



IN THE SERVICE OF FRANCE

A science-fiction novel

By

Michel Poulin



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A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY

MICHEL POULIN

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

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

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel can be described as a stand-alone follow-up story to my previous series on the Time Patrol and Nancy Laplante and is a sequel to one of the chapters contained in my novel CHILDREN OF TIME, which described the rescue of two young Neanderthal children by the Time Patrol in 50,000 B.C. The letters 'A', 'B' and 'C' following the year in dates denote in which of the three parallel timelines described in this series the action is happening, with 'A' denoting the original timeline of Humanity.

Other novels by this author

(Available for free at Free-Ebooks.net, or can be requested directly to me via email to natai@videotron.ca)

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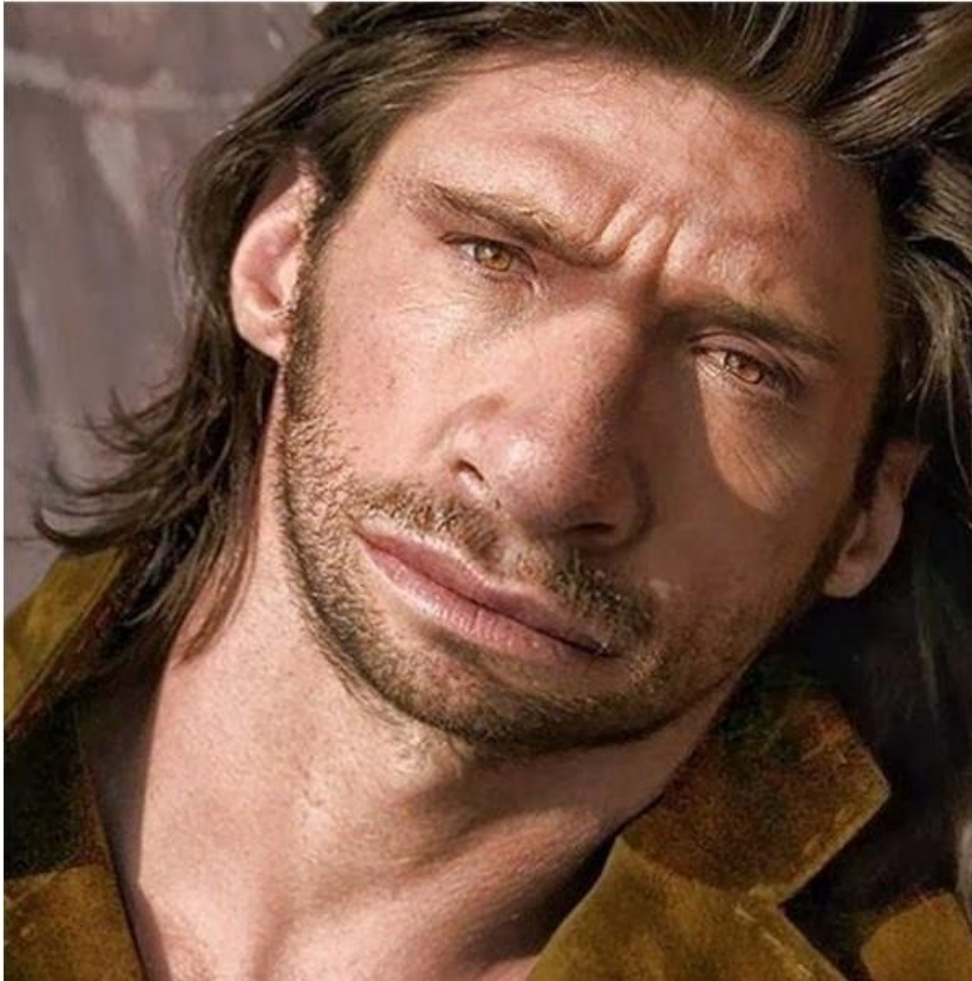
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CHAPTER 1 – A FATEFUL DECISION



11:18 (New Zealand Time)

Wednesday, March 14, 2,987 Before the Common Era (B.C.E.) ‘A’

Mount Aoraki, Southern Alps of South Island

New Zealand

The 56-year-old man leading the climbing team of four men, three women and one teenage girl reinforced his grip on the rock face he was clinging to as a stronger gust of wind swept the western side of Mount Aoraki. Waiting for the wind to calm down somewhat, he then resumed his slow climb, searching for each new hand and foot hold in the ice and snow-covered jagged rock face. The seven other climbers, linked together by a safety rope, followed him up the near-vertical slope while listening to his warnings and clues on where to find good holds.

"We have a nice ledge here where we will be able to stand and rest for a minute, guys and girls. The summit is now only some forty meters away."

"Good!" replied the older woman of the lot, a beautiful 32-year-old one with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes who was fourth in line along the safety rope. "Mount Aoraki certainly isn't a beginner's mountain to climb."

"Hey, we are talking about the highest mountain in New Zealand, with a 3,754-meter-high peak." said in turn the team leader. "However, this is good, prime training for all of us."

"It indeed is, Fernand!" added a big and tall 57-year-old man with a long scar on his left cheek, who was at the end of the safety rope, covering the tail of the climbing team. "This reminds me of my earlier climbs in the Austrian Alps, when I was a young man."

"But you're still young, Otto, if only one judges you by your degree of physical fitness." said the teenage girl just ahead of him. That got her a fond smile from Otto Skorzeni.

"And you're a hell of an athlete yourself, Nancy. I never saw a seventeen-year-old girl who was as fit and strong as you."

That made Nancy Laplante 'B' grin with both amusement and pride.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Otto."

The eight-person climbing team was soon lined up along the rocky ledge found by Fernand Brunet 'B', taking a well-deserved pause while admiring the sights of the Southern Alps and of the West Coast bordering the Tasmanian Sea, some fifty kilometers to the Northwest.

"What a beautiful vista!" said 21-year-old Tera of Sparta while looking afar at the ocean and coastline. "New Zealand must be one of the most beautiful countries on Earth."

"It is, if you don't take into account its frequent earthquakes and volcanic activity." replied 29-year-old Karen Taggart 'A'. "Thankfully, the zone where our base is located has been fairly quiet for some time now. The Time Patrol could hardly have chosen a better spot and time period for its secret base. For one thing, we won't see other Humans arrive in New Zealand for close to another four millennia."

The only climber who was not an active member or cadet of the Time Patrol, a young man of eighteen, listened to all that in silence while admiring the scenery with the others.

He stood only 171 centimeters-tall but was built like a bear and weighed 92 kilos, all of it muscles, with a barrel chest and thick, muscular arms and legs. Contrary to the others, he was not incommoded much by the cold wind, having a high degree of natural resistance to cold weather.

"Fernand," finally said the young man, "did anthropologists ever find traces of ancient hominids in New Zealand?"

"Never, Kin! The scientific consensus is that the Maoris were the first Humans in known history to arrive in New Zealand, and this around the Ninth or Tenth Century A.D."

"What about Australia, Indonesia and Papua-New Guinea? When did the first hominids arrive there?"

"The first Humans, members of the Homo Sapiens branch, arrived in Australia about 55,000 years ago, some 5,000 years before you and your family were living in a cave in the Dordogne region of France. That arrival date is however still in dispute. As for the Indonesian Archipelago and Papua-New Guinea, Homo Erectus and its descendants started arriving there some 1.5 million years ago. As for Homo Neanderthalensis, his occupation zone was mostly limited to Europe and Siberia and he never peopled South Asia or the South Pacific."

"If we discount you and Ani, of course." added jokingly 17-year-old Nancy 'B'. Kin did not take umbrage to that joke, on the contrary. Since he and Ani had been saved and adopted by Sylvie Comeau some twelve years ago and had been brought to the secret base of the Time Patrol, situated on the future site of the city of Auckland, they had always been loved and respected as much as the other children living there. That both Kin and Ani had proved to be very nearly as intelligent as an average modern Homo Sapiens had helped them a lot to adapt to their new life with the Time Patrol.

The group resumed its climbing after its short break, finally arriving on the summit of Mount Aoraki, which was going to be named 'Aoraki Mount Cook' in a few thousand years. There, the eight climbers took off their big backpacks and put them down on the snow-covered summit, then sat on them to admire the magnificent vista surrounding them while sipping some hot coffee from their thermos bottles. After a minute or so, Kin looked at Fernand Brunet, sitting to his right.

"Fernand, did you like the time you served in the French Army's Alpine Hunters Corps?"

"Of course I did, Kin! If not, I would not have stayed long enough to climb to the rank of lieutenant-colonel. I already loved mountain climbing and skiing as a young man and wanted to live a life of adventure, so the Alpine Hunters were a perfect fit for me. I am sure that Jean would say the same about his reasons to join the Chasseurs Alpains¹."

"That's right!" added Jean Bigras, a small but athletic man in his mid-thirties. "Also, I found a high degree of comradery inside my unit, the 27th Bataillon de Chasseurs Alpains.²"

"Does your old unit still exist in 1955 'B', Jean?"

"Very much so, Kin." answered Jean before throwing a suspicious look at Kin. "And why are you asking that, Kin?"

Kin hesitated a bit before answering, as the rest of the group now listened intently to the exchange.

"Because I am now eighteen and thus legally able to take decisions as an adult, Jean. I was born in the Dordogne region of France and, as such, am technically a French citizen, on top of being a citizen of the Global Council of the 34th Century, like all the other members and family relatives of the Time Patrol. I have been educating and training myself for twelve years at our base, with occasional trips with Ani and our adoptive mother to the France of the 20th Century 'B' and, more rarely, to the Montreal of the 21st Century 'A'. I now wish to do something significant and serve others instead of simply being supported by others. I believe that I could do that best by enrolling on a volunteer basis and serve the country where I was born. With my expertise in climbing, skiing and cold weather survival, I think that enrolling in the Alpine Hunters of the French Army would be my best choice. What do you think, Fernand?"

Fernand Brunet nodded his head slowly as he thought over his answer.

"That your wish both makes sense and shows a sense of patriotism that I can only admire, Kin. I am certain that you would make an excellent alpine hunter, but you should be aware that you may encounter some difficult times at such an army unit, thanks to your nature. Please understand that, in 1955 'B' France, most people still think of Neanderthals as being brutish, stupid and primitive beings. You may very well experience a high level of hazing and harassment from other recruits and from your superiors in such an army unit. Think well about that before taking a final decision."

¹ Chasseurs Alpains: Alpine Hunters of the French Army.

² Bataillon de Chasseurs Alpains : Alpine Hunter Battalion.

"I already thought a lot about it, Fernand, and I still wish to serve France, however hard that may prove."

"Well said, Kin!" said the big Otto Skorzeni while patting Kin's back. "That's the kind of spirit I admire. About that possible hazing and harassment in the barracks, I can tell you one thing: show yourself to be tougher than the others and they will then leave you in peace. I myself broke the jaw of a few loud mouths during my training time in the Waffen SS."

"Uh, I would not advocate that Kin starts knocking off every recruit that will mock him, Otto," cautioned Fernand Brunet. "That would quickly put him in trouble with his superiors. However, stoic resistance to insults should do the trick. For all its worth, I support your wish to enlist in the Chasseurs Alpains, Kin. Once we are back at base, we will discuss this in more details."

"Thank you, Fernand. I would appreciate that very much. Do you think that I could encounter some difficulties when I will try to enlist in the French Army?"

"Do not worry about that, Kin," said Fernand with a dismissive gesture of one hand. "I still have a few old friends who are well placed at senior echelons of the French Army."

19:21 (New Zealand Time)

The Timeless Club

Secret mobile base of the Time Patrol

Future site of the city of Auckland, New Zealand

Sylvie Comeau, a bit shaken by the announcement from Kin that he wanted to enlist in the French Army, took some time before she could reply to that. Kin had chosen to invite her and 16-year-old Ani to the Timeless Club, the favorite relaxation spot for members of the Time Patrol, in order to inform his adopted mother of his intentions. Fernand Brunet and Jean Bigras sat at a nearby table, ready to answer questions from Sylvie about the French Alpine Hunters, along with Mike Crawford, the Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol. Sylvie, an ex-Canadian Army nurse who had officially 'died' in the crash of her helicopter during the Campaign of Norway in 1941 'B', only to be then rescued and recruited by the Time Patrol, had saved both Kin and Ani in 50,000 B.C.E., after cave hyenas had just killed their families. She had then adopted the two small Neanderthal children and raised them as her own at the secret base of the

Time Patrol. However, her only attempt to present Kin and Ani to her parents living in 1943 'B' Montreal, in Canada, had been met with a fierce backlash of ignorance, bigotry and intolerance, much of it fueled by the dominating influence of the Catholic Church over the Quebec society of the time. That backlash had left Sylvie both bitter and disappointed and she had never visited her parents again after that. Thankfully, the members of the Time Patrol and the citizens of the Global Council, the 34th Century 'A' advanced civilization whose time travel technology had permitted the creation of the Time Patrol, had proved themselves a lot more tolerant, allowing Kin and Ani to grow up in a welcoming environment. Now, the boy she loved so much wanted to take his first steps alone as an adult. Next to her, 16-year-old Ani was at least equally shaken. While not technically linked to Kin as a blood relative, she had been raised by Sylvie like a sister of Kin, whom she always had considered like an older brother. Sylvie finally nodded her head slowly once.

"Kin, I understand and support your wish to join the French Army. I will dearly miss you but you are fully ready as a young man and I do not wish to impede your future life choices. Go enlist and make us all proud, Kin."

"Thank you, Mother." said Kin, tears in his eyes, before warmly hugging Sylvie. He also exchanged a hug with Ani before looking at Fernand Brunet.

"So, how do I proceed now, Fernand?"

"We go to 1955 'B' Paris and pay a visit to one of my old friends and comrades who works at the French Ministry of Defense."

08:49 (Paris Time)

Friday, March 18, 1955 'B'

French Ministry of Defense, Hôtel de Brienne

7th Arrondissement, Paris, France

When Kin and Fernand entered the old stone mansion that housed the French Ministry of Defense in Paris, they were greeted in the lobby by one of two female military receptionists sitting behind a work table set in one side of the large room. The receptionist, a young and pretty one, gave a wide smile to Fernand as he approached her table with Kin.

"May I help you, sir?"

"You certainly may, miss. I earlier called Colonel Jacques Forant to arrange a meeting with him. Could you advise him that retired Lieutenant-colonel Fernand Brunet is here to see him?"

"The Commandant of the Alpine Hunters Corps? One moment, please."

Grabbing the receiver of her telephone, the receptionist composed a short number, then waited for a few seconds before speaking in the handset.

"Colonel Forant? This is the main entrance reception desk. A Lieutenant-colonel Fernand Brunet is here to see you... Very well, sir!"

The receptionist then put down her receiver and looked up at Fernand while smiling.

"Colonel Forant is in his office and will be waiting for you, sir. His office is on the second floor, to the right of the main staircase."

"Thank you very much, miss. Follow me, Kin!"

As Fernand and Kin walked towards the large staircase near the end of the lobby, the receptionist bent sideways to whisper in the ear of the other female receptionist.

"Did you see how strong the young man following Mister Brunet appears to be?"

"I did! He sure has buns of steel!"

After climbing the stairs to the second floor and turning right, Fernand and Kin quickly located the office of Colonel Forant, which was marked by a bronze plaque on its door which showed his name, rank, decorations and position. Knocking on the door and then opening it on hearing someone say 'enter', Fernand stepped into a small anteroom where a captain of the Alpine Hunters sat behind a work desk. The captain got up from his chair and saluted Fernand at rigid attention.

"Lieutenant-colonel Brunet? You may enter Colonel Forant's office: he is waiting for you."

"Thank you, Captain!" replied Fernand, who had come to attention and had returned the salute from the young officer. He then knocked on the polished wooden door facing the captain's desk and entered it after hearing a 'come in'. The medium-built senior officer in his late fifties who greeted him inside still appeared in excellent physical shape despite of his age. Walking around his large work desk, he met Fernand in the middle of his office with a solid handshake and a happy smile.

"Fernand, mon Dieu, I haven't seen you for quite a while. You seem to be still well after all these years. How is the Time Patrol treating you?"

"Quite well indeed, but that doesn't mean that it is not sending me on risky missions from time to time. Their training program is also quite intensive."

"And I am sure that you are up to it, Fernand. So, what is the purpose of your visit, apart from coming to see an old friend?"

In response, Fernand showed Kin to Forant.

"I came because of Kin Comeau, here with me. He is the adopted son of a member of the Time Patrol and recently had his eighteenth birthday. He wishes to enlist on a volunteer basis in order to serve France, hopefully as an alpine hunter."

Forant seemed somewhat surprised by Fernand's statement and looked Kin up and down after shaking his hand.

"You didn't need to ask to see me just to make your young man enlist, Fernand. There must be a reason for you to come here, no?"

"There is, Jacques! In truth, I was afraid that Kin would be refused by army recruiters if he went straight to them."

"Why so? He seems to be healthy and strong."

"Oh, that he is, Jacques." replied Fernand with a mysterious smile. "There is however something about him that could create quite a few administrative obstacles for his enlistment"

"Like what, exactly?"

"Like the fact that Kin was born in the Dordogne region some 58,000 years ago. He is a Neanderthal man."

Forant was understandably taken aback by those words and stared for a moment at Kin before looking back at Fernand.

"You are serious, are you?"

"Very serious, Jacques. Kin and a Neanderthal girl were saved from certain death by one of our mission teams, which was studying remotely from a distance a group of Neanderthals living and moving around the region of Périgueux. One night, that group of Neanderthals was set upon by a pack of cave hyenas and all but two of them were killed, leaving only 6-year-old Kin and a 4-year-old girl named Ani alive. One of our team members then adopted those two small children and raised them at our main base."

"Uh, from a first look at him, I would say that your young man seems to be healthy enough for the service, but what about his mental abilities?"

"Don't worry about those, Jacques. Contrary to popular thinking, Neanderthals were about as intelligent as modern humans. After being saved by our team, Kin went through a session of language learning via mnemotronic techniques, which revealed his then Intelligence Quotient to be 96. Thanks to a better-balanced diet at our base, which included a lot of fish and seafood rich in Omega-3, and to intensive education, Kin's I.Q. is now at 102, the level of intelligence of an average Homo Sapiens. I have with me an official certificate signed by the chief medical officer of the Time Patrol, certifying to that I.Q. level and also certifying Kin to be in excellent health. Kin may not be a genius, but he would compare favorably with many of our usual recruits. I however realize that many in the Army's command echelon would doubt that just on the strength of their bias about so-called 'cavemen', so I came to see you so that you could grease the wheels a bit for him."

Forant was silent for a moment as he digested all that while eyeing Kin, who was nervously waiting beside Fernand.

"Well, you were right about fearing some negative reactions from our recruiters: I myself would not believe this if it had not come from your mouth."

"If it could help you in accepting him into the Alpine Hunters, I can tell you that I personally trained Kin in mountain climbing, alpine skiing and Nordic skiing, in which I now consider him as an expert. Kin also practiced rifle and pistol shooting alongside members of the Time Patrol. As a Neanderthal, his body is naturally extremely resistant to cold and he possesses extraordinary physical endurance and stamina, plus is as strong as a champion weightlifter."

Forant nodded his head, duly impressed.

"And may I ask you, young man, why you want to volunteer for service?"

