviet Union in terms of World influence and prestige. All this could have been avoided by the British if they would have behaved like true allies of the United States, but their sense of imperial entitlement had led them into some disastrous policies that had cost them most of their friends, starting with the United States. The last straw for Washington had been the shooting down in 1957 over Australia of Ingrid Dows' spaceplane, as it was returning from a space rescue mission with two Soviet cosmonauts. While the act of rescuing those two cosmonauts had not put an end to the American-Soviet rivalry, it had created enough goodwill between the two superpowers to at least avoid many disputes and confrontations. One present act of goodwill was the participation of Soviet scientists in the Mars Mission, with one such Soviet scientist featuring prominently in the surface exploration team led by Ingrid Dows. That last thought returned Robert Kennedy's mind to his daily agenda, which was quite full. Checking with his secretary, he was told that his science advisor, Professor Donald Hornig, was waiting to see him with Lieutenant General Medaris, from the Military Space Command.

"Very well, Miss Lincoln: let them in!"

The scientist and the general entered the Oval Office half a minute later, to be greeted with handshakes by Robert, who had risen from his work chair and had walked around the presidential desk.

"Professor Hornig, General Medaris, what may I do for you today?"

"Mister President," said Medaris, "I received a request from Professor Hornig, a request that I disagreed with. Professor Hornig thus decided to raise the question with you, in order to obtain your support for his request."

"Oh! And what would be that request?"

"The extension of the Mars surface exploration phase, Mister President." Answered Hornig. Robert, seeing at once that the subject could mean serious repercussions for the Mars Mission, pointed the sofas set in one corner of the Oval Office.

"Then, let's sit, gentlemen."

The three men sat down facing each other around the round coffee table, with Hornig launching at once his argumentation.

"Mister President, as you know well, our Mars surface expedition team has made numerous tremendously important scientific finds while rolling around Mars during the

last twelve months and is one month away from leaving Mars to return to its ship. Unfortunately, the sheer success of our surface team in finding proofs of life on Mars has meant that it has not covered all the ground it was supposed to explore, and by a long shot. Numerous top scientists, including foreign ones, have thus pleaded that the surface expedition be extended by a few months, in order to complete its exploration program. However, General Medaris has opposed such an extension and I am now coming to you for a final decision on the matter.”

Robert looked at Medaris, who wasted no time in counter-attacking.

“Mister President, my reasons for opposing such an extension are simple. First, the CONSTITUTION is due to leave Mars orbit in early December, after recuperating the surface exploration team in October, to return to Earth. That return trip would in turn take five months. Even with that planned mission profile, our astronauts will have ended up spending 23 months in deep space, with our surface team spending thirteen of these months living in extremely cramped conditions in their rover. Now, if the surface exploration phase is extended by more than a few weeks, our ship will miss its launch window, when the positions of Mars and Earth relative to each other are at their closest. This means that our ship will then have to wait until February of 1974 before the next launch window. Even then, the return trip will take a full eight months instead of five months. In total, a mission extension as requested by Professor Hornig will result in a total mission time in deep space of 41 months for our astronauts, many of which are married and have children. Even without counting in the family factor, nearly three and a half years in space is a very long time for anyone, Mister President. Finally, such an extension would as well stretch to the limit the reserves of food aboard our ship and would even mean some rationing towards the end of the mission, with no reserves left if anything goes wrong.”

Robert, understanding the concerns of Medaris, looked back at Hornig.

“The objections of General Medaris make a lot of sense to me, Professor Hornig. Our astronauts are national heroes and are precious to me and to the nation. Is your proposed extension worth risking the mental and physical health of our people on and around Mars?”

“Mister President, by all accounts the Mars Mission will have cost well over four billion dollars by the time it returns to Earth. I understand that it already more than justified its cost, but there is still so much left to do down on Mars. Over one third of the Valles Marineris canyon complex has still to be explored, while other important areas of

Mars will have been left completely unexplored except by aerial photography and radar. Waiting to complete the surface exploration phase by another mission would mean waiting many years and paying for a second full expedition. Extending the mission now will save a tremendous amount of time and money to our country, Mister President.”

Robert Kennedy sat back in his sofa, weighing the cases of both men facing him. Both had compelling reasons to support their respective cases. Robert in turn could see the political and economic consequences of each of the two options presented to him, consequences that were hardly trivial. Even for a country as rich as the United States, four billion dollars was a lot of public money, while risking the health or even the lives of the crew of the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION could cause some severe political fallouts. Faced with a nearly impossible choice, Robert then did what most politicians would do: he passed the buck to someone else.

“Professor Hornig, General Medaris, both of your arguments are compelling indeed. While I care very much for the health of our astronauts, I am also responsible to see that the taxpayers’ money is spent in the most judicious way, for the good of all. I am however not willing to order our astronauts, who have already endured a long space mission, to endure more without at least consulting them. I will thus let General Dows, who is presently on Mars, take the final decision on this. If she deems that a mission extension is too risky for the health of her crew, then I will support fully a decision by her to leave Mars according to the original schedule. General Medaris, I will let you contact General Dows on Mars to ask her for a decision on this. Also, pass my regards to her and her crew, for the fantastic job they have done up to now. Please inform me at once when General Dows will have taken her decision.”

“I will, Mister President.” Replied Medaris. All three men then got up from their sofas and exchanged handshakes before Hornig and Medaris left the Oval Office. While Hornig now felt that he had probably lost the argument, Medaris was nearly jubilant: the way he knew Ingrid Dows, he was certain that she would pass the needs of her crew before some budget-saving incentive.

18:33 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, August 30, 1972 ‘C’

Mars Rover, Coprates Chasma, Valles Marineris

Mars

"Aaah, I'm famished!" Said Michael Farmer as he saw Edward Stokes bring a container of rations from their food storage compartment and into the crew living room. "What's the choice of menu tonight?"

"Macaroni and cheese...and macaroni and cheese." Answered the veteran geologist with a fake grin. His answer drew a grimace from Farmer.

"What? Don't we have anything else?"

"No! Not until we get to our cargo module that landed in the Melas Chasma, some 200 miles away. That's what happens when everybody skips over the macaroni and cheese for twelve months: we end up with nothing but macaroni and cheese." Seeing Ingrid coming from the forward driving compartment, Edward started shouting a question to her.

"Hey, Ingrid, do you like macaroni and..."

Her somber look and the fact that she was holding in her hands a printed message made him shut up and watch her as she went to the central round table of the living room and sat heavily on one of the stools.

"Is something wrong, Ingrid?" Asked cautiously Sergei Petrov, who was already sitting at the table and writing some notes about his day of exploring. Ingrid took some time to answer him, her eyes staying on the message she was holding.

"Possibly! Washington is asking us if we would accept to extend our surface exploration phase by a few months, something that would make us miss our original window for our return trip to Earth."

"And, if we miss that window, when would be the next launch window to leave orbit?"

"That would delay our departure from Mars from December of this year to February of 1974. The travel time after the new launch window would also be longer, with us arriving in Earth orbit in October of 1974."

"October of 1974?!" Exclaimed Russel Schweickart. "But, that would make a total space mission time of 41 months! We have families waiting for us on Earth, Ingrid."

"I know that perfectly well, Russel." Replied Ingrid, her expression hardening as she contemplated the implications of such a mission extension. "That delayed departure for Earth would also tax our reserves of food to the limit, with little to no safety margin left. On the other hand, it is true that we have fallen behind in our surface exploration program, not because we have been laggards, but rather because of all the unexpected discoveries we made."

"So, I gather that it is the scientific community in the States which is pushing for that surface mission extension, Ingrid?" Asked Edward Stokes, making Ingrid nod her head.

"Correct, Ed! General Medaris, may he be blessed, opposed their request but they then went to President Kennedy, who decided to put the hot potatoe in my hands. I am now asked to decide whether we extend the mission or not."

"Then, it should be a no brainer, Ingrid!" Said Schweickart. "Tell those scientists to go screw themselves!"

"I am tempted to do just that, Russel, but..."

"But?" Said in unison Schweickart, Farmer and Sturgiss, while Stokes and Petrov listened on intently.

"But we did fall behind in our surface exploration program and I hate to leave a job half finished. However, you are right about having families waiting for us. Heck, we even have a family presently aboard the CONSTITUTION! Remember little Kevin, guys?"

"Shit, I didn't think of him!" Replied Schweickart. "He is what, seven month old now?"

