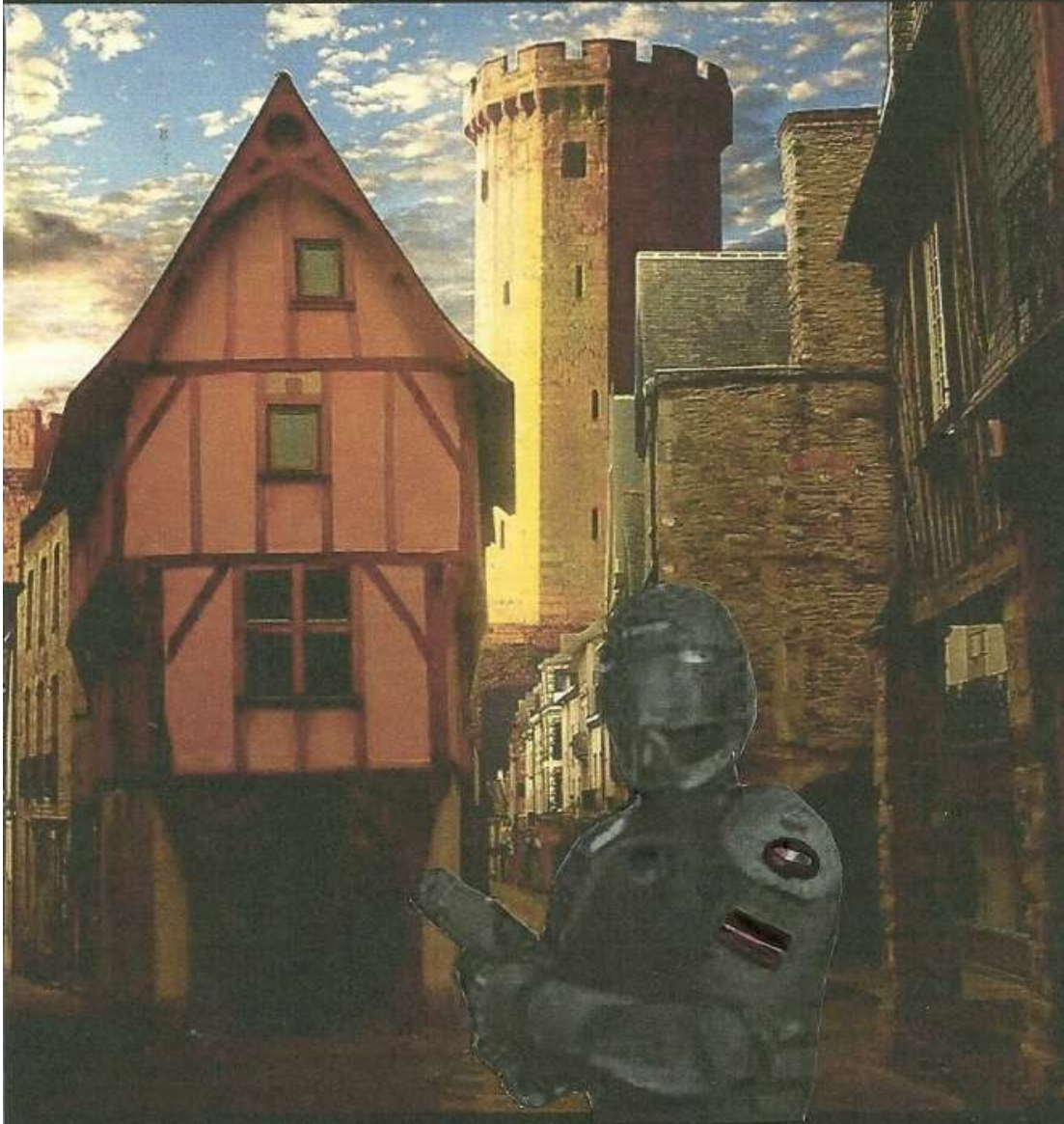


SPACE-TIME ODYSSEY



science-fiction novel
by
Michel Poulin

SPACE-TIME ODYSSEY

A science-fiction novel

By Michel Poulin

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Adapted and translated from the original novel in French

ODYSSÉE TEMPORELLE

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

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

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This science-fiction novel is a translated, improved and updated version of the original novel in French, ODYSSÉE TEMPORELLE, first written in 1997 and then revised in 2013. It is meant to entertain both the amateurs of time travel stories and those with an interest in the history of the early Middle Ages.

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INTRODUCTION

The Human race is now entering the fifth millennium of the Common Era, a chronology based on the old Christian calendar. In the year 4021, Humanity has been free of the scourges of internal quarrels and war for centuries and enjoys the rule of a stable, centralized democratic government dedicated to the well being of all. Most of the hard physical work is now done by a multitude of specialized robots, thus allowing Humans to express their imagination in the domains of the arts, sciences and technologies. All basic needs and essential services are free to all, thus eliminating starvation, homelessness and poverty, while salaries from an employment or profits from a commerce are used to pay for luxury products and services, as well as for entertainment. Humans are in consequence free to work on improving their physique, perfect their intellect or dedicate oneself to his/her children or grandchildren.

Crime has nearly disappeared in the society of the Human Expansion, the name of the human civilization throughout the stars. This is due partly to the general welfare level and partly to the use of mental introspection techniques able to verify rapidly and without risk of error the guilt or innocence of an individual. However, the use of these mental introspection techniques are severely regulated and controlled at multiple levels, in order to avoid abuses in their use. The death penalty, while still existing, is now very rarely given, and only in the case of the most horrendous, cruel and violent crimes.

The domain that has however most influenced the society of the 41st Century is that of space exploration. The invention in the 32nd Century of the molecular propulsion system, which allowed for speeds well above that of light, had finally opened new horizons for the Human Race and gave the planet Earth a salutary reprieve by allowing the emigration to the stars of its surplus population. The planetary systems settled by Humans now form a confederation named 'Human Expansion', which counts 26 inhabited solar systems. The best talents, as well as the resources still available after all the essential needs of the population have been satisfied, are now directed towards space exploration and colonization.

The only major deception of Humanity to date is the apparent rarity of intelligent life forms presently coexisting with Humanity in the Universe. While ancient traces of many alien civilizations have been found on a number of solar systems, some of them millions of years old, only three intelligent alien races have been encountered directly to date by Humans. Two of those races were too early in their technological and social developments to risk the unpredictable consequences of a mutual contact. The third race, originating from Epsilon Eridani, proved to be of an extremely aggressive nature and was thus ostracized after a particularly bloody incident between Eridanis and Human merchants. However, the search is continuing through the stars for a race Humans could call a friend.

CHAPTER 1 – A CORNER OF PARADISE

09:18 (Local Time)

Wednesday, February 3, 4021

Planet Mirphak III, Mirphak System

Perseus Constellation, 637 light-years from Earth

Ann Shelton turned herself on her back on her beach long chair, exposing her firm and generous chest to the ultraviolet rays from Mirphak, a F5 spectral type yellow star. The third planet of Mirphak had been sheltering for seven months the most recent colony of the Human Expansion and things looked very promising up to now. Also lying on a long chair beside her, Vyn Drelan, Ann's friend and colleague, raised her head and looked around the communal pool, which was surrounded by the prefabricated habitat modules of the colony. It was another beautiful day today, which was itself a common way to describe the weather and temperature along the equatorial belt of Mirphak III. The planet, first explored by a cruiser of the exploration fleet of the Human Expansion three years ago, benefited in fact from ideal climatic conditions and was also rich in mineral resources. Its vast oceans, which covered most of the planet's surface, were teeming with life, although none of which could be described as intelligent. Preliminary studies had shown that most of the marine species were actually edible by Humans and were rich in proteins and minerals, thus reinforcing the case for colonizing the planet. The only drawback of Mirphak III was its distance from Earth: a whopping 637 light-years, a factor that would normally have condemned the project for a new colony to a veto by the Supreme Council of the Human Expansion, in view of the close to one year travel time needed for a simple one way trip between Earth and Mirphak III. However, the near heavenly conditions on Mirphak III had convinced the Supreme Council to authorize the establishment of a colony that would shelter at first 50,000 persons. The volunteers that had shown up to go live on Mirphak III had then been transported on the brand new exploration cruiser MARCO POLO, along with a complete set of prefabricated buildings, installations, equipment and materials sufficient to make the colony nearly self-sufficient from the start. The MARCO POLO, which had been built expressly for the purpose of establishing new colonies on distant worlds and which had

been on its first ever interstellar trip, now rested on its landing legs on the small spaceport of the colony, its gigantic mass blocking a good part of the northern horizon.

Vvyn Drelan, a tall, svelte and beautiful woman of 34 years of age, whose Asian facial features mixed with blond hair and blue eyes betrayed the ethnic mixture of the first Humans to colonize her native world of Alpha Centauri A-IV, extended her left arm to lightly shake Ann's shoulder. The historian and sociologist turned her head towards her colleague, with the Centaurian woman smiling to Ann.

"I'm sorry, Ann, but I'm afraid that it is time for us to pack and leave, unless you want to stay here for another three years."

The native of London, England, let out a long sigh that told Vvyn that she didn't find that idea so unpleasant.

"Just when I was really becoming attached to this world. Well, let's go then!" Getting up slowly from her long chair and picking up her beach towel, Ann followed Vvyn towards their assigned habitat module. Both women were wearing only G-strings covering their genitals, like all the other bathers around the pool, and were topless, a state of dress that was both common and legal around the Human Expansion, that is of course where the climatic conditions permitted it. Ann and Vvyn soon got to the entrance of their habitat module, a cube of steel and tinted armor glass fifty meters to the side similar to the other habitat modules surrounding it. Each habitat module could house over 500 persons in complete comfort and had been simply dropped in place on its foundations by one of the giant flying cranes of the MARCO POLO, which in turn had transported over 400 million tons worth of prefabricated modules and other cargo to Mirphak III. With only the foundations and paved surfaces to prepare, establishing the colony's core had actually taken less than six days of work, with the following weeks and months used mostly to start growing food in the hydroponic gardens and to embellish the grounds around the modules. That had in turn been helped by the standard custom of the Human Expansion to leave intact as much as possible any original vegetation around construction sites. The colony was already self-sufficient in terms of food production, with an industrial base in place that mostly used minerals mined from the dense asteroid belt surrounding Mirphak. With the first phase of colonization now completed on Mirphak III, the MARCO POLO was now free to return to its port of origin of Kyoto Alpha, in the Alpha Centauri A system.

After a short trip by lift to the third level of the module, Ann and Vyyn arrived at the door of their apartment, which slid open after Ann had put her hand on the control panel fixed to the left of the door. While Vyyn went to the bathroom to take a quick shower, Ann packed away her last few things not already in suitcases, something that took her only a few minutes. With a set of fresh clothes ready on her bed, she took off her G-string and went to briefly look at herself in the full length wall mirror of the bedroom. The sun of Mirphak III had beautifully tanned her 185 centimeter long body and the daily swimming sessions in the colony's pool had helped her keep fully fit. Her long, silky black hair and large green eyes added to her sexiness, something that she had certainly exploited in the past few weeks. Being still single and with no present steady companion in her life at the age of 32, Ann had been free to entertain herself as she pleased in her free time, when not busy studying the social parameters of the new colony with Vyyn. They were due to return to Mirphak III in three years, when the MARCO POLO would return with the colonists, equipment and modules of Phase Two of the colonization plan. Then, Ann and Vyyn would be able to see how the first colonists were adapting to their new lives, with any relevant findings and lessons to be reported back to the Supreme Council of the Human Expansion. Vyyn's voice then came out of the bathroom.

"Ann, I'm finished with my shower. The bathroom is now free. I just called a taxi, asking it to show up on the roof in 45 minutes. Will that do with you?"

"No problems! I will be ready by then."

Ann then walked into the bathroom to take a last quick shower before leaving.

Both women, now wearing regulation sky blue two-piece Exploration Fleet shipboard uniforms, walked out of their room 25 minutes later, each pulling a large suitcase on wheels and carrying a travel bag and a computer bag. They had already informed the central lodging office of the colony of their departure, so that their apartment could be reassigned to other colonists as needed. Some past historians and ideologues would have qualified this system of centralized distribution of goods and services as being plain communism, but it was in fact simply based on practicality and economy of resources. That system had developed out of simple necessity through the past centuries and had nothing to do with any particular ideology. In fact, Ann would have refuted that argument about a centralized system of distribution being communism by a simple fact: there were no political parties of any kind in existence in the Human

Expansion. Public servants, as politicians were now described as opposed to civil servants, who administered the day-to-day machinery of government, were elected democratically at every level, from the district and municipal to that of the Supreme Council, following strict rules of egalitarianism limiting the amounts of public time and money used by candidates for campaigning for public office. The times when spending millions would help you win an election were long gone. With individual candidates forced to prove their worth in public debates and being unable to rely on the support of some big political machine geared towards a specific political ideology, all public servants in the Human Expansion gained and kept their posts through simple merit, competence and dedication to the public cause.

Once on the roof landing pad of their habitat module, the two women admired for a last time the scenery of Mirphak III, with its lush vegetation and with the nearby expanse of blue water of the sea surrounding the wide island on which the colony had been built.

"I will definitely regret this corner of paradise." Said Ann with a sigh, making Vyyn smile in comprehension.

"If it can help, remember that we will be back here in three years, when the MARCO POLO will return for the second phase of colonization."

"If I listened to myself, I would then stay here for good."

"No you wouldn't! You love too much studying old things to stay here for the rest of your life."

"Then, I will make it my retirement place when the time comes, in a few decades."

"Now, that makes sense! You will probably find me already here by then."

Their air taxi arrived twelve minutes later, landing silently on the roof thanks to its directed gravity propulsion system. That system basically manipulated the atomic force that created gravity and directed and amplified it in the specific direction wanted by the pilot of the system. Molecular propulsion, which was used by spaceships to accelerate beyond the speed of light, went even further, manipulating all atomic forces and isolating the molecules affected by it from the constraints of normal space-time. Like all standard air taxis, the vehicle had no human pilot, being controlled by a computer linked to a

central air traffic control system. Taking place with Vvyn on one of the bench seats of the taxi, Ann spoke towards the control panel of the vehicle.

“Destination: passenger arrival airlock of the cruiser MARCO POLO. Depart now!”

The air taxi then rose at once from the roof of the building and picked up speed while heading north. The exploration cruiser, which already dominated by its mass the northern horizon, grew even further in the field of view of the two women, until it completely filled the windshield of the taxi. While used to the cruiser’s sight by now, Ann still stared at it with admiration. Having basically the shape of a sphere 2,000 meters in diameter, which was surrounded in turn by a thick, 3,000 meter-wide equatorial belt shaped like a fat saucer, the MARCO POLO represented the edge of present human technology in the 41st Century. It had been designed specifically for two main missions: deep space exploration and the establishment of new human colonies. The gigantic mass and volume of the vessel had been dictated mainly by the need to include an industrial complex able to produce nearly any manufactured object, using as raw material the minerals found in asteroids and on lifeless moons. An important portion of its internal volume was also occupied by hydroponic farms, fish ponds and fruit tree plantations that basically made the cruiser self-sufficient in terms of food supplies. To top all that, the MARCO POLO also had a thermonuclear isotopic fuel production plant able to extract heavy helium and hydrogen isotopes from the atmosphere of giant gas planets. If it wanted to, the cruiser would thus be able to travel through space for decades without any external support.

The taxi was now heading directly towards a large opening visible at the surface of the cruiser’s equatorial belt. Entering it, the taxi flew down a long steel tunnel and covered a good 300 meters before turning right inside another tunnel that ringed the core section of the ship. That tunnel’s vertical surfaces were covered with the armored doors of hundreds of hangars for crafts of various sizes. The taxi finally landed smoothly in the middle of a fifty meter-wide hangar that opened on one side, near the mouth of the access tunnel and transit airlock. A beefy man approached the taxi as soon as it landed and quickly helped its two passengers to take out their bags.

“Doctors Drelan and Shelton? I am Corporal Hussein Faysal, from the ship’s security unit, and I was directed to guide you to your new quarters.”

"We are not going to our old apartment, the 31-10-D?" Asked Vvyn, a bit surprised. The corporal consulted briefly his electronic memo pad before answering her with an apologetic smile.

"No, Doctor! Since the colonists now on Mirphak III have vacated the majority of the apartments in the Main Habitat, a pair of luxury suites have been allotted to you. You are getting the 57-14-A and B, to be more precise. If you may follow me, please."

"Wow! Luxury suites! We are being pampered." Exclaimed Vvyn, attracting a grin from Ann.

"I can live with that."

Having loaded their bags on an anti-gravity platform, Faysal then sat at the commands, letting Ann and Vvyn take place on the rear bench seat. The trio then left the hangar, hovering silently and smoothly over the metallic deck, and entered a large security airlock. The thick external doors slid close behind them, with the internal doors opening after a few seconds, time for the occupants of the platform to be positively identified and their baggage scanned by remote sensors, while other sensors analyzed the air filling the security airlock. Ann didn't comment on that procedure, understanding its importance. Past experience had taught Humans to be cautious at all times when in space or on an alien world. Dangerous micro-organisms could infiltrate a ship or lodge themselves inside a crewmember's body, then infect gradually a whole ship. Humanoid aliens, like the Eridanis, could also disguise themselves to try entering a ship, to then attack it from the inside. While the Human Expansion was on the whole a pacifist society, it also had not forgotten its bloody past and had learned the lessons from it, one being that, while not looking for a fight, you had to be ready for one if the need arose. It was no time to rebuild from scratch your defensive forces when a new foe appeared and surprised you. A soft female voice spoke out of a speaker as the internal doors of the airlock opened.

"Welcome back aboard, Doctors Drelan and Shelton."

"Thank you, Guardian!" Replied Ann, answering the artificial intelligence central computer that helped control the ship. Faysal then started again his platform, gliding out of the airlock and inside a long, wide corridor. After a trip 400 meters up in a cargo elevator from the level of the access airlocks, they followed a wide tunnel for over 600 meters. The trio then emerged into what appeared to be open air, with the sky of Mirphak III visible all around an island covering 38 hectares and on which numerous buildings stood. Ann and Vvyn however knew that this was simply an illusion, as they

were now in one of the core sections of the ship: the Main Habitat. The habitat was actually modeled like a tropical island and was covered by a huge holographic dome that could project images picturing different types of skies and a variety of weather patterns. The artificial island supporting the buildings of the habitat was in turn surrounded by a 150 meter-wide band of water that reached a maximum depth of twenty meters. There were fish in that artificial lake and Ann had visited a couple of times an underwater observation dome that could be reached by a tunnel connected to the island. Even though she knew that all this was artificial, it still impressed her to no end. For one thing, such an environment had a tremendously positive impact on the psyche of crewmembers forced to live for months on end in the void of space during long interstellar trips. Whoever had thought of that definitely deserved kudos.

Faysal finally parked his platform along a long wooden promenade built along a beach of fine sand. Ann could see then that few people were using the beach at the time, something that was not surprising considering the fact that the population of the main habitat had gone from over 13,000 persons to a more typical 3,000 occupants during the last months. As for the auxiliary quarters section, located some 200 meters below, it was now empty after having lodged in still respectable comfort over 40,000 colonists during the year-long trip from Alpha Centauri. Very few colonists had complained about the auxiliary quarters, knowing that the only other alternative would have been to use some of the ten million cryogenic sleep cells contained in another section of the ship. Those cryogenic cells had been included in the design of the MARCO POLO with the goal of providing it with a mass emergency evacuation capability if a planet would ever face an imminent and unavoidable natural catastrophe, like the impact of a giant asteroid. Thankfully for the Human Expansion, that emergency capability had not needed to be used yet.

Corporal Faysal pointed with one hand an elegant, twenty storey building situated near one side of the promenade, fifteen meters to their left.

“Your building, Tower 57. If you will follow that paved trail with me.”

Taking the lead and towing her suitcase on wheels behind her, Ann followed a trail paved with flat stones that went up a gentle slope to their building, which dominated the beach from a position maybe ten meters above it. A large pool surrounded by a patio with a bar, a covered buffet area and a number of tables and chairs, was visible on the

side of the building, opposite the beach. About a hundred persons were relaxing around the pool when Ann and Vvyn arrived at the main entrance, which was situated on the side façade of the building. Some of the bathers waived at the two women as they were about to enter the building, something that prompted a remark from Faysal.

“You seem to be well known on the MARCO POLO, ladies.”

Vvyn smiled at that, like Ann.

“That’s normal, Corporal: we had to interview many people on board in order to do our job.”

Vvyn continued her explanation as they were entering an elevator cabin in the building’s reception lobby.

“As historian-sociologists, me and Ann were studying the behavior of the colonists during their trip to Mirphak and during the first phase of the installation, so that we could build the beginning of a database. We are due to return in three years, at which time we will examine how they will have adapted to their new environment, compared with similar cases in the past. By identifying similarities with past situations, we hope to be able to prevent on Mirphak III the repetition of past mistakes. As an old saying goes, ‘those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it’.”

“So, if I understood well, your job is to compare past and present human societies, in order to draw useful lessons from them, right?”

“Correct, Corporal!” Confirmed Ann. The trio was now in the main hallway of the fourteenth floor and soon stopped in front of a door marked ’57-14-A. The door slid open on Ann’s command, revealing the inside of a suite that, even by the comfortable standards of the 41st Century, bordered on the luxurious. Ann nodded her head, truly impressed.

“Very nice! Is this apartment for me or for Vvyn?”

“It is for you, Doctor Shelton. Doctor Drelan will be occupying the apartment 14-B, next door to yours. I hope that this will do?”

“Perfectly, Corporal! Thank you very much for your assistance.”

Faysal nodded, then came to attention and saluted the two women before turning around and leaving. Letting Vvyn go to her own apartment, Ann entered her new temporary home and dropped her two carry-on bags on top of one of the sofas of the lounge. Exploring quickly her apartment, she found a large bedroom with a huge bed, a private office, a nice, luxurious bathroom and even a small kitchenette and eating area adjacent to the lounge. Going to sit on a sofa facing one of the large patio doors giving

on the external balcony, Ann sighed as she contemplated the fake Mirphak sky depicted on the holographic dome of the main habitat. She was not yet gone from Mirphak III, yet she already wanted to be back.

14:03 (Local Time)

Thursday, February 4, 4021

Command bridge, exploration cruiser MARCO POLO

Surface of Mirphak III

Commodore Henry Ferguson gave a last look around him before sitting in the command chair reserved for the captain of the MARCO POLO. The three superimposed concentric platforms forming the bridge, each higher one smaller in diameter than the next lower platform, were located in the center of a big empty sphere with a diameter of forty meters. The inside surface of that sphere was actually a giant holographic display screen that showed to the operators and officers on the bridge the external world, complete with superimposed sensors symbols and navigation indicators. Right now, only twenty men and women occupied the bridge, the normal crew for a routine takeoff.

“Attention all hands! This is the Captain! Prepare for takeoff! Section heads, report by video link!”

The various senior officers of the ship then reported one by one, appearing in succession on the small display screen attached to the left armrest of Ferguson’s command chair.

“First Officer reporting! All our personnel is aboard and accounted for. All our auxiliary craft are in their hangars.”

“Engineering Officer reporting! The ship is ready for space. All systems function correctly and the generators are powered up.”

“Security Officer reporting! Safeties are on all the ship’s defensive turrets. All the airlocks and access points are closed and locked. No intruder or stowaway detected on board.”

“Quartermaster reporting! All the equipment and supplies in our holds are tied down securely to the decks.”

Henry Ferguson then turned his head towards his communications officer, seated to his left and one level lower.

“Lieutenant Tousla, deploy the external communication display screens on our rear arc. Plug them to the cameras inside the Great Lounge of the Main Habitat.”

On the surface of Mirphak III, the colonists had gathered on the roofs of their buildings to watch the departure of the MARCO POLO. Surprised exclamations went out when three gigantic flat rectangular panels deployed out of the lower surface of the equatorial bulge of the cruiser. The panels then angled themselves to be in direct line of sight of the colony and came alive with color images, revealing themselves to be giant viewing screens. The colonists could now see the inside of a big lounge occupied by over a hundred persons who were waving enthusiastically at them. Hidden loudspeakers also relayed the sounds from inside the lounge, making the air of Mirphak III vibrate. Lyyna Tshin, the chief administrator of the colony, looked with wonder on her face at her assistant, a stoutly-built man in his fifties.

“External visual screens to communicate with non-technological races? This is ingenious! Did you know about these, Yevgeni?”

“No! I must say that those who designed the MARCO POLO seemed to have thought about everything. Commodore Ferguson can be proud of his new ship.”

After about a minute of projection time, the external panels slid back inside the hull of the MARCO POLO and a slight ascending movement of the cruiser became noticeable. Slowly taking altitude at first in total silence thanks to its anti-gravity fields, the cruiser rose to an altitude of 5,000 meters before accelerating its climb, this in order to avoid damages on the ground if it used its main propulsion too low. With all its navigation lights on, the MARCO POLO then flew out of sight of the colonists in seconds.

On the cruiser’s bridge, Ferguson was watching carefully each phase of the departure: you didn’t move carelessly a mass close to 3,700,000,000 metric tons, however powerful your engines were. A major propulsion system failure now and they could well flatten the newly established colony. Once out of Mirphak III’s atmosphere, the cruiser increased its acceleration further while its navigator carefully pointed the ship towards Alpha Centauri. After less than eight hours of constant acceleration, the MARCO POLO was passing the orbit of Mirphak XII, the last planet of the system, at half the speed of light. As the MARCO POLO was approaching the threshold of the speed of

light and was about to truly start its eight month-long return trip, it passed by an asteroid field. It was not close enough however to be able to detect a small cloud of metallic debris inside that asteroid field. That cloud was in fact all that was left of a high speed automated courier probe sent from Alpha Centauri over a year ago, its top priority message now lost forever in the void of space.

CHAPTER 2 – A RUDE WELCOMING

16:46 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Saturday, October 17, 4021

Command bridge of the MARCO POLO

Outer periphery of Alpha Centauri A

“Attention all hands! This is the Captain speaking! We are now entering the Alpha Centauri A System and are under the speed of light. We should arrive at the Kyoto Alpha Spaceport in about twenty hours. As discussed previously, the section heads will have to be ready on landing to present a complete inventory of their needs in order to replenish their supplies and equipment lists. That is all!”

Henry Ferguson then closed his intercom line and contemplated on the giant display surface of the bridge sphere the brilliant yellow star that shone in the center of the screens. High and to the left of Alpha Centauri A, an orange ball marked the position of Alpha Centauri B, with Proxima Centauri showed as a small red dot at the bottom of the screens. After a few minutes, the voice of one of the sensors operators of the bridge took him out of his reveries.

“Sir, we have six ships on a fast intercept course towards us, coming from three different directions. They will be on top of us in two minutes.”

A few seconds later, the bridge communications officer, Lieutenant Tousla, looked at Ferguson, apparently perplex.

“Commodore, we have just received a call asking us to identify ourselves. The tone was rather aggressive.”

“Connect me to their channel, Lieutenant.” Grumbled Ferguson, who didn’t appreciate those kind of manners, especially when considering that the MARCO POLO’s arrival was supposed to be expected at this date on Kyoto Alpha. Henry Ferguson soon had the image of a young lieutenant on his chair’s left side screen. The young officer was looking at him in turn with apparent suspicion.

“This is Commodore Henry Ferguson, in command of the exploration cruiser MARCO POLO. We are arriving from Mirphak III and are planning to land at the Kyoto

Alpha Spaceport, as per our flight plan authorized prior to our departure from Kyoto Alpha. What are the reasons for this aggressive reception, Lieutenant?"

"I am sorry, Commodore, but the Alpha Centauri System is on defensive high alert and all approaching ships have to be intercepted and visually identified."

"Alpha Centauri, on the defensive? Against what?"

Ferguson's question seemed to irritate his interlocutor, who then answered in a decidedly harsh tone of voice.

"Against what? But, against the Morgs, of course! We have been at war for nearly two years now and you ask me such a question?"

The bridge personnel of the MARCO POLO froze in stunned surprise at that before exclamations came out.

"SILENCE ON THE BRIDGE!" Shouted Ferguson, himself upset, before looking back at his side display screen.

"Lieutenant, we were never informed about that state of war. If you will let us pass, I fully intend to learn more about this once I have landed in Kyoto Alpha."

The young officer, now much less aggressive, lowered his tone of voice.

"Please excuse my lack of tact, Commodore. The two last years have been truly tragic ones for the Expansion and everybody in the system is on edge. You may proceed to Kyoto Alpha, over and out."

Once his side display screen was blank, Ferguson turned his head towards Tousla, his face hard.

"Lieutenant, contact the Admiralty in Kyoto Alpha. Get me someone on the line with whom I can speak without wasting my time."

Ferguson then switched on the ship-wide intercom and spoke in a firm voice.

"Attention all hands! This is the Captain speaking! A local patrol has just intercepted us and has informed us that the Expansion has been at war for nearly two years now with an alien race called the Morgs. I am hoping to know more about this soon, at which time I will publish a communiqué with the relevant information. For the time being, our original schedule on arrival at Kyoto Alpha is cancelled, while all shore leave is suspended until further notice. The ship will immediately go to Alert Level Orange, with our main batteries manned and ready. Captain, out!"

A few seconds later, the general alarm tone for an orange threat level started sounding all across the ship, while 23 extra crewmembers arrived at a run in the next few minutes to man the weapons fire control stations on the bridge. The sixteen giant disintegrator

guns that formed with 24 missile-launching tubes the main armament of the MARCO POLO deployed out of their protective barbets around the equatorial bulge of the ship, their eighty meter-long tubes pointing in all directions. A tall woman in her forties with long black hair and wearing the ranks of a navy captain also came in and took the seat immediately to the right of Ferguson's seat. Carla Montoya had been the second in command of the MARCO POLO since its entry into service and Ferguson knew her as an extremely competent officer. She however had a bit of a cold personality and had little patience or tolerance towards any negligence or delay by someone in executing her orders. While she was not very popular with the crew, Ferguson knew that he could count on her during difficult times.

Lieutenant Tousla approached Ferguson a few minutes later, his expression sober.

"Commodore, I just sent a message with your request for information and instructions to Kyoto Alpha. However, due to the distance, we cannot expect a response before at least six hours from now."

"I understand, Lieutenant. Thank you!"

Ferguson then looked at his first officer.

"There is no point in the two of us staying on the bridge while waiting for a response from Kyoto Alpha. I will thus go to my day cabin to take some rest. Make sure in the meantime that the ship arrives as quickly as possible to Kyoto Alpha. Wake me up if anything serious happens."

"Understood, Commodore!"

Ferguson then got up from his command chair and left the bridge to go to his day cabin, situated just below the bridge complex. Montoya looked up and to the rear, towards the ship's pilot, whose seat was situated half a level up from her seat.

"Lieutenant, program and execute a high performance approach trajectory to Kyoto Alpha. I want us to be there as quickly as possible. If Space Control objects to that, then put me on line with them."

"With pleasure, Captain!" Replied the pilot, too happy to be able to do what regulations normally forbade.

Seven hours later, Henry Ferguson came back on the bridge, rested and having taken the time to eat something, and sent in turn Montoya to go take some rest. Three

hours after that, Lieutenant Tousla sent him electronically a message that he quickly read up and down before carefully re-reading it. It was a short message from Admiralty Headquarters in Kyoto Alpha, the capital of the fourth planet of the system.

TO: H.S.S. MARCO POLO, ATTENTION OF COMMODORE HENRY FERGUSON.

FROM: ADMIRAL AKIRO NINTSU, COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF ALPHA CENTAURI SECTOR.

SUBJECT: MISSION ORDER 082904.

1. THE H.S.S. MARCO POLO WILL GO TO ALPHA CENTAURI A-IV AT BEST SPEED POSSIBLE AND LAND IN THE MILITARY SECTOR OF THE KYOTO ALPHA SPACEPORT.
2. THE H.S.S. MARCO POLO IS TO BE READY ON LANDING TO TAKE ABOARD THE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF CIVILIAN REFUGEES IT CAN ACCOMMODATE, ALONG WITH ALL THE EQUIPMENT AND MATERIEL NEEDED FOR THEIR EVENTUAL RELOCATION IN ANOTHER SYSTEM.
3. ONCE LOADED, THE H.S.S. MARCO POLO WILL FLY TO EARTH UNDER ESCORT, WHERE IT WILL SEEK SUPPLEMENTARY ORDERS.
4. THE ALPHA CENTAURI SECTOR BEING THREATENED BY AN IMMINENT INVASION BY THE MORGS, THE H.S.S. MARCO POLO WILL BE PLACED UPON LANDING UNDER THE DIRECT AUTHORITY OF SYSTEM GRAND ADMINISTRATOR DJAEL ANAKER, WHO HAS ASSUMED EMERGENCY DICTATORIAL POWERS, AND THIS UNTIL ITS DEPARTURE FROM KYOTO ALPHA. ONCE THE H.S.S. MARCO POLO WILL BE ON ITS WAY TO EARTH, COMMODORE FERGUSON WILL TAKE COMMAND OF ITS ESCORT FLEET AND WILL ENSURE THE SAFE ARRIVAL OF ITS PASSENGERS TO EARTH. IF THE ROAD TO EARTH IS FOUND TO BE CUT OFF, COMMODORE FERGUSON WILL THEN BE AT LIBERTY TO FLY TO AN ALTERNATE, SUITABLE DESTINATION. THE SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF THE CIVILIAN REFUGEES WILL BE PARAMOUNT.
5. THREAT LEVEL RED IS PRESENTLY IN FORCE ACROSS THE ALPHA CENTAURI SYSTEM UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

“My god! This is even worse than I have imagined.” Said Ferguson to himself. Working the buttons of his intercom panel, he then started distributing a series of brief, concise orders to his principal officers.

“Pilot, program a high performance flight profile to Alpha Centauri A-IV. I want to be at the Kyoto Alpha spaceport as quickly as possible. You can chuck the navigation rules book out an airlock if that can help. Lieutenant Tousla, start emitting immediately in continuous a priority right of navigation signal, and this until we land on Kyoto Alpha. If anyone objects, tell them to shut up and get out of the way. Chief-Surgeon Perrier! We will soon have to help in the evacuation of the population of Alpha Centauri A-IV. Activate and man the cryogenic sleep cells section and be ready to fill it in a hurry. Quartermaster! Be ready to load in our holds as much equipment and supplies as you can. We will take off from Kyoto Alpha in overload condition if need be. Ensure that no space is wasted inside our holds and be ready to get rid of any empty containers aboard right after landing. Personnel Services Officer! You will have to be ready on landing to lodge the maximum number of people possible in our ship’s quarters. Reorganize the quarters attributed presently to the crew and have them double and triple up in order to free more space for refugees. Also, fit our communal lounges as sleeping quarters. However, do not use any of our storage compartments: we are going to fill them to capacity with equipment and supplies on landing. Coordinate your moves with the Quartermaster and ship security. Security Officer! Start planning the control measures needed for the safe and orderly embarkation of a minimum of ten million civilian refugees, along with a massive quantity of materiel. Plan as well for the possibility that panicky crowds could try to force their way on the ship. Your soldiers will have to be ready for everything, including the possibility of having to fire on rioters. To all the section heads: there will be an emergency command meeting in the bridge conference room in three hours. We will then discuss in detail the emergency evacuation of Alpha Centauri A-IV. That is all for the moment.”

Once finished with his announcements, Ferguson sat back in his command chair and looked on the screens at the small blue dot that was Alpha Centauri A-IV. A feeling of despair filled him as he thought of the hours to come. Even if the MARCO POLO managed to fill its quarters and its holds to capacity and then leave for Earth, this would still save only a very small portion of the population of

the planet, which counted over two billion inhabitants. The Alpha Centauri System had been the first extra-solar system ever to be colonized by Humans, and this nearly seventeen centuries ago, with the would-be colonists using sub-light ships powered by thermonuclear rocket engines that took a full 180 years to get to Alpha Centauri. The colonists, a mix of Scandinavians and Asians, had then developed on their own on the two habitable planets of the system, A-IV and B-III, for nearly a millennium before the invention of the molecular propulsion system had made possible frequent physical contacts with Earth. By then, the Centaurians, as they were called on Earth, had thoroughly mixed their ethnic Scandinavian and Asian genes and had adapted to the particular conditions of their new homes, making them a distinct new race in the Human family. Now, if he could go by the nearly panicky reaction of the Admiralty to that Morg threat, that race was now in danger of being exterminated. An exclamation from one of sensors operators on the bridge then took him out of his gloomy thoughts.

“Holy...! Look at that line of battleships in Quadrant 2! I have never seen so many of them in one place, even during fleet exercises.”

Looking in the direction pointed by the operator, Ferguson then saw a group of 72 gigantic battleships hurrying towards the Northeast sector of the system. Each of those battleships had a diameter of 1,200 meters and were over 1,700 meter-long from bow to stern. They were also armed with disintegrator batteries that made the guns of the MARCO POLO look like toys in comparison. That group of 72 battleships represented a sum of firepower nearly impossible to describe. Yet, the Admiralty was sufficiently worried by the Morgs to have ordered the MARCO POLO to urgently evacuate all the civilians it could take. Ferguson couldn't help feel renewed dread then.

CHAPTER 3 – THE CRUSHING WEIGHT OF POWER

22:44 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Saturday, October 17, 4021

Office of the System's Grand Administrator

Kyoto Alpha, Alpha Centauri A-IV

The videophone on the work desk of the Grand Administrator of the Alpha Centauri System buzzed, prompting Djael Anaker in extending an arm to press the 'answer' button. A still solid man in his sixties with gray strands mixed in his blond hair, Djael Anaker's face reflected his present state of fatigue, his eyes red and underlined by deep pockets from lack of sleep.

"What is it, Miss Delmas?"

The face of his secretary, filling the viewing screen of his videophone, also reflected fatigue. However, at 35, she apparently had more energy left in her than her boss.

"I am sorry to disturb you again, sir, but Admiral Nintsu and two of his officers are requesting to see you. They say that it is about an urgent matter."

"An urgent matter? That's original!" Said Anaker sarcastically while smiling. "Everybody who wanted to see me during the last three days claimed that it was for urgent reasons. Very well, let them in!"

The Grand Administrator then rose from behind his desk, as much to be able to stretch his tired muscles than to greet his visitors. Admiral Nintsu came in first, followed by two other senior officers of the Navy. Like Anaker, they obviously lacked sleep and their royal blue uniforms were wrinkled from constant wear. The Grand Administrator shook their hands in turn and showed them a comfortable sofa in a corner of his office.

"Please sit down, gentlemen! Would you like some coffee or tea?"

Nintsu replied to him with an apologetic smile.

"Thank you, but no: if I drink another cup of coffee, it will come out by my ears." Djael Anaker laughed briefly at that remark: he was himself staying up only by consuming coffee constantly. Pulling up a chair to face the sofa where his visitors were taking place, Anaker looked at Nintsu.

"So, Admiral, what can I do for you?"

“Grand Administrator, I believe that it is I who can do something for you today. To be more precise, Commodore Ferguson and his exploration cruiser, the MARCO POLO, which is due to arrive in Kyoto Alpha in about four hours, will be able to help you and your citizens.”

Those words immediately stimulated Anaker’s tired brain.

“You have an extra ship available to help in evacuating citizens?”

“Correct, sir! I gave orders for the MARCO POLO, which is just returning from a distant colonization mission, to land as quickly as possible in Kyoto Alpha and to then put itself at your disposal.”

“Aah, a good news, at last! How many evacuees can this MARCO POLO take aboard?”

A big smile appeared on Nintsu’s face as he answered Anaker.

“Eleven million, sir.”

“ELEVEN MILLION?” Exclaimed Anaker, surprise on his face, while jumping to his feet. Nintsu nodded his head, then pointed his subalterns to him.

“I brought Commodore Kempton and Captain Grant with me so that they could brief you in detail about the capacities of the MARCO POLO. Commodore Kempton, you may start your exposé.”

Kempton, a tall and lean man in his fifties, then read from a pocket electronic notepad, looking up from time to time at Anaker.

“The MARCO POLO is the first ship of a new class of exploration cruisers and entered service three years ago. It is just now returning from a colonization mission in the Mirphak System, 633 light-years away. In the case that preoccupies us all presently, the MARCO POLO is admirably equipped for your needs. It has a cryogenic sleep vault with a capacity of ten million cells, plus has an auxiliary quarters section that can lodge about a million more people, if packed to capacity. It also has huge holds able to carry up to 500 million tons of cargo and supplies, or even more if it takes off in overload condition. We as well have four heavy cargo ships that recently arrived from Earth with extra supplies for the fleet. As soon as they are finished unloading, that is in a couple of hours at the most, they will be at your disposal to be filled with emergency disaster relief equipment and supplies taken from the planet’s reserves, sir.”

Anaker was left speechless for a moment, unable to believe his luck at such a desperate time.

“Commodore, tell me if I’m wrong, but I believe that preparing a person for cryogenic sleep and then putting him or her in a cryogenic cell is not a quick process. Will we have time to process and load ten million persons in the MARCO POLO’s cells?” Nintsu’s other officer, Captain Grant, then took on him to answer Anaker’s question.

“Sir, the cryogenic cells aboard the MARCO POLO are of the same model as the ones equipping our underground shelters and are thus interchangeable. I was part of the MARCO POLO’s design team and know it like the inside of my pocket. We will just need to exchange one for one loaded cryogenic cells from our shelters with empty ones from the MARCO POLO. With robots doing the bulk of the cells’ handling, that process could be very quick indeed.”

Savage joy filled Anaker at those words: he was going to be able to save at least a few millions of his citizens from the mass destruction expected soon from the Morgs.

“Admiral Nintsu, you did tell me that the MARCO POLO will be placed under my authority as soon as it lands, right?”

“Yes sir, and this until it takes off and joins up with its escort fleet for its trip towards Earth.”

That left Anaker pensive for a moment before he looked back at Nintsu, pointing an index at him.

“Admiral, I want you to inform Commodore Ferguson that my office will take care of selecting and transporting the passengers and materiel to be loaded on his ship. I will also need some troops, so that they could form a security perimeter around the MARCO POLO’s landing pad and prevent possible rioters from boarding it. That cruiser will be vital in ensuring the survival of the Centaurian Race if the Morgs ever come and destroy this system, like too many of our other systems in the recent past.”

Nintsu nodded his head firmly in response.

“Grand Administrator, I have available right now the 12,000 commandos and 16,000 combat robots of the 58th Assault Division, which is protecting the city’s spaceport. Admiral Garth also promised me to send a strong force to escort the MARCO POLO on its way to Earth.”

“Excellent! One last point, Admiral. May I borrow the services of your Captain Grant for an undetermined period of time? I will really need his knowledge about the MARCO POLO.”

“No problem, sir!” Replied Nintsu, who then looked at his subaltern. “Captain Grant, you are now on detached duty with the office of the Grand Administrator and will

act as his special liaison officer. You will have my full authority to requisition any personnel, equipment or supplies that you will deem indispensable for the loading up of the MARCO POLO. Do you have any questions, Captain?"

"None, Admiral!"

"Good! Grand Administrator, if you will excuse me, I will go attend to other pressing problems. Please don't hesitate to call me if you need anything else."

"You already did a lot for me and my citizens, Admiral. I wish you and the fleet luck in the coming battle."

Anaker shook hands again with Nintsu and Kempten before escorting them to the door of his office. He then returned to his work desk and, with Grant watching him, activated his intercom.

"Miss Delmas, tell all my assistant administrators present in this building to come immediately to my office for an emergency meeting. The assistant administrators that are not here are to link up with my office via video-teleconferencing."

"Yes sir!"

Then turning to face Grant, Anaker gave him a sober look.

"Captain, only fifteen minutes ago I was desperate about saving any of my citizens still present on this planet. Thanks to you and to Commodore Ferguson, we will now be able to save millions of lives. It may take a few minutes before I will be able to open the meeting with my assistants. In the meantime, you may start putting together a list of what is going to be loaded aboard the MARCO POLO."

Anaker suddenly had a thought and activated again his intercom.

"Miss Delmas, please send in Miss Himiko."

That done, Anaker gave a smile to Grant.

"Miss Yoko Himiko is one of my junior secretaries. I will assign her to you, so that she can help you by calling people and passing messages and directives around."

Grant looked back at him gravely.

"How old is Miss Himiko? Does she have children?"

"Yoko is 27 years old and does have two young children. Why do you ask, Captain?"

"Because I would like her and her immediate family to be able to board the MARCO POLO once all the loading is finished, sir."

Anaker nodded his head nearly at once.

“Yoko is a young, competent and likeable person who certainly deserves to live through this. You may invoke my authority to get her and her family to be evacuated on the MARCO POLO.”

“Thank you sir! This brings me to another point about evacuees. When the Morgs invaded and then destroyed the Gliese 660C System three months ago, some of our ground troops tasked with protecting the landing pads used by our evacuation ships refused to board the ships when ordered to, and that because they wanted to stay with their families, which had been sent to shelters on Gliese 660Cc. The same thing could happen with the married soldiers of our 58th Assault Division if they are ordered to leave without their spouses and children.”

Anaker had a pang of the heart on hearing that: he could understand too well what a soldier would feel at being ordered to basically abandon his wife and children to near certain death while he himself fled. The danger of seeing sizeable portions of the 58th Assault Division, which originated from this planet, mutiny and refuse to leave was thus a very real one indeed. That had to be prevented at all cost, lest crowds of panicky rioters be able as a result to break through the security perimeter around the MARCO POLO and storm the ship.

“Captain Grant, contact the commander of the 58th Assault Division at once and tell him that he has my express permission to collect immediately and bring aboard the MARCO POLO the spouses and children of his soldiers. That permission will not however include other family members, like parents or siblings. Just spouses and children! Am I clear on that, Captain?”

“Very clear, sir. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, sir.”

“You will thank me when we both meet again...in the afterlife.”

Grant nodded soberly at that: he already knew that he would most probably die in the next few days. A young and very pretty Centaurian woman then walked in the office, an electronic notepad in one hand.

“You asked for me, sir?”

“Yes, I did, Yoko. This is Captain Grant, from Admiral Nintsu’s staff. Consider yourself attached to him as his executive assistant until further notice. Captain Grant has my full support and authority in executing the tasks I gave him. Make sure that whoever will get a message or directive from him understands that.”

The young secretary hesitated for a moment, looking briefly at Grant before looking back at her boss.

“Sir, could I ask for one hour of free time first, so that I could see my husband and children before they go to one of our underground shelters to be put into cryogenic cells?”

“You won’t need to, Yoko.” Said gently Anaker. “Call your husband instead and tell him to come here with your two children and with a few bags packed with essential items: you and your family will be evacuated to Earth once you are done helping Captain Grant.”

Tears nearly came out at once from Yoko’s eyes, prompting Anaker in walking quickly to her to press her into his arms, consoling her with soft words.

“Yoko, you are a good girl and you and your family deserves this. You now have ten minutes to go call your husband and pass the message for him to come here with your children. Then, come back to assist Captain Grant with his job.”

“Ye...yes sir! Thank you so much, sir.” Could only say the secretary before walking out of the office. Anaker then turned around and pointed an index at Grant.

“That goes for your wife, children and grand-children as well, Captain. Call them now and tell them to get their asses here.”

Grant gave him a stunned look before smiling, gratitude in his eyes.

“Thank you, sir!”

Anaker replied with a sarcastic smirk.

“Don’t thank me for that, Captain: I am simply acting like a typical politician ensuring the loyalty and dedication of his staff members by distributing favors, and this at a time I most need their help.”

The first of Anaker’s assistant administrators showed up a few minutes later, as Grant was finishing his calls to his adult children. Ten more minutes later, with six of his assistant administrators physically present and with eleven others in contact with him via holographic video link, Djael Anaker opened the meeting by rapping his knuckles on the long table of his conference room, adjacent to his office. He took a minute to tell his assistants about the imminent arrival of the MARCO POLO and its capacity to accommodate eleven million refugees, a number that stunned and pleased them. Anaker then looked at the men and women around the table.

“Now, the population of the Greater Kyoto Alpha region is a bit under three million people. Even if we manage to transfer to the MARCO POLO’s cryogenic vault all the citizens presently inside the city shelters, that would still leave place for seven million

more people in cryogenic sleep, plus another million people made up of infants, toddlers and their mothers, to be accommodated in the auxiliary quarters of the MARCO POLO. This leaves us with one critical question: what criteria will we follow to decide who will be part of those seven million spots left in the cryogenic vault of the MARCO POLO? Please think this over for a few seconds before starting to present your suggestions.”

The first to raise his hand was his employment minister, Rolf Magnusson.

“Yes, Rolf?”

“Djael, if I understand this well, our refugees due to go to Earth may still be redirected to another habitable system in order to establish themselves in a world away from the Morg threat, right?”

“Yes! And...?”

“Well, the population of Kyoto Alpha, while reasonably diverse in terms of work skills and qualifications, is still heavily skewed towards the service industries, the academic world and the administrative and commercial trades. You would find very few if any representatives of the agronomical or industrial trades in Kyoto Alpha, thus may end up with an unbalanced society if forced to settle another planet. What I suggest is for us to select a number of small centers of population or region where those agronomical and industrial trades would be more typically found. We could select and then transport to the MARCO POLO the populations of, say, small fishing communities, mining towns, farming regions and industrial centers.”

“That is a most eminently logical and practical idea, Rolf.” Replied Anaker, while the others around the table nodded their heads in agreement. “Let’s thus select a few such towns and regions along those guidelines. Personally, I would recommend first the population of New Trondheim, one of our most important fishing ports and fish processing centers. It has a population of about 160,000 people, if I remember well. We could also load aboard the MARCO POLO some of the more recent fishing vessels docked in New Trondheim, to ensure that we end up with a sizeable fishing capability.” Heads nodded again around the table, with others then presenting in turn suggestions on which population centers or regions to evacuate to Earth. After nearly one hour of such selective picking, Anaker ended up with a list totaling well over eleven million people in terms of population. His minister of health then raised a point.

“Sir, some may think of me as a bastard for saying this, but do we want to select for evacuation even the elderly and retired in those population centers we chose? Shouldn’t we select only people that are still reasonably healthy and productive?”

Anaker gave a somber look at the woman in her fifties, who was a medical surgeon by profession.”

“Miri, I would call you a realist rather than a bastard for raising that point, which is eminently valid. The time for hard choices is now and there is no way nor time to avoid it. Since I suspect that debating this could take a lot of precious time, I will thus present myself a basic rule concerning that point. You will then be free to vote for or against it. What I propose is that every evacuee must be either a productive adult under the mandatory retirement age and with no criminal record, or a child or teenager of those selected adults.”

After exchanging glances, his assistants collectively agreed to his idea. That was when Captain Grant, who had been silent up to now and working on his electronic notepad, spoke up.

“Sir, if I may, I believe that I have found a way to add another five million or so refugees to the maximum number approved for loading on the MARCO POLO.”

“And where do you propose that we put those extra five million people, Captain?” Asked Anaker, skeptical. Grant smiled in reply.

“In the cargo holds of the MARCO POLO, sir.”

01:29 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Sunday, October 18, 4021

Main Habitat, H.S.S. MARCO POLO

“ATTENTION ALL HANDS! THIS IS THE CAPTAIN SPEAKING! WE WILL ARRIVE IN KYOTO ALPHA IN APPROXIMATELY ONE HOUR. THE QUARTERS REASSIGNMENT MUST BE COMPLETED BEFORE LANDING.”

Ann Shelton let out an exasperated sigh on hearing that intercom announcement and continued transferring her belongings into the master bedroom of her luxury suite. The chime of the entrance door then rang, making her nearly run to it to open it. She smiled on seeing that it was Vvyn Drelan, who was loaded down with her own bags.

“Let me help you, Vvyn. I suppose that you have been reassigned to my suite?”

“Correct! I was also told that two more persons will occupy this suite with us.”

“Well, in view of the circumstances, it would have been dumb to leave the guest bedroom of this suite empty.”

Grabbing two of Vvyn's bags, Ann then led her to the main bedroom, where she dropped the bags on the big bed.

"At least, with such a large bedroom, we will not be in danger of suffering from claustrophobia. The view of the beach is also very nice."

The chime of the entrance door then rang for a second time.

"Those must be our new co-occupants. Unpack your things while I go open the door for them."

Going again to the door and opening it, Ann found herself facing two big, powerful men whose muscles and closely cut hair signaled them as probably being Navy commandos. The taller man nodded his head and smiled to Ann while presenting his right hand for a shake.

"Hi! I'm Sergeant Mark Dempster, of the ship's security battalion, and this is my partner, Corporal Tony Vinelli. We have been reassigned to this suite."

"And my name is Ann Shelton. One of my friends, Vvyn Drelan, also was reassigned to this suite. But please, do come in! The guest bedroom is the second door on the left after entering. It is all yours."

She then led the two men to the said bedroom, which also had large windows giving a view of the beach. Dempster nodded his head as he eyed the room, visibly satisfied.

"This is quite nice indeed. It certainly beats our previous bachelor apartments."

"Glad to see that you like it." Replied Ann. "If you don't mind, I will go finish moving my things."

"Go right ahead, Miss Shelton."

Returning to the master bedroom, Ann was alarmed to find Vvyn sitting on the bed, crying. Hurrying to her friend and colleague, Ann sat beside her and passed one arm around her shoulders.

"What's wrong, Vvyn? Why are you crying?"

"It's...it's my family." Said the Centaurian between sobs. "The full reality of this situation is now hitting me and I don't know if my parents and my siblings will be selected to board our ship. Even with the millions who will be able to come aboard the MARCO POLO, this will leave close to two billion Centaurians at the mercy of those Morgs. Two of my brothers are married and have young children. The thought of possibly losing all of them is making me sick."

Ann didn't know what to say to that at first. Statistically, the chances of Vvyn's relatives being selected among the lucky ones to board the ship were quite small indeed. In fact, Ann didn't know yet according to which criteria the refugees would be selected among the general population of Alpha Centauri A-IV. She finally spoke softly into her friend's ear.

"Don't lose hope about them, Vvyn. The fleet may yet be able to repel that Morg attack. You saw how powerful our combat fleet is in this system."

Vvyn was finally able to control her tears and turned her head to look at Ann with red eyes.

"Thanks for trying to comfort me, Ann. We now can only hope the best for the men and women of our combat fleet, as we all depend on them right now."

02:10 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge, H.S.S. MARCO POLO

"Commodore Ferguson, this is Captain James Grant, temporarily attached to the office of Grand Administrator Anaker. I was put in charge of planning and coordinating the loading of your ship once you will have landed in Kyoto Alpha."

"Thank the stars!" Replied Henry Ferguson with true relief while looking down at the viewing screen attached to his command chair. "I was getting worried about how we would be proceeding with the loading once on the ground. I still don't know exactly what is due to be loaded in my holds. The only thing I know is that I will be filling my living quarters and my cryogenic vaults to the maximum. You do realize that we will have to separate from the mass of refugees the mothers of infants and toddlers, along with their youngest children, who don't support well cryogenic sleep?"

Grant, whose head was visible on Ferguson's side viewing screen, smiled at his question.

"That is already being taken care of, Commodore. Apart from infants, toddlers and their mothers, which are being brought to the passenger terminal of the spaceport, over half a billion Centaurians have already been put into cryogenic sleep in the underground shelters, with more being processed continuously. I had fifteen million loaded cryogenic cells transported into hangars near the landing pad assigned to receive your ship. We will be able to bring them aboard your ship as soon as you land."

"Fifteen million cells? But, our cryogenic vault can only accommodate a maximum of ten million cells."

"I am well aware of that, Commodore. Know that I was part of the design team that built your ship. Since each cryo cell can function independently for two months on its own individual power source, or indefinitely if plugged to an external power source, I have thus filled cargo containers with five million loaded cells. Those containers also have portable generators and computers that will help supervise and sustain those cells for at least two years without any human supervision. I would have filled more cargo containers with cryogenic cells, but we had to leave enough space in your holds for the materiel and supplies necessary for so many people. Grand Administrator Anaker passed orders as well for two civilian cargo ships that were still on Alpha Centauri B-III to similarly load up with containers full of cryogenic cells and then join us as quickly as possible."

"A truly excellent idea, Captain Grant. What about the materiel and supplies to be loaded on my ship? Do you have a list of those already made?"

"Yes, Commodore! Much of it will consist of the prefabricated buildings, equipment and supplies that had been planned for the second phase of Mirphak III's colonization plan, to which we added more supplies, parts, vehicles and construction equipment, plus all the emergency disaster relief materiel we could spare here on Alpha Centauri A-IV. Finally, on the late suggestion from the secretary of the Grand Administrator, we rounded up all the baby supplies that we could find in the shopping malls of Kyoto Alpha. Without her, you would have found yourself stuck with nearly half a million babies and without baby food or diapers."

"Ouch! That would have been quite messy indeed. Captain, you truly are taking a big weight off my shoulders. I will never be able to thank you enough."

The face of James Grant, which had kept a neutral expression up to now, then reflected sadness, with his eyes becoming moist.

"Commodore, my family will be coming aboard your ship. You can thank me by bringing them safely to Earth."

CHAPTER 4 – BATTLE PLAN

17:39 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Sunday, October 18, 4021

Combat Center, H.S.S. INVINCIBLE

High orbit above Alpha Centauri A-IV

While they were quite low, Fleet Admiral Lex Garth still had hopes for this incoming battle, for a number of reasons. Up to now, in this 22 month-old war, the Morgs had possessed the decisive advantage of being able to concentrate all their forces at single points chosen by them, thus crushing their human opponents through sheer weight of numbers, rather than through any true technological or tactical superiority. Taken individually, the Morg ships were slower and less agile than human ships, plus they could not by themselves go above the speed of light. While their anti-matter projector guns had devastating firepower that could destroy even heavy combat ships in one strike, their true advantage resided in their inter-dimensional tunnel technology, which was analogous to creating large artificial wormholes in space. With their inter-dimensional tunnels, the Morgs were able to select a point in the star system of their choice and create a large opening in the fabric of space, opening through which whole fleets of Morg ships could then emerge from to attack the said star system. While the Morgs' native system's precise location was still unknown to Humans, it seemed that the Morgs knew too well the locations of the various systems inhabited by the Human Expansion. They thus had been able to overwhelm one by one in mass surprise attacks the Human-occupied systems, exterminating every Human in those systems and destroying everything in their path. After losing in succession 24 star systems to the Morgs in the last 22 months, the Human Expansion was left with only two systems intact: Alpha Centauri and the Solar System. However, all those tragic losses had brought a bitter benefit to the Human Expansion: its fleet was now able to concentrate its remaining forces on defending only two star systems, instead of having to spread its ships among two dozen star systems. For the first time in this war, Lex Garth felt that he had enough combat ships with him to have at least a reasonable chance of repulsing the Morg attack that was now expected at any time.

Lex Garth looked around the large tactical situation display sphere, eyeing in succession his flotilla commanders.

“Thank you all for coming on such a short notice, ladies and gentlemen. Time being strictly limited, I will thus ask you to keep your questions, if any, for after my presentation. Our forward patrols have now confirmed that the last of the Morg scout ships have been forced to jump back through the inter-dimensional tunnel they opened just beyond the orbit of Alpha Centauri A’s outer asteroid ring. It is now time for our fleet to deploy for battle while the enemy has no eyes left on the battlefield. Vice-Admiral Konovalov!”

The second most senior officer to Garth’s right came to attention on hearing his name.

“Admiral?”

“You will be in charge of our ambush force, which will be comprised of the light cruisers Second and Third Flotillas, the heavy cruisers Twelfth Division and the 340 interceptors of Rear-Admiral Janata. You will immediately take your force and post it in low orbit around Alpha Centauri A. Be careful to always stay above the surface opposite the Morgs’ inter-dimensional tunnel and use relay probes to stay in contact with me, but make sure to avoid detection by the Morgs. You will come out of your hiding place only on my express order. Good luck!”

Konovalov saluted Garth, then pivoted on his heels and walked out of the combat center at a hurried step. Not waiting for him to be out, Garth then continued his briefing.

“Vice-Admiral Yonan! Your 360 interceptors will be reinforced by the 48 frigates of Rear-Admiral Jibril and will form our covering force. Your mission will be to hide your ships in the asteroid belt, near the mouth of the Morgs’ inter-dimensional tunnel, and to wait there for the enemy fleet to emerge from the tunnel. Before the enemy does, however, I will want you to mine the entrance of the tunnel. When the enemy fleet will emerge, our main force will then concentrate an intense fire of synchrotron radiation on the enemy ships to force them into covering and protecting their sensors. Once the enemy will be blinded, you will attack him with continuous attack passes, with the goal of inflicting as many casualties as possible to the Morgs while staying out of the fields bathed by synchrotron radiation. You will withdraw on my order or if the Morgs initiate a pursuit.”

“Understood, Admiral!”

“Admiral Burnside! Your 106 battleships, along with the INVINCIBLE, will form our main force, which will take a blocking position halfway between the Morg tunnel and

the fourth planet. Your mission will be to strike the enemy hard with long range fire, cause the maximum casualties and to block at all cost the road to Alpha Centauri A-IV. Use liberally your synchrotron batteries and your heavy disintegrators.”

“We will give them hell, Admiral.”

“Rear-Admiral Juarez! Twelve of your battleships, along with 112 interceptors commanded by Commodore Akamura, will form my tactical reserve. Stay in high orbit above the fourth planet and watch closely the battle to detect any enemy group that could try to infiltrate our lines.”

The powerfully-built Hispanic man to which Garth had just spoken raised an eyebrow, apparently confused.

“And my six remaining battleships, Admiral? Where will they be?”

“They will be detached from your division to form an escort force for the exploration cruiser MARCO POLO, which has landed in Kyoto Alpha and is now busy loading up as many civilian refugees as it can carry. It will then take off to transport those refugees to Earth. That task has in fact the highest priority after that of defending this system.”

Garth then looked around at his assembled subalterns.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we now have for the first time the chance of using fully our fleet and give a bloody nose to the Morgs. With some luck, we may even be able to force them to withdraw before they can touch the fourth planet. Keep your ships concentrated and move them constantly while pushing your engines to the maximum. The fate of two billion Centaurians is now in our hands. Good luck and good hunting!”

CHAPTER 5 – CONTACT

20:37 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Sunday, October 18, 4021

Bridge of the light cruiser KARAKAN

Covering Force, outer asteroid belt

“All our ships are now in position, hidden behind asteroids, and are ready for action, Admiral.”

Vice-Admiral Li Yonan nodded his head to acknowledge the report from his operations officer before returning his attention to the main tactical situation display sphere, where a dozen ships were seen flying in a carefully planned pattern near the mouth of the Morg inter-dimensional tunnel.

“How long before Teno’s frigates are finished mining the mouth of the Morg’s tunnel?”

“About ten minutes, Admiral.”

“Good! Tell Captain Teno to get the hell out of there the moment she is finished seeding her mines. The Morgs could start appearing at any time now.”

“Yes, Admiral!”

20:43 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge, frigate H.S.S. CORINTHIA

Near the mouth of the Morg inter-dimensional tunnel

“We have just launched our last mines, Captain.”

“Excellent! Give two more minutes for our other frigates to take their distances before arming the mines. Pilot, get us back towards the asteroids!”

Navy Captain Yoko Teno hid her nervousness as best she could as her frigate turned around to join back the other ships of the covering force, hidden among the nearby asteroid belt. The Morgs could appear at any time now in the mouth of their tunnel while her frigates were still in the open and vulnerable. A shout of alarm from one of her sensors operators suddenly made her stiffen in her armored command chair.

“CONTACT! NUMEROUS SHIPS JUST APPEARED IN THE MOUTH OF THE MORG TUNNEL. MORE SHIPS ARE NOW APPEARING AT A FAST RATE.”

“MAX, ALERT THE FLEET!” Shouted at once Teno to her communications officer before looking at her pilot. “PILOT, GET US OUT OF HERE AS FAST AS YOU CAN. WEAPONS OFFICER, OPEN FIRE AT WILL ON THE NEAREST MORG SHIPS.”

Her second in command, Commander Borel Karpan, realizing something, gave her a horrified look.

“Captain, the mines: we are still in their danger radius! If we wait to arm them, the Morgs will be able to pass unmolested, but if we arm them now, we will most probably get blown up by our own mines.”

Teno felt her blood freeze on hearing those words. Karpan was too right about that, but she could not let in good conscience dozens of enemy ships clear the mouth of the tunnel unimpeded. There was only one thing she could do now.

“ARM THE MINES, NOW!”

Over eighty of the some 1,700 black cylinders floating in the vacuum of space at the entrance of the Morg tunnel suddenly started moving, accelerating at an incredible rate towards the ships they detected within their effective range of action. Designed to be extremely difficult to detect, each mine was armed with a five megaton thermonuclear warhead and was nearly impossible to avoid once it had acquired a target. A total of 57 heavy Morg combat ships and three Human frigates were vaporized in a series of blinding flashes. Nine more Morg ships and one Human frigate suffered heavy damages from nearby nuclear detonations, while four Morg ships managed to clear the minefield intact.

20:46 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge of the frigate H.S.S. CORINTHIA

The hurricane created on the bridge by the explosive decompression finally calmed down, all the air in the bridge complex having been sucked out into space. Borel Karpan looked at his control panel but had difficulty to focus his eyes, while he could barely stop himself from vomiting inside his sealed spacesuit. The reason for his illness became too clear to him when he was able to read his radiation detector.

“Cap...Captain, we...we have absorbed a dose of 57 grays¹ inside the bridge. Captain?”

Not getting a response from Teno, Karpan turned his head towards the command chair. He then had to swallow a lump that formed in his throat when he saw that Yoko Teno was inert in her chair, a large metallic fragment piercing her spacesuit at the level of her abdomen.

20:49 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge of the light cruiser H.S.S. KARAKAN

“We are getting no response from the CORINTHIA, Admiral. The frigate is drifting in space and none of its escape pods came out.”

Li Yonan’s heart tightened on hearing that: over 240 men and women had just paid with their lives while following his orders to mine the mouth of the Morg tunnel. It was now up to him and the remainder of his ships to make sure that their sacrifice had not been in vain.

“Rear-Admiral Jibril, take your remaining frigates and destroy the four Morg ships that managed to go through our minefield. Sensors, what is the status of our mines?”

“Of our 1,696 mines originally sown, 83 went active and detonated, sir. Correction: seven more mines just detonated against new Morg ships that have emerged from the tunnel. We presently have 32 still intact heavy Morg ships that have come out of the tunnel, with more joining them at a fast rate.”

“Thank you! Tactical Officer, order our interceptors to start attacking the Morgs near the mouth of the tunnel. Have them proceed by successive waves of divisions, with thirty seconds of spacing between the waves. They are to shoot a quarter of their missiles per attack but make sure that they stay away from the danger radius of our mines.”

20:54 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Interceptor AC3027, Covering Force

¹ Gray : Radiation measurement unit. A dose of six grays will cause nearly 100% of deaths within a week. A dose of over fifty grays will cause complete incapacitation within five minutes and assured death within one or two days.

The voice of their division commander, legi Minamoto, vibrated in the helmet headsets of the crew of the hundred meter-long interceptor as it rushed towards the enemy ships.

"Division Delta, adopt individual zigzag courses and accelerate at your maximum rate now! Fire your missiles from maximum range, then concentrate the fire of your disintegrator guns on the Morg first rank command ship presently in our flight path. You will turn away at my signal, or just before entering our minefield. Our main force should be opening fire soon with their synchrotron batteries. Good luck to all!"

The interceptor, along with the seventeen other similar attack craft of its division, was armed with two heavy weapons batteries situated at the tips of two of the four cruciform bulges around its ovoid main hull, plus forty missile launch tubes. Controlled by their fire control computer, ten of the missiles flew out of their tubes, shaking briefly the eight crewmembers sealed inside their spacesuits. A few seconds later, blinding rays of violet light started bracketing the interceptor.

"Three Morg battleships are spraying us with their antimatter cannons." Announced Jorge Canseco, the weapons officer of the interceptor.

"I'm going in manual control mode!" Replied the pilot and commander of the interceptor, Robert Busson, before starting to shake his craft around in order to put off the fire from the Morg gunners. His tactic seemed to work, with the antimatter beam fire becoming less dense around his interceptor.

"We are now within disintegrator range!" Announced Canseco before pushing his firing button. "Firing in continuous mode from now: it's free!" Two thick blue beams came out of his disintegrator guns, to which were added the rays from the seventeen other interceptors. One Morg battleship was hit after one second of fire, a disintegrator beam vaporizing a wide band of its external hull. More beams then added their destructive power to the first one, causing more external damage before digging inside the battleship. A blinding flash of light announced the destruction of the Morg battleship after four seconds of firing. Just as their division commander was ordering them to break contact, with Robert Busson then pulling up brutally his interceptor, an intense flash of light covered most of the right half of their holographic screens.

"Are we hit?" Asked anxiously Busson. Dyy Jonan, the flight engineer, shook her head.

“Negative! Some of our sensors have however been temporarily blinded. The explosion was coming from another interceptor.”

Their hearts beating fast, the eight crewmembers watched their screens as they flew away from the enemy fleet to give space to another interceptor division to attack. Their missiles then started to find their marks, exploding near or against a number of Morg battleships. A radio report from their division commander to Admiral Yonan soon informed them of the results of their attack.

“Division Delta to KARAKAN. We have now broken contact with the enemy and are returning in formation. Fourteen Morg battleships have been destroyed, but we lost the AC3014.”

“JACK! NOOO!”

Busson turned his head inside his helmet to look at Sylvia Morgan, one of his sensors specialist, and saw that she was now crying inside her spacesuit: Jack Frasier was Sylvia’s husband. Tightening his fists, Busson then concentrated back on his flying. They were certainly going to have to mourn many more deaths before the end of this battle.

21:04 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge of the battleship IRON DUKE

Main Force

“Admiral, Vice-Admiral Yonan is reporting that he has been engaging the enemy for nine minutes now. To date, 108 enemy ships have been destroyed and twelve others damaged. Admiral Yonan lost himself six frigates and two interceptors.”

Sam Burnside simply nodded his head, keeping an inscrutable face while watching the tactical displays. The graying officer was a partisan of the old school of leadership: a calm and deliberate leader was in his opinion the best remedy for the nerves of his subalterns when the going got rough. Internally, Burnside was very satisfied with the results of the efforts of the covering force. It was now time to give to Li Yonan some well deserved fire support.

“To all ships of the Main Force, open fire with your synchrotron batteries. Continuous fire at maximum power on the Morg fleet.”