"Because I was born here in France and wishes to do my patriotic duty towards my country, sir." answered firmly Kin in fluent French. His answer attracted a satisfied nod from Forant.

"Exactly the kind of answer I wanted to hear, young man. I will now arrange for you to pass a standard army physical examination at the Fort of Vincennes this morning. I know well the chief medical officer there and will ask him to keep the results confidential and to contact me as soon as he is finished examining you. If you pass that examination, then I will have you accepted as a volunteer enlistee in the Alpine Hunters. How long do you wish to serve? Volunteer contracts can be either three or five years and are renewable."

Kin only hesitated for a second before making his mind.

"I will sign first for a three-year contract, sir. If all goes well, I will then renew my contract further."

"Excellent! Let me make a quick call, then you will be able to go pass a medical acceptance exam at the Fort de Vincennes. Further instructions will await you there."

"Thank you so much, sir! You are really kind."

In his joy, Kin forgot to control his strength as he shook Forant's hand, making the old officer wince.

"Ow, ow! Hell, your handshake is like a vise grip! Fernand didn't exaggerate about your strength. Well, give me a moment to make a call."

Some ten minutes later, a happy Kin left Forant's office with Fernand, holding in his hand an introduction letter signed by the Commandant of the Alpine Hunters and destined to the medical officer who was now waiting for him at the Fort of Vincennes. Both of them jumped into a taxi once out of the Hôtel de Brienne, to be driven to the eastern suburbs of Paris. Their destination was actually a military medical establishment close to but separate from the Fort of Vincennes proper. Arriving there just before ten in the morning, Fernand led Kin inside the military clinic and presented himself to a medical orderly manning the reception desk.

"Good morning, Sergeant! We are here to see Doctor Chauvin, on the recommendation of Colonel Forant. Could you please lead us to him?"

"Certainly, sir! We were advised to expect you. This way, please!"

As they started following the orderly along a long hallway, Kin whispered to Fernand.

"Decidedly, you do still have a lot of influence left in the French Army, Fernand."

"Well, don't forget that the Time Patrol was the main factor in the liberation of France from the German occupation in 1942 'B'. We gained a lot of goodwill in France then. Helping France later on to secure a prime portion of the commercial and touristic business between this century and the society of the Global Council in the 34th Century only made us even more popular...except of course in the eyes of the Catholic Church." Kin rolled his eyes at that: saying that there existed some 'misunderstandings' between the Time Patrol and the Catholic Church, due to the fact that a certain Nancy Laplante officially reigned over Jerusalem and Palestine and publicly chastised the Church for its rigid dogmas, would be a severe understatement. What very few people knew was that Nancy Laplante 'A', the original Queen of Jerusalem, had been dead for a couple of

years now and had been replaced on her throne by Natai, her angel avatar, who was even more powerful than Nancy had been and was as critical of the Catholic Church as Nancy had been.

After walking down the hallway for some twenty meters, the orderly led the duo into a large waiting room with dozens of chairs set along the walls. Knocking on one of the doors visible along the walls, the orderly then opened it and gestured for Fernand and Kin to enter.

"The office of Doctor Chauvin, sirs."

"Thank you, Sergeant!" said Fernand before entering, Kin close behind him. They then found themselves in a fair-sized room well illuminated by large windows and which appeared to be a medical examination room. A man in his fifties wearing a white coat over an army uniform walked around his desk in one corner and came to shake their hands.

"Good morning, gentlemen! I am Major Chauvin. I suppose that this young man here is the one that Colonel Forant wanted examined by me?"

"That's correct, Major. I am Fernand Brunet, retired lieutenant-colonel in the Alpine Hunters, and this is Kin Comeau, who wishes to voluntarily enlist in the Alpine Hunters. Uh, I believe that Colonel Forant told you why Kin's case was a bit unusual, right?"

"Correct!" said Chauvin, becoming most serious while eyeing with interest Kin. "If you would not be from the Time Patrol, then I would probably not have believed your story. Well, let's get to work! Could you please remove all of your clothes, Kin, except for your shorts, Kin?"

"Right away, Doctor!" replied Kin, who started taking off his contemporary clothes, folding them carefully before putting them on a nearby chair. Chauvin nodded his head once he was able to see fully Kin's powerful body.

"You are truly built like a bear, young man, and you do look about as strong as one. First, let's measure and weigh you."

Making Kin step on a combined weight scale and height measuring ruler, Chauvin grabbed a clipboard on which he had put a standard recruit's examination form and noted down the results.

"Hum...171.5 centimeters. A bit shorter than the average recruit, but not by much. However, you weigh a good 92 kilos, but I don't see any excess fat on your body. Okay, let's listen to your heart and lungs, then I will take your blood pressure. By the way, do you know which blood type you are, Kin?"

"I am B Positive, Doctor. The doctors at the Time Patrol established that us Neanderthals have blood types compatible with modern humans."

"That is a good thing, especially in the Army, where one could get wounded in service. Could you please go sit on the examination table?"

"Yes, Doctor!"

That part of the examination impressed the army doctor, who noted down the results while speaking to Kin.

"Well, you have a cardio-vascular system worthy of an Olympic athlete, young man, and your blood pressure is just fine. Up to now, I would characterize you as being a model recruit in terms of medical condition. Let's do a grip strength test now. You can stay sitting on this table."

Grabbing a hand dynamometer from a table and handing it to Kin, Chauvin opened his eyes wide when Kin seemingly effortlessly squeezed the dynamometer to its maximum strength setting.

"Merde! You maxed out on your right grip strength! I never saw that before! Let's see about your left grip strength."

Kin squeezed the dynamometer in his left hand and obtained a similar result, albeit at the price of showing a bit of strain that time. With an enthusiastic smile now on his lips, Chauvin noted down the results on his examination form and looked at Fernand Brunet, who was standing near the door of the office.

"Damn, I wish that all the candidate recruits I examine could prove to be in such good health. Any chances that the French Army could get more candidates like Kin, here?"

"Sorry, Doctor." replied Fernand, also smiling. "There is only one more Neanderthal in existence today and she is a 16-year-old girl. Mind you, she is no slouch either in terms of strength and endurance. Neanderthals' physiques can best be described as 'hypertrophied' compared to us modern Homo Sapiens. They needed that to survive for over a quarter million years in some of the harshest climatic environment in history."

“Well, I only have a simple visual acuity test to perform on Kin. If he passes it, he will then be considered good for the service.”

Kin actually passed that test with flying colors, proving to have a superior vision. A satisfied Chauvin then completed and signed Kin’s medical examination form, smiling to both Kin and Fernand.

“You are now officially good for the service, young man. Colonel Forant gave me some instructions about your processing after passing this exam. You are now to present yourself on this coming Sunday at no later than eight in the morning at the École Militaire de Haute Montagne³, in Chamonix, where you will start on the following day an eight-week basic qualification course for alpine hunters. If you complete successfully that course, you will then follow a specialized mountain climbing and military skiing qualification course before joining an alpine hunter battalion, in this case the 27th Battalion, based in Annecy, in the Haute-Savoie Department.”

“Uh, Kin is already an expert in mountain climbing and skiing, Doctor.” cut in Fernand. “I trained him myself for years.”

“Then, he will be able to ask to pass the climbing and skiing tests right after his basic training. If he passes them, he will then be able to skip the BASM⁴ course and will go straight to his unit.”

Chauvin then shook Kin’s hand while smiling to him.

“Congratulation, young man! I am sure that you will make an outstanding alpine hunter.”

³ École Militaire de Haute Montagne (ÉMHM): High Mountain Military School, where French alpine hunters are formed.

⁴ BASM : Brevet d’Alpiniste et de Skieur Militaire. French for ‘Military Mountain Climber and Skier Certificate’.

CHAPTER 2 – FIRST DAY IN THE SERVICE



10:36 (Paris Time)

Sunday, March 20, 1955 'B'

Entrance yard of the École Militaire de Haute Montagne (ÉMHM)

Chamonix, French Alps region

France

"COME ON, YOU MAGGOTS! GET OUT OF THIS BUS AND LINE UP IN ONE RANK, QUICKLY!"

The 24 young men aboard the military bus that had just arrived from the local train station hurried up as much as they could, dragging their suitcases and travel bags with them out of the bus and lining up in a rather disorderly fashion by the side of it. Kin, who had been extensively briefed by both Fernand Brunet and Jean Bigras about what to expect during his training as a recruit and on how to behave, stoically took place in the line and dropped his kit bag on the ground before standing rigidly at attention. Other recruits who couldn't help look around them at their new environment attracted at once the ire of the alpine hunter sergeant in charge of 'welcoming' them.

"STOP TWISTING AROUND LIKE WIND GAUGES, YOU PIECES OF SHIT! YOU ARE NOW IN THE ARMY!"

Seeing a recruit who still was glancing around, the NCO charged towards him and stopped only a few centimeters short of his nose, then screamed at the top of his lungs.

"LOOKING FOR YOUR MOTHER, BOY? SHE'S NOT HERE, BUT I AM! STOP MOVING AND STAND AT ATTENTION!"

"Uh, yes, mister!" could only say the terrified young man, something that made the NCO explode.

"DON'T CALL ME MISTER, BOY! MY FIRST NAME IS 'SERGEANT!'!"

"Yes, Sergeant!"

"WHAT? I DIDN'T HEAR YOU!"

"YES, SERGEANT!"

"Aaah, that's better!" said the NCO before taking a few steps back to face the line of 24 recruits. "LISTEN UP, AND LISTEN UP WELL, MAGGOTS! I AM SERGEANT CHARLES VILLEMIN AND I WILL BE YOUR CHIEF-INSTRUCTOR FOR YOUR GROUP. YOU WILL ADDRESS ME AND OTHER NCOs BY OUR RANKS, WHILE YOU WILL ADDRESS OFFICERS AS 'SIR'. I WILL NOW DO A ROLL CALL OF YOUR GROUP. WHEN NAMED, SCREAM 'SERGEANT' AT ONCE, IF YOU DON'T WANT TO FEEL MY BOOT UP YOUR ASS!"

Using a list fixed to a clipboard which a corporal handed to him, the NCO then started to call the names of the recruits in alphabetic order, marking their name when they answered. When Kin answered in turn, the greying sergeant took good note of his impressive physique but did not comment verbally on it and continued with his roll call. He however had to repeat three times a name near the end of his list, without getting an answer.

"CLAUDE POULENC!... CLAUDE POULENC! WELL, WELL, IT SEEMS THAT WE HAVE A DESERTER IN YOUR LOT: TOO BAD FOR HIM! AS FOR THE REST OF YOU, I WILL NOW LEAD YOU TO YOUR QUARTERS, WHERE YOU WILL BE ABLE TO DROP OFF YOUR LUGGAGE BEFORE PAYING A VISIT TO OUR BARBER SHOP. PLATOON, LEFT TURN! NO! THE OTHER LEFT, YOU NINNIE!"

With the sergeant continuing to scream orders as they went, the group of recruits walked to a three-story-high stone building some 150 meters away and climbed its stairs, ending up in a long room on the second floor where double bunk beds were lined on two parallel rows along the walls. Large windows provided good illumination, while footlockers lay at the foot of each bunk bed. There was also a long line of wooden lockers along one wall.

"ALRIGHT, DROP YOUR THINGS ON ONE OF THOSE BEDS, THEN FORM BACK INTO A LINE, SO THAT WE COULD THEN GO VISIT THE BARBER SHOP. MAKE IT QUICK!"

Kin, who was near the head of the line, hurried at once to one of the lower beds at the end of the room, managing to put his kit bag on it before some other recruit could take it.

Other recruits however were not as quick or decisive as him and wasted time trying to find what they thought were the best beds, only to end up with top bunks. Again, the sergeant noted Kin's speed in reacting to his orders and mentally gave him a good note for that, something reinforced by the fact that Kin was the sole one in the group marked as a 'volunteer enlistee' rather than 'conscript' on the roll call list. Promising himself to follow closely the progress of this particular recruit, Villemin then had the recruits form back into a single line, then marched them out of the barracks building and into an adjacent building quite similar to the first. There, the recruits were made to sit on chairs lining one wall of a barber shop where three military barbers were waiting for them. Then, each recruit was shaved closely, leaving them with only very short haircuts. As for Kin's short beard and moustache, his hopes of being able to keep them were dashed by a few merciless passes by an electric clipper. While that hurt a bit his ego, he had been clearly told by Fernand Brunet to expect to lose them, so he endured the process in stoic silence.

From the barber shop, the group of recruits next proceeded to the quartermaster section of the school, where they were to receive their uniforms and personal kit. That was when Kin hit his first major snag: no uniform size could fit him, being either too narrow or too long. Sergeant Villemin, along with the master sergeant in charge of the quartermaster section, were scratching their heads about how to resolve that problem when Captain Lemire, the officer in charge of the recruits, entered the section, followed by a corporal carrying a large box, prompting a shout from Villemin.

"ROOM!"

Villemin and the quartermaster then saluted their officer, who saluted back.

"At ease! Master Sergeant Mirabeau, I got a visit from someone who anticipated that we would have problems fitting out one of our new recruits. We have also received some special instructions from Paris about that recruit, along with a bundle of specially cut regulation clothing and kit that could fit him. Chasseur Kin Comeau, step forward!" Kin, who had like the other recruits undressed down to his shorts and socks for the fitting out session, stepped forward at once and stopped at attention two paces from Lemire, who eyed him critically up and down. The confidential information he had just received had boggled his mind but one look at Kin's massive, muscular body convinced him that what he had been told was true. The trick now for him was going to cater to those special instructions from Paris without raising cries of preferential treatment. Lemire

dealt with that dilemma by using the oldest method known to the French Army: issue orders but no or little explanations and tell anyone protesting them to put up and shut up.

“Chasseur Comeau, Paris sent to us a complete set of clothing and personal kit specially made to your unusual size, so that you could be able to serve without having to worry about wearing an improperly-sized military dress. Also, because of your enormous muscular mass, which necessitates a higher caloric intake than that of an average man, the Commandant of the Alpine Hunters has authorized that you be issued a double rations scale during your service, for which financial arrangements have already been made by Paris to cover the extra cost of those rations.”

“Thank you, sir!” replied Kin, who saluted Lemire. Lemire saluted back, then told his corporal to pass his bundle to Kin.

“Master Sergeant Mirabeau, have one of your store clerks explain to Chasseur Comeau how to wear and care for his kit. You may now resume the kitting out session.” Everybody again came to attention and saluted as Captain Lemire turned around and left. Seeing that many of the recruits were now looking at Kin with what looked like suspicion and resentment at a perceived double standard, Sergeant Villemin went back into screaming mode.

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? CONTINUE TRYING OUT YOUR NEW KIT! WE DON'T HAVE ALL DAY!”

Now wearing a complete set of uniforms, called ‘dress’ in the alpine hunters’ special jargon, and carrying the rest of their kit in bulging kit bags, the new recruits left the quartermaster section a good hour later and walked back to their quarters, where they were told to drop their new kit in their assigned lockers, along with their civilian effects. There, Villemin and his marching junior NCO, Master Corporal Pierre Lacaille, took another hour to show to the recruits the finer points about wearing properly and caring for their new kit, including their emblematic large, dark blue berets, called ‘Alpine pies’. By then, it was time for lunch, so Villemin had the 24 recruits walk in formation to the central cafeteria, which gave him more occasions to scream invectives at their disorderly walk.

Lining up with the other new recruits and with more senior recruits in the lineup to the food counters, Kin grabbed a set of utensils and a food tray and read the menu, which had been scribbled on a chalkboard: it listed cabbage soup, boiled potatoes and

ham. Hoping that the word about him getting double rations had been passed along to the cooks, Kin advanced slowly with the line, finally arriving at the steam tables, where he started by filling a bowl of cabbage soup for himself and putting it on his tray. Next, he arrived at the meat station, where a cook put one slice of ham on his plate. However, Kin didn't move, waiting for a second slice. The cook threw him an irritated look then.

"Hey, you've been served. Move on!"

"I was told that I would get double servings, Corporal."

"Who told you that?"

"Captain Lemire, Corporal."

"Bunk! Move on before..."

The sergeant head cook in charge of the kitchen then intervened, patting the shoulder of his corporal.

"Didn't you read the morning directives, Durand? Serve him another slice."

"Yes, Sergeant!" replied the corporal, who then nearly threw a second slice of ham on Kin's plate while giving him a dark look.

"Next!"

Taking that incident out of his mind, Kin then collected four large boiled potatoes from the next cook before proceeding to the beverage counter, where he served himself two glasses of milk and a glass of cold water. Contrary to the other recruits, he didn't pour himself a glass of red table wine, which was traditionally served at all meals in all French military cafeterias and messes. While he had drunk alcohol before at the Time Patrol base, he was not fond of drinking and avoided alcohol as much as possible. Before heading for a long table occupied by his platoon, he made a last stop at the bread and salad bar, cutting for himself a few thick slices of bread, along with some butter. The recruits at his table couldn't help eye his full tray when he sat down, with one of them staring at Kin's plate.

"You really eat this much at every meal? But you are not fat. How come?"

"Different metabolism, guys. If I would eat normal portions, I would then slowly starve."

"Do you practice weightlifting, to have such big muscles, Kin?" asked a recruit named André Jonquière, a thin young conscript with an intellectual penchant with whom Kin had spoken with in the train which had brought them to Chamonix.

"I was born this way, André, but I do exercise every day in order to stay fit."

Kin kept it at that and concentrated into eating quickly his meal, expecting Sergeant Villemin to order them out soon enough. In that, he was right, as the recruits were made to leave the cafeteria after less than half an hour inside.

The drill exercise, made on the large parade square of the school during the whole afternoon, proved to be the most fastidious and unpleasant activity of the day, with Sergeant Villemin serving the recruits a juicy collection of swear words while he taught them the basic rudiments of military drill, all that done under a bright Sun and a cold wind. By five o'clock, all the recruits were shivering on the wind-swept parade square while also sweating from the frantic pace of the drill exercise. All except Kin that is, who still appeared fresh and comfortable as Villemin, himself getting quite tired but not showing it to the recruits, was about to conclude the drill practice.

"This Kin doesn't only look tough: he is tough!" thought the old NCO to himself, who usually trained mostly conscript recruits from urban environments who were not accustomed to physically rough conditions or work. However, if those recruits thought that their day of labor was about done, then they had another thing coming.

21:07 (Paris Time)

New recruits' quarters

"YOU NOW HAVE LESS THAN ONE HOUR TO CLEAN YOUR KITS AND WASH UP! LIGHTS OUT AT TEN!"

More than one recruit let out a sigh of relief at that announcement by Master Corporal Lacaille, their marching NCO: the day had gone by without hardly any break, except to go eat. Even that had to be done in a hurry, their instructors pushing them on constantly. After Lacaille left their dormitory, the recruits shed off their clothes and grabbed their towels and soap, then headed for the nearby communal shower room, situated on the other side of the hallway. André Jonquière, who was also heading for the showers, stopped by Kin's bed when he saw that his new friend was not taking off his uniform.

"You're not going to go have a shower, Kin?"

"Later!" replied Kin while taking out a shoe brush and a can of black shoe polish. "I'm going to clean and shine my boots first."