"Seven and a half. He would have been a year and a half old by the time we got back to Earth...according to the original schedule. With the second window departure, he would be nearly three years old by the time we arrive around Earth. I certainly don't want to expose a toddler to a life in space for so long. Damn, I need better options than this!"

"What other options could there be, Ingrid?" Asked Sergei Petrov, who had been watching carefully the reactions of his companions to this.

"Well, I am no astrophysicist, so I think that I will ask James Vincenti to see if there could be other options. I will let him a few days to think over the problem, then will take my decision once he gets back to me with our available choices. However, if he finds no other options, then we will depart on the date of our original window."

Her five male companions nodded their heads in unison, in agreement with her. Exploring Mars may have been exciting for the geologists in the team, but even a rugged individualist like Sergei Petrov could stand only so many months living inside a cramped and increasingly smelly vehicle.

22:08 (Universal Time)

Friday, September 1, 1972 'C'

Computer compartment, U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

Low Mars orbit

Edward White, doing a late inspection tour of the ship before going to sleep, was surprised to hear noises from the ship's computer compartment, one deck below the command deck. Sticking his head inside, he saw James Vincenti and Donald Rifkin hard at work, with Vincenti poring through astronomical charts and tables while Rifkin was typing complicated series of equations in the ship's mainframe computer. That mainframe computer was one of the most powerful and fast machines produced on Earth but, according to Ingrid, it would have been considered an electronic idiot in Nancy Laplante's time.

"What are you guys doing at this hour? You are supposed to be off shift and resting."

Both snapped their heads around at his voice, with Vincenti answering him in a tired voice.

"Donald is helping me check on a theoretical course back to Earth that would let us extend our surface exploration of Mars, yet would shave over eleven months from our return date even after missing our first launch window."

"ELEVEN MONTHS?" Nearly shouted White, stunned. "How the hell could we manage that?"

"You promise not to call me crazy first?"

"Uh, if you wish so. Show me what you got."

Vincenti grabbed a rough sketch of the Solar System that he had made on a pad of paper and showed it to White, pointing first at Mars.

"Our first, originally planned return trip used a fast but rather uneconomical transfer orbit to get to Earth, combined with an optimum positioning of both planets. Our second return window, meant in case we missed the optimum window, would use an elongated Hohman elliptical orbit in order to catch up to Earth. That type of orbit, while the simplest and most economical in terms of orbital mechanics, is also about the slowest, a fact made worse by the less than ideal positions of Earth and Mars relative to each other at the time of our launch."

“I know.” Agreed White. “However, we have no choice about that, unless we are ready to wait another year before Mars and Earth are again correctly aligned. The second launch window is the only feasible return orbit for us before we run out of food, or is it?”

Vincenti then grinned at those words.

“I thought so too, until I spoke to John.”

“John?! How the hell could a submariner teach you a trick about orbital mechanics?”

“He was actually telling me about his submarine service and how his boat operated. Something he said about submarine buoyancy then made me see the light. Now, bear with me for a minute even if what I say may appear basic stuff to you. First, because of the gravitation of the Sun and of the principle of centrifugal force, the farther from the Sun a body like a planet or a spaceship is orbiting, the faster it must rotate around the Sun. Once freed from Earth’s gravitational pull, a ship following a Hohman orbit would need to add about 2.2 miles per second of speed to the Earth’s speed around the Sun to climb to the level of Mars’ orbit. In reverse, to fall back to the level of Earth’s orbit from Mars, you need to boost away in a retrograde direction compared to the rotation of the Solar System and subtract 2.2 miles per second from your orbital speed.”

“I understand that, James, but where is the analogy with John’s submarine?”

“I was coming to that. Now, a submarine goes up and down in the water by adding or removing water in its ballast tanks, the same way a spaceship would add or subtract to its solar orbital speed to go up or down along the ecliptic plane of the Solar System. However, James told me that, in emergency situations, a submarine could do a steep dive or rise to the surface by pointing its nose down or up and use its propellers to push it against the effect of its actual mass in the water. If it dove far enough without crushing and didn’t compensate by filling its ballast tanks with water, that submarine would eventually rise up rapidly back to the level where it was before, like a floating cork pushed down and then released. What I propose to do is to do like that submarine. We will boost out of Mars orbit with our nose pointed at the Sun, thus accelerating quickly towards it, instead of simply breaking gently and letting us fall back to Earth level.”

“But that won’t work!” Objected White. “We still need to cut that 2.2 miles per second from our orbital speed if we don’t want to simply perform a tight elliptical loop and bounce back to Mars orbit level.”

“True, except for one thing: I figured a way to cut our solar orbital speed without using extra fuel.”

Vincenti then put a finger on the point representing Mars on his sketch and moved it towards the Sun, passing the orbit of Earth and then turning tightly around the next point on the sketch.

“We will boost directly towards Venus at high speed, fall into its gravitational well and turn around it, passing ahead of its orbital path. If we get close enough, Venus will both line us up back in the direction of the Earth and will accelerate us in a retrograde direction, thus cutting down our orbital speed. What I propose is a slingshot maneuver around Venus, which would then throw us back into Earth orbit.”

White stared at the sketch for a long moment, unable to speak. He finally looked back at the astrophysicist, doubt visible on his face.

“This is too good to be true, James. What’s the catch?”

Vincenti looked a bit embarrassed at that question.

“Well, to be frank, it is a bit of a risky maneuver. If we miscalculate our trajectory and pass too far from Venus, then we will be deflected only partially and may end up in a permanent low orbit around the Sun...or dive into it. On the other hand, if we pass too close to Venus, we may end up crashing on it or burning inside its atmosphere.”

“And you call that only a bit risky? James, are you nuts?”

“Not as nuts as I will be if we have to spend a whole 41 months in space, Ed. Besides, we will be able to refine our approach once close to Venus with the help of our main engines.”

“Do we at least have the fuel to do what you propose, James?” Asked Edward, somewhat mollified by now. Vincenti then pointed at Rifkin, who was still working at the computer control station.

“Donald is actually helping me by checking my calculations in detail. We should know if my plan will truly work in an hour or two.”

Edward looked at Donald, then at James. Both men were near geniuses in their fields and he truly hoped that James was right about this.

“You guys need a coffee from the cafeteria, or some snack? I could get it for you while you keep working here?”

That brought a grin on Vincenti’s and Rifkin’s faces, with the former then patting Edward’s shoulder.

“Now you are talking, Ed!”

09:40 (Universal Time)

Saturday, September 2, 1972 'C'

Mars Rover, Coprales Chasma

Valles Marineris, Mars

Ingrid sat back in her swiveling chair after James Vincenti, visible on the television screen and with Edward White and Donald Rifkin in the background, finished exposing his proposal for an alternate return plan. She knew at once that the astronomer's basic concept could work. The real question mark was if they could apply it with sufficient precision to avoid a tragic end to the expedition. On the other hand, to be able to cut eleven months from an extended mission time was a very attractive prospect indeed.

"James, how close to Venus will we pass?"

"If all goes according to plan, between 300 and 500 miles from the surface, Ingrid."

That made Ingrid raise an eyebrow and look inquisitively at Vincenti.

"After a flight of over seventy million miles? Can we really achieve that kind of precision? We launched a number of planetary probes in the past decade and none were able to achieve anything close to that kind of accuracy."

"That's mostly because they were automated probes and could not adjust their course by themselves. As a piloted ship, I am certain that the CONSTITUTION could do much better than those probes, especially with our nuclear engines and our precision astronomical instruments. As a plus, such a return trip profile will give us a golden opportunity to observe Venus from very close range and get tons of invaluable scientific data about that planet."

"A nice point but one that I will not use to make my call on this, James." Replied calmly Ingrid. "The only thing that will count for me is how risky your plan is and how much benefits we could gain from it. To be frank, I am not sure that we will still have all our marbles on arrival in Earth orbit if we have to spend 41 months in space. The way your plan works, we will be able to fully complete our surface exploration program and yet end up with a total mission time of only thirty months, only seven months longer than initially planned. I like that!"

“That makes the two of us, Ingrid.” Said Vincenti while smiling. The astrophysicist then watched on his television screen his mission commander, an apparent teenager who was in reality only one year younger than him and had vastly more experience than him concerning space operations, as she thought his plan over. Ingrid was quiet for a moment, then appeared to take a decision.

“James, Ed, we go with this new plan. Have the return flight parameters sent to Vandenberg so that our scientists there can triple check every data in it and make sure that there are no errors in it. Sorry if this hurts your pride, James, but I can’t take any chance that some mistake made its way into your calculations.”