A violet beam with a diameter of four meters shot out of the muzzle of a gigantic cannon mounted in a bow casemate of the battleship, imitated by 105 other battleships and by

the flagship, the INVINCIBLE. The latter, a converted asteroid with a length of six kilometers and a maximum diameter of four kilometers, was equipped with five super synchrotron cannons with a total power nearly equaling the combined power of the batteries of the 106 battleships of Admiral Burnside. Over 900 terawatts per second of penetrating radiation started to rain continuously on the Morg fleet.

21:05 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command post of the Morg flagship

The Morg Master Pilot didn't like at all the way this battle was going: the expected surprise effect had not played out as planned. Instead, the Morg Empire was now facing an enemy fleet of unprecedented power. Also, the cursed automated nuclear mines of the Humans had sown confusion among his armada, confusion that the human vermin was using with way too much success to his taste. However, final victory was not in doubt: his fleet still crushed the Humans with a numerical advantage of more than fifteen to one. The Master Pilot, who would have looked to a Human like a giant spider covered with a thick gray fur, pulled out a long tongue to activate a contact on his command couch. A high-pitched whistle interrupted him before he could address his subalterns, making him grumble with irritation.

"The threat alarm? What is going on now?"

One of his eight eyes then noticed that the display screens now showed the space outside his ship to be bathed in a violet glow. The frontal screen soon started filling with parasites, to then go entirely dark, to the Master Pilot's fury.

"TACTICAL CONDUCTOR, REPORT AT ONCE!"

The designated Morg hurried to his couch and rested his belly on the deck in sign of respect.

"Master Pilot, the Humans are bombarding our fleet with concentrated radiations of an intensity never encountered before. Our sensors are starting to fail one by one and I thus ordered our forward sensors to be masked. At the present exposure rate, our least protected ships, our troop transports, will receive lethal radiation exposures in less than nine ergos."

"Where is that bombardment coming from? From the group of Humans hiding in the asteroid belt?"

"Negative, Master Pilot! It is coming from the enemy heavy ships which are blocking the direct route to the fourth planet. What are your orders, Master Pilot?"

"We can't risk losing our invasion troops because of this. Have our troop transports and our surface bombardment force, escorted by half of our light units, leave the formation immediately. They will then turn the right flank of the enemy heavy ships to attack the fourth planet. The other half of our light ships will disperse the enemy hiding in the asteroid field. Our first rank ships will engage the enemy heavy units. Execution!"

The Tactical Conductor hurried back at once to his own control couch to transmit the orders around the fleet. However, communicating with the transport ships and light units to coordinate their actions took him a couple of minutes, with more minutes for the designated ships to start separating from the fleet, time that eventually cost the Morgs dearly.

21:06 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge of the light cruiser KARAKAN

Covering Force

"To all the units of the Covering Force, this is Admiral Yonan! Advance immediately to the periphery of the radiation field bathing the Morg fleet and open fire at will with your disintegrators. Do not fire missiles: their electronics would not resist the radiations."

The occasion was too good to miss, thought Li. The enemy was presently nearly blinded by the synchrotron radiations and unable to fire with any precision on his ships. He looked down at his sensors officer, seated one platform lower than his level.

"What is the intensity of the radiation field enveloping the enemy fleet, Lieutenant Egberd?"

"Approximately two grays per square meter per second, Admiral. Their smaller ships will not be able to withstand this kind of exposure for very long."

"Excellent! Be ready to greet them warmly if they try to exit the radiation field."

Nearly 400 frigates and interceptors quickly moved to position themselves on the right flank of the Morg fleet, just outside the zone bathed by synchrotron radiations. Once in position, they started firing relentlessly on the Morgs with their disintegrator

cannons. The Morg returned a furious fire, but their shooting proved to be lacking totally in accuracy. However, a simple brush by a beam of Morg antimatter was enough to completely destroy a Human ship, while the disintegrators took many precious seconds to burn through the hulls of the enemy ships and penetrate to their core to cause significant damages. Li Yonan followed with growing impatience the exchange of fire, to finally call the Main Force after twelve minutes.

“Admiral Burnside, this is Yonan. I would like you to cut for fifteen seconds your synchrotron fire, time for me to deliver a massive missile salvo from point blank range in the heart of the enemy fleet.”

“That could be risky, Yonan: this could allow the Morgs time to adjust their fire against your ships.”

“I consider that risk acceptable, Admiral: their sensors must be half burned out by now.”

“Hum... Very well! Be ready to fire your missiles in exactly one minute.”

Cutting the radio link with Burnside, Yonan then hurried to pass his instructions to his subordinates and prepare for a missile salvo. When the synchrotron fire stopped, nearly 20,000 missiles raced out at once towards the Morg fleet. The Morgs took a few precious seconds to see that the synchrotron fire had stopped and to unmask their surviving sensors. Five more seconds were needed for them to recalculate their fire control solution and point their batteries and activate their anti-missile defenses. In all, the Morgs had only three seconds to deliver an effective fire before the impact of the Human missiles. The following three seconds signed the destruction of over 5,000 heavy Morg ships in an orgy of nuclear explosions. Those same three seconds in turn allowed the firing from 7,000 Morg ships to vaporize 346 of Vice-Admiral Yonan's ships. Only the resumption of the synchrotron fire by the Main Force saved the Covering Force from total destruction.

21:21 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Combat operations center, H.S.S. INVINCIBLE

Main Force

Lex Garth tightened his fists as he watched the bloody finale of the covering phase of the battle on his tactical display sphere. The Morg fleet had been eviscerated, but at the cost of over 4,000 dead, including Li Yonan. Only 34 interceptors and six

frigates, all short of ammunition, had escaped the massacre. Looking at one of his aides, Garth told him to take notes.

“Send the surviving ships of the Covering Force to our logistical support flotilla in orbit around Alpha IV and have them rearmed and resupplied as fast as they can before joining the six battleships assigned to escort the MARCO POLO towards Earth. Prepare as well an encoded message and send it via a relay probe to Vice-Admiral Konovalov. We are detecting what seems to be the enemy amphibious assault force in the process of detaching itself from the main enemy fleet. Tell Konovalov to stay hidden for the moment but to be ready to greet warmly that enemy amphibious force. I will pretend to be too busy with the Morg battleships to be able to block their path. If he miscalculates his move, then the fourth planet will be cooked.”

As his aide hurried away to pass his instructions, Garth resumed his study of the tactical display sphere. The INVINCIBLE and the 106 battleships of Sam Burnside were still faced by nearly a thousand Morg heavy ships, while 3,000 more enemy ships were now starting a wide flanking movement to the right. One, then a second dot marking the position of a Human battleship disappeared from the display sphere in the next few seconds, making Garth swear to himself: the enemy seemed to have found a way to adjust its fire despite the continuing synchrotron fire. He thought bitterly that he could very well end up being too busy to block the path of the enemy amphibious assault force.

21:58 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge of the heavy cruiser H.S.S. KATANA

Ambush Force

“Admiral, could you come examine the data link viewer? Something curious is happening with the Morgs.”

Instantly worried about some possible bad surprise from the Morgs, Andrei Konovalov hurried to the side of his operations officer, a small, delicate woman in her thirties. He examined for a moment the screen displaying the movements of the Morg amphibious assault force, which was not very far on the opposite side of the star he was using to hide. Another hour and the enemy force was going to be behind the Main Force of Admiral Garth. He however didn't see anything particular at first and looked at his subaltern.

“What should I look for, Captain Kenotsu?”

“The individual movements of the Morg ships are bizarre, erratic, and two Morg troop transports just collided with each other. It is as if we are looking at a bunch of drunken soldiers trying to walk in cadence.”

That rendered Konovalov perplex for a moment and he examined the course of a few individual Morg ships before an explanation came to his mind, making him grin with glee.

“It is not the Morgs who are drunk, Captain Kenotsu: it is their navigation computers that are drunk from our synchrotron radiation bombardment.”

“But, that could mean that their fire control computers would be equally incapable of pointing accurately their weapons, right?”

“Correct! And since their computers are normally the most heavily protected systems on their ships, like in ours, that can only mean that the Morg crews must be presently dying from radiation exposure.”

“The Morgs are trying to bluff us, Admiral?” exclaimed Kenotsu, not able to believe that lucky break.

“Not much bluffing us than simply delaying the inevitable. The Morgs, now unable to invade our system with troops that are in the process of dying, will probably try instead to get their revenge by devastating our planets. Get me immediately a line with Admiral Garth!”

21:58 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Combat operations center, H.S.S. INVINCIBLE

The whole structure of the converted asteroid shook violently for two seconds from the last hit by a Morg antimatter beam. Once the rumble from the explosion had quieted down, Garth resumed his video conversation with the system’s Grand Administrator, whose image on the holographic screen reflected the state of utter physical fatigue.

“I am sorry for the interruption, sir. The Morgs are now shooting at us from nearly point blank. As I was saying, the MARCO POLO should take off as soon as possible: we won’t be able to contain the enemy for much longer.”

Djael Anaker nodded his head in understanding before replying in a tired tone.

“The latest report from Commodore Ferguson said that he was going to be able to take off in a bit less than three hours. Captain Grant, my special liaison officer,

assures me that we simply can't go faster. What are the chances of my planet and my citizens in the underground shelters to survive a Morg bombardment, Admiral?"

Lex Garth did his best to hide his dread then, but he still owed Anaker the truth.

"Nil, unfortunately, sir! The antimatter weapons of the Morgs will literally split open your planet, especially now that they have lost any hope of occupying it."

Anaker lowered his head in sadness and his voice became a near whisper.

"The MARCO POLO, along with the two civilian cargo ships that just arrived from Alpha Centauri B-III with more refugees in cryogenic sleep, is thus the only hope left for the survival of the Centaurian race. Pass my sincere admiration to all your crews for their bravery and their devotion. Good luck, Admiral Garth!"

"And good luck to you as well, Grand Administrator Anaker."

Garth kept looking for a moment at the now empty viewing display, then turned his head towards an aide.

"Send the attack signal to Vice-Admiral Konovalov now! His target: the enemy amphibious assault force."

22:02 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Orbit of Alpha Centauri A

Seventy-two Human cruisers, rushing at maximum acceleration from their hiding place behind Alpha Centauri A, suddenly appeared in the rear of the Morg amphibious assault force, catching it in a sandwich with the Main Force of Admiral Garth. After a moment of stupor, the commander of the Morg escort ships ordered the majority of his cruisers to face the newcomers, while the assault ships continued on their way to the fourth planet. Severely handicapped by their degraded computers and their sick crews, the Morg cruisers fared badly against the massive missile salvo fired by the Human cruisers of Konovalov's force. Over two thirds of the Morg cruisers were evaporated before they could even fire back once, with the Morg survivors then finding themselves in the middle of a ferocious close quarters battle. The commander of the Morg troopships, believing that he had just won a respite that would allow him to get to the fourth planet to bombard it, increased further his speed towards his objective, widening further the distance between his troopships and his escort cruisers. Konovalov's remaining 54 cruisers, accompanied by 340 interceptors, then came out from behind Alpha Centauri A and fell hard on the 1,700 Morg troopships and their handful of escort

cruisers. Completely outclassed in a fight against combat ships and also affected heavily by radiations, the Morg troopships were massacred without pity in less than six minutes. Sixteen million Morg soldiers soon disappeared in an orgy of thermonuclear explosions. Once the Morg amphibious force had been totally eliminated at very little cost to themselves, the victorious Human cruisers and interceptors then joined forces with the other cruisers of the Ambush Force. The last ship of the Morg assault force exploded twelve minutes later.

22:28 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge of the heavy cruiser KATANA

Ambush Force

“Confirm that there are no remaining Morg ships in this sector!”

“Confirmed, Admiral! There is nothing but debris left of the Morg assault force.”

Kenotsu’s answer was then followed by a series of reports on losses and battle damages. Konovalov felt much better after receiving those reports: he had lost only eight cruisers and eleven interceptors in exchange for the destruction of nearly 3,000 Morg ships. Facing a tactical display sphere where the battle between Admiral Garth’s Main Force and the heavy Morg units was shown, he then couldn’t help make a grimace: Garth was left with only 43 battleships and the INVINCIBLE to face over 300 Morg ships of the line. The synchrotron batteries were only firing occasionally, while missiles and disintegrator cannons did most of the work now. The Human battleships also seemed to be nearly out of missiles. It was time to do something about that.

“To all the ships of the Ambush Force, this is Vice-Admiral Konovalov speaking! We will now attack the left flank of the enemy heavy units to try to reduce the pressure on our battleships. Adopt a dispersed flat disk formation, the interceptors in the outer positions, and be prepared to fire half of your remaining missiles in a fleet salvo.”

The Morg heavy ships, having their hands full already with the tenacious battleships of Garth’s Main Force and with many of their sensors damaged by synchrotron radiations, had trouble facing Konovalov’s flank attack. Over a third of the Morgs’ ships of the line were destroyed by the massive missile salvo from the Ambush Force. Having seen what had happened to Li Yonan’s Covering Force, Konovalov had no taste to engage in a long range slugfest with the enemy and he rushed in at top

acceleration. Merging with the enemy fleet, Konovalov's interceptors multiplied lightning attack passes among the Morg ships, flying in zigzag like madmen while firing. The Human weapon of choice then in such a point blank engagement was the impulse cannon, also known in previous centuries as an electro-magnetic rail gun, a weapon normally reserved for combat inside planetary atmospheres. Firing projectiles with muzzle velocities of over thirty kilometers per second, the impulse cannon could fire solid, explosive or anti-proton-loaded shells, with the last type of projectile able to destroy a ship in one shot. Their relatively low muzzle velocity was however compensated by a high rate of fire and by the very short distances at which the impulse cannons were used. The battle quickly looked like a confusing, mortal dance between bears and bees, with the darkness of space illuminated at intervals by the detonation of projectiles, the explosion of ships and even by cataclysmic collisions between ships.

The battle went on for over forty minutes and stopped only for lack of Morg combatants. In the immense cloud of debris now floating in space a few light minutes away from Alpha Centauri A-IV, there was left intact or damaged only 68 Human ships: nineteen battleships, two heavy cruisers, nine light cruisers and 34 interceptors. The remains of the H.S.S. INVINCIBLE lay among the other debris of the battle. The Human survivors, exhausted and shocked by the ferocity of the battle they had just won, then took the time to exchange handshakes and accolades. Vice-Admiral Konovalov, who was now the most senior commander left alive on his KATANA full of holes, immediately ordered his surviving ships to rearm, especially preoccupied by the low stocks of missiles left on his ships. Six ammunition transport ships from the fleet's support division quickly came forward and started replenishing at once the missile magazines of the combat ships. The rearmament was still in progress two hours later when Konovalov received a message from Rear-Admiral Juarez, who was still in orbit around the fourth planet with his Reserve Force.

"Vice-Admiral Konovalov, this is Juarez. I am afraid that I have a bad news for you: our orbital stations are now detecting a second Morg armada emerging from the inter-dimensional tunnel."

CHAPTER 6 – DEATH BLOW

00:35 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Tuesday, October 19, 4021

Command bridge of the exploration cruiser MARCO POLO

Kyoto Alpha Spaceport, fourth planet

Alpha Centauri A System

“Captain Montoya, what is the latest estimate about the arrival time in orbit of the Morg fleet?”

“One hour and ten minutes, Commodore. What is left of our fleet will barely delay the enemy.”

“I know that too well, unfortunately. Where are we with our loading?”

“We will be able to start closing our access airlocks in twenty minutes, Commodore.”

Thanking his second in command, Henry Ferguson rested his back against his seat: he had not been this tired in a long time. Punching a call number on his personal communication screen, Ferguson contacted Captain James Grant, who had established a mobile command post at the foot of one of the main access ramps of the MARCO POLO. Grant’s face soon appeared on the screen, showing as much exhaustion as that of Ferguson.

“Yes, Commodore?”

“Captain Grant, I would like first to thank you again for all that you did for us and for the Centaurians during the last 24 hours.”

Grant managed to smile despite his fatigue.

“No need to say it, Commodore. After all, I was simply doing my duty. I also had a vested personal interest in helping you leave as quickly as possible, since my family is now aboard your ship. I suppose that you would like to get a quick list of what is now in your ship?”

“I sure would, Captain!”

“Well, apart from the 15, 173,520 persons now asleep in your cryogenic vault and in containers stored in your cargo holds, we were able to pack another 1,005,312

persons in the auxiliary quarters and in other available living spaces of the MARCO POLO, including 603,188 infants and young toddlers. This makes for a total of 16,178,832 civilian refugees aboard your ship, to which we can add 1,800,000 more refugees in cryogenic sleep from planet B-III who are now aboard the civilian cargo ships ALTAFJORD and CONFUCIUS, which will depart with you for Earth. Also on your ship are the 12,680 commandos of the 58th Assault Division, who are about finished loading their combat robots, heavy equipment, ammunition stocks and their 163 assault barges in your hangars. In terms of cargo, we have loaded on the MARCO POLO 689 million tons of equipment, supplies and foodstuff. That includes the habitat modules, the construction materials and the heavy machinery that had been produced for the Phase Two of the colonization of Mirphak III, enough to quickly build a city of over a million inhabitants.”

Grant suddenly grinned as he read a particular line on his list.

“An assistant of Grand Administrator Anaker thankfully reminded me to load in your ship stocks of diapers and baby food and milk. You can picture the situation on your ship if she had not thought about that.”

Ferguson covered his face with one hand at those words while shaking his head.

“I would not have thought about that, Captain. Please thank that person for thinking about that.”

Ferguson then realized that the person in question would most probably not survive the next few hours, like Grant. He looked gravely at the officer on his screen, measuring his words.

“Are you sure that you don’t want to come aboard and join your family, Captain Grant?”

Grant shook his head at once.

“As much as I am tempted to do, no, Commodore! If I come aboard, then where will we stop? Who will stay to lead the people still in Kyoto Alpha? I will die happy, knowing that my family is safe on your ship. Goodbye, Commodore Ferguson.”

“Goodbye, Captain James Grant.” Replied with difficulty Ferguson, a big lump in his throat, before cutting the video link.

00:59 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Landing Area Number Five

Kyoto Alpha Spaceport

“TO ALL THE PERSONNEL OF THE 58TH ASSAULT DIVISION STILL ON THE GROUND: CLIMB ABOARD IMMEDIATELY!”

The announcement from the loudspeakers of the ship started an orderly rush up the access ramps by the 3,000 commandos still guarding them. A group of three Navy officers that had stayed near the foot of a ramp made sure that all the soldiers were now aboard before one of them contacted the bridge of the MARCO POLO by radio.

“MARCO POLO, the landing area is now empty. Close your ramps and airlocks and have a good trip to Earth!”

James Grant then looked at his two assistants and pointed their air car parked nearby.

“Let’s get out of the way, quickly! The MARCO POLO’s departure must not be delayed because of us.”

The giant access ramps of the vessel were starting to close as the air car rose from the ground and headed towards the passenger terminal at the periphery of the landing pad. Even at its full speed, the air car took over a minute to get to the terminal. Parking the car alongside a concrete wall, Grant stepped out with his two officers and watched the huge mass of the exploration cruiser as it started to rise in the sky. Heavily loaded, the MARCO POLO took over two minutes to climb to the altitude judged to be safe before engaging its main propulsion system. The cruiser then accelerated out of sight in less than twenty seconds, all its navigational lights blinking as a last salute to Kyoto Alpha.

“Goodbye, Helen! Goodbye, little David!” Said softly Grant, his eyes filling with tears as he fixed the now empty sky.

01:12 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Morg command ship

Second Morg armada, approaching Alpha Centauri A-IV

“Master Pilot, from Detectors! A Human vessel just took off from the fourth planet. Over fifty other Human ships are apparently waiting for it in orbit to escort it.”

“What type of ship?” Asked the commander of the second armada, which had been sent urgently by the Emperor following the disgraceful defeat of the first armada.

“Unknown, but enormous, Master Pilot. It has an approximate diameter of 2,800 drams.” Answered the Sensors Master. Mreg-Hel took a few seconds to digest that information. The gross incompetence of the commander of the first armada, which had

caused the loss of over half of the combat ships that the Morg Empire possessed, had completely unraveled the strategic plans of the Empire. Instead of attacking as planned the system of birth of the Human vermin with his armada after the taking of Alpha Centauri, Mreg-Hel had been ordered directly by the Emperor to go finish the job in the Alpha Centauri System. Included in his armada was a ship equipped with a still untested experimental weapon that would, he hoped, help him to accomplish his task. If a solitary ship rated the protection of so many Human ships, then it had to be vital to the enemy. Mreg-Hel finally turned towards his tactical conductor.

“Detach the Tenth Fleet and the Xanta weapon. They are to intercept and destroy that Human ship at all cost!”

01:22 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Morg experimental cruiser

“Another group of Human ships has joined the target ship, Chief Supervisor. That group is composed of nineteen large support ships.”

“Pilot, can we get within conventional weapons range before the Humans accelerate past the speed of light?”

As his subaltern made a quick calculation, the Chief Supervisor mentally swore at the technical inferiority of the Morg ships, which were slower than the Human vessels. Once above the speed of light, the Humans would effectively be out of reach, Morg ships being incapable of going faster than light and needing an inter-dimensional tunnel to travel from star to star. The answer from his pilot only increased his frustration.

“Negative, Chief Supervisor! The enemy is too fast and the distance too great. The distance between us and them will only increase from now on.”

“Too bad! Power up the Xanta weapon!”

It took only a few seconds before the image of Kron-Tegad, the scientist responsible for the Xanta weapon, appeared on the display screen of the Chief Supervisor.

“Tag-Dohr, I counsel against the use of the Xanta weapon. We still do not fully control the resonance harmonics of the weapon. To fire now could damage the weapon or even destroy our ship.”

“Kron-Tegad, are you ready to tell to the Emperor that the Humans escaped us because your weapon, which has already cost so much resources to the Empire, was not ready?”

The eight eyes of the scientist started blinking rapidly, a sign of extreme agitation in a Morg.

“I will do my best, Tag-Dohr.”

“I hope so, for your sake, Kron-Tegad. Now, calibrate the weapon to fire in a wide arc: I want all of the enemy fleet to be destroyed before it can accelerate past the speed of light.”

“Understood, Tag-Dohr!”

The experimental Morg cruiser soon started to vibrate at a very high frequency, a sign announcing an imminent discharge by the Xanta weapon. However, instead of diminishing just before firing, as normally expected, the vibrations increased suddenly and dramatically, violently shaking the structure of the cruiser. A blinding blue arc of energy then shot out of the muzzle of the Xanta weapon. The energy discharge expanded as it headed towards the MARCO POLO and its escort fleet, while the experimental Morg cruiser disintegrated into pieces under the stress of the weapon discharge. Six seconds after the firing, the halo of Xanta energy caught up with the Human ships, enveloping them. Each ship then disappeared at once in a blue flash, leaving empty space where they once were.

01:25 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge of the battleship H.S.S. UXMAL

Andrei Konovalov was stunned motionless for a moment in front of his tactical display sphere, a mix of horror and rage on his face. With the loss of the MARCO POLO and of its millions of refugees, the fate of the Centaurian race was now sealed. He would never be able to protect the fourth planet with the pitiful remains of his fleet. It was however unthinkable for him to simply let the Morgs vaporize the planet without doing a thing. Looking slowly around him, he saw the same wish reflected on the faces of his crew: revenge! Opening a fleet-wide radio link, he then spoke in a cold, firm tone.

“Attention all hands! This is your admiral speaking! The MARCO POLO and its escort fleet has been destroyed by the enemy and our chances of stopping the Morg now are zero. The Alpha Centauri System is thus condemned. We will however not sit idle and let the enemy unmolested while they kill our citizens on the fourth planet. The fleet will go on an ultimate assault against the Morg armada, with the Morg command

ship as our priority target. Any Morg ship destroyed now will be one less Morg ship that will be able to attack Earth later. I am confident that everybody will do his or her duty to the end. Now, get ready to chew some Morgs!”

01:34 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Interceptor AC2943

The violet beams of Morg antimatter discharges closely bracketed the interceptor despite the frantic changes of course from its pilot, Lieutenant Kaprayon. The latter smiled when a Morg ship that was trying to shoot at him accidentally hit another Morg battleship, making it explode. The interceptor was now flying right in the middle of the Morg fleet, firing continuously all its weapons while pushing its molecular propulsion system to the limit. Kaprayon felt a pang of the heart when the last interceptor that had accompanied him in this suicide charge exploded ahead of him. His interceptor and the battleship UXMAL, following closely behind him, were now the two last remaining Human ships. The voice of Diana Uniko, the weapons officer of the interceptor, then vibrated in his helmet headset.

“I HAVE THE MORG COMMAND SHIP IN MY GUN SIGHTS, DEAD AHEAD AND NINE SECONDS AWAY!”

That announcement was immediately followed by a horrified exclamation from their rear observer.

“MY GOD! THE UXMAL JUST EXPLODED! WE ARE NOW ALONE!”

“CONTINUOUS FIRE! WE WILL GET THAT MORG BASTARD!” Shouted Kaprayon. The hull surface of the Morg command ship, a huge disk-shaped ship bristling with antimatter cannons, was now being chewed up by the disintegrator fire and the shells of the impulse cannons of the interceptor. A laser beam suddenly hit the small ship, penetrating all the way to the crew sphere. Kaprayon had the time to feel his spacesuit balloon and stiffen as the crew sphere decompressed and to see from the corner of one eye the decapitated and fuming shape of Diana Uniko slump down in her seat. Then the interceptor collided head-on with the Morg command ship. The 1,500 meter-diameter disk was pulverized by the kinetic impact of the 5,000 ton interceptor hitting at a combined speed of over 27 kilometers per second. Another Morg ship that was following too closely the command ship was in turn hit and destroyed by one of the bigger chunks of debris from the spectacular explosion.

The remaining 3,640 Morg ships needed only one hour afterwards to silence the few defensive batteries located on the surface of the fourth planet or on space stations orbiting around it. A salvo of heavy antimatter missiles was then fired by the Morg fleet, hitting the surface of the planet and penetrating deeply before exploding. The planetary crust split open under the pressure of the titanic underground explosions, letting out masses of molten magma. The waters of the planet's oceans then flashed into steam at the contact of the hot magma, killing most of the marine life in minutes. A second volley of missiles followed, this time armed with highly radioactive warheads, spreading radioactive steam and debris, contaminating the whole planet and condemning whatever life was left on it. The Morg fleet then split up to systematically ravage the other inhabited corners of the system. No Human survived in the Alpha Centauri system on this dark day of October nineteen, 4021.

CHAPTER 7 – ALIVE!

01:25 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Tuesday, October 19, 4021

Command bridge of the H.S.S. MARCO POLO

The blue flash from the enemy energy discharge dissipated in seconds on the holographic screens. While the shock that had come with it had been pretty insignificant, Henry Ferguson didn't take any chances and ordered immediately a complete status check on all the ship's systems. Only after having given his orders did he look back out at the space around the MARCO POLO. He was reassured to see that all the ships of its escort force and of the support group were there, loosely surrounding the exploration cruiser. Then, his heart skipped a beat: the triple stars of the Alpha Centauri System were not visible anymore! His navigator nearly shouted out in dismay before he could say something.

"COMMODORE! ALPHA CENTAURI IS NOW OVER ONE LIGHT YEAR AWAY FROM US!"

"BUT, THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE! CONFIRM OUR CURRENT POSITION AT ONCE!"

While the navigator and his assistant worked on that, the reports from the various section heads of the ship started coming in on the bridge, all reporting that no damages or breakdowns had been found. The other ships of the flotilla also started to report to the MARCO POLO. Three minutes later, Henry Ferguson was informed that all the ships were intact and operating normally but that they also all had reported the anomalous position of Alpha Centauri. He looked down severely at the poor navigator, who didn't seem to fare very well.

"So, Commander Rollings, where are we?"

Rollings hesitated before answering him, apparently unable to believe his instruments.

"Commodore, our optical instruments all confirm that Alpha Centauri A is now 1.3 light years away from us. Also, we seem to have seriously deviated from our planned trajectory: all the stars around us are in the wrong places and the navigation computer is having a hell of a tough time to figure out what is going on. The Solar System is however easily identifiable on our screens and is three light years away from us."

Ferguson took a few seconds to digest that information before giving an order.

“Very well! Recalculate a new trajectory towards Earth and transmit it to the other ships. Then, proceed at maximum speed.”

“Yes sir!”

He next turned to look at his second in command.

“Captain Montoya, it seems that the enemy weapon discharge did nothing more to us than to give us one hell of a kick in the ass and to propel us away from Alpha Centauri. Do you see any other possibility or explanation?”

“None for the moment, Commodore. That Morg weapon apparently acts on the fabric of space itself, which would explain our unexplained travel away from Alpha Centauri. Maybe it is a variant of their inter-dimensional tunnel.”

“Hum, that is one possibility indeed. If that was the only effect it had on us, then I won’t complain about it. We will study that case later, however. For the moment, we still have millions of refugees to bring safely to Earth. Since the enemy is now over one light year away from us, I believe that we are out of danger for the time being. I am thus cancelling the alert status. Have all ships go to reduced manning, so that our people can rest from the battle. I want everybody to be at full capacity by the time we arrive to Earth: we still don’t know if the Morgs attacked Sol or not. With their damn inter-dimensional tunnel, they could pop out in the Solar System at about any time of their choosing. We will hold a fleet-wide teleconference at 09:00, Universal Time, on October 22nd, before entering the Solar System. We will then reevaluate our situation. I am going to take some rest in my day cabin. Once my orders are passed, do the same and go to your cabin. Lieutenant Bosango will then take over the bridge for the rest of this shift.”

“Lieutenant Bosango? But, she is our least experienced bridge officer.”

Ferguson smiled at that remark.

“The more reason to give her a chance to gain more experience while we are in a routine flight status. Wake me up only if a true emergency pops up.”

“Yes, Commodore!”

Carla Montoya took a few minutes to pass around Ferguson’s directives after he left the bridge complex. She then called to her Lieutenant Winny Bosango. The young black woman was quite nervous as she presented herself to Montoya, who spoke to her in her usual dead serious tone.

“Lieutenant, you now have control of the ship for the next eight hours, or until when I return to the bridge. We are to continue towards Earth at maximum fleet speed. If some non-critical problem arises, use your common sense and my authority. Do you have any questions?”

The young African beauty hesitated for a moment before saying no. Montoya then got up from the command chair and invited her to take her place.

“That chair is now all yours. Consider this as a foretaste of what you can expect as a future ship captain.”

On those words, Montoya left the bridge complex at a tired pace, leaving a Lieutenant Bosango to worry nervously about what would be the first brick to drop on her head in the next few hours.

03:26 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Command bridge of the H.S.S. MARCO POLO

Winnie Bosango tensed up when the videophone attached to the left armrest of the command chair beeped, announcing an incoming call. Wondering what kind of possible problem this would announce, Winnie activated the screen. She however relaxed at once on seeing the face of Ann Shelton, a long-time friend of hers.

“Ann, I am happy to see you. What can I do for you?”

“Winnie? They put you in charge of the whole circus?”

“Yup! Thankfully, it has been very quiet up to now. So, what is your problem, if problem there is?”

“I effectively have a problem, and a big one. I am in the auxiliary quarters section, where the Centaurian mothers and their babies are. Having a doctorate in sociology, I was bombarded ‘Coordinating Officer in Charge of Baby Services’ after our departure from Kyoto Alpha and my job is becoming nearly impossible. To resume the situation down here, the mothers are exhausted and on edge and we have half a million babies crying their lungs out in unison. You can imagine the picture!”

“Ouch! I certainly don’t envy you. I suppose that you need some help?”

“Yes, a lot of help! I want to organize a system of collective nurseries to give a chance to the mothers to sleep at least a bit, but that will take a lot of people. Unfortunately, most of the crew is on forced rest right now, on orders from Commodore Ferguson.”

Winnie was thoughtful for a moment. The normal crew of the MARCO POLO only counted a bit less than 4,000 members, supplemented by an army of maintenance and cargo handling robots of all kinds. However, a robot would definitely make a very poor babysitter, even in the best of cases, and to take care of half a million babies was a truly colossal job. An idea suddenly came to her mind, making Winnie grin with expected amusement.

"I have an idea, Ann. The 12,000 commandos that came aboard in Kyoto Alpha have been idle since our departure. Would they do?"

"Winnie, you are a genius! Could you also add to them the ship's security battalion?"

"Why not? It won't hurt all these big macho guys to see what babysitting implies. I will contact Brigadier Gungor and Major Arntern at once."

"Thank you so much, Winnie! I owe you a big one."

"Glad to be of help." Replied Winnie, giggling to herself as she pictured commandos as babysitters.

06:57 (Kyoto Alpha Time)

Auxiliary quarters section of the MARCO POLO

Mark Dempster was starting to suffer from a persistent, heavy headache. The little three month-old girl he was trying to calm down for the last twenty minutes had just fallen asleep in his arms when one of the other fourteen babies occupying the cabin turned into an improvised nursery had started to cry loudly. The baby girl jerked awake, then started to cry as well. Swearing to himself, the tall and strong commando turned his head towards his partner, Tony Vinelli, who was busy throwing away a soiled diaper in a portable trash can, a disgusted expression on his face and his nose pinched.

"Eh, Toni! Could you throw me a milk bottle?"

"Wait! I have to get rid of this pile of shit here first. What a disgusting job! And that little bugger even peed on me as I was changing his diaper."

"Cut the wining and just throw me a milk bottle, will you."

"Okay, okay!... Here you go!"

Thrown like a primed grenade, the milk bottle was caught in mid-air by Dempster, who then quickly presented its plastic nipple to the baby girl he was holding. Djiri, as her exhausted mother had named her before going to catch some sleep, started sucking

milk at once and soon went back to sleep, to Mark's relief. As he contemplated the face of the baby girl, a tiny hand reflexively pressed itself around the little finger of his hand holding the bottle. That contact's sensation made the commando smile down tenderly at the baby.

"Well, babysitting does have some ups, along with its downs."

09:00 (Universal Time)

Friday, October 22, 4021

Command conference room of the MARCO POLO

Henry Ferguson took his seat at the head of the long, oval conference table made of polished wood. Brigadier General Gungor, Commander of the 58th Assault Division, sat near him, as did Captain Montoya and a graying Centaurian woman named Lynn Tsu, who had been until recently the mayor of Kyoto Alpha and who now was the political representative of the Centaurian refugees. The holographic 3-D images of twenty ship captains surrounded the table, as if they actually were sitting at the table, while the head and torso of 45 other senior officers appeared on holographic screens suspended around the walls of the command conference room. At precisely nine o'clock, Ferguson called the meeting to order. He then turned his head towards Lynn Tsu to present her to his officers.

"Madam Lynn Tsu, to my left, represents the eighteen million Centaurian refugees aboard the MARCO POLO, ALTAFJORD and CONFUCIUS. I will now recapitulate for her benefit the composition of our fleet."

Activating a giant flat holographic screen situated on the wall behind his chair, Ferguson started projecting the images of the various ships of the fleet, shown to scale besides a picture of the MARCO POLO.

"Apart from the MARCO POLO, which is now acting as our fleet flagship, we have 123 ships of various sizes, split in an escort group and a support group. The escort group is composed of six battleships, six frigates and 88 interceptors, 54 of which are presently parked in our hangars. The support group comprises one heavy dry-dock ship, the NEWPORT NEWS, two repair ships, one hospital ship, the HUMANITY, six ammunition ships, four heavy fleet cargo ships, six fuel tanker ships and one fleet tug. Also flying with us are two civilian cargo ships, the ALTAFJORD and the CONFUCIUS, who are carrying over 1,8 million refugees in cryogenic sleep cells evacuated from Alpha

Centauri B-III. To get back on our hospital ship, the HUMANITY is actually carrying 1,471 gravely wounded crewmembers of our combat fleet who were made casualties during the battle for Alpha Centauri.”

The mention of the wounded made many lower their heads then. Over two billion Centaurians were now dead, along with nearly 180,000 men and women who had represented the best of the Human Expansion’s Navy. Ferguson continued after a short pause.

“Apart from our escort group and our support group, the MARCO POLO also owns its own embarked flotilla, which is made up of 110 exploration corvettes, 286 heavy passenger shuttles, fifteen heavy cargo shuttles, 24 heavy flying cranes and over 2,300 various minor flying vehicles. On top of all this, we have loaded in Kyoto Alpha the 58th Assault division, along with all its equipment. Brigadier Gungor?”

Gungor, a severe-looking man in his fifties sporting a big moustache, spoke up at once in an impressive baritone voice.

“My 58th Assault Division counts 12,680 commandos, all equipped with force-multiplication exoskeleton armored suits, plus 16,000 combat robots, 163 assault barges and 800 battle tanks. We also loaded 36 mobile defense towers and hundreds of prefabricated fortification modules aboard the MARCO POLO before departing Kyoto Alpha. The original mission of my division was to defend Kyoto Alpha from a Morg ground attack, but Grand Administrator Anaker then tasked me with insuring the safety of our refugees once back on the ground, wherever that turns out to be.”

“Which leads me to the main subject of this conference.” Said Henry Ferguson, taking back control of the conversation. “Madam Tsu, my orders from Grand Administrator Anaker were clear and simple: to bring the refugees safely to Earth and to then help them resettle there. If for any reason the Solar System proves to be incapable of lodging our refugees, my task was then be to find an alternate star system that would be both habitable and away from the Morg menace. One of our options is Mirphak III, which already houses a new colony and is a full 633 light years away from Alpha Centauri. We however need a few more options as possible resettlement locations. I am thus awaiting your suggestions, ladies and gentlemen.”

A few seconds passed before someone raised a hand to speak.

“Yes, Captain Montoya.”

“Commodore, I believe that there are no real viable alternatives to Mirphak III if Earth proves to be impractical. All the other star systems known to have habitable

planets are relatively close to the Solar System, thus are vulnerable to the Morgs. On the other hand, Mirphak III is far from any of our original systems and is in a direction opposite that of the quadrant from which the Morgs appeared. It also has exceptional living conditions and would be perfect to accommodate our refugees.”

Ferguson looked around him to see if anyone had another suggestion. A soft chime then attracted his attention to one of the wall-mounted screens, on which appeared a beautiful young woman with long black hair and green eyes who wore the uniform of a scientist of the Exploration Fleet.

“Yes, miss? Remind me of your name and position.”

“Doctor Ann Shelton, sociologist and historian, Commodore. I was part of the first trip to Mirphak III but am presently in charge of the babysitting services for our refugees. I am afraid that, even if we wanted to resettle our refugees on Mirphak III, we don’t have the supplies to safely get them there: we have only three weeks worth of baby food and milk aboard. Even those supplies were loaded aboard in Kyoto Alpha as an afterthought. If we travel to Mirphak, our babies will run out of food well before the eight month trip will be over. We always could try to supplement or replace those baby supplies with alternate products, but we would still be putting the health of half a million babies at serious risk, Commodore.”

“Damn! She is right!” Swore Lynn Tsu, as Ferguson recognized as well that Ann Shelton’s argument was most valid.

“Well, you certainly have a point there, Doctor Shelton. Hopefully, even if we can’t resettle our people in the Solar System for some reason, then Earth could then provide us with extra baby supplies and food for a trip to Mirphak III. Your point is well noted and will be kept in mind, Doctor Shelton. Does anyone have another resettlement location to propose?”

No one else had a suggestion then, but Lynn Tsu had a question for Ferguson.

“Commodore, could I have your frank opinion on the following question: do we have all that we would need to resettle eighteen million refugees on a virgin world?”

Ferguson nodded his head at once, a firm expression on his face.

“Madam Tsu, with what I presently have at my disposal, I could colonize Hell itself!”

CHAPTER 8 – SAFE HAVEN

01:14 (Estimated Universal Time)

Saturday, October 23, 4021 (ship date)

Command bridge of the H.S.S. MARCO POLO

Henry Ferguson was now firmly strapped in his command chair as the Solar System was now clearly visible on the holographic screens. The Sun appeared as a small yellow marble-sized light as the fleet was approaching Pluto's orbit.

"Pilot, position report, please!"

"Our speed is now down to 0.57 lux², Commodore. Approximate distance to the Sun: forty Astronomical Units³. We will cross Pluto's orbit in six minutes and should enter into Earth orbit in about five hours."

"Very well" Replied Ferguson before switching his intercom to fleet-wide call. "Commodore Ferguson to all ships: go to full alert! Keep total electronic silence from now on."

Three tense hours then followed: Ferguson had no way to know if the Morgs had already attacked or not the Solar System and could take no chances with his precious cargo of refugees. The speed of the fleet was now down to 0.07 lux, or seven percent of light speed, allowing observations to be now made with minimal distortions.

"Commodore, this is the navigator."

"Go ahead, Commander Rollings."

"Commodore, our navigation computer still has a lot of problems calculating our exact position. I am thus navigating on visual at this time. The star in front of us is however definitely Sol but the other stars in the sky, while recognizable by their spectral signature, are not at the place they should be."

Ferguson was left perplex by that. An idea then came to his mind.

"Commander Rollings, could the Morg weapon have affected our databanks?"

² Lux : Speed compared to the speed of light.

³ Astronomical Unit, or AU : average distance between the Earth and the Sun (149,597,870 kilometers).

"That is a possibility, Commodore. I will keep that in mind."

"Thank you! Ferguson to all sensors operators! Do you have any anomalies to report as part of your observations of the Solar System?"

After a short moment, a voice came in on his intercom.

"Commodore, this is Lieutenant Slovic, at bridge sensors. Something definitely feels wrong in our observations. First, the electromagnetic frequencies are empty. Nobody is emitting in the system, at least not in omnidirectional. That could however be explained by a state of red alert across the system. There is more."

"Continue, Lieutenant: you are interesting me."

"Well, we just crossed Jupiter's orbit seven minutes ago. Our advance base on Europa should have been visible, but we were unable to detect it. It still could have been camouflaged in anticipation of a Morg attack. Finally, our optical telescopes are not detecting any artificial lights on the surface of the Earth, as if a planet-wide blackout had been ordered. That is all for the moment, Commodore."

"That is already more than enough for me, Lieutenant. Good job and keep your eyes opened! Attention all hands! Go to combat stations! We are going to Red Alert! Lieutenant Tousla, arrange a fleet-wide teleconference via laser links: I don't want to alert anyone of our presence by using radio waves."

"Understood, Commodore!"

Within a minute, Ferguson's videophone screen subdivided itself into a mosaic of 32 separate images, each showing the face of a ship captain, with a caption listing the name of the ship under each picture. Ferguson looked somberly back at his ship commanders.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the sensors of the MARCO POLO have detected a number of anomalies that are making me think that the Solar System is about to be attacked by the Morgs. I am thus declaring a Red Alert, and this until further notice."

"My sensors also picked up many anomalies, Commodore." Said Ray Shelby, of the battleship KONGO. "However, as painful as this is to say, there is another possible explanation for all this: that the Morgs have already visited the Solar System."

Ferguson's shoulders sagged at those words as he felt immense dread envelop him: Shelby could very well be right. Ole Messente, of the frigate ORAN, then spoke in turn.

"I am afraid that Captain Shelby may be right, Commodore. If the Solar System was really preparing for a Morg attack, we would already have had half of the local

defense fleet on our backs, demanding that we identify ourselves. Unfortunately, the Morg antimatter weapons don't leave any residual radiations, so we can't say if Earth has been bombarded or not. Only a close range reconnaissance run would be able to confirm the state of the Earth."

"Suggestions, ladies and gentlemen?" Said Ferguson, a bitter taste in his mouth. The first to speak next was Nina Perez, the commander of the interceptor division.

"Commodore, the fleet should adopt a waiting position near the main asteroid belt of the system while my interceptors make reconnaissance flights from up close. We are the fastest ships in the fleet and that would also keep the MARCO POLO and the support group away from any possible Morg ambush."

"An excellent idea, Captain Perez. Divide your interceptors between Mars, Earth, Venus, Mercury and the main bodies of the Main Asteroid Belt. Check also the hidden face of the Sun, in case a Morg fleet would be hiding behind it. Relay the data from your interceptors to the MARCO POLO. If you are attacked, withdraw immediately. Good luck, Captain!"

"Thank you, Commodore!"

"To the frigates MACAO, ORAN and MADRID, you will respectively do in-depth reconnaissance runs of the Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus systems. The frigates NEW YORK and SANTIAGO will check out the Trojans Asteroid Group, while the SIDNEY will adopt a blocking position halfway between Mars and the main asteroid belt. Our battleships will stay in battle formation around the MARCO POLO and the ships of the support group. Execution!"

Ferguson next spoke to his second in command.

"Captain Montoya, shake up our interceptor crews presently slacking off inside our hangars and have them form a defensive globe around the fleet."

"I will crack my whip forthwith, Commodore."

Once those orders were passed, Ferguson sat back in his chair, his heart beating fast and wondering if he had forgotten something important. He finally decided that he could do nothing more right now than wait and hope for the best.

05:48 (Estimated Universal Time)

Interceptor AC3027, on fast approach to Earth

“AC3051, this is AC3027! Cover me from a low Earth orbit while I enter the atmosphere for my reconnaissance run.”

“We have your back, AC3027. Good luck on your run.”

Robert Busson did not reply to that, instead making his interceptor decelerate brutally before diving at a steep angle inside Earth’s atmosphere. The bubble of molecular force propelling his craft also protected it from the friction with the rarified air of the troposphere, which would have normally heated the hull past its fusion point. Busson pointed the nose of his interceptor towards the East Coast of North America, his first objective. Diving at a blistering rate of four kilometers per second, the interceptor went down to an altitude of 3,000 meters before Busson raised its nose to the horizontal and slowed down to just under the speed of sound. The voice of Sylvia Morgan, who was operating the forward sensors, then resonated inside his helmet.

“Turn full North once you cross the coast. We will then overfly New York in less than two minutes. A turn to the Northeast after that will then lead us to Boston in five minutes.”

The voice of the young technician seemed steady enough to Busson then, to his relief. Sylvia had been put into forced rest after the disastrous battle for Alpha Centauri, suffering from a severe nervous shock after witnessing the death in battle of her husband. Thankfully, she now seemed to have mostly recovered her composure.

Crossing the coast at low altitude and subsonic speed, Robert then turned north, following roughly the contour of the coast.

“Sylvia, make sure that you relay your sensors readings to the MARCO POLO via the AC3051.”

“Already done, Robert.”

“Hey!” Exclaimed Jorge Canseco, their gunner. “Where is the coastal road and the New York-Atlantic City monorail?”

“Now that you are mentioning it,” added Dyy Jonan, their flight engineer, “I haven’t seen a single habitation or artificial structure up to now.”

That started an alarm bell inside Robert’s head.

“That doesn’t make sense! Even if the Morgs had already destroyed everything, we would still see some debris and craters, at the least. However, I can’t see nothing and the vegetation cover is intact. It is as if the whole infrastructure in this region had never existed.”

"Well, we should know more soon: we are now approaching New York." Replied Sylvia. Eight pairs of eyes then concentrated on the forward horizon.

"Are you sure?" Asked Robert after a few seconds.

"Yes! Here, we can see the mouth of the Hudson River and the island of Manhattan."

Jorge Canseco swore loudly as he examined the virgin forests they were overflying.

"Nothing! Absolutely nothing! No buildings, no roads, no bridges and not a single trace of bombardment. What the hell is going on, for God's sake?"

"I am now heading towards Boston. We will see once there." Replied Robert, who didn't know what to think anymore. The crew of the interceptor kept quiet during the short flight to Boston, faced with an impossible reality. Their remaining hopes evaporated when Boston proved as immaterial as New York. A fantastic hypothesis then started growing in Robert's mind. He suddenly veered straight east and accelerated to Mach ten while taking some altitude.

"Sylvia, give me a heading for Paris."

"For Paris? But, that's not our next planned target."

"Don't care! I was born in Paris. Let's say that I want to visit it again."

"As you wish. Adopt heading 086."

"Thank you! If what I think is confirmed, Paris should give us an indication of what happened on Earth."

The interceptor crossed the French coast twenty minutes later, with Robert decelerating at once to low subsonic speed and going down to an altitude of a thousand meters. Sylvia suddenly shouted excitedly less than a minute later.

"I SEE HOUSES AT TWO O'CLOCK!"

"I see them!" Replied Robert, veering to the right while slowing down further. His maneuver brought the interceptor to the vertical of a small group of tiny, apparently flimsy buildings. A dozen or so humans, apparently panicking at the sight of the interceptor immobilized over their heads, ran at once inside the buildings, which were made of wood and straw.

"All this looks so primitive." Said Dyy Jonan as she eyed the houses.

"Like I expected." Replied Robert, feeling immense discouragement fill him. "I am going to continue towards Paris. We should learn more there."

The interceptor crossed the Seine River a few minutes later and started following it upstream towards Paris, the city appearing soon afterwards. Dyy frowned at the sight of the small agglomeration concentrated on a small islet in the middle of the river, with two primitive wooden bridges linking it to the shores of the Seine.

“That’s the famous Paris?”

Robert gave her a resigned look, now knowing what they were facing.

“The correct expression right now would be ‘that was Paris’, Dyy.”

He continued on a tired tone as the other crewmembers looked at him with wide eyes.

“We didn’t find New York and Boston because they have not been built yet. If I recall correctly my history of Paris, which my father made me learn by heart when I was a kid, the absence of Notre-Dame Cathedral and the fact that the city walls are limited to the Île de la Cité tells me that we are back in the past, at least as far back as the High Middle Ages and maybe as far back as the period of the Roman Empire. That damn Morg weapon that struck us in the Alpha Centauri System kicked us back to the distant past.”

His companions stared at him with horror for a moment, then looked down at Paris to examine it more. Still under the shock of what Robert had said, Jorge pointed a small flotilla of wooden boats beached on the Left Shore downstream from the town.

“Look at those boats: they use both sails and oars. Do you recognize their type, Robert?”

The pilot took a few seconds to detail the boats in question, using the magnification of his belly camera to have a better look at them. He then swore loudly.

“Scandinavian dreki⁴! We are back in the Ninth Century of the Christian Era!”

⁴ Dreki : Longship used by the Vikings for their coastal raids and their battles at sea during the High Middle Ages. The incorrect term of ‘drakkar’ is often used to describe a dreki.

CHAPTER 9 – LOST IN TIME

07:26 (Adjusted Universal Time)

Unknown date, Ninth Century

Imagery analysis center, H.S.S. MARCO POLO

Holding position near the Main Asteroid Belt

Henry Ferguson grew increasingly impatient as successive specialists kept contradicting each other, while about everybody around him was proposing a range of ideas about what had exactly happened to Earth and the fleet. Finally having had enough, he got up from his seat in the imagery analysis center's briefing room and walked briskly to the lectern, waving the specialist that had been speaking back to his seat before facing his assembled staff officers and Madam Tsu.

"I believe that we are going nowhere here, ladies and gentlemen. I personally have no doubts left about our fleet having been projected back to the past by that mysterious Morg weapon. Too many indicators show that to us. We however have too little data to accurately fix the present date, except to say that we are most probably in the Ninth Century, 32 centuries before our time. In my opinion, we won't be able to decide exactly what to do until we know for sure about the date we are in now, so that we know what we are facing exactly. However, I am sure that, like me, you all probably know little or nothing about this obscure period of history. Professor Douglas, could you give us a quick exposé on the Earth of the Ninth Century, please?"

The director of the History Department of the MARCO POLO got up from his seat but didn't walk to the lectern, instead speaking from his current position.

"If you don't mind, Commodore, I will leave the floor to one of my esteemed colleagues who is better qualified than me on that historical period. Doctor Shelton, on top of her diplomas in history and human sociology, is the author of a thesis on the High Middle Ages, which she embraced as her specialty in history."

Ferguson nodded his head, satisfied.

"Doctor Shelton, if you may please step forward to the lectern."

Feeling a bit like someone being thrown into the proverbial snake pit, Ann got up and walked to the lectern, with Ferguson giving his place to her before returning to his seat.

With over forty senior officers and department heads now watching her, she chased her nervousness away as best she could before starting to speak at a deliberate pace.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you could hardly find a period of history more dissimilar to our own concept of human society than the High Middle Ages. Much of the splendor and culture of the Roman and Greek Antiquity has vanished, replaced by barbarism, religious obscurantism and intolerance. Wide scale slavery is legal around the World, while what we call democracy doesn’t exist yet...anywhere. The vast majority of the population of Earth is illiterate and lives in utter poverty and in precarious conditions under the rule of a multitude of various monarchs, aristocrats and tribal leaders who too often couldn’t care less about the common good. True technology is close to unknown, with religious intolerance often blocking the progress or even the dissemination of what little science there is. To give you an example of that, in Christian countries in the Ninth Century, most people believe that the Earth is flat and that it is the center of the Universe. To say otherwise publicly would in most cases get you in front of a religious tribunal under the accusation of heresy, to be tortured into confessing your errors before being burned alive at the stake.”

Horrified looks and exclamations from many in her audience greeted her words, making her pause briefly before continuing.

“There are however some good points, for us at the least. One of them is the low population density in most places on Earth. Also, and most importantly for us, some lands that are very favorable to human habitation are either completely unoccupied or are very sparsely populated. One such land presently unoccupied is New Zealand, which will be first visited by Polynesians only during the next century. Other unoccupied territories are Bermuda, the Azores, Easter Island, Cape Verde and Madeira, to list only a few of them. Australia is presently very sparsely populated by Stone Age nomads and I am sure that we could negotiate a fair deal with those nomads if we wanted to do so. Some major food resources, like the fishing grounds of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland, are not being exploited yet, or only in a minimal way. We thus in my opinion could easily find sufficient free living space for our refugees without causing prejudice to anyone on present Earth.”

“What about some possible interaction between us and the present people of Earth, Doctor Shelton?” Asked Lynn Tsu from her seat. Ann gave her a sober look as she answered her.

“Such interaction will be both tricky and complicated, at least at first, and we will have to be on our guards when doing so, Madam Tsu. Please understand that individual human rights is a notion that is nearly non-existent in this century, while armed banditry and piracy is an omnipresent plague. Most local rulers do pretty well as they please and often use brute force to impose their will on their people and on their neighbors, while the death penalty is a common punishment for many crimes we would consider rather petty. Some rulers are worse than others, but we could still find a few relatively moderate ones worth speaking to if need be. I would however need to know first the exact year we are now before I could tell you who would be worth contacting. Then, there is the problem of language. Nobody on today’s Earth can understand any of the modern languages we used in the Human Expansion, and certainly not Modern English. We do have a few classical languages that were still taught to scholars and historians in the Human Expansion and that we could use on today’s Earth, like Latin, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew and Mandarin. We thankfully have the mnemotronic teaching packs for those languages, thus our people could easily and quickly be made to assimilate them via mnemotronic sessions. Before coming to this briefing, I took the liberty to quickly check in our mnemotronic data banks to see which ancient language teaching packs we had, if any. Luckily for us, I found a lot more teaching packs than I had expected. Once we know for sure the date we are, I will then be able to select the packs that would be useful to us. One last point: the Ninth Century was well known in history for the depredations of Scandinavian pirates called ‘Vikings’, who looted, burned and massacred their way across most of Europe in this century. However, please do not think that those Vikings represented the worse to be met in this century, far from it. Those Vikings could also be shrewd merchants and first class sailors and engaged as much in peaceful commerce as they did in warfare.”

“Doctor Shelton,” said Henry Ferguson as Ann paused for a second to drink some water, “all that you said up to now only reinforced my conviction that one of our priority tasks will be to establish the precise date we presently are. That information will be crucial for us to be able to take informed decisions on what we will do next. How would you suggest that we obtain that particular information?”

“I believe that only a direct contact between an educated person of this century and a small reconnaissance team from our fleet will provide us that information, Commodore.”

“Exactly what I was thinking. Would you be ready to either lead or be part of such a reconnaissance team, Doctor Shelton?”

Ann was left speechless for a moment before she could go over her surprise, then nodded firmly her head.

“You can count me in, Commodore.”

CHAPTER 10 – INTERACTION

20:34 (Paris Time)

Unknown date, Ninth Century C.E.

City of Toulouse, County of Toulouse

Kingdom of Western Francia

Ann Shelton landed smoothly and silently in a narrow, dark alley separating two rows of miserable-looking houses made of either red bricks or cob and wood. She then cut the directed gravity propulsion system incorporated to her light protective suit as four more silhouettes joined her in the alley. Night had just fallen and there was nobody in sight in the dark, unlit streets around them. She could however hear the voices of people inside the nearby houses, voices speaking in Occitan, the common language spoken in the Ninth Century in the southern half of what would become France but which was now called Western Francia. Thankfully, the teaching pack for Occitan had been part of the mnemotronic databanks kept by the history department of the MARCO POLO, the language having survived on Earth until the 21st Century, when it had been electronically formatted for the use of historians. Ann and her small team had thus been able to learn Occitan in less than half an hour through a session in mnemotronic chairs. Mnemotronic teaching, or the direct transfer of knowledge to the human brain through a form of neuronc stimulation mixed with hypnosis, had been used for centuries in the Human Expansion and was a form of education that was both common and well understood, at least in the 41st Century. As a historian, Ann already knew as well classical Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic and Mandarin Chinese from past studies and mnemotronic sessions. Hopefully, the versions of those languages contained in the mnemotronic databanks would prove to correspond at least closely enough to the dialects spoken in the Ninth Century to permit meaningful conversations.

Ann opened the transparent visor of her helmet but closed it back nearly immediately, while she gagged and nearly vomited. Vvyn Drelan, who had landed just behind her, looked at her with worry.

“Ann, what’s wrong?”

“The...the smell in this alley: it is horrible! The whole place stinks of shit, urine and rotting garbage.”

The Centaurian historian and sociologist frowned and patted her shoulder.

“We should have expected that. Very few places in this century have working sewer systems and people must be commonly using chamber pots instead of toilets, pots that are then simply emptied in the streets through an opened window. No wonder that there were so many epidemics in the Middle Ages.”

“Beurk!” Said Private Djea Renak, a young Centaurian commando who had also been cross-trained as a paramedic. “Thankfully, the supplementary shots we received should protect us from the local diseases.”

“Count more on your general state of good health, Djea.” Replied Ann, who had by now regained some composure while breathing through her helmet’s air filter. “I am not sure that the strains of microbes currently running around correspond to the vaccines we use. At least, our antibiotics should kill the local microbes easily.”

Sergeant Mark Dempster, who formed the rest of the small team with Corporal Gino Vinelli, made a face as he looked at the ‘mud’ covering the dirt surface of the alley and nearby streets.

“Walking in shit... Great! I already love this century.”

That made Ann giggle in amusement.

“What till you catch a whiff from one of the local women...or men: most people of this time rarely bathe. I would discourage any oral sex with the locals until you could scrub them down a few times.”

“Ewww! Please cut the disgusting details, Ann.” Protested Vyyn, making the others laugh briefly. Looking at her handheld data viewer, which showed a photomap of Toulouse produced on the MARCO POLO during the previous 48 hours they had taken to prepare for this mission, Ann pointed down the main street connecting with the alley.

“What I believe to be an inn should be less than 200 meters away in that direction. Let’s put our disguises now, for what they will be worth.”

The five members of the reconnaissance team then opened the haversacks they carried and took out of them long sleeveless brown capes made of synthetic fibers before draping them over their light protective armored suits. Ann had few illusions about how effective those capes would be at rendering inconspicuous a group of tall men and women wearing what would look to locals like suits of armor, but that was the best they could come up with quickly, the fashion of the 41st Century being totally unlike that of the

Middle Ages. Major Hans Arntern, the security officer of the MARCO POLO, had also opposed the idea of sending people down to Toulouse without any protective gear, in view of the precarious security situation reigning around at this time. Ann then gave a resigned look to her companions as she slid open her helmet visor, hiding it under her raised hood and fighting the urge to throw up.

“This may not be fun, but we will have to go around with our visors up and under our capes’ hoods if we don’t want to attract attention immediately on us. Glass is still rare in this time and place and nobody would have the equivalent of our visors.”

Mark Dempster made a resigned sigh and raised his own visor, wrinkling his nose at the stench from the ground.

“Oh well, I will simply think that I am visiting my uncle’s pig farm again. Are you sure that we could not have chosen a better place to do our reconnaissance, Ann?”

“This place may stink, but I believe that it is one of the best places now for our mission. Toulouse had a reputation through the Middle Ages for being a tolerant and cultured city compared to most of the rest of Europe. The Counts of Toulouse were also said to be enlightened leaders who welcomed both scholars and artists at their court, protecting them from an intolerant Christian church. Well, we should know soon if that reputation is deserved.”

20:51 (Paris Time)

Inn of Saint-Sernin, Toulouse

Jean de Chambriand mentally wished that his young apprentice, Bernard le Gaucher⁵, showed more maturity at times. The teenager was bright enough but he was easily distracted, especially by girls. Jean often had to return his attention to his studies and work when Bernard would become too fixated on Marie, the young maidservant Jean employed. Even the threat from the approaching Vikings had done little to focus Bernard’s attention. Finally, Jean had decided to bring his apprentice to this inn, to drink some wine with him while trying to make him understand the importance of his studies in medicine, astronomy and mathematics, all things in which Jean excelled. In truth, most

⁵ Bernard le Gaucher : Bernard the Left-Handed. Nicknames were common in the Middle Ages, often taking the place of family names, which were uncommon for the people of the lower classes.

people would call Jean a genius, while quite a few would also call him a blasphemer and heretic, for his scientific views about the place of Earth in the Universe, which contradicted the official teachings of the Church. Unfortunately, his plan was quickly fizzling out, as young Bernard simply got progressively drunk while listening only partly to his mentor, eyeing instead the young and pretty maid of the inn and attracting in return a couple of light slaps from Jean meant to make him listen better. The inn was nearly empty at this hour, many having fled Toulouse at the news that a Viking flotilla was rowing up the Garonne River, coming from their base camp near Bordeaux. Most of the other citizens of Toulouse that had not fled barricaded themselves in their houses once night fell. As a result, only two other men were present in the hall of the inn, along with the innkeeper and his maid. The hall was half dark, poorly lit by a few torches and by the fire in the central hearth, whose too small hood had problems evacuating the smoke. That smoke in turn hid the low wooden ceiling of the hall, making the hall a bit claustrophobic. That was however common in inns and in most other places, as a matter of fact. Only the rich and the nobles had the money to use lots of wax candles, which were quite expensive.

A strong shock accompanied by a resounding 'BONK' suddenly shook the structure of the inn, making dust fall from the ceiling. Jean quickly covered his wine cup with one hand while turning his head towards the entrance of the inn. He felt immediate fear at the sight of the big man wearing a cape over a suit of armor, whose large frame filled the low, narrow door frame as he twisted himself sideways in order to go through. The newcomer then straightened up, only to bang the top of his helmet against the low ceiling, making him swear in a language unknown to Jean and making more dust fall down. The occupants of the inn were now all frozen with a mix of fear and of wonderment: the man in armor would easily dominate most local men by a full head. His suit of armor, of a complicated design barely hidden by his cape, also designated him as a warrior.

"Jean, do you think that he is a Viking?" Asked with difficulty Bernard, nearly stuttering with fear. The apprentice then swallowed hard when another armored man entered the inn. He was quickly followed by two women and a third man, all of them taller than the average. Bernard, like Jean, then noticed that the women also wore armored suits, something completely unheard of.

"They would bring their women on their expeditions?"

Jean shook his head slowly while continuing to examine the newcomers, who were now making their way to an empty table situated near his own table.

“Not that I know of. Also, their suits of armor are nothing like what I have seen to date and the men are closely shaved. Remember that all the stories about the Vikings talk of men with beards and long hair. In contrast, those men’s hair is cut very short, while I doubt that even my sharpest scalpel could do as close a shave as whatever those men use. My bet is that they are from some far away land. I think that you can relax, Bernard.”

His apprentice did relax then, but for the wrong reasons in Jean’s mind, fixing with nearly impolite insistence the faces of the two women in the group of five newcomers.

“Look at how beautiful those two women are, Jean.”

The alchemist, astronomer, barber, mathematician and surgeon discreetly kicked Bernard’s left leg under the table and chided him in a near whisper.

“By Christ, quit staring at those women! You want to attract their attention on us?”

It was apparently already too late for that, as the woman with black hair looked at Jean and Bernard for a few seconds before sitting down with her companions at a nearby table. Her look however bore no hostility, only curiosity. Jean had to agree with Bernard then: both of the women were beautiful, with the one with blond hair also having long slanted eyelids like he had never seen before. One of the three men of the group, a young one with reddish-brown hair, also had similar slanted eyelids.

“Definitely people from far away, and I don’t mean from the North.”

The woman with black hair then spoke up in a kind of Occitan that, while accented and a bit strange, was easily understandable to Jean and the other Toulousains in the inn.

“Waitress, five cups of wine, please!”

One of the two original customers of the inn, a rough and vulgar man named Gawen, laughed out loud on hearing her.

“Hey, Pierre, you heard that? They let their women order in their place in an inn.”

The two laborers’ laughing however strangled quickly when the biggest of the men in armor gave them a less than friendly stare while pushing away a part of his cape and uncovering a kind of short sword sheeted at his side. When the same woman who had ordered wine paid the young maid once her group was served, Jean discreetly spoke to the teenage girl as she passed by his table, pretending to order more wine.

“Quick, Jehanne, show me the money that those people used to pay for their wine.”

The teenager, a bit overwhelmed by all this, only hesitated for a moment before showing Jean three shiny silver coins. Jean then exchanged one of the shiny coins with two of his own silver coins from his belt purse. As the maid walked away with her empty tray, Jean examined with interest the shiny coin hidden in the palm of his left hand.

“Curious! This is a silver denier bearing the head of Emperor Charlemagne, but it is brand new.”

“So?” Replied Bernard, not seeing his point.

“So? Coins featuring Charlemagne have not been made for over fifty years now. However, that coin bears absolutely no scratches and appears brand new.” His apprentice opened wide eyes on hearing that.

“The strangers are paying with counterfeit money?”

“Yes...and no! Yes, because this coin was not made in any legally recognized establishment. No, because its weight and silver content seems to easily satisfy the legal requirements for a valid denier. In fact, I have never seen a coin of such high quality fabrication before. Whoever they are, those people probably know a lot about metal work.”

“We do know a lot about metal work, effectively.”

Jean and Bernard nearly jumped out from their benches, their hearts beating faster, when they realized a bit late that the tall woman with black hair had quietly approached their table and was now standing besides it, less than a pace away from them. Stopping Bernard from simply running away, Jean then looked up at the stranger, who was smiling with apparent amusement at their reaction to her.

“Please, lady, sit down at our table. I would love to speak a bit with you.”

“With pleasure, sire. My name is Ann, Ann Shelton.”

“And mine is Jean de Chambriand. This is my apprentice, Bernard le Gaucher.”

The woman looked with interest at Bernard, then at Jean on hearing the word ‘apprentice’, at the same time as she sat down facing Jean.

“Are you an artisan, Jean?”

“Oh, a bit more than that, Lady Shelton.” Replied Jean proudly. “I practice alchemy, astronomy and mathematics, on top of being a barber and a surgeon.”

Ann Shelton eyed with renewed interest the bearded man in his late twenties, who wore better quality clothes than the other Franks in the inn.

"A well educated man? That interests me. Could you answer an apparently funny question for me, Jean?"

"But of course, milady! What would you like to know?"

"Well, me and my companions just arrived in Toulouse after a very long trip and I'm afraid that I'm not certain anymore of the present date. Could you enlighten me on that subject?"

"I completely understand your confusion about this, Lady Shelton." Replied Jean, a wide smile on his face. "During a recent return trip from Florence, I left that marvelous city in the year 860. I then arrived in Pisa in the year 862, according to the calendar in force in THAT city, then in the Provence in the year 861, to finally arrive in Toulouse in the year 860. And all that during a six week trip! To answer your question, we are now, according to the calendar accepted in Rome as the official Christian calendar, on Friday, September 23 of the year 861, and that incompetent Charles the Second is still King of Western Francia."

For some reason, Jean saw Ann's face become somber and she lowered her head for a moment under some sort of emotion. Jean used that opportunity to slide in front of her the silver coin obtained from the maid. Ann looked at the coin, then up at Jean, eyeing him soberly as she pushed back the coin towards Jean.

"Keep this coin, Sire Jean. It is a proof that one can't predict everything, like finding myself face to face with a man with a mind as quick as yours."

Jean nodded his head, acknowledging her compliment.

"Thank you, milady. Could you tell me why someone produced this coin if he had the silver to buy legally made coins?"

Ann made a wry smile at that and pointed at the two laborers still drinking beer at another table.

"I would love to explain to you the problem facing me and my companions, but I would rather speak in a more discrete surrounding than this inn."

"I must agree with you that Gawen, over there, has both large ears and a loose tongue, Lady Shelton. Could I offer you and your friends the hospitality of my modest house for the night? I suppose that you have not had yet the time to get a room."

"No, effectively! I accept your gracious offer of hospitality with pleasure, Jean. I must say that being out at night is not a very good idea."

"Even more so now, with the Vikings being said to be approaching Toulouse." The mention of the Vikings brought at once a worried look on Ann's face.

"The Vikings? How close are they?"

"Nobody here knows for sure, milady. However, refugees have been arriving steadily in Toulouse from the lower Garonne area in the last couple of weeks, telling of the depredations and massacres committed by these barbarians while they make their way upstream."

"And...what are the chances that Toulouse could defend itself against them, Jean?"

The alchemist and astronomer shook his head sadly at that question.

"Very little chances, milady. Count Raymond, who is a valiant man despite his age, has only a handful of knights and men-at-arms with him. We have been repairing the old Roman city wall as best we could during the last few weeks, but it will not be enough to stop the Vikings. Nearly half of the population has already fled towards the mountains or towards the North."

"And the Count himself?" Asked Ann, who knew from historical studies how feckless and selfish too many of the European nobles of this century were.

"Count Raymond is still in his manor in town, with his family. He and his sons are trying to assemble more men-at-arms to defend the city."

Ann nodded her head approvingly at that: that piece of information corresponded to what she knew of that Raymond the First of Toulouse through her historical archives.

"Uh, could you excuse me for a minute, Jean? I need to go speak briefly with the head of my bodyguards."

"Go right ahead, Lady Shelton."

Getting up from her bench seat, Ann went back to her table and spoke in English to Mark Dempster, not bothering to lower her voice: nobody in this time period could understand Modern English.

"Call the fleet and pass the following information to Commodore Ferguson: today is Friday, September 23rd of the year 861 of the Gregorian Calendar. Also, there are rumors that a Viking flotilla is approaching Toulouse. We would need to have that confirmed quickly, as Toulouse seemingly is in no state to defend itself against those Vikings."

"Got it! What will we do next?"