"Uh, okay!" said André, who then walked out of the dormitory. Kin followed him a minute later, but went instead to the communal kit washing room, where big vats and a few large sinks were used to clean off mud and dust from their boots and equipment. Despite having lived nearly all his life in the ultra-modern facilities of the Time Patrol's secret base, Kin had also been surrounded and coached by field agents who were nearly all military veterans and who were accustomed to, as Fernand Brunet and Otto Skorzeni had said a few times, 'clean up our own shit' and who preferred the good old manual cleaning methods instead of simply letting cleaning robots do the work. Besides, his early childhood as a Neanderthal boy had taught Kin that, if he wanted something to be done, then he had to do it himself and not dither about it. So, he rinsed and brushed off the mud from his boots and dried them with a rag, then started applying a new coat of shoeshine on them. He was in the process of patiently polishing his boots to mirror-like appearance when a loud raucous broke out, coming from the direction of the communal shower room. Leaving his boots on the counter next to his washing sink, Kin stuck his head out of the washing room to see what was going on. Anger and irritation flashed in him on seeing what appeared to be a large group of more senior recruits forcibly running out his platoon comrades from the shower room, beating the naked junior recruits with tightly rolled wet towels while shouting invectives and insults. Kin understood at once what was happening: Fernand Brunet, Jean Bigras and many other field agents with military backgrounds had told him many stories about the kind of violent hazing and harassment that new recruits could expect from the more senior recruits, who took out their day's frustrations on their juniors at the same time as they proclaimed their status as more senior recruits. Still, although this was supposed to be an old tradition, Kin felt anger at this demonstration of abuse: those being beaten were after all his new comrades. Charging out of the washing room at a fast pace, Kin shouted as loud as his oversized lungs allowed him.

"STOP THIS, YOU BUNCH OF ASSHOLES!"

The senior recruits froze and twisted their heads towards him at once, surprised to hear some resistance. One of them then grinned and pointed at Kin.

"THERE'S ANOTHER ONE OF THEM! LET'S TEACH HIM A LESSON!"

That senior recruit then advanced on Kin while holding high his wet towel, ready to strike Kin with it, as three other senior recruits closely followed him. Kin did not back off or fled, as the senior recruits had expected him to do. Instead, he charged the leading recruit at a run while yelling, both of his arms up in front of him and bent. His forearms

slammed hard into the chest of the leading senior recruit, with the impact projecting him backward with enough force to cause the other senior recruit following him to lose his balance and fall on his back, slamming hard on the wooden floor. Kin then stopped a third senior recruit from hitting him by grabbing his right wrist and crushing it, making the recruit scream with pain and losing his grip on his wet towel. Grabbing himself that twisted wet towel, Kin then started swinging it around him like a flail and continuing to yell savagely, using all of his huge strength while doing so and sending senior recruit after senior recruit either falling down or fleeing. That proved too much for the band of abusers, who then fled back as a group to their own dormitory, pursued by Kin's taunts.

"SO, YOU'RE NOT THAT BRAVE OR TOUGH, AREN'T YOU, YOU BUNCH OF WIMPS?! DON'T EVER FUCK AROUND AGAIN WITH PLATOON NUMBER THREE!" Making sure first that the senior recruits would not regroup for a second attack, Kin then looked at his platoon comrades, who were all staring at him with disbelief.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Finish your showers, so that I could take mine afterwards."

André Jonquière, who had received quite a few hits from wet towels and now sported a few bruises, thanked him by grabbing and shaking his right hand.

"Kin, you are one great guy and a real friend!"

"Bof! What are friends for, except to help their comrades?"

05:00 (Paris Time)

Monday, March 21, 1955 'B'

Dormitory of Number Three Platoon

École Militaire de Haute Montagne

Chamonix

"WAKE UP, YOU BUNCH OF LAZY MAGGOTS! TIME FOR ANOTHER DAY OF TRAINING! LET'S MOVE! YOU HAVE THIRTY MINUTES TO SHAVE AND DRESS BEFORE INSPECTION."

Brutally awakened by the screams of their instructors before the Sun was even up, the recruits got up from their bunk beds, but not fast enough to their instructors' taste, with the slowest recruits being brutally pulled out of bed and sent crashing down on the floor. There was then a rush towards the communal washrooms, where the recruits hurried to

shave before returning to their bunks to put on their uniforms. At five thirty sharp, Master Corporal Lacaille shouted an order.

“EVERYBODY AT ATTENTION AT THE FOOT OF THEIR BED!”

Sergeant Villemin, who was standing next to him, started moving slowly from bed to bed twenty seconds later, stopping in front of each recruit and looking him up and down. He found something objectionable in the dress of every one of them, admonishing loudly each recruit for either having dirty boots or wearing incorrectly a piece of uniform. Kin got his share of remarks, this time for having a poorly shaped beret. However, he fared better than most and stoically accepted the criticism from Villemin, having been warned by Fernand Brunet and Jean Bigras not to play the smart aleck. He also happened to be the sole recruit of the platoon that had taken the time to make his bed before inspection, and this without having to be told to. That prompted another loud dressing down from Villemin to the platoon as a group.

“OUT OF 24 MEN HERE, ONLY ONE OF YOU HAS THOUGHT OF MAKING HIS BED BEFORE THE INSPECTION STARTED. AS A PUNISHMENT, YOU WILL NOW ALL DROP DOWN AND DO FIFTY PUSHUPS, ON MY COUNT!”

Villemin then turned his head towards Kin, to speak to him in a much lower voice.

“You too, Chasseur Comeau: we do everything as a team.”

“Yes, Sergeant!” replied Kin, who then went down on his belly and bent both of his arms, ready to do pushups. With everybody now in position, Villemin then started counting slowly, leaving the recruits with their arms extended in the ‘up’ position for a second or two before calling ‘down’. The first recruits started faltering after some twenty pushups, earning themselves a few invectives and screams. By the count of forty, all but two of the recruits were face down on the floor, completely exhausted. Out of those two, only Kin managed to do the fifty pushups required, while the other remaining recruit had to stop after 45 pushups, his arms completely tetanized.

“Good show, Chasseur Comeau! You also did pretty well, Chasseur Jobin. As for the others, that was pretty pitiful. You better be able to complete fifty pushups by the end of this week, or I will find you some supplementary training to do. Now, go make your beds before lining up outside, so that Master Corporal Lacaille could march you to the kitchen for your breakfast. If I am not satisfied with your bed, then you won’t eat!”

That threat accomplished miracles in giving some strength back to the recruits, who hurried to their beds. Ten minutes later, the beds having been made to his satisfaction, Villemin finally allowed his platoon to go line up outside.

With his platoon now gone to the cafeteria, Villemin walked out of the barrack building and was heading towards his office when the NCO instructor in charge of Number One Platoon, Sergeant Paul Chartrand, came to him at a furious pace. Villemin, who had been cultivating a long professional rivalry with Chartrand, stopped and waited for the other NCO to come to a halt in front of him with an accusing index pointed at him.

"One of your recruits attacked and beat up some of my recruits last night, Villemin. I had to send three of them to the sick parade this morning."

"Ooh!" replied Villemin with a false air of commiseration. "Was my man too rough with your little children, Chartrand?"

That earned him an angry frown from Chartrand, something that didn't bother Villemin one bit. Chartrand then raised his voice noticeably while approaching his face close to that of Villemin.

"Watch out, you old fart, or I will have to straighten you up one fine day."

"Now, you listen to me, Chartrand!" replied Villemin, now dead serious. "Don't ever threaten me again, or I will be the one straightening you up. If your bunch of wimps could get beaten by a single one of my recruits, then they and you would look pretty bad in front of Captain Lemire if you complained about it, don't you think?"

Realizing that Villemin was right about that, Chartrand contained his rage and turned around before leaving.

Some 35 minutes later, having his platoon form up in three ranks after exiting the cafeteria, Villemin posted himself some five paces in front of his recruits and shouted out for all to hear, with the recruits of Platoon Number One and their instructors within earshot.

"CHASSEUR COMEAU, DID YOU BEAT UP SOME RECRUITS FROM NUMBER ONE PLATOON LAST NIGHT?"

"YES, SERGEANT!" shouted back Kin without hesitation.

"WHY?"

"BECAUSE THEY ATTACKED MY COMRADES WHILE THEY WERE TAKING THEIR SHOWER, SERGEANT!"

"EXCELLENT! WELL DONE, CHASSEUR COMEAU!"

As Sergeant Chartrand stared furiously at Villemin's chutzpah, Captain Lemire, who was observing and listening from the window of his office, couldn't help chuckle to himself at the exchange. His assistant, Adjutant⁵ Pierre Mancini, who was standing next to him, also chuckled.

"I love this! That Chasseur Comeau did exactly what I would expect of a good alpine hunter: he defended his comrades and made the enemy flee."

"Comeau certainly showed that he had balls last night. Good for him!"

⁵ Adjutant: Warrant Officer in the French Army.

CHAPTER 3 – LEARNING THE TRADE



09:09 (Paris Time)

Friday, April 15, 1955 'B'

Lower northern slopes of the Mont-Blanc

Near the French-Italian-Swiss border

"ALRIGHT, MEN: FORM UP IN PLATOON FILES AND PUT ON YOUR BACKPACKS!"

Having just gotten out of the military buses which had carried them from Chamonix to the small town of Argentière, the 78 alpine hunter recruits hurried to obey the commands of Captain François Lemire, who was leading this cross-country training march of his company of recruits. Loaded down by their big backpacks, on which were attached pairs of skis, and by their individual weapons, the recruits soon started marching out behind Lemire, heading towards the Aiguille du Dru, one of the summits forming the rocky mass of the Mont-Blanc. While snow had by now melted in the valley of de l'Argentière, the Aiguille du Dru, culminating at 3,754 meters above sea level, was still covered with a thick coat of snow and ice, with glaciers flowing down its slopes. The ambient temperature in Argentière was close to zero centigrade, but the wind coming from the mountains was much colder, making many recruits shiver. As for Kin, he was truly

enjoying himself right now, as this was a near ideal temperature for which he was built for as a Neanderthal. Loaded down with over thirty kilos of equipment and supplies, the recruits found at once the march to be a difficult one, with patches of melting snow and ice alternating with grassy areas saturated with water in which boots sank and slipped. The slope of the terrain also quickly increased as they marched towards the Aiguille du Dru.

Half an hour into the march, the slope increased dramatically as the column of recruits reached the foot of the mountains. There, marching turned mainly into climbing, with the alpine hunters having to frequently use their hands and picks to help themselves. At this stage of their training, only three weeks after arriving in Chamonix, the recruits had only received basic training in mountain climbing techniques and most of them had not yet improved much their level of physical fitness, especially in the case of the conscripts who had been students or office workers prior to their callup. Despite the admonitions of their NCO instructors, some of the recruits started falling behind, creating gaps in the columns of climbers, to the growing irritation of Captain Lemire.

"COME ON MEN, KEEP UP THE PACE AND CLOSE THOSE GAPS IN THE COLUMNS!"

Lemire then looked at his second-in-command, Warrant Pierre Mancini.

"Warrant, stay here and push the laggards into accelerating their pace as they pass by you."

"Yes sir!"

The senior NCO posted himself on a near horizontal patch of rock as Lemire resumed leading the central column up the slope, then started encouraging the recruits who were slowing down with a mix of insults, encouragements and threats.

"COME ON, FONTAINE, SHOW SOME ENERGY AND PICK UP THE PACE!... LAGARDE, CLOSE THE DISTANCE BETWEEN YOU AND THE MAN AHEAD OF YOU, OR WE WILL HAVE SOME EXTRA TRAINING FOR YOU TONIGHT... JAURET, YOU FAT LARD, MOVE YOUR ASS BEFORE I INSERT MY BOOT IN IT!"

Mancini's intervention helped a bit in tightening up the columns, but only temporarily. After another hour of climbing, Captain Lemire saw that he would have to slow down his own pace if he didn't want to find his company of recruits badly strewn along this slope. To make things worse, he could now see gray clouds forming up in the sky: they could possibly be facing a storm in the next few hours. However, he was not ready to put an

early end to this training march. True alpine hunters did not abandon when things became difficult: they only redoubled their efforts. Besides, his recruits needed to learn their trade...the hard way.

Lemire finally had to stop the climbing once they reached an altitude of about 3,000 meters, with the nearly vertical rock face of the Aiguille du Dru some fifty meters away ahead of him. By now it was close to noon hour and he could see that many of the recruits were truly exhausted. Disappointed and shaking his head, Lemire shouted orders that were then repeated down the columns by his NCOs.

“STOP AND TAKE OFF YOUR BACKPACKS! WE ARE GOING TO TAKE A HALF HOUR BREAK TO REST AND EAT, THEN WE WILL RETURN TO ARGENTIÈRE.”

The recruits didn't have to be told twice and took off their backpack, then sat on them to eat cold some of the bread and cold cuts they had been given before getting into the buses in Chamonix. André Jonquière, who was one of the recruits who had been lagging behind, went to sit next to Kin, who had quickly become his best friend at the ÉMHM. While he had been able to witness the physical stamina and strength of his new friend, he was nearly shocked to see that Kin was not even sweating, contrary to André and everybody else around him.

“How can you look so fresh after such a march and climb, Kin?”

“Easy: I have done a lot of climbing in the last few years and I love to take long hikes. In truth, I was made to live outdoor.”

“Well, nobody will dispute you about that. I thought that I was myself in reasonable shape, but I guess that my university studies in history didn't prepare me for this.”

“You will do fine, André. You just need more time to build up your strength and stamina.”

“Yeah, but will Sergeant Villemin be ready to wait that long?”

That retort attracted a grin on Kin's face.

“Probably not!”

After a too short half hour, Lemire ordered his recruits back on their feet. However, the recruits who had thought that they would simply pivot around and climb down in the order they presently were in were bitterly disappointed, as Lemire made his

company make a 'U'-turn in column, with the tail of the column having first to climb to where Lemire had stopped before being able to start going down themselves. In his haste to close up the gap ahead of him, one of the recruits suddenly slipped and fell on his bum while on the way down. However, that happened as he was on a patch of ice and he started sliding down the steep slope at a rapidly increasing speed. He could well have continued down to a fatal fall if Kin, who had been some thirty meters ahead of the recruit, had not reacted quickly. Planting at once his ice pick in the ground, he then took one step and extended his arms, managing to grab the collar of the sliding recruit with one hand and abruptly stopping his slide. He then stared hard in the eyes of the scared recruit: Albert Lépine was one of the recruits he disliked the most, having proven to be an arrogant, bullying young man.

"It looks like you are not that good after all, Lépine. Maybe I should have let you pass by me, but again you are supposed to be one of my comrades, even though you haven't yet proved worthy of that title."

Lépine didn't dare reply to that, still scared by his near-fatal slip. He however didn't thank Kin either and got back up without a word before returning to his previous place in the column. Kin shook his head at that.

"Once an asshole, always an asshole!"

It was Sergeant Villemin who was the one to thank him for his action as Kin marched past him.

"Well done, Comeau! You are truly of the stuff alpine hunters are made of."

"Thanks, Sergeant!" replied a happy Kin, feeling good about himself. The first days of his training may have been a bit difficult, with many vexations dished out by his instructors. Those vexations were meant to teach to the recruits unquestioning obedience to orders and to mold them to army thinking, but he had quickly grown to both accept and even like his new environment. Back at the secret base of the Time Patrol, he had grown while surrounded by many military veterans and field agents who had shown to him the true meaning of the word 'comradeship'. The intense, stimulating training and education he had followed in his young years, added to an optimum diet, had done something that had surprised everyone at the base: his initial I.Q. of 96, measured right after he and Ani had been saved twelve years ago, had increased to an effective I.Q. of 106, while his already impressive physique had been further boosted. Normally, a Homo Neanderthalensis man in his natural environment could hope to reach a maximum of 168 centimeters in height and about eighty kilos in mass. However, the

optimum diet and modern physical training he had enjoyed with the Time Patrol had resulted in Kin growing well past those marks, making him taller than normal for a Neanderthal and also boosting both his strength and his stamina. As for today's training march in mountainous terrain, it actually was the kind of activity that a Neanderthal was built for and faced in his daily natural life, some 50,000 years ago. As he climbed down the mountain slope with the other recruits, Kin started seriously wondering if a lifelong career as a French Alpine Hunter would fit him.

CHAPTER 4 – JOINING A UNIT



French Chasseurs Alpins parading down a street.

11:17 (Paris Time)

Friday, May 13, 1955 'B'

Parade square, École Militaire de Haute Montagne

Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, Haute-Savoie, France

Captain Marc Lemire was all smile as he fitted the wide dark blue beret, nicknamed a 'tarte', or 'pie' in French, on Kin's head.

"Congratulations, Chasseur Comeau: you are now a chasseur alpin. I am certain that you will have a successful career in the Alpine Corps."

"Thank you, sir!" replied a proud Kin before saluting Lemire. Lemire returned his salute, then took a side step to pass to the next graduating recruit in the line, in order to also fit him with a beret. While staying at rigid attention, Kin discretely looked at the crowd of family relatives and friends of the recruits lined along the parade square of the military school and smiled to his adoptive mother, Sylvie Comeau, his Neanderthal companion Ani, who was now sixteen-years old, Fernand Brunet and Jean Bigras. While Sylvie and Ani wore conservative contemporary dresses, Fernand and Jean wore good suits on which were pinned an impressive collection of military decorations and

medals, earned during their service as French alpine hunters during World War Two, plus a few decorations earned from their service with the Time Patrol. While the four of them were grinning happily at him, Ani was the most enthusiastic-looking of the lot. Sylvie had carefully groomed her appearance and hair and, while unusually stocky and muscular for a teenage girl, she still was able to pass as a normal, albeit not very pretty, girl to the other spectators in the crowd. The spectators all warmly applauded when the school commandant declared the graduation ceremony completed and invited the spectators to walk to one of the halls of the school, where a buffet had been prepared for the occasion. As for the newly graduated soldiers, they were marched out of the parade square and then dismissed, so that they could join their families and friends for the reception.

The moment that he approached his mother and three friends, Kin got a hug and a kiss from both Sylvie and Ani and solid handshakes and pats on the back from Fernand and Jean.

"I am so proud of you, Kin!" said Sylvie between kisses. "How was your training?"

"It was a bit tough at times, especially when we got verbally abused and pushed by our instructors, but I adapted quickly to that. Physically, I loved the training, especially the Winter mountain training part, where I did very well, according to my instructors."

"Was there any hazing during your training, Kin?" asked Jean Bigras, making Kin smile.

"Some tried, but they quickly regretted it. Thankfully my chief-instructor, Sergeant Villemin, covered for me when another instructor complained about me roughing up a few of his senior recruits."

"Well done, Kin!" said Fernand Brunet approvingly. "That's the way to treat bullies. Now that you are a qualified alpine hunter, have you been given a posting to a specific unit yet?"

"Yes, Fernand! We all got our posting orders before the parade. I am going to join the 27th Alpine Hunter Battalion, based in Annecy."

"Aah, yes!" replied Fernand, grinning. "I served a few years there with that unit. Annecy is a beautiful little town sitting by a lake and surrounded by mountains. You should love the place. The military barracks there are quite old and not very comfortable

but you will have plenty of things to see and visit in town and around it. Also, you will be serving in the kind of climate and terrain which you like and you will be able to do plenty of skying, mountain hiking and climbing. As well, the 27th BCA⁶ is an old and distinguished unit and is considered part of the elite of the French Army. You will have plenty of occasions to advance there as an alpine soldier.”