“No offence taken, Ingrid. You would have been delinquent not to have those checked. My data will be sent to Earth by this afternoon.”

“Excellent! James...”

“Yes, Ingrid?”

“Good job! You too, Donald.”

“Thanks, Ingrid.” Said in unison the two men before Ingrid cut the link. The latter swiveled her chair to look outside through the armored glass windows of the driving compartment. They had moved to another site of interest in the early morning and Russel Schweickart was outside with the four geologists of the team, checking out what appeared to be an ancient geological formation made up of multiple layers that had been exposed by erosion. Ingrid was contemplating the majestic sight of the giant cliffs of the canyon, with the pink Martian sky above, in which they were in when she heard an excited shout from Michael Farmer on the radio.

“FOSSILS! I JUST FOUND TWO FOSSILS!”

Ingrid didn’t go on the radio then, leaving the frequency free for the geologists to use as they scrambled to Farmer’s location. If he had truly found two more fossils, then it would make for a total of seventeen fossils found to date by her team, on top of the underwater lakes full of Martian fish and organisms and the hundreds of sediment specimens collected. Just now, her decision to stay longer on Mars certainly seemed to have been well justified.

15:16 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, April 11, 1973 ‘C’

Top of Olympus Mons, altitude: 21,229 meters

Mars

“Say ‘cheese!’” Said playfully Russell Schweickart before pushing slowly the button of the remote-command wire of his tripod camera. The camera flash briefly illuminated the six members of the landing team, standing in their spacesuits outside the rover and with both the vehicle and the fantastic view from the top of Olympus Mons behind them. Their rover had used its belly rocket engine to jump four days earlier from the surrounding volcanic plain all the way to the summit of the gigantic, extinct volcano.

“Hold on! Let me take two more pictures, guys. This is after all an historic moment.”

“Damn right it is!” Replied Ingrid while keeping the pause. That was one hell of a fruitful expedition.”

“Maybe you will think that I’m nuts,” said Edward Stokes, “but I think that I have fallen in love with this planet. It is such an extraordinary collection of geological features and majestic sights.”

“It is indeed a world of wondrous sights, even if it is a nearly dead world.”

“Okay, guys! I have my three pictures.” Announced Russell. “We can go back inside and lift off.”

With Russell recuperating his camera first, the five men and one woman returned to the open access ramp of the lander, climbing it single file. Ingrid was last off the Martian ground, looking back at the Martian panorama.

“We will return here one day, this I promise!”

With both regret and relief, she then went up the ramp and entered the lander’s airlock, where the others were waiting for her. She closed and locked the outer hatch of the airlock, then activated the recompression cycle and waited the minute or so needed to fill back the airlock with air. Edward then opened the inner hatch and the five of them stepped inside the locker room compartment. Once the inner hatch was closed back and secured, they were finally able to open the faceplates of their suits. They however didn’t remove their spacesuits, as they were going to wear them for liftoff in a few minutes.

“Russell, you start disconnecting the ascent module from the umbilical lines coming from the lower stage with the help of Ed. I will go put the nuclear reactor plant into dormant mode. Edward, Mike and Sergei, you do a last inspection of the lower stage and make sure that we won’t be leaving behind something we need to bring back. If we forget behind some fossils, I will personally skin you alive!”

The others laughed at that but still took her order most seriously. Stupid was not even a proper way to describe them if they ever did commit such a gaffe as leaving behind any of their precious finds and Martian samples. Leaving the others to their respective tasks, Ingrid walked towards the rear of the rover, where the reactor compartment was located. Arriving at a sealed hatch with a large radiation warning sign on it, Ingrid opened it and entered the local control room of the reactor plant. Looking briefly through the thick protective glass of a porthole, she peered at the reactor core for a moment. It looked so quiet and inoffensive, yet could kill within a couple of days any human foolish enough to approach it unprotected inside its containment compartment for more than a few minutes. Once left dormant, however, it would be stable for the decades to come and could even be powered back up anytime during the next fifteen years if another Mars expedition landed back here. The abandoned lower stage of the rover would then be able to be used again as a rear base or even as an exploration vehicle. Going to the local reactor control station, Ingrid took hold of the reactor control rods remote mechanisms and slowly inserted the control rods fully in the nuclear core, slowing the fission reaction to a near stop. She watched carefully the neutron detectors and core temperature readings as they decreased steadily, then stabilized at minimum levels. Satisfied that the core was now safely shut down, she next closed the valves of the steam turbine generator system and of the coolant system, completing the plant shutdown procedure. This done, she switched the lower stage systems to radio-isotopic generator power, so that the vehicle's radio and light beacons could stay powered while the vehicle lay crewless on the surface. One radio and the mast-mounted camera would also stay powered up, providing a fixed observation site on Mars for the years to come. This was in line with Ingrid's belief that all space systems should ideally fulfill more than one function. That belief in turn had been a major reason for the tremendous successes achieved by her command and she was not going to abandon it, ever.

By the time Ingrid climbed up towards the ascent module of the lander through its main belly access hatch and ladder, all the power, water, air and control lines and conduits from the lower stage had been disconnected and stored away on the lower stage link compartment. Standing first in the transfer compartment sandwiched between the upper and lower stage, Ingrid retracted up the access ladder, then closed and locked the airtight entry hatch of the lower stage. She next climbed through the upper stage integrated hatch and closed as well that hatch, sealing it carefully and testing its

integrity. Once satisfied that the hatch was safe for space, she finally went to her pilot's seat on the flight deck, joining her crewmates there. She strapped herself in, then smiled at her crewmates.

"Ready to say goodbye to Mars, guys?"

"Yes! Boo ooh sniff sniff!" Replied jokingly Edward Stokes, making the others laugh. Happy to see that her crew still had a good morale, Ingrid then concentrated on the pre-liftoff procedures with Russell Schweickart, her copilot.

"Main power switched to power cells?"

"Check!"

"External antennas retracted and secured?"

"Check!"

"Joining clamps retracted."

"Check!"

"Rocket fuel tanks pressurized?"

"Check! Tanks show full and with feed lines flooded."

"Gyrostabilizers on and lined up?"

"Check!"

"Course laid out and on nav screen?"

"Check! Our ascent heading will be true north at fifty degrees up angle."

"Thank you! Everybody: seal your suits now!"

Sitting nearly on their backs, the six astronauts sealed their spacesuits in case of an improbable accident, then tightened their seat harnesses. Ingrid next spoke on the radio channel linking them to the USS CONSTITUTION.

"CONSTITUTION, this is MARS LANDER. We are about to liftoff from the top of Olympus Mons, over."

"Understood, MARS LANDER." Replied Edward White. "We have you in our telescope's sight and on radar. We have already slowed down the rotation of our carroussels so that the felt gravity will be only 0.5 G. That should feel more comfortable for you after spending eighteen and a half months in a 0.375 G gravity. We will crank up gradually the carroussels rotation speed during the next couple of weeks, to give you a chance to accustom yourselves again to near normal gravity, over."

"Thank you for the consideration, CONSTITUTION. That was a nice idea. Liftoff in three, two, one, ignition!"

The liquid rocket engine of the ascent module then lit up with a powerful roar. With the Martian gravity being equal to only 37.5 percent of that of Earth, the thrust of the rocket engine made the ascent module jump off from the lower stage of the lander in a fraction of a second and sent it skyward at an ever increasing speed. Without the lower stage, with its heavily protected reactor section, multiple driving wheels, living accommodations section, now empty storage compartments and main life support systems, the ascent module essentially contained only the flight deck, a small storage compartment for their Mars samples and finds, the rocket fuel tanks and engines and a small auxiliary systems compartment. With a high thrust to mass ratio, it rose speedily in the pink Martian sky, headed for an orbital rendezvous with its mother ship. Four minutes after liftoff they achieved low Mars polar orbit. Shutting down the main rocket, Ingrid then used the smaller, much less powerful space cruise engines of the module to refine her orbit and make rendezvous with the CONSTITUTION. The big mothership soon showed on their radar, with a visual sighting made of it a half hour later. At that stage, Ingrid let Russell take the commands, allowing him to perform the final approach and docking maneuver with the CONSTITUTION. As they were close and about to dock, they were able to see Louise Morin, standing behind one of the large panoramic bubble windows of the ship's belly observation deck and waving happily at the approaching craft. That brought a smile to all of them, with Ingrid waving back.

"It will be nice to see the rest of the bunch again. I missed them."

"Shall we party tonight, then, Ingrid?" Asked Edward, hopeful.