"That gentleman, Jean de Chambriand, has offered us the hospitality of his house in town for the night and I accepted. He claims to be an alchemist and an

astronomer and he seems to me to be a decent, educated man. We may be able to learn a lot more from him.”

“I have no problems with that, Ann. I will take care of calling the fleet right away.”

As Dempster turned his head towards Gino Vinelli, to make the Franks present in the inn believe that he was talking to him while in reality speaking in his helmet’s radio microphone, Ann returned to Jean’s table, sitting back in front of him.

“Well, I believe that it is time for us to go to your house, Jean: I have a thousand questions for you.”

“And so do I, Lady Shelton.”

“Please, call me simply ‘Ann’: I am no noblewoman.”

“No? You certainly have the demeanor and expensive accoutrement of a noblewoman, Ann. What are you then? The wife of a rich merchant?”

“No! In fact, I am not married. I am an historian, an erudite who studies history and human societies.”

That surprised Jean to no little end: women were generally expected to basically stay home, raise children and take care of the house, or maybe help run the family store or shop, not to study things. Jean had nothing in particular against the notion of an erudite woman, but this was the first time that he met one.

“Decidedly, I am getting more and more anxious to continue this conversation in private, Lad...uh, Ann.”

“Then, let’s go, shall we?”

Ann dropped a silver coin on the table for the maid as she got up again from her bench, with Jean and Bernard also getting up. The three men and one woman in armored suits at the nearby table followed them out a short moment later.

After leading Ann and her small group for maybe 500 meters through the narrow streets and alleys of the medieval city, Jean de Chambriand stopped in front of the wooden door of a three storey-high house made of bricks. Like the rest of the town, the streets of the district stank and the houses around appeared to be poorly built, with some visibly sagging to one side or another. As Jean knocked hard on the door, Bernard at his side, Ann and her comrades stayed against the façade of the house, trying their best to be inconspicuous to any possible person observing them from the windows of the neighboring houses.

“Judith! JUDITH! Open up! It’s me, Jean!”

After a moment, the noise of iron safety bolts being pulled came from the inside and the door opened. Jean and Bernard walked in at once past the old servant who had unlocked the door. Jean smiled reassuringly to his servant as she eyed with fear Ann and the four others entering the house.

“Do not worry, Judith: I met those people at the Inn of Saint-Sernin and I invited them home for the night.”

“But, sire, they are so tall and wear armor. What tells you that they are not Vikings?”

“Vikings, bringing two women with them on a scouting expedition?” Replied Jean with a smile that finally reassured the old maid. With a lit candle holder in one hand, she relocked the front door and followed her master and the newcomers through a small room that served as Jean’s workshop, then into the larger main room of the house, which served as a lounge, kitchen and dining room. A few wood logs burned inside the fireplace situated along one wall of the communal room, providing a poor level of illumination, while the floor was made of poorly cut planks. A teenage girl wearing a simple, well-worn dress got up to greet the newcomers with a forced smile as Jean de Chambriand made the presentations.

“Welcome into my house, my friends! I would like to present you to Judith, my senior maid and cook, and to Marie, my young servant. You also met already at the inn my apprentice, Bernard le Gaucher. Judith, Marie, this is Lady Ann Shelton, who arrived with her friends from a long trip. They will spend the night here.”

Both servants bowed to Ann, who bowed her head in return while smiling to them and Jean.

“Let me present to you in turn my companions. First, my partner historian, Vyn Drelan. Then, the members of my escort: Sergeant Mark Dempster, Corporal Gino Vinelli and Private Djea Renak. Thank you again for your hospitality, Jean. Do you mind if we put our packs, capes and other things inside your workshop for the night?”

“Not at all! Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

Ann bowed again to thank him before filing into the adjacent workshop with the other members of her team.

As they waited for Ann and her group to come back to the living room, young Bernard approached Jean and nearly whispered in his ear.

"Are you sure that we can trust those strangers, Jean?"

"Pretty much, Bernard: they are nothing like what I heard about the Vikings. Have you detailed their accoutrements?"

"Uh, not really. Their capes hid much of them."

"Which is why I believe that they wore capes, not because it is cold. In truth, their armored suits are quite strange, with many things on them that I can't identify. Also, the three men-at-arms have short swords and knives, but not the long swords the Vikings are known to favor. Did you notice the eyes of the second woman and of one of Ann's guards? I remember reading an old Roman parchment about a traveler who went far to the East, a long time ago. One of the things the writer had deemed worthy of mentioning was that Easterners often had elongated, slanted eyelids, like two of the newcomers. I do believe that those are travelers from afar, and not Vikings. Besides, the Vikings wouldn't have needed to ask me what date we are: they have been looting and rampaging through our country long enough now to know very well what date we are, right?"

"Uh, I believe that you are right, Jean." Replied Bernard while lowering his head, contrite. "What do we do now?"

"Show them our hospitality, of course! Marie, take out a pitcher of my best wine, along with cups for everyone, and I mean you and Judith as well: we don't get travelers from afar here very often. Maybe we will hear some fascinating stories tonight about the countries they went through."

Marie had finished lining up cups and a pitcher of wine on the rough wooden table of the living room when Ann and her comrades emerged from the workshop, having shed their light protective suits and wearing their form-fitting fleet shipboard work uniforms, supplemented by belts supporting their instruments and weapons. Jean held his breath on seeing Ann and Vyn's uniforms, two-piece outfits made of trousers and T-shirts that molded their eminently feminine bodies: such outrageous outfits would be enough by themselves to attract trouble to Ann and Vyn, for the Church absolutely forbade women to wear men's clothes. On her part, young Marie, all of fourteen years old, sucked air in and opened her eyes wide as she admired the athletic body and smooth face of young Djea Renak. Even old Judith eyed with interest the tall, strong and wide-shouldered Mark Dempster. As for Bernard, he was literally devouring with his

eyes the two female travelers, to the point where Jean had to discreetly elbow him in the ribs and whisper to him in Latin, in order not to be understood by the travelers.

“For God’s sake, Bernard, get a grip on yourself: you’re drooling!”

“Uh, sorry, Jean, but they are so beautiful.”

Ann Shelton grinned at that moment and spoke, also in Latin.

“Why, thank you, Bernard. You flatter me.”

While Bernard reddened from embarrassment, Jean looked sharply at Ann.

“You speak Latin, Ann? What other surprises do you have for us?”

“Oh, plenty, my good Jean. Do you have a place where we could speak in private?”

“I have an astronomical observatory in the attic. Will that do?”

“It will be perfect. Lead on!”

Jean nodded, then started climbing the creaky wooden stairs of the staircase leading to the upper floors of the house. Ann looked around her critically once they were up in the attic: four skylight windows covered by wooden panels faced the four cardinal points, making for decent observation positions, while a small table and chair sat in a corner, with a pile of parchments and two large bound, leather-covered books resting on the table, along with pens, an ink bottle and a primitive sextant. There were however no telescopes. That however fitted with the very low technological level of this century. Jean offered Ann the chair and sat himself on a wooden stool, facing her from two paces away. They both examined each other in silence at first, with Ann in particular taking the measure of Jean. The alchemist, in his late twenties, was small compared to a man of the 41st Century, but at least he appeared both healthy and fit. His face and eyes reflected both sharp intelligence and a gentle nature. Ann definitely found him charming and somehow felt that she could trust him.

“Jean, I am going to tell you things that will shock you and that you will have difficulty to believe, but what I am going to say is the simple truth.”

“And why would you be ready to trust a complete stranger like me, unless you wanted to deceive him, my dear Ann?” Replied Jean in a neutral tone. His eyes were however inquisitive, analyzing every move of her body language: he obviously still harbored some suspicions and doubts in his mind. Ann then chose her words carefully.

“Jean, I will tell you the truth because it is going to come out sooner or later and because I need someone I trust here in order to be able to interact peacefully with the local authorities and thus avoid some regrettable misunderstanding. I didn’t lie to you

when I said that we were travelers from afar and not Vikings. I just didn't tell you how far we actually came from."

Ann paused for a second before delivering her bombshell.

"Jean, we came here accidentally and are now in the impossibility of returning to our place of origin. We also come from the stars...and from the far future."

Jean's jaw dropped open at that, having expected about anything but that.

"But...but that's impossible! I can't accept such a story!"

"You will have to accept it eventually, Jean, like the other people of this century. Do I look like a person from this century, Jean?"

The alchemist had to recognize that Ann was anything but a typical Carolingian woman and shook his head.

"No, you don't! Let's say for the moment that I believe you. Why did you come here?"

"It was actually completely accidental and our trip in time can't be explained properly, even by our best scientists. My group comes from a giant ship of space that leads a fleet of ships filled with millions of refugees from a tragic war. Our time of origin was the year 4021 and Humanity had been spreading through the stars for centuries, using highly advanced science and machines to travel through space. We also lived in peace, until an alien race of giant, intelligent spiders attacked us. Those aliens, whom we call the 'Morgs', also had ships of space. Their ships were somewhat inferior to ours but they crushed us through sheer weight of numbers. We lost world after world, devastated by the Morgs and with their populations massacred, until we ended up with only two surviving worlds: this one in the Solar System and one in the Alpha Centauri System, the nearest star to the Sun. You know which star I am talking about, right?"

"I effectively know it: it is in the southern constellation of Centaurus and is the third brightest star in the sky."

"Good! Well, we were able to assemble a good part of what was left of our fleet to defend Alpha Centauri. When the Morgs came, we engaged them in battle and inflicted on them very heavy losses, destroying over eight of their ships for every ship we lost. Still more Morg ships came and they finally overwhelmed our fleet, then destroyed our inhabited planets in the system. Our ship, the MARCO POLO, was however able to leave with a strong escort before that and started heading for Earth, to find a refuge there for the millions of civilian refugees packed aboard our ships. Unfortunately, the enemy then used a weapon unknown to us, a weapon that they apparently didn't

understand fully themselves. That weapon projected our whole fleet in the past by over 31 centuries. Now, our fleet orbits Earth, unable to return to its proper time and still carrying millions of refugees in need of a new home. Before you become alarmed and think that we want to invade Western Francia in order to settle our people here, be reassured: we have no intentions of conquering anybody's lands. We know about many distant regions on Earth that are very nice to live in but are still totally empty of human presence, being undiscovered yet by the people of your time. We are already planning to settle our refugees in those distant, empty lands."

"Then, why come here at all, if you could go live in those lands, hidden from us by distance?"

"A legitimate question, my dear Jean. The answer is threefold. First, we truly didn't know on which date or even year we were now and needed to learn it in order to be able to properly analyze the known history of this century. Second, we are in need of finding adequate food sources for our millions of refugees, and quickly. We however are not like the Vikings, or anyone else from this century as a matter of fact, and simply stealing and looting is not our style. What we want is to establish peaceful commercial links, to both buy food from you and help your people grow food more efficiently. Thirdly, and flowing from the second reason, an Earth gripped in wars, poverty and famine would be of little help to us to find food for our people during the few critical first months and years that it will take us to settle properly our refugees on new lands and start producing food on our own. I could also add a fourth reason, a sentimental one rather than a practical one: we are humanists at heart and this business of wars, massacres, famines and general abuse and exploitation of the lower classes by a small class of nobles is abhorrent to our society, which highly prizes individual rights and promotes the equality of all, irrespective of race, sex or social rank. That is why we are here, Jean, and why we will help your people by getting rid of the Vikings for you."

The full meaning of what she had said impacted Jean at once, leaving him speechless for a moment.

"You...you would get us rid of the Vikings? Could you really do that?"

"Easily, Jean. We could and will massacre them as easily as they massacred defenseless peasants and monks around Europe. In fact, one of our ships is presently conducting a reconnaissance from the air along the Garonne, to locate any Viking flotilla that would be coming upstream towards Toulouse. Once we know where the Vikings are, we will free any of the prisoners and hostages they may be holding, then we will kill

the Vikings and destroy their ships. What we know of them through history makes them simple mass murderers, looters and rapists, rather than true warriors: they amply deserve the death penalty for their crimes. Those that stayed behind in their countries will then be warned to stay there and to never again try to attack others abroad.”

Jean was silent again, but for a long moment this time. He finally managed to recover enough of his wits to speak.

“Could you offer me some proofs about all that you said, Ann?”

“I can and I will, Jean. I will now show you one of the instruments I routinely use for my work. Don't be scared by it and don't think that it is some kind of magical item, please.”

“Pah! I don't believe in this magic nonsense.” Replied Jean with a dismissive gesture. “Magic and sorcery are two words the Church uses too often to accuse those who don't follow strictly its doctrine and to keep the ignorant and the illiterate in line. One of my best friends, an alchemist like myself, was burned at the stake by the Church, supposedly for practicing sorcery. I believe only in science, true science.”

Ann nodded her head soberly, quite satisfied by Jean's response. Up to now, he was proving to be the kind of man she had hoped him to be.

“Very well!” She said while taking out of a cargo pocket of her trousers a compact electronic pad in its protective casing. She then approached her chair to the table and put her pad on it, opening its cover as Jean got closer to examine that strange new object.

“I will now switch on this instrument, which is designed to fill multiple roles: information storage and retrieval; recording of conversations and of pictures; calculations; communication between two distant persons and much more. Explaining to you how it is powered and how it works would take a long time, so just bear with me and see what it can actually do: that should be enough by itself to convince you that we come from a much advanced, far future. The inside of the cover is touch-sensitive and you can activate or select a specific function by touching the corresponding icon.”

Jean held his breath as Ann touched a side button, powering the pad and lighting up its screen with bright colors that swirled around before forming quickly the beautiful picture of a field of flowers, with snowy mountains in the background. A number of small, thumb-sized symbols were lined up along the edges of the picture. Ann touched one of them, changing the picture to some kind of list in a language he didn't know but that definitely used the Latin alphabet. Touching one specific line of that list made the picture

change yet again, to that of some enormous, saucer-shaped object resting on a paved surface. Jean's mouth opened wide when he understood how big it really was as the view of the object showed tiny shapes moving around its legs.

"By the Mother of Christ! That thing is as big as a mountain! What is it?"

"The ship of space I came from, the MARCO POLO. This is a visual recording of its inaugural flight, as it was leaving for its first mission."

Ann touched another icon and the sound of some kind of music started to be heard, coming from the pad. Jean was however too fascinated by what he was seeing to ask right now about the music, as the gigantic ship was shown taking off slowly from the paved surface, which had to be as wide as a large city. The ship soon took up speed quickly and flew out of sight, at which point Ann stopped the recording and replaced it with another image. This time, Jean saw numerous soldiers wearing some kind of complicated armored suits advancing among the ruins of a city. He nearly jumped back from fright when the soldiers fired their weapons, which threw blinding bolts of lightning with a loud, cracking sound similar to thunder. What they were shooting at became evident when they bypassed the half burned out carcass of some kind of monstrous giant spider that also wore an armored suit, but of a much different kind than the men.

"That dead beast you now see is what we call a 'Morg', one of the aliens who attacked Humanity in the 41st Century and was driving it to extinction. Even though they were winning through sheer numerical superiority, you can see there that they were far from unbeatable, and in fact lost battles a number of times when we could achieve rough parity in numbers."

Jean nodded his head slowly in understanding as one soldier was seen to be hit by a thin beam of blue-green light and fell to the ground, dead, with a smoking hole in his chest, as the other soldiers pushed on. Mixed with the soldiers were many man-sized machines that also fired lightning bolts, along with a few, much bigger machines with weapons that fired thick, powerful bolts that vaporized whole sections of walls, along with the Morgs hiding behind them. Overall, the battle was of an intensity and speed that left Jean speechless, while being as ferocious as any battle between warriors of his century, except that the scale of destruction could not even be compared. After a few minutes of viewing that battle, Ann yet again changed the picture on her pad. To Jean's shock, it was that of a young woman looking at Ann and him as if she actually saw them. Jean was even more shaken when Ann started conversing with the woman in an unknown language, even though the woman was obviously not present in his house. He

however let Ann finish her conversation without interrupting her with some of the thousand questions he now had for her. Shutting off her pad, Ann pivoted in her chair to face Jean, her expression dead serious.

“One of our ships will make a low altitude flyby over Toulouse in a couple of minutes. Go to your East-facing skylight and watch for that ship: it should finish convincing you that I was telling you the truth.”

Although he was already pretty much convinced, Jean hurried anyway to the skylight opening on the eastern side of the sloping roof of his house and opened wide the wooden panel covering it, putting in place a wooden stick to hold it open. He then waited nervously while watching the dark night sky over Toulouse, helped by the fact that the medieval city itself was nearly totally dark, as usual, with only the faint lights from candles or oil lamps showing through some windows. Something approaching in the sky soon caught his eyes: it was spherical in shape and had numerous blinking lights around its surface that made it easy to spot in the night. It was also approaching very fast, growing constantly in Jean’s field of vision. The alchemist and astronomer nearly fell on his posterior, stunned, when the flying ship overflew Toulouse: it was bigger than the city itself! While it flew mostly silently, the howling winds its passage over Toulouse created were easily heard and felt by Jean. Sitting back on his stool, his legs shaky, he gave a haggard look at Ann.

“How...how big was that thing? Was this the ship you showed me earlier?”

“No, it wasn’t the one I showed you on my pad, Jean. The MARCO POLO is in fact even bigger, much bigger. What you just saw was one of the six battleships in our fleet, the JEAN LANNE, on its way to go vaporize the Vikings approaching Toulouse. Other ships of our fleet spotted the Vikings near Agen, which they had just burned down to the ground. Their destruction will be recorded visually, so that I could show it to you and others in Toulouse. From what you have seen by now, you should know that killing those Vikings and destroying their flotilla will be child’s play for us.”

Jean nodded his head slowly at those words, still shaken to the core. Something she had said then hit him.

“You just said that you wanted to show the destruction of the Vikings to someone else in Toulouse, didn’t you?”

“Correct!” Replied calmly Ann. “Tomorrow morning, I intend to go pay a friendly visit to the Count of Toulouse, with you at my side of course.”

“And what will you want to discuss with Count Raymond, if I may ask?”

"First, I will want to reassure him about the Vikings and to tell him not to worry about them anymore. Second, the leader of our fleet wishes me to conclude a pact of mutual assistance with Count Raymond."

"But, you are so much more powerful than us, or anybody around Western Francia. What could Count Raymond possibly have of interest to offer you?"

"A piece of land that we could use to build a commercial exchange point, along with a residential building. What we need desperately now is fresh food to feed our millions of refugees until we could raise our agricultural production to sufficient levels. Instead of taking by force and stealing that food, like the Vikings did, we intend to pay for it, in exchange for goods that we can produce in quantity. Believe me, if Count Raymond wants to become rich, then he will not be able to say no to our offer. Tell me, how is he like, especially towards his own people."

"I truly believe him to be a good, decent man, Ann. He is now 51 years old but is still vigorous and healthy and has three grown sons, plus four daughters. He is an honest, brave and generous man who truly cares for his people, contrary to too many of the nobles in the kingdom. He is also a tolerant, open-minded man and is my patron and protector. I am by the way his personal barber and surgeon and I am in very good terms with him."

"Excellent! Just the kind of man I can discuss with. Do you think that he will accept to talk to me, a mere woman?"

Jean smiled at the sarcasm evident in Ann's last question.

"With me at your side to introduce you? Without a doubt!"

Jean then paused, as his expression became sober and his eyes stared into Ann's eyes.

"Ann, you were open and frank with me about you and your people, so it would only be just that I also be frank with you. Count Raymond protected me once in the past from accusations of sorcery made against me by the Bishop of Toulouse. I told you already about another alchemist from Narbonne I knew who was burned at the stake by the Church for sorcery and heresy. Well, my apprentice, Bernard le Gaucher, was his son, while my servant and cook, Judith, was his wife and the mother of Bernard. Both had to flee Narbonne to escape the Church and I then gave them asylum, with the knowledge and support of Count Raymond. As for Marie, my younger maid, I also offered her a refuge after some women in Carcassonne, who were jealous of her beauty, accused her of being a witch. I tell you this so that you can be reassured about their

silence and discretion concerning you and your people: none of them will betray you to the Church.”

Ann stared back at Jean as she digested those revelations, finally smiling gently to him.

“I see that I must add courage and charity to your other qualities, Jean.”

Instead of being flattered by her words, Jean lowered his eyes, while bitterness showed on his face.

“Me, courageous? I have been hiding my true thoughts and beliefs from others for years, in order to avoid the unhealthy attention of the Church. Count Raymond is the only one with whom I dare speak openly about my scientific theories. Compared to me, Judith’s husband had the courage to defend himself publicly, but that cost him his life, while I mostly kept mum.”

“Jean,” said softly Ann, “you had innocents to protect. For you to also burn at the stake would not have helped them a bit. Don’t be hard on yourself.”

The alchemist then gave her a pleading look.

“Then, if you want to help me, could you promise me that your people will protect Bernard, Judith and Marie, whatever happens?”

“Jean, you and your companions already are under our protection.”

“Thank you, Ann, from the bottom of my heart.”

“You don’t need to thank us for that, Jean: we would protect any innocent we met. Well, now that I have convinced you, how about going down to your living room, so that you can give the good news to your household?”

“I believe that Bernard, Judith and Marie will definitely like those news, Ann.”

Going down the steep wooden stairs from the attic, Jean and Ann were soon down into the living room, where Bernard and the two servants were cautiously eyeing Ann’s four companions from a few paces away, not really afraid but still unsure about them. As Jean gathered his people in one corner to talk to them in a low voice, Ann went to her companions to brief them.

“Well, it went better than I even hoped for, guys. Jean de Chambriand is actually what we could consider as one of the rare true scientists from this region and time and had some rough relations with the local church in the past. So did his apprentice and two female servants, so we can be fairly sure that they won’t point us to the ecclesiastic authorities. According to Jean, Count Raymond is a reasonable, honest and open-minded man who cares for his people, all things that are a plus for us. I showed to Jean

a number of video recordings, along with the sight of the battleship JEAN LANNE passing overhead, that made him believe me.”

“So, what will we do next?” Asked Mark Dempster, making Ann think for a short moment.

“I still have to get Commodore Ferguson’s approval for the deal I will want to present to Count Raymond tomorrow morning, but I definitely want to go visit the Count tomorrow morning at his city palace. I plan to go alone to see Count Raymond, with Jean accompanying me to guide me and present me to the Count.”

“But, that could be dangerous!” Objected at once Dempster. “Those people are capable of using violence on a whim and your story will be hard to swallow for them. Let me at the least escort you.”

“And make the Count suspicious at once? Any unknown big man in armor is considered a possible Viking warrior by the local people. On the other hand, I believe that Count Raymond will not feel threatened by a single, apparently unarmed woman, even one who is wearing a strange suit. I...”

The rumbling of distant but powerful thunder then cut her off and also interrupted Jean de Chambriand, who reflexively looked up, confused.

“Thunder? But, the sky was clear this afternoon.”

Ann smiled when she understood what it was.

“That, Jean, is not thunder: it is our ships slaughtering the Vikings approaching Toulouse.”

22:06 (Paris Time)

Friday, September 23, 861 C.E.

Viking camp on the right shore of the Garonne River

Near Agen, Aquitaine Region

Hastein was about to force himself into the terrified young Frankish woman he had picked out of the herd of prisoners taken during the sack of the city of Agen when one of his men nearly ran into his tent, close to panic and shouting.

“HASTEIN! HASTEIN! THERE ARE LIGHTS IN THE SKY, ILLUMINATING OUR CAMP!”

Both annoyed and confused, the big and powerful chieftain looked up at the guard while still on top of the naked female slave.

"Lights in the sky? What are you talking about? Are you drunk?"

"No, Hastein, I'm sober! It is some sort of magic or a show from the gods. You better come outside."

Grumbling in frustration, Hastein got up on his feet and pulled up his trousers, grabbing his belt with sword and buckling it before stepping out of his tent. He stopped nearly immediately, frozen with surprise and awe while staring skyward: there were really lights in the sky above, powerful and bright, which illuminated the Viking camp as if it was the middle of the day.

"By Odin, what is that?"

He was then joined by his associate, Bjorn Ironside, who had also emerged from his nearby tent. The Danish chieftain was apparently half-drunk and was none too steady on his feet as he craned his neck up to look at the lights.

"Is Loki⁶ playing tricks on us?" He exclaimed while looking up. The shout of alarm from one of the sentries around the camp then made him look back down at the tree line around the camp.

"ALERT! WARRIORS ARE COMING OUT OF THE FOREST!"

Hastein and Bjorn saw at once the long extended line of men in intricate armor now emerging between the trees. The newcomers were basically forming a semi-circle that now surrounded the Viking camp, set along the right shore of the Garonne River. After a second or so, Hastein had to correct himself: some of the armored figures that had emerged from the forest didn't look much like men. His instincts as a warrior then took over his wonderment and he shouted out as loud as he could to the 1,700 Viking warriors in the camp.

"EVERYBODY UP! FORM A CONTINUOUS SHIELD WALL AROUND OUR CAMP! GET READY FOR BATTLE!"

As the Scandinavians, many of them only half dressed and more than a little drunk from consuming the wine looted in Agen, rushed to get ready for a fight, one of the newcomers took a few steps forward towards the camp, then stopped. A voice next echoed, incredibly loud, coming from the man in armor and speaking in Occitan.

"VIKINGS, SURRENDER IMMEDIATELY OR YOU WILL BE SLAUGHTERED TO THE LAST."

⁶ Loki : Norse god of mischief.

Hastein, who had been born a Frankish peasant before joining the Danish raiders at a young age, understood the man easily and translated for Bjorn before eyeing critically the unknown warriors. There were at most 400 of them surrounding the camp in a thin, extended line, while there were over four times as many Vikings. Hastein thus scoffed loudly in response.

“HA! YOU ARE THE ONES WHO WILL BE SLAUGHTERED, FRANKS!”

“LAST WARNING! YOU PUT YOUR WEAPONS DOWN NOW AND RELEASE UNARMED ALL YOUR PRISONERS AND YOU WILL NOT BE KILLED.”

“YOU FOOL! YOU ARE THE ONES WHO WILL DIE!” Replied Hastein before shouting in Norse to his men. “KILL THOSE IDIOTS TO THE LAST! FOR ODIN!”

Hastein, Bjorn Ironside and over 1,700 Vikings then charged at a run while screaming wild war shouts, their long swords and war axes raised high. Major Hans Arntern, the commander of the commando battalion assigned to the MARCO POLO, then gave a terse order in his helmet radio microphone.

“To all: fire at will!”

He then gave the example by firing his disintegrator rifle at the Viking chieftain that had replied to him and was now rushing straight at him under the harsh light from the projectors of the battleship JEAN LANNE. The disintegrator bolt, cracking out like a thunderbolt, hit Hastein squarely in the chest, creating a shower of incandescent sparks on impact. The energy bolt easily burned through the Viking chieftain’s chain mail armor, vaporizing half of the internal organs in the torso and killing Hastein instantly. The next one killed by Arntern was Bjorn Ironside. The men of Arntern’s battalion, along with 200 supporting combat robots, added their firepower then, shooting down Vikings in droves. Not one of the Vikings was able to advance within five meters from the commandos before they fell on the ground, dead, or were simply vaporized by disintegrator bolts. In all, the battle, if it could be called that, lasted less than two minutes. Hans Arntern finally looked around him at the hundreds of incinerated, smoking bodies and shook his head: it had really been too easy.

“Hell, next time we will use our short swords instead. ALRIGHT, COMMANDOS, LET’S DO A THOROUGH SWEEP OF THAT CAMP! ALPHA COMPANY WILL FIND AND ASSEMBLE THE UNFORTUNATES WHO HAD BEEN PRISONERS OR SLAVES OF THE VIKINGS, SO THAT WE COULD SEND THEM BACK TO THEIR HOMES. IF THOSE EX-PRISONERS WANT TO TAKE THE VIKINGS’ GOLD AND SILVER TO REPAY THEMSELVES, THAT’S FINE WITH ME. BRAVO COMPANY WILL COLLECT

THE VIKING WEAPONS AND DESTROY THEM, TO PREVENT OTHERS FROM GRABBING THEM LATER. IF YOU FIND SOME VIKINGS STILL ALIVE, THEN USE YOUR SHORT SWORDS. FINALLY, CHARLIE COMPANY WILL TURN THE VIKING SHIPS INTO FIRE WOOD. GET BUSY!”

CHAPTER 11 – NEW LANDS

09:42 (New Zealand Time)

Saturday, September 24, 861 C.E.

Corvette H.S.S. SEAGULL

Overflying the region of future Auckland

North Island, New Zealand

“Here you are, Madam Tsu: the original site of the city of Auckland.”

Lynn Tsu, sitting with Henry Ferguson and a number of staff officers and specialists in the observers’ chairs on the bridge of the corvette, opened her mouth with admiration as she contemplated on the holographic screens the wide, virgin peninsula covered with vegetation. Immediately to the East of the peninsula lay the blue waters of the Rangitoto Channel, which led to the nearby Hauraki Gulf and the South Pacific Sea. Immediately to the West were the sparkling waters of Waitemata Harbour, which connected with the Tasman Sea. To the North and South of the peninsula, forest-covered lands spread for tens of kilometers. Everything about the scenery Lynn Tsu was now examining avidly spoke of natural beauty and fertile land.

“By the stars, this is so beautiful! I never had the chance to visit New Zealand in our original time period, but I should have. This looks like paradise.”

“And a paradise it is, except for a few points.” Replied proudly Henry Ferguson. “My ancestors came from New Zealand and I visited it a number of times when young. Even in the 41st Century, it was still a land of utter natural beauty. The climate is mild year-long in most of New Zealand and nice beaches and fantastic scenic sights abound. The only thing we will have to worry about is the fact that New Zealand sits on the junction of two major tectonic plates. There are thus regions where volcanic activity and earthquakes could be a concern, but we know from history where those regions are and will be able to either avoid them or adapt to them. The site of Auckland itself sits on a dormant volcanic bed, with a volcano a mere eight kilometers northeast of the peninsula, on Rangitoto Island. That volcano is however mostly dormant and its next known eruption is due in only five centuries and will affect directly only a fairly limited area around it. Only a few spots should actually be avoided when we will build the

settlements for our refugees, notably the sites of Wellington and Christchurch, which are prone to severe and frequent earthquakes which could reach magnitudes of over seven on the Richter Scale. The area of Rotorua, in the center of the North Island, is an active volcanic plateau where I would not counsel to build any major settlements. However, the geothermal activity there makes it a good area to establish thermal baths resorts and geothermal energy plants. Finally, the site of Hamilton, in the Waikato River Valley, is presently a swamp area that would need major work to drain and make healthy for occupation. However, the grasslands of the Waikato Region and of other regions are very rich and quick growing and would make perfect free-roaming pastures and grazing grounds for herds of cattle. By the way, there were no known native species of mammals in New Zealand, except for a few species of bats, and there were as well no known species of predators before some were imported by humans in the future. Most of the fauna consists of birds in fact, including the giant Moa flightless bird, which went extinct around the 18th Century. That last factor, the lack of land predators, will make New Zealand even more ideal as a roaming ground for herds of cattle and sheep. Finally, the waters around the islands abound with fish. Give us a couple of years and we will turn New Zealand into a food basket.’’

Tsu nodded her head soberly as she kept eyeing the natural beauty their corvette was overflying at low altitude and low speed.

“Yes, but in the meantime, we still have to provide food to our refugees that are not in cryogenic sleep. Since I am not willing or ready to keep the million or so of mothers and infants presently crammed inside the auxiliary quarters of the MARCO POLO separated from their family members for months, this means that we will have to find food for two or three million people, and quickly! How much people can the hydroponic gardens, fish farms and animal farms of the MARCO POLO sustain on a long term basis, Commodore?”

Ferguson sighed silently as he mentally pictured the scale of their predicament.

“To be frank, the food production facilities of the MARCO POLO, when pushed to maximum productivity, can feed at most 400,000 people. Right now, we are managing to feed the people in the auxiliary quarters only by dipping into the reserves of rations and foodstuff loaded aboard before our departure from Kyoto Alpha. However, at the present rate of consumption, those reserves will last for less than a year, with many items running out before that. Also, we don’t have any spare space left on the MARCO POLO to accommodate the spouses and siblings of the mothers and babies.”

“Then, our top priority, apart from building new homes for our refugees, must be to acquire extra sources of food. To escape the Morgs, only to end up with our people starving to death, is unacceptable to me.”

“I fully agree with you, Madam Tsu.” Said Ferguson before turning towards one of the specialists, a renowned Centaurian agronomist, he had brought with him on this tour of New Zealand.

“Professor Zhang, what do you think about this problem? Could we find quickly sufficient quantities of food on today’s Earth, without of course looting everything in sight?”

“Uh, that is a good question, Commodore. Unfortunately, I know little about the Middle Ages and its capacity for food production. The little I know about it is that most of the human population of the period lived a precarious subsistence-level existence. Allied to that are the apparently dismal hygienic conditions the locals mostly live in, which means that the little we could get from them would likely be unfit for human consumption by our standards. What you need to answer your question would be an historian with a deep knowledge of this time period.”

“Hum, you’re right, Professor.” Said Ferguson, thoughtful. Right now, he could think of only one such person. That person was in fact presently on the ground in Europe. It took him only a moment before taking mentally a few decisions, then turned to face his second in command, Captain Montoya.

“Captain, get me a video link with Doctor Shelton in Toulouse, right away!”

08:01 (Paris Time) / 19: 01 (New Zealand Time)

Saturday, September 24, 861 C.E.

House of Jean de Chambriand, Toulouse

Kingdom of Western Francia

When Jean de Chambriand woke up with the rising Sun and went down to the living room of his house, he was surprised to see that Ann Shelton was already up, sitting on one of the crude wooden stools and with what she called a ‘tablet’ laid on the sole table in the room. She looked up from her tablet on hearing the wooden stairs creak under Jean’s feet. Jean was instantly alarmed at seeing that she appeared deadly tired. Hurrying down the stairs and stepping in the semi-obscure living room, which was

lit by only one candle and by the first rays of the Sun filtering through a window's wooden shutter, he approached her, worried.

"Ann, you look nearly exhausted. Didn't you sleep at least a bit?"

She made an apologetic smile to him while pointing her tablet, on which a page of text was visible.

"To be frank, I didn't sleep at all, Jean. I got a call from my commander, Commodore Ferguson, who had important and urgent questions for me. I then spent the night researching the matter he had raised. Oh, by the way, he and Administrator Tsu, who leads our refugees, named me their plenipotentiary envoy at large. It seems that our upcoming meeting with Count Raymond will be more important than ever."

"Has something grave happened to your people, Ann?"

"Only the realization that we will need to find lots of food...quickly, in order to avoid mass starvation within a few months. Tell me, Jean, how is the food situation in Francia at this time?"

She didn't like the disillusioned frown he made then.

"At the best of times, our peasants produce enough grains and vegetable to be able to provide for themselves and then sell the little surplus left to the populations of our various cities and towns, who depend on these surplus. However, one bad harvest or a Winter harsher than usual and famine would then ensue. Of course, the nobles of the land are insulated against that, since they extract from the peasants and farmers much of their produce in the form of various taxes, both royal and local ones. From what I have heard and seen during my various trips, some of the other countries of Europe, notably Moorish Spain, appear to be doing at least a bit better."

"I see! Then, we will have to cast a wider net than just Western Francia. We may very well have to go overseas as part of our search for food. However, wherever we will find that extra food, which we do not intend to simply loot by the way, we will try to avoid creating local shortages, thus will have to be both measured and judicious in our food acquisition. I was also asked by my commander to try obtaining a small portion of land around Toulouse, to establish a trading post where we could attract foreign merchants and make deals with them."

"Well, that kind of endeavor normally tends to do a lot of good to a local economy, so I would be ready to say that Count Raymond could certainly show interest in that, especially now that the Vikings approaching Toulouse are dead."

"At what time do you think we should go visit him, Jean?"

“Give him maybe an extra hour for him to have breakfast and start taking care of his daily routine, then we could show up at his manor.”

09:13 (Paris Time)

Manor of Count Raymond the First

Near Toulouse’s ‘Porte de Narbonne’ (south gate)

Situated near the right bank of the Garonne River, close to the dome of the monastery of Sainte-Marie la Dorée, the manor of Count Raymond the First was a rather modest two-storey building made of pink bricks and with an inclined roof covered with ceramic tiles. A brick wall surrounded a small courtyard in which the main entrance of the manor opened. Two Frankish guards greeted politely Jean and Ann at the heavy wooden door of the manor. The guards, shaggy-looking but muscular men, wore scale mail armored vests and conical iron helmets and were armed with lances, swords and knives. They simply crossed their lances to block the way as one of them addressed Jean while examining none too discreetly Ann from head to toe, taking a measure of her strange-looking light protective suit.

“Good morning, Sire Jean! What brings you here this morning?”

“And a good morning to you as well, Adélard. I came to ask for an audience with Count Raymond for me and my friend here, Lady Shelton.”

“The Count is quite busy right now, preparing the defense of the city against the Vikings, Sire Jean. However, if you certify to me that it is for an important matter, I will go see if he can receive you.”

Jean slipped a silver piece in the hand of the guard before replying to him.

“Tell him that I found some help to defend Toulouse: that should interest him.”

The guard nodded his head, then walked inside the manor at a hurried pace. Jean had only to wait for three minutes, time he used to discuss a few mundane matters with the remaining guard, a short but powerful man named Marcellus. Adélard soon reappeared and signaled Jean and Ann to follow him inside. The trio went through a small entrance lobby before entering a large, mostly empty room with a high ceiling and with a wooden elevated gallery surrounding it, linked to the ground level by a wooden stair. A dozen or so armed and armored men stood at one end of the hall, to each side of a bearded man seated in a sculpted wooden chair. The seated man, wearing a carefully trimmed beard and long hair and dressed in a silk shirt and trousers, appeared to be in his fifties. His

face reflected openness and intelligence as he keenly examined his two visitors, concentrating particularly on Ann. Standing to the right of the Count was also a man wearing the cassock and tonsure of a medieval priest. Jean then whispered to Ann while keeping his eyes on the priest.

“The man sitting on the chair is Count Raymond. The priest standing to his right is his confessor, Father Thomas, someone I personally don’t like at all. He will probably be your biggest problem. Let me speak first.”

Ann simply nodded her head while keeping her eyes on the priest, who now appeared agitated and was whispering into the Count’s ear while pointing at Ann. Jean, imitated by Ann, then walked to a position five paces in front of Raymond before putting one knee down on the floor and lowering his head briefly in salute. The Count was the first to speak, his voice strong and firm, but also friendly enough.

“What may I do for my personal barber today?”

“Count Raymond, I came to present to you my new friend, Lady Ann Shelton, who arrived in Toulouse last night. Lady Ann came from very far and has a message from her commander for you.”

Raymond’s attention immediately shifted to Ann, who was now getting back up, like Jean. His look was that of curiosity mixed with a bit of suspicion.

“And may I ask first where you are from, Lady Ann? Usually, men are used as messengers. Your accoutrement is also quite strange and unusual.”

“Where I come from, women have equal status with the men and can fill any role or position in my society, Count Raymond. To answer your question, I came from the stars...and from the future.”

Raymond, like everybody around him, was understandably stunned by her answer, while Jean stiffened, expecting a negative reaction. Raymond made an authoritative gesture of the hand to silence the men around him, who were now exchanging exclamations and incredulous remarks. His eyes also hardened as he stared straight into Ann’s eyes.

“Lady Ann, the Vikings are said to be approaching Toulouse and I am presently very busy planning the defense of the city, thus have no time to waste listening to frivolous declarations.”

“I am very serious, Count, I assure you. As for the Vikings, you do not need to worry anymore about them: our soldiers and ships massacred them near Agen last night.”

The armored men behind Raymond again exploded in exclamations, forcing Raymond to silence them a second time. He then stared again hard at Ann.

"That is quite a declaration, Lady Ann. Why should I believe you?"

"Because it is the truth, Count Raymond. As proof of my words, I can bring you to the site of the Vikings' demise, or I could show you pictures of that massacre."

"Don't you see that she must be a Viking herself, Count?" Shouted the priest besides Raymond. "She is trying to attract you into a trap."

Four of the armored men started moving towards Ann to grab her, but Raymond again stopped them with a gesture of the hand before nearly growling at her.

"You are indeed very tall and wear armor, Lady Ann. You better be more convincing than this, or I will have you arrested."

"Very well, Count Raymond: I will thus show you the pictures I talked about. May I approach you?"

"Yes, but be careful with your moves: my men will be watching you closely."

Two strong men then advanced on each side of Raymond, taking position near him and drawing their long swords. Ann, who was not wearing her protective helmet at the time, couldn't help becoming nervous as she slowly took four steps and again put one knee on the ground, nearly able to touch Raymond now. Moving slowly, she took her tablet out of a cargo pocket and flipped open its lid. She powered it and selected a video file, raising the sound volume and starting the video before turning the tablet towards Raymond to allow him to watch the recording of the battle of the Vikings.

"Don't be scared by this and please don't think that it is some kind of sorcery or magic, Count Raymond. Our science has an advance of over three millenniums on anything you know."

While Raymond stiffened, he still looked at the tablet as the video played. Father Thomas' reaction was however much less forgiving.

"A WITCH! GRAB HER BEFORE SHE COULD PLACE A CURSE ON THE COUNT!"

The two men flanking Ann started to move at once to grab her none too gently but were stopped at once by a shouted order from Raymond, who jumped to his feet.

"DON'T TOUCH HER!"

He then pivoted and stared down angrily at his priest.

"I COMMAND HERE IN TOULOUSE, FATHER THOMAS, NOT THE CHURCH. REMEMBER THAT!"

The priest shrunk under his stare and stepped back while bowing. Pivoting again to face Ann, Raymond spoke to her in a firm tone.

“Get up, Lady Ann!”

Heart beating fast, Ann obeyed him, still holding her tablet so that Raymond could continue looking at the video recording. The Count watched the Vikings being massacred, stiffening and nearly jumping back when the first disintegrator bolts were fired. He was however able to overcome his incomprehension and fear and watched the video until it ended, showing remarkable self-control. Ann then decided to take a big gamble in order to convince him. Moving her left hand slowly, she took her disintegrator pistol out of its belt holster, using two fingers, and presented it to Raymond, the muzzle pointed at herself.

“You saw the power of our weapons, Count Raymond. If you still don’t believe me, then kill me with my own pistol. You only need to point it at me and press the trigger. Be careful, though: it is quite sensitive.”

Jean de Chambriand became pale as a sheet at once as Raymond hesitantly took the pistol, wrapping his right hand around its grip. He then forcibly pulled Ann back and stepped in front of her to shield her with his body.

“PLEASE, COUNT, DON’T!”

Raymond, his face hard, kept pointing the disintegrator pistol towards Ann and Jean for long seconds. He was able to see the fear in Ann’s eyes, while Jean’s reaction had been clearly spontaneous. Moving slightly his right hand, he then pressed the trigger of the pistol. He nearly threw away the weapon after a disintegrator bolt shot out with a sharp crack, vaporizing half of a decorative vase, along with a large patch of the wooden floor. Looking incredulously at the damage from the disintegrator bolt, then at Ann, he took his finger off the trigger and presented back the pistol to Ann, who slowly took it and returned it to its holster. Jean was blowing out air in relief as Raymond eyed Ann with respect.

“You were brave indeed, Lady Ann, to put yourself at my mercy like this. Your weapon is a truly terrifying one, I must say. So, tell me more about you and your people, Lady Ann.”

Herself doing her best to calm down after the tension of the last seconds, Ann nodded briefly her head.

“Thank you for your comprehension, Count Raymond. I am an historian by profession and the study of this time period is my specialty. My commander, who

commands a large fleet of giant flying ships, sent me to Toulouse to ascertain the exact date we were now in. In truth, our trip through time to the past was completely involuntary and we are now in the impossibility of returning to our time, which was the 41st Century.”

“The 41st Century...” Said dreamily Raymond. “Over three millenniums in the future. No wonder that you look so different from the norm of today. And you still swear to me that the Vikings are now dead?”

“I do, Count! My offer of showing you the battlefield still stands, by the way.”

“And why would your people have massacred the Vikings like this? With your powerful weapons, you surely had no reasons to fear them.”

“Indeed not, Count, but we acted so that the people of Francia would not need to fear anymore the depredations of those invaders.”

“And why would you care for the people of Francia, Lady Ann?”

“Because we care for everyone, irrespective of social rank, race or sex. We are a deeply humanistic people at heart and the common good is paramount for us. Talking of common good, I have a revelation to make to you: my fleet is carrying millions of refugees and was fleeing from a powerful alien race when it was accidentally projected into the past. However, do not fear that this alien race could show up here: we firmly believe that they can’t travel through time themselves. While we are cut off for good from our original century, those aliens cannot touch us now. This is to say that, as powerful as we are, I actually came to seek your help, Count Raymond.”

“My...my help? If you indeed got rid of the Vikings for us, I would be more than happy to help you, but what could I possibly do to help people as powerful as yours?”

“That would be quite easy actually, Count. We need to establish one or more commercial exchange points in Europe, in order to be able to buy food to feed our refugees. We wouldn’t need much space, actually. A square mile or so would be more than enough for us.”

Raymond sat back on his chair and thought furiously for a moment while still staring at Ann. He finally nodded his head to her.

“Very well, Lady Ann. I am taking your offer to go see what remains of the Vikings near Agen. If your story proves true, then I will be willing to lend you some land for your exchange post. However, please keep in mind that I hold my titles and lands from King Charles and that I am not truly at liberty to give away land as I please.”

Ann gave a sober look at Raymond then: this could easily enough become a sticky point and she had to deal with it right away.

“You would still defer to King Charles after he has basically abandoned you and your people at the mercy of the Vikings, Count Raymond? Know that, if we establish an exchange point here in or near Toulouse, we intend to build permanent structures in it, structures that we would want to keep. We will not expend valuable resources just to be eventually evicted on the whims of a versatile king. Please excuse me if you find my words brutal, but we truly value frankness and honesty, Count.”

“I would rather prefer brutal but frank words than mellow but treacherous ones, Lady Ann.” Replied Raymond with a slight smile. “You are indeed a refreshing change from the misleading smiles and words I get at the royal court. Very well: I will take on me to make any eventual land grant to you permanent. You however still have to convince me that the Vikings are all dead.”

“That will be easy enough to do, Count.” Said Ann, smiling: that Frankish noble was decidedly the kind of man she could like and respect, the way she liked and respected Jean de Chambriand. The people of this time may have been ignorant and uneducated, but that didn’t make them stupid, something that Raymond had just proven to her. Activating her radio microphone, she called the JEAN LANNE, which was still hovering at high altitude over the region, as Raymond and the other medieval men around watched her with confusion and wonderment.

“JEAN LANNE, this is Doctor Ann Shelton. I will need the temporary use of a light shuttle in order to transport a local official to the site of the destroyed Viking camp near Agen, over.”

There was only a short delay before the face of the captain of the JEAN LANNE appeared on the screen of her wrist videophone.

“Your request is approved, Doctor Shelton. The shuttle should arrive in Toulouse in about fifteen minutes. Please activate your position beacon so that it can be guided to your location, over.”

“Activating my personal beacon now! Thank you, JEAN LANNE.”

Pushing a button on the control panel of her protective suit, Ann then smiled to the Count.

“A small flying ship will arrive shortly to transport us to the site of the destroyed Viking camp. If you wish to bring some of your men with you, there will be up to nine additional seats available, Count Raymond.”

"A...a flying ship? That would be a most wondrous experience for me, Lady Ann, and a good way to prove many of your words."

He then twisted his head to look at his men, pointing two of them.

"Eudes, Foulques, you will come with me. Bernard, you will stay here and command during my absence."

Father Thomas, who had kept silent with difficulty until now, then spoke up again.

"Please, Count Raymond, don't listen to the words of that witch! She probably wants to take you prisoner and take control of Toulouse."

Raymond gave the priest a jaundiced look, clearly displeased at him.

"Father Thomas, if you can only give me negative counsels despite what we have seen and heard up to now, then I won't need your advice anymore. Return to your monastery and stay there until I call for you again. Now, go!"

Realizing that he wouldn't be able to change Raymond's mind, the priest bowed his head to him and walked out of the hall. He however gave a hateful glance to Ann while passing by her. Jean de Chambriand, who was still going over his emotions, touched gently Ann's shoulder to attract her attention.

"Ann, about that flying ship, could I go with you and Count Raymond?"

"But of course, my dear Jean!" Replied Ann, grinning. "You think that I would have refused such a request from you, especially after the way you shielded me?"

That made the alchemist redden with embarrassment.

"Uh, that was purely a reflex on my part, Ann."

"A reflex I appreciated a lot, Jean. Well, let's go outside to wait for the coming shuttlecraft, shall we?"

About everyone in the hall, plus many other occupants of the manor, followed Ann outside in the courtyard. Seeing her step cautiously around the dirt ground covered with horse excrements and other filth, Raymond smiled to her and spoke in a joking tone.

"From your reactions, I would bet that you don't let horses, pigs and dogs go around freely inside your flying ships, Lady Ann."

"Uh, correct, Count Raymond. I just want to avoid soiling the floor of the flying ship we will be traveling in."

"That is easily enough taken care of, my friend. MARTHE! MARTHE! COME HERE WITH A BUCKET OF WATER AND A HARD BRUSH!"

Raymond then explained himself to Ann as an old woman, who had been tending to a few chickens held in cages in one corner of the courtyard, hurried inside the manor.

"We are accustomed to have to wash our feet or boots before entering the manor."

"I understand, Count Raymond. Maybe my people could help render Toulouse cleaner in the near future, by installing a sewer system and paving the streets."

"Well, the ancient Romans did know about such things, but unfortunately things have declined since their time, as you can see, and there is presently little money available for such public works."

Ann was tempted to mention the considerable sums spent by the various kings and rulers of Europe on building numerous and sumptuous palaces for themselves with the crushing taxes extracted from the farmers and workers of their lands, but wisely kept mum about that. Despite his titles and powers, Count Raymond's manor was far from extravagant and the servants around seemed well fed, apart from appearing to be content enough. The old maid soon came back with a wooden bucket full of water and a hard brush in her hands. She put down the bucket and bowed to Raymond.

"You need my services, my lord?"

"Yes, my good Marthe! A flying ship is about to come and transport me to near Agen. I will need you to clean our boots before we enter that ship."

The mention of a 'flying ship' was enough to make the old maid make the sign of the cross from fear and apprehension.

"A flying ship, my lord? It isn't some kind of devilish work, I hope?"

"Judging from my beautiful guest here, I would rather call it a ship from Heaven, Marthe." Replied Raymond with a malicious smile, making Ann smile as well from the compliment.

"My, you do know how to flatter women, Count Raymond."

"And I take great pleasure in doing so, my dear Lady Ann. Aaah, talking of women, here comes my wife and two of my daughters, along with two of my daughters in law."

Ann looked with interest at the woman with graying hair and at the two young women and two teenage girls, all dressed in fine silk dresses, who were now nearly running out of the manor to come towards her group. The newcomers couldn't help stare at Ann, who dominated all of them by a good head, and at her unusual outfit before the older woman addressed Raymond.

"What happened, Raymond? I heard a sort of loud noise from the main hall and, not seeing you there, got worried about you."

"No need to worry about me, my dear Berteiz: I was just trying not to kill by accident my guest here. May I present you Lady Ann Shelton, who arrived yesterday from the future? She is offering me a trip by air to Agen."

Berteiz de Reims de Roucy stared wide-eyed at her husband for a moment before shaking a disapproving index in front of his grinning face.

"Raymond, are you drunk? This is no time for jokes, especially with those bloodthirsty Vikings said to be approaching Toulouse."

"Jokes? What jokes? I just said the truth! Besides, the Vikings are now dead, if I can believe Lady Ann."

"The Vikings, dead? But that is wonderful news!"

"It certainly is, Berteiz. We were going to visit the site of their now wrecked camp, in order to make sure that those barbarians are dead. Would you like to come with us, you and the girls?"

The Countess hesitated and glanced at Ann for a moment before looking back at her husband.

"You did say that we would travel by air to Agen. How is that possible?"

"With the help of a machine made possible by a very advanced science, Countess." Said Ann, answering for Raymond. "I originate from the 41st Century and came in a fleet of giant flying ships that traveled among the stars. As for exactly how our machines fly, that is unfortunately quite complicated, but I assure you that it has nothing to do with either magic or sorcery."

The Countess, along with the women and teenagers that had accompanied her, stared blankly at Ann, unable to either comprehend or accept what she had just said. Berteiz was still staring at Ann when the latter pointed at something up in the sky.

"Here comes the shuttlecraft from our warship."

All the Franks looked up at once at the shuttlecraft that was steadily growing as it approached, with more than one onlooker then running away in panic to go hide somewhere. To their credit, the Count and his family stayed where they were, but still had awed looks as the shuttlecraft finally landed nearly silently in the middle of the courtyard. Its rear access ramp lowered at once, with the copilot of the craft then walking out on the ramp to signal to Ann's group to come aboard. The Franks followed Ann reluctantly at first, overwhelmed by the sight of that flying machine, with Ann doing

her best to reassure them. It was however the old servant, Marthe, who involuntarily helped her the most by posting herself at the foot of the ramp with her bucket and brush and then starting to wash the worse of the dirt and filth off Ann's boots. Jean de Chambriand was next on the ramp, followed closely by the Count and his family. Slowly entering the cabin of the shuttlecraft while embracing avidly every detail of its interior, Count Raymond then sat with his wife in one of the comfortable, padded passenger seats.

"By the saints, I should pay your artisans to make me chairs this comfortable for my manor. This thing is downright luxurious. Your people must be a rich one, Lady Ann."

Instead of pleasing her, Raymond's remark apparently saddened Ann, who lowered her head and replied in a subdued tone.

"You could have said that of us...before we lost our home worlds, Count Raymond. Now, we are little more than refugees, with millions of mouths to feed and little to feed them at the moment. Believe me when I say that being able to open a commercial exchange point near Toulouse will be very important to us."

Not wanting to distress her further, Raymond didn't insist, instead leaning sideways to whisper to Jean de Chambriand.

"My good Jean, could you possibly tell me more about what happened to her people?"

"I can, Count Raymond: she revealed to me many things and also showed me pictures yesterday, after I had met her and her group at the Inn of Saint-Sernin and had then brought them to my house for the night."

"There are more like her right now in Toulouse?"

"Yes, Count Raymond! She came with three men and one woman, all dressed the way she is now. I spoke at length with them and I believe them to be good people, all of them."

"And what did you learn about them?" Asked eagerly Raymond. Jean, knowing that Ann wanted the truth to be known, then recounted what he had seen and heard from Ann, speaking for a good two minutes. The other Franks, listening eagerly to him, only realized that the shuttlecraft had taken off after he stopped talking, with one of the teenage girls nearly screaming with fright on looking at one of the side viewing screens.

"EEEEK! WE'RE UP IN THE SKY!"

The Franks all looked outwards at once, opening their eyes wide and exclaiming themselves at the view of Toulouse they now had from an altitude of a hundred meters. The shuttlecraft then accelerated forward quickly in the direction of Agen, following roughly the stream of the Garonne River towards Bordeaux.

"By God, we could cross the whole of the kingdom in mere hours at such a speed." Exclaimed one of the men accompanying Raymond, who was actually one of his sons, Eudes. Ann benevolently smiled at that.

"Actually, it could do such a trip in mere minutes if we wanted to. The pilot is keeping his speed low at this time, so that you could better examine the ground under us. We should arrive over the area of Agen in about twenty minutes."

"What a fantastic experience!" Said Raymond in an awed tone. "After this, I will be ready to believe about anything."

"Be careful what you wish for, Count: you may get it!" Replied Ann, who had chased away most of her sadness by now. The pilot then spoke up in English from the nearby cockpit of the small craft.

"Doctor Shelton, I have a video transmission for you from Major Arntern."

"Put it on the cabin's forward viewing screen, please, and tell Major Arntern to speak in Occitan, for the benefit of our passengers."

"Understood, Doctor Shelton."

As the forward video screen switched to communications mode, Ann warned in advance her Frankish guests about the oncoming call.

"I am about to converse with one of the officers of my ship who commands part of our soldiers. He was the one who led the attack against the Vikings near Agen last night."

She did not have time to say more then, as the face and torso of Major Hans Arntern then filled the forward screen. The commando officer actually wore an impressive powered armor suit and was sitting inside one of the flying battle tanks of his unit.

"Doctor Shelton, I am pleased to be able to announce to your Frankish friends that the Viking army besieging Paris is now destroyed, along with the Viking army that was based in Abbeville and was ravaging the countryside along the Somme. Our forces are now busy thoroughly cleaning up the Viking fortified camp on the island of Noirmoutier, at the mouth of the Loire River. We will next do a full, detailed sweep down the Somme, Seine, Loire and Garonne Rivers, to catch any group of Vikings in Western Francia that may have yet escaped our attention."

As Count Raymond and his entourage beamed at each other with savage joy on hearing that, Ann hurried to ask a request to Arntern.

“Major, could you show on this channel at least parts of the scenes recorded during the attacks you just effected. I would like to prove beyond a doubt to our new friends that the Viking threat is effectively over.”

“Too easy! I will start transmitting our battle recordings in a short moment.” Pictures and sounds taken from one of the battle tanks that had attacked the Viking army and ships near Paris soon started playing on the screen, watched by the captivated Franks. They were still watching gleefully the recordings when the pilot announced that they were now overflying the site of the destroyed Viking camp near Agen. The Franks at once switched their attention downwards, towards a clearing on the right bank of the Garonne where the charred debris of dozens of Viking long ships lay, along with hundreds of bodies. A number of people roaming around the devastated camp fled at once into the nearby woods at the sight of the approaching shuttlecraft, prompting a remark from Jean de Chambriand.

“Hey, who are these people? Could they be surviving Vikings?”

“More likely local people who were looting the camp.” Answered Ann, making Raymond nod his head.

“That would make sense. Just the weapons and armor worn by the Vikings would be worth a fortune, and I am not counting all the gold and silver they looted around the kingdom in the last few years. Could we land inside the camp, so that I could inspect it with my own eyes, Lady Ann?”

“We came here just for that, Count Raymond. PILOT, PLEASE LAND INSIDE THE VIKING CAMP, THEN OPEN THE AFT RAMP.”

“No problem, Doctor!”

As soon as the shuttlecraft had landed and its rear access ramp was lowered, Count Raymond went out to wander around the ruins of the camp and the dead, rotting corpses. He was closely followed by his two sons, Eudes and Foulques, who also were keen to inspect the battlefield. The Frankish women were however markedly less interested in surveying the grounds and mostly stayed near the shuttlecraft. Dead Vikings lay everywhere, most of them bearing terrible wounds from disintegrator bolts, with burned away limbs or gaping, incinerated holes in their torsos. Countess Berteiz shivered on seeing the state of the corpses.

"I know that I should rejoice at seeing all those dead Vikings, but I can't help think that those weapons of yours are truly terrible ones, Lady Ann."

Ann nodded soberly her head while herself surveying visually the battlefield.

"I completely understand you, Countess. A famous general in the history I know said once that the next most terrible thing to a battle lost was a battle won. On the other hand, those Vikings were not what I would call true soldiers: they were not defending their lands or their country and they were not concentrating on killing enemy soldiers. They were looters, rapists and murderers who preyed mostly on the weak and the defenseless. Despite the huge ransoms they were paid repeatedly by various kings and nobles to go away, they kept breaking their word and returned to cause more deaths and misery to the little people of Europe. Many people glorified their feats of arms in the future, making them as fierce warriors, but the truth is that they owed their successes mostly to the mobility given them by their ships and to surprise. When faced with a prepared enemy with sufficient numbers of properly trained warriors, they were more often than not defeated soundly and forced to get back in their boats and flee. I will not grieve for any of them, as they got what they deserved."

Berteiz, like her daughters Régilinde and Sénagonde and her daughters in law Garsinde and Gauciane, stared at her, shaken by the fierceness of her response.

"My, Lady Ann, you are showing a side of yourself that I did not expect."

Ann pivoted to face Berteiz, her expression dead serious.

"Don't get me wrong, Countess: I am no blood-thirsty person and my people doesn't enjoy war, even if we have well-trained and well-equipped soldiers. An alien race of giant, intelligent spiders attacked without provocation our planets and devastated them, killing every Human they could find. Billions of peaceful people died at their hands in the space of less than two years, while our ships desperately fought to stop them. However, the enemy's numerical advantage was too great and, despite causing the Morgs huge losses, our fleets were either destroyed one by one or had to withdraw. The ship I came from barely escaped with its escort fleet when one of the two last solar systems we held was attacked and overwhelmed. We have over eighteen million refugees aboard our ships, all that could be saved from our population. Our priority concern for us now is to find new homes for those refugees and to procure or grow enough food to feed them. You will thus excuse me if I don't shed a single tear for the dead invaders now lying on this field."

Ann then returned inside the shuttlecraft and sat in one of the passenger seats, trying to chase from her mind the images of death and destruction at the hands of the Morgs that her conversation with Berteiz had brought back. She had partially calmed down when Countess Berteiz approached her cautiously a couple of minutes later. Ann looked up at her, painting a smile on her lips.

“Yes, Countess?”

Berteiz sat down in a nearby seat facing hers before starting to speak in a subdued tone.

“Tell me more about your people, Lady Ann.”

“What is there to say, Countess? We are Humans, just like you, and are far from perfect, despite the power given to us by our science and technology. Not all of our citizens could be called highly intelligent and some of them have criminal tendencies, like in any people in history. However, contrary to your own society, misery, poverty, death and suffering was not the norm in my time period, at least until the Morg invasion started, and my people had not been conditioned to become insensitive and uncaring of others. Most of all, we cherish justice and equality of rights for everyone, irrespective of social rank, race or sex. For us, slavery is an abomination that warrants the death penalty for those who enslave others, while aristocracy and its system of inherited privileges had died away nearly two millenniums ago. In my society, you rise strictly on merit, while our administrators are elected through universal suffrage by all our citizens. Those administrators in turn worked and governed for the common good of all, and not to become rich themselves. Being rich was in fact nearly pointless in our society, as all our citizens enjoyed a comfortable life and had plenty to eat.”

While Berteiz kept a straight face at those words, she did so with difficulty. Nearly all that Ann had just said contradicted the beliefs and norms of her own time. The disappearance of aristocracy in the future was one of the most shocking things mentioned by Ann, as Berteiz was a product of such a system and had benefited fully from it. She however understood Ann’s concern for the lower classes of the population. Berteiz always had made a point of treating well her servants and the other people of the county. She had also seen too often in the past few years refugees running from the Vikings, people who had lost everything, including some of their loved ones, and who were then facing starvation and misery. Berteiz then pictured mentally some of the other aristocrats and high nobles she knew, many of whom she personally considered nearly useless by themselves. Even the King, Charles the Second, had proved to be a weak, vain man who loved luxury and didn’t care at all for his people. King Charles had more

than once already paid huge ransoms to the Vikings to make them go away, ransoms raised through crushing new taxes imposed on the merchants and peasants of the kingdom, instead of assembling a proper army and fight the northern invaders. He had also fought with his own brothers for a vain imperial crown that was now next to meaningless, expending much time and resources on that quest rather than on his own people. There was a lot to think about what Ann had just said to her, even if it demeaned her own titles and privileges. She finally patted gently Ann's shoulder as she got back up to exit the shuttlecraft.

"I now understand better your point of view, Lady Ann. If we can help your people in any way, we will."

Ann didn't reply, silently watching Berteiz go back out. She saw the countess go to her husband, who was returning from his tour of the camp, and talk to him in private for a good four minutes. At the end of it, Raymond nodded to his wife and walked to the shuttlecraft, entering it. He sat down facing Ann and stared soberly at her for a few seconds before speaking in a solemn tone.

"Lady Ann, you told me the truth about the Vikings and I have only one word. I will thus give you the land you need to build your commercial exchange post, to the south and just outside the walls of Toulouse, along the old road to Narbonne. If we could fly back to Toulouse, I will then show you the limits of that land lot from above."

"Thank you, Count Raymond: you will not regret this, I promise. Please tell your family and Jean to return to the shuttlecraft."

"Right away, my friend."

Three minutes later, the shuttlecraft took off from the battlefield and headed back towards Toulouse, passing by the village of Moissac, which had miraculously escaped the Viking depredations. Once over Toulouse, Ann let Count Raymond guide the pilot of their shuttlecraft to a hover above a tract of forested land just south of the city walls. Raymond then pointed at a series of features on the ground.

"The road you see is the old Roman road connecting Toulouse with Carcassonne and Narbonne, on the Mediterranean coast. The road will constitute the eastern boundary of your commercial exchange post, with the right bank of the Garonne River being the western boundary of your land lot. The northern boundary of your lot will be an East-West line a hundred paces south of the city walls, with the southern boundary situated one mile further south."

Ann nodded her head at that as she examined the designated ground lot, most satisfied: that would be more than enough to establish a significant trading post and commercial market along one of the most traveled roads of the region. Raymond was however not finished and he pointed at a group of islands in the middle of the Garonne, just southwest of the city.

“Lady Ann, what you told my wife decided me to help further your people. Apart from the lot for your exchange post, I am also giving to your people the full use and ownership of the Islands of Le Ramier, which you see to our right. They are big enough to build a fair-sized town on them and are also adjacent to your new exchange point and could be connected to it by a simple bridge. I will be most honored to become a neighbor to some of your compatriots.”

Ann detailed the said islands with growing emotion, watched by Raymond and his family. The two main islands, grouped tightly with four small islets, covered a total of at least two square kilometers stretched over close to four kilometers of length, and were completely covered with a dense forest, with the fast waters of the Garonne flowing around them. It was not the biggest nor the richest tract of land around and was probably subject to periodic floods, but it would be more than sufficient to build a small city on it, especially with the way the Human Expansion had switched centuries ago in its history to building in height, instead of wasting precious fertile land just to build low housing. As for the flooding potential, some engineering work would take care of that easily enough.

“Count Raymond, I...I don't know how to thank you for your generous gift to my people. Be assured that those islands will be carefully exploited and used by us.”

“Well, it will certainly be a better use than the one I was making of those islands, my dear Lady Ann. I used them solely as occasional hunting and fishing grounds and only a handful of poor fishermen and their families live on them presently.”

“Again, you won't regret your generosity, Count Raymond. The pilot will now bring you back to your manor with your family and Jean de Chambriand. As for me, I will have to go report on the results of my mission to Commodore Ferguson and Administrator Tsu. Be assured however that I will come back to visit you very soon to appraise you of the details of our installation plans, once they are decided.”

“I will be waiting impatiently for your return, my friend.” Said Raymond, sincere.

Less than three minutes later, the shuttlecraft landed back in the courtyard of Raymond's manor. This time, most of the Franks present in and around the courtyard stayed and watched instead of fleeing, something that Ann thought was an encouraging improvement: curiosity was winning over fear and superstition. After renewing her promise to come back soon, Ann returned inside the shuttlecraft, which then lifted off and flew off, watched by Raymond and his family. The Count's head guard, Adélar, came to him at once, stopping near him and bowing his head in respect.

"Is my lord alright?"

"Perfectly alright, my good Adélar. Today, we will be able to celebrate: the Vikings are all dead, with their ships reduced to splinter. But first, I must discuss some urgent matters with my council. Tell my son Bernard, the chamberlain, the seneschal and my private cleric to join me in my chambers right away."

"Yes my lord!" Said the guard before turning around to walk inside the manor. Raymond then looked at his family members.

"You will come with me, Sons! We have some important decisions to take. Berteiz, pass the word around the servants and staff and reassure them about the Vikings, then start preparing a banquet for supper tonight."

Walking inside his manor, Raymond went up with his sons Eudes and Foulques to his private chambers, which had windows facing the nearby Garonne River. Ordering a servant to bring some wine for his group, Raymond sat in one of his chairs and waited patiently for the rest of his private council to show up. His son Bernard was the first to arrive, followed closely by Raymond's seneschal, Frédolon d'Albi. The chamberlain, Albéric de Vabres, arrived a minute later, accompanied by the Count's secretary, Armand, a well educated man in his forties who could read and write in four languages and could speak a further two more languages. Once everyone was present and had been served a cup of wine, Raymond dismissed his servant and had the door firmly closed, so they could speak in some privacy. Looking soberly at the six men facing him, Raymond raised his cup of wine high.

"First, I want us to drink to the death of the Vikings that were threatening Toulouse: me, Eudes and Foulques saw with our own eyes their bodies and their wrecked ships. May those Vikings go to Hell!"

"AYE!" Replied the others before gulping down half of their cups. They then listened religiously as Raymond spoke further.

“Today, very powerful people from the future visited us and massacred the Vikings that were about to attack our city. They did that not because the Vikings were threatening them, but because the Vikings were spreading death and destruction across the kingdom. Apart from the Viking army coming up the Garonne and which was destroyed near Agen, the Viking army besieging Paris and the one camped near the Somme were also destroyed by the people from the future, who call themselves the ‘Human Expansion’. The kingdom is thus free from those cursed northern invaders and we will finally be able to return to more normal lives. Frédon, Armand, know that I granted to the people of the future one square mile of land just south of the city, as a reward for having gotten rid of the Vikings for us. The people of the future will in turn use that lot of land to establish a commercial exchange point on it, so that they could buy food and trade goods. Know that, as powerful as they are, their representative, Lady Ann Shelton, told me that they are in reality refugees and have eighteen million people to feed, thus the need for them to buy in large quantities food from us and from passing merchants.”

Both the seneschal and the secretary looked with shock at Raymond on hearing the number of refugees.

“But, but that is as much as the whole population of both Western and Eastern Francia combined, my lord!” Exclaimed Frédon, the seneschal, making Raymond nod his head.

“True! That in turn led me to offer them a further grant of land: the islands of Le Ramier. I gave the possession of both the islands and the lot south of the city to the people from the future, in perpetuity.”

From shocked, Frédon became dubious, nearly reprobate.

“But, my lord, you hold those lands from the King and would need his approval before you could give them away like this.”

“Normally, you would be right, my dear Frédon. I did make an oath of fealty to King Charles when he named me Count of Toulouse and Rouergue and I have faithfully fulfilled that oath up to now. However, the King, whose oath to me was to protect me and my lands in return, did not respect his own part of that oath. Did he protect us from the Vikings? No! The only thing he did was to pay an enormous ransom to those invaders, who still stayed in the kingdom afterwards. Instead of fighting the Vikings, he launched his army in an expedition against his own nephew, Charles de Provence, while

he himself took refuge in Auxerre. So, you will excuse me if I feel free to take some leeway with my authority as Count.”

“What about the royal taxes on those lands, or even your own taxes, my lord?”