“Could his unit be called to some combat zones around the World?” asked Sylvie Comeau to Fernand, looking a bit worried. Fernand reassured her by a shake of his head.

“In Timeline ‘A’ France, yes, but not in this timeline. While France in Timeline ‘A’ has just been defeated and forced to withdraw from Indochina by the Vietminh, France was still embroiled at that same time in a nasty guerrilla war against nationalists in Algeria who were fighting to have Algeria gain its independence from France. However, the intervention of the Time Patrol in 1942 ‘B’, by cutting short World War 2 and imposing peace and numerous geopolitical changes, prevented many of the wars the Timeline ‘A’ went through in the decades following World War 2. General de Gaulle was intelligent enough to follow most of the advice given to him by Nancy Laplante at the armistice conference of 1942 and has been gradually withdrawing France from its colonies in Southeast Asia and Northern and Central Africa. Today, France is mostly concentrated on providing military assistance and training, plus economic assistance, to its ex-colonies. As a result, everybody involved ends up happy...and in peace. The only few hotspots that concern France today are incursions by groups of extremists and fanatics into its ex-colonies, especially in Africa. So, yes, Kin could end up seeing combat during the next few years but the main occupation of the 27th BCA in Annecy, apart from training, is mountain rescue and border patrolling.”

“You do reassure me, Fernand.” said Sylvie, sounding relieved. “Well, let’s go visit the buffet table! I am getting quite hungry!”

As their group got close to the tables on which an assortment of sandwiches, cheese and cold cuts lay, Sylvie asked a question to Kin.

“So, how was the food here, Kin?”

⁶ BCA : Bataillon de Chasseurs Alps (Alpine Hunter Battalion in French).

"It was okay. However, it was a good thing that Fernand had arranged with Paris to allow me to get double rations. If not, I would be starving. Uh, Fernand, do you know if the commander of my new unit in Annecy will be aware of that derogation?"

Fernand Brunet thought over that for a moment before answering him.

"I am not sure about that, to be frank. I will go check with the school commandant after this and will ask him to call your new unit commander about your need for double rations on medical grounds."

13:19 (Paris Time)

Office of the commandant of the 27th BCA

Annecy, Haute-Savoie

"Lieutenant-colonel Laurent Genest speaking!... Aah, Charles! How are things in Chamonix?... Good, good!... And what about the new batch of graduated recruits you are about to send me? Are they good materiel?... Uh, I don't recall getting anything about this Kin Comeau? What's up with him? Is he some sort of troublemaker or laggard?... Oh!"

At that point, Genest sat back in his chair while grabbing a pen and a paper notepad.

"And why would this young man be justified in getting double rations? This sounds like preferential treatment to me, Charles."

That remark made some irritation appear in Charles Martin's voice as he replied at once.

"Laurent, you know damn well that I don't allow anyone to push preferential treatment for a recruit. I don't care if the father of that recruit is a minister or a senior officer: that recruit will get the same treatment as the others. The case of Chasseur Kin Comeau is however very special and that requirement for him to get double rations was mandated by the chief-medical officer at our Paris headquarters. Basically, Chasseur Comeau's physiology is most unusual and exceptional: He is built literally like a bear and is extremely muscular and strong, with next to no fat on his body. As the Corps chief-medical officer certified in his special directive concerning him, Comeau would simply starve if given only standard rations."

"My God! Your Comeau sounds like some sort of freak. Was he a good recruit during training?"

"He was by far the best of his class, Laurent, and I am not exaggerating. When he arrived in Chamonix, he was already an experienced skier and mountain climber and

proved to have a phenomenal resistance to cold. He also is immensely strong and has incredible stamina, along with superior eyesight and hearing. While he is no rocket scientist, his intelligence can be described as average. In my opinion, Chasseur Kin Comeau has what it takes to be the near perfect Alpine Hunter.”

“Wow! I can’t wait to see that young man. When is he due in Annecy?”

“His group is due to leave Chamonix by bus at two this afternoon and should be in Annecy by five. Uh, there is more. However, what I am going to tell you must be kept strictly confidential. In fact, you should not repeat what I am going to tell you to any of your officers and NCOs. This comes from our Corps Commandant, Colonel Forant.” That left Genest somewhat surprised.

“Gee! Is he the son of some big-shot politician?”

“No! Chasseur Kin Comeau is a Neanderthal man.”

Genest nearly fell off his chair on hearing that.

“You must be joking!”

“I am very serious, Charles. To make a long story short, Kin Comeau was born some 58,000 years ago in the Dordogne Region. He and his family group were living in a cave and were being studied remotely by a team from the Time Patrol. One night, giant cave Hyenas attacked that group of Neanderthals and killed all of them, saved for Kin, who was six at the time, and a four-year-old girl. I met that girl, now a teenager, today, when she came to watch the graduation ceremony, and she definitely is a Neanderthal girl. Both of the kids were then saved and adopted by a female agent of the Time Patrol who was part of the team studying that group of Neanderthals. By the way, forget about all the nonsense you may have read before about Neanderthals: they are no stupid brutes, that I can certify to you. Kin Comeau, who is now eighteen, stands at 1.71 meter and weighs 92 kilos, with next to no fat on him. He has incredibly large shoulders, a barrel chest and very thick and muscular arms and legs. However, when well groomed and shaved, he could easily pass as a normal man, albeit a bit unusual one. The other recruits of his class in fact never figured out that he was a Neanderthal. One last thing about him: he was raised by the Time Patrol and trained physically with Time Patrol agents, many of whom are military veterans. In fact, ex-Lieutenant-colonel Fernand Brunet mentored him and watched his graduation parade with Kin’s mother and sister.”

“Fernand Brunet? I served with him before the war: a truly great officer and a great Alpine Hunter. Anything else that you can tell me about this Kin Comeau?”

“Yes! He is a very decent young man, honest, dependable and always ready to help his comrades. He has successfully passed the practical exam for skying and mountain climbing and now has his BASM⁷ qualification, on top of his basic qualification as Alpine Hunter. He is also a good overall shooter with both rifles, pistols and submachine-guns. If I would have a recommendation for you concerning Comeau, it would be to assign him to one of your heavy weapons teams, like your mortar platoon, where his uncommon strength and stamina would prove a gift.”

“Sounds like good advice to me, Laurent. Very well, I will immediately pass a directive to my kitchen staff and to my senior officers about his legitimate need for double rations. And don’t worry: I will keep his secret to myself.”

“Thank you for your comprehension, Laurent. Anything else you would like to know before I hang up?”

A passing thought then made Genest smile to himself.

“Yes! That Neanderthal girl, was she pretty, ugly or just plain?”

Charles Martin chuckled at his question.

“While not truly ugly, let’s say that Ani Comeau is at most ‘plain’. On this, have a good day, my friend.”

“And a good day to you too, Charles.” replied Genest before putting down his telephone receiver. He was thoughtful for a moment, then started writing a short directive destined to his staff officers and to the unit’s chief-cook.

16:52 (Paris Time)

Galbert Barracks, Annecy, Haute-Savoie

Kin, who had watched with interest the passing countryside as the military bus carrying him and 35 other graduate recruits to Annecy, some 110 kilometers by road west from Chamonix, had a good first feeling about Annecy by the time he arrived at the barracks complex of his new unit. The town, built on the shores of Annecy Lake and surrounded by mountains, was a pretty one with many old buildings dating from early in this century or older. As for the garrison of the 27th BCA, it was composed of over twenty buildings, most of them long, single-story barrack buildings with white walls and

⁷ BASM : Brevet d’Alpinisme et de Skieur Militaire (Certificate for Mountain Climbing and Military Skying, in French).

brownish-red roofs assembled around a large central parade square, in the middle of which stood a high flagpole.



The Galbert Barracks in Annecy, Haute-Savoie. Home of the 27th BCA in 1955.

The bus, after entering the main gate of the garrison, immediately turned and stopped in a small parking lot where five men in uniform had been waiting for its arrival. One of the five men, a sergeant, then climbed into the bus and shouted at the newcomers.

“ALRIGHT, MEN, GET OUT OF THE BUS, PICK UP YOUR KIT AND THEN LINE UP IN SINGLE FILE IN THE PARKING LOT. MOVE!”

Kin thought as he got up from his bench seat that, while the order had been given in a firm and authoritarian tone, it at least had been free of swear words and insults, a nice improvement compared to his arrival in Chamonix two months ago. Taking his small travel bag from the overhead bin, he then followed the other young soldiers out of the bus, then went with them to the luggage bins situated under the cabin, finding and extracting his big kit bag and foot locker from it before lining up under the shouted instructions of the sergeant.

Waiting on one side of the parking lot and watching the new soldiers lining up with their baggage, Lieutenant-colonel Laurent Genest quickly zeroed in on one particular recruit, while his senior NCO, Adjudant-chef⁸ Louis Volage, let out a discrete exclamation.

"Oulah! Look at that young man near the first opened luggage bin, sir: he is truly built like a bear."

"Indeed! He must be Hunter Kin Comeau, the one I was warned about by Lieutenant-colonel Martin that he would need double rations because of his unusual physique. I can now see that he was not exaggerating. Please remind our cooks after this about that directive, Adjudant-Chef."

"Will do, mon Colonel!"

Waiting for a minute more, time for the sergeant to line up the newcomers and make them stand at attention, Genest then walked in front of the group, closely followed by Volage, and stopped in front of the line of 36 young soldiers. After looking left and right at the soldiers, Genest then spoke out in a strong voice.

"SOLDIERS, WELCOME TO THE 27TH BCA! I AM LIEUTENANT-COLONEL LAURENT GENEST, YOUR BATTALION COMMANDER. TO MY RIGHT IS ADJUDANT-CHEF LOUIS VOLAGE, SENIOR NCO OF THIS UNIT. WE WILL NOW REVIEW YOU QUICKLY, FOLLOWING WHICH YOU WILL BE GIVEN YOUR SUB-UNIT ASSIGNMENTS, SO THAT YOU COULD THEN BE LED TO YOUR RESPECTIVE BARRACKS AND INSTALL YOURSELVES BEFORE SUPPER. ADJUDANT-CHEF, WITH ME!"

"SIR!"

Walking at a martial pace to the right-side extremity of the line of newcomers, Genest then started examining the young soldiers one by one, standing for a few seconds in front of each young man and looking him up and down them before passing to the next soldier. Overall, Genest got a favorable impression of his new soldiers: the school in Chamonix usually made a good job of weeding out the recruits who proved problematic or outright unfit for military service. His stop in front of Kin was however markedly longer than for the other young soldiers, as Kin's physique proved to be even more impressive from up close than from afar. Since Genest knew now that Kin was a

⁸ Adjudant-chef : Chief Warrant Officer.

Neanderthal man, he was able to notice the prominent Kin's brow ridge and receding chin. However, his eyes were not that of a simple brute and his expression was open and frank, something that Genest appreciated. He then continued down the line of young soldiers, to then walk back to his previous position in front of the line and shouting an order to the sergeant who had greeted the bus.

"SERGEANT MORIN, READ THE LIST OF SUB-UNIT ASSIGNMENT FOR OUR NEW SOLDIERS!"

"YES SIR!" shouted back the sergeant, who then grabbed a clipboard handed to him by a corporal and started reading from it, shouting the name of each recruit and the battalion's sub-unit to which they had been assigned.

"I WILL NOW CALL YOU UP AND GIVE YOU YOUR SUB-UNIT ASSIGNMENTS. MY NCOS WILL THEN GUIDE YOU TO YOUR RESPECTIVE BARRACKS, WHERE YOU WILL BE ASSIGNED A BUNK BED AND A LOCKER. BE READY TO GO FOR SUPPER FOR SIX O'CLOCK, ALONG WITH YOUR NEW UNIT COMRADES. LET'S NOW START! HUNTER PIERRE ANGLOIS, TO THE THIRD COMPANY!"

"SERGEANT!"

"IT'S 'SIR' FOR YOU: OFFICER ON PARADE. HUNTER BOILEAU! FIRST COMPANY!"

As the names of his comrades were called up in alphabetical order, Kin felt a bit of anxiety, wondering to which sub-unit and job he would be assigned to. Then came his turn to be called.

"HUNTER KIN COMEAU, TO THE MORTAR GROUP OF THE HEAVY WEAPONS COMPANY."

"SIR!" shouted back Kin a bit surprised: up to now he was the first young soldier not assigned to a rifle company. In fact, he ended up being the only newcomer to be assigned to the heavy weapons company, while three more young soldiers ended up being assigned to the battalion's logistics support company or administrative support unit. With his list reading completed, the sergeant then called up a group of junior NCOs waiting on the sideline, who took with them the newcomers assigned to their respective companies and led them towards their barracks. Kin ended up being the sole newcomer who was taken charge of by a master corporal, a lean man in his late twenties who showed himself quite friendly with him, conversing with Kin while the later carried his luggage and followed him towards one of the single-story barracks.

"So, Hunter Comeau, you are going to work as part of our mortar group. First off, I am Caporal-Chef Denis Vallière, the senior truck driver of the mortar group. All the enlisted men of our group lodge in the same barrack as the enlisted men of the other groups of the heavy weapons company. For your information, the mortar group is commanded by Sous-Lieutenant Louis Montreuil, who commands a total of twenty enlisted men and NCOs. Our group's main armament consists in two 81mm mortars, which provide the battalion with indirect fire support. Mortars are important in alpine units, because they are often the only type of weapon able to provide fire support despite the presence of surrounding hills and mountains. You can thus feel privileged in being assigned to our group."

"But I know next to nothing about mortars, Master corporal."

"Don't worry about that, Hunter Comeau. You will at first be used as an ammunition carrier, which doesn't need any special skills or training. In turn, your strength and physical built should prove a boon to our group. Our Alpha Detachment has been short one ammunition carrier for about three months now, due to an accident that happened to your predecessor."

"Oh?! What happened to him?"

"Hunter Larochelle fell down a cliff during a mountain exercise. Thankfully, he survived but is now crippled for life and was subsequently released from service with a medical pension."

"Poor guy! Crippled at such a young age."

"Yes! He was a nice guy and we miss him a lot. By the way, the leader of Alpha Detachment is Sergeant Pierre Dubreuil. He is a bit rough and short-tempered but will be fair with you...if you do your job correctly and with diligence. However, from what I can see of your physique, you should have no problems fulfilling your role as an ammunition carrier. Sergeant Dubreuil is presently waiting at our barrack with the other members of our mortar group, so that he could greet you in our little unit."

Kin nodded his head at that, having a good first impression about his new assignment. That he was not going to be simply ignored and ordered around was a good sign for him.

"Uh, is there a gymnasium in this garrison, or a place where I could practice weightlifting, Master corporal? I would like to practice and keep physically fit."

Vallière gave a critical look at Kin's extra-wide shoulders and thick, muscular arms, then nodded his head.

"There is a small gymnasium with some weights on the garrison, close to the gate by which your bus entered. Just by curiosity, how much can you lift, Hunter Comeau?"

"I can bench press around 220 kilos, can snatch 165 kilos and do a clean and jerk with 200 kilos, Master corporal."

Vallièrè's mouth opened wide on hearing that and he nearly stopped walking while staring in disbelief at Kin.

"My God! That sounds like Olympic-level performances to me. Are there other sport disciplines you are good at?"

"I do like to practice Greco-Roman wrestling and I can throw a javelin quite far. I did a lot of sports and physical training while growing up, including skying and mountain climbing."

"Decidedly, Sergeant Dubreuil and Sous-lieutenant Montreuil, our mortar group's officer, should hear about this."

"Uh, why?"

"Why? Because the various units of the French Army often send their best athletes to compete in various Olympic sports disciplines and some of our soldiers even won Olympic medals on behalf of France. In the case of us Chasseurs Alpins, some of our soldiers often compete at the Winter Olympics, especially in skying and biathlon. However, you look and sound like an interesting prospect for some Summer Olympic disciplines."

"But, wouldn't that detract from my military training, Master corporal? I enlisted to serve France, not to chase after Olympic medals."

Vallièrès nodded again his head, impressed by Kin's reply and sense of duty.

"Don't worry about your service, Hunter Comeau: you will still be serving fully as a Chasseur Alpin. Aah, here is our group's barrack. The guys from the machine gun group and from the snipers' section are also lodged in the same barrack."

Vallièrè opened the door of the barrack for Kin, as he was carrying two big pieces of luggage, then led him to one of the dormitories of the barrack, which contained a row of fifteen double-bunk beds facing wooden lockers set against the opposing wall. However, only half of the beds were occupied, with all the upper bunks apparently unused. Seeing a junior officer in the room, standing in front of a group of enlisted men

and NCOs, Kin quickly put down his kit bag and foot locker and came to attention, saluting the young sous-lieutenant⁹.

"SIR! HUNTER KIN COMEAU, REPORTING FOR DUTY, SIR!"

"At ease, Hunter Comeau." said the young officer. "I am Sous-lieutenant Louis Montreuil, in command of the mortar group. Welcome in my little unit."

"Thank you, sir!"

"Sergeant Dubreuil will first assign a bed to you, then you will have a chance to get to know your new comrades."

"Yes sir!" replied Kin, grabbing again his kit bag and foot locker and going to a bunk bed pointed to him by a solidly-built sergeant.

"You can take the top bunk here, Hunter Comeau. Just drop your things next to this double bunk, then I will present to you the other members of our sub-unit. I am Sergeant Pierre Dubreuil and I am the leader of Mortar Detachment Alpha."

While putting down his luggage next to the bunk bed designated to him, Kin didn't see Vallière speak in a near-whisper to Sous-lieutenant Montreuil, making the young officer stare for a moment at Kin. Next, Dubreuil led Kin to the small circle formed by seven other soldiers.

"Hunter Comeau, here are the men forming Mortar Detachment Alpha: our mortar pointer, Master corporal Fortier; our loader, Hunter First Class Maurice Panetton; our ammunition preparation specialist, Corporal Julien Harcourt; our two other ammunition carriers, Hunter First Class Daniel Vaillant and Hunter First Class Philippe Bonséjour; our driver, Hunter First Class Charles Jumonville and; last but not least, our mule handler, Corporal Samuel Benchetrit."

Kin was not surprised when Benchetrit got named: he already knew from his training in Chamonix that the French Alpine hunters still used mules when operating in difficult mountain terrain where vehicles could not be used. While that could sound anachronic in this modern age, the fact was that mules were an excellent means to carry heavy loads in rough mountain areas, being able to carry as much as 120 kilos and to cover eight to ten kilometers a day on steep slopes. Kin exchanged handshakes with the others as they got named by Dubreuil, making many of them shake their own hand after having them crushed by Kin's grip. After the presentations were made, and with Sous-lieutenant Montreuil staying nearby and listening, Dubreuil smiled to Kin.

⁹ Sous-lieutenant : Second Lieutenant in French.

"Now that you are here with us, Hunter Comeau, tell us about yourself."

"Uh, yes Sergeant! Basically, I am eighteen years-old and was born in the Dordogne Region, northeast of Bergerac. My parents died in an accident when I was still only six-years-old and I and my sister Ani were then adopted by my present mother, who is a French-Canadian doctor. She was at first a military nurse but then got her medical diploma and started working for various international humanitarian organizations. We have often traveled as a family as she served in or visited many countries all around the World. I also got to practice a lot various Winter sports in Canada and also visited the Canadian Arctic region, where I learned a number of survival skills. I am a good skier and mountain climber and am a fairly good shot with a rifle. I also like weightlifting, Greco-Roman wrestling and javelin throwing. I have a high-school diploma and can speak English and German on top of French. Well, that's it, I believe."