"Of course! I saved a couple of good bottles just for this occasion."

"Goodie!"

"Don't rejoice yet, Ed: Russell still has to manage to dock our craft."

"Ingrid, no offense meant but, fuck off!" Replied Russell, triggering a round of laughs. Russell had his revenge by docking smoothly the lander's ascent module with the Mars Lander's original ship's docking port less than two minutes later, drawing cheers from the others and a playful announcement from the copilot.

"Lady and gentlemen, we have now arrived at our destination. You can now undo your seat belts and proceed to disembark. Please don't forget to declare any goods purchased on Mars to the customs officer. We hope that you have enjoyed your flight with Air Ingrid and wish you a good day."

"Alright, guys," said Ingrid while twisting her head to look at the others behind her, "go to the transit locker room of the ship and get out of your spacesuits there. Once

we are all in coveralls, we will return here to unload our samples, fossils, films and personal things.”

It took them only a few minutes for the six of them to float through the docking hatch of the module and into the airlock of the ship, from which they entered the belly locker room on the CONSTITUTION, where Edward White, Louise Morin, Jack Ridley, James Vincenti, Wendy Clarkson and John Barry were waiting for them. Their shipmates helped the lander’s crew to get out of their spacesuits and to secure the suits to their racks, then allowed themselves at last a round of exchanged hugs and handshakes. After hugging and kissing the others, Ingrid smiled to all of them, standing in the zero gravity thanks to the small magnets incorporated in the soles of her boots, which made her stick lightly to the thin steel sheeting covering the deck.

“Our most urgent priority now is to safely store away our Mars soil and water samples, fossils and camera films. We will store those inside the ship’s escape module, which has the highest level of anti-radiation protection on the ship and would also be our last mean of escape in case of a sudden catastrophe. I want each storage crate to be handled by two persons: I don’t want to see those crates banged around on their way to the escape module. Once that is done, we will then be free to recuperate our personal luggage and seal the lander for the trip home. Let’s move, guys!”

As the others started diving back in the ascent module to retrieve the precious crates, Ingrid discreetly motioned John Barry to join her behind a large locker. There, she looked with concern into the eyes of the submariner.

“Louise told me about your wife asking for a divorce. How are you coping with this, John?”

Barry looked away for a second then, a reaction that didn’t reassure Ingrid. He then spoke to her in a subdued voice.

“I would be lying if I said that I am my cheery self, Ingrid. Me and Rhonda had grown a bit distant in the last few years but I didn’t expect her to do this to me while I was around Mars and unable to discuss things with her. I am however able and ready to concentrate on my job properly, Ingrid, if that’s what you wanted to know.”

“I did want to know about that, John, but I also was worried about you as a person. If you need any help or support from me, just say so.”

“That’s one of the things Rhonda accused me of, Ingrid: of being with you.” Said Barry, now looking bitter. “God knows however that you behaved correctly with all of us up to now.”

He then eyed her with a mix of sadness and tenderness.

“The worst part in this, the one that makes me feel guilty to a point about this divorce, was that I was actually attracted to you during this trip. Only your own restraint allowed me to keep a proper relationship with you. If I may say in all honesty, you are about the most beautiful and admirable girl I ever saw.”

Ingrid gave John a benign smile, not really surprised by this: she was quite conscious of her sex-appeal on men and normally didn’t mind using it to her profit when it was time to have fun in a proper setting.

“Thank you for the compliment, John. I wish that the circumstances had been less restrictive between us. Unfortunately, we will have to be careful not to publicly send the wrong signals, as many on Earth would be too happy to invent a scandal where there is none. We will already have enough to explain when they learn about little Kevin Prentice. If you ever want to speak further about this, don’t hesitate. You can also talk with Louise any time: she is here just for this kind of problem.”

“Thanks, Ingrid. You are a great girl and an even greater commander.”

“You’re welcome, John. Now, let’s go help the others before they call us a pair of slackers.”

Another hour or so was enough to empty the ascent module of its precious Mars samples and fossils, which then left Ingrid free to finally go see someone she had been wanting to meet for months. Floating along the communication tubes of the ship, she went to the twin carroussels containing the living facilities of the ship, where she was able to walk normally, thanks to the artificial gravity created by their rotation. Meeting Professor Everet Mansfield, the planetologist of the expedition, Ingrid shook hands with him before asking him a question.

“Nice to see you again, Professor Mansfield. Would you know by chance where I could find our little Kevin?”

“I do, Ingrid! He is with his mother in the crew cafeteria.”

“Thanks!”

Walking down the curved surface of the ‘A’ carroussel’s upper deck, Ingrid got to the short staircase leading down to the cafeteria, going down the stairs and finding there

about thirty members of the ship's crew eating supper or preparing their meal. Exchanging smiles, handshakes and hugs on the way, she went to Sergeant Mary Robinson, who was sitting at a table with five other crewmembers and with what looked liked an improvised baby carriage near her. The carriage was actually an empty standard ship plastic storage box, to which had been added a set of four wheels and a pushing handle. Ingrid exchanged a warm hug with Mary Robinson as soon as she got to her table.

"I am happy to see you in good health and good spirits, Mary."

"And I am happy to see you back from the surface of Mars, General."

"Thank you!" Said Ingrid before looking down in the improvised carriage. A plump toddler boy was sleeping peacefully inside, on top of multiple layers of folded linen sheets.

"My god, he is truly adorable! How have you been managing up to now with his care, Mary?"

"Surprisingly well, considering the unique setting of this ship, General. I must say that I was helped tremendously by the other crewmembers, who eagerly volunteered to care for him during my duty shifts. Kevin has also proved to be a really good-natured baby. Doctor Clarkson is checking him regularly and his development is normal up to date. He even likes floating in zero gravity from time to time...before I feed him."

"I am happy to hear that, Mary. We will make a good Space Command member out of him."

Mary smiled with pride at that, then lowered her voice to a confidential tone.

"Uh, General, how are you going to handle his return on Earth? Will I have to present him to the medias?"

"Not if we can avoid it, Mary. My plan is to disembark him and you as discreetly as we can once back on Earth. In fact, nobody but us needs to know about him for the time being. Word of him will eventually come out, I am sure of that, but hopefully the hoopla about this mission will have mostly died down by then. What is important is to give as many chances to your son to grow normally, without undue publicity around him."

"Thank you for that, General: this takes a big weight off my shoulders."

Ingrid then patted Mary's shoulder.

"It's my pleasure, Mary. One more thing: don't worry about any career repercussions for you because you got pregnant and gave birth in space. You will have my support as long as I am in charge of the Space Command."

"May I ask how long you will still stay in the service, General? You must be approaching retirement by now, no?"

"I will effectively have served a bit over 31 years by the time we arrive on Earth, Mary, but I am still plenty fit and eager and they can't force me to retire before I am 65 years old, which leaves me with a good fifteen more years of service. We may have just explored Mars, but there is still so much to explore in our Solar System. I fully intend to direct and lead that space exploration program."

Mary gave her an admiring look then.

"General, you must be the most remarkable woman I ever met, and I am not saying that to lick ass."

"I know Mary. Thank you for the compliment and take good care of your son." Ingrid then went to the service counter of the cafeteria, behind which one of the four stewards of the ship stood.

"Hello, Sam!"

"Hello, General, and welcome back aboard. What would you like for supper, General?"

"Anything but macaroni and cheese!" Answered Ingrid without hesitation.

08:26 (Universal Time)

Sunday, April 29, 1973 'C'

Flight deck, USS CONSTITUTION

Low Mars orbit

"Let's go home, guys! John, fire our nuclear engines on James' mark!"

"Engines ready for ignition." Replied the nuclear engineer, with James Vincenti jumping in afterwards.

"Ignition point will be reached in twelve seconds...three, two, one, fire engines!"

"Firing engines!"

The nuclear rockets then came to life on command, their roar audible through the ship's structure. Since the spaceship, with half of its fuel already expended, now had a mass only forty percent of what it had been at launch from Earth orbit, the felt acceleration was

much stronger than at the start of their mission. This time, the engines burned fuel for less than fifteen minutes, which was still enough to project it towards Venus. If all went well, they would be back safely in Earth orbit in a bit over six months.

21:48 (Universal Time)

Monday, September 17, 1973 'C'

Command Deck, U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

Closing in on Venus

“All our antenna booms are retracted and locked inside the hull, Ingrid.” Announced Edward White. “We are ready to fire our engines for our final main course adjustment boost. We are ready for Venus closest approach.”