“What about them? I have a grand total of four tenant families, slaves actually, living in the southern lot and on the islands of Le Ramier, all of them poor as Job. The only things I was getting from them were some fish, venison and the occasional cut tree. I gave full ownership of those lands to Lady Shelton’s people and I don’t intend to ask taxes from them.”

From dubious, Frédolon became nearly scandalized at those last words.

“You won’t ask taxes from them, my lord? But, that future commercial exchange post could bring in some considerable revenues in sales taxes alone. Since the merchants coming to that exchange post would be crossing your lands, it would only be fair for you to raise at least a sales tax on the business of that post. You would also be justified in raising a toll fee as well on the passing merchants.”

Seeing that his own sons, along with his chamberlain, appeared to agree with Frédolon, Raymond carefully thought his response over. Everything that his seneschal had said was correct, according to Carolingian customs. However, there was nothing customary about Ann Shelton’s people.

“To be frank, I did not want to appear crass to Lady Shelton by discussing the payment of taxes with her just after her people had massacred those Viking, my dear Frédolon. However, I still could talk with Lady Shelton about that subject the next time I see her. I am sure that she will prove reasonable on that subject.”

Raymond’s eldest son, Bernard, a solid man of thirty, then spoke in turn.

“What about the allegiance of those people from the future, Father? Since some of them will be living inside your county, shouldn’t they swear fealty to you and King Charles?”

Raymond nearly burst out laughing at that question.

“Lady Ann’s people, swear fealty to me or King Charles? They could crush both of us easily with their flying ships if they wanted to, so why would they demean themselves by kneeling to a man like King Charles? Know that Lady Ann confided to Berteiz that the concept of aristocracy died out centuries ago in their history, and that they are governed by officials elected by all of their citizens. They call that ‘democracy’. No! having them simply as friends and allies will be enough for me.”

“What if King Charles comes and asks taxes and an oath of fealty from Lady Ann’s people, Father?” Asked Raymond’s second son, Eudes. The Count frowned as he contemplated that scenario.

“I hope that he won’t be stupid enough to try such a thing, Eudes. If he can’t even face his own brothers or the Vikings, then he better not think that he could cower into submission people who have flying ships and weapons that throw lightning bolts. By all the past habits of this kingdom, Lady Ann’s people would have been expected to overthrow King Charles as the weakling he is and take his place, but I am not sure that the people of the future would be interested in grabbing the kingdom, even if it was offered to them. The one thing I will do for King Charles, though, is to send him a letter to announce to him the coming of the people of the future to Toulouse. Armand, you will stay here after this, so that I could dictate that letter to you. Foulques, you will carry that letter to the royal court in Auxerre. Take two sergeants-at-arms to escort you and start preparing for your trip: you will be leaving tomorrow morning. Albéric, have a herald go around Toulouse to announce the demise of the Vikings. We will celebrate the event with a feast tonight.”

CHAPTER 12 – NEW NEIGHBORS

07:20 (Paris Time)

Monday, September 26, 861 C.E.

Northern tip of the l'Île du Grand Ramier

200 meters upstream from the city of Toulouse

Kingdom of Western Francia

A nearly imperceptible vibration transmitted by the dirt floor of the family hut awoke young Jehan, who had been sleeping near his older sister on a pile of hay. Being intensely curious by nature, the seven year-old boy quietly got up, not wanting to wake up his family, and walked out of the hut to go see what was causing the vibration. It was still dark outside, with the Sun still due to rise, and the thick curtain of trees around the hut prevented him from seeing the rest of the island, so he didn't notice anything at first. Jehan suddenly froze and looked up at the night sky, where a huge black mass floated silently above, obscuring the stars over a wide part of the sky. Fear filled him for a moment as he stared at the gigantic object, which was round like a bowl and had a number of lights of various colors on its surface. A rectangle of light suddenly appeared on one side of the flying object, as if a gigantic door or window had just been opened. Jehan's jaw fell open wide when what looked like a giant flying spider came out by the lit opening, some kind of big, box-like object hooked under it. Still frozen in front of his family hut, the boy followed the flying spider with his eyes as it silently flew south with its load while losing altitude. Suddenly deciding that he wanted to know more about this, Jehan started running southward among the trees of the forest. Despite the darkness, he wasn't afraid of getting lost, as he knew well every corner of the island. He also knew that there were no wolves or other dangerous beasts on the island, those having been hunted down to the last in the past years by Count Raymond and his sons, who occasionally used l'Île du Ramier as a hunting and fishing ground. Jehan thus didn't fear much from running around like this, except maybe a spanking from his father once the latter would see that Jehan had left the family hut without permission.

As Jehan was following the shore of the island that faced Toulouse, on the right bank of the Garonne River, he noticed more lights, this time at the surface of the small

islet situated between the northern tip of the main island and the right bank. Slowing down and then hiding behind a tree, he examined the lights for a moment. They were not shivering like the light from torches, but were bright and steady. The lights were actually forming a large rectangle that covered more than half of the surface of the islet. A dozen flying objects, each the size of a cart, suddenly overflowed silently Jehan's position, scaring him and making him crouch to hide better. The flying objects didn't seem to notice him and continued flying towards the islet, where they soon landed inside the rectangle of lights. Not even a minute later, the noise of saws cutting down trees started to be heard. Jehan also heard similar noises coming from deep in the forest on his own island. Now more than ever intent on seeing what was going on, Jehan went deeper into the woods of the l'Île du Ramier, guiding himself on the noises from the unknown lumberjacks.

After covering maybe 400 meters, Jehan had to stop and hide again behind a bush when he started to see in the growing light of the day shapes move between the trees ahead of him. He then realized with a shock that the forest, which had been a dense one covering the whole island only yesterday, was now cut down over a surface of many hectares, with more trees kept coming down still. Flying objects were busy picking up the trees that had been cut down, lifting them in the air as if they weighed next to nothing, to pile them up into a number of big piles along the periphery of the deforested zone. Jehan then saw the giant box that he had seen under the flying spider: it now rested on pillars in one corner of the clearing. Now that he could see better thanks to the growing daylight, Jehan realized with a shock that the giant box and the things that were cutting and picking up trees were made of metal. Someone thus had to have built them, but who? Sorcerers? Demons? No normal person could fly or build flying things. Angels maybe? Jehan dismissed that last thought at once: why would angels cut trees down? The forest represented life and God cherished life.

As Jehan was watching the machines at work, his eyes caught a fleeting movement a short distance to his right. Concentrating on that spot, he saw a small shape move slowly between two bushes. He smiled when he recognized the other person, who was wearing like him a tunic made of rough wool: it was Isabelle, the nine year-old daughter of another fisherman living on the island. Jehan often played with her and they were good friends. Like him, Isabelle was curious and mischievous, something

that often attracted a spanking from her parents, who already had a hard time feeding their family with the little that slaves could hope for in life. They, and also Jehan's parents, were however lucky to belong to a decent man like Count Raymond. Basically, the Count let them live undisturbed on the island, 'forgetting' to levy from them a part of the catches they made. He also had made an habit of inviting all three families of slaves that lived on the l'Île du Ramier to share a feast every New Year with his servants and the poor of Toulouse. Whistling discreetly to Isabelle, Jehan made her join him behind his bush. The young girl smiled on recognizing him.

"Jehan? Those things also woke you up?"

"Yes! What do you think that these things are?"

"Uh, I really don't know. I however saw earlier two men, who seemed to supervise the work of those things."

"Men? Where are they now?"

"They entered that big iron box over there, using a staircase on one side of it."

That brought an idea to Jehan's mind and he smiled to his friend.

"I think that I will go try to go inside that box to see what is happening inside. Will you come with me, Isabelle?"

"Oh yes!" Replied at once the little girl, enthusiastic.

"In that case, we better make a large detour inside the forest, to avoid those things that cut trees. Follow me!"

Taking their time and advancing cautiously in order not to be seen, the two children finally arrived near the giant metal box and hid behind a bush situated along the intact tree line to examine the box from up close. The box was actually gigantic, measuring easily over a hundred paces in length and eighty paces in both width and height. It rested on ten thick metal legs that kept it high above the ground, plus had a number of large doors at its extremities. Jehan and Isabelle looked on, fascinated, as a flying object grabbed with its big pincers a cut tree from one of the piles, lifting it and flying to the metal box with its load. The flyer then dropped the tree into a roof opening of the box. The noises of numerous saws was heard nearly immediately as the flying object was returning to the pile of cut trees to pick up a new load. As the second cut tree was dropped into the huge box, a large rectangular bundle of wood beams came out through one of the doors at one extremity of the box, suspended under a telescopic arm. The bundle of wood beams, which was bigger than Jehan's family hut, was lowered

down on the ground near the giant box. A second bundle of cut wood followed less than two minutes later, with a third one following soon afterwards. Jehan exchanged an incredulous look with Isabelle.

"How could they work so fast? The Count's woodcutters would take a good day to turn beams and planks out of a tree that size."

"I don't know! Why don't we use the same staircase used by the two men I saw earlier and go see inside how they do it?"

"Good idea!"

This time, it was Isabelle who led Jehan to the foot of the metal staircase. After a short hesitation, the little girl started climbing the steps, Jehan close behind her. Once they had arrived on top and were standing on a landing made of a metal grate, Jehan tried to open the metallic door on the side of the box. It however proved to be locked and refused to open. As Jehan, frustrated, tried again to pull the door open, Isabelle noticed a small box on one side of the door. There were small squares with numbers on them at the surface of the box.

"Damn! I think that we have to compose some magic number to open that door. What do we do now, Jehan?"

"Try some of them at random: maybe we will get lucky."

Making first a short prayer in order to attract luck, Isabelle pushed in succession a few of the buttons, then looked at Jehan.

"Try now!"

Jehan did, but the door refused again to open. Isabelle then tried many more combinations one after the other, but still without success. The two children were about to abandon their efforts, disappointed to see their little adventure end like this, when the door opened with an audible, metallic 'click'. The children sucked in a cry of fear on seeing that but, with nothing else happening afterwards, gathered their courage and pulled the door wide open to look inside. What they saw was a long corridor illuminated by the same kind of cold lights Jehan had seen earlier. There were also a number of doors spaced along one side of the corridor and at each end.

"There is no one in sight, Isabelle. Come!"

Following Jehan inside, Isabelle then looked up and down the long corridor, hesitant.

"Which way should we go?"

"That way!" Said Jehan, pointing the door at the nearest end of the corridor. The two children approached that door cautiously while constantly looking over their

shoulders. That was when the external access door closed back by itself with a loud metallic noise. Jehan and Isabelle ran back to it at once and tried to open it, but without success. Now terrified, they nearly jumped from fright when a woman's voice came from behind them.

"Don't worry, my children: we mean you no harm."

Turning around in a flash, the two children then saw a tall woman in her thirties who wore a sort of body-clinging blue outfit and who stood in the frame of the now opened internal door they had planned to use. The stranger smiled to them with a mix of amusement and tenderness while slowly walking towards them, her two hands up in a sign of peace.

"You are brave indeed for approaching our sawmill like this...brave and curious."

"Who...who are you, my lady?" Asked Isabelle in a shaking voice, while Jean partly hid behind her.

"I am part of the group of strangers who killed two days ago the Vikings approaching Toulouse. As a reward for that, Count Raymond gave us these islands on the Garonne, plus a lot of land on the right bank to build a commercial exchange post."

"Does that mean that we and our families also belong to you now?"

Isabelle's question seemed to profoundly shock the stranger, who however kept her tone friendly.

"You, belonging to us? I don't understand."

"But, it's simple enough! Our parents are slaves and belong to Count Raymond, like I and my friend do. If he gave you those islands, then he must have given you possession of our families as well, no?"

To the surprise of the two children, tears came to the eyes of the woman, who then got closer and crouched in front of them to gently take their hands.

"My poor kids! In our society, slavery is strictly forbidden. You are now free, along with the rest of your families."

"We are free?" Asked Jehan, unable to believe his ears. The woman nodded her head while wiping her tears away with one hand.

"Yes, you are, my little boy."

She then eyed with sadness the thin bodies of the two children, which showed signs of malnutrition, and smiled gently to them.

"Are you hungry, children? Our sawmill module includes a small kitchen and dining room."

Both Jehan and Isabelle eagerly nodded their heads at once at the mention of food: while they and their families had not been truly starving, the meager catches their fathers could take every day were barely sufficient to provide a bare minimum of food to their families. The stranger was about to get back up when she sniffed while frowning.

“Uh, I believe that a good shower would be in order before you eat, kids. Follow me!”

Taking one hand from each child, the woman walked through the open door at the near end of the corridor, then climbed wide steps that led to a control room two levels above. The three men occupying the control room looked with both curiosity and kindness at the children as the woman spoke to them in a language that Jehan and Isabelle could not understand. The woman then switched to Occitan while smiling down at the children.

“These men are my work colleagues. You will have a chance to speak with them after you have washed and will have eaten. This way, please!”

“How should we call you, madam?” Asked timidly Isabelle as the woman led them to a locker room two doors down a short hallway connected to the control room.

“Just call me Tina, girl. And you? What is your name?”

“Isabelle! My friend is Jehan.”

“Pleased to know you two. Well, here we are! Please undress while I go get some towels for you.”

Isabelle and Jehan removed without hesitation the dirty tunics that were their only clothes and stood naked in the locker room. As children of poor peasants living in tiny, overcrowded huts, they were accustomed to nudity, including adult nudity. Tina quickly came back with two large towels and two adult-sized T-shirts on one arm.

“You will be able to wear those T-shirts while eating. That will give me time to wash and dry your tunics. Let’s go into the showers section.”

Leading the children to one of the shower stalls, Tina opened the water, adjusting the temperature to a comfortable warmth. She then showed the water spray falling from the shower head to the children, who were looking at the shower with big eyes.

“Time to jump in, kids. Take your time, as I will want to give you a shampoo on top of soaping you up and scrubbing you.”

Jehan first tested the water temperature before walking inside the shower stall and stand under the spray, quickly imitated by Isabelle. The latter sniffed the liquid soap Tina collected with one hand from a soap dispenser, smiling widely on smelling the fruity aroma of the soap.

"This smells good! What is in it?"

"Essence from apricot fruits. Most of the soap we use incorporate such fruit or herbal flavors. They are however not to be ingested, or you could get quite sick. I will now rub soap on your bodies. It will then turn into foam. Be careful not to rub any of it into your eyes, or it will sting your eyes."

Thoroughly washing the two kids took Tina two soaping, scrubbing and rinsing cycles, so dirty they were from living in a hut with a dirt floor and from walking around barefoot. It also took two shampooing cycles to clean their hair. All the while, the children obediently obeyed Tina's commands while giggling and playing under the water spray. Twenty minutes after going in the shower, Jehan and Isabelle, clean, dry and wearing the oversize T-shirts, went with Tina to a small lounge with a table and a small kitchen corner. The children watched Tina with intense curiosity as she took two ration bags from a refrigerator, then put them into a microwave oven to heat them up. They grabbed at once the glasses full of milk that Tina served them, marveling at how fresh and cold the milk was. Isabelle finally asked a question as the technician served them each a plate of ham omelet.

"Tina, what are those things made of iron that are working outside?"

"Those are machines specialized in the cutting down and picking up of trees. You are presently inside one of the mobile sawmills transported by our fleet."

"And...the huge thing that was in the sky above the island?"

"That was one of our ships. After you will have eaten, we will go see together your respective parents: I have important things to announce to them about your future."

"Our future?"

"Yes, the future of you and your families." Said softly Tina while smiling. "These islands are now ours through a gift from Count Raymond and we are preparing the grounds to build a city on these islands, plus a market place on the right bank. That will mean however that most of the trees on these islands will have to be cut down, while we will be building a flood protection wall around their banks. Your families will have to move out of their huts but we will in return provide them with new, much better lodging. But don't worry about that for the moment and eat your breakfast. In the meantime, I will be going to discuss things with someone."

Jehan waited for Tina to have walked out of the lounge before whispering to Isabelle.

"Do you think that they are sorcerers or magicians?"

“Uh, I frankly don’t know, Jehan. What they do is like magic, but they have been nice to us, up to now. They certainly fed us well, though.”

“True!” Said Jehan before biting with delight in a piece of ham. “I could eat here every day.”

Tina returned into the lounge a few minutes later and sat down at their table while smiling down at them.

“Good news, children: I was able to speak with my superior and he agreed with me on what to do with your families. Do you know if there are other families on these islands on the Garonne?”

“There is only one other family living on these islands apart from my family and that of Jehan, Tina.” Answered Isabelle. “The hut of my family is along the west bank, while Jehan’s family lives on the northern tip. Charles’ hut, on its part, is situated near the southern tip of the Island of Le Ramier.”

“Thank you for that information, Isabelle. I will go see that Charles after escorting you back to your respective family huts.”

“Be careful when you will go see Charles.” Cautioned Isabelle, surprising Tina. “He lives as a solitaire and is always worried that anyone approaching his hut would come to steal from him. My father already fought once with him when Charles accused him of fishing in a spot that Charles considered to be reserved for his exclusive use.”

“I see! I will then take my precautions when going to see him.”

A half hour later, with their belly full and wearing their now clean tunics of rough wool, Isabelle and Jehan left the sawmill module with Tina and headed towards the hut of Isabelle’s family, walking through a now deforested area. Before they could get to the hut, the group heard a man’s voice that was shouting loudly.

“ISABELLE! ISABELLE! WHERE ARE YOU HIDING, DAMMIT!”

The little girl paled on hearing the voice.

“Sweet Jesus! That’s my father’s voice. He will beat me for leaving our hut without his permission.”

“Not if I can help it.” Replied Tina, her face hardening. She hurried her pace, taking some advance on the two children, and soon met a bearded man wearing a dirty wool tunic and carrying a wooden stick. The man looked relieved on seeing Isabelle, but then eyed Tina with suspicion.

"Who are you, and what are you doing with my daughter?"

"Please calm down, mister." Said Tina in a firm but neutral voice, stopping ten paces from the man and keeping her right hand near the butt of her stun pistol, the retaining strap of its holster undone. "My name is Tina Deloran and I am the crew manager of the construction site where your daughter Isabelle and her friend Jehan came to pay us a visit. We then invited them for breakfast before escorting them back to their huts."

"You are on lands belonging to Count Raymond and you obviously are not from Toulouse. Who gave you the right to start a construction site on this island?"

"Count Raymond did! This island and the other islands adjacent to it now belong to my people, as a gift from Count Raymond for having killed the Vikings threatening Toulouse. Our machines and ships may appear to you like sorcery or magic, but we are not magicians nor sorcerers, just people with highly advanced science and knowledge. We intend to build a city on this island, while a market place will be built on the right shore, level with this island. By the way, you don't need that stick, mister: we mean no harm to the people of Toulouse, on the contrary."

Isabelle's father didn't seem to believe her at first, but a look above at the big cargo ship floating in the sky finally convinced him to throw away his stick. Isabelle then ran to him, with her father opening his arms to greet her.

"I am sorry, Father: I should have asked your permission before going into the forest to see what was happening there."

Her father gave her a severe look and shook his index in front of her face.

"It will be okay this time, Isabelle, but don't do it again, or you will taste my cane."

"Yes, Father." Replied Isabelle, looking repentant. Tina then spoke again.

"Mister, your daughter told us that you were slaves belonging to Count Raymond. Since these islands are now ours, with Count Raymond having given us full possession of them, you and your family are now free people. My society has banned slavery millenniums ago. Also, being residents of this island, you and your family, along with the few others living here, are now citizens of the Human Expansion, with all the social benefits that our citizens are entitled to."

The man, not believing his ears, put his daughter down on the ground before staring at Tina.

"We...we are free? And what are those social benefits that you just mentioned?"

"First, your children will be able to go to the same schools as our other children, for free. Second, you and your family will have access to full and free health and medical care. Third, like all our citizens, you will get for free enough food to stay healthy and will also have free lodging. All these things are considered basic rights for our citizens. In return, our society expects its citizens to do honest, reasonable work while you are physically and mentally apt to do so. You will also have to respect and follow our laws and customs and not use violence against others, including your wife and children, except in self defense or in defense of others."

"And the laws and customs of the Kingdom, they won't apply here anymore?"

"No! Count Raymond will continue to enforce his laws inside his county, but only the laws of the Human Expansion will apply on these islands. Even King Charles will not have authority here."

"But, your laws...I don't know them!"

"Our laws are actually quite simple, mister. Suffice to know that slavery and slave trading are for us capital crimes punishable by death. Corporal punishments and any other acts of cruelty are also considered serious crimes, while it is forbidden to discriminate against others on the basis of race, sex, social rank or spiritual beliefs. Violence against children, even coming from a parent, is also severely frowned upon in our society."

Isabelle's father took a while to digest all that. After looking down at his daughter, he faced Tina again.

"This is well and good, madam. What do you expect from me now?"

"As you may see further today, we have started some extensive work to prepare for the building of a city on this island. That work will include the building of anti-flood walls along the banks of these islands and I am afraid that your hut may probably have to be demolished in the process. However, we will provide you with temporary accommodations until our new buildings are completed. You will then be provided a permanent lodging unit. Your family will also be fed by us."

"But...I want to work! Could I work for your people?"

Tina smiled and nodded her head at those words.

"I like your attitude, mister. I understand that you are a fisherman, right?"

"Correct!"

"Then, you will be able to work on one of our fishing vessels, two of which are due to be assigned to Toulouse. They in fact should arrive here in the next few days."

“Uh, how big are these ships? I am accustomed to fish alone in my rowboat.”

“Quite big, since they are built for the high seas, but don’t worry: if you know how to gut and cut fish, you will have plenty of work aboard to do.”

“Then, I am ready to go fish with your people any time. By the way, my name is Grégoire.”

“I am pleased to hear that, Grégoire. Now, could you show me where your family house is?”

Grégoire didn’t correct her at the use of the word ‘house’ and simply nodded his head, turning around and starting to walk while holding Isabelle’s hand. Tina followed them, herself holding Jehan’s hand.

After less than four minutes of walking, the group arrived at a wood and straw hut built near the shore, with a small, primitive rowboat tied to a nearby tree. Grégoire didn’t miss the shocked look of Tina when she could detail the rickety hut, with the opened cracks between the roughly cut pieces of wood summarily filled with clay and mud. Tina was even more shocked when she could see the inside of the tiny hut and saw as well that it housed a family of seven. A fire pit made of rough stones was the only amenity of the hut, while piles of straw in the corners served as beds. Seeing the pained expression on Tina’s face then convinced Grégoire about the good intentions of the newcomers. His first gesture once inside the hut with Tina, Isabelle and Jehan was to present his family.

“Milady, let me present you my wife, Emma, my sons Armand, Pierre and Simon and my daughter Élyse.”

“Pleased to meet you all. I am Tina Deloran, and my people are now owners of these islands, after Count Raymond gave them to us as a reward for us killing the Vikings threatening Toulouse. By the way, as I already told Grégoire, you are now all free people and citizens of our society, which is named the Human Expansion.”

As Emma stared with deep shock at Tina, her husband hurried to repeat to her what Tina had told him. Isabelle, having a sudden idea, took her mother’s hand and nearly dragged her outside while verbally encouraging her siblings to come out of the hut and look up at the sky. The sight of the giant cargo ship still floating some 400 meters above the island made most of them kneel down from the surprise and disbelief. Pointing the cargo ship to them, Tina then spoke in a sober tone.

“This may look like magic to you, but know that we are simple human beings that came from both the stars and from over three millenniums in the future. You are now part of us and I promise you that you will now be able to live decently and comfortably as free people.”

16:28 (New Zealand Time)

Command conference room, H.S.S. MARCO POLO

Temporary landing site south-southwest of Auckland

New Zealand

“You wanted to see us, Madam Tsu?” Asked Ann Shelton on entering the large conference room with Vvyn Drelan at her side. Lynn Tsu, sitting at the conference table with Commodore Henry Ferguson, two uniformed fleet officers and three civilian advisors, nodded her head and pointed two unoccupied chairs facing her.

“Yes, I did, Doctor Shelton. Please, have a seat, along with Doctor Drelan.”

Tsu waited for the two historians to have sat down before speaking again.

“First, I want to congratulate both of you for a job very well done in Toulouse. Doctor Shelton, I must praise in particular the courage and diplomacy you showed during your initial meeting with Count Raymond: you took a big risk then, but it paid off handsomely. First, may I ask you about your personal assessment of the character of this Count Raymond?”

Ann acknowledged the compliment to her with a smile, then weighed carefully her answer before speaking.

“My personal impression of him is that of an intelligent, open-minded man who, while holding power of life and death over his citizens, actually cares for them, contrary to many other nobles and rulers in this century. He accepted our nature much faster than I hoped for and forcefully reined in his confessor, who was the Church’s representative attached to his court. He then proved to me that he was no stooge of the Christian Church, nor was he intimidated by it. His family is still mostly an unknown quantity to me, but I believe that it will abide by Count Raymond’s words and commands. However, the case of King Charles II of Western Francia could prove much more delicate and difficult, in view of what I know of him through history. We may have to lend our protection and support to Count Raymond in the very possible case that King Charles turns against him for having allied himself with us.”

“And he will get that protection and support from us, Doctor Shelton.” Replied without hesitation Lynn Tsu. “Know that our future outpost in Toulouse is now considered as one of our top priorities right now. Until we can set in place our agricultural facilities in New Zealand and until our first crops can grow to maturity, we will need to find foodstuff by the hundreds and thousands of tons every day, and this for the next few months at the least. Since we are not invaders or robbers, contrary to those Vikings we destroyed, we will have to either catch, pick, buy or exchange that foodstuff all around the World. Toulouse will be a crucial point for that procurement of foodstuff, both as a buying and exchange point and as an advance base for some of our fishing vessels. Two of those fishing vessels, the FV FLYING FISH and FV DOLPHIN, have been chosen as the first two vessels to be based in Toulouse and will start fishing in the North Atlantic and the Northern Pacific as soon as they are down in Toulouse. A modular fish processing plant, a meat processing plant and a food processing and packaging plant, along with a refrigerated warehouse module and a few other auxiliary service modules, will also be installed in Toulouse, on the grounds given to us by Count Raymond to establish a market. The building of that market, even though a simple affair for us, will also be a top priority for us, so that we could accommodate the merchants that will visit Toulouse in the near future. An hotel built as part of the Phase Two infrastructure program for the colonization of Mirphak III will be one of the first buildings to be set in place in Toulouse, near the future market place, and will serve as an initial accommodation and administrative center for you and the personnel assigned to building our outpost in Toulouse. Afterwards, it will be used to lodge visiting merchants, travelers and emissaries coming to Toulouse.”

Ann stiffened on hearing her last two sentences: Tsu obviously had big plans concerning her. What Tsu then said confirmed that to her.

“With the approval of Commodore Ferguson, I have decided to name you, Doctor Shelton, as our local administrator and plenipotentiary representative-at-large in Toulouse. You will be in charge of directing our food acquisition program and will be responsible for cultivating our relations with the various rulers in Europe and around the World. Doctor Drelan will be your assistant and will directly manage our food acquisition program around the World, with the help of a specialist qualified in food quality inspection and importation. A corvette and one of our two civilian cargo ships will be assigned to Doctor Drelan to facilitate her traveling and collect the foodstuff she will buy

or acquire, while a light shuttlecraft will be assigned to you for your personal use as of today.”

“Madam Tsu, I must thank you first for the confidence you are showing in me and my friend. May I ask what we will build on the islands on the Garonne that Count Raymond gave to us?”

“You certainly may, Doctor Shelton. Since you will be our visible representative in Europe, we must obviously present our most impressive side to any future visitor to Toulouse, may he or she be a simple merchant or a king, in order to convince them to collaborate and deal with us. Me and Commodore Ferguson have thus decided to use the Island of Le Grand Ramier as the future site for one of the key modular structures that had been planned and built for Mirphak III: the Skylon Tower.”

Punching a few commands in the computer terminal of her position, Lynn Tsu activated the holographic display unit embedded in the center of the conference table, making the color picture of a tall, graceful skyscraper with curved side support arches appear in 3D above the table. Ann held her breath when she realized how tall that building was, with Tsu describing it.

“The Skylon Tower, which will be renamed as the ‘Toulouse Tower’, was chosen as our key structure in our new enclave in Toulouse. It will have a total height of 1,780 meters at the top of its summit’s antenna, while its top landing pad will sit at a height of 1,590 meters. It has 216 apartment levels, each level being two storey-high, plus more levels at the base for shops, schools, sports facilities, offices and a medical center. The core center section of the tower houses hydroponic gardens on levels totaling 1,080 hectares of floor space supporting multi-stacked culture basins. It can accommodate a permanent population of 85,000 persons and the hotel at its top has 1,300 rooms of various sizes for visitors and transient occupants. Once completed in Toulouse, it will then become the headquarter for your administration, Doctor Shelton. Supplementing the hydroponic gardens and various farms inside the tower itself, another tower strictly dedicated to the hydroponic farming of low productivity or density items like wheat and coffee bushes, will be assembled on the adjacent island of Empalot, thus making the outpost nearly self-sufficient in food production, with some foodstuff items being produced in surplus quantities. That, along with the catches made by our two fishing vessels to be based in Toulouse, will make our outpost doubly important to us.”

“And the foodstuff that I will have to find and buy, with what will I pay for it, Madam Tsu?” Then asked Vvyn Drelan, who was quickly realizing how crucial her work

was going to be. Tsu then deferred to one of her civilian advisors, a man in his fifties who was a financial and commercial expert. That expert produced one of the silver coins produced in small quantities for the initial contact mission of Ann Shelton and her team in Toulouse.

"With both silver and gold, Doctor Drelan. The various countries of this time widely use coins made of either of those precious metals, thus we will produce in industrial quantities copies of this silver coin in a number of denominations, plus gold coins for large sums and copper coins for small sums. Our standard monetary unit will thus become the Silver Credit, equal in silver quantity and value to the Frankish Silver Denier. We will also use barter as a way to buy food, proposing various items that are either hard to get or expensive to make for the local inhabitants of Ninth Century Earth. Doctor Shelton, I suppose that you would have some ideas about which kind of items we can manufacture or obtain easily that would interest the people of this time in Europe."

"I effectively do, mister. The things that are typically either rare or expensive in Europe are objects made of metal or glass, things that local artisans can produce only in very small quantities while using manually intensive labor. Simple things like steel nails, hinges, mechanical locks, drinking glasses, mirrors and decorative glassware, if sold or bartered by us at prices well below the current average, should sell very well and also attract merchants to our market place. Rare spices that we could easily fly in from Asia or other distant regions would also find eager buyers in Toulouse. I could write down for you a list of such items, in order of desirability in the eyes of local Europeans, after this meeting."

"That would be much appreciated, Doctor Shelton. Your list will in fact help us select the citizens who will be sent to live and work in Toulouse. Your outpost may thus end up becoming one of the most important trading centers in Europe, and not only for foodstuff."

"I will do my best to make it a magnet for trade and diplomacy, mister. If I may, I would like to propose now that we do more than just open a market place to thank Count Raymond for his help and understanding towards us."

"What do you have in mind exactly, Doctor Shelton?" Asked Henry Ferguson, speaking up for the first time in the meeting.

"A few things that would actually use only a negligible part of our resources and workforce but that would improve immensely the daily lives of the people of Toulouse. Those things would also make the city of Toulouse a much nicer place to visit and

frequent for our citizens living on the islands of Le Ramier. I am talking about cleaning and paving the streets of Toulouse, installing a sewer system connected to a network of public toilets, putting in place a clean water distribution system and erecting street lights. Connecting both banks of the Garonne River with bridges and repaving and enlarging the old Roman roads connecting Toulouse to surrounding cities would also greatly encourage merchants to come to our new market.”

Ferguson, like Tsu, nodded his head at those words and looked at one of his staff officers, who commanded the construction engineers battalion of the 58th Assault Division.

“What do you think, Commander Merrick?”

“All those things could be done quite quickly indeed with the help of our teams of construction robots and with the industrial plants contained inside the MARCO POLO, Commodore. I would say that the effort for us would be minimal, while the potential returns could be significant in the medium to long term.”

“Then, I say ‘yes’ to all your propositions, Doctor Shelton. We will thus prepare an urbanization plan for Toulouse that you will then be able to present and propose to Count Raymond. Since he won’t have to pay a single credit for that work, I doubt very much that he will reject our offer. Please confer afterwards with Commander Merrick to help him plan the work to be done in and around Toulouse. In the meantime, I will have a suitably qualified candidate awakened, along with his or her family, so that this specialist could assist Doctor Drelan with her World quest for food. Madam Tsu, do you see other points to be covered right now?”

“No! I am satisfied that things are going the right way. We may thus adjourn this meeting, ladies and gentlemen.”

19:52 (New Zealand Time)

Awakening ward, cryogenic sleep section

Exploration cruiser H.S.S. MARCO POLO

Pham Tarang opened his eyes slowly, while his brain felt a heavy fatigue across his body as he was waking up. A soft, indirect light helped his eyes to regain gradually full vision. After a minute or so, Pham was able to see that he was lying naked in a hospital bed, his body partly covered by a thin bed sheet. Remembering that his family had been put to sleep on Alpha Centauri A-IV at the same time as him, he anxiously

turned his head to look left and right. He felt immense relief when he saw that his wife Dinh lay in the next bed to his left, while his two children, Vinka and Duon, lay in the next two beds to his right. Another forty or so more persons also occupied beds inside the large room he was in, while a dozen nurses and doctors circulated around the beds, checking on their awakening patients. A young Centaurian nurse quickly came to Pham's bedside and spoke to him in a soft tone while gently preventing him from sitting up in bed.

"Do not try yet to move or to speak, Mister Pham. You just got out of cryogenic sleep and you need to rest for another hour or two before you will be able to get out of bed."

"Where...where are we? Were the Morgs repulsed?"

His question brought instant sadness to the face of the young nurse.

"Unfortunately, no. You are now aboard the exploration cruiser MARCO POLO, which loaded aboard millions of our compatriots put in cryogenic sleep before fleeing Alpha Centauri and going to Earth. We lost Alpha Centauri and the Morgs then presumably destroyed the system, as our fleet was unable to stop them. Now, please refrain from speaking further and rest. An officer will brief you and your family on our present situation once you will be able to walk by yourself."

The nurse then left him to go check on another patient. Seeing that his wife and two children were still asleep, Pham used the next minutes to reflect with bitterness on his personal situation. At the age of 44, he had been on Alpha Centauri a prosperous food import and trading merchant with diplomas in agronomy, biology and food inspection. Now, he was a destitute refugee, with only the few clothes and personal items that he had been allowed to keep with him in a carrying bag when he was put to sleep in Kyoto Alpha. The realization that he would never again see his native planet and most of his friends brought tears to his eyes. His sadness turned to despair at the thought that the Earth could well suffer the same fate as Alpha Centauri and that he and his family would then perish with the remainder of Humanity. The injustice of such a fate then brought anger to the mature man. He always had been a pacifist and a quiet man but, if he was ever needed as a soldier or crewmember, he would be more than ready to fight and defend his family against those monstrous Morgs.

His wife, Dinh, woke up ten minutes later, closely followed by their eleven year-old son Duon and their fifteen year-old daughter Vinka. As with Pham, a nurse went to

see them when they awoke, to reassure them and tell them to lay still. Dinh started to cry on hearing the news of the loss of Alpha Centauri, prompting Pham in talking to her from his bed.

“Dinh, we are still together, alive: there is still hope.”

“You...you think so, Pham?”

“Yes! Please, Dinh, be strong, for our children.”

Dinh didn't answer that, instead gazing at the ceiling with still sleepy eyes. A nurse came half an hour later to examine Pham and make him exercise slowly his muscles for a minute before helping him to sit on the edge of his bed. The nurse then brought him a robe and paper slippers and helped him walk to his wife's bed, giving him as well a chair to sit on so that he could stay at her side. Another half hour later, Dinh and their two children were also able to get out of bed and were led with Pham to a small office where a graying officer of the Exploration Fleet made them sit in chairs set in front of his work desk after shaking their hands. The officer consulted quickly an electronic tablet held in his hands, then looked at Pham.

“Mister Pham Tarang? I am Commander Tcherkov, Senior Psychologist aboard the MARCO POLO. Do you feel ready to be briefed on the present situation?”

Pham looked at his wife and children, who nodded their heads, then back at Tcherkov.

“We are, Commander. Please go ahead.”

“Very well! Mister and Madam Tarang, you were already told that we lost the Alpha Centauri system to the Morgs and that you are now aboard the cruiser MARCO POLO, which is presently on the ground in New Zealand. I am however afraid that I have a few more bad news for you. Basically, the Morgs used some kind of new weapon on the MARCO POLO and its escort and support fleet as our ships were withdrawing towards the Solar System. While that weapon didn't destroy our fleet, it seems that it sent it back in time by over 3,000 years, an effect that was probably not expected by the Morgs. We are now in the 9th Century, in the year 861 C.E. to be more exact.”

The four Centaurians looked at each other with disbelief before Pham could speak.

“You...you are sure about that, Commander?”

“Very sure, Mister Tarang. A reconnaissance team was sent on the surface and established without a doubt that we are now in the early Middle Ages. Today is a Monday, September 26 of the year 861. As for returning to the future, our scientists all agree that we are incapable of doing so. We are thus stuck in this era. The good side of

this is that the Morg threat is now a full 3,000 years in the future. We are thus safe from any more attacks by them. This will in turn allow us to resettle on Earth the eighteen million refugees we brought with our fleet without having to worry about the Morgs.”

“But...what about the actual inhabitants of Earth? How are they reacting to us? Can they help us?” Asked Dinh. Tcherkov made a contrite smile at her questions.

“Let’s say that they are technically and socially very primitive compared to us, Madam Tarang. We have however already started to prepare and occupy the whole of New Zealand, which was still empty of any Humans when we arrived. We also initiated contact with one local group in Europe that is ready to help us, notably by providing land for the construction of a commercial outpost and of a residential complex. You, your children and your husband were awakened on a priority basis because your husband could play a critical role in the short and medium term for our outpost in Europe.”

“Me?” Said Pham, utterly surprised. “But...I am a simple food merchant, not an urbanism expert or engineer.”

“True, but that is precisely the kind of experience and expertise we need right now. Our most pressing problem right now is to find enough foodstuff to feed the nearly two million refugees that are now awake, and this until our first crops could grow. Your new job, if you accept it, will be to go around the World, examine and analyze the state of the local food supply chain and then select and buy foodstuff in large quantities. Your personal file mentions that you hold a permit as a qualified food quality inspector, along with diplomas in agronomy and biology. Is that correct?”

“Uh, yes! In fact, my inspector’s permit is still valid: I inspected myself the products I was importing from around the rest of the Human Expansion. I also traveled often around the planet and to Alpha Centauri B-III to find new food suppliers.”

“That’s perfect!” Exclaimed Tcherkov, visibly satisfied. “Would you thus accept to fill the position of head food inspector that is now open in Toulouse?”

“Uh, where is this Toulouse, Commander?”

“In the south of what will eventually become France, but which is presently called Western Francia. We have started to build an outpost just outside the city gates, to establish both a commercial exchange point and a residential complex. So, do you accept to fill that position in Toulouse, Mister Tarang?”

Pham exchanged quick glances with his wife and children before answering.

“If I can truly help my compatriots this way, then I accept, Commander. When will me and my family move to Toulouse?”

“In approximately two days. We still need to put in place at least one building that could temporarily house you and others until our main residential tower is completed. In the meantime, this will allow you to meet with our designated administrator in Toulouse, Doctor Ann Shelton, who will brief you more in depth on the present situation around Earth and who will discuss with you and her assistant, Doctor Vynn Drelan, how to proceed to find and gather all that foodstuff. If you don't have more questions at this time, I will get a crewmember to escort you and your family to our central mnemotronic laboratory, where you will be able to assimilate a number of ancient languages presently used around the Earth. You will then be given a meal and a cabin. Doctors Shelton and Drelan will meet with you tomorrow morning.”

Tcherkov then got up, imitated by Pham and his family, and shook their hands in turn.

“Thank you for accepting the position in Toulouse and good luck in your new lives.”

“Thank you, Commander.” Replied Pham before leaving the office with his family and returning to his bed, to retrieve the large plastic bag containing his original clothes from Kyoto Alpha and his carrying bag, which had been stored under it after being taken out from the cryogenic cell that he had occupied. The whole family then changed, using small cabins provided for that purpose. Once properly dressed and carrying with them all the possessions left to them in this world, the Tarangs shared emotional hugs as a young female crewmember was approaching them to guide them.

“With a bit of luck, we will be able to rebuild a decent life for ourselves.” Said Pham in a strangled voice.

“We are still together and alive, Pham: that is the most important thing right now.” Replied Dinh.

CHAPTER 13 – SHOCKWAVES

10:39 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, September 27, 861 C.E.

Island of Jeufosse, on the River Seine

55 kilometers northwest of Paris, Western Francia

“GET READY TO JUMP OUT THE MOMENT WE BEACH, MEN!”

The nine armed and armored Carolingian men-at-arms and knights occupying the rowboat with Robert Le Fort, Margrave⁷ of Neustria⁸, tightened their grips on their swords and battleaxes at the command of their leader. The bottom of their rowboat soon scrapped against the silt and sand of the island of Jeufosse, a small island in the middle of the Seine River that covered maybe sixty hectares of surface. Robert Le Fort, a still vigorous man and an intrepid warrior at the age of 46, jumped first on the sand of the shallow beach and ran towards the interior of the island, closely followed by the nine armored men of his rowboat. The six unarmored men that had been rowing the boat also jumped out, short swords, javelins or bows in hand, and pulled their boat on the beach, securing it to a dead tree before also running towards the interior. Another 400 Carolingian knights and men-at-arms, all loyal followers of Robert Le Fort, did the same, disembarking from a flotilla of rowboats. They all could see clearly now the wooden palisade of the large Viking fortified camp that was their objective this morning. However, large, incinerated holes were visible along the palisade, while a multitude of crows were either turning over the camp or were perched on top of the palisade.

The Carolingians soon understood why so many crows were flying over the camp, as they found thousands of bodies rotting under the Sun inside the camp. All the bodies were those of Vikings and most of them were half incinerated, with whole parts burned away or with gaping, melted holes in their chainmail or scale mail armor. Other Vikings had been literally hacked to pieces by what had to have been very sharp blades

⁷ Margrave : Old early Middle Ages title for a noble controlling a territory on the border of a kingdom. Corresponded to the title of ‘Marquess’.

⁸ Neustria : Old name for region of France situated between the Seine and the Loire.

swung by strong men. The first moment of exhilaration among the Carolingian warriors on seeing the bodies of the hated Vikings was soon replaced by utter stupor when they could find no bodies that could have been part of the attackers of this camp. This appeared to have been a straightforward massacre and not a real battle per say. The local peasants to whom Robert Le Fort had been able to speak with yesterday did talk of gigantic flying ships throwing lances of flames from the air, but Robert had mostly laughed off their stories then. Now, as he contemplated the field of burned down tents and rotting bodies, he didn't know anymore what to think.

"By the Virgin Mary, this was nothing short of a one-sided massacre! I can see thousands of dead Vikings, but nobody else. Either those who attacked those Vikings collected their dead afterwards, or they simply walked all over these Danes as if they were mere sheep for the slaughter."

One of his knights who had knelt beside the decapitated body of a big Viking showed him the leather belt purse that had been carried by the dead man, shaking it and producing a metallic noise.

"Those attackers also didn't seem to care about gold or silver, Your Excellency: they didn't grab the purses of those Vikings afterwards. Yet, if I can judge by this purse, the Vikings had plenty of silver and gold with them."

Robert stared with disbelief at the purse for a long moment, both confused and disbelieving. For men-at-arms to kill opponents in battle and then not loot the dead was simply unheard of, as looting was the main way, often the only one even, to pay oneself while fighting a war. Why let gold and silver lay around for some peasant or camp follower to then grab it later on? Looking at the dead Vikings close to him, Robert was shocked to see that all of them still had their purse at their belt.

"There must be hundreds of livres⁹ in silver and gold lying around this camp, asking to be taken, yet those who killed the Vikings seemed to have no interest for that fortune. Were those attackers this dumb, or were they already so rich that they didn't care?"

"Well, Your Excellency," replied the now smiling knight, "our men sure won't complain about that."

⁹ Livre : Common money denomination during the Middle Ages. One livre (or pound in England) was worth twenty sous (or shillings), with each sou itself worth twelve deniers (or pennies). Thus, one pound was worth 240 silver deniers.

That made the Margrave look sharply around him, seeing with some displeasure that his men were now busy looting the corpses instead of checking out the camp for any surviving Viking. The Carolingian noble then shouted out loud at his knights and men-at-arms.

“FORGET THE VIKINGS’ PURSES FOR THE TIME BEING, MEN! WE STILL HAVE TO CHECK OUT THE CAMP FOR SURVIVORS. ONCE THAT IS DONE, YOU WILL THEN BE FREE TO PICK UP THE VIKING SILVER AND GOLD TO YOUR CONTENT.”

‘That’s going to make one insanely rich bunch of men-at-arms!’ Thought Robert to himself while resuming his walk around the camp. Even discounting the gold, silver and jewels lying around, just the abandoned armor and weapons on this field was worth a fortune, as equipping oneself for war was an expensive proposition for most but affluent nobles. His eyes were soon attracted by a still standing group of three tents in the middle of the camp that seemed to have miraculously escaped the wrath of whoever had massacred the Vikings. Intrigued, Robert went to those tents, stepping around the dense carpet of rotting corpses. He eyed critically a particularly thick carpet of corpses forming a kind of barrier just short of the entrance to the largest tent, a big affair with decorative Viking wood carvings flanking the entrance.

‘The Vikings must have tried to make a last stand to protect that tent, for the good it did them.’

Wondering about what the Vikings had tried so desperately to defend, Robert parted the canvas curtains of the tent’s entrance with the blade of his long sword and cautiously walked inside the semi-obscure tent. What he found was what seemed to have been the tent of a chieftain, with distinctly more comfortable and luxurious accommodations compared to that of the common man-at-arms. There were also a dozen large wooden coffers and chests piled around the central pole of the tent, with the body of a Viking next to them. Blood rushed to Robert’s brain when he saw that many of those coffers bore the royal markings of King Charles II, his own sovereign! Understanding then came to him like a lightning bolt, bringing both satisfaction and bitterness to Robert. Going to one of the coffers bearing Carolingian royal markings, he opened it and contemplated in silence the fortune in gold and silver coins filling it, his stomach turning acid. This had to be part of the huge ransom of 5,000 silver livres King Charles had paid to the Viking chieftain Weland for him to stop his depredations around the Somme area and to go attack instead the Viking army camped near Paris. Raising those 5,000 livres had

meant imposing more extra taxes on the already struggling people of the kingdom, with the poorer ones paying the largest part of it. King Charles could have used that money to raise an army able to repulse that Viking force that had been burning and looting their way around Paris for years, but had instead sent most of his present army south in a foolish and pointless campaign supposedly meant to subdue his rebellious nephew, Charles de Provence. Robert had protested that questionable choice of priorities, in vain. Robert had then been sorely tempted to drop his support to that weak and versatile king, who had meekly paid ransom after ransom to the Vikings to keep them away from Western Francia, even though the Vikings kept breaking their word and returning to do more looting and killing. However, someone had to oppose somewhat those cursed Vikings. If not, there would soon be little left of the kingdom and its people but smoking ruins. Checking quickly the other coffers and chests, Robert found them also filled with silver and gold, plus some jewels, including gold chalices and crosses that had obviously been looted from some churches or monasteries by the Vikings. The total treasure he was looking at actually represented over double the ransom paid recently by King Charles: the rest must have constituted the loot amassed by the Viking army that had devastated the Seine region and Paris for years. For a moment, Robert was furiously tempted to simply grab that huge treasure and go his way with it. However, if he did that, who would be left to protect the kingdom from the Vikings? This army had not been the only one to roam around Europe, far from it. Maybe, if he could find who had massacred this Viking army, he could then ally himself with them and chase for good the Danes from the kingdom. In the meantime, as much as this riled him, his duty said that he would have to bring back that treasure to King Charles. Maybe then, with that gold and silver, he would be able to convince him to grow some backbone and to concentrate on the true problems of the kingdom, instead of fighting with his brothers for a vain imperial crown that was now next to meaningless.

His mind made, Robert knelt beside the dead Viking, whose gold rings and necklace suggested that he had been an important chieftain, and calmly looted the body, adding on his own belt the purse of the dead Dane and putting in it the rings and necklace. He then got out of the tent and shouted around at his men.

“YOU MAY NOW LOOT THE DEAD VIKINGS, MEN! CONCENTRATE ON THE GOLD AND SILVER AND FORGET THE ARMS AND ARMOR. HOWEVER, ANY

RELIGIOUS ITEMS WILL BE ASSEMBLED HERE, TO BE RETURNED LATER TO THE CHURCH. I WANT EVERYBODY BACK AROUND THIS TENT IN ONE HOUR.”

His happy men didn't waste time in obeying him, grabbing Viking purses left and right and quickly becoming richer than they ever could have imagined before. Despite his order about the arms and armor, many of his less well equipped men, who had been unable up to now to afford armor, took as well the time to scavenge for still intact chainmail or scale mail vests and to grab better weapons than what they had been to afford to this day. Robert himself got in the looting as well: after all, he deserved even more than his men to profit from that Viking defeat. Just the pile of dead Vikings in front of the chieftain's tent was enough to fill a leather bag with gold and silver. He smiled to himself on finding a really nice gold broche inlaid with large emeralds and rubies that had to be worth a good hundred livres by itself.

“Well, I think that Adelaide should like this as a little gift when I see her again.”

Slipping the broche inside his already bulging belt purse, he then called to him one of his leading knights. The man, smiling and carrying a heavy saddle bag, came to him at once and bowed his head in respect.

“What are your orders, Your Excellency?”

“Once our men are finished looting the dead Vikings, assemble them around this tent. Know that I found inside that tent the ransom paid recently by King Charles to the Vikings. We will bring back that treasure to the King, who should now be in Auxerre. Did you find anything that could tell us who massacred those Vikings?”

“Nothing, Your Excellency, except that I wouldn't want to oppose those who did this.”

“Too true! However, men who kill Vikings wholesale can't be really bad. Hopefully, we will be able to find them and then build a decent rapport with them.”

“What about all those dead Vikings, Your Excellency? Should we bury them?”

“Those pagans don't deserve a Christian burial: let them feed the crows!”

08:02 (Paris Time)

Thursday, September 29, 861 C.E.

Count Raymond's manor, Toulouse

Raymond was awakened a bit rudely by someone shaking him in a progressively vigorous manner. Opening his eyes, he saw that it was Chilberic, one of his oldest and most faithful servants.

“Stop shaking me like this, Chilberic! What is it?”

“The strangers from the stars: they built a huge building overnight just outside the city walls, milord!”

That got Raymond out of bed and to the nearest window of his bedroom in a hurry, soon followed by his wife Berteiz. Both were left speechless at the sight of a huge building that had to reach over a good hundred paces in height. That building, seemingly made of steel and glass, was topped by a large kind of cupola covered by a glass dome. Dozens of the steel machines Ann’s people had accustomed the people of Toulouse to see during the last three days were at work around and over the new building, apparently busy putting some finishing touches to it. Even after seeing with incredulity and amazement how fast those machines worked during the last days, Raymond was still dumbfounded by what felt to him like a touch of magic.

“But...how could such a huge building be built overnight like this? This thing must be close to forty storey in height!”

Berteiz suddenly pressed one hand over his right shoulder and spoke in a strangled voice.

“Raymond, look towards the island of Le Grand Ramier...above it.”

Raymond did so and instantly felt blood rush to his head. Flying down from the sky towards the huge hole dug by the people from the future in the island was what looked like a gigantic flying spider made of iron. Held under its belly by eight flexible legs was a giant square box, also apparently made of iron. The box itself was about half as long per side as the island was wide! It had to weigh thousands of tons, yet the flying spider maneuvered with ease while holding it, floating to a stop over the pit that covered one third of the largest island on the Garonne. It then carefully adjusted its position over the hole before slowly coming down with its load. When it flew up about one minute later, it left the giant iron box inside the pit, its top level with the edge of the pit. Looking alternatively at the box in the pit and at the new building now standing just outside the walls of Toulouse, Raymond then swallowed hard as he understood that the flying spider now rising up and away in the sky was easily big enough to drop in place the new building in one single move, as the box in the ground was much bigger than the new building. His legs suddenly weak at witnessing such a feat, Raymond went to a nearby

stool and sat on it, his eyes still staring at the building outside of the walls. With such prowess within their capabilities, no wonder that Ann Shelton's people had been able to massacre the Vikings so easily. He then regretted the fact that his younger son, Foulques, had not been able to see this, as he had left with two men-at-arms for Auxerre four days ago, to carry his father's letter to King Charles.

"By the Christ! The power of these people is simply incredible!"

"What...what do we do now?" Asked Berteiz while she watched a multitude of iron machine now active around and over the pit containing the giant box on the island of Le Grand Ramier.

"What do we do now? We go examine that new building from up close, of course! CHILBERIC, MY CLOTHES!"

"I'm coming too!" Replied Raymond's wife while walking to the wooden chest containing her dresses.

The whole extended family, including Raymond's daughters-in-law, ended up leaving the manor, riding on horses down the dung-covered streets of Toulouse to the nearby southern city gate. They found what had to be at least half of the population of Toulouse outside the gate, gawking from a respectable distance at the new building and at the working iron machines. Looking at their expression, Raymond saw mostly awed looks, but only a few truly fearful ones, except for some making the sign of the cross as a way to ward off magic and sorcery. On the whole, the few men and women from the future visible near the new building mostly ignored the crowd of onlookers staying a good fifty paces away, with only a handful of armed soldiers standing guard close to the building. Looking closely at the building from the top of his horse, stopped just ahead of the edge of the crowd of onlookers, Raymond saw that the foundations of the building, made of iron or steel, fitted quite snugly inside a pit that was now being filled up with a kind of white mud by the machines working around it. Detailing the building itself, which ground section had an oval shape and which sides were covered with mirror-like windows tainted a sky blue color, Raymond could only wonder at the cost of it all. Glass was horribly expensive in Toulouse and in the rest of Francia, with only affluent nobles able to afford cups made of glass, while there was more steel in this building than what had ever been produced in the whole of the kingdom in the past centuries. Raymond finally made a sign to his family to advance towards the building, urging his own horse to a trot and taking the lead. One of the soldiers on guard then started to move, walking

calmly towards the count while raising one arm in a friendly gesture. At no time did the soldier touch his disintegrator rifle, slung across his armored chest.

“Good morning, Count Raymond! What may we do for you today?”

“Would you know if Lady Ann Shelton would be around by chance, my good man?”

To Raymond’s surprise and shock, the soldier then opened the visor of his armored suit, revealing the face of a smiling young woman.

“She is due to arrive soon in Toulouse by air, Count Raymond. If you will give me a moment, I will confirm her time of arrival for you.”

“Please do, uh, Lady.”

“I am Private Diane Champagne, Count Raymond.” Replied the woman, amused, before speaking inside the helmet of her impressive armored suit. After a short moment, she looked back at Raymond, who was still on his horse.

“Doctor Shelton will be arriving in approximately three minutes and will land on the roof landing pad of the Novotel Inn. I will guide you and your family up to the landing pad.”

“The Novotel Inn? This is an inn?”

“It was designed and built for that purpose, Count Raymond. It will however be used as a temporary accommodation and headquarter for our work crews in Toulouse until our residential tower is up and ready for occupation on the island of Le Grand Ramier. Then, it will be used to lodge the visitors coming to our future market. If you will please follow me.”

As Raymond followed the female soldier towards one end of the new building, his son Eudes made his horse come to one side of Raymond’s horse, then spoke in a low voice while smiling.

“This soldier from the future is a lot prettier than our own men-at-arms, wouldn’t you say, Father?”

“She’s also a lot more polite than our guards, even if she doesn’t seem to be intimidated by titles of nobility.” Replied Raymond, also smiling. “Damn, I envy the way they can communicate instantly through great distances, however they do it. It would make it so much easier for me to run the county.”

Eudes bent sideways to get closer to Raymond’s ear and spoke in a near whisper.

“And you don’t think that they do it through magic or sorcery, Father?”

Raymond shook firmly his head, now looking dead serious.

"No! Everything they do implies knowledge of things vastly superior to our own knowledge. Have you seen any of them do up to now incantations or gestures connected to magic or sorcery, Son?"

"Uh, none, really."

"And what did you see up to now?"

"Er, lots of fantastic machines and some truly terrifying weapons."

"Exactly! Machines, weapons, all made of metal, lots of metal, but no magic potions, powders, insects or serpents, which are reputed to be used by witches and sorcerers. Also, could you say in good faith that you have seen up to now anything with these people that looks like signs or symbols of the Devil?"

"No, I haven't, Father." Answered Eudes, now sounding convinced. "Then, how do they do all that they do, particularly flying?"

"We may learn that with time, Son." Replied philosophically Raymond.

After trotting past most of the length of the huge building, the group arrived at one of the semi-circular extremities of the inn, which was a good fifty paces wide and had three widely spaced sets of short stairs and access ramps. Dismounting and leaving their horses in the care of one of his men-at-arms, Raymond and his family followed Private Champagne through a set of large, double doors made of some kind of glass, entering a large lobby with a graciously curved dome ceiling and a central fountain. The fountain was not working yet, but Raymond had to stop dead in his track as he stared around him. Everything in the lobby, including its architecture, spoke of unimaginable luxury and comfort, even for a high noble like him. The amount of glass, brass, polished metal and decorative artwork in this lobby alone made the royal palace in Aachen look like a pauper's hut. The place was also well illuminated, thanks to both the large glass window surfaces and to the artificial lights peculiar to the people from the future, while the inside air was surprisingly fresh for this season.

"My God! Was this inn built for your leaders or are all your inns this luxurious, Private Champagne?"

The young female soldier replied in a sober tone, understanding how this surrounding could be unsettling to the Carolingians.

"This is the normal standard for our inns and for our residential buildings as well, Count Raymond. All of our citizens are treated equally in terms of basic needs, be it food, lodging, education or health care. This way, please."

Raymond exchanged shocked glances with Berteiz and his sons before following Champagne to the nearest bank of elevators, at the back of the lobby. The female soldier gave them a few basic explanations after pushing a button beside a sliding steel door.

"We are now going to ride an elevator cabin up to the level of the roof landing pad, 28 storey above the lobby. Don't worry: it is completely safe and also much faster than climbing stairs."

"Climbing 28 floors worth of stairs? I would probably die of a heart attack." Quipped Raymond. The steel doors then slid open, showing the inside of a cabin made of glimmering steel, polished wood and decorative mirrors. Berteiz and her daughter Régilinde swooned at once as they looked at their reflections in the mirrors of the cabin.

"Look at those superb mirrors! They reflect images much better than the mirrors we have at the manor."

"That's because your mirrors are made of polished metal, rather than glass, Countess." Said Champagne as the doors of the cabin slid close. "I heard that a variety of mirrors made of glass will be part of the wares we will offer at our future market."

"Then, I must visit that market as soon as it opens." Promised out loud Berteiz, making Raymond wince.

"Ouch! Something tells me that my purse will take a big hit that day."

That made the whole group laugh briefly, with the Carolingians suddenly falling silent as the cabin started moving smoothly and silently, while they felt the sudden vertical acceleration. A few seconds later, the doors of the cabin slid open, showing the inside of some sort of waiting lounge furnished with very comfortable-looking padded sofas.

"We are already up at roof level?" Asked Raymond, incredulous.

"Yes, Count!" Replied Diane Champagne while leading the group out of the elevator cabin. "We will now go outside to wait for Doctor Shelton's shuttle."

Bernard, the oldest son of Raymond at the age of thirty, couldn't help sit down briefly in one of the padded, leather-covered sofas to try it. He couldn't help push a sigh of content as he sprawled himself on it.

"If only I could find furniture as comfortable as this for my room. I could just fall asleep in here right now."

"You better not, Son, or I will have to wake you up with a slap on the head." Replied his father, smiling. "Now, get up! We have some serious business to conduct soon."

Bernard regretfully got up from his sofa and followed the group outside on the wind-swept flat surface of the roof, with the huge covered cupola they had seen from the ground now hanging partly over their heads until they walked completely in the open. The panoramic view offered from a height of 130 meters made the Carolingians gawk around them in silence until Raymond spoke up.

“What a fantastic sight of Toulouse and its surroundings we have from here. Just for this view, visitors would flock to here from all around the kingdom.”

“Well, we certainly hope that visitors and merchants will come to our future market in droves, Count Raymond.” Replied Diane Champagne as she scanned the sky with her eyes. She soon pointed at a growing dot in the sky, coming from the Southwest.

“Here’s Doctor Shelton’s shuttle, Count Raymond. I will ask all of you not to approach our shuttle until it has completely stopped moving, so that we could avoid accidents.”

The shuttlecraft, measuring about eleven meters in length and four meters in width, soon landed silently on the roof landing pad of the Novotel Inn, watched by Raymond and his family. A few seconds more and the rear access ramp lowered open, with 23 persons soon coming out, all carrying or towing suitcases and bags. One of them was Ann Shelton, accompanied by Vvyn Drelan and the Tarang family. Ann beamed at the sight of Raymond and hurried to him, exchanging a friendly hug with the graying Carolingian noble.

“Count Raymond! I am really happy to see you here and now.”

“The pleasure is mutual, my friend. I had brought out my family to have a look at your new inn and your woman-at-arms was nice enough to guide us to the roof.”

Ann smiled and nodded then to Diane Champagne after stepping back from Raymond.

“Thank you for bringing Count Raymond here. You may return to your duties, Private Champagne.”

“Yes, Doctor!”

As the female commando walked away, Ann presented Vvyn to Raymond.

“Count, I would like to present you my friend and assistant, Doctor Vvyn Drelan. She is a historian and sociologist, like me, and will lead our food quest program.”

Raymond smiled to Vvyn, attracted by her exotic beauty and slanted eyes.

“Welcome to Toulouse, Doctor Drelan.”

Ann then pointed at the door of the arrival lounge, where a man in blue coveralls and hard hat was waiting.

"Let's move inside if you don't mind, Count: my group still has to go to its assigned rooms and make themselves at home, like myself."

"So, you will be staying in this inn from now on, my friend?"

"Yes, until our main residential tower on the island of Le Grand Ramier is completed in a few days and is ready for occupation. By the way, I see that you have your whole family here, except for your son Foulques. Is he sick?"

Raymond hesitated then, something that Ann noticed, but finally decided to be frank with her.

"Foulques actually left Toulouse four days ago with an escort of two sergeants-at-arms, on his way to Auxerre to bring a letter from me to King Charles. That letter is simply to announce the arrival of your people in Toulouse and the fact that you killed the Vikings near Agen."

Contrary to his fears, Ann took that information lightly, smiling and patting gently his shoulder.

"A most understandable and normal thing to do, Count Raymond. King Charles may be an incompetent weakling but he is still entitled to at least know what is happening inside his kingdom. You should have told me about your son traveling to Auxerre: I would have offered him the use of one of our flying craft. In fact, I still could offer him and his two men a ride by air for the rest of their trip. I suppose that they are riding horses? Where would they be by now, Count Raymond?"

Raymond hesitated only for a second before answering her.

"Yes, my son and his two men are riding on horses and they should by now be on the old Roman road between Narbonne and Nîmes. They are due to go up the Rhône all the way to Chalon, then to follow the road to Auxerre."

"Then, I will be happy to arrange a pickup for them to fly them to Auxerre."

Something that Raymond had said then struck her and she looked at him with some misgiving.

"Uh, isn't the Count of Narbonne a sworn enemy of yours, Count? Your son could have met trouble while passing through Narbonne."

"He would effectively have, but I told Foulques to skirt Narbonne from the North and cut through woods, then to rejoin the Roman road east of Narbonne. He should be safe enough, especially with his two men to escort him."

“Still, I will send a craft with a few of our commandos to make sure that he travels safely and quickly, that is if you don’t mind, Count.”

“Go right ahead, my friend.” Said Raymond, secretly relieved by Ann’s offer. In truth, Count Humfrid of Narbonne wanted nothing better than his death, so that he could put his grubby hands on the county of Toulouse. Raymond watched, fascinated, while Ann used a small bracelet she wore around her left wrist to talk to someone for a few seconds. She finally looked up and smiled at Raymond.

“Well, a craft will soon depart to go meet with your son and his men and offer them an aerial ride to Auxerre. Let’s go inside now: we have many things to discuss together.”

“That craft, will it be similar to the one you just arrived in? It looks too small to accommodate three horses.”

“Don’t worry about that, Count Raymond: Captain Nierman is going to send an assault barge to meet your son.”

“An...assault barge? Is it armed?”

“Definitely!” Replied Ann with a grin while leading Raymond and his family inside the arrival lounge.

09:15 (Paris Time)

Old Roman road between Narbonne and Nîmes

Mediterranean coastal area

Up to now, the trip had gone well, thought Foulques, a young, energetic 23 year-old man, as his horse and those of his two sergeants-at-arms trotted on the old stones of the ancient Roman road following roughly the contour of the coast, visible a few kilometers away. To his relief, they had not encountered any road toll station manned by soldiers of Count Humfrid of Narbonne, a man Foulques and his father truly loathed. If everything continued to go well, his group would be at the royal residence in Auxerre in about ten days. Then, he would be able to deliver his letter to the King and be free to return to Toulouse. That last thought about his home made him think about what kind of marriage his father would eventually arrange for him in the coming years. His two older brothers, Bernard and Eudes, were already married, Raymond having chosen suitably

wealthy noblewomen for them among the more powerful families in Aquitaine¹⁰. Maybe his father could even try to solidify his alliance with Lady Shelton's people by making him marry one of the women from the future? He was not sure however that this would work, since Lady Shelton herself had said that nobility and bloodline counted for nothing in her society.

Foulques' eyes were then attracted to a large group of riders that had just appeared from behind trees at a far bend of the road ahead of him. The group counted a good twenty riders formed in two parallel files, with one rider holding high a standard. This had to be a nobleman traveling with a strong escort. Foulques felt instant unease at that sight: noblemen who could afford such a large escort were far and few around here, one of them being Count Humfrid. Adélard, one of his two sergeant-at-arms, also saw the approaching group, which was going at a calm trot, and looked worriedly at Foulques.

"Should we try to avoid these men, Milord?"

"No, not yet! They still could be harmless for us. Beside, fleeing now would only attract undue attention on us. Let's continue riding calmly past them instead. With luck, everything will be fine. If not, then we will try to bluff our way through and then gallop away."

"Yes, Milord!" Replied the big Adélard, who then painted a quiet composure on his face as the group of riders got closer and closer. Foulques had to refrain himself from cursing when the standard was close enough to become clearly identifiable: it was that of Count Humfrid of Narbonne! Signaling his two sergeants-at-arms to get off the road and ride on the grass on the right side, apparently to leave the road to the incoming riders as a sign of deference, he kept his head low and hoped for the best. Count Humfrid, a stocky man with long beard and hair, gave Foulques' group a cursory glance at first as they were about to cross path. He however seemed to tense up just as Foulques was riding past him after saluting him with a nod of the head.

"Hey, young man! Don't I know you? What is your name?"

Foulques' response was to urge his horse to a gallop while shouting at his two men.

"RIDE!"

¹⁰ Aquitaine : Old name for the southern part of France.

Adélar and Marcellus didn't waste time in urging their horses as well, galloping past the surprised men of Humfrid's escort. It took the latter a few precious seconds to catch on to what was happening and to turn their horses around and engage in hot pursuit of Foulques and his small escort, urged on by a furious Humfrid. By then, the men from Toulouse had managed to create a good twenty meter gap, which only widened as Humfrid's men took time to accelerate their horses to full gallop. However, Foulques realized too well that he and his men were still not out of trouble. Thankfully, none of Humfrid's men apparently had bows and arrows, them being armed only with swords and lances. Glancing quickly to his back, he saw that twelve men were pursuing his group, while eight men had stayed around Count Humfrid to protect him. Foulques then looked worriedly at Marcellus and his horse. His mount was not the fastest around and was actually getting old: the poor beast was not going to be able to sustain such speeds for very long. The stocky sergeant-at-arms also seemed to realize that and shouted to be heard over the noise of the galloping.

"MY HORSE WON'T LAST VERY LONG, MILORD. LET ME TURN AROUND TO DELAY THOSE MEN, SO THAT YOU CAN ESCAPE."

"NO! WE WILL MAKE IT TOGETHER OR NOT AT ALL!"

"PLEASE, MILORD! YOU HAVE A LETTER FROM YOUR FATHER TO DELIVER TO THE KING. YOUR MISSION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ME."

Foulques felt his heart sink on hearing those words: the faithful Marcellus, who had been serving his father for over fifteen years, was unfortunately too right. His mission primed everything else. His cruel dilemma was fortunately cut short by a triumphant shout from Adélar, his other sergeant-at-arms.

"LOOK BEHIND US, MILORD, IN THE SKY!"

Foulques did so and grinned on seeing a kind of flying ship approaching quickly while losing altitude: Lady Shelton's people were coming to his rescue!

"KEEP RIDING STILL, MEN! DON'T LET HUMFRID'S MEN GET CLOSE BEFORE LADY SHELTON'S MEN COULD ARRIVE."

Continuing to push their horses to the maximum, Foulques and his two men kept glancing backward, watching the approach of the flying ship as well as the riders pursuing them. The latter finally saw as well the flying ship and promptly slowed down and stopped, paralyzed by that fantastic apparition. That in turn decided Foulques in shouting an order to his two men.

"ALRIGHT, MEN: YOU CAN SLOW DOWN TO A TROT, NOW."

He and his men soon saw something that made Humfrid's men flee in panic: ten men in armor jumped out from the back of the flying ship and, instead of falling like rocks, started floating down in controlled flight paths. The ten flying warriors landed smoothly between Foulques' group and its pursuers, forming a line blocking the old Roman road and passing a clear message to Humfrid's men to go no further. In the meantime, the flying ship, a massive, squat thing Foulques judged to be a good thirty paces long and twelve paces wide and thick, overflew him slowly before landing on the road ahead of him. A large ramp then lowered at its back, with a man in armor soon coming out and signaling Foulques to come to him while shouting in Occitan.

"GET IN, SIRE FOULQUES! WE WILL FLY YOU TO AUXERRE, YOU AND YOUR MEN."

Foulques was only too happy to comply and trotted with his men to the ship, then made his mount climb the ramp, entering a barn-sized compartment illuminated by the cold torches he had seen before in the craft he had flown in five days ago. His two men followed a bit hesitantly and dismounted once inside, like Foulques. The man in armor approached Foulques and saluted him with one arm in a fashion unfamiliar to the young noble.