Sergeant Dubreuil applauded then, making the others do the same.

"A good presentation, Hunter Comeau. Now, take the time to place your things in your assigned locker. We will all go eat supper at fifteen to six and will march as a group to the cafeteria. Again, welcome to Mortar Detachment Alpha."

"Thank you, Sergeant!"

Dubreuil then called the group to attention before leaving the room with Sous-lieutenant Montreuil, leaving Kin free to unpack and arrange his things.

With Sergeant Dubreuil gone, Kin then took the time to arrange his things and transfer his uniforms and his three sets of civilian clothes to the wooden locker assigned to him. Hunter Philippe Bonséjour, who occupied the bunk bed under the one taken by Kin, opened his eyes with interest when he saw the brown deerskin leather vest belonging to Kin as the latter hooked it inside his locker.

"Ooh, a deerskin vest? Can I see it?"

"Of course!" replied Kin, who then handed his vest to the tall and athletic young man. Bonséjour was smiling while admiring the vest and caressing its surface.

"This is authentic deerskin, right?"

"It is! I hunt from time to time and I bagged that deer myself. My sister Ani then did the sewing, using old traditional manual sewing. I am quite fond of this vest."

"You should be! This is a really nice coat. Deerskin items are quite uncommon here in France. Where did you kill that deer, Kin?"

"In Canada! That country is a paradise for hunters...if you have the right permits and follow the rules. However, if you are caught poaching or hunting out of season, the fines could be quite hefty."

"Canada... I heard a lot of good things about it but unfortunately never had a chance to travel to it and visit it."

"I am sure that you will have that chance one day, Philippe."

"I hope so. Unfortunately, the Army pay is nothing to shout about, so it could take quite a while for me to save enough for such a trip."

"Well, if you ever go to Canada and if you don't speak English, then I would counsel you to visit the Province of Québec: French is still the primary language there."

"A good tip! I will remember it, as my English is limited to only a few words. And you, I suppose that you can speak English?"

"I do, plus German."

"German? Where and when did you learn it?"

"We had ethnic German neighbors in Canada and I often played with their kids when I was growing up. The father in that family was from the Austrian Tyrol and showed me how to hunt."

What Kin didn't say was that nearly half of his friends at the Time Patrol were Germans or Austrians, like in the case of Otto Skorzeni. Philippe Bonséjour nodded his head at his words.

"Knowing German in this part of France is a definite plus for you, with Switzerland nearby. You will possibly be able to practice your German when we will be doing border patrols in the Alps: a lot of Swiss and German tourists come to the French Alps to ski. The one downer about visiting Switzerland is the prices there. The cost of things in Switzerland is much higher than here in France."

"But it will cost us nothing for us to practice our skying, right?" quipped Kin, making Bonséjour smile.

"Yeah! In fact, we will be paid to do so. Not much but we also get swearing at us and boots up our asses as bonuses."

Both laughed at that joke, along with three other soldiers who occupied the nearby bunks.

As promised, Sergeant Dubreuil came back to the barrack at a quarter to six and had the seven men of his detachment who were single assemble outside and form in

two ranks before marching them to the cafeteria. As for Corporal Samuel Benchetrit, the mule handler, as a married man he lived in an apartment block next to the garrison, along with other married men of the unit. The cafeteria proved to be a large, albeit modestly furnished facility, but the food there proved to be quite acceptable. To Kin's relief, the word about serving him double portions seemed to have been received by the cooks, who served him a second slice of pork roast and extra potatoes without Kin needing to remind them about it. Contrary to most of his comrades, he chose fresh milk as a beverage rather than the traditional table wine served routinely in all French Army messes. That attracted a question from Master corporal Réjean Fortier, the mortar pointer and the most senior enlisted man in the detachment.

"You don't drink wine, Comeau?"

"I drink alcohol only on occasions: it is not good for health if we abuse it. I do however like a cold beer on hot days. How is the beer in Annecy?"

"We have some excellent local brands in Annecy, plus a lot of imports from Switzerland and from the Alsace and Germany. The local bars and bistros are well stocked-up, both in wine and in beer. In fact, the biggest disciplinary problem in the unit is excessive drinking on weekends by some of our soldiers."

"Talking of weekends, what are normally the times off allotted to us, Master corporal? In Chamonix, we were restricted to the barracks during our whole basic training."

"Well, you will find things here are definitely more relaxed than at the school in Chamonix. We have the right to go out of the garrison after work hours, from seven in the evening up to the curfew at midnight, plus have the Sundays off. The commandant also frequently gives us part or all of Saturdays off, especially when they fall on official holidays."

Kin nodded in appreciation at that: the local work regime was definitely more relaxed than in Chamonix, where the instructors harassed the recruits with numerous extra cleaning duties.

"I used to practice weightlifting before joining the Army but had to improvise while in Chamonix. Is there a gymnasium in the garrison where I could practice weightlifting?" Fortier nodded his head in response.

"We have a small but reasonably well-equipped gymnasium near the main gate. Physical fitness is considered very important at the unit and our commandant encourages sporting initiatives, as far as the unit's budget will permit. We had to

improvise dumbbells by using old tin cans filled with concrete but the final results worked. You certainly look like a very strong man, Comeau. Just by curiosity, how much can you bench-press?"

"About 220 kilos." answered Kin, making a number of his comrades choke on their food and stare at him with big eyes.

"Two hundred and twenty kilos?!" exclaimed Philippe Bonséjour, himself a culturist and accomplished athlete. "But that would qualify you for our national Olympic team! What about clean and jerk and snatch?"

Realizing that he may have said a bit too much about his physical abilities, Kin nonetheless answered frankly, pushed in this by his profound sense of honesty.

"I can routinely do 200 kilos at the clean and jerk and 165 kilos at the snatch."

"My God! You are an Olympic-class weightlifter, Kin!"

"But I simply want to be a Chasseur Alpin! I don't want to spend my military service as part of some sporting team. What I want is to help other people in mountain areas and help defend France."

"You certainly have your priorities straight, Comeau." said Fortier. "Still, it would be nice to confirm your claims after supper. How about we all go to the gym after supper, so that you can show us what you can do?"

With all his comrades then encouraging him to do so, Kin finally gave up and nodded once.

"Alright! But I will want to be able to warm up a bit before my demonstration. Doing weightlifting cold could easily result in muscular accidents."

"A reasonable precaution indeed! Alright, let's finish eating, then we will return to the barrack and change into sporting gear before going as a group to the gym."

When they formed up outside of the cafeteria at the end of supper, Master corporal Fortier walked the group back to their barrack, with the men then changing into regulation shorts, T-shirts and running shoes. When Kin changed out of his duty uniform and revealed how muscular and powerful his body was, his comrades nearly pushed a collective exclamation of stunned disbelief, with Philippe Bonséjour, himself an accomplished athlete, saying what the others thought.

"Kin, I never saw a guy built as powerfully as you. How the hell did you manage to have such a mass of muscles?"

"Genes, I suppose. I was always big and strong as a kid and I trained to improve further my physique."

"Wow! The girls in Annecy will be crazy about you." Said Hunter First Class Charles Jumonville, the detachment's driver, making Kin smirk.

"Maybe!"

Six minutes after having returned to their barrack, the seven soldiers went out again, this time marching to a single-story building next to the main gate of the garrison. The gymnasium turned out to be fairly small and shared the same building which housed the unit's infirmary. Since most of the unit's physical training was done in the open air, outside of buildings, Kin was not surprised or discouraged by the gym's small size. It did however have a decent collection of weightlifting equipment, with the smaller ones being improvised dumbbells made of concrete-filled pairs of old tin cans linked together by a steel bar. As for the larger ones, they were properly manufactured, with a collection of steel disks of various weights which could be added or subtracted from a transverse steel bar. On entering the small musculation room, the group was greeted by a strong-looking man in his thirties wearing regulation physical training gear.

"Aah, coming to practice your muscles, hey?"

The man then froze while staring at Kin's body.

"Nom de Dieu! That's what I call muscles."

"Hunter Kin Comeau arrived this afternoon with the batch of new soldiers from Chamonix, Master sergeant." replied Fortier. "He told us during supper that he was good at weightlifting, so we brought him here to see how good he effectively is."

"A good idea, Master corporal Fortier. Well, Hunter Comeau, why don't you go warm up while I go get a clipboard, a pen and a physical evaluation form? By the way, I am Master Sergeant Maurice Delmar, chief physical fitness instructor for the unit."

"Yes, Master sergeant!"

When Delmar returned with a clipboard and a pen after going to his small office, he found Kin doing warming up and stretching exercises, showing a lot more suppleness and agility than his impressive set of muscles and massive skeleton would have suggested. Delmar nodded in appreciation before speaking to Kin.

"We will try with the snatch, then with the clean and jerk, followed by bench pressing. At how much do you want the barbell set for the snatch, Chasseur Comeau? And be careful not to try too much at first."

"I would like to start the snatch at 140 kilos, Master sergeant: that's my daily standard for the snatch. As for the clean and jerk, I will start with 170 kilos."

Delmar hesitated on hearing those numbers: they were easily within Olympic standards.

"Are you sure, Hunter Comeau? Those are truly punishing weights."

"I am, Master sergeant! My personal record is 165 kilos for the snatch and 200 kilos for the clean and jerk."

"Merde! Those numbers would place you on an Olympic podium any day. Very well, continue warming up while I go prepare the weights. Come help me for that, guys." The six young soldiers followed Delmar to a gym mat on which sat a barbell, with a collection of steel disks held on a steel rack.

"Alright guys, let's set this barbell to 140 kilos. Let's start first by adding four 25-kilo disks to the barbell, for a total of 110 kilos with the bar. Then we will add two ten-kilo disks plus two five-kilo disks."

With the young soldiers spraining to lift and put in place the 25-kilo disks, Delmar supervised them carefully in order to avoid accidents. Himself an accomplished culturist and athlete, Delmar knew how easy it was for people not properly trained in weightlifting to pull or sprain a muscle when not properly warmed up. After a couple of minutes, the barbell was ready at 140 kilos of total weight. Looking towards Kin, Delmar saw that he was already walking towards the barbell.

"Do you feel fully warmed up, Hunter Comeau?"

"Yes, Master sergeant! I am ready."

"Then, take position behind the barbell. Take your time before your first try."

Kin obeyed him and put talc on his hands before going to stand behind the barbell. Delmar hid his excitement while waiting for Kin to do his first try: if that young soldier succeeded in his snatch lift, this would become a new record within the French Army. In this case, Kin would have to squat behind the barbell, with both hands on the transverse bar, then throw the barbell up over his head in one shot and stand upright while holding the barbell above him. Right now, the Olympic record for the heavyweight class was 187 kilos, not much more than the 140 kilos this Kin Comeau was going to attempt to lift. Delmar and the younger soldiers around him watched with anticipation as Kin crouched behind the barbell and carefully grabbed it with both hands. Then taking one deep

breath, he pulled up the 140-kilo mass at the same time as he sprang up in an explosive effort. Delmar's jaw nearly dropped to the floor when Kin completed the snatch with relative ease and stood straight for four seconds with the barbell over him at the end of his extended arms, then lowered the barbell down on the mat.

"Jesus! I can't believe this! What was your personal record again for the snatch, Hunter Comeau?"

"One hundred and sixty-five kilos, Master sergeant."

Delmar nearly fell on his bum on hearing that. With his head nearly swimming from the rush of blood to his brain, he noted down Kin's performance for the snatch on his evaluation form, then pointed the barbell to the other soldiers.

"Alright, men: let's set this barbell at 170 kilos. Use the waiting time to relax and rest a bit, Comeau."

As Kin started slowly walking around while shaking his arms and hands, Delmar thought furiously about the implications of this. One thing was for sure: Lieutenant-colonel Genest needed to be informed about this.

When Kin returned behind the barbell, now set at 170 kilos, Delmar held his breath as Kin squatted behind it. The clean and jerk involved two separate moves: first, the culturist would lift the barbell up to just below his groin level, then would stand straight before throwing up the barbell over his head, bending forward a bit before straightening up while holding the barbell above his head, with both arms fully extended. The present Olympic record for the clean and jerk for the heavyweight class was 224 kilos. If Kin succeeded now, he would easily qualify for the French national team. Then, again with relative ease, Kin sprang up, then threw the barbell up over his heads. The young soldiers around, accompanied by Delmar, then broke into wild applauses and cheers as Kin let the barbell go down on the mat. Delmar enthusiastically shook hands with Kin, a huge grin on his face.

"Hunter Comeau, your performance was phenomenal. Do you feel up to try your luck at bench-pressing after this?"

"Yes, Master sergeant! I will just ask for five to ten minutes of rest first. Could you set the barbell at 220 kilos?"

"As you wish, Hunter Comeau. Take your time to recuperate before your try."

Now feeling downright jubilant, Delmar noted down Kin's performance at the clean and jerk before using the other soldiers to reset the barbell once again. When Kin did his

attempt at bench-pressing some ten minutes ago, Delmar yelled in triumph on seeing the young soldier succeed again. Going next to him, he then helped him get up from the bench and patted his back in congratulation.

"Hunter Comeau, consider yourself on the unit's weightlifting team."

"That won't detract from my time dedicated to my military duties, I hope, Master sergeant?"

"Don't worry about that. The only times you will officially perform with our sporting teams will be at the Alpine Corps sporting competition next month. As for your training, feel free to come here and train on your own time after work hours. Are there other sports where you excel?"

"I am good at Greco-Roman wrestling and at the javelin throw, Master sergeant."

"Then, I would love to take you on at wrestling tomorrow. I am not bad myself at Greco-Roman wrestling."

That declaration made Kin smile and point an index at Delmar.

"You may regret it, Master sergeant."

"Maybe, maybe not: I know a few tricks of my own, Hunter Comeau."

The next day, watched on by nearly the whole battalion, including Lieutenant-colonel Genest, Kin did short work of Delmar, slamming him down hard on the mat after only twenty seconds and leaving the poor PT instructor stunned and out of breath for seconds before Kin helped him back up, a friendly smile on his face.

"I warned you, Master sergeant."

"You sure did, Chasseur Comeau."

However, not having a proper sporting field in the garrison, they were not able to do some javelin throwing afterwards. Still in PT gear, Kin was then asked by Lieutenant-colonel Genest to come to his office, which Kin did with some apprehension: this business of going big into sports competitions was not why he had volunteered for military service. Apparently, someone had told Genest about his reservations on that subject, so he gave Kin a reassuring smile after sitting behind his desk, with Kin standing at attention in front of the desk.

"At ease, Hunter Comeau! First, don't worry about being pulled away from your military duties in order for you to train and compete in sports. I was told about your reservations on that subject and fully agree with you. In my unit, duty comes first, then we can think about sports and competitions. I will thus encourage you to continue

training on your own free time and not to worry about competitions. While you may represent this unit during some of the friendly inter-unit competitions held by our Alpine Corps during the year, you will do it on a strictly volunteer basis. How's that, Hunter Comeau?"

"That would be perfect for me, mon Colonel!" answered loudly Kin, feeling relief.

"Then, you are dismissed, Hunter Comeau."

"Thank you, mon Colonel!" replied Kin before saluting and then pivoting on his heels and walking out of the office.

CHAPTER 5 – MOUNTAIN PATROL



09:18 (Paris Time)

Saturday, November 26, 1955

Barracks of the 27th BCA, Annecy

Haute-Savoie, France

“Alright, men, gather around me: we have a new mission.”

On the urging of Sub-lieutenant Louis Montreuil, the men of his mortar group assembled around the bunk bed on which their young officer had sat in their barrack, eager to hear what news he had for them. Kin, who was part of the 21 soldiers now surrounding Montreuil, listened on carefully as his group commander spoke in a sober tone.

“Men, our battalion has received a new tasking from Paris, meant to lend support to our Gendarmerie. Some three weeks ago, a Gendarmerie border patrol encountered a group of seven suspicious men who were crossing from Italy into France via the Alps, near Tresse. When that patrol of four gendarmes tried to intercept that group in order to check on them, the suspects opened fire on the gendarmes with automatic weapons. Two gendarmes were wounded in the exchange of fire, with one gendarme dying from his wounds before his comrades could carry him to a medical facility. As for the suspects, they fled and continued to get deeper into French territory. Unfortunately, they managed to disappear before the gendarmerie could send reinforcements to the area of the incident.”

"Sir, do we know why those men shot at our gendarmes?" asked Sergeant Jean Delorimier, one of the two detachment leaders of the mortar group.

"We don't know for sure but the surviving gendarmes noticed that the seven men carried apparently heavy packs on their backs, apart from lugging automatic weapons. The Gendarmerie is speculating that those men were smugglers, carrying either drugs or weapons between Italy and France. Then, two weeks after that incident, another gendarmerie patrol encountered a group of armed men skying across the border from Italy east of Les Houches. Those armed men fired at our gendarmes from a distance, apparently to make them stay away, then continued towards the Northwest and Chamonix. Unfortunately, those armed men managed to escape the gendarmes. In view of those two incidents and of the fact that it had few gendarmes trained in mountain-climbing, the Gendarmerie asked for the help of the Army, which then tasked our Alpine Corps to lend assistance to the Gendarmerie by sending frequent patrols along our alpine border with Italy. I, along with other officers of the battalion, just got orders from Colonel Genest. As part of a battalion-level patrolling plan, our mortar group was given the task of establishing a base camp at the alpine refuge of Albert the First, near the Aiguille du Tour. From there, our group will run out patrols between the Aiguille du Tour and the Aiguille d'Argentière. Our job will be to intercept and control anyone seen crossing that portion of the Alps. If the ones we will check out are simple tourists and mountain climbers, then we will let them pass without further ado. However, if we encounter armed persons or smugglers carrying contraband, we will arrest them and hand them over to the Gendarmerie. As the two incidents involving the Gendarmerie showed, this could be a dangerous job, so we will be armed and will carry plenty of ammunition. However, we will not bring our mortars along with us for those patrols, just our individual small arms."

"What are the rules of engagement, sir?" asked Sergeant Pierre Dubreuil, Kin's detachment commander, making Montreuil nod his head once.

"Our rules of engagement are both simple and straightforward: if we encounter suspicious men, we will challenge them and search them. If they carry weapons on them, then we will disarm and arrest them. If they fire at us or even point weapons at us, then we will have the right to open fire in order to neutralize them. We will have the right to use deadly force if the circumstances call for that. If any suspect tries to flee, we will give chase and shout a warning. If that warning is ignored, then we will fire a warning shot. If that warning shot is also ignored, then we will shoot to kill. Colonel Genest was

firm about those rules: while we want to follow legality, we will not risk the lives of our soldiers by imposing rules that could get them killed. Questions?"

Corporal Samuel Benchetrit, the mule caretaker of Kin's detachment, then raised one hand.

"Sir, are we going to bring our mules with us?"

"No! Since we are not bringing our mortars with us, we won't need them for this mission. However, you and the other mule caretakers, except for Sergeant Nadeau, our chief mule caretaker, will come patrol with our other soldiers. As for Sergeant Nadeau, he will stay here and ensure that our mules are properly cared for. Yes, Master corporal Fortier?"

"How long will be this patrol, sir?"