“Good!” Replied Ingrid from her command seat in the command deck. All the crewmembers were now in their spacesuits and lying in their duty seats or in the crashworthy seats inside the emergency escape module.

“Is our probe inside Venus’ atmosphere yet, Tom?”

“It should enter it in about two minutes, Ingrid. I don’t have much hope of getting much data from it for very long, though: it was designed for Mars, not Venus.”

“We will grab what we can. Just be ready to record its data. How is the mapping radar doing?”

“I have been getting some pretty fantastic radar returns already, Ingrid.” Replied the sensors officer. “From the altitude we will be at closest approach, we will be able to map with excellent accuracy a good swath of Venus along its equatorial region.”

“Tell me about it! A mere 170 miles from the surface at closest approach! Closer than that and we would be burning in the atmosphere.”

“Hey, we got lucky!” Shot back from his seat James Vincenti, grinning. The astrophysicist, like the others, had actually some good reasons to grin now. Apart from providing them a chance to get data on Venus from extremely close range, that closeness also magnified the gravity pull of the planet on the spaceship, helping it lose even more speed in relation to the Sun than expected at first and negating nearly completely the need for a final course adjustment. While their scheduled arrival date around Earth was still mostly unchanged, they were going to arrive in Earth orbit with a substantial, and unexpected, fuel reserve, something Ingrid was not complaining about. Thomas Lakehurst spoke up four minutes later, sounding a bit disappointed.

“Our probe barely had time to transmit for less than a minute before it became silent, Ingrid. From the data recorded last, it was still 72 miles above the surface when it gave up the ghost. I will let James and Charles analyze the data later. On the other hand, our cameras are taking excellent pictures of the clouds of Venus.”

“Our spectrometers are also getting some interesting readings.” Said in turn Charles Watson, who was looking from his station at the pictures and sensors data taken by the spaceship. “From what I can figure out, the upper atmosphere seems to contain a high concentration of droplets of sulfuric acid, as stated in the old ATHENA files. The atmospheric temperature is also around 900 degrees Fahrenheit at surface level.”

“Ouch!” Said Christine Doherty on hearing that. “No wonder that our probe didn’t survive long in there. We would need a specially designed probe in order to penetrate this atmosphere.”

“A future mission will take care of that.” Replied Ingrid from her command seat. “However, I can’t see any human ever landing on Venus, unless he or she is suicidal.” A soft whispering sound then started to rise in the ship in the minutes that followed, growing slowly until it became like the noise of a fair wind. Edward White was the first to comment on it.

“We are going through the ionosphere of Venus. It is too thin to heat up significantly the outside surfaces of our ship but it should slow us down a bit.”

“That’s already factored in my calculations, Ed.” Said James Vincenti while still watching his mapping radar screen. “We don’t have to worry about it.”

The crew then fell silent as their ship sped by Venus, its course arching around the planet and pointing gradually toward Earth, still over 80 million miles away. On the signal of Vincenti, who was carefully observing their course and position relative to both Venus and Earth, John Barry fired again their nuclear engines for a short boost that both freed them from the attraction of Venus and slowed them down further relative to the Sun. A few tense minutes followed the shutting down of the engines, as Vincenti checked their new trajectory and made some calculations. The astronomer finally spoke up, listened to anxiously by all the others.

“We are on course to Earth and on the correct speed, ladies and gentlemen. We only need now to let our ship coast all the way to home, with only a very slight correction once around Earth to get in the proper orbit.”

Cheers greeted that announcement, with Ingrid giving next a few orders.

“Alright, let’s secure from boost stations. Diane, redeploy our antennas and point them towards Earth. You stay with James and send our new course parameters by datalink to Cape Canaveral. I will then send a video report to Earth.”

Ingrid let Diane Sawyer send first a warning signal towards Earth with their directional antenna once it was properly oriented, so that Cape Canaveral would be ready to record their transmission. That signal took nearly seven minutes to get to Earth at the speed of light, a measure of how far from home they were. Sixteen minutes after sending her warning signal, Christine got an acknowledge signal from Cape Canaveral and sent back a stream of data on the datalink frequency, by which time Ingrid had prepared her message to be sent by video link. Ingrid looked at the video screen in front of her, where John Glenn was now visible, sitting at one of the monitor stations in the space mission control room at Cape Canaveral and patiently waiting for her message. Interplanetary communications certainly wasn’t a quick business and made live exchanges close to impossible. She then looked slightly up at the camera perched just above the video screen and facing her.

“Cape Canaveral, this is General Dows, speaking from the USS CONSTITUTION. We have completed our slingshot maneuver around Venus and are now on track to Earth, with our estimated date of arrival being November 9 of this year. Our relative solar speed is now 4.8826 miles per second and we are presently 11,400 miles from Venus. All ship systems are nominal and we will have a seven percent fuel reserve above the initial amount calculated by the time we enter low Earth orbit. We can thank the incredible accuracy of Doctor Vincenti’s calculations and of his navigation for the perfection of our trajectory. I would request that you send us a condensed daily news bulletin, to help us get reacquainted with home. Please include some French news items for our psychologist, Louise Morin and also Soviet news items for our two Soviet scientists. On our part, we will continue to send you our astronomical observations as we go, over.”

It was then Ingrid’s turn to wait. Fourteen minutes later, she saw John Glenn open his mouth.

“Cape Canaveral to USS CONSTITUTION, we copy your transmission. Congratulations for your successful Venus slingshot maneuver. We will be sending the requested news bulletin in the next couple of hours. Do you have any other requests at this time, over?”

Ingrid shook her head in response.

“Cape, not at this time. USS CONSTITUTION, out!”

Ingrid then got out of her seat and looked at Edward White.

“I am going to my cabin to write down a few things in my mission log. You have the conn, Ed.”

“Understood, Ingrid.”

Floating again down a series of communication tubes, Ingrid went to her private suite on Carroussel ‘A’. She however froze the moment she entered her office: her guardian angel, Natai, was sitting in her chair behind her work desk! Quickly closing and locking the door behind her, Ingrid then walked quickly to her desk, sitting in one of the two chairs set in front of it.

“Natai?! What are you doing here? Did anyone else on the ship see you?”

“Nobody saw me, Ingrid.” Replied calmly the angel, who was in Nancy Laplante’s form and wearing the white robe and jewels of the Queen of Jerusalem. “I came here to tell you about an important outcome: the Imperium ‘C’ is no more. It has been replaced by a civilization that does not have a time travel capability and has not lived through a nuclear war in its past. The Time Patrol has already done a discreet reconnaissance of that civilization, which calls itself ‘The Terran Federation’.”

Ingrid was silent for a moment on hearing those words. Avoiding a nuclear holocaust in her future had been her main mission as a Chosen of The One. Even though her mission was apparently a success, she couldn’t help feel bad about the people of the Imperium ‘C’ who had now been erased out of history. Natai then spoke softly to her.

“Don’t worry about the people of the Imperium ‘C’, Ingrid: they never felt a thing. In fact, they never will have existed in the first place. No lives were lost: they just live under different personas.”

“What about the citizens of the Imperium ‘C’ who were working or visiting in Timeline ‘B’ or Timeline ‘A’ at the time the Imperium was erased? They must have lost countless family members and friends.”

“Sadly, you are right about that, Ingrid, and The One grieves for their losses. I have spoken to them and did my best to console and reassure them. The Time Patrol is now helping those Imperium survivors to readapt and to rebuild their lives. Most of them have already decided to join the community of the Global Council, in the 35th Century of Timeline ‘A’. The rest have decided to keep living in the 20th Century of Timeline ‘B’.”

“So, is my mission as a Chosen now completed?”

“Not quite, Ingrid. The biggest part is now done, but The One still needs you to keep pushing for the peaceful progress of Humanity. Your mission to Mars has in fact done a lot in that respect. Keep on as you are doing now and do your best to prevent future wars as best you can, while promoting racial and religious tolerance.”

Natai then got up from her chair and went to Ingrid, who also got up, to hug her.

“I am proud of you and so is The One. May you live a long and happy life. Goodbye, Ingrid.”

The angel then vanished into thin air, leaving a shaken Ingrid alone in her office. Going to her work chair, Ingrid sat heavily in it before bursting into mixed tears: tears of joy for having avoided a nuclear holocaust and tears of sadness for those Imperium citizens who had lost their families and friends.