"Sire Foulques, I presume?"

"Correct, sire. You and your men arrived just in time. The men of Count Humfrid of Narbonne would probably have caught at least one of us in the long run. Thank you for your intervention. I suppose that Lady Shelton sent you?"

"She did, Sire Foulques. My assault barge is going to fly you to Auxerre, to allow you to deliver your letter to the King. Once you are done in Auxerre, we will then fly you back to Toulouse."

"That will be most welcome, sire. I will have to thank Lady Shelton on my return to Toulouse."

"She is now residing in Toulouse, so you will certainly be able to thank her in person, Sire Foulques. You said that these men pursuing you belong to Count Humfrid of Narbonne?"

"Correct! In fact, Count Humfrid himself is here, about half a mile down the road, along with more of his men."

"Please give me a moment, sire: I'm going to pass a quick message to Toulouse."

The armored man, whose face was hidden by the reflexive visor of his massive and most impressive armor, then apparently fell silent while standing still. A minute or so passed before he spoke again to Foulques.

"Lady Shelton has asked me to go deliver a short and concise message to Count Humfrid. Once that is done, we will fly out to Auxerre."

"And may I ask what that message will be?"

"Certainly, Sire Foulques: basically, I will tell Count Humfrid to mind his business and to not interfere in the affairs of the county of Toulouse, or with the travelers and merchants that will be coming and going to Toulouse. It won't take long."

The warrior then walked out of the craft and took off silently, accelerating and flying down the road, followed by the eyes of Foulques and of his two men.

It took Sergeant Mark Dempster only a few seconds to get to Count Humfrid and his escort, overflying them before landing in the middle of the road behind him, cutting off the way to Narbonne. He then activated his external loud speaker and addressed the spooked out Carolingian noble in Occitan.

"COUNT HUMFRID OF NARBONNE, I REPRESENT THE FORCES OF THE HUMAN EXPANSION, WHICH HAVE SWORN TO PROTECT THE COUNTY OF TOULOUSE FROM EXTERNAL AGGRESSION. WE HAVE EXTERMINATED THE VIKINGS THREATENING TOULOUSE AND OTHER PARTS OF WESTERN FRANCIA AND WILL DO THE SAME TO ANY OTHER INVADER, GROUP OR PERSON THAT WILL INTERFERE IN ITS AFFAIRS AND WITH THE TRAVELERS AND MERCHANTS EITHER GOING TO OR COMING FROM TOULOUSE. THIS WILL BE YOUR ONLY WARNING."

Either because the emotion had affected his reasoning process or because he was simply dumb, Count Humfrid shouted back angrily at Dempster.

"SO, COUNT RAYMOND MADE A DEAL WITH SOME DEMONS AND I SHOULD LET IT BE? I SWEAR BY THE LORD JESUS CHRIST THAT I WILL HAVE HIS HEAD FOR THAT AND THAT I WILL RID TOULOUSE OF YOUR KIND."

Dempster knew instantly that the man was only grandstanding, probably in order to impress his men and look tough. However, the directives he had received only moments ago had been very clear: Count Humfrid was to be eliminated without hesitation if he proved to be a potential threat to Toulouse. For Dempster, the bombastic reply from the Carolingian noble was more than enough. Besides, Humfrid had a historical reputation

of being what many would call a 'robber baron', a local lord who abused his powers and privileges and plundered the others around him by extracting undue taxes and tolls. He would not be missed by many. Raising and pointing quickly his disintegrator rifle, Dempster fired once, vaporizing the head and upper torso of Humfrid. As the smoking remains of Unifred's body fell from his horse, the commando shouted out at the terrorized Carolingian cavalymen.

"I HAD SAID ONLY ONE WARNING! PASS THE WORD TO WHOEVER WILL TAKE HIS PLACE IN NARBONNE. NOW, GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!"

The cavalymen didn't have to be told twice, urging their horses to a gallop and passing on both sides of Dempster while keeping a respectful distance from him. Two of the count's men however took the time to dismount and to put back Humfrid's remains on top of his horse before trotting away while leading the count's mount by its bridle, watched by Dempster.

"One less leech to worry about." Spat out the commando before taking off again, flying back to his assault barge. Young Foulques went to him as soon as he entered the cargo compartment of the barge.

"I heard a lightning bolt from your weapon. What happened?"

"Count Humfrid said something stupid and paid for it, Sire Foulques. He will now be able to think about the wisdom of watching his words while roasting in Hell, or so you would say."

Foulques grinned widely at that news and gave a strong pat on Dempster's left shoulder.

"Decidedly, my father was right to ally himself to your people. This part of the kingdom will be definitely better off without that greedy thief. What now?"

"Now, we fly to Auxerre. We will land a bit short of it and will let you out then, in order to avoid a mass panic at the royal court if we simply land in the King's courtyard. We will then wait for your return to this barge before flying back to Toulouse."

"Uh, while delivering my letter won't take long, the King may ask me to stay for at least a few hours, maybe longer, in order to ask me questions about what happened to the Vikings and about your people."

"Fair enough! Feel free to tell things to King Charles as you saw them, Sire Foulques. We will be waiting for you."

"And how will you know how long I will be in Auxerre?"

Dempster, who had opened the visor of his powered armor, smiled to the young noble.

"We have ways, Sire Foulques."

11:46 (Paris Time)**Abbey of Saint-Germain, Auxerre**

Foulques, riding just ahead of his two sergeants-at-arms, had to say that Auxerre seemed to be quite a nice-looking city, with the Yonne River running along its eastern walls and with the Saint-Germain abbey dominating the northeast corner of the city with its bell tower. A guard at the southern gate had told him after being asked that the King was staying at the abbey with his retinue and had given him directions to the abbey. So Foulques had ridden through the town and to the abbey, which he was now approaching. Already, the King's presence there was betrayed by the large number of armored guards posted all around the abbey and inside its courtyard. Two of the guards at the main entrance to the courtyard of the abbey crossed their lances to block Foulques' passage, while a third one shouted at him.

"WHO GOES THERE?"

Foulques stopped temporarily his horse and looked down at the senior guard.

"I AM FOULQUES OF TOULOUSE, SON OF THE COUNT OF TOULOUSE. I HAVE A LETTER FROM MY FATHER, ADDRESSED TO THE KING."

"THE KING IS INSIDE THE ABBEY. YOU MAY PASS."

"THANK YOU, MY GOOD MAN!" Replied Foulques as he made his horse resume its trot and go through the opened gate, followed by his two men. Another pair of guards challenged him again as he was going to climb the short flight of stairs leading to the main entrance of the abbey. He again presented himself and stated his need to deliver a letter to the King, making one of the guards nod his head once.

"Please wait here, sire. I will go inform the King's chancellor of your arrival."

Foulques and his men had to wait a good six minutes before the guard came back, accompanied by a big, richly dressed nobleman who stopped in front of Foulques and looked down at him with studied indifference.

"I am Louis le Rorgonide, Chancellor of the King. You have a letter for the King from Count Raymond of Toulouse?"

"Yes, Milord!"

"Then, I will take it and bring it to the King, boy."

Hiding his displeasure at being called 'boy', Foulques answered the man in a polite but firm tone.

"No, Milord! My father instructed me to give his letter in person to the King."

The Chancellor gave him a dark look on hearing that and visibly tensed up.

"And what is in that letter that would be so important for the King to see?"

"News that the Viking army that had been going up the Garonne has been destroyed, Milord."

Both the Chancellor and the two nearby guards opened wide their eyes on hearing that. Louis le Rorgonide then nodded once and relented.

"Very well, boy. Follow me, but alone! Your two men will have to stay outside."

Foulques wasn't pleased to have to leave Adélar and Marcellus behind like this, but had half expected that, thus gave some quick instructions to Adélar.

"Bring our horses to the stables of the abbey and give them water and feed, then go eat yourselves."

"Yes, Milord!"

Foulques then followed Louis, entering the abbey's lobby and following a wide hallway illuminated by windows opening on a central courtyard and garden. Louis spoke up as they were walking, but without looking at him.

"The King has just started having lunch with his court in the abbey's refectory. You will be able to give him your letter there, boy."

Foulques didn't reply to that, hiding his growing irritation towards that arrogant chancellor. Just as they were about to enter a large, high ceiling hall through a guarded door, Louis stopped for a moment and glanced at him.

"Remind me of your name again, boy."

"Foulques of Toulouse, son of Count Raymond of Toulouse."

Only then did Louis lead him inside the hall, which was full of monks and nobles sitting down at wooden tables and eating. Foulques noticed at once that the monks ate at the back of the hall, with the forward half occupied by nobles and with a clear empty space between the two groups, space that was guarded by eight soldiers. He then saw King Charles, sitting at the head table and surrounded by the members of his council and by two richly dressed women, one of which had to be the Queen. A high-level churchman, probably the Abbot, also sat at the high table, accompanied by three monks. Normally, Foulques would have felt very humble in such high presence, but after having met the people from the future, he now had a much more critical view of things. He thus kept his

head high and walked with an assured pace towards the high table as Louis le Rorgonide announced him out loud.

“SIRE FOULQUES OF TOULOUSE, HERE TO BRING A LETTER TO THE KING!”

All heads, both nobles and monks, turned to look at Foulques as he walked to the high table, finally stopping five paces short of the King’s seat and then putting one knee down while bending down his head.

“Your Majesty, I bring you good news from Toulouse: the Viking army that had been going up the Garonne has been destroyed near Agen. Here is a letter from my father, Count Raymond of Toulouse, giving the details on that event.”

Consternation, then happy exclamations and whispers, went around the hall at those words. The King, visibly happy, and for good reasons, then signaled to one of the monks eating beside the Abbot.

“Liuthard, please bring me that letter.”

“Right away, Your Majesty.” Replied the King’s scribe, getting up quickly from his wooden bench and going around the high table to go take the sealed parchment held up by Foulques. King Charles waited for Liuthard to hand him the parchment before speaking to Foulques.

“Please, get up, young man. Have you eaten yet?”

“Not yet, Your Majesty!” Answered Foulques while getting back on his feet.

“Then, come and sit at my table, so that you can tell me who got rid of those Vikings for me. Count Vivien, have an extra service added at the left end of the table.”

The King’s chamberlain quickly gave some orders, with a royal servant hurrying to place a cup of wine, a large wooden bowl and a spoon and knife at one end of the table. Foulques then found himself sitting beside a beautiful teenage noble girl who was wearing a fine silk dress and many expensive jewels. Her beauty was however somewhat spoiled by her rather haughty attitude towards Foulques as he sat down at the table at the same time that the King broke the parchment’s seal and started reading the letter from Raymond de Toulouse. The nobles around him clearly saw Charles’ face gradually reflect incredulity first, then utter consternation as he read the letter. The King finally looked up at Foulques with a haggard expression.

“People from the stars...and from the future? This must be a joke, a bad joke!”

“It is the truth, Your Majesty.” Replied Foulques as waves of exclamations went around the hall, forcing the King to raise a hand to call for silence. “I myself flew in one

of the flying machines of the people from the future, along with my father and the rest of my family, to go see the remains of the destroyed Viking camp near Agen. Before you ask, Your Majesty, I believe, like my father, that those people use very advanced knowledge that has nothing to do with magic or sorcery. They in effect are three millenniums ahead of us in all domains. Their representative, Lady Ann Shelton, also told us then that the Viking armies on the Seine, the Loire and the Somme were also destroyed swiftly by the flying ships of her people's fleet."

"All the Viking armies in Western Francia, destroyed?" Nearly stuttered Charles, unable to believe his ears.

"Correct, Your Majesty. As a reward for such a feat and for saving Toulouse from the Vikings, my father then gave to the people of Lady Shelton, who call themselves the 'Human Expansion', the full possession of a string of small islands in the Garonne, just upstream from Toulouse, along with a square mile of land on the left bank of the Garonne, on which the people from the future intend to build a commercial exchange outpost."

Thankfully, King Charles didn't object then at the giving away of land by Raymond, something that definitely was good in terms of legal precedence. He however had more questions, a lot more in fact, for Foulques, who noticed that one of the monks sitting at the high table, an older man in his early fifties, now showed extreme interest in what he had to say.

"What are the goals of these people, Sire Foulques? Tell me more about them."

"Well, there is so much to say about them, Your Majesty. First and foremost, while extremely powerful and having huge flying ships, those people from the future are in reality refugees from a war, a war they lost against a non-human race. Their fleet was accidentally projected in the past and they are now in the impossibility of returning to their original time, thus have no choice but to stay in this century. Lady Shelton told my father that her people had been able to evacuate eighteen million people before fleeing their home world. Feeding those eighteen million people is now their top priority and they hope that opening that commercial exchange point in Toulouse will help them buy food for those multitudes."

"Eighteen million? But that's more than the whole population of my kingdom! Where do they expect to put all these people?"

"There is supposedly a large, fertile land that is unknown to us, far away to the confines of the Earth, that was free of any human occupation until now, Your Majesty.

Lady Shelton told my father that her people has already started to occupy that land, but that they have no intentions of grabbing lands from anyone. By the way, while I call her 'Lady Shelton', her proper title is 'Doctor Shelton', as she is a historian by trade. She speaks and write Latin and Greek, on top of Occitan and of her own language, which she calls 'English'. She is also no noble. In fact, her people, if I can believe her, did away with the notion of aristocracy and nobility two millenniums ago. Their leaders are selected through a vote by their whole adult population and are promoted on the basis of merit alone, and not through bloodline. They call that 'democracy'."

"The old Greek system used in Athens during the Antiquity?" Suddenly cut in the older monk sitting near the Abbot, who quickly gave an apologizing look at Charles. "Please excuse my interruption, Your Majesty, but this is all most fascinating. May I ask a few questions of my own to the young Sire Foulques?"

Charles, a highly educated man for his time, hesitated a bit, then nodded his head.

"You may ask your questions, my good Erigène."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The monk then stared at Foulques with introspecting eyes.

"Let me present myself to you, Sire Foulques: Jean Scot Erigène, official philosopher of the King. You said that those people came from the stars, on top of coming from the future. From what star exactly do they say that they come from?"

"From Alpha Centauri. You will excuse me if I don't know anything about astronomy and couldn't tell you more than that."

Erigène gave him an understanding smile before continuing.

"And their ships, how do they make them fly?"

"I frankly have no idea at all, Brother Erigène. The one ship I flew in, a small one by their standards if I can believe Lady Shelton, flew silently, as if floating in the sky, but was also very speedy: it covered the distance between Toulouse and Agen in mere minutes. I visited Agen before in the past and I was able to recognize it from above just before we landed in the middle of the devastated Viking camp, which was strewn with the rotting bodies of hundreds of Vikings. That small ship was actually very luxurious and comfortable, on top of being fast and agile. It was controlled by two men sitting in front of very complicated-looking pulpits covered with small colored protuberances and tiny windows showing them groups of numbers and images. I can tell you that those men didn't say or do anything that would appear like witchcraft or sorcery. By the way, all of the people from the future seem to be literate and well educated."

"Really? All of them?"

"Yes, Brother Erigène. Lady Shelton also professed that they considered everyone equal, irrespective of race, social rank, sex or religion."

"Then, they must be good Christians indeed."

"Not at all, Brother! Lady Shelton at the least is an atheist. Actually, she preferred to call herself a humanist."

"Hum, most interesting. And that woman was the ruler of those people from the future?"

"No! Only their envoy in Toulouse. She however said that a woman ruled over all those millions of refugees, while a man commanded their fleet of flying ships." Foulques, who had been served some meat and vegetables and had started eating, noticed how the teenage noble girl sitting next to him at the table seemed to be highly interested by his last sentence. She however did not comment then and kept eating in silence. The King, however, had one question burning his tongue.

"And those people from the future, did they say why they attacked the Vikings? Were they attacked themselves by the Vikings previously?"

"No, Your Majesty! Lady Shelton said that they were doing it simply to help the little people of Francia and to stop the Vikings from doing more burning, killing and looting."

That answer seemed to displease to a marked degree King Charles, on top of surprising him, something that Foulques had expected. After all, the swift, selfless and decisive actions of the people of Lady Shelton could only put in a most unflattering light the own inaction and sheepish response of his monarch when faced with the Vikings. As King Charles retreated in a moody silence, thinking about all that Foulques had said, Jean Scot Erigène made an impassionate plea to him.

"Your Majesty, I believe that it would be in the highest interest of the kingdom to try to cultivate the friendship of those people from the future, or at the least to get to know more about them. If you would let me accompany back young Sire Foulques to Toulouse, I would be most happy to report to you afterwards on those people from the future."

"Hmm. I will have to think on that for a while, Brother Erigène. Sire Foulques, is there anything else that you could tell me about these people?"

Foulques wiggled a bit on his bench then before responding to Charles.

“Uh, one last thing, Your Majesty. While I was traveling to here, me and my men were attacked on the road between Nîmes and Narbonne by men of Count Humfrid. Thankfully, one flying ship of the people of the Human Expansion passed by at that time and, seeing me being pursued, intervened to safeguard me and my group. However, in the encounter that ensued, Count Humfrid of Narbonne was killed.”

“COUNT HUMFRID, KILLED?” Nearly shouted Charles, suddenly agitated, straightening up in his chair.

“Yes, Your Majesty! He made the mistake of threatening verbally the people from the future and got killed on the spot by them in return.”

Foulques had very deliberately chosen those exact words to pass an indirect message to that weak, self-centered king: do not screw around with the people from the future! King Charles seemed to get that message and tightened his lips for a second before speaking.

“Very well! Right now, I am busy campaigning against the traitor, Pepin of Aquitaine, and his partisans in Aquitaine, thus will have to deal with that situation later. In the meantime, I think that the proposal of Brother Erigène is a good one. He is however very precious to me and to my court. Your father, Count Raymond, will answer for his safety while he is in Toulouse.”

Foulques smiled and bowed to Charles on hearing that.

“Brother Erigène will be safe with my family, Your Majesty. When could I return to Toulouse with the good brother, Your Majesty?”

“Once I have had time to write a letter to respond to your father’s letter, plus another letter to be given to this Lady Shelton. Could you describe her to me, Sire Foulques?”

“Certainly, Your Majesty. She is in her late twenties or early thirties I believe, is tall and beautiful, with long black hair and green eyes, and is a very intelligent and strong-willed woman. As I said before, she speaks and writes Occitan, Latin and Greek, plus her own native language, of course.”

As Charles was pondering that information, the teenage girl sitting beside Foulques suddenly spoke up, addressing the King with surprising assurance.

“Your Majesty, without wanting to offend Count Raymond or his son here, shouldn’t Brother Erigène be escorted by a strong, valorous knight from this court during his trip to Toulouse? A knight mandated by you and acting on your authority should be able to order sense into any follower of the late Count Humfrid who could want to take

revenge on young Sire Foulques. You would also have that way a second person you could rely onto in reporting on those people from the future. If this idea is agreeable to you, I believe that my brother Boson would be the perfect man for that task.”

“Hum, your idea has merit, my dear Richilde.” Replied Charles nearly at once, while Foulques concealed his frustration at that unexpected twist. “SIRE BOSON!”

“HERE, YOUR MAJESTY!” Replied a young noble while getting up from his bench at a side table.

“Sire Boson, once we will have finished with lunch, you will prepare for an extended trip to Toulouse with Brother Erigène and Sire Foulques. Apart from escorting Brother Erigène during that trip, you will also personally carry the two letters I will write respectively to Count Raymond and to that Lady Shelton.”

“You can count on me, Your Majesty.” Said the strong young man, bowing to Charles before sitting back down.

From that point on, the lunch went on without much of substance being either said or done in the opinion of Foulques. The latter however couldn't help wonder about how the teenage girl next to him had managed to convince so easily the King to agree to her idea of an extra escort. He thus attempted a conversation with her as they ate mostly in silence. Foulques had to say that the girl was very beautiful and appetizing but he still went carefully in his approach.

“So, Lady Richilde, what is your position here at the royal court?”

“Me?” Said the girl, a malicious smile appearing on her pretty young face. “Officially, I am the daughter of Bivin de Gorze, Count of the Ardennes, who is a loyal supporter of the King. Less officially, I am the concubine of the King, thus have his ear.” That declaration somewhat unsettled Foulques: the King, who was reputed to be a devout man, was not yet forty and this Richilde could not be more than half the age of Charles, at the most. Also, that arrangement couldn't possibly be one to particularly please Queen Ermentrude.

“And you, Sire Foulques? Do you have a function in your father's court? Are you married?”

“My two elder brothers are married, but not me, not yet. My father promised me to make me Viscount of Limoges in a few years, once I will have gained more experience. For the moment, I am content to serve him and to lend my sword to him.”

Richilde nodded her head at those words: Foulques' situation was a common one for many cadet sons of the nobility, who had to play second fiddle to their elder brothers.

"That Lady Shelton, you described her physically to the King, but I would like to know how she is as a woman."

"Well, you must understand that I hardly know her, Lady Richilde. She was with us for only a few hours before she flew away in her small ship, having promised to come back soon. Those few hours were however enough to truly impress me. Apart from being very tall and beautiful, she is also highly intelligent and is strong of character. She is also a very brave woman."

"How could you say that she is brave? Did she fight a man in Toulouse, or faced the Vikings?"

"More than that, actually." Replied Foulques, who then told her how Ann Shelton had gambled her life and had trusted Count Raymond with her disintegrator pistol. That story did impress the teenager, who nodded slowly her head in appreciation.

"That was a truly risky gamble to take, I must say."

"It also showed me that she was a good judge of men, Lady Richilde."

"You kept saying previously that she is tall. How tall exactly?"

"Taller than your brother and taller than you by more than a head. She also looked quite fit and strong for a woman."

Richilde was then silent while digesting that information. She still suspected that magic, or even sorcery and witchcraft, was involved in the case of those newcomers, even though their flying ships were hard to explain. However, Brother Jean Scot Erigène was reputed to be a master theologian and Richilde knew that he had a very keen mind. If there was sorcery or witchcraft involved with the newcomers, he would find out. On the other hand, she should probably caution Boson before he left for Toulouse: her brother tended to be somewhat impulsive and was definitely independent of spirit. If he made the mistake of losing his calm with Lady Shelton's people, he could very well end like the late Count Humfrid, something she certainly didn't wish to happen.

Lunch concluded fifteen minutes later, when King Charles rose from his chair to leave the hall, prompting all the other persons present to get up as well in a sign of respect. As the crowd of dinners dispersed, Foulques went to see Brother Erigène, who was talking with the Abbot of Saint-Germain. He waited for the duo to finish their

conversation, which concerned the brother's travel arrangements, before approaching the monk, who greeted him with a benign smile and a bow of the head.

"Aah, young Sire Foulques! The good Abbot just promised to lend me a horse and some provisions for my trip to Toulouse. Is the old Roman coastal road in fair condition still?"

"In truth, it definitely could use some serious repair work, Brother. It is however still better than nothing."

"Indeed! I have to say that I am anxious to leave, so that I could meet those mysterious people from the future. From what century did they say they came from?"

"The 41st Century, more precisely from the year 4021."

"Such a far time from now." Said dreamily the monk. "Everything about life then must have been vastly different in all aspects, compared to what we know."

"From the little I saw of them, I would agree with you, Brother. However, they gave me the distinct feeling that they are on the whole good people. For one, they seemed genuinely concerned about the plight of the common people of Toulouse."

"That is certainly a point in their favor in my mind, Sire Foulques. They may not be Christians, but they are acting like Christians up to now."

"I agree with you, Brother. By the way, Lady Shelton told my mother that her people forbids slavery and that slave trading is considered by them as a capital crime."

"Another point in their favor: to enslave the image of God is a cruel abomination that should have been banned a long time ago. Well, I will go to my cell to pack for my trip. Where should I join you, Sire Foulques?"

"At the stables, where my two sergeants-at-arms are taking care of our horses."

"Then, I should join you there shortly."

As he had promised, Erigène joined up with Foulques and his two men at the stables less than half a hour later. There, the monk in charge of the stables prepared a horse for him. The small group then waited for Boson to show up with his royal letters. That wait however turned out to be much longer. Even Jean Scot Erigène was starting to lose patience by the time the said Boson showed up at the stables, a bedroll and a pair of saddlebags over his shoulders.

"Please excuse the delay, Brother Erigène: the King took some time to write the two letters I am to carry to Toulouse. Let's go, now!"

Foulques bit his lips in order not to blow his temper at the way Boson had just ignored him, acting as if he was in charge of the group. He however spoke up in a firm tone, looking the pretentious court noble in the eyes.

"Let's make something clear before we leave, Sire Boson: we are going to Toulouse, where my father will be your host, and I am in charge of this group. Understood?"

The two young nobles stared hard at each other and would possibly have come to blows if not for the intervention of Erigène, who interposed himself.

"Please, young men! We are on a mission of diplomacy, for the greater good of the kingdom. Do not let discord and ego sabotage that mission from the start. Sire Foulques is in his right to claim leadership of our group, as he came all the way from Toulouse to here to inform the King about those people from the future. Now, please make peace between yourselves, in the name of God."

After a short hesitation, Foulques extended his right hand, with Boson reluctantly shaking it the customary way of the time, with the two men mutually grabbing each other's forearm for a second. There was however no brotherly love in their looks. Resigning himself to a quarrelsome trip, Erigène then climbed on his horse, soon imitated by the four other men. With Foulques in the lead, the group trotted out of the abbey's main gate and started crossing the town of Auxerre, on their way to join the road leading to Autun and Chalon, to the Southeast.

One hour later, as they were following the road, in reality no more than a dirt trail, through a forest, a huge shadow that came over their heads made the five men look up. Erigène instantly made the sign of the cross at the sight of the big metallic object now floating above them. Boson, on his part, drew his sword, only to be strongly cautioned by Foulques.

"I would counsel you to sheath your sword at once, Sire Boson: that is the flying ship of the people from the future that intervened to save me from the men of Count Humfrid."

Boson reluctantly obeyed him and watched as the assault barge landed smoothly ahead of them on the road, breaking the tops of a few trees in the process. Its rear access ramp then lowered open and a silhouette in armor walked down the ramp to gesture at them to get in.

“Well, it seems like the people of Lady Shelton decided to provide us a quick ride to Toulouse.” Said with a slight smile Foulques, who had known in advance about the pickup but had not said anything about it to either Boson or Erigène. “We might as well accept their gracious offer, as it will save us many days of travel.”

“Since my goal was to meet these people, then I have no objection against travelling in this thing.” Replied Erigène, arming himself with courage before urging his horse forward. Boson, who was reacting with a lot more misgiving to the sight of the assault barge, took a moment before following the others inside the craft, throwing a suspicious look at the commando standing on the access ramp as he went in. The sight of the artificial lights and viewing screens inside nearly spooked him out and he would have turned his horse around if not for Foulques, who firmly grabbed his horse’s bridles.

“Are you going to chicken out already, Sire Boson? You have two letters to deliver in Toulouse, remember?”

Mortified, Boson resigned himself to whatever would follow and dismounted from his horse. A commando in powered armor suit came forward and, grabbing in succession the bridles of the five horses, tied them to a cable and hook fixed to the ceiling of the cargo compartment. Boson eyed cautiously the commando and his armor as the latter moved around.

“That warrior certainly looks quite powerful and intimidating, I must say. I also never saw a suit or armor so complicated in my life.”

“Most of their things do appear complicated from up close.” Agreed Foulques. “If anything, that somehow convinced me that magic is not involved in them. Did you ever hear of a witchcraft ceremony that involved anything more complicated than the preparation of potions or the mixing of powders?”

“You are right, young Sire Foulques.” Said Erigène. “I have a few notions in the mechanical arts and nothing I know looks as intricate as what I am seeing now.”

The commando who had tied up the horses then came to them and opened his helmet’s visor, revealing his face as he smiled to the Carolingians.

“If you will please take place in those seats along the sides, gentlemen, we are about to take off for Toulouse.”

“And how long will be our trip, good man?” Asked Jean Scot Erigène.

“Oh, about fifteen minutes, mister.”

That answer made the jaws of both the monk and Boson drop wide open. Erigène then recovered some of his wits after a moment.

"Fifteen...minutes? How could that be possible?"

"Actually, we could go much faster, mister. But please, sit down and fasten your safety belts."

Still shaken and incredulous, the monk went to sit in one of the padded seats lining the sidewalls of the cargo compartment, with the commando then helping him to buckle his safety belt. Once the commando had checked all of their seat belts, he spoke briefly into his helmet's microphone.

"We are all set here in the back, Marina. You may lift off now."

Both Erigène and Boson froze in their seats when they saw on the viewing screens of the cargo compartment that their craft was rising from the ground. The assault barge then accelerated quickly while taking more altitude, heading south towards Toulouse. They kept silent at first, watching with awe the ground speed past under them. The commando who had helped them buckle their belts then went to speak with Foulques, asking him the names and intents of the two newest passengers of the barge and noting down the information on his electronic pad before walking forward to the cockpit. Adélard, sitting next to Erigène, smiled to him in order to reassure him a bit.

"Quite a quick and comfortable way to travel wouldn't you say, Brother?"

"Indeed! I can understand now why the Vikings could not escape the wrath of these people. I must say that the view we have of our good kingdom from above is very nice. Decidedly, the level of knowledge of these people in the mechanical arts goes much further than I would have ever believed to be possible."

A female voice coming out of nowhere suddenly resonated inside the cargo compartment, making the heads of the Carolingians look up, then down to the sides.

"Gentlemen, we are about to pass the town of Nevers on our left side. To our right, you will also see the city of Bourges in the distance."

"Nevers, already?" Exclaimed Boson, incredulous. "But, it is a good fifty miles from Auxerre as the crow flies."

"Well, from up here, I would say that this is indeed Nevers, Sire Boson." Replied Erigène in a sober tone. "What a fantastic machine this is."

"You really think that this is only a machine and that it doesn't have anything to do with magic or sorcery, Brother?"

"Sire Boson, look carefully around you at the inside of this flying ship. I have performed quite a few exorcisms in the past, mostly in Ireland, and I see nothing here

that has the mark or manner of the Demon. Each minute detail tells me of a very advanced and meticulous construction process, rather than of magic.”

The young knight did look around him for a moment before speaking in a bit of a repentant tone.

“You are right, Brother Erigène. Still, all this would be enough to addle anyone’s brain.”

“True! Decidedly, this trip to Toulouse promises to be memorable in many ways.”

The Carolingians then stayed mostly silent during the next ten minutes, fascinated by the spectacle offered by the forests, hills and villages passing under them. Young Foulques suddenly shouted out happily while pointing at the screen offering them a forward view.

“I SEE TOULOUSE IN THE DISTANCE!”

His excitement at arriving home however turned quickly to bemusement and incredulity as the assault barge got closer to Toulouse and he could see the ten new buildings, each of them huge by Carolingian standards, and the two wide paved squares visible just south of the city, on the lot of land given by his father to Ann Shelton’s people. There were also two huge, deep pits that had been dug on the islands of Le Ramier, with gigantic metallic boxes nearly filling those pits. A multitude of machines, both flying ones and crawling ones, moved around the two sites, busy doing some kind of work. There were as well two large ships docked at a new quay along the right bank of the Garonne, near the buildings on the lot of land destined to become a commercial exchange point for the people of the future. Both ships dwarfed any ships the Vikings had and appeared to be made of metal rather than wood.

“But, but...nothing of this was there when I left Toulouse less than four days ago.”

“It seems that those people from the future build fast...and big.” Said Erigène while himself contemplating the buildings and construction activity outside the gates of the city. “Look at all that steel and glass! Any of the King’s architects could only dream of having so much of both to work with. Also, that tall building nearest to the walls, while positively huge, is also very appealing to the eye, I must say. King Charles would be jealous if he could see all this.”

What he didn't say, especially with Boson present, was that this display of construction prowess only confirmed his opinion that those people were so far ahead of what was known in Francia that opposing them in any way would be utter folly. It would be like a group of ants trying to win a fight against a bull. One could thus only hope that Lady Shelton and her people prove themselves both benevolent and reasonable. Thankfully, it appeared to be so...up to now. The commando who had been taking care of the group then came back to them and addressed them collectively.

"We are about to land just outside of the southern gate of Toulouse, where Doctor Shelton and Count Raymond are now waiting for you. They are anxious to go speak with you inside our new hotel by the Narbonne Gate. Make sure that your seat belts are buckled for the landing."

Jean Scot Erigène complied at once, then watched anxiously as the assault barge started losing altitude, heading towards the lot of land outside the southern walls of Toulouse. While the assault barge he was in was massive by Carolingian standards, it was dwarfed by the elegant building of glass and steel it landed near to, with the building and its top dome rising higher than any building the monk had seen before in his life. As the rear access ramp lowered open after a very smooth landing, Jean Scot was able to see four persons standing on the grass and apparently waiting for them. Two of them were Carolingian men and wore contemporary clothes, while the two other persons were young women dressed in clothes that would normally be reserved for men to wear. Young Foulques gave the example and urged his companions on as he rose from his seat to go out of the barge.

"Follow me, Brother Erigène and Sire Boson: my father is waiting for us alongside Lady Shelton."

Dragging their horses by their bridles, the five Carolingian men walked down the access ramp and joined up with Raymond and Ann. While Raymond hugged warmly his son, Ann shook hands with Jean Scot and Boson.

"Brother Erigène, Sire Boson, welcome to the Toulouse outpost of the Human Expansion. I am Doctor Ann Shelton, Representative of the Human Expansion. At my side are my friend and assistant, Doctor Vyn Drelan, and Jean de Chambriand, a counselor for both me and Count Raymond."

While the monk was polite and friendly in his bow to Ann, Vyn and Jean, Boson looked suspiciously at Jean while only shaking hands quickly with him. Jean de Chambriand

noted that, like Ann and Vyyn, but didn't comment on it. Instead, Ann looked unflinchingly at the young court noble.

"Sire Boson, I was told that you have letters for both me and Count Raymond, letters sent by King Charles. I propose that we all go to my office in the Novotel Inn, where we will be more comfortable to read and discuss those letters. You may in the meantime keep your horses in the first stables we just built besides our hotel."

"With pleasure, Lady Ann." Replied Boson before the group walked to a wooden stable with a dozen horses stalls in it and a big pile of hay at one end. A number of carpenters from Toulouse were busy building more stables to be connected to the existing one, banging their hammers and nailing together wood beams and planks. Jean Scot Erigène noticed that, while the workers were Carolingian men, the wood beams and planks were precisely cut in a way a Carolingian carpenter would have a hard time replicating. The carpenters also used what seemed to him to be an inordinate quantity of nails, as if they cost nothing. After putting his horse inside a stall, and with a stable boy hurrying to bring it water and hay, the monk went to look at the nails used by the carpenters. Picking one long nail from a box filled with hundreds of them, he examined it carefully: it was of an impressive manufacture and was also made of steel rather than of iron.

"Lady Ann, such a quantity of steel nails would normally cost a fortune if bought from one of our blacksmiths. I suppose that those nails, along with that cut wood, were produced by your people."

"You are correct, Brother Erigène. We have the tools to produce both metal objects and cut wood in mass quantities and at a very low price. Those two things will in fact be part of the goods offered for trade at our future market place."

"And they will find plenty of takers, Lady Ann, I can assure you."

"That will make us happy, especially if those takers bring in exchange foodstuff of good quality that we could buy. Well, now that your horses are taken care of, let's go up to my office now."

With Adélard and Marcellus actually returning on their horses to Count Raymond's manor, the rest of the group walked along the façade of the Novotel Inn, finally entering through the western entrance of the building. Both Erigène and Boson were struck at once by the luxury and comfort of the inside of the reception lobby. Smiling at their reactions and comments, Ann led them to the nearest elevators and

called a cabin, then invited her guests in once the doors of the cabin slid open. The Carolingians, except for Raymond, who was by now accustomed to that experience, stiffened and looked with alarm around them when the cabin started going up, making Ann reassure them.

“Do not worry: this is a very safe and common mode of vertical travel for us. We are now going up to the 28th floor, where my personal suite and office are.”

“The 28th floor? Thank God that you have this, Lady Ann. My poor old legs would not have been able to get me this high up.”

“I understand, Brother. In the Human Expansion, we are accustomed to build in height, in order not to waste precious arable or forested land. Aah, here we are!”

Going out of the now immobilized cabin, the group walked only a few steps before Ann opened a door and invited the others inside a lounge with large windows giving a fine view of the city of Toulouse and of the Garonne River. Boson was struck at once by the apparent luxury of the furniture and by the wall-to-wall carpeting.

“Is this standard all over your hotel, Lady Ann, or is this a suite reserved for nobles?”

“Sire Boson, please remember that there is no nobility or aristocracy in the Human Expansion. As for this suite, all the rooms in this hotel, which was designed along standards common in all our hotels and residences, are as comfortable and well furnished as this lounge. But, please, do take seats and make yourselves comfortable, my friends. Now, could you show us the letters King Charles gave you to deliver, Sire Boson?”

“Certainly, Lady Ann.” Replied Boson, taking out of his leather vest two sealed parchments and giving one to Ann and the other to Raymond. He then sat down besides Brother Erigène in a large sofa that proved very comfortable indeed. Boson couldn't help be a bit nervous as both Ann Shelton and Count Raymond broke the seals of their respective letters from the King and read them, not knowing what was written in them. He quickly noticed that neither Ann or Raymond seemed to like very much the content of their letters. Looking up first from his letter, Count Raymond gave a unhappy glance at Ann.

“The King is officially acknowledging and accepting my granting of lands to you as a reward for getting us rid of the Vikings. He however is also requesting me to send a strong contingent of men-at-arms under the command of one of my sons, so that it could

reinforce the King's army, which is about to fight the forces of allies of Pepin of Aquitaine near Macon."

Ann, who had just finished her own letter, nodded slowly her head in acknowledgment, clearly displeased.

"So, not content to leave you alone to oppose the Vikings that were approaching Toulouse, King Charles is now asking for warriors from Toulouse, to continue a wasteful internecine conflict with other Carolingian nobles inside his kingdom."

"It seems so, my friend. And your letter, what does it say, if I may ask?"

"King Charles briefly thanks me for ridding his kingdom of the Vikings. Then, he states that, as quote new tenants in his kingdom unquote, he expects me and my people to pay all the customary royal taxes and road tolls due on the business we will conduct at our future market place, plus a portion of any crop or products from fishing or hunting by us."

"Uh, if I may, Lady Shelton," said hesitantly Boson, cutting in, "all those demands are legitimate ones, according to Carolingian rules and customs. I would say that they are both reasonable and well justified."

Ann stared hard at him at once and replied in a cold voice.

"Sire Boson, King Charles would do well to remember that both sides of a contract have to be honored in order for that contract to be considered legitimate. Yet, he repeatedly failed to come to the help of Count Raymond and of many other nobles when they were facing the wrath of the Vikings. Instead of forming an army to chase those Vikings from his kingdom, he instead squeezed his subjects dry in order to pay a number of astronomical ransoms to keep the Vikings away, all in vain. And what does he do with the warriors he has in hand? He fights his brothers, sons and nephews inside Francia, in order to claim supremacy in power, instead of sending them to fight the Vikings. The oath of fealty made by Count Raymond to King Charles included in return a promise by the King to come to the defense of Count Raymond if he was threatened or attacked. Well, King Charles failed miserably to live up to his part of the contract, many times! Count Raymond will be the one to decide how to respond to King Charles' demands, but I wouldn't blame him one second if he refused to comply to the King's demands for reinforcements, especially with such hostile neighbors as the family of Count Humfrid of Narbonne and their followers. I would also be more than ready to offer Count Raymond our protection if the King then threatens him for not sending men-at-arms to go add to the waste of lives and property caused by those stupid internal power

conflicts within Western Francia. As for my people paying royal taxes and tolls to King Charles, he better forget that! In case that he didn't understand this yet, he and the other nobles that have been abusing their powers and mismanaging their fiefs around Europe will from now on keep their seats only at our sufferance. We massacred the Vikings to help the little people of this kingdom live in peace at last, not to help the present rulers to keep abusing their subjects and waste precious resources simply to make their power grow. I will now write quickly a letter to respond to King Charles' letter, a letter that you will then be able to bring back to Auxerre."

It was then the turn of Count Raymond to look hard at Boson.

"I will also be writing a letter to the King to respond to his demands, Sire Boson. You are welcome to spend the night in my manor, from which you will then be able to return to Auxerre next morning."

"But, Count Raymond, I was also charged by the King to escort the good Brother Erigène during his visit to Toulouse."

Raymond exchanged a look with Ann, who nodded her head and spoke to Boson.

"You are welcome to spend a few days around my people, Sire Boson, as is Brother Erigène. I will then offer you a return trip by air to Auxerre, to shorten your return journey. However, you will have to follow our rules and laws while here, which essentially mean that you can't use violence against anyone except in self-defense or in defense of an innocent. You draw your sword against one of our citizens, or try to impose yourself on a woman or a girl, and you will be immediately expelled from our outpost...or worse. Also, remember that the notion of nobility does not exist in my society, thus don't treat others around you like simple servants or inferior people."

It took all to Boson to control his growing anger at all this. He finally nodded his head reluctantly.

"Very well, Lady Shelton. I will abide by the rules of your people while visiting your outpost."

"Excellent! Then, I sincerely wish that you enjoy your stay here in Toulouse, Sire Boson. I will send by tomorrow morning to Count Raymond's manor my letter to King Charles. I have now only one last thing for you."

Grabbing her electronic tablet, she punched its keyboard, selecting and displaying a particular image before passing the tablet to Boson.

"Please do not touch the screen of that tablet: it is touch-actuated. Can you identify for me the Carolingian noble shown leading a large column of armored cavalymen along a trail?"

While amazed at once at the quality of the image on the said tablet, Boson answered Ann at once.

"I certainly can, Lady Shelton: this is Robert le Fort, Margrave of Neustria. He was charged by the King to fight the Viking invaders in Neustria and has an enviable reputation as a fearless warrior and defender of the kingdom. Why are you interested in him?"

"Because we know that he inspected two days ago one of the Viking fortified camps that we destroyed. There, in Jeufosse, he recuperated a number of chests full of gold and silver, chests that he is now apparently bringing to King Charles in Auxerre."

"And I suppose that you would like to get those precious chests, Lady Shelton?" Said Boson in a near accusatory tone, making Ann glare at him.

"Sire Boson, you decidedly do not understand me or my people at all. We are the ones who left those chests to be found in the Viking camp, since we massacred the Vikings in Jeufosse and elsewhere. We could have easily left with all that gold and silver, which actually represents the ransoms paid so meekly and in vain by King Charles to the Vikings. We left it there in order to see if someone worthy and honest enough would do something other than just fill his own purse. Well, Margrave Robert le Fort seems to be such a man, to his great merit. We now know another good man worthy of talking with and I certainly am looking forward to meeting such a man in the near future."

Ann's answer seemed to completely confuse the young Carolingian.

"You are not interested in such a huge amount of gold and silver? But then, what does interest you, Lady Shelton?"

"The common good of all, Sire Boson!" Replied firmly Ann. "Right now, my main responsibility is to find, buy and gather large quantities of foodstuff, in order to help feed eighteen million refugees, all that is left of our society. Since we are neither thieves nor invaders, I intend to get that foodstuff through legitimate, peaceful ways. We have already huge reserves of precious metals on our ships, so that gold and silver Margrave Robert le Fort is now escorting to Auxerre is of no real interest to me or my superiors. Please stop judging me and my people through your own selfish standards, Sire Boson. On the other hand, if that gold and silver is going to be used by King Charles to simply

buy himself more personal luxuries and to pay for more soldiers in order to pursue his stupid internal quarrels, then we won't let him grab those chests. We will use them instead to help improve the lot of his subjects, who after all paid extra taxes in order to collect those ransoms for the Vikings.”

Switching then her attention to Brother Erigène, Ann smiled amiably to him.

“Brother Erigène, the visit of such a great mind as yours is a true honor for me. I will be most anxious to be able to converse with you tomorrow morning, after you will be able to have a good night of sleep.’

“And I look forward as well to such a conversation, Lady Shelton.”

“Then, I wish you all a good evening, gentlemen. I am quite a busy woman and have to deal with many things, especially with our outpost still under construction. Count Raymond, could I ask you to guide our guests to your manor?”

“Of course, my friend! Sire Boson, Brother Erigène, if you may follow me and my son Foulques.”

The Carolingians, getting up from their sofas, then walked out, leaving Ann alone in her office. Looking at her tablet, she contemplated for a long moment the picture of the noble still on it.

“Robert le Fort... Just the kind of man I wanted to meet.”

CHAPTER 14 – A NEW ALLIANCE

20:38 (Paris Time)

Thursday, September 29, 861 C.E.

Field camp near Melun, fifty kilometers southeast of Paris

Kingdom of Western Francia

The two Carolingian men-at-arms guarding the western extremity of the field camp formed by dozens of tents tensed up and pointed their lances at the three dark silhouettes now approaching on foot after emerging from the night.

“HALT! WHO GOES THERE?” Shouted one of the guards, eyeing nervously the tall newcomers, who seemed to be wearing some kind of suits of armor. The newcomers came to a halt about ten paces away, with the smaller silhouette then taking one extra step before speaking.

“My name is Ann Shelton, Representative of the Human Expansion. We are the ones who massacred the Vikings in Jeufosse...and elsewhere. I came to speak with Margrave Robert le Fort.”

Both surprised at seeing that the leading newcomer was a woman and suddenly nervous at facing people who could massacre Vikings en masse, the two guards glanced at each other before the senior one took a decision.

“Wait here for a moment, Milady: I will go get a knight to guide you to Lord Robert.”

The senior guard then left at a run, leaving his nervous comrade alone to face the three newcomers. The senior guard soon returned in the company of a fully armored bearded man who eyed cautiously the three visitors.

“You said that you wish to speak with Margrave Robert le Fort, Milady?”

“That is correct, sire.”

“And who are your two companions, if I may ask?”

“Two of my bodyguards. Is Margrave Robert still up?”

“He is! Please follow me.”

The two sentries parted to let the newcomers pass and follow the knight, eyeing the big, impressive warriors wearing complicated armors who were accompanying Ann Shelton.

"Hell, did you see the size of those two men?" Said in a low voice one of the sentries once the newcomers had disappeared inside the camp. "They were a good half head taller than us."

"Yeah, and wider than us as well! No wonder they were able to trounce the Vikings."

Robert le Fort, a still vigorous man in his forties sporting a long drooping moustache and brown hair falling to his neck, was drinking a cup of wine while sitting alone inside his command tent, trying to rest after a long day of riding. An exchange of words outside his tent between the two men guarding it and some visitor then made him look at the entrance of his tent, just before someone spoke to him through the canvas flap.

"Milord, a woman came to speak with you. She is escorted by two warriors and says that she is a representative of the people who destroyed the Viking camp in Jeufosse."

Those words were enough to make Robert jump to his feet and shout back at the sentry.

"Let that woman in, Karloman, but make her escort wait outside."

"Understood, Milord!"

A tall woman soon entered the tent, which was poorly lit by a couple of oil lamps, and then stood three paces in front of Robert, both of them eyeing the other with interest. The woman wore what looked like an armored suit, complete with helmet and visor, the latter pulled up and open. That armored suit was however like nothing Robert had seen before. The woman's face was beautiful, with green sparkling eyes and a wide smile that showed perfect white teeth. She didn't seem to be armed, although she wore at her belt two strangely-shaped sorts of purses holding each a sizeable metal object. She nodded once her head to Robert as a salute, then spoke in an agreeable, melodious voice.

"Margrave Robert le Fort, my name is Ann Shelton, Representative of the Human Expansion in Francia. I came to discuss with you some important matters pertaining to the well-being of this land."

"Then, please sit, so that we could discuss at ease. Would you like a cup of wine?"

"Why not?" Replied Ann, smiling to Robert before going to the folding chair pointed by Robert and sitting in it. The Carolingian then went to a folding table set in

one corner of the tent, grabbing a pitcher of wine and filling a cup before bringing it to Ann, who gratefully took it. Grabbing back his own cup and sitting down, Robert examined with intense interest the woman.

“So, your people are the ones who massacred the Vikings camping on the island of Jeufosse, Lady Ann?”

“Not only there, Margrave Robert: our soldiers and ships also massacred the Viking armies threatening Toulouse and roaming the Somme region. We also paid quick visits to the Vikings in Dorestad, Quentovic, Noirmoutier, Bordeaux and near Winchester, in the British Isles. The ships of our fleet are now roaming all over Europe and the British Isles, destroying the Vikings wherever they are found outside of their home countries.”

Robert took a long moment to digest the meaning of these words, hit hard by their implications.

“You can travel so swiftly and so wide? Who are you and where do you come from?”

“We come from the stars...and from the distant future.” Answered Ann, who then spoke for a few minutes, listened to by a stunned Robert le Fort, explaining where she and the Human Expansion came from. At the end, Robert shook slowly his head, shaken to the core.

“By the Virgin Mary, what a story! Yet, what your ships did to the Vikings cannot be denied. You just saved the kingdom from systematic looting and destruction.”

“We eliminated one threat to the well-being of Western Francia, Margrave Robert. Unfortunately, the kingdom is still not out of its miseries yet.”

“What do you mean, Lady Ann?”

“Please, simply call me Ann.”

“Only if you call me simply Robert.”

“Very well, Robert.” Replied Ann, smiling briefly before becoming serious again. “What I am talking about is those stupid, selfish and senseless internal fights for power between King Charles, his brothers, sons, nephews and other power-hungry nobles of the realm. The kingdom may now be rid of the Vikings, thanks to us, but it is still being exploited and bled dry by what I would call parasites who care nothing about the common good. You, however, seems to be made of a nobler mold, my dear Robert.”

“Me? You flatter me, Ann, but how could you know me? We just met!”

"I actually met you first a long time ago, through history books. Your destiny is an inspiring one and, at least in the history I read, you will be the origin of a long line of kings."

"What do you mean, in the history you read?" Asked Robert, confused by her choice of words. Ann grinned to him and bent forward.

"Because history is presently being rewritten by our actions, my dear Robert. As you saw by the fact that we left those chests full of gold and silver behind in Jeufosse, we are not interested in riches, nor in power per say in Western Francia, or elsewhere in the World. The only things that interests us, apart from finding ways to feed our citizens, is to see peace and order reign around the World, that and the well-being of the little people, who have been neglected and exploited mercilessly up to now for the profit of a few privileged ones. Yes, I know that you are technically part of those privileged ones, but you at the least have fought the Vikings and did your best to protect the little people. The nobles who did the same as you are unfortunately too rare, and King Charles is certainly not part of them."

Robert le Fort, who was no stranger to power plays, then started seeing where she was heading and nodded once his head.

"And you would like me to act in concert with you, is that it?"

"Correct! The fact that you did not seize that treasure in Jeufosse for yourself and was bringing it back to King Charles convinced me that you were the kind of man I could work with."

"I do not want to insult you, Ann, but in this kingdom men usually do the deals and scheming, not women. How much actual authority do you have among your people?"

"The political leader of our people is actually a woman and she made me her plenipotentiary envoy to the World at large, my dear Robert." Replied Ann, not offended at all by his question, which was a legitimate one in this medieval context. "Her directives to me were both clear and simple: first, to find and acquire foodstuff for our millions of refugees; second, to do what is needed to bring peace and order back to this World, so that it would finally become fully productive instead of being sacked and burned down by successive waves of invaders and tyrants: and third, to reestablish as much as feasible some measure of justice and fairness for all. We believe in the equality of all, irrespective of sex, race, religion or social status."

"I see! Many would call your views rather utopian, Ann, but with the kind of power your people is wielding, you could well be able to enforce those goals. I said 'enforce' because you certainly can expect much resistance, both overt and covert, from those you accuse of profiting from the present chaos and excesses."

"Oh, I have no illusions about that, Robert, but I am hoping to convince them to abide by my counsels. If they react really stupidly, then they will be put them back in their place, firmly, or even eliminate them if they try to use force against me, my people and my allies. So, would you like to become my latest ally, my dear Robert?"

Robert smiled while weighing her offer.

"You certainly play a good game, Ann. How many allies do you have at the moment in Western Francia, if I may ask?"

"Right now, to be frank, I can count firmly only on Count Raymond of Toulouse and his family. I however have a number of promising prospects across Europe that I intend to contact soon."

"And, if I accept to ally myself with you, what exactly would you expect from me? I do command a respectable number of followers, but not enough by far to openly oppose by arms King Charles."

"What I would expect from you would be to counsel King Charles to listen to me and make him understand what would happen to him if he keeps ignoring the plight of his people and keeps acting solely for his own personal profit. If King Charles and the other members of the court and of the big families prove to be resistant to reason, then I may just make them irrelevant and put some honest and dedicated leaders and administrators in their place, leaders like you. However, know that we tend to choose our leaders through merit, not bloodline. If you ever end up at the head of Western Francia, you will then keep your post only as long as you prove that you have the common good in mind."

Robert stared at Ann in silence for long seconds, thinking over her offer. She was in essence playing an old game in Francia: that of king-making. However, she was playing it for the right reasons for a change, with her main concern being for the common people. He finally made his mind and got up from his chair, extending his right hand.

"You can count on me, Ann."

Ann got up as well and shook hands with Robert while looking straight in his eyes, very serious.

“Thank you, Robert. Together, we may soon bring justice and peace back to this kingdom.”

“I have no doubts about that, my friend. So, how do you intend to play things next?”

“I have already a plan in mind, Robert. Here is what we will do...”

CHAPTER 15 – IN QUEST OF FOOD

07:20 (Paris Time)

Friday, September 30, 861 C.E.

Buffet restaurant of the Novotel Inn

Toulouse, Kingdom of Western Francia

Pham Tarang let his son Duon, his teenage daughter Vinka and his wife Dinh go in front of him in the small queue of people slowly making their way past the buffet tables, picking their choices for breakfast. Compared to what the Tarangs had been accustomed to see in cafeterias and restaurants in Kyoto Alpha, the spread that had been prepared for this morning's breakfast was nearly barebones in terms of variety, consisting solely of bacon, bread, cereals, ham, jam and porridge, but no fresh fruits or fresh eggs. Pham perfectly understood why it was so, with the whole fleet on rations until fresh food could be grown or acquired in sizeable quantities. A sign at the start of the line advertized that fact, urging the customers to show restraint and not to waste food. A small bearded man following Pham in the lineup surprised the food inspector by expressing contentment about the food spread while speaking in Occitan. Pham gave him a curious look as the man, along with a woman and five children, all dressed in simple fleet coveralls without any insignias on them, served himself.

"You really think that this morning's selection is great, mister?"

"Of course it is, sire! There is plenty to eat, isn't there?"

"Uh, may I suppose that you are a native of Toulouse, mister?"

"You may, sire!" Replied the man before extending his right hand, which Pham shook. "I am Grégoire, and this is my family. Only four days ago, I was a slave and a poor fisherman living in a tiny wooden hut on the island of Le Grand Ramier. Then your people came and me and my family became free people, on top of becoming citizens of your wondrous society. Since they had to demolish our hut in order to build anti-flood walls around the island, we were relocated here in this inn yesterday, until your people could build a city on the island. Today, I am going to go fish in style, as part of the crew of one of the two magnificent ships now docked here."

Pham couldn't help smile at the exuberance and enthusiasm of the man. His attitude about the limited variety of the food available also made Pham seriously think about how spoiled the average Centaurian had been, like the other citizens of the Human Expansion.

"Then, I wish you a good and safe fishing trip, Mister Grégoire."

"Thank you, sire!"

Continuing to serve himself, Pham then went to a free table with his family and sat down to eat his porridge and toasts with jam. Grégoire and his own family soon sat down at the next table and it took less than a minute before the children from both families started conversing together, with the Tarangs asking questions about life around present-day Toulouse and with the children of Grégoire answering those questions, often in colorful terms. Pham smiled with amusement when his eleven year-old son Duon exchanged room numbers with Élyse, the twelve year-old daughter of Grégoire. Vvyn Drelan, who had been eating breakfast with Ann Shelton at another table, came to see Pham as he was about to finish his meal, smiling down to him and his family.

"Good morning, Mister Tarang! The corvette WANDERER just called to say that it will land in Toulouse in about ten minutes. If you could go gather your things for our trip, we will leave from the lobby of the inn in twenty minutes."

"I will be there, Doctor Drelan: I already packed my things and only need to go get them in my family suite."

"Excellent!"

"Uh, how long will my husband be gone, miss?" Asked Dinh, still a bit apprehensive despite the repeated attempts by Pham to reassure her. Vvyn, feeling Dinh's unease, answered her frankly in a sober voice.

"I am not sure yet, Misses Tarang. It will depend on how we are greeted at each of our stops of our tour. At the minimum, I expect us to be gone for at least a week, maybe two, since we intend to discuss trade with the major suppliers we will find. Please understand that a lot depends on our trip, along with the fishing that will be done by our vessels: we have millions to feed and little time to find food for them. We will however proceed with all due caution and will have a strong escort of commandos and combat robots to protect us, plus the disintegrator guns of our corvette. Your husband will be quite safe, I promise you."

"Thank you, miss." Said Dinh, somewhat reassured. She then gave a quick kiss to Pham, who was about to bring his plate and utensils to the dishwashing counter.

"Be careful, Pham!"

"I will, I promise, Dinh." Replied her husband before leaving. At the table nearby, the same process basically repeated itself as Grégoire was about to leave to go board his fishing vessel, due to leave this morning for the fertile fishing grounds of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. Vvyn, Pham and Grégoire actually walked out of the restaurant together after last waves of the hand to their respective families and friends.

Half a hour later, Vvyn, Pham and a contingent of eleven commandos with fifty combat robots were brought by air bus to the foot of the access ramp of the corvette H.S.S. WANDERER, resting on the landing pad just built near the future market place. The corvette, shaped like a fat saucer with a top dome, had a maximum diameter of a hundred meters and a height of sixty meters and represented a very respectable mass and volume. Vvyn knew that this type of ship, while lightly armed by the standards of the Combat Fleet, specialized in the detailed exploration of planetary systems. As such, it was superbly equipped with sensors and mapping equipment and had crew facilities meant to sustain independent trips as long as a few months. It also had sizeable cargo holds and embarked four shuttles, which would prove very useful indeed for their coming trip. An officer of the Exploration Fleet, a solidly-built man in his thirties with red hair and green eyes, greeted them inside a large airlock after the group climbed the access ramp.

"Doctor Drelan? I am Lieutenant Commander Sean McManus, Executive Officer of the corvette WANDERER. I will be leading you and your companions to your quarters."

"Thank you, Commander. Did you embark a good quantity of storage containers of various sizes before leaving the MARCO POLO, as was requested?"

"We did, Doctor. We also emptied our main cargo hold to make space for the foodstuff you will be able to acquire during your trip and have already lowered the ambient temperature in it to near freezing point. Also, as per your request, we loaded up metal and glass items, plus some gold and silver, to be able to trade them for food."

"Excellent! Then, lead the way, mister."

Leaving the combat robots in the large airlock, Vvyn, Pham and the eleven commandos followed McManus through a secondary airlock, then to a cargo elevator. As their cabin was rising silently, the officer asked a question to Vvyn.

“So, what will be our first stop on your quest for food, Doctor?”

“Bordeaux! We should find there sizeable quantities of wine, fresh grapes, vinegar, salt and fruits, since it is the most important port and exchange point on the Southwest Coast of Francia. We will however have to approach the town cautiously and be vigilant: Bordeaux had been under Viking control for many years, until our ships destroyed a Danish army there a few days ago. There may still be some Vikings around the town. If we do find some of them in or around Bordeaux, we will then destroy them, unless they are in the process of leaving to go back home. Those Scandinavians caused too many destruction and deaths to be allowed to stay in Francia.”

“Agreed! How many stops are you planning to do during your World quest?”

“Not as many as I had first thought. After discussing things with Mister Tarang here, we decided to concentrate solely on the locations that are either large population centers or trading centers, or both. Some locations may have some foodstuff to offer, but collecting food in small quantities would be a waste of time for us, in view of how much we need to acquire. Also, we wish to avoid destabilizing the food chain of places that have barely more than the minimum they need to feed their own population. For those reasons, we will be mostly avoiding Central and South America. According to our historical records, the area of Mexico has been suffering a long period of drought during the last decades and the Mayan civilization is presently in a severe decline, like the Wari culture in Peru. The latter also didn't have a true marketing system, instead redistributing the little surpluses they had to the profit of their governing classes. At the most, we may make short stops in places that could offer some quantities of spices, like chili peppers, which we need in lesser quantities. One last question for you, Commander: your corvette is equipped with at least one mnemotronic chair and has extensive language databanks, I hope?”

“We do have a small mnemotronic section with two assimilation chairs and a complete data library, Doctor. Why do you ask?”

“Because me and Mister Tarang decided that we may well have to select a few individuals during our trip to serve as our local interpreters. Since most of the present languages on Earth are not contained in our mnemotronic databanks, the only alternative we have to spending years learning them is to make some locals assimilate modern English and use them as translators.”

McManus nodded his head at those words as the doors of their cargo elevator opened.

“A nice, simple solution to a complex problem, I must say. This way, please!”

Getting to their assigned cabins and quickly storing their luggage in them, Vyyn and Pham, accompanied by Sergeant Mark Dempster, who was in charge of the commando squad, went up next to the bridge of the corvette, where Commander Hien Minh greeted them with a warm smile and a handshake. After the usual presentations, the delicately-built Asian woman showed them spare seats on the command platform.

"Please make yourselves comfortable: we are about to take off for Bordeaux. Just in case of trouble there, we have two interceptors in support with embarked commandos and combat robots ready to intervene on short notice."

"A good idea, Commander." Replied Vyyn. "Surviving Vikings around Bordeaux have now had a few days to regroup since our initial assault. However, if they show themselves about to leave, then we will let them go after delivering to them a warning never to return to Francia."

Commander Minh nodded at that, satisfied: while the Human Expansion was no pushover and was more than ready to deal with threats, it didn't believe in causing unnecessary deaths if an enemy was giving up.

"We do have heavy stun cannons on top of disintegrator guns, Doctor. We will thus be able to measure our response if need be. I understand that your mission is as much diplomatic as it is commercial, right?"

"Correct, Commander Minh! If we could make friends during this mission and thus facilitate continued commercial exchanges with various cities, then the better. We will also try to enroll the services of a few local translators, which would then be made to learn English in your mnemotronic section."

"A good idea: I had been wondering about how you were going to proceed when faced with such a bewildering range of languages and dialects. Very well! Mister Alvarez, you may take off for Bordeaux when ready."

"Aye, Captain!" Replied the pilot, who then gently moved his control stick, making the 43,000 ton corvette lift off silently from its landing pad.

With the corvette taking some altitude, then accelerating to supersonic speed, they arrived within sight of Bordeaux and the Atlantic coast within minutes. As they were slowing down and losing altitude, Hien Minh received a report from one of the two interceptors now circling over the town and its port that made her frown.

“Doctor Drelan, one of our interceptors has sighted two Viking long ships moored at quayside in the port of Bordeaux. They are in fact docked besides the wrecks of the Viking ships destroyed six days ago. They must have arrived in Bordeaux in the last few days.”

“Hum, probably liaison or courier ships. They also could be here to pick up some of the loot accumulated by the Vikings while looting this region. Tell our interceptors to hold fire for the moment, until we could find the reason for their presence. They could become useful to send back to Denmark any Danes still in Bordeaux...minus their loot, of course!”

“Of course!” Said Minh, smiling, before looking at her sensors officer. “Jeff, scan visually the port area and the town and see if there is any suspicious-looking activity.”

The sensors officer acknowledged her order, then took a few minutes to scrutinize Bordeaux from the air before reporting back to his captain.

“Commander, there are dozens of big wooden barrels on the docks near the Viking ships, along with some chests and bundles, while a number of men are bringing more barrels and bundles from inside the town. It appears that those long ships are being loaded with some cargo.”

“Probably loot being sent to Denmark. We will certainly not allow those Vikings to leave with the fruit of their crimes. Tell Lieutenant Frunze to land on the docks the commandos and robots carried by his interceptor. Have them stop the loading of these ships, but with minimal force.”

“Aye, Commander!”

Minh then looked again at Vyyn.

“I believe that it will soon be time for you to land in Bordeaux, Doctor. Do you have a protective suit equipped with directed gravity propulsion?”

“I do and I know how to use it, Commander. I will go suit up, then will jump with my escort over the port.”

“Understood! We will go down to low altitude to facilitate your jump.”

“Thank you, Commander! Sergeant Dempster, Mister Tarang, let’s go!”

As the trio was riding an elevator cabin down to their quarters, Pham Tarang patted gently Vyyn’s shoulder.

“Uh, could I remind you that I never used a directed gravity-equipped suit, Doctor?”

“That’s no problem, Mister Tarang: you can ride on the back of one of our robots: they are equipped with a folding stepping platform and with handles and safety lines. Have you ever fired a stun pistol?”

“Uh, no!”

“Again, not a problem: I will instruct the robot which will carry you down to stay with you and provide you close protection while on the ground.”

Only half reassured, Pham nonetheless didn’t ask more questions to her. After a stop of a few minutes in their respective cabins in order to put on their suits and gather packsacks with essential tools and equipments, the trio and the ten commandos of Sergeant Dempster went down to the main airlock, where their fifty combat robots were waiting. Seeing that an air car was ready as well to follow them out, Vvyn pointed it to Pham.

“If you prefer to go sit in that air car instead of riding on the back of a robot, feel free to do so, Mister Tarang.”

Pham hesitated for a moment, eyeing the air car, then the robots. He finally decided that he might as well take a few risks and stay with his companions.

“Uh, I will go down with one of our robots, Doctor.”

Vvyn nodded, satisfied by that answer.

“Good show, Mister Tarang: you are showing yourself a truly worthy citizen of the Human Expansion. Take place at the back of Unit 2094.”

Mark Dempster went with Pham to the designated robot and unfolded down its rear stepping platform. Once Pham was on the platform, the commando snapped the hooks of two short safety lines to rings fixed to Pham’s protective suit, then gave a few verbal orders to the robot before going back to the side of Vvyn Drelan as the access ramp of the airlock lowered open, creating a small hurricane inside the airlock. Pham could now see that Bordeaux’s port area, on the left bank of the Garonne, was just under them, maybe fifty meters below, while the corvette had slowed to a near hover. Sergeant Dempster and his ten commandos were the first to run down the ramp and jump, closely followed by Vvyn Drelan and the robots. Pham tightened his jaws and held on firmly with both hands to the safety bar on the back of his robot as it lifted off the deck of the airlock and flew out with the other robots. His heart beating fast, Pham actually enjoyed his ride as much as it scared him: it was like riding a rollercoaster car at an amusement

park. He was however returned quickly to the reality of his situation when his robot landed smoothly on a quay and started rolling on its twin set of rubber and steel tracks: maybe ten men lay immobile on the quay, near two Viking long ships. Since their bodies appeared intact, Pham reasoned that they must have been hit by stun discharges. Seeing that Vvyn kept going on towards the center of the town, Pham stayed on his robot and let it carry him inside Bordeaux. The town was actually surprisingly small, Pham having expected a much larger city. He then remembered what Ann Shelton had told him about the demographics of the Middle Ages: towns with a population larger than 10,000 were actually the exception in this time period, at least in Europe. Pham also noticed that the streets were nearly deserted, with only a few heads visible in windows of upper floors of the primitive houses bordering the narrow street his robot was following. In view of the reputation of those Vikings, that however did not surprise him much.

He was finally able to step down from his robot's platform when it stopped in the middle of a public square, joining an extended line formed by dozens of combat robots. Undoing his safety lines and jumping down on the rough stone pavement of the square, he walked to Vvyn Drelan, who was standing maybe twenty meters in front of the main entrance of a stone building. That stone building looked quite sturdy and its four levels actually dominated the other buildings around the square, while a narrow tower jutted out at the back.

"So, Doctor Drelan, what is going on?" Asked Pham once he had stopped beside Vvyn.

"There were indeed quite a few Vikings left in Bordeaux, Mister Tarang. Those who were not stunned in the port fled to the local church and are now hiding inside. They also posted a few archers at the windows, so keep your visor down for the time being."

"Then, what do we do now? Send our robots to assault the place?"

"We will certainly do that if those Vikings prove too obtuse. We have the church completely surrounded by commandos and robots, thus the Vikings inside have no way out. I would however prefer that they give themselves up peacefully. I guess that this is a good time to practice my diplomatic skills. Stay behind and close to Sergeant Dempster while I go forward to parley."

Vvyn then walked alone towards the entrance of the church, to stop a mere ten paces from the thick wooden double doors before opening her helmet's visor and shouting in Occitan.

"YOU ARE NOW SURROUNDED, WITH NO WAY OUT. SEND SOMEONE TO PARLEY WITH ME IN THE NEXT MINUTE, OR WE WILL STORM THIS CHURCH AND KILL YOU ALL."

She then waited patiently, hoping that common sense would prevail on the opposite side, thus avoiding an ugly bloodbath. One minute nearly passed before someone opened the door of the church. To her surprise, a woman came out alone and walked towards her. She was dressed in female Viking clothes and carried a long dagger at her belt, plus wore a set of golden jewels. The Viking woman was nearly as tall as Vvyn, who stood a good 178 centimeters, and appeared fit and strong. She however could only hide partly her fear as she glanced nervously at the line of combat robots and of commandos in powered armor suits. When she spoke to Vvyn, it was in a fair but accented Occitan.

"I am Thorunn, wife of Chieftain Björn Ironside. What kind of people are you, to throw lightning bolts and to be able to fly like you do?"

"We are simple human beings like you, Thorunn. We however came from the future, from three millenniums ahead, in fact. We have also traveled through the stars to arrive here. What you see is merely the product of very advanced knowledge, and not some sort of magic. My name is Vvyn Drelan and we came to tell you and your people to leave Bordeaux immediately, without your loot, and to never return to Francia. If you refuse to leave, then we will be forced to kill you all."

The Viking woman gave Vvyn a jaundiced look while seemingly restraining herself from attacking her.

"You were lucky that my husband's army was not here when you attacked our ships in the port five days ago."

"And you think that it would have made a difference?" Shot back Vvyn, hardening her tone. "In case you didn't know it already, your husband is dead, along with his friend Hasting and their army. We killed them all near Agen six nights ago."

Thorunn obviously had not known about that, as she recoiled by one step while horror and grief appeared on her face.

"No! That can't be true!"

"It is!" Replied Vvyn, forcing herself not to feel some sympathy towards the Viking woman. After all, did this Thorunn grieve for all the people killed by her husband's army? "Furthermore, all the Viking armies that had been roaming Western and Eastern Francia, as well as those in the British Isles, have now been destroyed by our flying ships. Any future Scandinavian fleet or army that will leave Denmark, Norway or Sweden with the goal of plundering their neighbors will be destroyed on sight. The Viking way is over, Thorunn, for good! You and the others hiding in that church will now leave Bordeaux in your two boats and return home, where you will pass the word about our warning."