"We will be up in the Albert Refuge for a month or so. Colonel Genest will then decide if we need to prolong our mission, depending on what happens in the meantime. If we have to continue patrolling past Christmas, then we will rotate out those of you who are married with children, while the single members will stay up in the mountains. Gendarmerie intelligence has noted a very distinct rise in armed crimes involving automatic weapons during the last few months, so those suspect smugglers may well be carrying weapons and ammunition across the Alps from Italy, counting on the weak manpower of the Gendarmerie in that region. Well, if they try again to smuggle things in across the Alps, then they will hit something a lot tougher than a handful of gendarmes." A concert of approving cheers greeted his last sentence.

16:02 (Paris Time)

Parade square of the 27th BCA, Annecy

"Hey, why are we going to use civilian tour buses rather than our own military trucks?" asked Corporal Julien Harcour, the artificer in Kin's mortar detachment, as five civilian buses of the type which drove around tourists coming to the Alps region rolled inside the garrison. Master sergeant Marc Laurendeau, the senior NCO of the mortar group, gave at once an explanation, speaking loud enough to allow all the soldiers around him to hear him.

"Because we want our move to Argentière to be discreet. The Gendarmerie suspect that those smugglers we will be looking for have accomplices in Argentière and in other towns near the mountains, accomplices who signal any unusual police

movements to the smugglers. We will thus arrive in Argentière after darkness will have fallen. Furthermore, we will not get out in the town itself or at the nearby ski lift station for the same reason. Instead, we will stop and get out before the town and will then proceed on skis to the Albert Refuge.”

“But, renting those buses must have cost a bundle to our battalion, Master sergeant.” objected Hunter First Class Charles Jumonville, the assigned truck driver of Detachment Alpha. “I thought that our unit’s budget for fuel and transportation was strictly limited.”

Laurendeau nodded at that remark.

“An accurate statement, Jumonville. However, since this operation is in support of the Gendarmerie, we will not be paying for these buses: the Gendarmerie will. So, you can thank it for being able to travel in comfort rather than in the rear box of a military truck.”

“That’s nice of them, Master sergeant.” said Kin, making Laurendeau give him a sober look.

“One gendarme is dead and another is in a hospital because of those smugglers, Hunter Comeau. The Gendarmerie will thus provide to us as much support as we will need in order to catch those bastards. The usual interservice rivalry between us and the Gendarmerie will thus be suspended for this operation. ALL RIGHT MEN! STUFF YOUR GEAR AND SKIS IN THE BAGGAGE COMPARTMENTS OF THIS FIRST BUS AND THEN GET ABOARD!”

Kin, like the other soldiers of the mortar group, obeyed at once and was soon able to sit in one of the comfortable, well-padded seats in the bus tasked to carry his sub-unit. He let out a satisfied groan as he sank into the soft seat.

“Aah! This is nice!”

“Talk for yourself, Kin!” replied Philippe Bonséjour, who took the second seat next to him. “With your wide shoulders, you are taking a full one and a half seat width. We are lucky that there are enough seats in this bus to leave some empty ones. If not, I would be feeling like a sardine in its can.”

“Hey, I can’t help it, Philippe!” replied Kin in a playful tone. Soon, the convoy of buses started rolling out of the parade square and onto the Avenue de Genève. The atmosphere inside the bus was sober but relaxed as it rolled through Annecy and started following the roads leading to Argentière. Kin, who had always been a quiet type,

mentally reflected on the mission of his unit and its implications for him: he may well soon be called to fire at and possibly kill someone for the first time in his life. However, he had learned very early as a Neanderthal boy living in the wild hills of prehistoric Dordogne that you often had to kill in order not to be killed. His own parents and the other Neanderthal family living in their cave had been killed by cave hyenas hunting for preys one night, 52,000 years ago. Only Ani and himself had survived that devastating attack, thanks to the bravery and sacrifice of his parents, who had died while defending their group. Then, Sylvie Comeau, a member of the Time Patrol team which had been secretly following and documenting the life of his Neanderthal group¹⁰, had taken on her to come down to the cave in order to save him and Ani from certain death if left abandoned to themselves. He had extensively trained with a variety of weapons while growing up at the secret base of the Time Patrol, situated some 5,000 years in the past in New Zealand, coached in this by military veterans and Time Patrol field agents. Apart from practicing target shooting with them, Kin had also participated with them in a number of hunting or trapping expeditions in various time periods. He thus had already killed a number of times in the past, but always animals, never Humans. Some of those expeditions had also been conducted to capture alive groups of specimens of prehistoric animals, specimens which had then been transported to the far future in the 34th Century, where the civilization of the Global Council existed, in order to repopulate regions of Earth which had been devastated by a widespread nuclear war in the Mid-21st Century. The Time Patrol had originally been created and formed by Nancy Laplante and Doctor Farah Tolkonen as the first armed agency of the Global Council, a pacifist and unarmed civilization, in order to regulate and control time travel and thus prevent illegal manipulations of History which could have catastrophic consequences for Humanity. While the existence of the Time Patrol was widely known in this timeline, called Timeline 'B', contrary to the same century in the original Timeline 'A', the Time Patrol stayed mostly discreet about its activities and actions around the World. The one link apparent to all at present was the fact that Nancy Laplante was officially the head of state and ruler of the Holy Land of Palestine, the name for what would be called 'Israel' in Timeline 'A'. However, what normal people didn't know was that the original Nancy Laplante was dead, killed a few ago in relative time while practicing her profession of war correspondent in the early 21st Century of Timeline 'A'. Her soul had then become a

¹⁰ Please refer to my novel CHILDREN OF TIME concerning that episode.

powerful avatar and angel of the god-like entity called 'The One', an immaterial and immensely powerful being made of spiritual energy, which had been following and shepherding Humanity along for millions of years already. As an ex-resident of the secret base of the Time Patrol, Kin knew all this but nobody outside of the Time Patrol was in the know about the true nature of the 'Nancy Laplante' who was presently ruling under the title of 'Overseer of the Holy Land of Palestine and that of Queen of Jerusalem'.

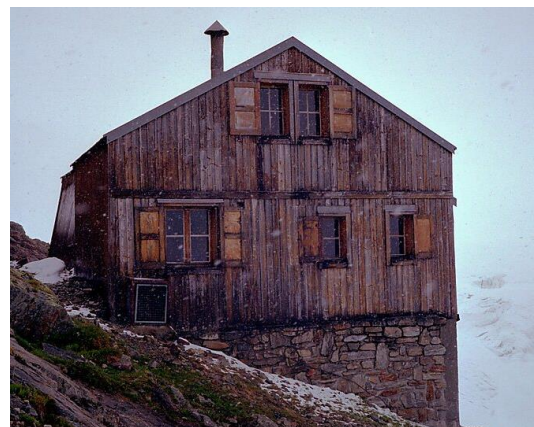
Plunged in his thoughts and souvenirs, Kin hardly paid attention to the scenery rolling past his bus and the three-hour trip to Argentière thus went by quickly for him. It was dark, with only a half-moon providing illumination, when the convoy of five buses stopped along the road at a temporary stop area a few kilometers short of Argentière. With the senior NCOs shouting orders, the alpine soldiers got off the buses and retrieved their skis and packs from the underfloor baggage compartments, then put on their backpacks and their skis. With the soldiers wearing by their carrying straps slung across their chests their Model 49 semi-automatic rifles and MAT 49 submachine guns, the 92 men of the heavy weapons company of the 27th BCA started skying across the open ground, heading in parallel single files towards the Argentière Glacier and the Albert the First mountain refuge, situated at the junction of the French, Swiss and Italian borders.

23:15 (Paris Time)

Albert the First mountain refuge, altitude of 2,771 meters, French Alps

Near the junction of the French, Italian and Swiss borders

The alpine soldiers were happy to finally approach the mountain refuge that was going to be their base camp for their mission. While all in excellent shape and being well practiced skiers, their heavy backpacks, loaded with rations, ammunition and winter



survival gear, were starting to tire them and make them sweat. The one exception was Kin, who still looked as fresh as a rose and appeared to enjoy his trip, something that

made Charles Jumonville wonder out loud to Samuel Benchetrit, who was just ahead of him.

"Look at Kin! He doesn't seem to be tired one bit after this trip up the slopes. How does he do that?"

"Charles, you should know by now that Kin basically has the energy of two or three of us combined. He may not be a genius but, physically, he is the perfect alpine soldier and possesses incredible endurance. It is as if he was born in these mountains."

"I understand that he was born in the Dordogne Department, right?"

"Correct! Have you ever visited the Dordogne Department?"

"Uh, no! I am from Orléans."

"Then, you should know that the Dordogne is a very hilly and densely wooded area, with lots of gorges, deep valleys and steep cliffs. It is an excellent place to do some vigorous excursions on foot. It also happens to be a beautiful region."

"Oh! Maybe I should visit it one day."

"You definitely could do worse, Charles."

After another thirty minutes of hard slogging and climbing, the alpine soldiers finally arrived at the refuge proper, a wooden building that had obviously seen better days. Sub-lieutenant Louis Montreuil shone his flashlight across the façade of the two-story building and frowned.

"This refuge is in a rather poor condition, yet it was built only 25 years ago, if I refer to our briefings and documentation."

"Yes, but my guess is that the owners of this refuge skimmed on its maintenance, in order to maximize their operating profits," replied Master sergeant Marc Laurendeau. "Places in it will be tight, considering that we are three times the number of persons it was built to accommodate. No wonder that there are talks of building a newer and larger refuge on this site."

"Well, we better get in before those bums from the machine gun group grab the best places."

To Montreuil's disappointment, the 37 men of the machine gun group did manage to grab the best spots in the refuge first, as the company commander, Captain Robert Théoret, let the machine gunners in first. The men of the mortar group thus ended up being packed into one of the upper floor rooms of the refuge. That was

however still better than if they would have had to pitch their tents outside, on the rocky terrasse next to the refuge. After piling their backpacks and skis in one corner of the room, the 21 enlisted men and NCOs of the mortar group laid their sleeping bags either on the double bunk beds of the room or directly on the wooden, creaky floor, then went to sleep, while their officer went to a command meeting called by Captain Théoret.

In the main ground level room of the refuge, where a wood stove had been fired up, Captain Théoret laid out a map on one of the wooden tables of the lounge and spoke to his five subaltern officers and one top senior NCO, Warrant Officer René Fonck.

"Alright, men. We will let our soldiers sleep for three hours before we will wake up the first of them who will have to go establish three observation posts across the Glacier du Milieu, near the slopes of the Aiguille d'Argentière and of the Aiguille du Chardonnet. We will erect a tent in each of those three locations here, here and here and will also build a snow wall around them in order to protect them from the wind and also to provide some cover to our soldiers manning those observation posts. Sub-Lieutenant Montreuil, you will send one of your two mortar detachments to this location at the foot of the Aiguille d'Argentière, in a spot where your men will be able to observe the ski trail passing by it. Lieutenant Charlier, your men will go install and man two observation posts here and here, next to the Aiguille du Chardonnet, with 400 meters separating the two posts, so that you could block the passage next to the Glacier du Milieu if need be. The rest of the battalion will also establish observation posts along the border, in order to cover every possible passage into France by smugglers. Our antitank and sniper groups will be kept in reserve, ready to reinforce our observation posts or to cut the path of smugglers if any of them are spotted. We will receive fresh supplies of rations via helicopter every two or three days, weather permitting. The men manning the observation post will be relieved each 48 hours after their camps have been established. The idea here is to stay discrete and as much out of sight as possible, so that would-be smugglers won't suspect our presence here and will then walk into our trap. Questions? No? Then go grab some sleep yourselves. You will wake up your first departing teams at three in the morning. I want our observation posts built and ready to operate by six. That's it, gentlemen: you are dismissed!"

Louis Montreuil felt some excitement as he went back upstairs to go sleep with his men: this was going to be the first truly operational mission of his young career, which had consisted up to now of a series of training exercises, with no live ammunition issued to

his group up to now, except for a few target practice sessions during the past few months.



The Aiguille d'Argentière (3,901 meters), with the Glacier du Milieu, in the French Alps.

03:01 (Paris Time)

Sunday, November 27, 1955

Mountain refuge of Albert the First

"Alright, men, wake up! Keep the noise down while equipping yourselves, so that you don't wake up the men of our other detachment."

Awakened by Sergent Dubreuil, Kin rubbed his eyes before getting out of his sleeping bag. Contrary to most of his comrades, who insisted on sleeping fully dressed inside their sleeping bags in the erroneous belief that they would thus keep warmer that way, Kin wore only his shorts and socks while sleeping. Yet, he was now much warmer than his comrades who had slept fully clothed, something which attracted a question in a low voice from Charles Jumonville.

"How come you are not shivering while wearing only your shorts? You must have frozen all night, no?"

"Not at all, Charles! You and the others who sleep fully clothed are the ones who do things the wrong way."

"How so?"

"Because our sleeping bags are meant to reflect our body heat and thus keep us warm. By sleeping with your clothes on, you prevent your body heat from being reflected back at you. Furthermore, since your clothes were not completely dry, their humidity further defeated the design of our sleeping bags."

"But what about my clothes? If I leave them outside my sleeping bag while I sleep, they will be frozen stiff in the morning."

"Not if you place them between the inner and outer sections of your sleeping bag. Try that next time you go to sleep."

What Kin didn't say was that the French soldiers could have learned a lot from how Neanderthals like him had lived and survived in severe Ice Age weather for many tens of thousands of years. As for Kin himself, his Neanderthal physiology was perfectly adapted to cold climates, with a compact, stocky body which minimized body heat loss and with his large nostrils filtering the cold air of Winter.

Doing their best to keep the noise down in order not to wake up the other men of their mortar group, Kin and the other eight soldiers of Detachment Alpha got dressed and equipped, then quietly walked out of their room, their backpack, skis and weapons on them. Going down to the ground level, Sergeant Dubreuil had his men fill their thermos bottles with hot coffee before leading them outside, where they collected a large toboggan containing a winter tent and various supplies and tools. Kin did not complain when he and Philippe Bonséjour were designated to pull the toboggan: he and Philippe were the two strongest men of their detachment and it was only logical for them to pull such a load. Daniel Vaillant, the robust son of a farmer, was chosen to help guide the toboggan by holding on to its rear guide frame. With Sergeant Dubreuil in the lead, the group of nine men cautiously went down the rocky slope from the refuge's terrasse before starting to cross the Glacier du Milieu. While complete darkness would have been ideal, the crossing of the glacier, with its multiple crevasses, was too dangerous to be attempted at night without lights, so the chasseurs switched on the lamps fixed to the front of their helmets, lamps which had been fitted with red filters in order to be less visible from a distance. With Dubreuil putting a premium on safety, their group took two and a half hours to cover the four kilometers between the refuge and the location chosen in advance for their future observation post. Their skis however helped them a lot by distributing their weight over a larger surface and also by helping the soldiers slide on the snow and ice instead of sinking in it at every step. The only true tricky moment came

when they encountered a meter-wide crevasse in the glacier which they could not go around. They defeated it by having four men jump across first without their packs, then throwing those packs across by hand, a task at which Kin's superlative strength proved again to be a boon to his sub-unit. Then, the toboggan was cautiously pulled across by the four soldiers who had already crossed, with the five other soldiers pushing and holding the rear frame. The whole operation took some twenty minutes, after which the nine soldiers continued on towards the foot of the Aiguille d'Argentière. On their way, Sergeant Dubreuil stopped for a moment to show to his men old tracks from multiple skiers who had gone across the glacier.

"This is the main trail used by sports skiers and mountain climbers to cross this glacier and get to either the various summits or passes of this area. We will have to make sure that we have a good direct view of that trail from our observation post. I can see a large rock outcrop some 200 meters to our front that will be ideal to cut the wind for our tent. A little extra effort and we will soon be able to drop our packs and erect our tent."

That encouraged his soldiers, who renewed their efforts and soon stopped behind the big rock outcrop, which rose a good three meters above the snow and ice. Dubreuil surveyed quickly the site before grinning to his men.

"This will be perfect for our post. Master corporal Fortier, Corporal Benchetrit, you will start building a snow wall at the edge of that rock, in order to provide some protection from the wind for our men who will be observing our surroundings. The rest will erect our tent under my supervision. Let's get to work, men!"

Half an hour later, with their tent now up and with part of their supplies and equipment being transferred inside, Kin approached Dubreuil with a suggestion.

"Sergeant, how about building a snow wall around our tent, so that the wind could not blow it down or damage it?"

Dubreuil only had to think for a second before nodding his head and smile to Kin.

"A good idea, Comeau. Use the men who are not doing anything at the moment to help you."

"Thank you, Sergeant!" replied Kin before going to collect a shovel and a few men. Dubreuil watched him as he walked away.

"Decidedly, this Kin was made to be a chasseur alpin: it is as if he was born in the middle of ice and snow."

01:48 (Paris Time)

Thursday, December 3, 1955

Mortar group's observation post

Southwest slopes of the Aiguille d'Argentière

Kin was on watch duty with Hunter First Class Maurice Panetton, an outgoing, friendly and likeable young man from Lyon, as their group was ending the first week of their mission. Up to now, there had been little activity in the area, this time of the year seeing few tourists or mountain enthusiasts traveling around this region. A three-day-long snowstorm had also contributed to the low level of activity around. Despite the long routine observation work, Kin was enjoying this mission in the Alps, which reminded him of his youth in the Dordogne of the Ice Age era. His companion, seemingly a bit bored, then made a comment while still scanning the area around their observation post.

"At least, we can see quite well at night, thanks to the reflection of the moonlight on the snow. It would probably be much harder to spot anyone coming while following these rocky slopes."

"True, but even then, we have Sergeant Dubreuil's night vision scope to help us spot suspicious activity. I..."

"What? Do you see something, Kin?"

"Uh, maybe. Can you pass me the night scope?"

Panetton quickly took the scope, a cylindrical object about the size of a beer can, out of one pocket of his winter parka and gave it to Kin, who raised it to his right eye and looked through it for a few seconds before giving it back to his companion while pointing in one direction.

"Look in that direction, some 300 meters away: there is a group of seven skiers approaching from the direction of the border. They wear big packs and are all dressed in white camouflage outfits: those are not tourists or sportsmen. You better go wake up Sergeant Dubreuil, and quickly."

A few seconds of looking through the night scope convinced Panetton that Kin was right.

"You are right: tourists and sportsmen don't travel around here at night and they never dress only in white clothes. Those bozos are definitely wearing winter camouflage."

Panetton gave the scope back to Kin before going quickly in their tent, allowing Kin to further examine the newcomers. The more he saw of them, the more he grew suspicious about them. Even if legitimate travelers would be skying around at night like this, they would at least be using a few flashlights in order to avoid any possible crevasses which could be along their way. Those men however used no lights at all and could have slipped by the observation post unobserved if not for Kin's exceptional nocturnal eyesight, another common trait in Neanderthals. Then, the approaching men seemed to hesitate and stopped while looking in Kin's direction. Kin, surprised by this, instinctively looked behind him and nearly swore out loud: someone had lit a flashlight inside the tent, which made it light up like a Chinese paper lamp, making it easily visible from a long distance at night. Then, the flashlight inside the tent was shut off but the damage had already been done. Looking back at the group of seven men, Kin saw that they now had resumed skying, this time at a much-accelerated pace. Furious, Kin, quickly walked to his tent and spoke through its canvas fabric.