13:11 (Universal Time)

Friday, October 19, 1973 ‘C’

Gymnasium of the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION

Three weeks away from Earth

Ingrid was pedaling hard on one of the exercise bikes in the ship’s well equipped exercise room when John Barry showed up, a paper sheet in his left hand. John smiled and admired for a second her fit and young body, molded in a skin-tight leotard, before approaching her and handing her the sheet.

“A message for you from Cape Canaveral, Ingrid. It was sent in clear.”

“Thanks, John.” She simply said, returning his smile and stopping her pedaling before starting to read the message.

TO: GENERAL INGRID DOWS, COMMANDER UNITED STATES SPACESHIP
CONSTITUTION.

FROM: GENERAL JOHN MEDARIS, INTERIM COMMANDER UNITED STATES
MILITARY SPACE COMMAND.

I AM HAPPY TO ANNOUNCE TO YOU THAT PRESIDENT KENNEDY SIGNED
YESTERDAY AN ACT VOTED AND APPROVED BY THE CONGRESS,
MAKING THE MILITARY SPACE COMMAND AN INDEPENDENT SERVICE

UNDER THE NAME 'UNITED STATES SPACE CORPS', EFFECTIVE JANUARY 1, 1974. I WILL BE WAITING YOUR INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW YOU WANT TO PROCEED WITH THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE COMMAND INTO A CORPS. I WOULD SUGGEST A LOOSE ASSOCIATION WITH THE AIR FORCE, SIMILAR TO THAT BETWEEN THE MARINE CORPS AND THE NAVY. WE COULD THUS SHARE SOME COMMON FACILITIES AND SAVE SOME MONEY. YOU ARE HOWEVER THE BOSS AND YOUR WORD WILL BE LAW HERE.

HOPE THIS MADE YOUR DAY. WE ARE ALL ANXIOUS TO SEE YOU BACK ON EARTH, YOU AND YOUR INTREPID CREW.

Ingrid's quickly grinned as she read the message. She then pushed a loud cheer while throwing her hands up.

"YIPPEE! WE WILL BE AN INDEPENDENT SERVICE AT LAST!"

"What's that 'we' stuff?" Replied John Barry with a malicious grin. "I am a submariner, remember?"

"But one I fully intend to cajole into joining the Space Corps." Said Ingrid, her eyes sparkling.

"And how much cajoling are you ready to dispense for that, Ingrid? It will take a lot of convincing to make me abandon my fellow submariners."

"Yeah, sure, John!" Replied Ingrid in a sarcastic tone. "I can see you coming for miles on this one."

She then became serious and looked critically at the nuclear plant engineer.

"You realize what kind of inter-service brawl it will be for me to keep the men and women already serving with the Military Space Command and then to attract new ones as well despite the competition from the other services. It won't be pretty and I fully expect daggers to fly low. Imagine for example the reaction of the Navy if you announce to the Navy Chief of Personnel that you want to transfer to the Space Corps."

"Oh, I can imagine that perfectly, Ingrid. He would probably call me on the carpet and first tell me how wonderful the Navy is for my career. Then, if I persist in my heresy, he will damn me to hell for being a traitor to the Navy and for letting down my comrades. That won't work on me, however: the Military Space Command already has numerous

important achievements to its credit, not the least being this mission to Mars. Serving in the Space Corps certainly would be an honor for me.”

“Thanks, John, I appreciate that a lot.” Said Ingrid, shaking John’s hand. The latter made a show of looking disappointed.

“That’s it? What about the cajoling you promised me?”

Ingrid gave John a malicious look at those words.

“You know the rules I laid down at the start of this mission, John. We will have to wait until we are back on Earth before discussing this further...at my residence.”

John grinned and came to attention.

“I will follow your orders to the letter, General!”

John then turned around and left Ingrid finish her exercises, a repressed grin of anticipation on his face.

11:45 (Universal Time)

Friday, November 9, 1973 ‘C’

Observation deck, USS CONSTITUTION

Low Earth orbit

“God, it is so beautiful!” Said softly Louise Morin while looking at the blue orb of Earth through one of the large bubble windows of the ship’s observation deck. Michael Farmer, standing next to her with Wendy Clarkson, nodded.

“It certainly is, Louise. It is after all our home in the midst of a vast universe.”

“Thirty months in space.” Added Wendy. “I can’t wait to take in a breath of fresh, natural air.”

“That will feel good indeed.” Said Louise. “But we accomplished so much on this mission.”

“That we did.” Agreed Michael. The voice of Ingrid coming from an overhead speaker then echoed on the observation deck, cutting short their conversation.

“Attention to all crewmembers, this is the Mission Commander speaking. The crewmembers not on duty or on sleep period will assemble at the airlock to the escape module, to start transferring out our Mars samples and films. The space plane with the relief and refit crew will rendezvous with our ship in five hours. The faster we are ready to greet them, the faster we go home.”

The trio on the observation deck didn't have to be told twice before hurrying up to the command module.

Five hours and twenty minutes later, the space plane AMERICA docked with the USS CONSTITUTION, bringing a relief crew of eleven engineers led by Colonel James McDivitt, along with four tons of fresh food supplies and spare parts. The crew of the USS CONSTITUTION gave them a hand to unload their supplies, then spent the next four hours giving the relief and refit crew detailed debriefs on the state of the various ship systems, so that the ship could be refurbished for future space missions without delay. Far from being a one-shot deal, the USS CONSTITUTION was going to prove to be the first true interplanetary spaceship in Humanity's history.

In the morning of the next day, the first sixteen members of the Mars mission, including Mary Robertson and her toddler son, took place in the AMERICA to go down to Earth's surface. With Ingrid at the commands and Russel Schweickart as her copilot, the spaceplane separated from the spaceship at eight O'clock, Washington time, and fired its retro-rockets. The AMERICA was soon hitting the first layers of the Earth's atmosphere, with its crew experiencing the fiery show of a typical Earth atmospheric reentry. Having performed dozens of such reentries before, Ingrid piloted the spaceplane with aplomb and landed her craft 53 minutes later on the long runway of Vandenberg Space Command Base. A huge crowd of reporters, photographers and cameramen were on hand there in front of the space plane terminal, prompting a comment from Russel Schweickart.

"Looks like the vultures will get to us before our families do."

"Call it the price of celebrity and fame, Ed." Replied Ingrid as she taxied the spaceplane towards the terminal. "After thirty months in space, we are certainly entitled to some glory."

"Right now, I will settle for a few weeks of quiet vacation time with my family."

"That you will get, Ed. We will all get some." Said Ingrid softly, thinking about Hien and longing for the sweet moment when she would be able to hug her adopted daughter again.

CHAPTER 18 – ANOTHER ROAD ENDS

22:46 (Iceland Time)

Sunday, April 14, 1912 'A'

R.M.S. TITANIC

Middle of the North Atlantic, south of Iceland

Few of the people still up and present on the Promenade Deck paid much attention to the old but tall woman, dressed in a simple but elegant gown covered by a long fur coat, as she made her way towards the Forecastle Deck. Those who did mostly marveled at the vigor of her pace for such an obviously old lady with white hair and wrinkled face and hands. Ignoring the few stares, the old woman exited in the open air and went down on the Forward Crane Deck, then up again on the Forecastle Deck. The air was at the freezing point and made even more cold by the ship's speed of 22.5 knots. Apparently not bothered by the cold, the old woman went to the bow, where she leaned against the railing and looked ahead of the ship into the dark night. Nancy Laplante 'B', traveling under her official name of Lady Jeanne Smythe-D'Orléans, then reflected on her long but fruitful life and her many accomplishments. Officially eighty years old in this life, she was in reality 191 years old now, the longevity treatment received as a member of the Time Patrol helping her look and feel like a woman closer to seventy years of age. Both of her lives, the one in the 17th Century as the Marquess of St-Laurent and the one that had started in the 19th Century as Jeanne de Brissac, then as Lady Jeanne D'Orléans, had provided many tragedies but also many satisfactions to her. As the Marquess of St-Laurent, she was already officially dead at the age of 65, having supposedly drowned during an Atlantic crossing from New England to France in 1700. She had left in Philadelphia her adopted son, James Walker, his wife Annette Beaulieu and his two sons and one daughter. Jame's wine shop, dealing in wine imported from the estate of the Château La Tour Carnet, near Bordeaux, was prosperous and had provided his family a comfortable living in peaceful Philadelphia, far away from the anti-Huguenot religious persecutions that had been sweeping France since 1680. The estate of La Tour Carnet was itself in the good hands of Nancy's son from D'Artagnan, Charles. Charles had retired from the royal musketeers and had married a local girl, Jeanne