The Scandinavian had tears on her face and could barely stop herself from crying openly as she stared at Vvyn.

"And what then? There is not enough good land back home to feed properly all of my people."

"And that justified attacking others, raping, looting, burning and killing your way through Europe, on top of reducing others to slavery? If this could console you a bit, we are not going to single out your people in this manner, as we intend to enforce peace and order throughout the World in the next few weeks and months. Now, go tell your people to come out, without their weapons. You have ten minutes before we take this church by assault and I can guarantee you that none of you will survive it if we have to attack."

"Ten minutes?" Said Thorunn, apparently unsure. "How long exactly is that?" Vvyn then remembered that the notion of precise timing was still unknown to this time period, as no devices existed yet that could measure minutes precisely. Sighing with frustration, Vvyn nodded once to Thorunn.

"Very well! I will be counting down the minutes out loud until the time is up. You better go convince the others inside to give up: time is now running."

Still in a state of semi-shock, Thorunn turned around and hurried back in the church, with the doors closing back behind her. Mark Dempster then approached Vvyn to speak with her, glancing from time to time towards the front façade windows of the church.

"I am not sure that they will surrender this easily, Doctor Drelan. You and Mister Tarang should step back behind our line of robots."

"No! That would be interpreted as fear on my part, which may convince them to attack. I still have hope that they will give up. Could you tell your commandos and our

robots to switch to stun guns only? That way, we will avoid killing them even if they decide to resist.”

“Hmm, I suppose that we could do that. Alright! I will pass the order around to use stun fire only.”

“Thanks, Sergeant! That is much appreciated.”

To Vvyn’s relief, the Vikings started coming out of the church one by one after four minutes, dropping their weapons in a pile near the door and then forming a group a few paces away. Vvyn was able to count eighteen grown men, six teenage boys and 32 women, including Thorunn. All had long faces and looked with apprehension at the robots and commandos, possibly expecting to be massacred now that they were disarmed. With the accord of Dempster, Vvyn walked alone up to the group of Scandinavians, stopping three paces in front of Thorunn.

“Thank you for being reasonable. My warriors will now escort you to your two boats. Then, you will be free to leave for Scandinavia. Remember: never come back, on pain of death!”

Escorted by ten commandos and twenty combat robots, the Scandinavians soon left towards the port, leaving Vvyn free to go inspect the inside of the church. What she found was pews that had been pushed aside along the walls, freeing a large surface in the center, with that surface occupied by a big pile of wooden barrels and chests and with hundreds of bulging jute bags piled on top of each other. Getting close to the pile and lighting up her helmet’s frontal lamp to supplement the poor light coming from the few windows, Vvyn read quickly the few inscriptions on the barrels and also touched some of the bags as Pham Tarang joined her inside.

“Wine, cereal grains, olive oil and salt. All things that we certainly could buy for our own people. We will however have to find their previous owners first, in order to be able to pay them for this merchandise and also to possibly get even more foodstuff. Bordeaux is the center of a rich agricultural region, so we should be able to acquire much food here.”

“And how do you propose that we find those owners, Doctor?”

“Simple! We will do like they do in this time period: have people roam the streets while shouting out our offer to the previous owners to show up in the main square to recuperate their goods.”

“Uh, some fraudsters could use that chance to come and pretend to be some of those owners, don’t you think?”

Vvyn smiled at those words.

“I know! However, I am sure that the real owners will also show up and sort those fraudsters out. Could you make a rough inventory of this stuff while I go talk with Sergeant Dempster to arrange for our public announcements?”

“With pleasure! It will also give me time to take test samples of the wine and olive oil, to check them for purity and bacterial content.”

“A good idea! I will send you a few commandos to help you by bringing out the stuff you will declare fit to be bought for our consumption.”

With Vvyn then walking out of the church, Pham quickly went to work, taking out of his backpack a small portable lab designed to test food and liquid samples, then drawing out a few drops of wine and of olive oil to examine them through his microscope. His fears of finding them to be contaminated or unsanitary were quickly assuaged, while the sacks of grains proved free of vermin. Taking a sudden decision, Pham filled a test tube with red wine and tasted it. He was actually a true connoisseur of wines and spirits and found the wine to be a young one of fair quality, enough to qualify as table wine. In truth, since aging wine in bottles was not a known process in this century, this was probably as good as he would ever find around here. Calling the corvette by radio on the channel indicated to him earlier, Pham asked for a shuttle to come down with a variety of some of the food and liquid containers brought from the MARCO POLO, so that he could transfer the wine and olive oil from the barrels he had to pierce to extract samples. By the time that he was finished with his inventory and sampling and had the barrels and bags brought out in the open, a growing crowd of Carolingians had started gathering in the public square, with Vvyn Drelan busy discussing with some of them. Vvyn seemed to be quite happy when Pham approached her.

“So, are these some of the owners of this stuff taken by the Vikings, Doctor Drelan?”

“Indeed, plus quite a few more merchants who are willing to sell to us.”

“Excellent! Know that I found everything we found inside the church to be of good enough quality for our use. If you don’t mind, I will now take over the dealings from here: I have quite a lot of experience in haggling prices.”

“Have fun, Mister Tarang!” Said Vvyn, stepping back to give her place to Pham.

The next few hours proved very fruitful for Pham, who was able to buy dozens of barrels of red wine and of olive oil, plus a few barrels of vinegar, three tons of salt, one ton of fresh grapes, over twenty tons of wheat grain and oat grain, plus mountains of fresh fruits and vegetables. From what he could understand from the claims of the local merchants, those quantities hardly dented the reserves available to feed the people of Bordeaux, so he was free to buy the lot without fear of causing a future famine. As a payment, he used some of the gold and silver recuperated on the dead Vikings killed near Agen, with enough coins left for more acquisitions at other locations. When he had completed his dealings, with all the foodstuff he had bought having been flown to the waiting corvette, he was able to fly back to the ship with Vvyn and their escort of commandos and combat robots, plenty happy and satisfied.

“Well, Doctor Drelan, if things continue like this, we should be able to fill up the cargo hold of this corvette with foodstuff. What is our next stop?”

“Bruges, in Flanders. It is presently called Bruggia and is still quite small, but it is already an important exchange point, thanks to its port and to being at a major crossroads. It supposedly resisted all the Vikings attacks against it, so we should find it intact and full of merchants...hopefully.”

Pham nodded his head at that and consulted his electronic tablet, reading the few paragraphs on Bruges that Ann Shelton had collated for his use.

“Hum, with over two million of our people presently having only one spare set of clothes, we will certainly be interested in buying lots of wool cloth. Bruges, sorry, Bruggia, should also have much fresh produces and cereals to offer us, plus salt, cheese and some beer and wine. What if we find live cattle and animals there, like pigs, chicken and cows?”

“Well, our new meat processing plant is now operational in Toulouse and it has a series of corrals to contain animals prior to their butchering. If we can find and buy animals in Bruggia and elsewhere, we will then call in a cargo shuttle from Toulouse to pick them up. The time we will have to wait for that shuttle will give me time to conduct some diplomacy in Bruggia.”

“Oh, is someone of importance living in Bruggia?”

“Yes! A certain Beudoin Bras de Fer¹¹, who is due to become the first Count of Flanders in history...after having eloped illegally with the daughter of King Charles, who is presently kept under guard in a monastery in Senlis, north of Paris. He is said by history to be a very energetic and strong-willed young man and is one of the few Carolingian nobles known to have fought off the Viking invaders instead of fleeing or buying them off. He could thus become a useful ally for us in an important corner of Europe.”

“And why would that princess be held in a monastery, if I may ask?”

Vvyn smiled in amusement as she reviewed mentally the history of that noblewoman.

“Actually, Judith of Francia, who is presently eighteen years old and is said to be very beautiful, was previously Queen of Wessex, having married in succession two of their late kings, Aethelwulf and Aethelbald of Wessex. When King Aethelbald died a year ago, Judith, still childless, returned to Western Francia after having sold her properties in the Wessex. Her father, King Charles II, then put her in the monastery of Senlis, with the intention of eventually giving her away in another arranged marriage. However, it seems that the said Judith, apart from being a well educated girl, is also a person of strong character who was tired of being given away to marry much older men. One of her brothers, Louis the Stammerer, is presumably in the process of preparing her escape from Senlis in the near future, and this at the instigation of young Beudouin, who is said to be genuinely in love with her.”

It was the turn of Pham to smile on hearing that story.

“Well, I can’t really blame that girl for wanting to know true love, or that Beudouin Bras de Fer for risking it all for her. It is nice to see that romance has its place in this century.”

“Oh, there is plenty of romance and juicy scandals to go around in this century, Mister Tarang. They may be ignorant by our standards, but you will find in this time the whole range of human emotions and reactions, both good and bad.”

“And revenge as well?” Said Pham in a much more serious tone. “Those Scandinavians are not going to love us for killing so many of their men. That Thorunn could in fact inflame sentiments against us once back in Denmark, instead of discouraging others from attempting more raids.”

Vvyn nodded her head, knowing that Pham was right on that point.

¹¹ Beudouin Bras de Fer : Baldwin Iron Arm in French.

“If she does, then she will prove a lot more stupid than I judged her to be. But you are right: we will have to be very cautious if we ever have to send an emissary to them. Well, let’s prepare for our visit to Bruggia: we should be there in less than half an hour.”

11:42 (Paris Time)

Old castle of Bruggia (Bruges)

Vlaanderen (Flanders), Western Francia

Beaudouin Bras de Fer, Lord Forestier of the Pagus Flandrensis¹², was about to go have lunch in the main hall of the old Roman castle that served as his manor when a commotion outside attracted him to the nearest window. He was in time to see a small flying ship land silently in the middle of the market square of Bruggia. That sight both excited and worried the young Beaudouin, who at the age of 24 was a solid man with years of warfare already under his belt, mostly against the Vikings. Excited because he had been dying to see what kind of people could have the fantastic flying ships that had been spotted numerous times in the sky during the last few days. Worried because Beaudouin had already heard the rumors about how the Viking Roric, who had been holding the neighboring city of Dorestad, about ninety kilometers to the Northeast, had been killed by the people with the flying ships, along with his whole army. Not that Beaudouin had cried at the news of Roric’s death, but anyone said to be able to throw lightning bolts around had to be approached with caution. And all this had started to happen as he was already preparing for his secret project to marry beautiful and young Judith. Forgetting any idea about lunch, Beaudouin ran to the main staircase of the castle, holding with one hand the pommel of his sword so that it wouldn’t beat against his upper left leg. He was met at the main entrance of the castle by four of his guards arriving at a run, having been alerted by the arrival of the flying ship. Beaudouin was about to order them to follow him outside to the market but hesitated: it may have been prudent to have an escort, but that could also possibly provoke the newcomers in unpredictable ways. His youth and self-assurance finally won over and he signaled his guards to stop.

¹² Pagus Flandrensis : Old Roman name for the region around Bruges.

"I will go alone to the market place, men. Stay here and guard the entrance in the meantime."

His guards, accustomed to his impetuous character, knew better than argue with him and reluctantly stayed behind while Beaudouin walked out of his castle, which was in reality only a stone keep surrounded by a perimeter wall with a single gate. He had just crossed that gate and was in the crowded market place, which was adjacent to his castle and to the town's church, when he saw a woman wearing a sort of armored suit and who was walking towards him, making the locals part along her path. Some sort of thing made of steel followed closely the woman, prompting Beaudouin to stop in his track and take hold of his sword. He however quickly realized that his last gesture could provoke the kind of response he was fearing, so he withdrew his right hand and watched the woman as she approached him at a calm pace, her face visible through the open visor of her helmet. Her exotic looks marked her as someone from a far away land to Beaudouin, who found her beautiful as well. She finally stopped three paces in front of him, with the metal thing staying behind her. The woman then spoke in Occitan, a language Beaudouin knew well.

"Sire Beaudouin, I presume?"

"Lord Beaudouin, Lord Forestier of Bruggia." Corrected politely Beaudouin. The woman nodded her head once and presented her right hand, which Beaudouin shook.

"And I am Doctor Vvyn Drelan, historian and sociologist and a representative of the Human Expansion. Be reassured about us, Lord Beaudouin: we came here strictly to conduct trade...and to talk. I realize that you probably have hundreds of questions to ask about me and my people, thus I suggest that we go discuss calmly inside your castle while my companion buys things around your market."

"A sensible proposition, Lady Drelan. May I first ask what is the thing following you?"

"You may, Lord Beaudouin. It is a machine with an artificial intelligence and that was designed for war. We call such machines 'combat robots'. It would be able just by itself to raze your castle if need be, but it has orders from me to stay passive, unless I am attacked, of course."

Beaudouin nearly stepped back as he detailed the 'robot'.

"And this has nothing to do with the Devil or with magic?"

“Nothing at all! It is simply the product of very advanced knowledge and science. We will be able to talk further about it inside, along with other subjects of more importance.”

“Very well, Lady Drelan. Please follow me.”

As they were walking side by side towards the castle’s gate, watched by the crowd of merchants and customers present in the square, Beaudouin warmly smiled to Vvyn as he examined in more detail her facial features.

“You are quite beautiful, Lady Drelan, but you look quite different from the people I have met before in my life.”

“Thank you for the compliment, Lord Beaudouin. In truth, my ancestors were a mix of Northern Europeans and of Orientals. I am also part of a race called the Centaurians, which developed separate from the rest of Humanity for centuries.”

“I will be most interested to learn more about your race later on, Lady Drelan. You will however excuse me if my first questions will be about the actions of your people against the Vikings.”

“That is quite understandable, Lord Beaudouin.”

“Well, I was about to have lunch when your flying ship arrived. I would be most happy to host you for lunch: it would make our conversation more agreeable and relaxed.”

“A fine idea, Lord Beaudouin. I accept your invitation with pleasure.”

The duo was then mostly silent as Beaudouin led Vvyn inside the castle and went to a large room with a high vaulted ceiling. Vvyn examined the architecture for a moment with genuine interest.

“This is Late Roman architecture, like the rest of your castle.”

“You are correct, Lady Drelan. You did say that you were a historian, right?”

“I did! Studying the history of Humanity and the structures of Human societies is my passion.”

Beaudouin didn’t remark on that then out of politeness: women were supposed to be interested in things that helped run households and raise families, not in intricate studies. He led her to the head table, which had already been set up for lunch by servants, and made her sit to his left. Very few other people joined them for lunch, with Beaudouin presenting them as his various court officials and assistants. It was evident at once to Vvyn that her host held court to only a small following, as she had expected

from a small local lord. The meal itself turned out to be no feast, consisting only of a beef and vegetable broth served with bread and cheese, with a young wine to wash the food down. Vvyn actually found that to be a positive point in Beaudouin's favor: he didn't seem to be the kind of lord to stuff himself while his people lived through hardship. The young nobleman didn't waste time in starting to ask questions to Vvyn as soon as they had been served. Vvyn actually preempted most of those questions by taking a few minutes to tell a stunned Beaudouin about her origin and how the MARCO POLO and its escort fleet had found themselves back in the distant past. She finished her explanations with a description of the actions taken against the Vikings. While still shaken by her story, Beaudouin grinned on hearing how extensive the Viking defeat had been.

"By the Holy Cross, this is great news indeed! Merchants that arrived yesterday brought the news about the death of Rorik and of his Vikings in and around Dorestad, but the fate of the other Viking armies around the kingdom had been unknown here...up to now! The people of the kingdom will at last be able to breathe a sigh of relief and be able to return to the business of living."

"Not quite yet, Lord Beaudouin!" Replied Vvyn, her face now most serious. "There is still the matter of all those useless and wasteful internecine wars between King Charles, his brothers, nephews and other nobles inside his kingdom. I am actually afraid that the resources now freed by the disappearance of the Vikings will be used by King Charles and his brothers to fight each other even harder."

Beaudouin frowned at those words, not because he was offended by them, but rather because he realized that she was right. He had been loyal to King Charles up to now and, despite his secret plans to go grab Judith in her monastery in Senlis, had served him fatefully. He was not however obtuse or blind and knew too well about the infighting within the kingdom.

"You are quite right about this fight for power, Lady Drelan. Does your people plan to do something about it?"

"Well, while our top priority is to acquire food for our millions of refugees, having a Europe at peace would certainly help us secure more food. We already have started some diplomatic work to try calm the situation down, notably by bringing emissaries of King Charles to Toulouse for talks, but I'm afraid that talking will not be enough to convince the most stubborn and power-hungry nobles in Francia."

As Beaudouin was mulling those words, an alarming realization suddenly came to his mind and he looked sharply at Vvyn.

“You said that you were a historian and that you came from the far future, Lady Drelan. What exactly do you know about me through your history books?”

Vvyn smiled, pleased to see that Beaudouin had indeed a sharp mind.

“Plenty, my dear Beaudouin!” She said out loud before bending sideways to whisper in his ear. “I always had sympathy for young lovers. Go get her!”

As a stunned Beaudouin stared at her, she calmly took a sip of her wine before speaking again, her voice back to a normal volume.

“I am sure that we will make good partners and allies and that we will be able to help each other out, Lord Beaudouin.”

“Uh, could we speak in private after this meal, Lady Drelan? Just to talk, of course.”

Vvyn grinned, amused by his quick reassurance.

“Of course! I will be happy to, my dear Lord Beaudouin.”

12:51 (Paris Time)

Buffet restaurant of the Novotel Inn

Toulouse, Western Francia

Ann Shelton sighed with frustration as Jean Scott Erigène launched himself on another philosophical dissertation on the fate of Man as it related to God. Putting down her fork and knife, she looked across the restaurant’s table at the old monk, her face reflecting clear annoyance. The man was a near genius, but he was in her opinion basically wasting his intellect in studying and analyzing something completely irrelevant to the realities of the Universe.

“Brother Erigène, I don’t want to be impolite, but I already told you a number of time that me and my society are atheists who don’t believe in a god, and certainly not in the God you keep talking about. The doctrines and beliefs written in your Bible and enforced by your Catholic Church, as well as those taught by the Muslim Koran and other religious books on present Earth, have all been contradicted and dispelled by what thousands of years of scientific research and fact-finding taught us. Also, being atheists didn’t stop us from being humane, compassionate, generous and tolerant, while too many so-called good Christians of today show greed, selfishness, intolerance and

cruelty. If you truly want to learn about us and from us, then you will have to take off your religious blinders and start looking at the world around you with a more scientific mindset.”

Young Boson, who was eating besides the monk, eyed the old man, expecting him to explode in religious indignation. Jean Scott did manage to control himself but replied in a near growl to Ann.

“What I believe in is that God created us and that we owe him obedience through our acts and words, Lady Shelton. You may not believe in him, but he will still judge you when your time comes.”

Ann eyes narrowed as she stared hard at the old monk, with her voice becoming nearly icy.

“Your Church has been persecuting and punishing for centuries those who refused to follow its doctrine or disputed it, and all this based on blind belief in old books and manuscripts written by men a long time ago. In my history, Humanity spent over three millenniums beyond this century slowly learning about this planet, then about the Universe around it, studying the universal laws of science governing it. Despite wasting an obscene amount of time praying and imploring your God or other gods, Humanity still continued suffering from wars, diseases and natural disasters for more centuries. Its welfare only improved when we took on ourselves to become more tolerant and compassionate and when studies in science provided us new, technological means to exploit our planet, treat diseases and grow more food. We ended up united and at peace because we improved and bettered ourselves, and not by waiting and hoping for an invisible, immaterial God who actually never manifested itself once during those millenniums, except in the imagination of his believers. We started helping ourselves instead of meekly hoping that a god would help us along. Now, look at where my people is now, compared to your God-fearing society, Brother! We can fly between the stars, can cure most diseases and heal wounds that would be considered fatal here and can also defeat in minutes any army your king could muster. Yet, we have stopped the Vikings from murdering the little people of Francia and are helping refugees and homeless people, while your ‘Christian’ nobles keep fighting each other in a selfish quest for personal power, crushing their own people under taxes and abandoning them to the fury of the Vikings. So, tell me, Brother Erigène, who are the better persons? My people or your Christians? If you keep refusing to open your mind and learn from what you see

here in Toulouse, then I will stop wasting my time with you and will fly you back to Auxerre in the next hour.”

“And how can you expect to see God if you refuse to even look for him? Your machines may make you very powerful, but your souls will still belong to God on Judgment Day.”

Ann’s patience then truly ran out and she abruptly got up from her chair and grabbed her food tray, staring down at the monk.

“Brother Erigène, you truly disappoint me. Go pack your things, you and Sire Boson. Commandos will come in one hour to bring you to a barge that will then fly you back to Auxerre.”

“And what if I refuse to leave Toulouse?”

“Then, you may continue staying at the Count’s manor, but you will not be given further access to our installations and you will have to do the return trip to Auxerre the long way. You have one hour to decide. Goodbye, Brother Erigène! Goodbye, Sire Boson!”

Stunned, Boson watched Ann walk away and drop her tray at the dishwashing counter before leaving the restaurant. He then gave the monk a pissed look.

“Congratulations, Brother: you just compromised the mission given to me and you by the King.”

The young knight then got up and picked up his food tray, leaving the unrepentant monk alone at his table.

Going down to the lobby level and exiting the inn, Boson went to the external stables, where his horse was waiting. Getting on his horse, he then headed towards Count Raymond’s manor, inside Toulouse, while thinking furiously about his options. He could actually understand the reaction of Ann Shelton to Erigène’s religious rants: while a true master of theology, the monk could indeed become tiresome at times. On the other hand, atheist or not, the people of Ann Shelton could show a lot of things to the people of the kingdom, apart from already having getting rid of the Vikings and stopping their murderous depredations. If he left with Brother Erigène for Auxerre in one hour, then he would be incapable of observing further the people of Ann Shelton and studying their motives. In theory, he would have to accompany him to Auxerre, to escort him and protect him from bandits and the like, but a quick trip by air up to a few miles short of Auxerre would mean that Brother Erigène could probably go safely without him. Boson

then realized that he would have to follow the monk either way, for the simple fact that someone would need to balance his account and judgment of Lady Shelton and provide a more accurate picture to King Charles than the one tainted by religious zeal that Erigène was liable to give. Boson was swearing mentally about that when a gigantic shadow started enveloping him and most of Toulouse as he was about to enter Toulouse through its southern gate. Looking up at the sky, he nearly jumped off his horse on seeing the huge structure that was now heading towards the island of Le Grand Ramier, suspended under what looked like a huge steel flying spider. Stopping his horse, Boson then watched, mesmerized, as the spider came to a hover above the foundations already dug in the island. With deliberate slowness, the spider then lowered the structure, which measured a good 300 paces in width and height, positioning it with utmost precision. The anchoring points at the base of the structure finally engaged after four minutes in the recesses of the foundations' boxes sunk in the pit. An army of flying and rolling machines then surrounded the newly placed structure to start some kind of finishing touches, while the giant steel spider let go its grip and flew away towards the West, disappearing from sight after a minute or so. Deeply shaken by such a display of technical prowess, Boson urged his horse forward, entering Toulouse and heading for the nearby manor of Count Raymond.

Boson had finished packing his things and was waiting for the men to be sent by Ann Shelton to bring him and Brother Erigène to a flying ship when a commotion outside made him run to the nearest window. He nearly fell on his bum on seeing that the giant steel spider was already back, with a second, equally huge structure suspended from its legs. Again proceeding with deliberate caution, the spider hovered above the structure already in place on the island of Le Grand Ramier and put down the new structure on top of the first one. Boson then understood that the structures were prefabricated parts of what promised to be a tall tower with graciously curved cruciform corner support pillars. The whole thing seemed to be made strictly of shiny steel and sky blue tinted glass surfaces that reflected light like mirrors. It also already stood higher than Boson would have believed possible, forcing him to crane his neck back to the maximum. The thing was in fact already four times higher than the Novotel Inn, which was itself of unprecedented height for this century. Seeing the giant steel spider again fly away towards the West, Boson then decided to stay in Toulouse for the time being, in order to see how this giant tower would turn out once finished. With his sword at his belt, he

walked out of his guest room and went to the adjacent room occupied by Brother Erigène, knocking loudly on the door.

“BROTHER ERIGÈNE, THIS IS BOSON! OPEN UP!”

The monk opened his door a few seconds later, smiling with satisfaction on seeing that Boson was fully dressed and equipped for travel.

“Aah, you are ready as well for our trip to Auxerre, Sire Boson. Lady Shelton’s men should be here shortly.”

“Maybe, but we will tell them that we are staying, Brother.” Announced Boson in a firm tone, dead serious. Jean Scott nearly recoiled at those words and looked at him with incomprehension.

“But, why?”

“Why? Because the King gave us a mission to fulfill: to study those people from the future and to assess their true goals and intentions. We spent less than a day in Toulouse and I certainly am not ready to pass an educated judgment yet on Lady Shelton and her people.”

“But, you saw what kind of blasphemer she was, Sire Boson! She even denied the existence of God! How could we have confidence in such a person?”

“How? By judging her and her people by their actions rather than by their religious fervor, or lack of it. Whether you like it or not, they did get rid of the Vikings, to the benefit of the kingdom and, yes, our own Christian nobles do spend most of their time fighting each other for personal gain, while neglecting our people. I may be one of those nobles but I am not blind, nor am I ready to deny the obvious. Furthermore, significant things are happening here in Toulouse, things that I need to watch in order to better brief King Charles about later on. Feel free to leave for Auxerre today if you wish so, but you will do it without me. If you do leave, then you better be careful about what you say to the King about Lady Shelton and her people. I frankly am not sure that you can be counted on to give a fair account of what was said and done here to King Charles. You turn prematurely the King against these people and you may just bring his death and the downfall of the kingdom as a result. If that happens, then I swear that I will hunt you down and make you pay for your foolish words. Do you understand me, Brother?”

While not truly intimidated by the young man’s threat, the monk did understand that he meant what he said. He thus nodded his head once, his face hard.

“Very well, Sire Boson. Stay behind if you wish so. On my part, I have nothing left to do here with such blasphemous people. I will however temper my report to King Charles and will caution him to wait for your return before making his mind about Lady Shelton.”

“Good! Then I wish you a good trip back to Auxerre, Brother.”

Without further words, Boson then turned around and left the monk's room, leaving the latter to ponder what had just happened.

Going next to the office of Armand, Count Raymond's private cleric, Boson borrowed from him a pen, an ink bottle and some parchments, returning to his room with the lot. He then took position at a window of his room and sat on a stool while placing his ink bottle and a parchment on top of the window's ledge. With both the islands of Le Ramier and the new market place now visible to him, Boson started writing a report for King Charles, first recounting the stormy exchange between Brother Erigène and Lady Shelton, then describing as best he could the new buildings erected outside of Toulouse. While not as spectacular-looking as the giant tower now being built, Boson understood that the new market place and its neighboring buildings, like the fish and meat processing plants and the sawmill, would have a huge impact on the future economy of the region, and this very soon, especially if the people from the future provided protection and security to the traveling merchants that would come to Toulouse. He was still writing when the giant steel spider returned yet again to drop another part of the tower in place, then flew westward, probably to go get another segment. By now, Boson was starting to wonder how tall that tower would stand once completed. He noticed in passing the departure of Brother Erigène, escorted to a small flying ship that had landed outside the walls of the city. Boson followed the ship with his eyes as it took off silently and flew north, fervently hoping that Erigène would remember his warning about how to brief King Charles.

The rest of the afternoon went by quickly for Boson, who had quite a lot to ponder and write about. Maybe one hour before supper, a ship landed on the pad beside the new market place and started unloading things lying on pallets, which were then transported to the corrals of the nearby meat processing plant. Straining his eyes, Boson saw that the pallets actually carried beasts the size of large oxen. The beasts, which seemed to be either dead or unconscious at first, started waking up and getting on

their legs half an hour later. Boson was able to count over 130 of them by the time the ship flew off and left. He finally identified the beasts as being buffalos, animals that were becoming increasingly rare in the kingdom due to past intensive hunting. Such beasts certainly made for a good source of meat for the needs of the people from the future, if they could be found and captured in sufficient quantities. To capture them alive instead of killing them on the spot also made sense to Boson: live animals could be kept available for a long time as sources of meat, compared to the few days meat could stay edible if not smoked, dried or salted quickly after slaughtering. It was thus much easier to manage your meat production levels by keeping livestock. That the people from the future had chosen that solution showed to Boson that they indeed possessed much common sense.

By the time that a servant of Count Raymond came to his room to invite him to have supper with the Count and his family, the giant steel spider had dropped in place a total of five parts, with the top of the gigantic tower now approaching the level of the few clouds in the sky. Leaving his sword in his room and putting on his best court outfit, made of brocade, he went down to the great hall of the manor and was surprised to see that Ann Shelton was also present. He however went first to Count Raymond and bowed to him, as good manners and customs demanded.

“I must thank you for giving me the honor of attending your supper, Milord.”

“It was the least I could do as your host, Sire Boson. It is regrettable that Brother Erigène decided to leave so soon to return to Auxerre.”

“Indeed, Milord! I see that you invited as well Lady Shelton for this supper.”

“She actually came to my manor to pass on some information and also to bring some truly mouth-watering pieces of venison her people hunted down. We will be feasting on roast bison tonight.”

“That definitely sounds appetizing, Milord. Uh, I probably don’t need to ask, but I suppose that you have seen the gigantic tower being built just outside Toulouse?”

Raymond smiled, amused by his question.

“One would have to be blind not to see it, Sire Boson. I must say that, as much as I had seen previously about Lady Shelton’s people, they are truly astounding me today with their technical feats, which I am sure do not involve sorcery or the Devil’s work.”

Boson took that as the thinly disguised hint it was and bowed again to the Count.

“Without a doubt, Milord.”

“Good for you! Now, let’s find an appropriate position for you at my table.”

Raymond led Boson to the high table, which formed the bottom of a ‘U’ made of it and four other tables. The young knight was not a little surprised by the composition of the other guests for this supper: apart from the family members of Count Raymond, his whole household, down to the servants, seemed to have been invited. Raymond noticed his surprised look and grinned while patting his shoulder.

“A new habit I recently adopted: my whole household now shares my meals, along with my guests.”

Somehow, Boson didn’t find necessary to ask from where the Count had adopted that new habit. He was again surprised when Raymond gave him the place immediately left of Ann Shelton, with the Count giving him a wink while making him sit.

“I am sure that you and Lady Shelton will have plenty to talk about together during supper, my young friend.”

‘Talk about being set up!’ thought Boson before smiling to Ann Shelton, who smiled back.

“Good evening, Lady Shelton! I must present my excuses for Brother Erigène’s harsh words at noon.”

“You were not at fault then, Sire Boson. I am happy to see that you decided to stay in Toulouse afterwards.”

“And I must say that I have seen much to make me think further about you and your people, Lady Shelton. Your new tower has now grown to a truly unimaginable height. Will it get higher still?”

“A bit higher only: there are only the top landing platform and the central antenna tower assembly left to put in place, which should be done before sundown today. Once completed, our new Toulouse Tower will stand over one mile high and will count the equivalent of 566 levels. It will then become the new home for over 83,000 of our citizens.”

All heads in the hall, save for Count Raymond, snapped around at once towards Ann at those words, while Boson was left speechless for a moment.

“One mile high? Over 83,000 persons? But, that would make it the most populous place in the whole of Francia.”

“Correct! We intend for the Toulouse Tower to act like a beacon and to attract a flow of merchants and visitors to Toulouse.”

"All things that will be good for the county and its people." Pronounced Raymond, attracting a concert of approving exclamations and comments from around the tables. Boson approved loudly as well, then looked at Ann.

"The buffalos that your people hunted down, where did you find so many of them, Lady Shelton? We barely see a few from time to time here in Francia."

"They were captured on another continent that was unknown to the Europeans of this time. On that continent, millions of buffalos freely roam the plains, while herds of hundreds of thousands of caribous and deer roam the forests and the sub-arctic tundra. There are Humans living on that continent, but in fairly limited numbers and in dispersed groups living as hunter-gatherers. We intend to keep hunting there, but in a selective manner and at night, both to avoid endangering the herds by excessive hunting and to avoid scaring or antagonizing the locals, who will be left in peace by us. My assistant, Doctor Vyyn Drelan, is presently touring the World in one of our ships, taking stock of the available food resources and establishing commercial contacts in various large cities where there are large food markets and warehouses. Also, the two fishing vessels now based here in Toulouse are presently fishing in the North Atlantic and North Pacific, while a dozen more similar fishing vessels have also started catching fish in the other seas of the World. All that will allow us with some luck to feed our refugees that are presently awake, and this until our own crops could start producing in a few months." Régilinde, the teenage daughter of Count Raymond, had a dreamy look appear on her face as she listened with the others to Ann.

"To tour the World... That would indeed be a fantastic voyage to accomplish. I envy your people's ability to travel quickly through the air like this."

"One day, when we will be more solidly established on Earth, we will extend to the people of this century the access to our commercial air routes. Then, you will be able to travel to your content, Lady Régilinde."

"I can't wait to see that moment come!" Exclaimed excitedly the teenager, making her father smile.

"Traveling through the World and visiting new places... That could be a nice way to live one's retirement once old."

"I do have to caution you about that, Count." Said Ann politely. "The rest of the planet knows as many wars and disturbances than this kingdom does, while some places are very wary of foreigners. It will be a while before this world knows a semblance of universal peace. Hopefully, we will be able to see that in our lifetimes."

“Universal peace... Now, that is a goal truly worth working for, my dear Ann.” Said soberly Count Raymond, making many heads nod around the hall. Servants then showed up with the first service of the meal, a vegetable soup, and started serving the dinners.

The rest of the supper brought more questions to Ann about the Toulouse Tower and the new market place, which she answered patiently, trying her best to give simple answers and avoid technological dissertations that would be lost on the other guests. They had finished the bison roast and were eating a dessert of mixed fruits and cheese, by which time the Sun was setting on the horizon, when Ann got up to make an announcement.

“Count Raymond, ladies and gentlemen, I now have the pleasure to announce that a public party will be held at our new market place tomorrow, starting at noon with a free lunch for all the citizens of Toulouse who will wish to attend. This party will be meant to celebrate the inauguration of the Toulouse Tower, which has just been completed and which will be ready for occupation in a couple of days. My own people will attend as well and will be most happy to mingle with the people of Toulouse. It is high time that we start knowing each other better, so that we can achieve mutual trust and friendship. I will have public announcers go around Toulouse tomorrow morning to inform everyone about this party, which will last until sundown.”

Enthusiastic cheers greeted her announcement, making Ann pause before speaking again.

“Now that the Sun is down, I will ask you all to step outside, so that you can look at our completed tower.”

Count Raymond led by example, taking the hand of his wife Berteiz and leading her out of the hall and into the courtyard, followed by the other dinners. As was typical of medieval cities, Toulouse was mostly dark now, with only a few torches, oil lamps and candles lit around the town after the Sun had set. The dinners then looked at the gigantic mass of the Toulouse Tower, with its stainless steel and tainted glass surfaces still glimmering lightly from the last rays of the twilight. Ann raised her left wrist close to her mouth and activated her wrist videophone to make a short call.

“Mister Shimada, you may start lighting up the tower now.”

Exclamations of admiration and wonderment went up around her as the first sets of blue and red lights came on along the curved side support pillars of the Toulouse Tower.

More exclamations followed as each level of the tower, starting with the lower ones, lit up, their tainted glass façades shining from the inside with a soft blue glow. Heads craned upward as more and more levels lit up, until the huge, 400 meter-diameter top saucer platform also sparkled with lights showing through its panoramic windows. The best was however yet to come. After another few seconds, a vertical column of bright white light appeared from the focusing lens of a powerful battery of projectors installed at the top of the needle-like tower set in the center of the landing platform. With the projectors themselves sitting at a height of 1,780 meters, the focused vertical column of bright white light reached high in the night sky, attracting a comment from Count Raymond, who was standing near Ann.

“By God! With this light directed at the sky and with the height of your tower, it will be seen by everyone in a radius of tens of miles.”

“On a clear night, our tower and its top light should be visible from as far as Narbonne and Bordeaux, my dear Raymond. If that doesn’t attract merchants and visitors to Toulouse, then I don’t know what will.”

CHAPTER 16 – SENDING A MESSAGE

13:46 (Paris Time)

Monday, October 3, 861 C.E.

Royal suite, abbey of St-Germain

Auxerre, Western Francia

King Charles II was in the suite loaned to him by the Abbot of St-Germain when someone knocked urgently on his door, prompting him to shout out loud.

“COME IN!”

The door opened at once, with his chancellor, Louis le Rorgonide, entering and bowing to him.

“Your Majesty, Margrave Robert le Fort has just arrived...with 300 armored cavalrymen at his back.”

That last sentence immediately froze Charles with alarm and worry: Robert le Fort had once rebelled against him, allying himself with Charles’ own brother, Louis le Germanique. He had then submitted to Charles only after receiving Neustria in exchange. That Robert had come with a force that could easily overwhelm his royal guards could mean very bad news indeed for Charles, who had no shortage of enemies and few allies.

“Did he say why he came?”

“He simply said that he wanted to speak with you, Your Majesty. He is presently waiting alone at the main entrance, with his cavalrymen staying in one corner of the courtyard.”

“Very well! Assemble first my knights and barons in the main hall, then bring Robert in.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Louis le Rorgonide then left, closing the door behind him. Charles pondered for a moment what Robert’s visit meant. If he would have come to kill or overthrow him, then he would have simply stormed the place without warning. Maybe he really meant to simply talk, but about what? The Vikings? Not knowing what to think, Charles took his time in putting on a silk cape, giving plenty of time to his chancellor to assemble his

armed followers. Only after a good ten minutes did Charles started on his way to the main hall, arriving there to find a good forty knights and barons in armor and waiting for him. A bit reassured now, Charles made a sign to his chamberlain to introduce Robert le Fort. The latter entered behind Louis le Rorgonide and looked with disdain at the assembled armed followers of Charles before walking with an assured step towards him. Charles didn't miss the fact that Robert was fully armed and armored, wearing a heavy scale mail vest and a helmet. The Margrave of Neustria finally stopped a good six steps in front of Charles and bowed rather perfunctorily to him. That alone was enough to alarm anew Charles, who did his best to sound sure of himself.

"To what do I owe your visit, Robert?"

"I came to bring news, Your Majesty. First off, I was able to inspect six days ago the Viking camp in Jeufosse and found it completely devastated, with all the Vikings dead. They were apparently killed by people from the future traveling in huge flying ships."

"I have heard about those people from the future. They seemingly established themselves in Toulouse and supposedly killed all the Vikings inside Francia, if I could believe what Brother Erigène told me about them. What else?"

"As incredible as this may sound, those people from the future left behind in the camp the chests containing the gold and silver you paid to the Vikings as ransoms, apparently not taking one coin from them. I thus decided to bring back that treasure under escort, Your Majesty."

Charles suddenly felt immense relief on hearing those last words: that explained the strong escort accompanying Robert le Fort to Auxerre. His anxiety however returned at once when a gigantic shadow masked the Sun outside, plunging the main hall in semi-darkness.

"What the...? What is happening outside? Count Vivien, go see outside, quickly!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Replied the chamberlain before nearly running out of the hall. He was back in less than two minutes, his face as white as a sheet.

"Your...Your Majesty, a gigantic ship made of steel is now floating in the sky above the abbey. It is in fact bloating most of the sky."

"WHAT?" Shouted Charles in disbelief before getting up from his throne and running to the nearest window. What he saw then literally made his hair stand up: an impossibly large ball of metal was indeed floating silently just above the abbey. Charles

then saw some kind of small metal boat come out of the ship, floating down towards the abbey. The small boat soon landed in the courtyard, between the main entrance and the soldiers of Robert le Fort. A sort of ramp then lowered at its back and four silhouettes came out, walking calmly towards the main entrance of the abbey. Charles then noticed that the men of Robert le Fort were not reacting to the newcomers, as if the arrival of a flying ship was common occurrence. Becoming suspicious again, he gave a hard look at Robert, still standing in front of the throne.

“Do you know who the people that landed in the courtyard are, Robert?”

“In fact, I do, Your Majesty. One of them is Sire Boson, whom you sent as emissary to Toulouse. Another is Lady Ann Shelton, the representative of the people from the future.”

“And how would you happen to know that, unless you plotted in advance with that Lady Shelton?”

“Your Majesty, before you do something regrettable, I would suggest that you simply wait until the arrival of Lady Shelton. She will then be able to tell you herself what the goal of all this is. Do not worry: neither I nor her wishes to kill you, unless you attack us, of course.”

Seeing his knights and barons starting to draw their swords at those words, Charles urgently signaled them to refrain.

“HOLD, MEN!”

Returning to his throne and sitting on it, Charles shot a murderous look at Robert but otherwise did not say anything until four newcomers entered the hall and walked towards him. One of them was effectively young Sire Boson, while another was a tall woman wearing a sort of armored suit with helmet whose visor was pulled open. The two others were massive men who wore complicated armored suits and acted pretty much like bodyguards, staying two steps behind and to each side of the woman. Charles started sweating profusely as he reminded himself that such armored men had reputedly massacred with ease the vaunted Vikings. The group stopped beside Robert le Fort, with Sire Boson then bowing to Charles. Neither the woman nor her two bodyguards did so, however. The woman, who was truly beautiful and appeared to be in her late twenties, spoke up in a firm but polite tone.

“Greetings, King Charles! I am Doctor Ann Shelton, Plenipotentiary Envoy of the Human Expansion in Toulouse. I came to respond to your letter, which you sent to me via the services of Sire Boson.”

“And what exactly is your response to my letter, Doctor Shelton?”

“That you won’t get any part of our revenues in the county of Toulouse. We also will not swear allegiance to you, as we see no benefit or reason to do so. I however have a message for you and for the rest of the nobility of this kingdom.”

Charles felt acid form in his stomach then: this was probably not going to be to his liking, but there was little that he could do right now but listen.

“Go ahead, Doctor Shelton: deliver your message.”

“That message is actually simple: start governing with the welfare of all your people in mind and, most importantly, stop your stupid and wasteful conflicts between yourselves, right now! Anyone attacking someone else for reasons other than self-defense will from now be dealt with harshly by us. Even in a case of self-defense, we will then act as arbitrators in order to stop the violence. This land has seen too many deaths, destruction and misery during the last decades, mostly due to the selfishness, greed and petty thirst for power of both you and of most of your nobles.”

“Now, wait a minute! I...”

“SHUT UP! You owe your present throne strictly to your bloodline and have shown precious few personal abilities or skills in governing or administering your kingdom. Furthermore, you failed to protect your people from the Vikings and instead wasted much resources and manpower in pursuing an imperial crown that is now utterly meaningless. Your brothers, sons, nephews and other nobles have proved equally negligent and selfish, so we have no choice now but to impose an immediate and indefinite armistice across the whole of Francia. That means Eastern Francia and Lotharingia as well as Western Francia. Anyone violating that armistice will be warned at first, then will be destroyed if the violence continues. By anyone, I mean the nobles and rulers that will have ordered the violence, rather than the soldiers themselves. Those soldiers will in turn be able to return to their respective villages and towns to grow crops or pursue other, more constructive trades than war. Once I am finished here, I will be paying visits to your brother, Louis le Germanique, as well as to your nephews and to King Salomon of Britain, to whom I will be serving the same conditions as I am now doing to you. Hopefully, common sense will then prevail and peace will return to Francia.”

“What about those who were revolting against me and are sowing discord and chaos in my kingdom? You pretend that I won’t be allowed anymore to ascertain my authority as King of Western Francia?”

“Basically, all your vassals from the level of counts and down will now be responsible for the welfare of their present territories but will have to restrict their actions to those said territories. No more territorial encroachments at the expense of neighbors! If there is any local dispute about who is in charge, then we will mediate and will support the most capable and caring local noble. If none of those nobles prove to be worthy of governing, then we will reserve the right to name someone competent at the head of that territory.”

“What about the royal taxes due to me?” Shot back Charles, getting more furious by the minute. Ann looked down at him with something akin to contempt.

“You mean the taxes that you were wasting on offering yourself a life of luxury while your people lived in utter poverty? The taxes that you should have used to build an army strong enough to chase the Vikings out of your kingdom but instead used to pay ransom after ransom to those Vikings? Well, from now on you will have to live strictly on the revenues from your own personal land holdings. The people of this land have had to support too many parasites like you for too long and it is high time that it finally gets priority in the distribution of resources.”

One of the barons of King Charles, understanding that this would probably mean the loss of his lucrative court function, then unsheathed his sword and held it high while shouting to the other nobles present.

“DON'T YOU SEE THAT SHE IS INTENT ON USURPING THE THRONE? KILL HER!”

The other 41 armed and armored nobles, equally incensed by Ann's declarations, then rushed at Ann with their swords high, led by the baron. The two commandos flanking Ann immediately stepped forward, forming a wall of steel in front of her while at the same time raising their weapons. As per their prior orders from Ann, they used strictly the stun guns attached to their disintegrator rifles, firing in continuous mode and sweeping their fire from left to right and back. The nearest any noble got from Ann was a knight that fell on top of the feet of one commando, stunned unconscious before he could even deliver a single blow of his sword. Ann, now as tense as a spring and holding her own stun pistol, was left to look at the piled bodies around her commandos. She then glanced at both Robert le Fort and Boson, who had drawn their swords and had stood ready to defend her flanks.

“Are you alright, my friends?”

“Perfectly alright, Lady Shelton.” Replied Boson.

"The same here, Ann." Said Robert le Fort, who then pointed at King Charles, who was cowering on his throne. "What about him?"

Ann gave Charles a disdainful look.

"Him? He will now be king in name only."

She then walked to Charles and bent down over him, her expression hard.

"You heard my terms, Charles. You will now abide by them, disband your army and your court and return to your own lands, where you better start treating correctly your people. If you don't, then I will pay you a second visit and you may like it even less than this one. If I hear that you ordered your army into the offensive after this, then you will die, end of story."

Ann didn't wait for a reply from Charles, turning her back to him and returning to the side of Robert le Fort and of Boson. The latter, still in shock at all that had happened so quickly, looked hesitantly at her.

"What about me and my family, Lady Shelton? I was also part of the King's court, along with my sister Richilde."

"You will now be free to return with her to your family lands in the Ardennes. The good news is that you will no longer have to pay royal taxes from now on, which should save you a pretty penny. You may also remind your sister that we are not adverse at seeing women in administrative or government positions. As long as you don't use force or violence to attain your goals and as long as you take care of your people, you will be free to build your lives the way you want. If you wish so, I am ready to offer you and your sister a quick trip back to the Ardennes. You will have an hour to pack."

"I will go speak to her right away." Said Boson before nearly running out of the hall. Ann next looked with fondness at Robert le Fort as King Charles, still sitting on his throne and not daring to move, listened on.

"I am sure that you will take good care of the people of Neustria, Robert. I can assure you that the gold and silver recuperated from the Vikings will be equitably distributed and used to compensate those across the kingdom who lost everything to the Vikings. I will also use it to help rebuild what was burned down."

"I know that you will use that money well, Ann. We will keep in contact in the future, I hope?"

"Of course we will, Robert. I in fact intend to arrange something soon to provide instant communications between Toulouse and Tours, so that we can converse at will in

the future. Now, let's make sure that King Charles passes around his ultimate orders as sovereign of Western Francia."

In another part of the abbey reserved for female guests, poor Boson soon hit a major obstacle: his furious sister.

"YOU HELPED THAT WOMAN TO BASICALLY STRIP KING CHARLES OF HIS THRONE? ARE YOU CRAZY? I WAS HOPING TO BECOME QUEEN ONE DAY!"

"Queen of what?" Replied her brother, standing his ground. "Of a kingdom ruined by Viking invasions and constant infighting? Charles was a failure as a king. Can't you think past your own personal good for once?"

"And what will our father think of you after that? You betrayed your king and broke your oath of loyalty to him."

"An oath of loyalty is worthless if only one side respects it. As for what Father will say, did you realize that, with counts now being basically independent, he will not have to worry anymore about being stripped of his titles by the King on a simple whim in the future? More importantly, our father will now be able to name himself his successor instead of the King doing so. That means that his titles will stay in the family. Count as well the fact that we won't have to levy royal taxes on our peasants and merchants anymore. That will help our county prosper instead of it only barely surviving. A prosperous county means in turn more revenues for us. Just the fact that we won't need to provide a military contingent every year for the King's army will save us a fortune. Do you have any idea how much it cost our father to equip and support those extra men-at-arms and knights he was sending away every year? A bloody fortune, that's what!" Shaken by Boson's arguments, Richilde furiously thought for a moment, trying to find counter-arguments.

"If there will be no royal army left, then who will defend the kingdom, Boson?"

"First, King Charles' army did little to actually defend the kingdom against the Vikings, who were looting, burning and murdering nearly at will. It was too busy fighting the King's brother and nephews. Second, if you are worried about the defense of the kingdom against invaders, just go look outside and up at the sky: you will then see a mile-wide flying ship made of steel thicker than my arm and able to fly across the whole kingdom in less than one hour. I know because I came from Toulouse in it. And that is only one of the flying ships of Lady Shelton's people."

“But, what if the King resists, keeps his army around him and rallies his followers against those people from the future? Brother Erigène said that they are blasphemers of the worst kind.”

“The hell with Brother Erigène!” Nearly shouted Boson, getting tired of this. “What does he know outside of his religious books? Compared to Lady Shelton’s people, he is an utter ignorant. As for the King trying to rally his followers around him, good luck to him! By the time it will take him to simply get to Paris, Lady Shelton will have sent ships all over the kingdom to announce his demise. Do you think that many counts will follow King Charles, once they know that they could now act completely independently from him and keep their titles forever? Hell, I expect all but a handful of them to simply turn him around politely. That’s if they don’t simply kill him on the spot! Do you really want to stay associated with him, Sister?”

Richilde was left speechless for a moment as she realized that Boson was right.

“But, what are these people from the future hoping to gain by all this? Does that Lady Shelton plan to name herself Queen?”

To her surprise, her last question made Boson explode in laughter.

“Lady Shelton, Queen? Never! She doesn’t even believe in the concept of nobility or of hereditary passage of power. Back in Toulouse, I visited a huge, incredibly luxurious hotel they literally put in place in one day. Lady Shelton was staying in that hotel, along with the rest of her people in Toulouse, that is until yesterday, when she moved into a gigantic, mile-high tower that was assembled in mere days. An ex-slave of Count Raymond, a simple fisherman who had become with his family citizens of her Human Expansion, also lived in that hotel until yesterday. Care to tell me who had the largest apartment?”

“Lady Shelton, of course!” Replied at once Richilde. She then hesitated on seeing the smirk that appeared on Boson’s face.

“Wait! Don’t tell me...”

“That she had the smallest apartment? Yes, and that simply because she is single, while that ex-slave had a family with many children to accommodate. In fact, her apartment was only half the size of that ex-slave’s apartment. When I asked her why that was so, she simply replied that her society considered everyone as equals, irrespective of race, sex or social status. In her society, an administrator at her present level cannot by law receive a salary that is more than three times the minimum salary earned by their lowest worker. Their own supreme leader, a woman by the way, who is

ruling over eighteen million people, cannot earn more than six times the minimum salary. Those people truly believe in the common good, contrary to too many of us. Hell, I was myself one of those selfish nobles before, until I saw what was going on in Toulouse. I believe that we are on the verge of a marvelous future, Richilde, and that we should help those people help our own people.”

Richilde slowly sat down on her bed, trying to bring order to her mind. After a long moment, she looked up at her brother.

“Do you think that I could meet and talk with that Lady Shelton, Boson?”

Boson nodded at once.

“I am sure that she will love to meet you, Sister.”

CHAPTER 17 – A CHANCE AT A NEW LIFE

15:13 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, October 4, 861 C.E.

Passenger shuttle on approach to the Toulouse Tower

Human Expansion post of Toulouse

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are now on final approach to land on top of the Toulouse Tower. Once landed and inside the hangar, please proceed with your luggage to the arrival lounge, where guides will be waiting for you. We hope that you enjoyed your trip and wish you a good stay in Toulouse.”

The announcement by the head stewardess of the passenger shuttle, who was like the rest of the crew an ex-employee of the now defunct Alpha Space Lines of Alpha Centauri A-IV, didn't raise a single cheer among the 117 passengers. The faces in the passenger cabin showed only a mix of sadness, anxiety and resignation, rather than joy or anticipation. Jan Fong also stayed silent, watching absentmindedly on the forward viewing screen of the cabin the Toulouse Tower grow as they closed in on it. A 25 year-old professional musician, Jan could only think about all that he and his little family had lost with the destruction by the Morgs of Alpha Centauri A-IV. Now, he and his wife Lita, his three year-old daughter Mirta and his five month-old son Yoni were supposed to rebuild their lives on an Earth that was said to be totally alien in most aspects to what they had known in the Human Expansion. As their shuttle was about to land on one of the designated landing spots of the wide platform topping the Toulouse Tower, Jan couldn't help contrast the tower itself with the adjacent medieval city, something that would actually have been called a mere big village in the 41st Century. At least, the region around it looked fertile enough, with vast forests and cultivated fields all around it. The landing spot, which was also an elevator platform, started going down inside the hangar complex of the tower as soon as the shuttle's skids rested on the surface. Jan briefly saw another loaded shuttle about to land on the adjacent landing spot before his shuttle disappeared inside the hangar complex. He knew that quite a few shuttles loaded with other refugees from Alpha Centauri A-IV were due to arrive in Toulouse today, to start populating the giant tower. That thought made him wish that the other

members of his old band had survived the catastrophe: reforming their band would certainly help give back a meaning to his life other than simply surviving with his family. Time had however been too short since he had been awakened on the MARCO POLO and then was reunited with his wife and two children and he had not yet had the chance to consult the list of refugees embarked on the exploration cruiser. That was certainly something that he would have to do soon in the near future.

The stewardess finally told the passengers that they could now unbuckle their seat belt and exit the shuttle, which the men, women and children, including 41 infants, did with little conviction. Carrying each no more than a single bag, all that they still possessed now, the passengers walked down the access stairs and went inside the arrival lounge adjacent to the hangar, where a number of people greeted them with reassuring smiles and then guided them to a big amphitheatre situated on the same level but located near the center of the huge saucer section supporting the landing platform. With over a dozen shuttles arriving at a quick cadence, the amphitheatre filled rapidly to half its maximum capacity with over 1,300 people. A medium-built man in his early fifties then got up on the stage, along with a tall young woman with long black hair, and addressed the crowd with the help of a microphone connected to a sound amplification system.

“Welcome all to the Toulouse Tower, good people. I am Ben Corbin, General Manager of the Toulouse Tower, your new home on Earth. With me presently is Doctor Ann Shelton, an historian and sociologist by profession who is the plenipotentiary envoy of the Human Expansion in Toulouse. You must undoubtedly be both confused and sad after having been either awakened from cryogenic sleep only yesterday or having been reunited with your spouses and children for a few days at the most. You all know by now the tragic fate that befell our home world at the hands of the Morgs. We have however survived this disaster and we now have to rebuild our lives on the Earth of the Ninth Century. I, as general manager of this megastructure, am committed to doing everything to help you adapt to your new situation and to make life as easy and pleasant as possible. Thankfully, this megastructure was built in modular form with the original goal of assembling it on Mirphak III, thus came fully equipped and stocked. You will find your respective apartments fully furnished, with all the amenities that you were accustomed to back on Alpha Centauri. However, the food situation is at present still being worked on, so I will urge you to show restraint in the first months and avoid any

food wastage. Also, while the stores in this tower came supplied with full inventories, it will take us up to a year or more before our people can rebuild an extensive industrial base in New Zealand and Australia. Thus, what we have in our stores now may dwindle quickly before we could get replacement stocks. Fortunately, parts of the extra supplies loaded aboard our fleet before its departure from Alpha Centauri included large quantities of civilian clothing. Some of those stocks were brought here in the past couple of days, so you will be able soon to get some extra clothing to supplement the little you were able to carry with you.”

Those last words were greeted with a few approving comments, as many present had at most two sets of clothes with them and precious little else. Corbin thus paused briefly before continuing.

“Now to the main subject of interest to us all: how to rebuild your lives here in Toulouse. In terms of finding new jobs to support your families, there are lots of positions open presently in the various offices, stores, shops and farming facilities of this tower. There are also more positions to fill in the open air market place that we built on the Right Shore of the Garonne River and in the various plants surrounding it. My staff will help you choose a suitable job during the following days, but take first the time to install yourself and your family and to learn about the Earth of today. Doctor Shelton has prepared a video documentary describing the present state of Human civilization at large, with an emphasis on the situation in and around Toulouse and what is presently called Western Francia. I urge you to pay close attention to this documentary, which will now play, so that you know what to expect outside of this tower.”

The lights in the amphitheatre then dimmed down as Ben Corbin and Ann Shelton stood to one side of the stage to let the newcomers watch the main viewing screen at the back of the stage.

The documentary was relatively short, at a duration of eighteen minutes, but it shocked many in the audience with its descriptions of what was to Centaurians a violent, barbaric and primitive world. Jan Fong and his wife Lita were as shaken as the others around them, they being mild mannered and peaceful persons. Ann Shelton then walked to the center of the stage and looked somberly at the crowd of refugees.

“Ladies and gentlemen, while the main message of this documentary you just saw was to exercise caution when outside of our possessions in Toulouse, I can assure you that there are plenty of decent people in and around the city of Toulouse. Much will

depend on how we build a friendly, constructive relationship with the people of this century, so I will urge you to treat the local people in a polite, friendly manner. While they are quite ignorant by our technological standards, that doesn't mean that they are stupid, far from it. They have the same basic preoccupations than you do, but have to deal with much harsher living conditions than those you now experience, which is why you may find them a bit rude at times. Local children will attend school with your own children once we open our various schools next week, while many local people are already working in our various plants and aboard our two fishing vessels, which are presently out fishing on the high seas. You will thus have plenty of occasions to interact with the people of Toulouse in the next few days. A word of caution about the general sanitary conditions outside our territory and in Toulouse: assume that most of the foodstuff offered on sale will need to be disinfected before consumption, so be careful about what you eat or drink in town. Especially, do not drink the local water, which is untreated and heavily contaminated with bacterias and parasites. You will also find out very quickly that the local streets are in a rather disgusting state, while relieving yourselves may involve using some repulsive facilities, when there are any. As well, the streets of Toulouse are not lit at night and some quarters should be avoided when dark, as street crime is still a problem, like in all medieval cities. I am however working with Count Raymond, the titular holder of the county of Toulouse, on improving those various points. Hopefully, you will be instrumental in bringing in those improvements, thanks to your various competences and specialties."

At that point, Jan couldn't help himself and he raised a hand to ask a question, attracting the attention of Ann.

"Yes, mister?"

"Uh, my name is Jan Fong and I am a professional musician. One of my concerns is about how relevant my skills will be around here. Would you have any use for a musician here and around Toulouse?"

Ann gave him a benevolent smile before answering him with a question.

"What instrument do you play, Mister Fong?"

"My specialty is the electronic keyboard, but I also play the electronic guitar and the accordion."

"Mister Fong, I can assure you that your talents will not be wasted here. Our people will be in need of some entertainment to help get over our collective losses. As for the local people of Toulouse, know that they enjoy any entertainment they could get

in the course of their hard lives. You in fact would be perfect for a position I had in mind. Come and see me later at my office once you will have had time to install your family.”

“I will certainly do that, miss.” Said Jan, encouraged, before sitting down and whispering to his wife. “I hope that they do have an electronic keyboard here.”

“They probably do, Jan. That Mister Corbin did say that this tower and its stores came fully equipped and supplied. There must be at least one music store in this big tower.”

“You are probably right, Lita.” Replied Jan before listening to Ben Corbin, who had just started explaining the process they would follow for getting an assigned apartment.

Fifty minutes later, after having been processed by a small army of secretaries and clerks, the Fongs were able to go to their new apartment, Unit 29-S-09, situated on the 29th level of the tower. Jan, like Lita, felt better at once on seeing their new home: it was a three-bedroom apartment arranged on two levels, with the bedrooms, a study, two bathrooms and a laundry room arranged in a loft on the upper level, overlooking a large, high ceiling living room and dining area. A private office, a small kitchen, a washroom and a storage room were situated on the lower level, under the upper rooms. The furniture and appliances were all modern and brand new, while large bay windows gave a spectacular view of the surrounding countryside, with the mountains of the Pyrenees visible in the distance, to the South. Jan glued himself to Lita’s back and enveloped her and their little son with his arms as they admired the outside view together, their small daughter at their side.

“I think that we will do well here, dear. Our children will be able to grow up in safety here.”

The couple then exchanged a tender kiss, with little Yoni still asleep in Lita’s arms.

17:04 (Paris Time)

New market place, Toulouse

“So, what do you think, guys?”

Ranulf, son of Bertrand, grinned as he and his companion carpenters admired their finished work, a new playground for children built in the center of the wide new market place.

“I can tell you that my kids will sure love to come and play here, boss.”

His ‘boss’, carpentry foreman Fidel Ramirez, nodded at that while smiling. His crew of local workers had just completed twelve wood, rope, plastic and foam play modules set in the middle of a large sand box, itself situated in the center of the 200 meter-wide new market place, a square, paved expanse surrounded on its four sides by long, low and shallow wooden buildings housing over sixty vending stalls, boutiques and shops, plus four warehouses. Behind the rows of stalls and shops, a perimeter road connected together the back of the shops and long rows of stables meant to shelter the horses and oxen of the merchants and visitors to the market. At the moment, the stalls and shops were empty, but this was going to change very soon, hopefully. Fidel eyed with appreciation the nine local carpenters that he had been supervising and also teaching to. While all illiterate men at first, they were far from stupid and had proved surprisingly good with their hands and with basic, manual tools, even though they had at first been completely unfamiliar with the notion of exact measurements. They had however learned quickly, with a couple of mnemotronic sessions to each of them used to teach them both modern English, basic arithmetic and geometry, something that had done wonders to simplify Fidel’s job as their supervisor.

“Well, guys, before I pay you for this day’s work, I have an important announcement to make. The schools inside the Toulouse Tower will be opening next Monday, now that qualified teachers have started to arrive, along with other new occupants. Doctor Ann Shelton has decreed that the schools will be opened to the children of the local people of Toulouse, along with the children of my own people. Special classes will be available to allow the older children to learn the basic curriculum, while your younger children will directly mix with our own younger kids. Schooling will be free and breakfast and lunch will be served as well for free to all the kids attending school. Priority will be given to the kids of those who have been working for us, meaning you and the others who worked on this market place. You will have until tomorrow to discuss this with your wives and decide if you want to enroll your children in our schools. Think well before making a decision, guys: this represents a better future for your children. Some may tell you negative things to discourage you from signing in your kids, but be wary of what they say.”

Fidel did not have to specify to Ranulf or the others to whom he was alluding to: the various churchmen in Toulouse had been rabidly condemning with harsh words the newcomers for days, telling their parishioners that the people of the Human Expansion

were blasphemers, atheists and sorcerers of the worst kind and enjoining them to stay away from them. Many in Toulouse had listened to the churchmen at first and had kept their distances, but that was quickly changing by now. The friendly attitude, openness and generosity of the people from the Human Expansion had already persuaded many that the accusations from the Church were baseless and were in reality meant solely to preserve the grip of the Church over them, rather than to protect the souls of the citizens of Toulouse. On his part, Ranulf did not hesitate one second and raised his hand at once.

“I will want to enroll my children in your schools, Boss.”

To Fidel’s satisfaction, all of his carpenters quickly joined suit with Ranulf.

“Thank you, my friends. You will not regret this decision, I promise you. When you will come back to work tomorrow morning, I will have someone here to register your kids and give you some information about the school opening day. Now, let’s proceed to the paymaster’s counter.”

Cheers greeted that announcement: compared to the wages the carpenters had been accustomed to get before in and around Toulouse, the people of the Human Expansion were paying over double the usual salaries, on top of providing a free lunch to their workers, lunch that was simple but solid. Just yesterday, Ranulf and his comrades had enjoyed parts of one of the biggest fish they had ever seen, a two meter-long codfish that had been caught in the North Atlantic by one of the two fishing vessels based in Toulouse. That fish, seasoned with salt and pepper, had proved excellent, on top of there being plenty of it. The men had even been able to bring home the leftovers, something their families had much appreciated.

Going to one of the shops and offices on the east side of the square, which were reserved for Human Expansion sales offices, warehouses, shops and businesses, the nine carpenters lined up at the entrance of the office of the market place’s manager, which also served as a pay office. As they patiently waited in line with other local workers employed in the stables of the market place, they saw one of the two fishing vessels based in Toulouse appear in the western sky, approaching at a fair speed. After a couple of minutes, it slowed down once near Toulouse and came to a hover above one of the storage silos of the fish processing plant established just south of the market square, along with a meat processing plant, a food processing and packaging plant, a sawmill, a sewage treatment plant, a water purification plant and a thermonuclear power

plant. Work was still being done to prepare the foundations for yet more plants and facilities that would add more products and goods to be sold or exchanged at the market. Watched by the local workers, the fishing vessel opened one of its belly traps, making an avalanche of fish fall into the waiting storage silo. Once its first hold was empty, the vessel then slowly hovered to another storage silo to empty its second hold. It repeated that process a total of six times, filling the storage silos of the fish processing plant with what had to be hundreds of tons of fresh fish.

“Wow!” Exclaimed Ranulf, “That’s a lot of fish! I wonder what kind of fish they caught today.”

Fidel Ramirez smiled on hearing that question and discreetly placed a call to someone he knew at the fish processing plant. He soon had an answer for Ranulf.

“Well, according to the fish plant senior foreman, the FLYING FISH just delivered 360 tons of codfish, 310 tons of salmon and 275 tons of shrimps. Our other fishing vessel, the DOLPHIN, is on its way back with sardines, mackerel and tuna.”

“Your people in that big tower can’t possibly eat all that fish, Fidel.” Said Bernard, one of Ranulf’s co-workers. “What happens to that mountain of fish?”

Fidel’s expression changed to a sad one then as he explained.

“We do have a lot of mouths to feed, Bernard, but most of them are not here: they are on another continent where the large majority of our people is being resettled. Right now, we have a bit over two million people to feed, but that number will eventually grow to eighteen million, once all our refugees are awakened from cold sleep. I thus can assure you that none of that fish will go to waste.”

The foreman forced a smile on his face after that to cheer himself up by giving away a good news.

“I can also tell you that some of that fish will be used in a new program about to be started soon. Doctor Shelton has received authorization from her superiors to organize a system of mobile flying canteens that will help feed the refugees made homeless by the Vikings across the kingdom. As for the next project you guys will be doing with me, I will show you how to build prefabricated house elements that will then be shipped to those same homeless refugees.”

Ranulf, like his comrades, nodded his head in approval at that: the people of the Human Expansion were demonstrating yet again their compassion and generosity towards the people of Western Francia. That was certainly going to help further discredit the bad words proffered by the Church against them. Ranulf made a wry smile on thinking that

the bishop of Toulouse, Hélishachar, was still not back from Arles, where he had fled with the treasure of the Basilica of Saint Sernin on hearing that the Vikings were coming.

Ranulf's turn at the paymaster's wicket came a few minutes later, with a young and very pretty woman from the Human Expansion noting down on her machine, which she called a 'computer', his work hours and his salary. She then counted six shiny new silver deniers of the type now mass-produced by the people from the stars, giving them to a happy Ranulf while flashing a warm smile to him.

"Here are your six deniers, Mister Ranulf. If you may go to the next service wicket, you will be able to take a container of meat and fish home to your family."

"You are too kind, Miss Watanabe. Thank you!"

Collecting his six silver coins and putting them in his belt purse, Ranulf then went to the next wicket to his right, where a young man gave him two large, sealed transparent plastic bags, themselves kept inside a larger bag containing ice cubes, to help preserve the food longer. Ranulf grinned on weighing the bags: they contained a good two kilos of meat and maybe three kilos of fish filets. There was as well a smaller plastic bag inside the biggest bag that contained granulated salt. And the Church was wondering why its credibility in Toulouse was going down every day!

CHAPTER 18 – NIGHT WATCH

20:11 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, October 5, 861 C.E.

Guardroom, Count Raymond's manor

Toulouse, County of Toulouse, Western Francia

The nine Carolingian men-at-arms got up on their feet the moment that Count Raymond entered the guardroom, followed closely by his son Bernard and by Major Hans Arntern. The five commandos present also got up, albeit less quickly. Raymond eyed first the portable surveillance console that had been set up in a corner of the guardroom, then the five commandos. He was not a little surprised to see that one of the commandos was a woman. She was very tall for a woman and was apparently fit and strong, apart from being most pretty. Major Arntern then started presenting to Raymond his five commandos.

"Count, may I present you my soldiers who will be on duty with your men to night: Sergeant Mark Dempster, who is in charge of this squad; Corporal Baya Makwando; Private Jor Deloran; Private Diane Champagne and Private William McGrath."

Raymond had to crane his neck up to look at the face of the gigantic Baya Makwando, who stood a good 192 centimeter-tall and whose head nearly bumped on the ceiling of the guardroom. The African man was also bulging with muscles, attracting a remark from Bernard.

"Uh, I would not want to get into a fistfight with that man, Father."

"Neither would I, Son! Well, Major, tell us about the organization of your watch."

"It is actually quite simple, Count Raymond. First, I want to emphasize that my soldiers and robots will simply be assisting and supporting your own men in enforcing peace in Toulouse at night. We do not intend to impose our own laws inside Toulouse. Your men will decide if an infraction or a crime was committed and my soldiers will then assist them, unless irregularities happen, in which case my soldiers would then report to me before acting."

Raymond understood at once what Arntern meant by his polite use of the word 'irregularities': it was common around the kingdom for men-at-arms in charge of watch

patrols to abuse their powers by levying so-called fines under flimsy pretexts, in order to fatten their purses. He however knew well each of his guards and was confident about their honesty. The arrangements for this cooperative venture, as stated by Arntern, satisfied him fully, as they emphasized his authority in Toulouse.

“Those terms suit me just fine, Major. What will be the use of that machine in the left corner?”

“That is a remote surveillance and control station, Count Raymond. It will link up my commandos and robots, who will be able to communicate instantly between themselves anywhere in and around Toulouse. Talking of my robots, a total of twenty combat robots just dispersed around Toulouse, using nightfall to take discreetly their positions at key street junctions and public squares. They will be watching their surroundings with the help of their night-capable sensors and will report immediately to this surveillance console any anomaly or disturbance they will detect. That will then allow our combined patrols to react quickly and converge on the trouble spots to restore order. Another ten combat robots are also kept in reserve at our new market place, ready to reinforce any point if necessary. If a band of cutthroats decides to commit crimes tonight, they will be out of luck.”