"Sergeant, those men have seen the light inside our tent and are now skying at double time down the slope."

A pungent exclamation came out from Sergeant Dubreuil before he emerged from the tent, still only partially dressed.

"Show me where they are, Kin!"

"Yes, Sergeant!"

Going back to the snow wall of the observation post, Kin gave the night scope to his NCO while pointing in the direction where he could see the group of seven men.

"They are now about 250 meters from us, skying down the slope, Sergeant. They are dressed in white winter camouflage and carry big packs. They were also not using any lights: these are no tourists, in my opinion."

"You are right: these guys smell most suspicious. We may have to pursue them down the slope. Put your skis on while I alert our command post by radio."

Excited at the prospect of seeing some action, Kin hurried to his skis, planted in the snow outside the tent, and put them on as more soldiers hurried out of the tent. Less than two minutes later, Sergeant Dubreuil, now fully clothed, also came to put his skis on while giving orders around him.

"HARCOUR, FORTIER, YOU STAY HERE AND CONTINUE TO OBSERVE. THE REST, FOLLOW ME AND MAKE SURE THAT YOUR WEAPONS ARE LOADED."

Having already his skis fixed to his boots, Kin was the first man behind Dubreuil as their detachment hurried down the slope, hot on the trail of the group of seven suspicious men. Then, a few seconds later, a number of bullets whistled through the air, a second before a salvo of shots rang out in the night, making Sergeant Dubreuil swear out loud.

"THOSE BASTARDS HAVE AUTOMATIC WEAPONS! CHASSEURS, CHAMBER ROUNDS IN YOUR RIFLES!"

Dubreuil then spoke in the headset of the tactical radio he was carrying.

"Nine, this is Seven Alpha. We are now pursuing a group of seven men armed with automatic weapons who are fleeing down the slope past our observation post. We will need to have someone cut their path further down the slope... Seven Alpha, understood! ALRIGHT MEN, WE HAVE AUTHORIZATION TO RETURN FIRE BUT HOLD YOUR FIRE UNTIL WE GET CLOSER."

"SERGEANT, PERMISSION TO GO AHEAD AND TO THE LEFT IN ORDER TO CUT THEIR PATH FURTHER DOWN."

"DO IT COMEAU! VAILLANT, GO WITH COMEAU!"

Kin grinned on hearing that: Hunter First Class Daniel Vaillant was the best skier of the detachment and was not going to have any problem following close behind him. Leaving the line of seven soldiers with Vaillant, Kin started skying as fast as he could in the dark, taking extra risks in the process but with his performance boosted by the adrenaline rush he now felt. The occasional flashes from gunfire helped him keep track of where their enemies were and Kin soon found himself and Vaillant slightly ahead of the suspects and about 150 meters to their left, on parallel courses.

"Daniel, let's gain another hundred meters ahead of these assholes, then we will turn hard right and stop to mount an ambush."

"Got it, Kin!"

By the time that Kin decided to turn hard right, the other chasseurs under Sergeant Dubreuil had started returning fire with their rifles. However, the volume of fire coming from the suspects was worrying Kin, who fully realized how outgunned his comrades were.

"Those assholes all seem to have assault rifles. Who the fuck could they be to have such armament? These are no ordinary smugglers."

"They sure aren't, Kin." agreed at once Daniel Vaillant. "There, just ahead: there is a large rock that would give us excellent cover from enemy fire."

"Sold!" replied Kin, who then bifurcated towards that rock. The two of them soon were crouching behind the rock in question and pointing their rifles. Thankfully, the moonlight reflecting on the snow illuminated sufficiently the incoming seven suspects to allow for aimed shots. Being the junior soldier out of the two, Kin then looked at Daniel Vaillant.

"Should we give them a warning before starting to shoot?"

"Did they give us a warning before starting to shoot at us? Let them have it!"

Kin nodded at that, satisfied, then aimed at the nearest incoming skier, who was firing his automatic rifle from the hip towards the pursuing soldiers behind him and while skying down the slope, showing some impressive winter combat skills in the process. Taking careful aim, Kin then gently and progressively pressed the trigger of his Model 1949 rifle. The shot came out the way it was supposed to do, without warning. Kin's target, squarely hit in the torso, fell to the ground and cartwheeled a couple of time in the snow before sliding to a stop, unmoving. Vaillant's first shot was equally a success, downing another man. The five remaining skiers then split their fire between Kin's duo and Sergeant Dubreuil's team. As bullets zipped by his head, Kin took aim at another suspect and fired, bowling him over in the snow. Two more suspects then fell, at which time the two surviving suspects seemingly had enough and threw down their weapons before raising their arms high in the air and shouting in French.

"DON'T SHOOT! WE SURRENDER! WE SURRENDER!"

"Yes!" said Daniel Vaillant triumphantly while getting up on his skis. "Let's close in on them, Kin, cautiously."

"I'm with you!" replied Kin while also getting up. It took them only seconds before they arrived at the two suspects, who had been less than fifty meters from the large rock by the time they had surrendered. Daniel Vaillant then gave orders in a harsh tone to the two men.

"Get on your knees and keep your hands up! Kin, check them for any weapons which could still be on them."

His rifle pointed, Kin approached the nearest man and quickly patted him down before making him take off his big backpack. Kin frowned on finding a loaded pistol and a knife on each of the two men.

"An automatic rifle, plus a pistol and a knife? These guys are walking arsenals!"

"Then, check their boots as well: they may be hiding pocket knives inside them."

Following Daniel's advice, Kin did so and frowned on finding a switchblade inside the right-side boot of one of the suspects. Just at that moment, Sergeant Dubreuil and the rest of the detachment arrived and stopped in a semi-circle around the two suspects.

"Great job, Comeau and Vaillant! I will make sure that our company commander hears about this. What have you found on them yet?"

"A complete arsenal of automatic rifle, pistol and knives, Sergeant. This one even had a switchblade hidden inside one boot. Are all our guys okay, Sergeant? I don't see either Jumonville or Bonséjour."

Kin's heart skipped a beat on hearing that, with Dubreuil answering Vaillant in a somber tone.

"Jumonville was hit and fell down. I told Bonséjour to stop and give him medical assistance. Benchetrit, Panetton, go check out the other suspects which were hit. Be careful: they may still be combative if still alive."

"Yes, Sergeant!"

As Benchetrit and Panetton went back up the slope, Dubreuil bent down and grabbed the automatic rifle thrown down by one of the captured suspects and examined it quickly.

"Hum... A fully automatic Belgian FN FAL 7.62mm rifle. This is a very recent rifle which is being produced strictly for military customers. Where did these guys find such modern weapons? Did you search their backpacks yet, guys?"

"No, Sergeant!" answered Vaillant, prompting Dubreuil in grabbing one of the two backpacks near him and opening it before inspecting its content with the help of his flashlight. What he found made him swear to himself.

"MERDE! This backpack is full of plastic bags containing a brown paste. I bet that this is opium. If I am right and if all of those assholes were transporting opium, then we have a fortune in illegal drugs on our hands. I better report this at once via radio. Comeau, Vaillant, go up the slope and help Bonséjour take care of Jumonville. If Jumonville can be moved, then you will bring him back to the refuge."

"On our way, Sergeant!"

Putting back on his skis, Kin then proceeded up slope with Daniel Vaillant, anxious about Charles Jumonville's state. The two young soldiers were shocked to find Philippe Bonséjour dejectedly sitting on the snow next to an unmoving Jumonville.

"Philippe, why are you not caring for Charles?" asked Vaillant. Bonséjour looked up at him with sadness.

"Charles is dead: I couldn't stop the hemorrhaging in time and he bled to death."

"Merde!" said Kin on hearing that. "Charles was a nice guy. What do we do now?"

"We will have to carry his body back to the refuge for evacuation." answered Vaillant. "However, we will need more men and our toboggan for that. Kin, you better go inform Sergeant Dubreuil about this."

"On my way!" replied Kin before turning around and starting to sky down the slope. A mere minute later, he stopped next to his detachment leader and spoke to him in a subdued voice.

"Jumonville is dead, Sergeant: he bled to death."

"MERDE! MERDE!" swore the NCO before throwing a dark look at his two prisoners. Next, he grabbed the handset of his tactical radio and spoke in it.

"Seven, this is Seven Alpha: situation report. We suffered one dead soldier, while five suspects are either dead or gravely wounded, while two more suspects are in custody. The suspects were armed with automatic rifles and were carrying large packs full of drugs. I request support for casualties and prisoner evacuation, over."

There was a bit of a delay before he got an answer on the radio.

"Seven Alpha, I copy your report. Instructions will follow in a couple of minutes. In the meantime, gather together the casualties and keep watch on your prisoners, over."

"Understood, Seven!"

Next, Dubreuil looked at his men and gave a series of orders.

"Comeau, return to where Bonséjour is and help him carry Jumonville's body to here. The others will gather the bodies of the dead smugglers and assemble them here. Fortier and Panetton, you stay here with me and keep a close watch on these two pieces of shit. Let's move!"

Kin immediately skied back up the slope to where Bonséjour and Vaillant stood next to their dead comrade, where he told them about Dubreuil's orders before the three of them grabbed Jumonville's body by its feet and hands, then slowly skied down the slope with their morbid load. Dubreuil gave a sad look down at his dead soldier before speaking to Kin and Philippe.

"Our company command post called back a minute ago. Our machine gun and antitank sections will come join us with empty toboggans, so that the dead could be brought to the refuge, along with our two prisoners. Once they will be here, we will

resume our observation post duties. In the meantime, we will erect a snow wall around our position, in order to cut the wind while we wait for the reinforcements.”

The soldiers then got busy, with Kin helping to build a U-shaped shoulder-high snow wall around their position. Once the wall was completed, the soldiers sat behind it, protected from the cold mountain wind. The two prisoners and the six dead however stayed out of the wall’s protection as they waited for other chasseurs to arrive. Some two hours later, 43 soldiers led by Captain Robert Théoret arrived at their location while it was still dark. The dead were then placed in the empty toboggans brought by Théoret’s group and were solidly tied in place, while the weapons and backpacks of the smugglers were loaded on three other toboggans. As for the two prisoners, they were made to put back on their skis and were tied with long ropes to soldiers before the whole group skied away towards the refuge. As it disappeared into the darkness, Dubreuil looked at his five remaining soldiers in the location and gave a curt order.

“Alright: time to return to our observation post and resume our watch duties.” Kin, near the tail end of his detachment, gave a last look towards where Captain Théoret’s group had disappeared, thinking about his lost comrade, then started skying back to their tent.

13:49 (Paris Time)

Saturday, December 5, 1955 ‘B’

Headquarters of the 27th BCA, Galbert Barracks

Annecy, Haute-Savoie

Alerted by the soldiers guarding the main gate of the barracks, Lieutenant-colonel Laurent Genest greeted the senior Gendarmerie officer as the latter was introduced in his office, shaking hands with him after they exchanged salutes.

“Lieutenant-colonel Laurent Genest, commander of the 27th BCA. Welcome to Annecy!”

“Thank you, Colonel. I am Commandant Jean Pierrefond, from the Gendarmerie’s provincial prefecture. I came to brief you on what we found to date about the smugglers your soldiers stopped.”

“Aah, that will certainly interest me to the highest degree, Commandant Pierrefond. But let’s sit down in this sofa. Would you like some coffee or tea?”

"A strong cup of coffee would be appreciated, Colonel: we have been working long hours lately while investigating this case."

"Then, let me order some coffee before we talk."

Genest took a few seconds to go see his secretary and order two cups of espresso coffee before joining Pierrefond on the well-used sofa occupying a corner of his office.

"So, what have you learned about the bastards who killed one of my men?"

"Quite a few things, much of it rather alarming, Colonel. First off, those seven smugglers were all ex-Italian mountain troops and were well trained in alpine operations and conditions."

Genest straightened up on hearing that, not liking the implications of that revelation.

"Ex-Italian Army mountain troops? And for whom did they work for now?"

"We are still investigating that but we strongly suspect that they worked for a big Mafia boss based in Turin, who specializes in drug and arms trafficking."

"And about arms, where and how were they able to get FN FAL assault rifles, a recent model still in limited circulation?"

"Please keep this to yourself, Colonel, but a shipment of FAL rifles was stolen and disappeared in Belgium some nine months ago. We suspect that the same Turin Mafia boss who was employing those ex-Italian Army troopers instigated that arms theft."

"And how many such rifles were stolen if I may ask?"

The Gendarmerie officer hesitated for a moment before answering Genest.

"A bit over 900 FAL rifles, plus spare parts and extra magazines. We are still trying to find them but our hopes of doing so are quite low."

"And my soldiers have only semi-automatic rifles and submachine guns," said Genest, sounding discouraged. "My men will thus be at a severe disadvantage in terms of firepower in any armed encounters with those Italian smugglers. Do you know if we could expect more such attempts at cross-border crossings, Commandant Pierrefond?"

"We are afraid so, Colonel. This drug-smuggling business is too lucrative to be abandoned by this Mafia leader because of one failed attempt. The Justice Minister thus requested the Defense Minister to continue your unit's support to my prefecture. By the way, the other battalions of the Alpine Corps have also been solicited in that aspect. Hopefully, that Mafia boss will tire of this and will switch to other things."

"Hopefully but unlikely, as you said. Alright, my men will keep patrolling the Alps until further notice. By the way, do you know if those Italian smugglers may transport other things than drugs across the Alps?"

"While they presently concentrate on drug smuggling operations, which are very lucrative, they were known to occasionally carry contraband weapons, mostly pistols and submachine guns. It is also rumored that they have stocks of hand grenades as well."

"Better and better! Then, I better reposition my sub-units and bring forward my own heavy weapons. Damn! I never thought that our Alps could be one day turned into a battlefield."

"We also hope that this won't happen, Colonel: my own gendarmes are poorly equipped to face such a severe threat. Unfortunately, we are afraid that the coming of Spring will only augment this threat, with the terrain then becoming easier to cross. Well, that's about all that we presently know about, Colonel."

"And I thank you for the information, Commandant. But please, have a cup of coffee before you leave."

Pierrefond happily agreed to that and actually drank two cups of espresso coffee before he got up from his sofa, imitated by Genest, and shook hands with him.

"Again, thank you for your precious help, Colonel. You can be proud of your men: they performed admirably."

"Thank you, Commandant Pierrefond. We will continue to do our best to support your gendarmes."

"And that support will be greatly appreciated, Colonel. Thank you for receiving me and have a good day."

"And a good day to you as well, Commandant."

Accompanying Pierrefond out of his office first, Genest then returned to sit behind his desk, deep in thoughts about what the gendarme officer had revealed to him. This business of modern military weapons in the hands of smugglers disturbed him to no small degree. On the other hand, using heavy weapons in terrain like the Alps was fraught with risks. For one thing, the use of explosive munitions could well trigger deadly avalanches, which would care little who they would sweep down the slopes once triggered. There was also the matter of arranging for a proper periodic troop rotation along the border, so that he would not burn out his soldiers if this crisis went on for more

than a couple of months. With the Christmas season approaching, that part of the problem would soon make itself felt.

10:14 (Paris Time)

Friday, December 23, 1955 'B'

Albert 1er mountain refuge

Aiguille d'Argentière area, French Alps

"HAVE A NICE CHRISTMAS WITH YOUR FAMILY, SAMUEL, AND DON'T DO ANYTHING THAT I WON'T DO!"

"AND WHAT WOULD YOU NOT DO, KIN?"

Samuel Benchetrit's retort to Kin triggered a collective round of laughter as the mule handler stepped out of the refuge with the other married men who were returning to Annecy for ten days in order to be able to spend the holiday season with their families. Master corporal Réjean Fortier, who was now in temporary charge of Mortar Detachment Alpha, then faced back the remaining five men of their sub-unit.

"Alright, guys, time to get back to work. I want all our equipment checked and readied, with fresh supplies put in our toboggan for this afternoon, so that we could go relieve Detachment Bravo at the observation outpost before nightfall."

His subalterns obeyed him at once and returned upstairs to their assigned room, where they finished putting their things in order and cleaned their weapons. Since that firefight with armed smugglers which had cost the life of Charles Jumonville, the situation had been calm along the border, while few tourists had visited the area in this late year season. As Kin was oiling his rifle, one of his good friends, Hunter First Class Maurice Panetton, asked him a question with a mischievous smile.

"So, Kin, do you have a girl in your life?"

Kin stopped his cleaning for a moment while thinking how to phrase his answer to that.

"I do, but I have not seen her for a few months now, since she lives with my adoptive mother. You saw Ani when she came to watch our graduation parade, right?"

"Yes, but I thought that she was your sister."

"She was adopted at the same time as me by my mother but she is not my biological sister, Maurice. In fact, she doesn't have any family parentage with me, so

dating her would not constitute what you could call 'incest', even though we now wear the same family name. I must say that I miss her quite a lot lately."

"You could always use one of the street girls in Annecy to relieve yourself until you could see her again, Kin." suggested Panetton, still smiling.

"And burn the equivalent of a month's salary in one night, on top of risking to catch a disease? No thank you! Besides, I am not a sex addict...like you!"

Panetton and the other soldiers around them laughed briefly at that, then returned to their cleaning duties.

17:09 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, January 10, 1956 'B'

Albert the First mountain refuge

Kin, like the rest of his detachment, which was on standby in case the men of Detachment Bravo would call for help or backup, was doing his best to pass the time in their small room by reading a book when Sergeant Dubreuil entered the room with a thin, bespectacled newcomer.

"Guys, gather around to greet our new detachment member, Hunter Yves Soulange. He just arrived from the Alpine Corps Depot and will replace our late driver, Charles Jumonville."

Kin, like his other six comrades, got up from his cot and approached Dubreuil and the new soldier, who was of medium height and looked a bit like an intellectual type. The soldiers took turns to present themselves to Soulange while shaking hands with him. However, when Kin's turn came, the said Soulange opened his eyes wide while staring at his face with apparent shock.

"A...a Neanderthal? But that's impossible!"

The soldiers around him, including Sergeant Dubreuil, looked at Kin, then back at Soulange, incomprehension on their faces, while Kin did his best to keep a straight face. Dubreuil then spoke to the newcomer in a stern tone.

"You are not going to start well your tour in my detachment if you start insulting one of my men right from the start, Soulange."

"But...but, he HIS a Neanderthal, Sergeant! I had just completed my studies in anthropology when I was conscripted and I can recognize a Homo Neanderthalensis

when I see one. Look at his prominent brow ridge and lack of chin! He also has the build typical of Neanderthal men: short but stocky and very muscular.”

Dubreuil and the other soldiers then looked at Kin, expecting him to contradict Soulangue. Instead, Kin gathered his courage and nodded his head once.

“He is correct, Sergeant: I am a Neanderthal and I was born some 58,000 years ago. I was saved by the Time Patrol after my family was killed by a pack of cave hyenas and was then adopted by one of their field agents.”

There was a stunned silence for a few seconds before Dubreuil quickly went to the door of the room and closed and locked it before returning to the group.

“Alright, guys. Until I say otherwise, this stays within the detachment. I will skin alive the first man who will start babbling about this to the rest of the company. Can you tell us more about you, Kin? Why did you enroll in the Army if you were a dependent of a member of the Time Patrol?”