Dupré, from whom he had a son, Pierre, and a daughter, Réjeanne, who in turn had given Nancy a further seven great-grandchildren, albeit after her official death. As for King Louis XIV, once a lover and good friend of Nancy, he had grown into an increasingly intolerant and egotistic tyrant, from whom Nancy had been further repelled by the often mean gossips about her circulated by the king's confessor, who had rightly suspected her of aiding and protecting Huguenot Protestants around Bordeaux, and by the king's other mistresses. While Nancy had been sad to leave her sons and grandchildren in France and Philadelphia, she had also felt some relief at exiting the increasingly poisonous atmosphere of the royal court in Versailles, which she had avoided as much as she could by continuing to conduct field missions for the King. As for her life as Jeanne Smythe-D'Orléans, it had been most eventful and had quieted down a bit only in the last decade. After rebelling against the Time Patrol and becoming an independent time-traveling operator as well as a new Chosen of The One in 1860, following the birth of her illegitimate twins from King Louis XIV, she had renewed her efforts to help the wounded, the sick, the poor and the downtrodden, living through the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune. More work as a nurse and Red Cross representative had followed during the turbulent decades of the end of the 19th Century in Europe. She had also gone through the numerous social tremors and colonial wars of the time while continuing to expand the work of the D'Orléans Social Foundation. Her charitable organization was now supported by a hidden financial empire built along six decades and that was now worth over 300 million British Pounds Sterling. That empire was however operated in a very discreet manner and very few people knew about the true extent of Jeanne's fortune, which she used almost exclusively to help others or further extend her reach. Her charity and nursing work had attracted her many honors, including the awarding to her of the Order of the Red Cross by Queen Victoria, but also many political enemies. Her support of the legal defense of French Army Captain Dreyfuss during his celebrated trial, followed by his imprisonment and then his retrial, had branded her as a 'social revolutionary' in the minds of many French politicians and military leaders. Her financial and political leverage had however been too powerful for those men to dare attack her directly. Her political and social victories had unfortunately been shadowed by the successive deaths in Paris of her father Pierre in 1894 and of her mother Suzan in 1897. Her children in the 19th Century, William, Louis and Anne, had grown to adulthood and married, forming families of their own while staying close to Jeanne. Jeanne now had a total of ten

grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren in this century and knew that the future of her charity organization and financial empire was in good, dependable and trusted hands.

Coming out of her mental contemplation of her past lives, she looked at her wristwatch and saw that it was now twenty past eleven. Walking calmly away from the railing, she went back inside the ship and made her way aft to the 3rd class social hall, in the stern part of the Upper Deck. She had just arrived in the social hall when the ship shook, while a long scraping sound could be heard from the lower hull. Knowing perfectly well that this announced the collision of the TITANIC with the iceberg that would sink it, Jeanne nonetheless went to sit quietly in one corner of the mostly unoccupied room, where less than a dozen men were still playing cards in two groups. A few of the men, 3rd class passengers that had booked passage on the ship to emigrate to the United States with their families, eyed her briefly but discreetly, surprised by the visit of an old woman who was visibly of a much higher social class than them. They however didn't comment loudly about her and continued playing cards.

After a few minutes and with still no signs or indications that the ship was in trouble apart from the fact that it had slowed down and stopped, Jeanne got up and used the nearby 3rd class main staircase to go down to the women's lavatories. There, she relieved herself one last time and washed her hands. A young redhead woman who was combing her hair in front of the sinks counter looked at her with curiosity when she saw the six medals pinned to her dress, which had been hidden up to now by her fur coat.

"Uh, excuse me, madam, but are we suppose to celebrate something tonight?" She asked with a strong Irish accent. Jeanne shook her head gently and looked into her brown eyes, speaking softly to her.

"No, miss. There will be nothing to celebrate about tonight."

"Then, why the medals, madam?"

"Because I wanted to look my best tonight, miss."

On those mysterious words Jeanne left the young woman and returned to the 3rd class social hall, her fur coat over her left arm. Before entering the hall, though, she stopped briefly in a poorly lit corner and sent a silent radio message through the miniature radio still embedded at the base of her skull.

"This is Nancy. Send the bag of transit probes to the pre-selected location now."

She had to wait less than ten seconds before a large Victorian-style canvas travel bag appeared in a flash of light a few centimeters above the deck, then dropped with a soft thud to the ground. Jeanne, still incredibly strong despite her age, thanks to her powers as a Chosen, picked up the thirty kilo bag and carried it without difficulty. Her entrance in the social hall was much more noticed, thanks to her now visible medals, but she simply returned to her original seat without saying a word. On their part, the card players probably made her up to be some sort of eccentric and continued their game after staring at her for a few seconds.

Half an hour later, the last few card players still left in the hall started seeing apparently confused passengers enter the hall, coming from the open decks. One player, a big Scandinavian man, shouted in Danish at one of the passengers who had just come in.

“HEY, SVEN, WHAT IS GOING ON?”

The other man shrugged his shoulders and approached the table before speaking also in Danish.

“I’m not sure, Erik. There is some sort of evacuation drill going on on the 1st class decks.”

“An evacuation drill? What do you mean?”

“Passengers milling around and wearing life jackets while sailors are starting to lower the lifeboats. The ship is also stopped.”

Now alarmed, the big Dane glanced at his game partners, then back at Sven.

“The ship has stopped? Why?”

“I don’t know, Erik!” Replied in a somewhat exasperated tone Sven. “We couldn’t get to the boat deck and the crewmembers I spoke with didn’t know what was going on either.”

Erik then put down his cards and got up, concern on his face.

“I think that I will go see by myself what is going on.”

“But, the game...” Protested one of the other players at his table.

“Screw the game! This could be serious.”

Erik was about to walk away when he stopped and looked at the deck with alarm.

“The ship...it is listing by the bow. I can feel it.”

“Are you sure?” Asked Sven, prompting a no-nonsense glare from Erik.

“I’m a fisherman, Sven: I can tell when a ship or boat is listing.”

The big Dane then ran out of the social hall, followed by quite a few more men. Erik came back less than fifteen minutes later at a near run and went straight to his game partners.

“You better get your families up and dressed: lifeboats are being lowered to the water, with passengers in them. Also, the bow of the ship is nearly under water right now.”

That started a miniature stampede as the men present ran towards the 3rd class access staircase to go to their respective cabins. Erik was about to also run downstairs when the weird old woman that had sat quietly all along touched his shoulder and stopped him. She then spoke to him in fluent Danish.

“I believe that I can help you and your family, Erik. Could I go with you to your cabin?”

Erik eyed her quickly, barely managing to stay polite as he answered her.

“Who are you, madam? Why do you want to come with me?”

“To save you and your family, along with many others.”

Now convinced that she was crazy, Erik tried to walk away from the old woman. To his utter surprise, her grip on his shoulder then tightened, showing incredible strength.

“Please,” said softly the old woman, not even showing strain while immobilizing him, “I simply wish to help you. This ship is going to sink in less than an hour and there aren’t enough lifeboats for everyone.”

“What are you? Some kind of witch?” Said Erik angrily, trying to break free without success. She shook her head while looking straight into his eyes.

“You may call me some sort of angel, Erik. Show me the way to your family’s cabin.”

Reasoning that he was wasting precious time and that he might as well go to his cabin with or without her, Erik nodded once and started on his way downstairs, followed closely by the old woman carrying her canvas bag and fur coat. When they got to the port passageway on the Main Deck, two levels down, they saw and heard a ship’s steward banging in succession on the cabin doors lining the passageway while shouting urgently.

“EVERYBODY UP! PUT ON LIFE JACKETS AND GO TO THE BOAT DECK: WE ARE EVACUATING THE SHIP.”

Erik looked with shock at the old woman, then ran to the door of a cabin twenty meters away and opened it, entering the cabin and switching on the lights.

“FRIDA! ELSA! LARS! GET UP AND GET DRESSED, NOW!”

His young wife Frida groggily sat up in her bunk bed and looked at him with surprise and confusion.

“What is going on, Erik?”

“The ship is sinking, that’s what’s up! Get dressed quickly while I prepare our children.”

Now afraid, Frida got out of bed and was about to remove her night gown in order to put a dress on when she saw a distinguished old woman that had just entered their small cabin and had closed and locked the door behind her. Before she could ask who she was, the old woman spoke first, urgency in her voice.

“Just get dressed quickly, miss: there is little time available and I want to save as many people as I can before the ship sinks.”