“My citizens will most certainly appreciate this extra security from criminals, Major. Well, I will then let you do your work. Good luck to you all!”

Raymond, his son Bernard and Major Arntern then left the guardroom, leaving the commandos and men-at-arms to resume what they had been doing.

Mark Dempster went back at studying with Adélar, the head of the Count's guards, the photomap of Toulouse that had been made with high resolution air photos of the town.

“So, you think that these two inns, the Tavern of the Crown and the Tavern of the Pig, could be centers of trouble at night?”

“Not ‘could be’, but rather ‘are’, Sire Dempster.” Replied the big Carolingian head guard. “They are the usual meeting points for the worse scum in town, especially in the case of the Tavern of the Pig. I hate to say this, but even my guards hesitate to enter those inns at night, unless they are at least four men together.”

That made Dempster raise an eyebrow.

“Then, we definitely need to keep a keen eye on those two places. One of our patrols will also have to pay a visit to them.”

“A patrol, pay a visit to those taverns? They could end up dead!” Protested Adélard. The commando shook his head in response, a mean smile appearing on his lips.

“I don’t think so, Adélard. Here is how we will proceed...”

21:07 (Paris Time)

Place du Salin, Toulouse

Half hidden behind the corner of a house, Diane Champagne detailed visually the small city square and the buildings bordering it with the help of the night vision camera integrated to her multi-function helmet. Tonight, she wore only a light protective suit, instead of the massive powered combat armor more common to commandos. Marcus, one of the guards of Count Raymond, stood behind her, watching nervously two buildings in particular.

“Those two inns over there, the ones where you see many lights inside, are the Tavern of the Pig on the left and the Tavern of the Crown on the right. Probably the most dangerous place out of those two is the Tavern of the Pig. The thieves and cutthroats that frequent it don’t like seeing members of the night watch in it.”

“Then, we will have to do some provoking, won’t we?” Replied Diane, sounding amused. Marcus gave her a dubious look.

“Look, I know that we have other guards ready to back us up, but don’t underestimate the criminals in there. They are very good with knives and won’t think twice before slicing your throat open if they think they need or want to do it.”

Diane mentally debated how much credit she should give to those words but finally decided that she was better off playing on the side of caution.

“Very well! I will keep my helmet camera and my microphone on continuous transmission mode, so that our other guards can react quickly at the least sign of trouble. Now, let’s do our best to look unafraid, Marcus.”

‘Unafraid?! I would have to be totally dumb to be unafraid right now!’ Thought the Carolingian guard as he followed the female commando towards the front door of the Tavern of the Pig.

21:10 (Paris Time)

Tavern of the Pig, Toulouse

"...and you should have seen how I rearranged the face of that fat merchant. He fled with his tail between his legs. Then, me and Fréjus helped ourselves to his wife and daughter!"

The said Fréjus, sitting facing directly Jules, burst out in laughter, showing twin incomplete rows of yellow, decaying teeth in the middle of a greasy, unkempt beard.

"But we were nice with them: we let them go afterwards...as naked as newborns!"

A third man sitting at their table smiled as Jules and Fréjus laughed again. As dirty and smelly as his companions, his huge frame and big, thick hands marked him as someone particularly dangerous, and with good reasons: Rufius didn't count anymore the number of people he had killed or maimed, either for money or for fun, but rarely by necessity. Nobody in Toulouse, where his reputation was notorious, dared get in his way, not even the guards of the city watch. He however still wasn't sure how to react to the newcomers from the future: anybody who could massacre Vikings with apparent ease deserved a modicum of caution.

As Fréjus, who was sitting facing the main entrance of the tavern, was raising his cup of wine and starting to drink from it, his eyes opened wide with surprise and he choked on his wine, spitting it in Rufius' face. The colossus let out a loud swear and grabbed the terrorized Fréjus by the collar, pulling him off his bench with ease.

"ARE YOU CRAZY, YOU SON OF A BITCH? I'LL BREAK YOUR NECK FOR THIS!"

"Marcelus, from the city watch...he is here, with a girl!" Said Fréjus, half strangled and barely able to talk. Turning his head towards the door, Rufius then let go his grip from the effect of surprise, letting Fréjus fall back on his bench, wheezing for air.

"By the Devil! That Marcelus cockroach, here! And with a girl from those newcomers, on top of that."

Pivoting on his bench to face the door, Rufius watched as the count's guard and the woman, who wore some kind of armored suit and a helmet, sat down at a table near the door and ordered some wine. As the tavern's serving wench was about to go to their table with a pitcher of wine and two cups, Rufius grabbed her by one arm, stopping her cold and nearly making her drop her pitcher.

"Let me serve those two, Marthe."

A concert of laughs and encouragements greeted Rufius' words. With the pitcher of wine and the two cups in his hands, the colossus walked heavily towards Marcelus and the woman, looking at both with murder in his eyes. While Marcelus looked quite nervous, with good reasons, the tall young woman sitting beside him simply watched calmly Rufius approach, apparently not intimidated one bit. That made Rufius positively furious: no man had ever dared look back at him like that. Coming from a woman, that felt to him like a slap in the face. Brutally putting down the pitcher and the cups on their table, Rufius bent forward, until his face was only mere centimeters from the woman's face. Completely ignoring Marcelus, who was by now as tense as a spring, the colossus spoke in his most threatening tone.

"You're not very smart, coming here to provoke me like this, you fucking bitch! However, if you follow me quietly upstairs and if you prove to be very nice with me, then maybe I will decide not to cut your throat and that of your shit disturber."

The young woman waited until the concert of laughs that those words raised had died down before replying in a calm, firm voice, looking straight into Rufius' eyes.

"You know the penalty for threatening members of the watch, you fat lard?"

Screaming with rage, Rufius threw the content of the pitcher of wine in the face of the woman before grabbing her by the throat. Temporarily blinded by the wine, Diane then raised her riot baton, which she had discreetly taken out of her belt, and jabbed it in the belly of her opponent. An intense pain went through the brute's body, while his muscles contracted uncontrollably under the effect of the high voltage jolt he received from the baton. Watched by the incredulous crowd of customers, Rufius crumpled to the ground, convulsing with pain. Diane Champagne then got up from her bench and adopted an aggressive stance, holding her baton with both hands.

"LISTEN UP, ALL OF YOU! YOU WILL NOW COME OUT QUIETLY BY THE FRONT DOOR, ONE BY ONE! AS FOR YOU, YOU BIG BULLY, I AM ARRESTING YOU FOR ASSAULT AND FOR UTTERING DEATH THREATS AT A MEMBER OF THE CITY WATCH."

Nobody moved at first, the customers being still shocked by the defeat of their champion at the hands of a woman. That delay was enough for Rufius to get over the effects of the baton's discharge. Jumping back on his feet, he pulled a long knife out of his belt and pointed it at Diane.

"You are starting to really break my balls, you snotty little whore!"

He then rushed at her like a bull, his blade held in front of him, while screaming furiously. Diane waited until the ultimate moment before taking one step to a side, while she swung her baton twice with lightning speed. The first hit was on the right wrist of Rufius, with the second one striking his right temple. The colossus lost his grip on his knife and crashed into the table previously used by Diane and Marcellus, breaking it into pieces. Mad with rage, Rufius got up and, still a bit wobbly, rushed again at Diane. This time, he managed to grab her baton with both hands, intending to take it away from her and hopefully to use it on her. Diane kept her grip on her baton and raised both of her feet, planting them against her opponent's chest. Put off balance by the 67 kilos of the female commando, Rufius fell forward and was catapulted in the air by a furious kick from Diane, who let herself fall and then roll on her back. The colossus fell down heavily on top of a table and three customers, crushing them. Before he could get up again, Diane drew her stun pistol, which was already set on maximum stun, and fired once, hitting Rufius in the chest. The big man then crumpled on the floor, down for the count. Diane then looked around her, fury in her eyes and voice.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? I SAID 'GET OUT', ALL OF YOU!"

Encouraged by slaps from the flat of Marcellus' sword, the customers hurried out by the front door. There, they were firmly lined up, searched and handcuffed by Sergeant Dempsters' commandos and Adélarde's men-at-arms, who were backed up by twenty combat robots. Baya Makwando and Beaudouin, the biggest of Count Raymond's guards, came in the tavern and grabbed Rufius none too gently, putting two sets of handcuffs around his wrists before dragging him out. Now alone in the devastated hall of the tavern, Marcellus and Diane looked at each other. A sparkle of admiration shone in the eyes of the old soldier.

"My, you crazy girl! You really know how to take down big bullies, don't you?"

CHAPTER 19 – A GOOD DEAL

14:08 (Paris Time)

Thursday, October 6, 861 C.E.

Air terminal of the Toulouse Tower

Human Expansion outpost of Toulouse

Ann Shelton gave a look of encouragement to Count Raymond, who stood with Jean de Chambriand at her side in the passenger arrival lounge of the Toulouse Tower's air terminal.

"Don't worry, Count: Governor Tsu is a fine woman and a very reasonable and decent person. Besides, this visit is mostly meant to inspect MY work in Toulouse."

"But so much could depend on this visit, my friend. To get her approval for all the projects you discussed with me would mean a lot for my county and my people."

"And that is why I like you, Raymond: you think about the good of your people, contrary to too many rulers around Francia."

Ann then concentrated back her attention on the shuttlecraft now sitting inside the arrival hangar of the tower. Three persons soon came out of the craft, two women and one man, and walked towards the arrival lounge. Ann then walked out of the lounge with Count Raymond, Jean de Chambriand and Ben Corbin, the general manager of the tower, to greet her visitors half way. She first saluted with her head Lynn Tsu, then Commodore Ferguson.

"Madam Tsu, Commodore Ferguson, welcome to Toulouse."

"Thank you, my dear Doctor Shelton. May I present you Miss Lana Tensing, my personal aide?"

"Pleased to meet you." Then said Ann while shaking hands with the woman in her mid thirties following the Senior Administrator before returning her eyes on Tsu. "May I in turn present you Count Raymond of Toulouse, his personal advisor Jean de Chambriand and Mister Ben Corbin, General Manager of the Toulouse Tower?"

There was another round of handshakes, then the group went into the lounge, followed by a shuttlecraft crewman pushing an anti-gravity cart full of luggage. As they made

their way towards the hotel of the tower, also situated inside the 400 meter diameter saucer section supporting the landing platforms, Tsu spoke to Ann in a gentle tone.

"I must say that I am impressed with your work here in Toulouse, Doctor Shelton. You accomplished a lot here, including on the diplomatic front."

"But a lot of that was thanks to the work of my assistants, Madam Governor. Mister Corbin has managed the activation of this tower and of its facilities in a masterful way, while Doctor Vyyn Drelan has had quite a lot of success in her world quest for foodstuff."

"Talking of Doctor Drelan, where is she now with her corvette?"

"She is presently in Japan, where she is in the process of discussing a commercial deal with the local authorities. She is hoping in particular to secure a deal for the acquisition of significant stocks of rice and tea there. Her next stop will be Guangzhou, the present-day city of Canton in China. According to our historical files, Guangzhou is presently a major trading port that receives many foreign ships and merchants, most of them Arab or Persian."

"Then, we should reasonably hope that Doctor Drelan will be able to secure important quantities of rice and other foodstuff there, in view of the size of the Chinese population, no?"

Ann hesitated before answering, making Lynn Tsu and Henry Ferguson look sharply at her as they walked together.

"Well, could there be problems there, Doctor Shelton?" Asked Tsu, making Ann nod her head.

"There could be, Madam Governor. Our historical files also mention that the second part of this century saw a series of droughts and floods that caused terrible famines in China. Those famines caused in turn a number of peasant revolts that rose in response to the lack of care from Emperor Yizong's government and to the crushing taxes he was imposing on his subjects to sustain his own, luxurious lifestyle. Unfortunately, our historical files don't give precise years for those famines and revolts. The only firm date we have about that period of troubles is the year 878, when an army of rebels led by a Huang Chao besieged Guangzhou and subsequently massacred thousands of foreign merchants living there, on top of sacking the city. If China proves to be presently in the grip of a cycle of natural disasters causing famines, then it would be immoral in my opinion to go there and buy large quantities of rice, rice that could feed starving peasants instead."

"But," cut in Henry Ferguson, "if there are indeed famines now inside China, then the warehouses in Guangzhou will be empty. Thus, Doctor Drelan should not encounter a dilemma there, apart from finding nothing to buy."

Ann vigorously shook her head at that apparently logical reasoning.

"Unfortunately, things don't work that way in this time period, Commodore. Guangzhou is a trading port geared towards the exportation of goods towards foreign lands. If there is rice and other foodstuff on sale in the warehouses of Guangzhou, it will have come from the collecting of taxes, which are mostly paid by peasants in grains and produces. The profits made on the sale of those goods to foreigners in turn go mostly to the coffers of the Emperor and of his regional military governor in Guangzhou. History tells us that the taxes levied on the peasants and merchants in China were not lightened in times of shortages and famines. Thus, Doctor Drelan will probably find sizeable quantities of rice and other foodstuff in Guangzhou, irrespective of the present plight of the Chinese peasants. The worst part is that, even if we don't buy that foodstuff out of moral misgivings, others will then buy it."

Lynn Tsu then stopped walking, forcing the whole group to stop in the middle of the hallway they were following, and looked somberly at Ann.

"I see where you are going, Doctor Shelton. I would also feel bad at profiting from the misery of others. Unfortunately, short of basically taking over by force the whole planet, it will be hard to avoid such dilemmas in the weeks and months to come. I want to be just and compassionate, as you obviously are, but I do have presently close to three millions of our citizens that are awake and need to be fed. Do you have a suggestion for me on how to handle that problem?"

"I do, Madam Tsu, and it would apply to the whole planet, not only to China. Basically, I say that we should buy what we can within reasonable limits and without unsettling the local food supply, but to also put aside a small percentage of the foodstuff we collect, to be used to help those in true need. Even one percent of what we collect could be enough to improve dramatically the situation in given regions. Heck, even the county of Toulouse could use some help in that fashion."

That last sentence made Tsu and Ferguson look at Count Raymond, who nodded his head.

"As proud of my county as I am, I must agree with Ann, Madam Tsu. With the recent depredations of the Vikings across the kingdom, the situation of many is quite precarious. One premature period of frost or a drought would be enough to push many

peasants to severe malnutrition or even starvation. Even in the best of times, there are still plenty of people in Toulouse and in other towns of my county that have barely enough to eat, like widows and old people without families to support them. Not having anymore to levy royal taxes on behalf of King Charles does help a lot, but I still don't have any significant reserves of grain in hand to counter any sudden shortages."

Tsu was left pensive for a long moment as Raymond, Jean de Chambriand and Ann waited, watching her. The ex-Governor of the Kyoto Alpha Province finally pointed a finger at Raymond.

"Count Raymond, I would like you to show me the situation of your poorest citizens. I came here to see how things are going in Toulouse and that is what I will do."

"I will be most happy to give you a guided tour of Toulouse, Madam Tsu." Replied Raymond while bowing to her. "When would you like me to guide you around?"

"How about right now? Doctor Shelton and Mister de Chambriand will also accompany me and Commodore Ferguson. Miss Tensing will take care of our luggage in the meantime."

Ann nodded her head, most satisfied by that decision, and looked at Ben Corbin.

"Mister Corbin, could you guide Miss Tensing to the V.I.P. suites of our distinguished guests while I go into town with them?"

"Of course, Doctor Shelton! If you will please follow me, Miss Tensing."

Splitting away from the duo with the luggage cart, Tsu's group took place in the nearest elevator and went down all the way to ground level. As the doors of their cabin opened into the luxurious reception lobby of the tower, Ann smiled to Lynn Tsu.

"If you don't mind, Madam Tsu, I would like for us to first walk to our new market place, which could be part of the solution to this local food dilemma. I will explain once there."

"As you wish, my dear! I need some exercise anyway: I have been buried inside my office in New Auckland for far too many days now."

While not saying a word then, Raymond and Jean de Chambriand exchanged sober looks: King Charles would not have shown any interest in witnessing the plight of his own people in the first place. As for walking long distance, Charles would have commandeered either a horse or a sedan chair instead in order not to tire himself. Those people from the future were decidedly completely alien in their way of thinking, compared to the average Carolingian noble. Walking out of the tower, the group

followed the paved road leading north to the new bridge linking the island of Le Grand Ramier to both banks of the Garonne River. They crossed that bridge to the right shore while continuing to discuss, with Ann reviewing with Tsu the amounts of foodstuff already acquired during the last week.

"...our catches in fish in particular could help us a lot in providing a food supplement to the needy, Madam Tsu. The success of our two allotted fishing vessels has been greater than even our wildest dreams, with an average of 840 tons of fish, mostly cod, mackerel, sardines, salmon, tuna and shrimp, brought back to Toulouse for processing every day."

"I certainly agree on that point, Doctor Shelton. Our other fishing vessels have also been catching record amounts of fish, so fish and seafood are actually the one domain where we already fulfill easily our needs. We are in fact enjoying a surplus in fish products. You thus have my blessing to keep in reserve or distribute to the needy ten percent of the catches that your two vessels bring daily, plus two percents of the meat from the wild game your teams take. I will do the same with the fish and meat brought to New Zealand, but will have those reserves turned into canned food, for a longer shelf life."

That exchange stunned Raymond of Toulouse, as a happy Ann Shelton noted down that directive on her electronic notepad: 84 tons of fish a day, plus a few tons of meat, would be more than enough by itself to alleviate any food shortages in his county.

Passing by the mass of the Novotel Inn once they had crossed to the right bank of the Garonne, the group then bifurcated on the road linking the hotel with the new market place, which had recently been completed. A tender smile appeared on Lynn Tsu's face when she saw the more than one hundred young children playing with enthusiasm in the playground of the market place, laughing and running around. The children were a mix of local and Centaurian children, watched by their respective mothers. Both the children and the adults seemed to mix without trouble.

"Children will always be the same everywhere. This sight truly warms my heart, Doctor Shelton."

"Mine too, Madam Tsu. Now, if you look to your left, you will see the row of commercial stands and shops that are reserved for Human Expansion businesses and offices. Some of these concessions will be restaurants and food counters due to be run by our citizens living in the Toulouse Tower. Other restaurants and food counters

around this square will be run by local Toulouse residents. All those shops will be regularly inspected and will have to abide by our public hygiene standards in terms of cleanliness and food safety. What I have in mind is to use some of those food counters, preferably run by our own people, to serve either free or subsidized food to the certified needy people of Toulouse and to the less wealthy merchants and visitors to this market.”

“And why not simply distribute free foodstuff to those in need instead?” Asked Henry Ferguson.

“I will actually wait until Count Raymond makes you visit a few hovels before answering you on that, Commodore. You will then understand better the local situation.”

“As you wish, Doctor Shelton. Well, Count Raymond, we are all yours.”

“Then, please follow me inside the town.” Replied Raymond.

Going through the Narbonne Gate, the small group then followed the Saint-Rome Street, the main street of the medieval city. Lynn Tsu and Henry Ferguson immediately wrinkled their nose at the stench from the raw sewage and garbage covering the streets of the city. Tsu nearly gagged at one point and covered her mouth and nose with a tissue to filter the worse of the smell, while eyeing with dismay the conditions around her.

“Is this considered normal as conditions go inside your city, Count Raymond?”

“It is indeed, Madam Tsu. In fact, you will find that all the cities of this kingdom lack in what you call public sanitation. Ann has however discussed with me a few oncoming projects that should improve greatly the situation...and the smell.”

“Well, it certainly won’t be a luxury!” Said Tsu as she looked with disgust at what she had just stepped on with her right boot. Raymond stopped the group forty meters down the street and pointed the miserable-looking, poorly built three storey building made of red bricks and wood that they were now in front of.

“This is a house used to provide low cost rented rooms to some of the poorest citizens of Toulouse, typically widows and old people devoid of family support. If you will follow me inside.”

A mature woman came out of a ground floor room as soon as Count Raymond had entered the building, the rest of his group in tow. She then bowed respectfully to her lord after one bewildered look at the group.

“Milord, to what do I owe the honor of your visit?”

"I simply wished to show to some distinguished guests the living conditions of the poor in Toulouse, my good woman. Do you mind if we tour your building?"

"Not at all, Milord! I will accompany you, in case you have questions about any of my tenants."

"A good idea indeed. Lead on, woman!"

Taking first the time to grab a candle holder and lighting it, the woman then made the group look in succession inside the six small rooms on the ground floor. None of those rooms had any furniture in them, save for either a pile of hay or a couple of wool blankets acting as bed. Lynn Tsu, like Henry Ferguson, eyed with dismay the last room as the female superintendant just finished giving them some information on the occupant of the room.

"You say that a widowed woman is living here? But, there is no furniture, no cooking utensils and not even a fireplace to cook food or warm oneself in Winter. Where does that poor woman eat?"

"At one of the cook shops around the Place du Salin, a bit down the street, Milady. All my tenants use those cook shops to eat every day, since none of them own cooking utensils and are too poor to buy some."

Confused by the terms used by the woman, Tsu looked questioningly at Raymond.

"What is exactly a cook shop, Count Raymond?"

"Something that is common to all the cities and big villages in this kingdom, Madam Tsu. Cook shops are either fixed or mobile kitchens where passersby can buy prepared, ready-to-eat food at most hours of the day or night. Since the majority of my urban citizens are too poor to own cooking utensils or even buy firewood to cook, they get most of their meals at such cook shops, sometimes as late as past midnight. The food prepared in those shops is generally cheap, but is also often of dubious quality, with the meat and pastries served there being frequently spoiled or moldy. My seneschal often has to slap fines on owners of cook shops who serve bad food or defraud their customers by overcharging them. An old proverb actually says that, while God sends the food to men, the Devil sends the cooks. By far the most common thing my people eat is bread, which is the main staple of everyone's diet in and around Toulouse and other cities. Meat is actually too expensive for most people to buy."

Ann then hurried to jump in the conversation at that point.

"This is why I was hoping to use the food counters that will open soon at the new market to help feed the needy of Toulouse, Madam Tsu."

"I certainly can see the merit in your idea, Doctor Shelton. Could we go visit one of those cook shops after this?"

"No problem, Madam Tsu!" Replied Raymond at once. "But let's first complete the tour of this building, if you don't mind."

The next level up showed more of the same, but they did encounter a room that was occupied by a woman, two young children and a baby. All of them looked emaciated and the children were also lethargic, probably because of severe malnutrition. The woman, who was maybe 25 years old and was busy spinning some wool by hand, looked up with bewilderment at her unexpected visitors. She was starting to hurry to get up on her feet when a gesture from Raymond stopped her.

"Please, woman, stay sitting: we are only paying a quick visit to this house. What is your name?"

"Marie, Milord." Said the woman in a weak voice.

"And you are a widow, I suppose?"

"I am, Milord. My husband died from a fever nine months ago. I then had to move out of the house we lived in previously. Now, I spin wool to earn money in order to buy food...when I can."

Raymond then saw Lynn Tsu lower her head, with tears rolling on her cheeks. Even Commodore Ferguson seemed to be moved by the words of the poor widower. Opening his belt purse, Raymond took out of it a handful of silver deniers and, gently grabbing the left hand of the widower, put the coins in her palm.

"Please accept these coins, so that you could go buy some decent food for you and your children. My advisor will accompany you to make sure that nobody steals your money. Jean, go with her!"

"With pleasure, Milord!"

"Wait!"

All eyes turned to Lynn Tsu, who still had tears on her face but had raised her head.

"I believe that more can and should be done to help her and the others in Toulouse that are in the same predicament. Doctor Shelton, I believe that your latest report mentioned the fact that local carpenters and construction workers had been hired by you to help build the facilities around the new market place and that you were planning to have them build prefabricated housing elements to help shelter those made homeless by the Vikings, correct?"

"You are correct, Madam Tsu."

"Then, you can add one priority project to your plans. I wish you to have built a number of hospices near the market place, hospices that would be able to house the widows and old people in need presently living in this county. Those hospices are to include communal kitchens that will serve free meals to their tenants. A school should also be built as part of that new complex."

"Did you say 'county', Madam Tsu?" Asked Ann, getting a firm nod from Tsu.

"You heard me well, Doctor. Count Raymond, do you see objections to this project?"

"Uh, of course not, Madam Tsu!" Replied a stunned Raymond, "I must praise you incredible generosity in offering such a gift to my poor citizens."

"Put it on the account of simple humanity, my dear Count. Until those hospices are built and ready for occupation, these needy people will be lodged at the Novotel Inn. Doctor Shelton, could you organize and supervise the selection and move of these people, in coordination with Count Raymond, of course."

"I will be most happy to, Madam Tsu."

Raymond looked alternatively at Lynn Tsu and Ann Shelton, humbled by such compassion and generosity.

"When I think that the Church accuses you of not being good Christians..."

09:09 (China Time)

Friday, October 7, 861 C.E.

Port area of Guangzhou (future Canton)

Guang Prefecture, China, Tang Empire

"So, when are you planning to return to Baghdad, my friend?"

Abu'l-Qasim Ubaydallah ibn Abdallah ibn Khordadbeh, better known to his friends and family as simply 'Ibn Khordadbeh', was thoughtful for a moment before answering the question from his friend Omar al-Khindi, an old Arab merchant who had been living in Guangzhou for over twenty years and who could speak fluently the local language.

"Well, I must say that visiting this country has been a truly fascinating experience for me, but I really should return soon to my work in Baghdad. I think that I will take the next ship that will depart for Basrah. However, I will make sure to travel on a better ship than the one that brought me here two months ago."

Omar laughed with Abu'l-Qasim about that reference to the way the latter's ship had barely survived a storm, only to limp into port in Guangzhou and sink at quayside.

"Yeah! It would be sad for the Caliph to lose his best geographer in such a way." A growing concert of terrified women's screams and exclamations in many languages suddenly erupted in the port area, making the two men snap their heads around. Pointed fingers then made ibn Khordadbeh and al-Khindi raise their heads, in time to see a huge, nearly spherical object overfly the city at a tremendous speed. Khordadbeh's jaw dropped wide open as he followed with his eyes the impossible flying ship as it performed a wide turn to come back over Guangzhou while losing speed and altitude. He however stayed where he was, contrary to most of the other people in the port area, who ran to go hide anywhere they could: this was too fantastic an event to miss any detail about this sight. The flying ship then came to a hover some 300 meters above the waters of the Pearl River, allowing Khordadbeh to have a good look at it. It was basically shaped like a wide, flattened cone with a rounded top and bottom and was at least three times larger than the biggest ship present in Guangzhou's port. It was also painted a sky blue and white pattern and bore a number of inscriptions and an insignia that the geographer could not read or even recognize. Whatever it was, it was definitely something that someone built. A kind of large door opened after a few seconds on one side of the flying ship and a much smaller flying ship came out. Khordadbeh felt blood rush to his brain when he saw the smaller ship turn towards the docks area he stood on, approaching while losing altitude, all in near silence. A quick glance told him that his friend Omar was still close by, albeit crouched behind a pile of big dried tea bags. As for the few Chinese soldiers that had been on guard duty in the port area, they had vanished from sight, something that didn't surprise Khordadbeh: the soldiers of the military governor of Guangzhou were much better at extracting bribes and bullying foreign merchants than at fighting. He kept watching the small flying boat as it landed smoothly and silently on the docks, a mere thirty paces from him. Khordadbeh could now clearly see at least two people through the front windows of the boat, which were covered with glass panes. More people then became visible as they started coming out of the boat via a rear ramp that had just opened. The four first persons to come out were certainly foreigners, and of a rather fantastic aspect at that: two of them, including a woman, wore a sort of suit that closely molded their bodies, plus complicated-looking helmets. The two others were even more of a fantastic sight, being huge and wearing formidable-looking steel armor that completely covered their bodies and heads.

'Warriors, no doubts!' Thought Khordadbeh of the two last newcomers. Then came out three more persons, two of which confused him to no end: one was a teenage boy and the other an old man, escorted by a warrior in full armor. The teenage boy wore contemporary clothes that marked him as a Christian barbarian from the West, while the old, bearded man wore what looked furiously like a rich Muslim robe and a turban. His curiosity now at its maximum, Khordadbeh started slowly walking towards the landed flying boat while keeping both of his hands visible, attracting an alarmed question from his friend Omar.

"Hey! Where are you going like this? You'll get killed!"

"He who doesn't seek does not discover!" Was the answer of the Persian geographer as he kept advancing towards the newcomers. One of the strangers, a beautiful young woman with blond hair, stared at him with interest as he walked towards her. Exchanging first a few words in an unknown language with her companions, the woman then addressed Khordadbeh in what sounded like the local Cantonese language. The geographer, who spoke only a few words of Cantonese, shook his head before replying in Arabic.

"I am sorry, but I don't speak Cantonese. Do you understand me?"

After only a brief pause, the woman answered him in good Classical Arabic, while the old bearded man approached, obviously interested in the exchange.

"Yes, I do! I suppose that you are a merchant that came from Arabia?"

"Close: I am a geographer on a learning trip and my name is Abu'l-Qasim Ubaydallah ibn Abdallah ibn Khordadbeh. And who might you and your companions be, coming in such fantastic fashion to Guangzhou?"

Before the woman could answer him, the old man stepped forward, a big smile on his face.

"Ibn Khordadbeh? The famous geographer working for the Caliph of Baghdad?"

"Uh, yes! You know me?" Replied Khordadbeh, both surprised and flattered.

"From reputation only: I read a copy of your 'Book of Roads and Kingdoms', a most excellent book. Let me present myself in turn: Abbas ibn Firnass, philosopher, mathematician and astronomer at the court of the Emir of Cordoba."

“Abbas ibn Firnass? I read one of your treatises on geometry and mathematics at the Bayt al-Hikma¹³ of Baghdad.” Said Khordadbeh, pleasantly surprised, before his mind returned him to the reality of his present situation. “Uh, who are these people and how come you are with them?”

“These people have come from the stars...and from three millenniums in the future. This flying ship, which is only one of the smaller ones in their fleet, visited Cordoba six days ago to buy fresh foodstuff. That was when I met Doctor Vyn Drelan, to my right, who graciously offered me to tour the World with her.”

Those words left Khordadbeh speechless for long seconds before he could speak again, pointing at the teenage boy, who seemed to be of strong character.

“And who might that boy be? He is obviously not from the future.”

“You are correct, my friend. This is Prince Alfred of Wessex, who is also accompanying Doctor Drelan on her World food quest. She picked him up at the court of the King of Wessex in Winchester, before coming to Cordoba.”

Vyn then jumped in on the conversation, smiling at Khordadbeh.

“Mister ibn Khordadbeh, I also happen to know you from your writings: your ‘Book of Roads and Kingdoms’ was required reading while I was studying Middle East history at the university. We will certainly talk further together soon but know this first: me and my people came to this century by accident and are in the impossibility of returning to the future. Furthermore, we have millions of refugees with us that need to be fed, thus the reason for my World quest. Do you know something about the food situation around Guangzhou and the rest of China? Are there reserves of food available for buying?”

“Since I am only a visiting traveler and can’t speak the local language, I am unfortunately ill-suited to help you in this, Lady Drelan, but I happen to have a friend here that would be able to help you.”

Turning around, Khordadbeh shouted out loud while waving at his merchant friend.

“OMAR, MY FRIEND! COME HERE! THERE IS BUSINESS TO DISCUSS!”

Reassured partly by Khordadbeh’s invitation and also attracted by the word ‘business’, Omar left his hiding place and cautiously came to join the geographer and the

¹³ Bayt al-Hikma : ‘House of Wisdom’ in Arabic. It was a famous library and center of learning opened in Baghdad in the year 832 C.E..

newcomers. He gave a nervous smile to Vvyn while bowing to her and speaking in Arabic.

“What may I do for you, lady?”

“While I do speak Mandarin Chinese, I would need the services of someone who has knowledge about the present state of the food market situation here. Know that I am here with the hope of buying very large quantities of foodstuff..if any is available.”

“I will certainly be able to help you in that matter, lady: I have been living here and doing business for the last 21 years. I also speak the local language. My name is Omar al-Khindi, at your service.”

“Excellent! My first question to you will be about the local modes of payment. Do they accept foreign gold and silver coins or do I need to change my money first in local currency?”

“By law, all foreign merchants have to change their own currencies into local money. That way, the local military governor gets a cut out of all foreign transactions.”

“I see!” Replied Vvyn, smiling with amusement. This Omar looked like he could be a lively character indeed. “And could you recommend to me a money changer that will not rob me blind?”

“I certainly can do that for you, lady. Uh, may I ask from where you come from exactly?”

Vvyn’s smile faded, replaced by what looked to Omar and Khordadbeh like sadness.

“From a very far place in the future that does not exist anymore. By the way, you may call me ‘Lady Drelan’. Here is the kind of money I use.”

Omar, straightening up, took the silver coin Vvyn then took out of a belt purse and examined it, weighing it roughly in his hand.

“Hum, the silver content of this coin seems to be very decent. You should get a good exchange rate for it.”

“I have also small ingots of pure gold and silver, if that could help things.”

Omar raised an eyebrow at that: those strangers seemed to be quite well off, on top of traveling in impossible flying ships.

“That could actually save you a lot for big deals, as you wouldn’t lose on the estimate of the silver or gold content of your coins, Lady Drelan. And what exactly are you looking for as goods and in what quantities, if I may ask?”

In response, Vvyn designated the Oriental man standing beside her.

"Mister Pham Tarang, who is my specialist in food acquisition, will be better placed to answer you."

The said Pham Tarang nodded his head once, then spoke in good Arabic to Omar.

"We are especially interested in very large quantities of rice, sugar, tea, wheat, spices of all kinds and also fresh vegetables and fruits. By large quantities, I mean volumes that would help us feed millions of people. On the other hand, we do not wish to empty the local reserves of food and thus cause a famine. So, Mister Omar, do you think that we could do serious business here?"

While taken aback by the number quoted by Pham Tarang, Omar nodded his head after only a short delay.

"I appreciate your concern about not causing local famines, mister: when such things as floods or droughts happen here from time to time, they can indeed cause untold misery and suffering. Fortunately for you, this year has been good for the peasants of the region. You may be interested as well to know that what is stored in the warehouses of this port is exclusively destined for exportation. If that will not be enough, I know a big local merchant that buys rice, sugar and fresh produce in large quantities, to then resell it to the highest buyer."

"We may very well need to visit that big merchant during the course of our dealings here: we truly need huge quantities of good quality foodstuff for our people. But first, about you, Mister Omar. If things go well in Guangzhou, we would be interested in keeping your services as our local contact and go-between here in China. We would also appreciate a lot if you could recommend to us someone trustworthy that could follow us around China as a translator."

Omar grinned at that last sentence and bowed again.

"I may just have the perfect translator for you, Mister Tarang. I have a son who is close to adulthood and who speaks perfectly Cantonese and Mandarin on top of Arabic and to whom I have also been teaching the intricacies and subtleties of business. Ahmed grew up here in Guangzhou and his mother is a local Chinese woman whom I married after coming here from Basrah. As for becoming your local point of contact, I would certainly be honored to be your man."

Pham Tarang nodded once, satisfied, and took out of his belt purse a small ingot of pure gold, giving it to Omar.

"Excellent! First, here is to pay for your services to come today. There could be more for you if business proves good."

Omar happily put the gold ingot inside his own purse and pointed at the rows of warehouses lining the docks of the port.

“Then, how about if we go see what we could find for you here, both in the port and in town? We could go see the money changers once you will have an idea of how much you need to buy your foodstuff.”

“A sensible course of action, Mister Omar. Uh, what about the local military governor? Could he possibly try to cause us trouble?”

In response, Omar detailed more carefully the three armored warriors escorting the newcomers. As weapons went, they seemed to have only short swords on them, but a number of objects that they wore could well be weapons of some kind. Short cylinders with handles slung across their armored chests particularly attracted his attention.

“If he ever does, would you be capable of making him more, uh, reasonable?”

Vyyn Drelan answered that question, a mean grin appearing on her face.

“We indeed can, easily. We saw how brave his soldiers posted around the port were. We are anyway ready to give him a little gold, and I mean a little, to help assuage him.”

“General Zhu Shong is always partial to gold donations.” Replied Omar without hesitation. “Let’s visit those warehouses, my friends!”

The next few hours passed like a blur for both Omar and ibn Khordadbeh, as the group visited warehouse after warehouse in the port area, with Pham Tarang ending up buying there a total of over 1,800 tons of rice, sugar, tea and wheat, plus dozens of tons of fresh fruits and a few tons of various spices. A final visit to the warehouse of the big merchant mentioned by Omar proved to be the proverbial icing on the cake, with another 700 tons of rice and 500 tons of wheat bought from that merchant. Omar, like ibn Khordadbeh and the residents of Guangzhou, was stunned when the time came to carry away all that foodstuff, with a 300 meter-long cargo shuttle from the MARCO POLO showing up to pick up the precious cargo. While Omar was kept fully busy guiding the group around and helping Pham Tarang close deals, ibn Khordadbeh used that time to converse at length with both Vyyn Drelan and Abbas ibn Firnas, learning more about the people from the future. As for twelve year-old Prince Alfred, while he didn’t speak much during the day, he kept his eyes wide open, wondering at all the exotic sights around him, including the local girls.

The Sun was low on the horizon when the last of the foodstuff had been safely picked up, leaving many local merchants beaming with satisfaction, their purses much heavier by now. Even the local military governor was satisfied, having invited Vvyn Drelan and her group for a brief tea ceremony, time to discuss business and earn his share of gold. With everybody tired and hungry but also happy, Omar thus invited the whole group to have supper at his house, which was close to the docks area and was attached to his own personal shop and storage room. The Arab merchant called in his family to the small but comfortable lounge of the house, lined up with Persian carpets and thick, large pillows, so that he could present it to his guests.

“Lady Drelan, may I present you my wife Liang, my son Ahmed and my daughters Aisha and Miriam?”

Vvyn, like Pham, Abbas and Alfred, bowed politely to the family first before being presented by Omar. Vvyn, like Omar, didn't miss the glimmer of interest and admiration in the eyes of young Prince Alfred on seeing fourteen year-old Aisha, an already sensual and very beautiful exotic mix of Chinese and Arabic blood. Vvyn also took good note of Ahmed, a handsome teenage boy of sixteen who was also of mixed blood and looked intelligent and quick-witted.

“So, this is our future translator. Quite a handsome son you have, Omar.”

“Thank you, Vvyn.” Replied Omar proudly, who was now on a first name basis with the members of the group. “I have been training him for years already for the day when he will take over my business in my old age.”

Vvyn nodded soberly at that: with no system of social security or old age pensions, the people of this century depended on their children to support them once age, disease or wounds incapacitated them, making them unable to earn a living by themselves. Life was indeed rough and unforgiving for most in this historical period.

“While I still want to gain the services of your son to help me as a traveling translator during my present tour of China, I would be loathe to deprive you of his support in the coming years, my dear Omar. I was looking at hopefully finding a person whom I could train and employ on a more permanent basis. Does your daughter Aisha speak Cantonese, Mandarin and Arabic, like Ahmed?”

Omar, struck off balance like his wife by Vvyn's question, finally answered her, with young Aisha now listening very carefully to the conversation.

“Uh, yes, she does, Vvyn. She also knows how to read and write in both Arabic and Chinese and knows how to count. You really would like to employ her? I must say that, here as well as in Basrah, girls are not expected to get involved in business.”

“I fully realize that, Omar, but you may have already surmised that, in my society, women are fully equal to men and can work in any occupation. If you and Aisha accept my offer, I guarantee you that she will then receive an advanced education and will be able to see the World. She will also be well paid and will be able to visit her family frequently. She will thus be able as well to help support you in your old days.”

While young Aisha looked on, her heart beating faster now, Omar hesitated for a long moment: while this proposition was most unusual, the fact was that the only plausible future prospect for his daughters up to now had been to marry one day with a local man or foreign resident of Guangzhou. Imperial Chinese laws already prohibited foreign men who married Chinese women from bringing them back to their country of origin. If he ever wanted to go back to Basrah, his native city, he would have to do so while leaving behind Liang, unless he flouted the laws and brought her and their children to a departing ship under the cover of the night. In fact, other imperial laws promulgated under the present dynasty had made it harder and harder for foreigners to mix with Chinese, while the liberty of practicing foreign religions was quickly eroding. His children, including Aisha, were practicing Muslims, but had to pray in secret, for fear of earning a visit by the soldiers of the local military governor. While totally unorthodox, Vvyn’s offer actually would mean a much better life in the long run for Aisha, whom he adored.

“Uh, Aisha is a practicing Muslim, like all of us. Would she be able to continue practicing Islam while working for your people?”

“Omar, while we are atheists, we believe in religious freedom, meaning that anyone in our society can choose to practice the religion of his or her choice, as long as that religion doesn’t advocate violence or discriminates against others. Aisha will be fully free to practice Islam among us.”

With a ball quickly growing inside his throat, Omar looked at his elder daughter, who had managed to keep silent up to now.

“Aisha, would you be ready to accompany these people and work for them?”

“Yes, Father! I would!” Answered at once the teenager. Omar gravely nodded once his head, then looked back at Vvyn.

“Vyyn, you have my benediction to bring my daughter Aisha with you and to employ her as a translator. When would you like her to leave with you?”

“Tomorrow morning, my friend. However, I would like to bring her, you and Ahmed for an hour or so on my ship after supper. I wish to make you three benefit from a technology we call ‘mnemotronics’, which will allow you to learn my own language in less than half an hour.”

“But, if you possess such incredible technology, why don’t you learn yourselves all the languages you need? Why the need for translators?”

“My dear Omar, you certainly noticed today how laborious my exchanges in Cantonese or Mandarin were with local people. That was because the variants I learned through mnemotronic techniques are the variants still known 3,000 years in the future, variants that markedly differ from the dialects used here in Guangzhou at this time. Our mnemotronic data banks are vast, but most of the languages presently spoken on Earth are absent from those data banks, since they became extinct centuries or even millenniums before my time. If you take the example of young Prince Alfred, our data banks did not contain a Saxon language program, so our only solution to be able to converse with him was to make him assimilate Modern English, along with a few more languages of particular use for him.”

“I understand now.” Said Omar, thoughtful. “In truth, you can hear dozens of different Chinese dialects just here in Guangzhou, and I won’t even talk about the rest of the empire.”

“Then, if you agree with this, I can offer you a mnemotronic session tonight, to teach you my language. As our official contact in Guangzhou from now on, it will be only logical for you to know English.”

“And I accept your offer with pleasure, my dear Vyyn. Liang, Aisha, serve us some tea, so that we could drink to this together.”

Both Liang and Aisha then hurried to their feet and disappeared inside the kitchen. Ten minutes later, all were served a cup of hot tea, including Aisha, Miriam and Alfred. Raising his cup high, Omar spoke in a solemn voice while looking at Vyyn.

“May this be the start of a fruitful partnership between us! To new friends!”

“To new friends!” Repeated the others before taking a sip of their tea.

12:53 (China Time)

Saturday, October 8, 861 C.E.

Bridge of the corvette H.S.S. WANDERER

Over the region of Chang'an, Northern China

Aisha al-Khindi was in a near state of shock as she was sitting at a vacant station on the bridge of the corvette WANDERER, with ibn Khordadbeh, Abbas ibn Firnas and Prince Alfred of Wessex also present on the bridge. Despite her having spent already a few hours aboard the corvette, what the newcomers from the stars could do with their science still stunned Aisha. An hour-long session in what they called a 'mnemotronic chair' had been enough to make her assimilate Modern English, Occitan and Old Japanese, plus modern mathematics at the basic level. The tour of the corvette given afterwards to her, her brother Ahmed, her father Omar and to ibn Khordadbeh had finished impressing into her how far ahead of the present world Vvyn Drelan and her people were. That they had not simply used their power from the start to grab whatever they wanted however told Aisha that their advance was not only technological, but also social and moral. Just the composition of the corvette's crew, with nearly half of the crewmembers being women, was enough to clearly distinguish them from what she was accustomed to. With her brother Ahmed returned to Guangzhou in the morning, she now could view from the air the imperial capital, Chang'an, a place that was nearly mythical for the common Chinese. It was built in a grid pattern of rectangular street blocks, each block being a good 1500 meters long by 500 meters deep. The whole city was about twelve kilometers to the side, with the Palace City and Imperial City situated at the northern extremity of Chang'an, walled off from the rest of the city. With its defensive walls and moats and its multiple pagoda temples, Chang'an made a truly impressive sight. However, her short life had already taught Aisha that this marvelous city had been built through the crushing taxes and forced labor imposed on millions of Chinese peasants, most of whom lived in abject poverty in their rural villages, with the specter of possible famines and natural disasters ever present.

Vvyn Drelan, standing behind Aisha's chair, was also looking at Chang'an on the panoramic viewing screen of the corvette's bridge. She was however mostly interested in the area of the East Market, one of the two giant market squares of Chang'an, where she hoped to find more substantial quantities of foodstuff to buy. They had made

another stop after leaving Guangzhou, this time at Hangzhou, which would become Shanghai in the future and was already a major commercial port. That stop, while relatively brief, had been nearly as fruitful as the one in Guangzhou, with large quantities of wheat, rice, tea, sugar and produces bought there. Vvyn had however decided not to search for or appoint a representative there at this time, in order to save a few hours in her crammed World tour program. Now, she could see the large warehouses lining up the sides of the East and West Markets. With nearly all the produces, grains and other goods taken by imperial collectors as taxes across China then shipped to Chang'an, those warehouses were liable to be full, something she fervently counted on. There was however the matter of Tang Yizong, the petty, 28 year-old emperor living in his luxurious Great Luminous Palace, enclosed by walls and adjacent to the Imperial Gardens at the northern end of the city. History had formed a picture of Emperor Tang Yizong that was less than flattering, to say the least. An indolent, arrogant and self-centered man, Tang Yizong had let his empire start to fritter away, oblivious to the miseries afflicting much of his people while living a debauched, luxurious life. No doubt that he, once he learned of the visits to other Chinese cities by Vvyn, would expect her to come and kneel at his feet while bringing him gifts. Well, he would indeed get a visit, but not the kind he would expect or hope for.

12:59 (China Time)

Emperor's chambers, Great Luminous Palace

Chang'an

Tang Yizong was in the process of undressing one of his concubines in the intimacy of his bedroom when the head of his guards entered the room at a quick pace. Angry and frustrated at this most unethical intrusion, Yizong shot a murderous look at the officer.

"How dare you enter my bedroom like this without being announced first?"

The captain of the guards, nervous sweat on his forehead, bowed deeply to his emperor while speaking in an urgent tone.

"I am truly sorry for this intrusion, Your Majesty, but two huge flying mountains of steel are now hovering above the city."

His answer only maddened even more the Emperor, who grabbed his robe with one hand while stepping out of bed.

“FLYING MOUNTAINS OF STEEL? ARE YOU DRUNK OR JUST MAD?”

“It’s the simple truth, Your Majesty, I swear! They are each as big as the Imperial City itself.”

Promising himself to have the man decapitated if he proved to have lied, Yizong quickly put on his robe before walking to the balcony of his bedroom. He however had to stop just short of the balcony, as a portion of a gigantic gray sphere was now visible to his eyes. With fear quickly replacing anger in him, he hesitantly made a few more steps to get on the balcony proper, his eyes embracing the impossible thing filling half of the sky above the palace. Another similar gigantic sphere floated above the southern half of the city. His brain nearly paralyzed by fear, Yizong then saw after a few seconds a third metal sphere, a much smaller one than the two others and with a different shape, floating in the sky further away from the city. He however did not have time to examine more the spheres before a female voice coming from the nearest giant sphere and speaking Mandarin boomed across the whole city.

“PEOPLE OF CHANG’AN, DO NOT BE FEARFUL. WE COME IN PEACE WITH THE SOLE PURPOSE OF CONDUCTING COMMERCE. SOME OF US WILL SOON COME DOWN TO THE EAST MARKET TO BUY FOODSTUFF. WE DO NOT INTEND TO BE VIOLENT OR TO STEAL ANYTHING, AS WE HAVE PLENTY OF GOLD AND SILVER. HOWEVER, ANYONE WHO WILL OBSTRUCT OR ATTACK OUR PEOPLE WILL ATTRACT A DEVASTATING RESPONSE FROM US. TO EMPEROR YIZONG, DO NOT INTERFERE WITH OUR TRADING AND DO NOT EXPECT A COURTESY VISIT FROM US. STAY IN YOUR PALACE AND LET THINGS BE! THIS WILL BE OUR ONLY WARNING.”

The voice then fell silent. Anger then flared again in Yizong, incensed by the deeply insulting content of the announcement from the giant sphere. How could anyone dare to order him to stay in his palace and do nothing while strangers were about to come to his own capital city? Turning around to face the captain of his guards, he screamed nearly hysterically at him.

“I WANT THOSE STRANGERS THAT WILL COME TO THE EAST MARKET TO BE BROUGHT TO ME, BY FORCE IF NECESSARY! THEY WILL KNEEL BEFORE ME OR THEY WILL DIE!”

The officer froze for a moment, caught in an impossible dilemma: if he disobeyed his Emperor, then he would lose his head. On the other hand, strangers powerful enough to make such huge flying ships no doubt could easily kill all the guards he would send to

the East Market, himself included. His dilemma was however resolved by the intrusion of a huge man completely covered in steel armor. The newcomer actually floated down from the level of the roof and silently landed on the balcony, just behind the Emperor. Before the captain of the guards could overcome his stupor at that sight, the newcomer roughly grabbed Yizong's right shoulder and made him pivot around to face him.

"You had your warning, Emperor Yizong." Said the warrior, with derision in his tone while saying the word 'Emperor'. He then raised a cylindrical object held in his right hand, pointing it at Yizong's chest. The captain of the guards jumped back from fear when the loud crack of thunder accompanied a bolt of fire that came out of the cylinder. Half of his chest vaporized away, Yizong fell dead without a word at the warrior's feet. The latter contemplated for an instant the dead emperor before looking at the captain of the guards.

"Feel free to have a new emperor designated, but remember our warning. Also, pray that the next emperor shows more consideration towards the plight of his people, or we may come back to remind him of his duties and responsibilities towards the Chinese people."

On these words, the warrior flew off the balcony and disappeared skyward, leaving a shaken captain of the guard alone with the terrified concubine and the half incinerated body of the emperor.

08:52 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, October 11, 861 C.E.

Carcassonne-Narbonne section of the old Roman road

Kingdom of Western Francia

COME ON, RÉGIS, HURRY UP A BIT!"

Régis, pushed by the three other merchants from Marseille travelling with him, finally managed to tie his oxen to his chariot, then climbed on the driver's bench, the bridles in his hands. Their four chariots, heavily loaded with barrels and jute bags, started rolling away from the roadside spot where they had spent the night. Before they could get to the old Roman road leading to Carcassonne and Toulouse, a small convoy of three chariots as heavily loaded as their own chariots rolled past them on the road. The foreign accoutrements of the newcomers made Humbert, the senior merchant of the group, curious about them and he shouted in Occitan at them.

"HEY, WERE ARE YOU FROM?"

The answer came in a heavily accented but still understandable Occitan.

"WE CAME FROM SARAGOSSA AND ARE ON OUR WAY TO TOULOUSE. WE HEARD THAT THE PEOPLE WHO FLY OPENED A MARKET THERE AND ARE BUYING ALL THE FOODSTUFF THEY CAN FIND."

Humbert and his associates couldn't help tense up on hearing the name 'Saragossa': that city was part of the Moorish Emirate of Cordoba, a Muslim country from which numerous past raids had come, devastating many Christian coastal towns along the Mediterranean coast, including Marseille.

"ARE YOU MUSLIMS?"

"NO, JEWISH!"

Humbert exchanged looks with Sylvestre, Régis and Alain.

"I suppose that Jews are still welcome in this country." Said Alain, the next oldest merchant of their group, who was traveling with his fourteen year-old son Gérard. "They also suffered in the past at the hands of the Muslims. Why not travel with them for the time being? As a bigger group, we will be better able to discourage or repel bandits."

"Hum, not a bad idea, actually. Let me go talk with those Jews."

Leaving the bridles of his oxen in the hands of Charles, his seventeen year-old son, Humbert jumped down from his chariot and walked quickly to the lead chariot of the Jews. The man in that chariot, which also carried a teenage boy, seemed for a moment to be about to grab the javelin lying at his feet but apparently changed his mind. Instead, the Jew also jumped down from his chariot and met Humbert halfway, politely saluting him with a bow of the head.

"Shalom, friend! I suppose that you and your friends are also heading towards Toulouse?"

"Who isn't, lately?" Replied Humbert before presenting his right hand. "My name is Humbert and me and my partners come from Marseille."

"Aah, Marseille! I went there a couple of times to conduct business: a nice city indeed. My name is Joseph and I come from Saragossa, like my associates, Daniel and Shimon. What may I do for you, my friend?"

"I was thinking that, if we traveled as one group, we would have better chances to either discourage or repel thieves and bandits. We have a couple of lances and my son Charles is good with a bow."

Joseph grinned on hearing that.

“My own son Eli is a good archer as well. Your idea is a sensible one: you may join our small convoy. What are you transporting as merchandise, if I may ask?”

“Wine, fruits, grains and salt, mostly. And you?”

“Olive oil, olives and citrus fruits. We heard that the people who fly will buy all the foodstuff we could bring to them, so we should not be worried about possibly competing against each other.”

“Good! Then I will not need to outsell you.”

Humbert’s defiant reply made Joseph laugh out loud and he patted his shoulder in a friendly way.

“A response worthy of a true merchant! I think that we will get along quite well, my friend. I suppose that you have been guiding yourself towards Toulouse with the help of that wondrous beam of light rising in the sky at night?”

“While I have been to Toulouse before during past years, that beam of light indeed attracted my attention fully. What do you think that we will find in Toulouse?”

“Well, I am not sure, as me and my friends are the first ones from Saragossa to head towards Toulouse since the apparition of the big flying ships. However, a fast rider from Cordoba brought to Saragossa the news that a flying ship had visited Cordoba to buy foodstuff and that strangers from the stars were now established in Toulouse and needed to buy foodstuff in huge quantities. So, we loaded up our chariots and went on our way.”

“Hum, I see! On our part, it was a flying ship that came over Marseille a few days ago, to announce in a thundering voice that a new market was now opened in Toulouse and that sellers of foodstuff were welcomed there.”

Joseph nodded his head at that, then pointed at the old Roman road leading to Carcassonne and Toulouse.

“Then, we should get moving, if we wish to be able to sell soon our stuff in Toulouse. By the way, my name is Joseph.”

“And I am Humbert. You are right: business can’t wait!”

The seven chariots and their occupants then resumed their slow advance towards Toulouse, the three chariots from Saragossa in the lead.

After another three hours of rolling on the old, rough pavement, the small convoy came in sight of the city of Carcassonne. It was actually not much more than a big

village, with only a few thousand inhabitants and without defensive walls¹⁴, but it was still an important town along the old Roman road. As they were passing beside the town, the merchants saw something ahead along the road. That something soon turned out to be a barrage held by a dozen soldiers, with a number of chariots bottled up at the barrage or in the process of turning around. Joseph, now worried, signaled to the driver of a chariot that had turned back at the barrage as he was going to roll past him.

“Excuse me, sire, but can I ask you what is going up ahead?”

The man threw an angry look towards the barrage and the soldiers before answering Joseph in a frustrated tone.

“You may! Those bastards, who are soldiers of the Viscount of Carcassonne, are stopping and turning around everyone heading to Toulouse...after collecting a toll on top of it!”

“But, why would they do that?”

“The Viscount of Carcassonne is said to be a nephew of the late Count Humfrid of Narbonne, who was killed by the people with flying ships who now reside in Toulouse. He seemingly wants to take revenge for that by cutting the road traffic going to Toulouse. I would not try passing around that barrage if I were you: those soldiers killed in cold blood a poor shepherd who objected too loudly to their taste to the barrage and to them taking two of his sheep.”

Those words, heard by all the Jews and by Humbert and his son, were greeted with consternation, starting an animated debate between the merchants on what to do next. The convoy was about to turn around, with the idea of trying to go around the town by another road, when young Eli suddenly shouted excitedly while pointing at something in the sky.

“THERE! A FLYING SHIP!”

The merchants all stopped their chariots at once and watched as a small flying dot quickly grew in the sky. The dot soon turned out to be a flying ship measuring a good thirty meters and basically shaped like a rounded wedge. It quickly slowed down and lost altitude as it approached the road barrage from the North. The soldiers manning the barrage didn't wait for it to land and ran away, trying to flee into nearby Carcassonne. Thin, yellow beams of light then shot out of the flying ship, striking in quick succession the fleeing soldiers and downing them all in seconds. Encouraged by this sight, Joseph

¹⁴ The walls of Carcassonne and its castle were built in the 13th Century.

took a quick decision and urged his oxen back on the road towards Toulouse, while encouraging his companions to do the same.

“COME, FRIENDS! THE ROAD TO TOULOUSE IS NOW OPEN!”

The merchants were too happy to do so and reformed the convoy as the flying ship was landing beside the road barrage, with men in armor coming out to go check the downed soldiers. As they were about to get to the barrage, now being dismantled by the newcomers, Humbert noticed two children, a boy and a girl, kneeling beside a body in the field next to the road and apparently crying. Some thirty sheep and lambs surrounded them, eating the grass of the field. Giving the bridles of his oxen to his son Charles, Humbert jumped out of his chariot and walked quickly to the two children. As he got close to them, what had happened became too evident to him: the body was that of a man in his late twenties or early thirties dressed like a typical shepherd, while the two children had to be the son and daughter of the dead man. Humbert reflected with bitterness at how cheap life was in the eyes of those who held power. Kneeling beside the body, he gave a sad look at the children, who were still crying.

“He was your father, right?”

The boy, who was maybe ten years old, nodded his head in answer.

“Yes! The soldiers killed him for protesting after they stopped us and took two of our sheep.”

Humbert then looked at the girl, who was a bit younger than her brother. By themselves, those two children would be utterly defenseless and unable to provide for themselves, apart from probably losing control of their herd of sheep in a matter of hours if they continued on their way to Toulouse. The noise of booted feet approaching then made him snap his head around, in time to see a near giant of a man in an impressive armor walking towards him and the children. Humbert slowly got up while making sure not to make any threatening move as the man in armor stopped near the dead shepherd and looked down at the corpse. Arming himself with courage, the merchant then spoke in Occitan.

“The soldiers at the barrage killed that poor man for protesting the stealing by them of two of his sheep. These two kids were his children. Could you help them, good sire? Alone, they will surely die or will end up being abused by someone.”

The big man raised the visor of his helmet, showing his face to Humbert. His expression was somber as he spoke softly to the merchant.

“We will help them, mister. Thank you for showing care towards them.”

He then turned around to shout a series of orders in a language unknown to Humbert before looking back at him.

“My soldiers will now kill those bastards for murdering an innocent. Were you on your way to Toulouse, mister?”

“I was! Me and my traveling companions are driving seven chariots full of foodstuff that we intended to sell in Toulouse. It seems that those soldiers, who belong to the Viscount of Carcassonne, were turning around all those heading to Toulouse. A number of merchants have already been forced to turn around at the barrage.”

“I see! I guess that I will have to pay a visit to that Viscount of Carcassonne after this.”

“What will you do with those two children? That herd of sheep is probably all that they have left to them and they will never be able by themselves to guide it to Toulouse.”

“We will take them to Toulouse, along with their sheep and the body of their father. If they have no other adult family members left, then they will be lodged at an orphanage we have just built, until someone could adopt them. Again, thank you for caring about them, mister.”

“It was the only Christian thing to do, sire.”

The man nodded again and shouted more orders, making four of his soldiers come at a run. Now reassured about the kids, Humbert returned to his chariot, climbing on top of it and taking back the bridles from his son.

“Those knights will take care of the two kids of that poor dead shepherd. Let’s get back on our way to Toulouse.”

Humbert couldn’t help make a ferocious grin when he saw six of the armored men get off the ground and start flying towards Carcassonne, where the Viscount’s manor was easily distinguishable.

“Justice is about to be rendered. Another blood-sucking noble who will get his just comeuppance.”

10:05 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, October 12, 861 C.E.

Toulouse-Carcassonne road

Two kilometers south of Toulouse

The seven merchants and four teenage boys were silent for a long moment atop their stopped chariots as they contemplated the gigantic mass of the Toulouse Tower on the island of Le Grand Ramier. After seeing its roof light from as far as Marseille at night, the illuminated tower itself had started to appear over the horizon near Carcassonne. Now, they could plainly see how truly big and tall it was. The merchants could also see as well the other buildings surrounding it, all evidently not built by Carolingian architects. Only a few kilometers short of Carcassonne, the small convoy had encountered a group of machines supervised by a few persons from the future who were building a new road parallel to the old Roman road, but much wider and smoother, with a surface made of some kind of white mortar. The engineer in charge of that construction crew had then told Joseph and the others that the road was going to eventually go all the way to Marseille, while other roads were also being built, radiating from Toulouse and heading respectively towards Albi and Rodez, Auch, Bordeaux via Moissac and Agen, Cahors and Périgueux. Now that he could see the extent of the new industrial zone just outside the old city of Toulouse, Joseph understood at last how extensive and ambitious the plans of the men from the stars were. Anxious to do business with such people and curious to see what he would be able to buy in exchange for his foodstuff, he urged forward his pair of oxen, rolling down the new road towards the big market place visible ahead and with the other six chariots following closely.

Their chariots passed by a number of big buildings with sides made of metal and glass before arriving at the market place proper. Quite a few other chariots and carts were also on the access road of the market when they rolled to a stop beside a man holding a sort of tablet and standing near a kind of control hut. The man approached Joseph's chariot and gave the Jewish merchant a welcoming smile, addressing him in Occitan.

"Good morning sir, and welcome to Toulouse! May I ask what you are bringing for sale to this market?"

"You may, my good man. Me and my two associates following behind me come from Saragossa and brought barrels of olive oil, fresh olives, citrus fruits and a couple of barrels of sardines conserved in olive oil. The four next chariots behind us are from Marseille, so you will have to ask them about their merchandise."

The man, dressed in a close-fitting blue coverall, played the fingers of his right hand over his tablet before looking back up at Joseph.

“Please proceed to the second food inspection station from the left, where inspectors will check the quality of your foodstuff and assess a price for it. There is however no haggling allowed on the value of the foodstuff: the prices offered by us will depend strictly on the quality of your products. If you accept the values we will establish, you will then be paid and you will be able to visit the market and decide what you want to buy from us in exchange. Know that we rent at low prices to visiting merchants both vending stalls, storage huts and stables set around the market square. You will also be able to find some comfortable lodging at the Novotel Inn over there.”

Joseph looked up at the towering glass and steel building sitting near the market square and pointed at by the man.

“Your inn looks quite luxurious to me, good man. Could we really afford it? We are of quite modest means, after all.”

“Do not fear, mister: the accommodations for visiting merchants at the Novotel Inn are subsidized, to encourage commerce. There is only one thing, though: if you want to stay at the Novotel Inn, you will have to pass first by a cleaning station set outside the entrance. We, uh, had a few problems at first with visitors bringing in small unwanted guests.”

Joseph, like his companions, broke into laughter then, having understood perfectly what the man meant. With the poor sanitary conditions prevailing around Francia, where body cleanliness was much less practiced than in Spain, lice and pubic crabs were a common occurrence with the members of the lower classes. One person infected with lice or crabs could and did often contaminate a whole inn during a stay, in which case getting rid of the pest afterwards could be very difficult indeed.

“We won’t mind that, sire: we saw our share of bed bugs in poorly kept inns and appreciate the fact that you are trying to prevent that in your inn.”

Going to the designated station, which was part of a row of four similar stations set along the access road, the three chariots from Saragossa stopped there, while the four chariots from Marseille were directed to the next adjacent station. One man and two women, all dressed in blue coveralls, then approached the Spanish chariots with tablets in their hands. Eli smiled on seeing one of the two women, a young beauty in her early twenties, approach his chariot and talk to Joseph, asking him about the exact nature and quantity of his merchandise. After taking note of his answers, the woman then got up on the chariot to visually inspect his oil and olives, taking samples of them

before jumping back down on the pavement and entering the hut that was part of the inspection station. She came back after a few minutes and went to Joseph, who was waiting nervously for her verdict on his merchandise: if he didn't make a significant profit on the sale of his merchandise, then his trip to Toulouse could well turn out to be a net loss, due to all the travel costs and various road tolls during his long trip from Saragossa. That was a gamble that merchants had to take all the time, which was why they commonly haggled quite fiercely about prices.

"Well, Mister Joseph, I am happy to tell you that your olive oil was found to be pure and of very good quality, while your olives preserved in oil were also of good quality. We will now weigh your merchandise, to establish the final price we will offer you."

"Then, I will start unloading my barrels with the help of my son."

"No need to, mister: we have robots for that kind of work."

"Rob...what?"

"Robots, machines with artificial intelligence built for specific tasks, like carrying heavy objects."

Two big machines, each the size of a large man and rolling around on four small wheels, then came out of the station and approached Joseph's chariot. Their pairs of steel arms quickly undid with surprising dexterity the ropes tying down the barrels filling the chariot, then each grabbed one barrel at a time, lifting the heavy barrels with apparent ease and then bringing them to what looked like a low steel platform next to the inspection hut. The whole process took less than five minutes, after which the woman came to see Joseph again.

"Mister Joseph, I am ready to offer you a total of 5,360 silver deniers for your olive oil and your olives. Do you accept that offer?"

Joseph had to repress a content smile then: while the sum quoted by the woman was higher than even his best hopes, he didn't want to give her the impression that he was fleecing her, so that he could come back on another trip and profit again from such good prices.

"I must say that your offer is quite reasonable, young lady. I accept it!"

"Excellent! You will also get as an extra a coupon for a free room for one night at the Novotel Inn, which will include three free meals as well, plus another coupon for renting free a stall for your chariot and oxen for one day. If you decide to stay longer at

the inn, then it will cost you three deniers a day, meals included, plus one denier a day for a stall.”

Joseph did smile then, quite happy: overall, this was a very good deal.

“I will certainly use your generous inn bonus, young lady. Uh, may I ask what kind of products I could find here that would sell well in Saragossa?”

“You will find plenty of items of interest here, Mister Joseph.” Replied with a charming smile the young woman. “We specialize in the low cost production of metal items, glassware and cut wood, while we sell limited quantities of various spices we brought by air from the distant Orient. You will also find in this market place a number of restaurants serving a variety of exotic food and drinks, on top of more traditional dishes. Now, would you prefer to be paid in silver coinage, in gold coinage or with a mix of gold and silver?”

“Since both are accepted in the Emirate of Cordoba, I will take half of the sum due to me in gold and the other half in silver.”

“Then, if you could follow me inside the inspection hut.”

“With pleasure, young lady. ELI, COME DOWN TO HELP ME CARRY OUR MONEY!”

“COMING, FATHER!”

Following the woman inside the inspection hut, Joseph watched her use some sort of money dispensing machine to form piles of coins on a service counter. She then showed to the merchant the four types of coins she had piled on the counter.

“Your 5,360 silver deniers were subdivided by me into eleven gold livres, 200 silver sous, 320 silver deniers and 100 copper oboles. Just to refresh your memory, there are twenty sou per livre and twelve deniers per sou, or 240 deniers per livre. The obole, used as small pocket change, goes for ten to the denier. You may inspect or weigh each model of coin we use if you wish so before accepting your payment and counting your money.”

Taking one example each of the coins on the counter, Joseph examined them with interest while also roughly weighing them in his practiced hands.

“So, you strike your own coinage. I must say that your coins’ manufacture is of very high quality indeed. Their gold and silver content also appear high. I accept them!”

“Then, before you start counting your coins, may I offer you this, for the very modest price of two deniers each?”

Joseph looked down at the steel box that the woman had taken from under the counter and put on top of it, with its cover opened. It looked extremely sturdy and was large enough to accommodate over half of the coins piled on the counter. The key that came with it was of a complicated design that appeared very difficult to pick. The inside was also arranged into two superimposed, removable drawers meant to facilitate the storage of different types of coins. Grabbing it and turning it around to examine it in detail, Joseph nodded his head after a few seconds.

“I like this! I will buy two of these.”

The woman took out a second, similar strong box from under the counter, along with a long neck lanyard with a safety clip.

“If you wish to keep your keys with you at all times, then you may use this key lanyard. You may now count your money.”

“Thank you!” Said Joseph before starting to count his coins, pouring them as he went into his two new strong boxes. Once he declared himself satisfied with his counting, the woman gave him as well a sort of rectangular piece of what looked like waxed parchment covered with colorful printing and an image of the nearby inn, plus a large numbered disk made of a light material.

“Here is your coupon for a free one-day stay at the Novotel Inn, plus a numbered tag for the stall now assigned to your chariot and oxen. A stable boy will guide you to your stall. If you don’t mind, Mister Joseph, I would like to ask you a few questions, so that we could register some basic data about you for the benefit of future trading with you.”

“Uh, okay!”

“Could you then please step in front of this white wall screen, Mister Joseph?”

The puzzled Jewish merchant did so, facing a sort of small box held on top of a tripod on the counter. The young woman looked at something behind the box and pressed a button, then had Joseph lay in succession both of his hands on a glass surface laid on the counter. She finished by asking a few short questions to the merchant about his name, date and place of birth and his present place of residence before smiling to him and shaking hands with him.

“Thank you very much for bringing your products to Toulouse, Mister Joseph. I will now call a stable boy, so that he could guide you around the market.”

"It was my pleasure, young lady." Replied Joseph before grabbing his two precious strong boxes and going back to his chariot. Seeing that Daniel and Shimon had also concluded their dealings, he went to see them.

"I must say that I got a very good deal. How did you two fare?"

"Very well indeed!" Replied Daniel. "I got really good prices for my olive oil, which those people seem to need in large quantities."

"And you, Shimon?"

"I also got good prices for my fruits, Joseph. So, what do we do now?"

"We wait for a stable boy to guide our chariots to rental stables, then go take our rooms at that giant inn of theirs. We will have plenty of time afterwards to go see what is on sale at this market that could be of interest to us. Let me just see quickly how our friends from Marseille did."

Going to the next inspection station, where the four chariots led by Humbert had been directed to, Joseph found the Provence merchants quite satisfied as well about the deals they had made. Of a common accord, the two groups then joined back together after two teenage boys wearing green coveralls came to them, presenting themselves as their guides to the stables. As the now empty chariots and their occupants followed the two guides along the periphery road running alongside the market square, Humbert asked a question to his guide while pointing at a group of wooden buildings located near the eastern edge of the market. Some of the buildings were completed, but many were still under construction, with over two dozen workers hard at work around the sites.