That prompted Erik, who had started to help his two year-old son dress, to turn around and face her angrily.

“Look, madam! You warned me and I thank you for that but you may go now.”

“Not before I send you and your family to safety. Take this!”

She then put inside his belt a small cylindrical object after pressing a red button on top of it. The object then slipped under his belt, falling inside his undershorts and preventing Erik from throwing it away. Before he could do anything, the big Dane disappeared from where he stood in a flash of white light. Frida opened her eyes wide in horror at that and was about to scream when the old woman covered her mouth while slipping another cylinder in her corsage.

“You are going to join your husband now.” Said Jeanne, who withdrew her hand just before Frida disappeared as well. That left a small girl and a toddler boy with her in the cabin. Crouching down and facing the two scared children, Jeanne smiled to them to reassure them.

“Don’t worry, little ones: you will join your parents right now. Just take those cylinders.”

“Where will we go?” Asked in a tiny voice the small girl, still afraid.

“In a new home where you will live happily and prosper. Please take this cylinder, Elsa.”

Only half convinced, the girl nonetheless took the transit probe and disappeared two seconds later. Jeanne next gave a probe to the toddler boy, who was frozen with his eyes wide open in a corner of the cabin.

“Goodbye and good luck, Lars.”

As soon as the boy disappeared, Jeanne grabbed two empty suitcases and one kit bag from under one bag and quickly stuffed in them the clothes and personal effects that were in the cabin. She next activated and put in the bags three transit probes, making the luggage disappear seconds later. With Erik and his family now sent to safety aboard the time transport ship GILGAMESH, Jeanne grabbed back her canvas bag and coat and exited the cabin, going to the next door cabin and entering it. A man who was hurriedly dressing up with a woman and four children stared at her as she closed the door behind her.

“Who are you?” He asked with a strong Irish accent. “What are you doing in our cabin?”

She gave him a disarming smile while getting closer to him.

“I am here to help save you and your family.”

Jeanne had time to evacuate to safety a total of four families and three single men from inside their cabins before the rest of the passengers in this section of the ship had run out to go to the boat deck. Those passengers however found out to their utter distress that most of the lifeboats had already been lowered in the water and had left, while the few boats still being loaded would accommodate only a small portion of the people left aboard the ship. Some of the stranded passengers, panicking, started running around the stricken ship, trying to find some unused lifeboats. The majority, though, either stayed passively on the outer decks or went back to the aft 3rd class saloons, away from the steadily submerging bow. Many of the lower class crewmembers of the TITANIC, maids, stewards, cooks and valets, also went to find temporary refuge in the aft parts of the ship. Faced with the daunting task of trying to save over 1,500 persons with less than fifty minutes to spare, Jeanne had to improvise and show ingenuity, catching by surprise people who were unaware and standing out of sight of others and dumping activated transit probes in their pockets. She however quickly ran out of such opportunities, apart from running out of transit probes. She had to go quickly back to her predetermined pickup point to get a second bag of probes while operators aboard the GILGAMESH worked frantically, using spy probes to find crewmembers trapped low in the bowels of the ship, then evacuating them by sending to them transit probes. With a new bag of probes in her hands, Jeanne decided to return to the 3rd class social hall, hoping for more opportunities there. She found the hall packed

with passengers and crewmembers either sitting sullenly or trying to forget their incoming faith by drinking from bottles grabbed around the ship or by playing cards. Looking at her watch, Jeanne saw that she now had less than thirty minutes left before the ship would disappear under the surface of the sea. In even less time, the ship's list would become so severe that most movement aboard would become nearly impossible. She would need to act quickly if she wanted to save at least the people present in the social hall. Standing in front of the doors of the hall and blocking them, she then sent telepathically as loud a mental message as she could, stunning the crowd in the hall into silence.

"LISTEN TO ME, ALL OF YOU! I AM THE OLD WOMAN NOW STANDING IN FRONT OF THE EXIT. ALL THE LIFEBOATS OF THE SHIP ARE EITHER FULL OR HAVE ALREADY LEFT. I HOWEVER CAN OFFER YOU A WAY OUT. IT MAY LOOK LIKE MAGIC TO YOU BUT THINK OF IT AS A MIRACLE OFFERED BY GOD. WHO WANTS TO LEAVE THIS SHIP? THOSE WHO DO, RAISE ONE HAND."

Everybody raised a hand, hesitantly at first, then more readily, while staring at her. Jeanne nodded, then pointed at a young maid who had been sobbing with terror in a nearby corner of the hall.

"Come to me, miss." She said verbally in a gentle tone. The young woman hesitated for a moment, then got up and slowly came to her. Jeanne then showed to all one of her transit probes and used telepathy again to better impress her point.

"THIS OBJECT AND OTHER SIMILAR ONES ARE YOUR WAY OUT TO A SHIP WAITING NEARBY. ONCE ON THAT SHIP, YOU WILL BE BROUGHT TO A NEW COUNTRY WHERE YOU WILL BE ABLE TO LIVE AND PROSPER IN PEACE."

Jeanne activated the probe, then quickly slipped it in a breast pocket of the maid's apron. Two seconds later the maid disappeared in a flash of light, attracting exclamations and even screams from the onlookers. Jeanne gently smiled to the people around her and spoke telepathically again.

"IF YOU WANT TO SAFELY LEAVE THIS SHIP, THEN LINE UP IN FRONT OF ME."

When no one moved at first, Jeanne used her powers of spacetime travel and jumped instantly to just in front of another ship's maid.

"AS YOU CAN SEE, IT IS PERFECTLY SAFE TO MOVE THE WAY I DO."

She then jumped again, reappearing in her previous spot.

“TIME IS RUNNING SHORT. YOU MUST MOVE QUICKLY IN ORDER TO SURVIVE.”

Either convinced by her arguments or figuring that he had nothing left to lose, a man got up with his wife and three children and came to Jeanne, hat in hands and eyeing her with hope.

“Can you really save my family, madam?”

“I can and I will, good man. Take these.”

The man and his family took the probes presented by Jeanne and disappeared within seconds. That seemed to decide many in the hall, who then came to her in increasing numbers. Ten minutes later all of the 126 men, women and children that had been in the hall were gone, transported to the safety of the time cargo ship GILGAMESH.

Now nearly out of time, Jeanne called for and got a new bag of probes, then went back on the open aft Poop Deck, packed with desperate, terrified passengers and crewmembers trying to escape the sea that was progressively engulfing the forward decks. Barely bothering to hide her actions due to the lack of time, Jeanne quickly walked around the crowd, working her way from aft to forward while activating probe after probe and stuffing them in nearby pockets. Most of the people on the deck had eyes only for the rising waters approaching them and never noticed the others disappearing in their backs. By the time the ship's list started increasing at a much faster rate, Jeanne had sent to safety a further 131 persons and stood alone on the Poop Deck. With no transit probes left and with less than a minute to spare, Jeanne concentrated and jumped spacetime, appearing just outside the entrance to the 1st class lounge on the Boat Deck. Entering the luxurious lounge, she found inside less than twenty male passengers waiting their final fate there as water was about to rush in via the forward entrance doors. Walking quickly to a man with gray hair dressed in a fine evening suit, she sat beside him at his table, drawing a stunned look from the man.

“Lady Jeanne? How come you didn't take place in one of the lifeboats?”

Jeanne smiled calmly to Benjamin Guggenheim, one of the richest passengers on the TITANIC, and gently pressed his left hand.

“I wanted to leave a space for someone younger who still had not seen much of life. I also wanted to die by the side of a true gentleman.”

Guggenheim swallowed hard, with tears coming to his eyes as he looked into her resolute green eyes.

“It will be a true honor to have you with me at this time, my dear Lady Jeanne.” Just then, the forward doors of the lounge crashed open under the pressure of the sea and tons of water rushed in. Jeanne passed one arm around Benjamin Guggenheim’s shoulders as the frigid water started rushing around and over their legs.

“God is about to accept us back in his fold, Benjamin.” She said tenderly to the man, mere seconds before the water submerged them completely.

On the bridge of the time transport ship GILGAMESH, operating under cloak above the doomed liner, Captain Jan Zirel, who was watching intensely a holoscreen connected to a spy probe, got up from his command chair and, tears in his eyes, spoke up to his bridge crew.

“ALL WILL STAND UP!”

Waiting for the others to be all up on their feet, he then spoke with difficulty in a strangled voice.

“Nancy is now with The One. She...she was one of the greatest. May her spirit be in peace, along with the other unfortunate souls still on the TITANIC.”

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