"Hey, boy, what are those buildings for?"

"They are hospices for widows, elderly persons and poor people. There will also be an orphanage and a school, all built at the expense of the people from the future. Their occupants live for free in these hospices, which includes free meals as well, sire."

"That's mighty generous of those people from the stars, I must say. And why are they doing this?"

"Out of simple generosity and compassion, sire. The people from the future themselves came with millions of their citizens reduced to being dispossessed, destitute refugees, which is the main reason they are now buying food everywhere they can. Their own plight pushed them to sympathize with our own poor people, I guess."

"I see!" Said Humbert, digesting those words. He then looked at the playground set in a huge sand box in the middle of the market square, where dozens of young

children and toddlers were playing with enthusiasm. From their clothes, it was evident that the children were a mix of Carolingian and star people, yet there didn't seem to be any apparent preferential treatment in favor of the children from the stars, while mothers from both eras conversed on apparently amiable terms while watching their respective kids.

"I am starting to really like those people, Charles."

"Me too, Father. Hell, I wish that I could have had a playground like this to play in when younger."

"With luck, maybe your own children will be able to enjoy such facilities." Replied Humbert in a prophetic tone.

The group soon got to a row of wooden stalls, with their two guides then designating to them seven stalls to be used by the merchants for their chariots and oxen. Each individual stall had large doors locked with a chain and padlock and were provided with piles of hay and basins full of water. Once the chariots and beasts were inside their individual stalls, the two guides gave the keys for their padlocks to the respective chariot owners, telling them to hook the keys to the safety lanyards already supporting the keys of their new strongboxes. From there, with their precious strong boxes in their hands and their bags on their backs, they proceeded on foot to what looked like a newly built wooden annex situated beside the main entrance to the Novotel Inn. One of the guides made a polite smile while explaining what was next.

"My employers from the Human Expansion hope that you will not feel badly about something that has turned out to be a necessary precaution meant to protect public health. Inside are a series of showers and baths meant to clean yourselves of any potential body and hair lice and other little critters that could in turn potentially infect the whole inn. As seasoned travelers, you surely must have encountered such a problem before in the past, gentlemen."

All the merchants nodded their heads soberly at that, knowing too well how common lice and bed bugs were in the inns found in the towns and villages of Francia.

"Excellent! Your present clothes will also be cleaned at the same time, to be returned to your rooms afterwards. In the meantime, robes and sandals will be provided to you until you can get your personal clothes back. If you will now follow me inside."

Actually happy to have this opportunity to enjoy a free bath, the merchants from Saragossa walked in first, to find themselves at first in a small reception room on which

two doors gave in: one with the pictogram of a woman on it and the other with the pictogram of a man. Guided at once into the men's section, the merchants had their guides then replaced by a male attendant whose first action was to show them a modern flush toilet and explain to them how it worked, insisting on refraining from the common medieval habit of relieving oneself wherever one was, even when inside a building. Next, the group was split into individuals and sent to cabins where they completely undressed and put their clothes in bags that were then marked and tagged with their names and reservation numbers. Their precious money boxes were also locked inside sturdy lockers, with the keys to the lockers then handed over to the respective merchant. Each one of them then got a brief visit by an old man who closely inspected their hair and bodies to see if they had vermin on them. While the Saragossa merchants, who came from a culture that hailed cleanliness, were found free of vermin, a number of the Marseille merchants were found to have hair lice. All of them still had to then have a hot shower, a new experience that they actually enjoyed, using a strong-smelling cream soap and shampoo provided by the attendant. Those that had been found with lice earned a second shampoo for themselves, with the same old men who had inspected them vigorously rubbing their scalps and beard with a sort of cream and then telling the merchants to sit down and wait for a few minutes, to give time to the anti-lice cream to thoroughly kill all the lice larvae in their hair. Those same merchants had to take a third shower afterwards to remove the cream and dead lice. After nearly forty minutes of this thorough treatment, the merchants were finally able to walk in the main reception lobby of the Novotel Inn, wearing comfortable robes and sandals and carrying their strong boxes and keys. They were at once stunned by the utter luxury and comfort of the décor.

"By God!" Uttered Shimon, one of the Saragossa merchants. "This would make the Emir's palace in Cordoba look like a cheap inn!"

"Yes, but don't tell that to the Emir!" Replied Joseph in jest. The latter however had his own eyes nearly pop out when he stepped inside his assigned room on the 21st floor of the inn nine minutes later.

"God! The Emir's palace IS a shithole compared to this! And this is a so-called standard room for your people?"

The inn's valet that had accompanied him and his son Eli to his room, a young woman from the future, smiled at his question.

“Our society is a very egalitarian one, sir. There isn’t much difference in the standard of living between our highest and lowest citizens. Our few V.I.P. rooms in this inn, while roomier, are not much more comfortable than your room.”

Joseph took a few seconds to digest those words: in contrast, Saragossa had both palatial mansions and hovels, the latter being in the crushing majority. Coming inside with him and Eli, the valet then quickly reviewed with him the amenities of the room, including the bathroom appliances, and took a couple of minutes to show the two Saragossans how to use the flat screen viewer unit of the room, which had four entertainment and three news and educational channels available on display. The valet also used that occasion to set the viewer’s language on Arabic dubbing, one of the five language settings available. She ended up her visit by showing to Joseph the three meal chips both he and Eli had received at the reception desk of the inn.

“Just to make sure that you understood that, sir, those chips are each good for a meal at the buffet cafeteria of the inn. Even if you decide to go eat one or more time at one of the restaurants of the market place during your free day of lodging here, you will still be able to use them for meals at the inn during the next days if you decide to pay for some extra days at our inn.”

“With the kind of luxury and comfort I am looking at here, young lady, I may very well decide to take a few days of well-earned rest at your fantastic inn before going back to Saragossa.”

“About your return trip, sir, if I may: you may or may not have been told yet about this at the market place, but chartered return trips by air for merchants with chariots and large confinements of goods can be arranged with our market offices, for a fee. This could save you weeks of travel and may end up being more economical for you despite the cost of the air ticket.”

“Hell, I think that I will use such a service! Thank you very much for your advice, young girl.”

Joseph then gave the valet a one denier silver coin before she left, closing the door of the room behind her. Looking at the clock on the dresser of his room, which showed the hour in both Arabic and Latin numbers, Joseph saw that it was close to noon.

“Well, I don’t know about you, Son, but I am getting quite hungry. How about going to visit that buffet cafeteria our valet mentioned?”

“A fine idea, Father. But, if those people are truly in bad need of foodstuff, won’t we find that buffet a bit, uh, bare?”

“Hum, an interesting question, actually. I guess that there is only one way to find out about that.”

Going up to the top level, where the restaurants of the inn were situated, they quickly found that Eli had been both right and wrong. While there was only a very limited variety of meat and fresh vegetable dishes on the menu, this was more than compensated by the impressive list of fish and seafood recipes on display, some of them very exotic-looking. There were also on display a good number of dishes made with something called ‘rice’, while a hot beverage called ‘tea’ was served. Asked about that discrepancy between meat, vegetable and fish availability, one of the cooks answered Joseph readily enough.

“It is true that our present menu is quite limited in the meat, vegetable and fruit departments, sir. Hopefully, the situation will start improving in a few weeks, particularly in the case of fresh fruits and vegetables, when our own crops will start producing. As for fish and seafood, our fishing vessels have been highly successful in catching fish of all sorts around the high seas and fish is actually the one type of foodstuff that we now have in sufficient quantities for all of our people. As for rice, it is a very common staple in Asia and is produced there in quantities huge enough for us to have been able to go buy in good quantities. The same goes for tea. Rice is actually quite filling and nourishing and was used extensively on Alpha Centauri.”

“I see! Thank you for your information, good man.” Said Joseph before going with Eli to an empty table, carrying their trays of food. Joseph, who had made a point of serving himself a little of everything in order to taste the various dishes available on the menu, was more than pleased with the recipes, including those made up with rice and fish, which were seasoned with a wide variety of spices. The hot tea, which he had heard about before but had never tasted, also met with his approval. As for his son Eli, his eyes were closed in delight as he bit on a piece of deep-fried fish.

“Even with this so-called ‘limited’ menu, I could eat here every day. This deep-fried fish fillet in batter is really nice and tasty.”

As he just said that, they were joined at their table by Daniel, Shimon and Zev, each carrying a full food tray.

“So, how is the food?” Asked Cheerfully Shimon.

“Excellent, actually, especially the fish and rice dishes.” Answered Joseph.

“Good! By the way, Zev took some time to watch a bit those spectacles shown on that magic flat box in our room and he stumbled on a show with very nice-looking young women wearing delightfully shocking, immodest clothes. Those girls were also singing and dancing very well indeed. It’s a good thing that my wife didn’t come on this trip.”

“On what channel was that show, Shimon?” Asked Eli at once, to Joseph’s amusement.

“On the second one, I believe.”

“Well, you lecherous guys can discuss that show later on. Now, eat, so that we could go see what would be worth buying at the market place for our return trip.” Said Joseph, making the others nod and dive in their food.

Fifty minutes later, having changed into their original clothes, just back from cleaning, the five Jews walked out of the Novotel Inn and headed to the market place, where a fair crowd was milling around. There was also some kind of soft, soothing music coming from an invisible source that could be heard all around the square. Of a common accord, the group decided to first effect one full tour around the lines of shops and stalls, to see what kind of variety of goods was available, before doing the serious shopping. They found the northern side of the square to be lined with a good twenty food counters and restaurants, some held by local people and others by people from the future, from which a variety of appetizing smells came from. The eastern side proved at once to be of very high interest to the merchants, being home to the sales counters and storerooms where the people from the future sold metal, glass and wood items they produced with the help of their advanced technology and knowledge. It took all of their self-discipline for the Jewish merchants not to go buy at once some of those wares in quantity and to continue their tour of the square. They next found the southern side of the square to be housing the shops and stalls of artisans from the future who were selling a tempting array of fabulous-looking decorative objects and works of art. Joseph felt his heart beat faster when he saw an incredibly beautiful tainted crystal sculpture which contained what looked like tiny slivers of gold and silver embedded in the crystal, on which sunlight reflected, creating a dazzling display of colors.

“By God! I absolutely must buy this for my wife. You will excuse me, guys, but I can’t risk that someone else buys it before I am back at this shop.”

“Go right ahead, Joseph.” Replied Shimon, himself eyeing with admiration another crystal object. “I think that I myself saw something for my own wife.”

The whole group entered as one the crystal shop, ending up buying a total of seven crystal objects, including a purple-tinted, exquisitely engraved crystal carafe meant to contain wine or liquors, bought by Daniel. As the group, having paid what they thought to be ridiculously low prices for such works of art, were exiting the store, they passed by a trio of Carolingian nobles who had stopped in front of the store. Joseph, carrying his precious sculpture inside a wooden box well packed with straw, grinned on seeing the awestruck expression of the woman and the girl of the trio as they stared at the crystal ware visible from the front window.

“It looks like that nobleman better have a deep purse now if he wishes to keep his wife and daughter happy.”

That remark, made in Arabic, made his companions laugh as they resumed their tour. They saw many more very tempting shops along that side of the square but managed to control themselves this time, promising to return later on. As for the last side of the square, the western one, it was home to a varied mix of stores managed by either local or future people, including a few local butcher shops that announced ‘safe and sanitary’ meat from local animals, including pork, chicken, beef, veal, duck, mutton and lamb. Those butchers in turn seemed to make some pretty good business with the people from the future frequenting the market. One store that caught the eye of Joseph sold a wide variety of spices at incredibly low prices, along with large quantities of food, mostly fish, preserved in either hermetically sealed glass jars or in metallic cans made of tin. Those tins of fish could prove very useful indeed on future long trips, while his mind bubbled up as he calculated what kind of huge profits he could get from the sale of some of those spices back in Saragossa. The sight of one particular jar full of a black spice and its price tag made him exclaim loudly in disbelief.

“Black pepper for only three deniers per pound? But, that’s the normal price per ounce back home!”

The salesman, a young man from the future, smiled at his astonishment.

“The spices we sell here have been brought by air straight from the Orient and the Middle East, which makes them much cheaper than the spices that have to take the traditional, long and slow land or sea route. However, the quantities we can sell now are limited, since most of what was bought overseas goes to provide for our own people.

We should have much more spices available in a few months, when our own spice cultures start producing.”

“Then, I must buy this, now! How much black pepper and other spices do you have in stock right now, available for sale?”

“Right now, I can let you buy a ten-pound bag of black pepper, mister. For the other spices on sale, I will have to decide on an individual basis, as I am loathe to sell everything to only a couple of customers. I want to be able to continue providing at least some of my products to the local people of Toulouse during the coming days.”

Calculating furiously in his head, Joseph saw that he could make a profit of at least 400 silver deniers just with that ten-pound bag of black pepper, once he had deducted the travel costs. Not wanting to rob his two associates of the opportunity to also buy spices here at such good prices, he discussed quickly with them what they wanted to buy and how much of it. They ended up splitting in three all the spices they were going to buy today, then had the salesman split the spices in a number of very light, transparent containers made of something the man called ‘plastic’. Promising themselves to return the next day to buy some canned fish for their return trip to Saragossa, the Jewish merchants exited the bulk food store with enough spices to each make at least a thousand silver deniers in profit once back home.

Even though they had already seen enough incredible bargains to make them potentially thousands of silver deniers in profit once back home, what the Jewish merchants found as they started visiting the official sales stores of the people from the future boggled their minds. One Centaurian salesman watching the Jews rant and rave about the prices for his steel tools, construction materiel and glass panes couldn’t help smile to himself as Daniel marveled at a crate full of long, heavy duty steel nails. While Daniel praised the price of three silver deniers for a back-busting box of 2,000 nails, the salesman knew that their production cost had been the equivalent of only a bit over one silver denier for such a box. However, Daniel had good reasons to be ecstatic: similar nails, made individually by hand with inferior iron, would have cost two deniers for only ten of them at a local blacksmith in Toulouse. Once resold away from Toulouse, the Jewish merchant would make a fortune with those steel nails, even if he kept his price well below normal. As for the rather plain, mass-produced glass hand mirrors sold at eight copper oboles a piece, it was still twenty times less expensive than the poorly reflecting contemporary Carolingian hand mirrors made of polished metal. Hearing the

Jewish merchants wonder between themselves how they would carry away such heavy quantities of steel and glass products, the salesman approached them and presented his right hand for a shake while speaking in Occitan to them.

"Hi! My name is Kwang and I couldn't help overhear your discussion about how to carry your acquisitions. Could I propose a solution to you, gentlemen?"

"Uh, of course, sire!" Replied Joseph while shaking the offered hand. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well, since all our sales are recorded electronically and since we give to our customers paper receipts when they pay for their goods, we can put aside for you the items you will buy, until you are ready to pick them up with your chariots. Further on, I can if you wish book for you in advance a trip home by air that will take only a few hours at the most, and this for a very reasonable price."

"Someone already told us about such air travel. We would certainly be interested by this. How much would it cost exactly?"

"First, may I ask where you came from, mister?"

"Saragossa, in the Emirate of Cordoba, to the south of here."

"That's actually quite close from Toulouse, so the cost should be minimal. Let me check quickly on my computer."

Both intrigued and eager, Joseph followed the salesman to his service counter, where his fingers quickly played over a keyboard, with a fascinated Joseph watching him. Kwang finally looked up from his computer screen, a smile on his face.

"I could book for you a one-way trip to Saragossa for eighty silver deniers per chariot. Would you be interested, mister?"

It took only a short discussion between the three adult merchants for them to agree to Kwang's offer, who then booked at their request a return flight to Saragossa in two days. The merchants ended up buying at that store nearly two tons of tools, nails, kitchenware and other steel and glass products, along with a few seemingly minor but actually very valuable items for Middle Ages people, like sets of fine steel sewing needles and dozens of handheld mirrors. Still having nearly half of the money they had earned from the sale of their foodstuff, the Jews left the store in high spirits more than an hour later. Joseph gave a happy pat on the shoulder of his son Eli as they walked back towards the art stores.

"This, Son, is what you can call a good deal!"

No more than a hundred meters away, in the large sand box that contained the central playground of the market, a little girl was playing without conviction, alone, with a toy shovel and a small plastic bucket, watched by her mother. The latter had encouraged her to go play with the other children running around the playground, but her seven year-old daughter had ignored her suggestions. The mother was now seriously worried about the depressive state of her little Lynn: she had not been the same since she and her family had been awakened from cryogenic sleep three days ago and had been told about the destruction of Alpha Centauri by the Morgs. On top of having lost all her previous friends, Lynn had also lost in that catastrophe her beloved dog, Topsy, who had been her constant companion since her birth. Unfortunately for Lynn, the circumstances of the evacuation of Kyoto Alpha had prohibited any pet animal from following their masters, a rule that had been ruthlessly enforced despite many children's tears. Now, her mother was despairing of being able to give her back some taste for life in this new, strange and backward Earth.

Little Lynn was still building without conviction one sand castle after another, destroying them as soon as they were finished, when a dog's barking made her snap her head around towards a small boy approaching the playground while holding the leash of a small, hairy dog. From his rough, cheap wool tunic, the boy had to be a Carolingian, and a rather poor one at that. As for his dog, who had a medium-length tail, long pointed ears and a medium-length white and brown coat of hair, it was straining on its leash, obviously anxious to go play with the dozens of children running around and playing loudly around the playground. With her eyes now fixed on the dog, Lynn abandoned her sand castle and toys and got up, walking to meet the boy and his dog. The boy watched her approach and stopped with his dog just before Lynn got to them. Lynn, who had assimilated Occitan on arrival in Toulouse, like all the other occupants of the Toulouse Tower, pointed the dog and spoke hesitantly in Occitan.

"What kind of dog is it?"

"A Podengo¹⁵. Would you like to touch it?"

"Yes, please!"

¹⁵ Podengo : Hunting dog from Portugal, descending from dogs imported by Romans and Phoenicians, who then interbred with dogs imported by the Moors. Comes today in three size variants : large (55-70 cm, 20-30 kg); medium (40-55 cm, 16-20 kg) and small (20-30 cm, 4-6 kg).

"Then, go right ahead: my Kiki is very friendly."

Lynn didn't have to be told twice and quickly knelt in front of the exuberant dog, who started licking at once her face, making her laugh. Her mother approached the two children a few seconds later, having picked up Lynn's toys, and watched, thoughtful, as her daughter played with the dog with obvious content: this was the first time that she had heard her laugh since their awakening on the MARCO POLO.

"Excuse me, boy, but could I ask you where you got that dog?"

"Sure, lady! Our neighbor in town has a pair of Podengos and he sells the puppies when the female gets a litter. Podengos, especially the smaller ones like Kiki, are very good at catching rats and mice and are very popular. You want one for your daughter, I suppose?"

Lynn snapped her head on hearing the boy's question, looking up at her mother with imploring eyes.

"Please, Mother! I want one like this!"

"Uh, we will see, Lynn." Said her mother before looking back at the boy. "What do you feed to your dog, boy?"

"When he doesn't catch and eat mice or rats, I get him bones and refuse thrown away by one of our neighbors, who is a butcher. Kiki is also not averse at eating leftover parts of fish thrown on the ground around the fish market."

"And...do you know if that neighbor of yours still has puppies for sale?"

"I believe that he still has two puppies, lady. Do you want me to lead you to his house?"

The mother hesitated for a moment then: she had not dared yet go inside the medieval city, because of the disgusting state of the streets in it and because she was not sure that it would be safe for her, with the possibility of thieves very much in her mind. While the soldiers of the Human Expansion were brave and well trained, the average citizen of the Human Expansion, like her, was a pacifist with no training in fighting.

"Please, Mom!"

Lynn's nearly desperate tone then convinced her and she nodded her head to the boy.

"Very well! Show me to that man's house, please."

"With pleasure, lady! By the way, my name is Régis. What is the name of your daughter?"

"Her name is Lynn. I am Nina Lecord. Lead on!"

With young Régis leading with his dog Kiki and with Lynn staying by the side of the boy, Nina left the playground, then the market square area, to enter Toulouse by the Porte de Narbonne, a hundred meters away. The stench of feces, urine and garbage mixed together and covering the streets was at once overwhelming, making both Nina and Lynn grimace. As for Régis, he seemed to take the smell in stride and led them up the Rue de la Dalbade, turning after 600 meters on the Rue des Marchants. All along, Nina was struck by the noise level in this medieval city without any motorized vehicle, with the shouted offers from errant salesmen of all kinds and the barking of dogs added to the loud conversations between busybodies standing in upper floor windows, conversations that sometimes turned into exchanges of insults. Most of the people they crossed in the street or saw in windows or opened shop fronts looked at her and Lynn for a while before going back to their business. The looks were however mostly curiosity, with little suspicion or hostility apparent in them. The only truly hostile looks she got were from two religious men in rough woolen brown robes they crossed as they were about to turn on the Rue des Marchants. Kiki obviously felt their hostility towards Lynn and Nina, as he interposed himself at once between the priests and Lynn, growling at the former as a warning not to approach. That convinced the priests to continue on their way, while looking back from time to time at the trio and the dog. As the group resumed its walk, Nina couldn't help ask a question to the medieval boy.

“Who are these men, Régis, and why did they look at me like this?”

The boy sneered while glancing briefly at the two religious men walking away.

“These were two priests, probably from the nearby Basilica of Notre-Dame-de-la-Daurade. Churchmen have been opposed to your people since you first arrived in Toulouse. They claim that you are either demons or sorcerers and witches, or both. Before your arrival, we believed what the priests were telling us. However, those churchmen have since lost a lot of their credibility and influence, thanks to the uncommon generosity and goodness of your people, Lady Nina. My own father works for your people as a carpenter and in fact helped build the playground at the new market place. He has been helping to counter in our neighborhood the false accusations made by the Church against your people.”

“But, those accusations don't make any sense! Who would believe them anyway?”

The nine year-old boy, who seemed much more alert and perceptive than what Nina would have expected from a Human Expansion boy of the same age, gave her a dubious look, probably finding her a bit naïve.

“Before your people came, most people in and around Toulouse would have believed about anything the Church would say, Lady Nina. However, the openness of your people and its generosity has quickly made us skeptical about the Church’s accusations against you, especially since you started building free hospices for the widows, old people and the poor of Toulouse. Now, most of the people of Toulouse trust your people.”

That made Nina thoughtful for the rest of their trip, until Régis stopped in front of the open shop front occupying most of the ground level façade of a modest house. A man in his late twenties who stood inside the shop was busy selling through the opened counter of his store a long woolen nightshirt to a local woman.

“This is Guimond the tailor, the one who has a couple of Podengos.” Explained Régis, who then waited for Guimond to conclude his business with the local woman before approaching him, followed by Lynn and Nina.

“Hello, sir! I brought you a mother and her daughter who would be interested in buying one of your puppies.”

The curious look on the tailor’s face immediately changed to a welcoming smile directed at Nina.

“Aaah, something that you will not regret, my dear lady: Podengos make for first class guard dogs and companions. They are also good at catching mice, rats and rabbits. But please come in with your lovely daughter.”

Lynn was first in, obviously anxious to see the puppies, followed by Nina and then by Régis. The trio went with Guimond to a large wooden crate whose bottom was packed with straw and in which three small, furry puppies lay. One look at them was enough for Lynn, who joyfully clapped her hands together while jumping up and down.

“Oooh, they are so cute! Please, buy one for me, Mommy!”

“How could I refuse, when your happiness at seeing them is so obvious, my sweet Lynn?” Replied Nina before looking at the tailor. “How much do you ask for one puppy, mister?”

“Eleven silver deniers would be a very reasonable price for such a nice dog, lady.” Lied Guimond, who was quoting over double the normal price. To his delighted

surprise, Nina didn't argue or haggle about that price and took out of her purse eleven silver coins that she then gave him.

"Would you by chance have a leash I could use for the puppy, mister?"

"Of course, my good lady! I have a good leather leash and collar that I can give you for three deniers."

"I will take them, mister Guimond."

The happy tailor went out to another room for a short moment and came back with a hand-made leather leash and collar.

"Uh, which puppy do you want, lady?"

Nina in turn looked down at her daughter, who looked for a long moment at the three puppies, obviously unable at first to decide. Nina however gave her all the time she needed to make her choice: such a psychologically important acquisition had to be made right. Lynn finally pointed at the smallest of the puppies.

"That one! I will call it Topsy."

Smiling, Guimond bent down and fitted the collar around the neck of the chosen puppy, then tied the leather leash to it before picking the dog up and putting it in the little girl's waiting arms. Lynn, tears of joy on her face, immediately kissed the puppy all over its head with an instant love that was too apparent and that made Guimond's heart melt: the happiness of that cute little girl was overwhelming. As Nina paid him for the collar and leash, she asked her a question.

"Uh, are these puppies weaned from their mother yet?"

"They stopped sucking milk a week ago. I have since been feeding them with table scraps and with butchered animal bones rejected by a butcher who is a neighbor of mine. Be careful however about giving it small bones, like chicken bones: your puppy could choke on them. Pieces of raw fish will also do, as long as you remove the bones first. Could I ask you if many of your people could be interested in buying puppies, lady?"

Nina didn't have to think long before answering him: many other young children had cried like her Lynn when they had understood on awakening from cryogenic sleep that their beloved pets were gone forever.

"I believe that you will have no difficulty finding buyers for your two other puppies at the Toulouse Tower, mister. Maybe you should visit our sales offices at the new market, where my people will be able to place an ad for your puppies. I can go with you and give them the exact location of your shop, if you want."

“The lady is much too kind. Give me a minute to secure my shop and warn my wife and I will be with you.”

“Wait! Before we go together at the new market place, I would need to find some food for my daughter’s dog.”

“Of course! We will stop at the shop of my friend the butcher on our way to the new market.”

As he was about to leave his shop, Guimond had an afterthought and went back in to get the crate containing the two remaining puppies, carrying it out in his arms. They first made a stop at the nearby butcher’s shop, where Nina bought a good quantity of pork and beef bones with scrapes of raw meat on them, along with a few actual pieces of meat. As Nina and Lynn were inside the butcher’s shop, Guimond discreetly slipped a silver coin to Régis, who eagerly took it.

“Thanks for bringing me their business, boy.”

The group then headed towards the new market place, coming out of Toulouse via the Porte de Narbonne. Having a sudden idea at the sight of the over one hundred young children playing in the vast playground of the market square, Guimond passed on purpose next to it while inducing his two puppies to bark. Dozens of young heads snapped at once towards him, with a fair number of children then running to him, eyeing the puppy and the dogs held on leashes by Lynn and Régis. A lot of admiring exclamations went up as half a dozen children, all from the future, looked inside the crate held by Guimond. Not having expected such a quick success, the tailor nonetheless put down on the sand of the playground his wooden crate, so that the children could admire his two puppies. With mothers quickly coming his way to check out what had attracted their children, Guimond ended up selling his two remaining puppies in less than ten minutes. Wishing goodbye to Nina and Lynn, the happy tailor made his way back into Toulouse, now 35 silver deniers richer than he had been less than one hour ago: these had definitely been good deals!

CHAPTER 20 – A VISIT TO THE POPE

08:58 (Rome Time)

Friday, December 9, 861 C.E.

Air limousine, 2,000 meters above the West Coast of Italy

On approach to Rome

“We are about to cross the Italian coast, Doctor Drelan.”

Vvyn Drelan, who was sitting in the back of the air limousine and had been reading her notes on her electronic tablet, looked up and contemplated for a moment the coastline before speaking briefly to the driver of the vehicle.

“Thank you, Min!”

Vvyn then switched off her tablet in order to concentrate on the landscape they were about to overfly. As a historian, the idea of being able to visit the ancient city of Rome excited her tremendously. However, for this visit at least, her time in Rome was going to be quite limited, as she had a very specific mission to fill today. The Centaurian Public Security officer who was serving as her bodyguard today wiggled in his seat, apparently nervous. Vvyn gave him an encouraging smile in response.

“Don’t worry, Agent Jong: this should be a peaceful visit.”

“Uh, if you says so, Doctor.” Replied Xia Jong. At the age of 26, he had served six years as a police officer with the Public Security Department of Kyoto Alpha and had dealt in the past with a wide variety of crimes and incidents, including brawls in bars and situations involving mentally disturbed people. This was however the first time that he had left the enclave of Toulouse since his arrival there with his family in October. On the plus side, he could rely on his past training as a bodyguard during his few months on Kyoto Alpha when he had been attached to the V.I.P. Protection Section, plus he wore the protective helmet and armored vest that had been standard for the public security officers in Kyoto Alpha. As armament went, he wore a riot baton and a neuronc stun pistol at his belt, while Vvyn Drelan carried a compact stun pistol. He thus did his best to relax while contemplating the Italian landscape.

The air limousine soon arrived at the vertical of Rome and headed for the Esquilin District, in the eastern part of the city. Vyyn examined from above the buildings on the ground before pointing to her driver a palace surrounded by gardens and situated near a cliff, just inside Rome's walls.

"There is the palace of Latran! Land on the square near the palace to let me and Agent Jong get off. You will then take off and will wait for us at low altitude."

"Understood, Doctor Drelan."

The driver soon started his descent, to finally land smoothly on the paved square. Ignoring the few passersby who were now fleeing left and right at the sight of the flying machine, Vyyn and Xia calmly stepped out of their vehicle and started walking towards the Pope's palace. As she was walking, Vyyn took her time to admire the multitude of ancient monuments and buildings visible around her, while their air limousine took off.

"Agent Jong, you can't know how much I had been dreaming about making such a visit. This city was the seat of an empire the kind of which history had rarely seen."

"To each his own, Doctor." Replied Xia, who only saw the primitive and potentially dangerous character of this place. His eyes then caught on two men who were running towards him and Vyyn. Both men, dressed in short tunics and sandals, were armed with lances, swords and shields. He undid the safety strap of his pistol's holster as he spoke to Vyyn in a low voice.

"Doctor, two armed men are running towards us, coming from our back."

Vyyn immediately snapped her head around and examined the two men for an instant before shouting to them in Latin.

"DO NOT BE ALARMED! WE ARE HERE TO MEET THE POPE AND HAVE NO HOSTILE INTENTIONS."

The two papal guards slowed down to a normal walk, but continued to follow them from a respectful distance, with Xia keeping an eye on them. Arriving at the foot of the stairs leading to the main entrance of the palace of Latran, the duo calmly climbed the stone steps of the old Roman palace, to arrive at the main entrance, guarded by four guards similar to the two men that had been following them. Vyyn politely bowed her head in salute at the man who appeared to be an officer.

"Good morning my good man! I am Doctor Vyyn Drelan, diplomatic envoy of the Human Expansion, and I am here to ask for an audience with His Holiness The Pope."

The officer of the guards returned her salute, his expression neutral.

"I will see if His Holiness can receive you. Please wait here."

The man then opened one of the double doors and disappeared inside the palace, leaving Vvyn and Xia alone with five armed guards nervously watching them. Xia then whispered in Vvyn's ear in English.

"I don't like this, Doctor: those guards are way too nervous to my taste and could easily overreact."

"The more reasons to stay calm, Agent Jong." Whispered back Vvyn. They had to wait a good six minutes before the officer returned, accompanied by a graying man wearing a red robe. The latter eyed Vvyn with visible hostility and spoke to her in Latin, his tone harsh.

"Why would the Pope wish to speak with a witch like you? What is the true goal of your visit?"

Vvyn reddened with anger at those words but managed to keep her voice level.

"First of, I am no witch. Second, I came here as a representative of the Human Expansion, in order to have diplomatic talks with His Holiness The Pope. And who would you be?"

"I am Cardinal Fraolo, First Secretary of His Holiness, and I decide who gets to see The Pope. As for you coming as a diplomat, I don't believe you."

Fraolo then looked at the officer of the guards while pointing at Vvyn.

"She probably came to assassinate His Holiness. Arrest her!"

Xia, who had tensed up at the hostile tone of the cardinal, quickly interpose himself between the guards and Vvyn while drawing his stun pistol in a flash. He had time to fire once, hitting the officer as the latter was drawing his sword, before the other three guards facing him attacked with their lances. Two of the lances either stuck on his body armor or slid against it, but the third once jabbed him in his left arm, making him scream with pain. Clenching his teeth, Xia fired a second time, downing one more guard. He had however forgotten about the two guards in his back and paid for that with a lance point through his neck. Killed nearly instantly, Xia crumbled to the ground as two guards brutally grabbed Vvyn by the arms, preventing her from activating her radio to send an alert message. A third guard then stepped forward and swung his fist at her, hitting her on the chin and knocking her unconscious. Cardinal Fraolo grabbed the pistol dropped by Xia and threw a hateful look at Vvyn, inert and held by two guards.

"Bring her to the basement cells of the guards' barracks: I will have questions for that witch. Make sure that she has no weapons with her. As for her guard, put his body in a cell for the time being."

“Yes, Your Excellency!”

The group then entered the palace, with two guards dragging Xia's body inside, while the remaining guard took care of their two stunned comrades. The driver of the air limousine, who was in the middle of a wide turn over the palace, was unable to see the drama, as the overhang over the main entrance had cut his line of sight. Unaware that anything untoward had happened, the driver followed his directives from Vyyn and continued circling around the palace, waiting for a call from her to come pick her up. The only witness to the brief fight had in fact been a lowly monk carrying a pile of books and parchments, who hurried inside the palace as well.

When Vyyn slowly woke up, with a sharp pain to her chin and jaw, she found herself suspended by chains and manacles to the vaulted stone ceiling of a dark basement room, with her feet off the floor and forcibly spread by chains attached to her ankles. She also happened to be completely naked. Fear rising in her, she looked around her to detail the room she was in. What she saw did nothing to reassure her: a number of torture instruments, including a stretching rack and a brazier containing a number of iron pokers, were plainly visible. A guard that had been sitting near the only door visible to her got up on seeing that she was awake and left the room, closing the thick wood and iron door behind him. Now alone in the semi-darkness, Vyyn desperately thought about a way to get out of her present predicament, but in vain. She no longer had her videophone bracelet, nor her radio headset, so could not call for help. Vyyn then started hoping fervently that the driver of her air limousine had seen the brief fight and had called for help, in which case she should see commandos and combat robots arrive in minutes, hopefully. When somebody returned to the torture chamber, it was unfortunately no commando, but rather Cardinal Fraolo, accompanied by two armed guards and by two powerful, scary-looking men wearing only loincloths and sandals. Fraolo walked to a position three paces in front of Vyyn and took long seconds to admire with a cruel smile her naked body before speaking in Latin.

“You were found with a weapon on you similar to your guard's weapon, witch. You might as well confess now that you had come to kill His Holiness The Pope.” Vyyn threw him a contemptuous look, doing her best to hide her fear.

“You are both mad and stupid! My weapon can only stun, not kill, and it is meant only as a defensive weapon. I came to speak with the Pope and I demand to see him at once.”

"You are in no position to demand anything, witch. Your people have already proved themselves to be atheists and blasphemers of the worst kind, so why should we believe anything that you or your people say?"

"Why? Because attacking and jailing me will attract the wrath of my people on you, you idiot! You just signed your death warrant by causing the death of my bodyguard."

"Your bodyguard is inconsequential. As for you, you will now tell me what was the true goal of your visit to Rome."

"I already told you! I came to have diplomatic talks with The Pope."

"LIAR!" Shouted Fraolo before looking at the two men in loincloths. "Make her tell the real reason for her coming to Rome. Keep her in one piece but try everything."

"Yes, Your Excellency!" Replied the senior jailer. "We will start with whips."

"A good choice indeed. I may just stay and watch you work on her."

Fraolo then had a guard get a stool for him as the two jailers each grabbed short leather whips with multiple lanyards. Once seated, he gave a cold look at Vvyn, who now had cold sweat on her forehead.

"This is your last chance, witch: why did you come to Rome?"

"I told you already! I only wanted to talk with The Pope."

"As you wish! Flog her simultaneously on both the back and the front, men."

With mean smiles on their faces, the two jailers then started using their whips, quickly making bloody marks appear on Vvyn's back and chest and making her scream in agony with each lash. Vvyn endured over forty such lashes before passing out from the pain. Getting up from his stool, Fraolo approached the unconscious Centaurian and passed a hand over her bloodied body, taking his time to fondle her bruised breasts and her genitals. Stepping back, he looked at the senior jailer, who still held his whip.

"Wake her up by rubbing some salt on her wounds, then whip her a bit more. If she continues to resist, stretch her on the rack and use the hot pokers."

"We will do our best, Your Excellency."

"Then, I will leave you to your work. Advise me if she changes her tune."

Satisfied with himself and also quite aroused by the sight of Vvyn's naked, tortured body, Fraolo then left the torture chamber with his two guards. He smiled with sadistic pleasure when he heard a long, horrible scream coming from the dungeon as he was climbing up the stairs leading to the exit.

Vvyn was crying uncontrollably from the continuous, intense pain from her wounds as the two jailers undid her manacles to carry her to the nearby stretching rack. She had by now passed out a total of three times and had been extensively flogged all over her body, including her groin area, on top of being branded twice with red hot pokers. The jailers roughly put her down on top of the rack, then tied her wrists and ankles to the manacles of the torture device. Using a wheel mechanism to put tension in her body, they cranked the mechanism until her back was off the rack, with her body painfully stretched as straight as a plank. The senior jailer took the time to fondle her bruised and bleeding left breast, making her shout with pain, then brutally grabbed her hair to force her to look at him.

“You want the pain to stop, witch? Then confess to your true intentions. Did you come to kill His Holiness The Pope?”

“N...no, I swear.” Said Vvyn, her voice weak and nearly extinct from the screaming.

“Too bad for you! Marcus, tighten her by a couple of notches.”

The other jailer did so at once, making Vvyn scream again as the ligaments in her joints started stretching past their normal limit. The senior jailer then went to the brazier to get a red hot poker and came back to show the poker to Vvyn, who looked at it with terror.

“Where shall I apply this poker now? On your right nipple or on your cunt? SPEAK!”

“I...I only told you the truth. Please, stop!”

“Well, you asked for it, witch.”

The senior jailer made a show of hesitating between her right breast and her groin area, approaching his hot poker to one point, then to the other. He was holding it only a couple of centimeters from her clitoris, letting it slowly roast and making Vvyn tighten her jaws to avoid screaming again, when the door of the torture chamber suddenly opened. Looking up and expecting to see Cardinal Fraolo, the senior jailer straightened up on seeing that the Pope himself was here, accompanied by four guards. Pope Nicolas the First embraced the scene with scandalized eyes before shouting at the jailers.

“STOP THOSE TORTURES AT ONCE AND FREE THAT WOMAN!”

As the jailers frantically released the tension in the mechanism of the rack in order to free Vvyn, Pope Nicolas looked around the chamber for some clothes to cover the unfortunate young woman. Seeing none, he took off his own cape, made of fine silk, and gave it to his head guard.

“Use this to cover her nudity, then carry her gently out to my private apartments.”

“Right away, Your Holiness!”

Pope Nicolas then eyed severely the two jailers, who were finishing to untie Vvyn from the rack.

“Who ordered you to torture that woman?”

“Cardinal Fraolo, Your Holiness. He suspected that this witch had come to assassinate you and wanted her to confess.” Answered the senior jailer, apprehensive about what could follow next.

“Cardinal Fraolo... And you thought that his orders were enough to cancel my prohibition about using torture to extract confessions?”

When the jailers didn't reply to that, the Pope looked at two of his guards.

“Chase these two men from my palace: I don't want to see them again, ever! Then, go find Cardinal Fraolo and tell him that I want to see him at once in my throne room.”

As the two guards expelled the two jailers with the help of slaps from the flat of their swords, Pope Nicolas approached the sobbing Vvyn, who was being helped to a sitting position on top of the rack by the captain of the guards. Nicolas made a bitter grimace on seeing the severity of the woman's torture wounds: those jailers had not been tender with her one bit. This in turn could very well attract a very fierce response from the people of the Human Expansion based in Toulouse: after more than two months of their presence in Francia, their reputation of immense power and knowledge had long spread across Europe and most of the rest of the World. If they decided that he, Nicolas, had condoned this, then he could expect death very soon. Bending forward, he spoke very softly to the sobbing young woman.

“Don't worry anymore, my child: you are safe now and nobody will hurt you further. I am Pope Nicolas the First. What is your name?”

“I...I am Doctor Vvyn Drelan, historian and sociologist. I was sent to Rome as a diplomatic envoy by the Human Expansion, with the goal of speaking with you.”

“You will soon be able to do just that, my child. First, though, you need to have your wounds treated.”

Somehow, that prompted Vvyn to shake her head at once.

“No! I don't want the attention of your doctors: they are ignoramuses and charlatans. I need to call my people, to get proper medical help.”

“As you wish, my child. And how do you expect to contact your people?”

"My clothes and personal effects: they contained a means for me to communicate with my people. I will need them back."

"I will make sure that you will get them. For the time being, let my guards carry you to my apartments. We will talk further there."

Then letting the captain and one other guard carry away Vvyn, now wrapped in his cape, Nicolas made a quick tour of the cells with two guards, quickly finding the body of the unfortunate Xia Jong inside one cell. Now feeling truly grim, Nicolas had his guards bring out the body, to carry it to the courtyard behind his palace, where it would lay under a blanket until such time as his people could retrieve him.

Once back in his private apartments and with Vvyn Drelan being gently laid down on her side in the Pope's bed, Nicolas had one of his secretaries go find the effects and clothes that belonged to her. As the secretary went on his quest, Nicolas walked resolutely to his throne room, finding a nervous Cardinal Fraolo waiting for him while watched by two papal guards. Nicolas didn't say a word or even looked at Fraolo until he sat on his throne and eyed severely his cardinal and First Secretary, who was kneeling in front of him.

"By what right did you have this woman from the future arrested and tortured? What were you hoping to accomplish by all this? DO YOU HAVE THE FAINTEST IDEA OF THE DAMAGE YOU JUST CAUSED, YOU IMBECILE?"

"But, Your Holiness, I could not possibly allow such a blasphemous and witch to see you. She was found to be armed and probably wanted to assassinate you."

"BULLSHIT! IF THOSE PEOPLE FROM THE FUTURE WANTED ME DEAD, THEY WOULD HAVE SIMPLY COME IN ONE OF THEIR FLYING WARSHIPS AND RAZED MY PALACE TO THE GROUND. NOW, THANKS TO YOU, THEY MAY JUST DO THAT VERY SOON."

"Your Holiness, you know what kind of atheists these people are and how they publicly contradict everything that is said in the Bible. What possible good could come from talking with them?"

"What possible good? Start by possibly avoiding utter destruction at their hands if we prove ourselves to be too rigid and inflexible to their taste. We are talking about people who basically deposed or rendered nearly powerless half of the kings and princes of Europe, and this in less than two months. They also massacred with apparent ease all the Viking armies that had been causing so much destruction and death across

the continent. Don't you think that such powerful people deserve to at least be heard by me? However, I don't expect you to ever understand that. Now, go pack your things and leave Rome! Return to Ravenna and stay there: you are not my private secretary anymore. And count yourself lucky that I don't hand you over to the people from the future. Guards, make sure that Cardinal Fraolo leaves Rome today...for good!"

"Yes, Your Holiness!"

Without another look at Fraolo, Nicolas got up from his throne and walked back to his private apartments, fuming. The problem for him was that many of his cardinals would have condoned, some enthusiastically, Fraolo's actions today. When saying that the people from the future were publicly contradicting the most sacred teachings of the Church, Fraolo was only telling the truth. Unfortunately, the people from the future were way more powerful and dangerous than any nobleman or churchman could ever be. As different as their beliefs could be to those the Church held about God, Man and the Universe, Nicolas still needed to find some middle ground with them, if that was at all possible.

When he got back to his apartments, it was to see that his second secretary had already found the clothes and possessions of the young woman and had given them to her. Nicolas actually entered his bedroom to find Vvyn speaking apparently to herself in a language he didn't know while laying on her side in his bed. Looking more carefully while approaching her, the Pope then saw that she was speaking to a bracelet with a small luminous window in it. A female voice in turn came out of that bracelet, making Nicolas step back and hesitate: this had all the appearance of magic. He then shook himself back to reality: he had heard many times in the recent past about the ability of those people to communicate together even through great distances, using their incredible science. Listening carefully to the young woman, who was still obviously in great pain, her desperate tone of voice, mixed with sobs, made it evident to Nicolas that she was pleading for help. He could have made his guards cut that conversation, but that would certainly have only aggravated the situation for him. While said to be compassionate and generous with people in need, the people from the future were also widely known by now to be ruthless with those who attracted their ire. The young woman finally ended her call and let her head go down on the bed while a spasm of pain shook her body. That was when her tearful eyes saw Nicolas, still standing and waiting in a corner of the bedroom.

"I...I just called for help, Your Holiness."

"I understood that much, my child. Again, I am truly sorry for what happened to you."

"And I thank you for making those horrible tortures stop. I did mention that to my friend and superior in Toulouse. Soldiers will now come, but at least they won't shoot on sight now."

Nicolas' nervousness redoubled at those last words, but he had already expected such an outcome.

"How long will it be before your soldiers arrive here, Doctor Dreelan?"

"A few minutes at the most."

Nicolas was seriously shaken by those words: a few minutes only to react and arrive from another country? No wonder that no one could even hope to oppose with any success those people. His next words were for his captain of guards, who was still present in the bedroom.

"Pass the word at once to all your guards: soldiers from the future will arrive soon to recuperate their envoy. Nobody is to resist them or block them from entering the palace. I will take my chances with them."

The officer nearly protested that order but thought better of it and didn't reply, instead saluting Nicolas before turning around and leaving at a hurried step.

As they were now alone in the bedroom, Nicolas went to sit on one corner of the bed, so that he could speak more easily with Vvyn, and eyed with sorrow her torture marks. Judicial torture was something that he had been trying for some time already to have abolished, or at the least make the Church condemn it across Christendom. That one of his own cardinals had used such tortures only made him more bitter about it.

"What now? How can I repair the wrong that was just done?"

"You can't!" Replied Vvyn, clenching her teeth as the bruises and cuts from the whip lashes burned like hell. "Too many of your followers would have done like your Fraolo bastard. Don't deny it! You may personally be a decent man, but your Church is too corrupt, too intolerant and ignorant to change quickly to any significant degree. I had come to propose a gentlemen's agreement between us, where we would not interfere with your Church if it promised in exchange to stop persecuting those who don't agree with your religious doctrine, but I now see that even that was too optimistic."

"Then, what will your people do next?"

"I will counsel them to put your Church on firm notice to stop accusing and prosecuting people simply because they expressed opinions that contradict your flawed beliefs and doctrines. If we see anyone persecuted or harmed for such reasons, then we will act...decisively. It is high time that your precious Church start following the words of tolerance, compassion and generosity preached by your own prophet Jesus." That left Nicolas pensive for a long moment as he debated her words inside his head. When he finally looked back at Vvyn, it was in time to see her pass out, probably from a combination of excessive pain and loss of blood. Nicolas went to her at once, hoping fervently that she was not going to die right now, right here. If she did, then he was as good as dead himself. Thankfully she was still breathing. Nicolas was tempted for a moment to call his doctors in, but remembered Vvyn's opinion about them and stayed where he was, holding rather uselessly her hand with the idea of comforting her.

He was still holding Vvyn's hand when the noise and vibration of heavy feet landing on the floor of his bedroom made him turn his head towards his balcony. His hair nearly rose on his head at the sight of the three gigantic men wearing full metal armor and pointing tubes of some sort at him. They had apparently come from the direction of the balcony, but how? His bedroom was on the upper floor of the palace.

"MOVE AWAY FROM DOCTOR DRELAN! NOW!"

Thoroughly intimidated by the armored giants, Nicolas got up at once from the bed and went to a far corner, but didn't flee the bedroom: the giants might have killed him just for that. Two more persons, a man and a woman, then flew in and landed on his balcony, holding the handles of what looked like a sort of coffin half made of glass. The two newcomers, speaking in the same unknown language Vvyn Drelan had used, then went quickly to the unconscious woman on the bed. After a quick examination of her, using instruments that Nicolas didn't understand or recognized, she was put inside the floating coffin, with the glass cover being closed over her. The duo left as quickly as they had come, towing the coffin between them and flying out by the balcony, heading towards a big spherical ship made of metal that now floated above Rome. Nicolas was still following them with his incredulous eyes when one of the armored giants addressed him in a harsh tone.

"ARE YOU POPE NICOLAS THE FIRST?"

"Yes, I am! I had nothing to do with that disgrace, I swear."

The giant lowered the tube he was holding and replied to him in a much softer tone.

"We know! Where is Cardinal Fraolo right now?"

"He should be in the process of packing up in his room, one floor up in the West wing of this palace. I fired him after what he just did to your envoy."

"That bastard tortured our envoy, and you only fired him?" Asked the giant, sarcastic, before looking at his two companions and giving them orders in their incomprehensible language. The two soldiers then ran out of the bedroom, no doubt heading towards Fraolo's bedroom in order to apprehend him. The armored soldier that was left in the room then switched back to Latin.

"Please stay here for the time being, Pope Nicolas: someone is on her way to speak to you."

Both relief and surprise came to Nicolas at these words: relief, as this probably means that he was not going to be killed; surprise at the willingness of these people to still speak with him after such an incident.

"Your people are still interested in discussing with me?"

The soldier, whose face was hidden by his closed helmet visor, shook his head in response.

"Not discuss, but rather speak to you. Since your followers are too fanatical to understand common sense, we will now use the threat of force to make your Church understand its new situation. You better sit down in the meantime: it will be a few minutes before our spokesperson arrives."

With the little that he could do now, Nicolas obeyed the soldier and went to sit on the chair of his private desk to wait.

That wait went on for a good twenty minutes, by which time the two armored soldiers who had gone upstairs had returned with the announcement that Cardinal Fraolo was now dead, executed by them. Nicolas was thus quite grim and anxious when another group of newcomers entered his bedroom by the door, making him stand up. To his surprise, his new visitors consisted of a mature Oriental woman escorted by four armored soldiers. The woman, dressed in an exquisitely embroidered silk dress, examined coldly Nicolas for a moment before speaking to him in Latin.

"I am Senior Administrator Lynn Tsu, present leader of the Human Expansion on Earth. I presume that you are Pope Nicolas the First?"

"I am, Lady Tsu! I am most..."

“I will be doing the speaking here, Pope Nicolas!” Cut at once the woman in a firm, authoritarian tone. “Know that, along with premeditated murder, two types of crimes rate the death penalty in the society of the Human Expansion: enslavement and torture. Your Cardinal Fraolo has already paid for his crimes, but I came so that your Church understands clearly one thing: that the times when it could prosecute and punish innocent people simply for contradicting Church doctrines and edicts or for supposedly being witches or sorcerers are over. From now on, in the territories of our allies, the Church will be forbidden from arresting or judging anyone, for whatever reason. Inciting a crowd of ignorant peasants into lynching someone will be considered as severely as if churchmen would have done the deed, with a fitting punishment then administered by us to those who would have incited the mob. The practice of the Tithes, or taxation by the Church, will also be banned in those territories. As for the territories where we do not have allies yet, we will still intervene at the least sign that your Church is persecuting or punishing someone for so-called religious crimes, especially if that someone did nothing more than study or practice true sciences. We will also counter and stop any false propaganda made and circulated by your Church against us. I am personally getting quite tired of hearing ignorant churchmen call us witches and sorcerers. You will however find that, as time passes, your crude and hateful propaganda will have less and less grip on the little people that we now are helping to have better lives. Make sure that your cardinals, archbishops and abbots understand all this, as there will be no other warning from us, just action. Goodbye, Pope Nicolas!”

Tsu then turned around and walked out with her soldiers, leaving a downcast Nicolas to grimly contemplate the future of his Church.

CHAPTER 21 – A NEW YEAR

08:51 (Paris Time)

Monday, January 2, 862 C.E.

Apartment 26-W-05, Toulouse Tower

Human Expansion enclave of Toulouse

Western Francia

Grégoire, answering the bell chime of his apartment's door, opened the door and found himself facing the young, eleven year-old Duon Tarang, a good friend of his own daughter Élyse, who was twelve years old. On a normal Monday, both children would have been in school but, with New Year falling on a Sunday this year, January 2 was considered as a holiday by Human Expansion custom.

"Hello, Duon! I suppose that you are here to see Élyse?"

"That is correct, Mister Grégoire." Replied the boy with his customary politeness. "I wanted to invite her to go with me at the amusement park of the tower. If your other children want to come too, I won't mind."

"They may just accept your offer, Duon." Said the fisherman before twisting his head around and shouting towards his living room. "ÉLYSE! DUON IS HERE!" Grégoire then let the Centaurian boy in, as his daughter Élyse came at a run from the lounge. While she was one year older than Duon, she was also much smaller than him, the result of growing on a poor diet until a mere few months ago. However, that had not stopped the Centaurian boy from becoming attracted to Élyse from the first time they had met, thanks to her sweetness and beauty. She in turn appreciated Duon's gentleness and intelligence, something she demonstrated again by kissing him on the cheek.

"Hello, Duon! To what do I owe your visit this morning?"

"Well, I wanted to invite you to go with me at the amusement park of the tower. If you want to bring along your brothers and sisters, then they are welcome too."

Seeing his daughter hesitate then, and understanding why she did so, Grégoire cut in on the conversation.

"I will accompany your brothers and sisters to the park, Élyse, so that you can concentrate on Duon."

"Thanks, Father!" Replied Élyse, relieved. "Just give me a minute to go change, Duon. I won't be long."

Élyse actually took three minutes to replace her pajamas with a T-shirt and a short skirt, plus a pair of running shoes. By the time she came out of her bedroom, her younger sister Isabelle and her brothers Pierre and Simon were also lined up at the door beside Duon and her father Grégoire.

"Armand is not coming?" Asked Élyse on not seeing her older brother. Grégoire shook his head while smiling.

"No! He needs to study his mathematics."

Understanding that this was most probably not Armand's decision, Élyse did not insist and took the hand of Duon, giving him a big, warm smile.

"I am ready, Duon."

"Then, let's go! The amusement park will open in five minutes."

The group of five children and one adult eagerly walked to the nearest bank of elevators, calling a cabin and then going down to ground lobby level, where they exited the cabin and walked to the main entrance of the southeast annex of the Toulouse Tower, a rectangular building directly attached to the southeast side of the tower and which was 400 meter long by 160 meter deep by eighty meter high. Three other similar annexes were attached to the base of the tower, between the huge corner support pillars of the building, each housing different services and facilities. The southeast annex contained a number of entertainment facilities, including a vast kindergarten complex with playground, an amusement park and a holographic game parlor, plus a dance club and a number of entertainment clubs for adults. The other three annexes respectively contained a medical complex, a sports complex and an educational complex, while the open space of the huge central lobby of the tower was surrounded by an internal ring of shops, boutiques and offices built on ten levels. Once past the main entrance to the Southeast Annex, the group went through the admission counters, where they paid the entrance fee of one silver denier per adult or five oboles per children under the age of thirteen. After passing the admission counters, the group found itself in a cavernous enclosed space, with the external walls being made of big armor glass panes that provided plenty of daylight. A large variety of kiosks, roundabouts and other rides,

including a full-fledged rollercoaster, offered themselves to them, prompting Grégoire in giving the children a warning.

“Now remember, kids: we stay together as a group at all times. No running away individually to some particular ride. We have ample time to tour the whole park together...and have fun together.”

The children, the oldest one being Élyse at twelve years old, all nodded their heads in understanding before each suggesting to start at different rides. Grégoire sighed, understanding that he was going to have to lead the group if he wanted them to stay together. Arbitrarily choosing one path to the right of the entrance, he slowly led the five children past various rides and kiosks, stopping for a moment at the ones that attracted the whims of one or more child, time for them to try the ride, then continuing on. There were already quite a few other customers in the park, even at this early hour, but Grégoire put that on the fact that it was a holiday. New Year was actually the most important holiday of the year for the people of the Human Expansion, who otherwise didn't have many of them, compared to the multitude of holidays celebrated in the Christian calendar used in Western Francia. Still, he saw a few Carolingians mixed in with the early crowd having fun at the park, which was opened to the citizens of Toulouse and was hugely popular with them.

The group arrived maybe forty minutes after in front of an attraction that was announced as newly opened. The description on the entrance poster made Duon yell with approval, while the Carolingians didn't understand at first what it was.

“YES! A HOUSE OF FEAR! LET'S GO IN!”

“A house of fear? What's that, Duon?” Asked Élyse, intrigued.

“A house of fear is a dark place where holographic images and recorded sounds are used to simulate all kinds of scary things, like monsters, demons and ghosts. You have to go through it while getting scared to death by sudden apparitions. Everything is just illusions, so we risk nothing actually. It can be real fun when the simulations are done well. You will love it, I am sure!”

“Oh, okay! Let's go in, then.”

The excited children then lined up at the entrance wicket of the House of Fear, which actually looked more like the entrance of a dark tunnel. Duon couldn't help ask the attendant about the late opening of his attraction compared to the other rides and kiosks. The young man nodded his head somberly at the question.

"The original owner and designer of this attraction didn't survive the destruction of Alpha Centauri, unfortunately, and some of his programming was still incomplete. I only recently acquired the attraction and completed the programming, but it took me a few weeks to do that. However, I am sure that you kids will love it: I can set the show to various levels of scariness, in order to fit it to specific age groups. Since you have preteens in your group, I will set the show to a relatively mild level for you."

"Uh, please don't set it too low, mister." Asked Duon, making the attendant smile.

"Don't worry, boy: you will be scared, that I promise you. You can go in now." The children didn't have to be told twice and nearly ran inside the dark tunnel, with Grégoire going in last. The said tunnel made a ninety degree turn shortly after the entrance, with the first illusion showing after the turn. Duon soon saw that the attendant had not been bragging, as one scary apparition after another attracted concerts of screams from both the kids and from Grégoire.

The group emerged from the tunnel, next to the entrance, after five minutes that felt very long to the poor Grégoire. As for the children, they clapped hands and grinned with pleasure after a few seconds taken to regain their composure.

"THAT WAS FUN!" Exclaimed young Isabelle. "We should come here more often, Father."

"Uh, please take pity on your father's poor heart, Isabelle. Next time, I will let you kids go inside without me."

The group was about to proceed to the next attraction when Duon spotted Ann Shelton, approaching on the path and accompanied by a large group of nobles apparently touring the amusement park. Excusing himself with Élyse for a moment, Duon ran to Ann and stopped in front of her.

"Good morning, Doctor Shelton! Have you seen Vvyn lately? How is she?" His question brought a sober look on Ann's face.

"Vvyn is recovering well enough physically, Duon. However, she will need time to go over her horrible experience in Rome."

"I am sorry to hear that. Please tell her that we miss her and that we would love to see her soon."

"I will! Thank you for caring, Duon."

The teenager then left to join back with his group, which went to the next attraction. Count Raymond of Toulouse gave a concerned look at Ann once the boy was away.

"I haven't seen Vyn myself in two weeks. How is she, really?"

"Unfortunately, her psychological wounds will take longer to heal than her physical wounds, Count Raymond. She was tortured horribly in Rome and it takes time to recover from such an ordeal. Our best psychologists and therapists are however taking care of her in New Zealand and I have good hopes that she will recover completely in the next weeks. Have you heard anything on your side about the Church's reaction to the Rome incident?"

Somehow, her question seemed to put Raymond in a bad mood and he made a bitter smirk.

"Yes, but not the kind of reaction you or I would have hoped for. The local churchmen in Toulouse, with Bishop Helisachar at their head, ranted and raved about what they called an 'impudent visit forced on His Holiness The Pope by one of the witches from the future'. When Helisachar spewed those words at the Christmas mass in the Saint-Sernin Basilica, I stormed out after telling him publicly that he was full of shit. I am told that what he collected in alms from his parishioners at the end of the mass was quite meager indeed as a result of his mean words."

King Ethelbert of Wessex, a much younger man than Raymond at 27 but a devout person, frowned on hearing that.

"May I ask what exactly happened in Rome to that friend of yours, Lady Shelton?"

"You may, Your Majesty." Replied Ann before spending two minutes to tell the Saxon King about Vyn Drelan's misadventures in Rome. Her version of that story made him frown even more.

"That cardinal took on him to have a diplomatic envoy arrested and tortured, without even telling his Pope about it? He went way over his head and certainly deserved death. I would have done the same to the Bishop of Winchester if he would have pulled a stunt like that on me. For what it is worth, I promise you to counter any false stories about this that could reach my court, Lady Ann."

"And I am grateful for that, Your Majesty." Replied Ann, bowing her head. Ethelbert bowed to her in reply, knowing very well who had the real power in their present group, which included all the main nobles presently allied with the Human

Expansion. The Lord Forester of Bruggia, Baudouin Bras de Fer, pointed at the tunnel from which the children had run out in near panic a few moments ago.

“May I ask what kind of attraction this ‘House of Fear’ is, Lady Ann?”

“That, my dear Baudouin is a place that could scare even the bravest of warriors.” Answered Ann, hoping to entice a few of her most stalwart guests in entering that attraction. Her trap worked better than she had expected, with Baudouin Bras de Fer, Prince Alfred of Wessex, Eudes and Bernard of Toulouse, Margrave Robert le Fort of Neustria and Sire Boson d’Ardenne protesting as one that nothing could scare them. To her surprise, Richilde d’Ardenne, the sister of Boson, and Judith of France, the new wife of Baudouin Bras de Fer, also announced themselves to be willing to enter the House of Fear. Collecting first their swords and daggers, so that they would not hurt anyone by overreacting to the holographic illusions inside the tunnel, Ann then approached the attendant and programmer of the attraction to whisper in his ear.

“We have a bunch of tough heroes here: crank the juice to maximum, mister.”

“I will be happy to do so, Doctor Shelton.” Replied the young man with a grin, who then readjusted his controls and activated extra illusions. Ann joined back with King Ethelbert, Raymond of Toulouse, Count Bivin de Gorze of the Ardenne and their wives, a malicious smile on her face as the younger nobles entered the dark tunnel.

“This should be fun! You did well not to go in there, gentlemen: I would have hated to lose any of you from a sudden heart attack.”

“Is that place really that scary, Lady Ann?” Asked Bivin de Gorze, making Ann’s head nod once.

“When set to maximum effect? Oh yes! Even a Viking Berserker would think twice before going back in for seconds.”

A concert of muffled screams was then heard from inside the tunnel, making Ann grin.

“I can hear that the fun has started already, my friends.”

“What was that, Baudouin?” Asked Judith, her heart still beating at an accelerated pace, as she clung to him in order to reassure herself. Baudouin, who could feel the adrenaline rushing through his arteries, did his best to sound unshaken.

“Some sort of ghoulish demon, I suppose. If those things are really only illusions, then they are most realistic ones, I must say. Let’s continue to advance, cautiously.”

The group of eight nobles then slowly resumed its advance along the dark tunnel, which was dimly illuminated by a few well-spaced lights with minimal outputs. The walls, floor and ceiling looked like they were made of flat, polished dark stone, which added to the creepiness of the place, while scary noises kept coming from all sides. Richilde, who was closely following her brother Boson and who was last of the group, twisted her head to look if anyone or anything was behind them. Her hair nearly rose on her head and she pushed a scream of pure terror when she found herself looking at a ghoulish, repugnant creature standing less than one meter behind her, its wide mouth distorted in a grimace that showed long, pointed teeth. The creature was also emitting some kind of gurgling sound as it was raising a deformed hand with long, sharp claws towards Richilde's face. In her terror, the teenager pushed hard her brother in the back as she attempted to get away from the apparition. Her scream also made the others look back, in time to also see the creature, with more similar creatures coming behind it and advancing on the group. The nobles broke into a run as one to escape the apparitions, negotiating the next turn of the tunnel. They however had to stop cold after a few meters, as a seemingly solid wall blocked the tunnel. Robert le Fort put his hand on that wall to feel it, as the other nobles pressed together around him, with the ghoulish creatures appearing past the corner and advancing on them.

"IT'S A REAL WALL, NOT AN ILLUSION!"

"WHAT DO WE DO NOW?" Asked in a panicky voice Judith of France, her eyes on the approaching creatures. Those were so real-looking that she had already forgotten that they were supposed to be simple illusions. Her eyes bulged with fear when the large stone plates forming the floor of the tunnel started suddenly opening with loud thuds one after the other, unmasking a seemingly bottomless pit under them. The plates were also opening closer and closer to the group, which reflectively pressed against each other. They now could see that the bottom of the pit, which was a good ten meters deep, was lined with sinister vertical spikes on which a number of decomposing corpses were impaled.

"OH MY GOD!" Only had time to shout Judith before the floor plates seemingly opened under the feet of the group. What she saw then was the four sides of the pit starting to go past her at increasing speed, as if she was falling, while the bottom of the pit grew towards her and the others. Betrayed by her senses, which were tricked by the holographic images generated around her, she genuinely felt like she was falling and screamed with horror as she saw the spikes coming up fast. The spikes and the sides of

the pit suddenly disappeared just as she thought that she was about to be impaled at the bottom of the pit. Shaking like a leaf and looking up from her crouched position, she saw that she and the others, who had also crouched instinctively in anticipation of hitting the bottom of the pit, were back in a solid tunnel of stone plates.

“G...God! Was this only an illusion?”

Robert le Fort swallowed hard, his heart still beating fast, before answering her.

“Apparently, Lady Judith. These people are decidedly masters of illusions.”

He was about to get back up when a long, wide tongue of flames flew past their heads, making him flatten himself against the floor as a ferocious scream made the whole tunnel vibrate. Robert’s eyes then opened wide on seeing what was now approaching them in the tunnel.

“A DRAGON!”

Without another word, the whole group got up and ran in a panicky attempt at escaping the dragon, with more terrifying apparitions materializing along their way.

King Ethelbert of Wessex, waiting outside the tunnel with the others who had not gone inside the House of Fear, burst out in laughter when he saw the nobles that had gone in run out in of the tunnel in utter panic. Even his young brother Alfred, a boy renowned for his courage, ran out, fear evident on his face, while Richilde and Judith were screaming nearly hysterically. The five men, one boy and two girls broke out of their run and stopped to collect back their wits only once well out of the tunnel’s exit. Ann, followed by the other nobles, then approached them and smiled with amusement on seeing the residual fear in their eyes.

“So, what do you think of this House of Fear, my friends?”

“I...I must say that I was never this scared before in my life, Ann.” Replied haltingly Robert le Fort while trying to calm down. “Those illusions were so realistic...”

“I swear that I am never going back inside that place.” Said Judith of France, both hands on her heart and nearly hyperventilating. Her declaration made those who had not gone inside laugh again before Ann patted gently her shoulder to help reassure Judith.

“Well, I suppose that we could go have a drink after this, so that you could all calm down, my friends. We will then be able to talk about serious things. In the meantime, would you like to continue visiting this amusement park, or do you prefer to go start our meeting?”

Of a common accord, the group decided to continue the tour of the amusement park, with Ann still guiding them around and accompanying them on a few rides. In the process, the whole group agreed to try the rollercoaster, bringing out more screams of fright from many of them. They finally decided to cut the tour of the park at lunch hour, at which time the group went up to the main cafeteria of the tower, near its summit. King Ethelbert, who was on his first visit to Toulouse, couldn't help be left bewildered and incredulous on seeing Ann lining up behind other citizens of the Human Expansion, to be served at the service counter.

"Do you always wait your turn like this to be served, Lady Shelton?"

"Yes, I do, Your Majesty: my people is very egalitarian in all aspects. Even our political leader, Senior Administrator Lynn Tsu, goes in the waiting line to be served. Also, everybody gets served the same quality and quantity of food. This is made possible because our food production methods eliminated centuries ago any food shortages or famines in my society. When we arrived here last September, we were then faced with our first real food shortage in over a millennium and decided to ration everybody until we could correct that food shortage. Thankfully, our hydroponic cultures and our new farms in this tower and in New Zealand have started recently to produce foodstuff in quantity, supplemented by the trade links we have cultivated with other parts of the planet during the last three months. While certain food items are still in short supply and rationed, all our basic staple foods needs are now being met. I of course cannot in all honesty encourage you now to do the same in your kingdom, as your agricultural system is still straining to simply provide the bare essentials to most of your population, but we are certainly willing and ready to help you improve your agricultural output. I in fact intend to discuss how to do that and much more during lunch."

With Ethelbert and the other nobles raising an ear at those last words, Ann led them down the service counter, describing to them the various choices available on today's menu, including items that had been unknown to many of them until today, like rice and potatoes. The group finally sat down at two adjacent tables in the middle of the cafeteria, with hundreds of other people eating around them. Ann waited a while before starting to seriously speak, in order to give a chance to her guests to sample their food and relax a bit after their emotions at the amusement park. It was actually Ethelbert who pushed her with a question into speaking about her future plans.

"So, Lady Shelton, how do you propose to help my farmers in producing more food?"

“We actually have a few ways to achieve that, Your Majesty. First, know that the first phase of my people’s settlement and industrialization plan has recently been completed. All of the prefabricated facilities and buildings that we brought with us from Alpha Centauri are now fully functional, occupied and operating. Also, as I told earlier, our first crops have started to be harvested. As a result of all this, a sizeable part of our construction machinery and production facilities is now available for what I would call ‘expansion projects’, meaning projects meant to help our society on Earth grow and expand as more and more of our people are awakened from cold sleep. Even a tiny part of that machinery could make a huge difference for other people on Earth. To be specific, we are now in a position to be able to start producing in quantity simple farm tools, like steel plows, to be sold at very low prices to your farmers. Furthermore, we are ready to produce advanced robotic farm machinery that will then be loaned to you and the others around this table, and this on a rotating basis, in order to help your farmers boost the productivity of their fields. We will also help by providing fertilizers and high output seeds and by building for you improved irrigation systems. As our official allies in this world, your lands will be the first to benefit from our help in this. Construction machinery that is now available on a part time basis will also start soon to build support infrastructures, like roads and bridges, that will help commerce and the circulation of goods and people in your respective domains.”

The nobles around her exchanged hopeful looks, highly pleased by what she had said. It was however young Richilde who asked first a question, a bit hesitant.

“And...your people? What are you planning to do in the long term?”

Ann paused for a moment, her eyes closed, before answering in a calm but fervent tone.

“We will then build up our industrial capacity and diversity, until we can produce here in this time period everything that had been available to us back in Alpha Centauri, including the building of spaceships. In a few decades, we should be ready to return into deep space, with one main goal in mind: to find and destroy the Morgs who killed so many billions of our people, and this before they could technologically evolve sufficiently to become a threat to other intelligent races. Never again will these monsters spread death and destruction across the galaxy.”

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