“Sergeant, like I stated when I arrived in Annecy, I was truly born in the Dordogne region. However, I was born in a rock shelter, not in a house. I lost my family when I was six years-old and me and a little girl were the only survivors of an attack by a pack of hyenas. My mother Nana succeeded in chasing away those hyenas but was mortally wounded during the fight. A Time Patrol team which was discretely watching and studying my group then came to my help and that of Ani. My mother Nana spoke with my adoptive mother before dying, asking her to take care of me and Ani. Sylvie accepted at once and we were then brought to the future. When I reached the age of eighteen, I decided that I wanted to serve the country where I was born and signed into the service for three years. That’s my story in a nutshell, Sergeant.”

Dubreuil, like the other soldiers in the room, stared for a moment at Kin while digesting these revelations. Then, to Kin’s huge relief, he smiled to him and patted his shoulder in a friendly manner.

“Kin, the main thing of importance to me is the fact that you volunteered by yourself to serve our country. For me, you will still be a brave and most capable alpine soldier. Right, guys?”

The young men around Kin nodded and expressed their accord to that, attracting tears to Kin’s eyes.

“Thank you, my friends. Thank you for your acceptance and confidence in me.”

“Well, time to get back to our routine, men.” announced Dubreuil in a tone that meant that this discussion was closed. “I will ask you all to help Chasseur Soulangue in

taking his place in our detachment and in adapting him to our mission routine. I will see you all at mealtime in one hour. Master corporal Fortier, see that Chasseur Soulange gets a place in this room.”

“Yes Sergeant!” replied at once Fortier. Once Dubreuil had left the room, Fortier pointed to a corner of the room where an empty cot sat.

“This was the cot used by our ex-driver, Hunter First Class Charles Jumonville. It is now yours. Put down your things and install yourself, then prepare your kit and clean your rifle in advance of our move to our observation post.”

Soulange nodded at that and quickly went to the empty cot, then put his backpack and his web gear under it before sitting on it and starting to disassemble his rifle prior to cleaning it. He however couldn't help look from time to time at Kin, who noticed that. Stopping his cleaning work for a moment, Kin went to sit besides the newcomer on his cot and spoke to him in a low voice.

“Look, I won't hold a grudge against you for outing me as a Neanderthal man. Your reaction was both understandable and spontaneous. If you wish so, I am ready to speak with you later on about my time as a Neanderthal boy living in the Dordogne region. However, my life with the Time Patrol is strictly confidential, so don't ask me things like where their base is, if you want to stay my friend.”

“I...I understand, Kin, although there is a lot of public curiosity about the Time Patrol in France, and this since they appeared and brought an end to the war in 1942. I promise you not to broach that subject...ever.”

“Thank you, Yves. Again, welcome to our mortar detachment.”

Kin then returned to his cot and his weapon cleaning. Soulange, his mind still in a bit of a turmoil, watched him walk away, then forced himself to return his attention to his own rifle.

The next morning, Mortar Detachment Alpha's nine men, led by Sub-lieutenant Louis Montreuil, left the refuge with their toboggan filled with fresh rations and supplies and crossed the jagged icepack of the Glacier du Milieu, getting at the group's observation post after some fifty minutes. Once they were there, the men of Bravo Detachment left to return to the refuge after making a brief situation report to Montreuil. However, instead of going with the departing detachment, the young officer stayed at the observation post. As Kin was helping to store the supplies and the toboggan away,

Montreuil signaled to Kin to follow him, then walked away from their tent before stopping some twenty meters away behind a big rock. There, he looked straight into Kin's eyes.

"Hunter Comeau, know that Sergeant Dubreuil informed me yesterday about what was revealed about you. While this came as quite a shock to me, know that I still have full confidence in you and that I consider you as a precious asset to my group and to our unit. Continue on as before and don't worry about any repercussions about these revelations."

"Thank you, sir! Will this get known by the rest of the battalion? I really would like my story to stay as private as possible, for obvious reasons."

"And you have good reasons to wish so, Hunter Comeau. Unfortunately, not everybody in France is open-minded, by a long shot. However, you can count on my discretion in this matter."

"Thank you, sir! This is a big relief for me."

"Indeed! You may now return to your duties."

"Yes sir!" replied Kin, saluting Montreuil before returning to the toboggan and the supplies. The young officer nodded slowly his head while watching him walk away: maybe he ought to have a private discussion with Soulange, in order to learn more about Neanderthals and the possible assets someone like Kin could bring to his group.

Some three weeks later, they received the news that their mountain border surveillance mission was being closed and that they could return to Annecy. While Kin had actually enjoyed his time in the pure alpine air and slopes of the region, he was as happy as his companions to be able to return to the unit's barracks in Annecy, a small town he had quickly learned to appreciate. It also would allow him to be able again to place periodic calls to Ani and Sylvie via the Time Patrol's official outpost in Paris and, maybe, go to that outpost while on weekend leave and then get a time scooter ride to the main Time Patrol base, situated in New Zealand some 4,900 years in the past.

CHAPTER 6 – ALGERIAN TROUBLES



Street demonstration in Algiers during the Algerian War.

20:15 (Paris Time)

Thursday, February 23, 1956 'B'

Barrack of the Heavy Weapons Company, 27th B.C.A.

Galbert Barracks, Annecy

Haute-Savoie, France

Kin, along with most of his comrades, was watching the nightly news on the small television set of their barrack's small communal lounge when the announcer shifted to news from Algeria, where a bloody insurrection had been ongoing for years. Filmed scenes of a horrible massacre which had been committed inside a small village then started playing on the screen as a French commentator spoke.

"These are some of the pictures taken in the small village of Sfisfifa, in the Northwest of Algeria, near the border with Morocco. From the declarations by local survivors, a large group of armed terrorists which came from the direction of the Moroccan border attacked the village at night and killed every French person they could find, along with their Muslim neighbors known to support the government. Over 79 men, women and children were killed, many of them tortured and mutilated before being killed.

The local police detachment of five men was overwhelmed and massacred during that same attack. The other French inhabitants of this region, commonly called 'Pieds Noirs'¹¹ here in France, are now clamoring for better protection from the central government against such terrorist attacks. However, the local police forces and government militias are notoriously ill equipped and in insufficient numbers to face the growing threat from roaming bands of armed nationalists and Islamic extremists, who want to completely erase what is left of the French presence in Algeria. The locals also bitterly criticize the past actions of the French government in the past years since the end of World War 2, which gradually withdrew French military units from Algeria without ensuring that local military and police forces were sufficient to keep order. The various past decisions by General de Gaulle concerning the future of Algeria are particularly pointed at as being mainly responsible for the actual chaotic situation. A bitter discussion is now ongoing at the National Assembly in Paris, with some deputies asking that the government send French Army troops to restore calm and security in Algeria, while other deputies are vehemently opposed to such an action..."

Kin cringed at the view of the horrible pictures shown on televisions and had to look away more than once. Finally, having had enough, he got up from his chair and walked out of the lounge, using the room's entrance to exit in the open air, where he inhaled deeply the cold air of the evening. He was soon joined outside by Samuel Benchetrit, who looked at least as pissed and disturbed as Kin. Knowing that Samuel had been born in Algeria and had lived there for many years before moving to continental France and joining the Army, Kin gave him a discouraged look.

"Will things ever get better in Algeria, Samuel? How could things degenerate to this point?"

"How? Thank old hatreds, intolerance and extremism for that, Kin. Thank also government corruption, ineptitude, incompetence and racism for the actual situation. France originally conquered Algeria and other North African countries to enlarge its 'empire', the same way the British conquered many other countries while building their own empire much earlier on. However, like the British, the Spaniards, the Portuguese and even the Belgians, those empires were only meant to enrich the conquerors and not

¹¹ Pieds Noirs: 'Black Feet' in French. Derogative term often used by French people in continental France to describe the French and their descendants who immigrated in the past to Algeria, often to establish farms or work in the local administration. Being mainly Christians, they were often targeted by Islamic extremists and by Arab nationalists.

to help the local people or improve their lives. Those local people, seeing little to no benefit gained by them while also being treated in a most racist way, understandably grew resentful along the years, while their wish for independence grew. All that pent up resentment and hatred has now exploded in the open. I know too well about this, as my family were Algerian Jews who suffered much from hatred and intolerance...from both sides. My parents finally had enough of that and emigrated to France when I was a young teenager. Thankfully, the welcome we got in France was not as bad as we had feared and I eventually joined the Chasseurs Alpains before marrying."

Kin looked in silence at his friend for a moment before speaking.

"Samuel, do you see a way out of this mess? What should be done?"

In response, Samuel lowered his head, discouragement on his face.

"I can see no way out of this, Kin. There is simply too much accumulated hatred and intolerance from past decades. I believe that the only realistic thing France could do now would be to completely withdraw from Algeria, evacuate its citizens and let the Algerians govern themselves. Sending French Army units in Algeria would only delay the final outcome, which will probably be a fully independent Algeria. However, even that will not insure peace in Algeria. Morocco and Tunisia, both of which border Algeria, also have long-standing border disputes and old hatreds with Algeria, dating back from the times of the Ottoman Empire, which then controlled North Africa."

Kin shook his head angrily at those words.

"What a screwed-up mess! I always avoided politics and this only confirms that I did well to do so."

"I suppose that politics was the least worry of Neanderthals, right Kin?"

"You got that right, Samuel. Finding food, water and shelter was what was on our minds. That and surviving. It was a tough life but it was also a simple life."

Samuel nodded approvingly to Kin's words and patted his shoulder.

"True! Well, I better go back to the married quarters and help my wife put our two young kids in bed. See you tomorrow at the morning roll call, Kin."

"And have a good night, Samuel."

Now alone outside of his barrack block, Kin looked up at the evening sky to watch the stars and the moon, a sight that never failed to calm him and soothe him. While what he had said about disliking politics was true, it didn't mean that he was ignorant or uneducated about it. While living at the secret main base of the Time Patrol,

he and Ani had benefitted from twelve years of top-notch education there, augmented by frequent field trips and classes meant to expose them to nature and to help them develop both physically and mentally. The still common belief in France that Neanderthals were simplistic brutes could not be further from the truth. If anything, Kin's intelligence was at least as sharp as that of the average Frenchman of this century, while his various survival skills were far superior in comparison. He was thus able to fully understand Samuel's arguments and completely agreed with him. While the various predator beasts from the Paleolithic had been ferocious and merciless, they had been motivated by simple survival needs, like finding food by hunting. In contrast, modern Humans too often acted out of sheer hatred, intolerance and cruelty, something no beast he had met 52,000 years ago had done. After some ten minutes spent looking at the night sky, Kin then went back inside in order to prepare his uniform for tomorrow's day of work.

10:03 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, March 5, 1956 'B'

Office of Lieutenant-colonel Genest

27th BCA, Galbert Barracks, Annecy

The sixteen senior officers of the battalion, having been called in by their commander, gradually filed inside Genest's office as they arrived from their own offices or from some unit activity. They found Lieutenant-colonel Laurent Genest standing behind his desk near one window, his expression somber. More than one officer then connected his apparent mood with the increasingly deteriorating situation in Algeria. In that they were quickly proven right.

"Since my office is a bit small for seating all of us, I will speak to you while standing. To make matters short, I got a call this morning from the Alpine Brigade headquarters in Varcès, which had itself received a call from Army Headquarters in Paris. I was then warned to expect soon a detailed mission order for our battalion and to prepare right away our unit for deployment to Algeria."

The senior officers either stiffened or redoubled their attention on hearing that: the possibility of a deployment had been the object of speculations for weeks already, with many doubting the wisdom of such a move in view of the politically divided feelings in France about the situation in Algeria. Genest then spoke further.

"The operational and logistical details of such a deployment to Algeria will be contained in the operational mission order we should receive sometimes today but our brigade commander was able to give me some pertinent information in advance. Basically, we will be deploying in the Northwest part of Algeria, next to the border with Morocco, in order to interdict the movements and infiltrations by Algerian nationalist terrorist groups who are based in Morocco and who frequently cross the border into Algeria. While details about our deployment will be found in the incoming mission order, Colonel Martin was able to tell me that our battalion will deploy to the area of Ain Sefra, in the Ksour Mountains of the Atlas Chain. I was assured that we will soon receive ample stocks of pertinent maps covering that area. I was also told to have this unit ready to move by train to Marseille within a week, where we will then embark on a ship bound for Algeria. That is it for the moment in terms of what I can tell you about our mission. There is however a point that was passed to me by Colonel Martin, a point that will greatly complicate the accomplishment of our incoming mission. Due to purely political factors, the Defense Minister has decreed that only career soldiers and those serving voluntarily under contract will be deployed. We will be forbidden to bring any of our conscripts with us to Algeria."

Those last words had the effect of a cold shower on the group of senior officers, with one of the infantry company commanders protesting nearly at once.

"But, sir, this means that nearly forty percent of my company will not be allowed to deploy to Algeria, right at the time when numbers will count the most. The same can be said of all five of our infantry companies."

Genest could only nod once his head in visible frustration.

"I realize that all too well, Commandant Rimbaud. However, we will have to live with that, whether we like it or not. Apparently, the Prime Minister and the President are unwilling to face the political storm that a combat deployment of our conscripts to Algeria would raise. Thus, one of your immediate jobs will be to go back to your respective sub-units and to report quickly to me how many men will be eligible to deploy to Algeria. Once that is done, then you will direct your men to start preparing their kits for operations in a hot semi-desertic mountain environment."

"Uh, sir, do we know how long this mission could be?" asked another company commander."

"To be frank, nobody knows yet. Be prepared for an open-ended operational combat mission."

Genest didn't miss the shocked look on the face of many of his officers, something he could easily understand. He himself had been shocked and not a little bit angered on hearing how improvised and nebulous the incoming mission was going to be. With nearly daily images on television news about the atrocities and violence being committed around Algeria, this was bound to create quite a few misgivings and recriminations among his men. He again looked around at his officers, gauging their state of mind before speaking again.

"Well, I will call a more substantial meeting once I get those operational orders from Paris. Now go back to your sub-units and start preparing them for deployment. Oh, one last thing: this mission will stay confidential until I say otherwise. I don't want to see rumors start spreading around about this. Dismissed, gentlemen!"

The senior officers then filed out of his office at a hurried step, leaving Genest alone with his thoughts. Captain Robert Théoret, who commanded the heavy weapons company, discussed in a low voice with Commandant Rimbaud as both men walked down the main hallway of the headquarters building.

"You have that many conscripts in your company, Commandant?"

"I do, unfortunately. The worst part is that I will have to also leave behind a few experienced NCOs in order to not leave those conscripts behind disorganized and leaderless. In a way, I envy you: most of your heavy weapons company is formed of experienced NCOs and of men under voluntary contract."

"I will still have to leave behind a few men but I concede that I will be in a much better shape than you, Commandant. Unfortunately, orders are orders, especially when they come from the top."

"Right!" said Rimbaud in a bitter tone before splitting away from Théoret to go his own way. On his part, the latter went straight to the barrack sheltering the men of his company and shouted out as loudly as he could once inside it.

"ALL THE MEN OF THE HEAVY WEAPONS COMPANY ARE TO ASSEMBLE AT ONCE IN THE COMMUNAL LOUNGE OF THE BARRACK! THIS INCLUDES THE OFFICERS AND SENIOR NCOS. PASS THE WORD AROUND!"

Théoret then went out and walked to the next building, where the offices of his company were, and informed his junior officers and senior NCOs to go to the adjacent barrack. As he walked back to that barrack, he started to think about what kind of personal kit and equipment his company would need to bring to Algeria. Once item that immediately

came to his mind was the need for his men to sign for an extra water canteen: in Algeria's climate, his men were going to need all the water they could carry on them.

Théoret had to wait no more than a few minutes before the last of his men assembled in the TV lounge of the barrack. With the lounge being a fairly small room, his soldiers had to stand around while lining the walls three-deep. Once everybody was in, Théoret started speaking in a firm but calm voice while looking at his men.

"Men of the Heavy Weapons Company, I have important news to pass to you. First, as many of you had been expecting, our battalion, along with many other units, will soon be deploying to Algeria for an operational mission. While details of that mission are still to come, our main job will be to watch over the border area between Algeria in Morocco, to stop Islamist extremists and armed nationalists from crossing into Algeria and to prevent attacks on civilians by them. Our battalion will be posted in the Northwest of the country, in the Ksour Mountains, but I can't say more right now until we get more detailed orders. Colonel Genest wants us to start preparing for this deployment and to be ready to move by train to Marseille, where we will board a ship to Algeria. After lunch, we will all go the unit's quartermaster in order to sign for extra water canteens and other hot desertic climate gear. We will be leaving behind our Winter gear and skis for this new mission. Corporal Benchetrit, you lived many years in Algeria. Can you tell us what kind of climatic conditions we will encounter in the Ksour Mountains near the Moroccan border?"

The mule handler, standing near Kin in the crowd of soldiers, answered Théoret in a louder than usual voice, so that the other soldiers could hear him clearly.

"Well, sir, since we will be at some altitude in the Ksour Mountains, we will fortunately experience more moderate temperatures than in most of Algeria. Right now, temperatures in the mountains should be around ten degrees Celsius and will climb to a maximum of about thirty degrees in the Summer. However, the climate there is very dry, so water supplies will be critical. Even in the mountains of the region, snow is a rarity, so our skis would effectively be useless there. Due to the mostly rocky ground, temperatures will drop quite a lot at night, so we will still need our parkas over there. There are few roads around but there is a railway line running North-South and which crosses into Morocco near Ain Sefra. That's about it for what I know of the region, sir."

"That is still very useful information, Corporal Benchetrit. Thank you very much. Now, there is another thing that you must know about that incoming mission: by decision

of the government, we will not be allowed to deploy with our conscript soldiers, who will have to stay behind in Annecy.”

That announcement created quite a stir in the crowd of soldiers but Théoret quickly spoke again as whispers went around.

“Quiet, please! I now want all of the conscript soldiers present to step out of the ranks and line the wall behind me.”

Kin, who was serving a three-year contract, patted in encouragement the shoulder of Yves Soulange, who was the only conscript member of their mortar detachment.

“Go, Yves! And don’t feel bad for not accompanying us to Algeria.”

“Thanks, Kin!” replied the young man before walking out of the ranks, along with a dozen other soldiers of the company, and taking position behind Captain Théoret. After a minute of shuffling around, Théoret then spoke again, his expression becoming severe.

“One last thing before we disperse: this is to stay classified. No loose talk at the local cafés about our oncoming deployment to Algeria: we don’t want our enemies there to be able to prepare in advance for our arrival.”

“What about our families, sir?” asked nearly at once a young soldier, making Théoret nod his head once.

“I will have to ask Colonel Genest about that before I could answer that question, Hunter Cuvier. In the meantime, keep mum about this. The senior NCOs and junior officers will now stay here, so that I can brief them on what we will do today. The rest, start preparing your kit for operations in a semi-desertic mountain area. DISMISSED!” As Kin filed out of the lounge to go to his bed and locker, he whispered in passing to Samuel Benchetrit.

“How do you think that your wife and kids will take this, Samuel?”

“Not very well I’ afraid but that’s the Army for you, Kin.”

08:25 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, March 14, 1956 ‘B’

Annecy train station, Haute-Savoie

“ALRIGHT, MEN, SIT DOWN ON YOUR KIT AND RELAX: OUR TRAIN WILL ARRIVE IN SOME TWENTY MINUTES!”

On the announcement from the battalion top NCO, Chief Warrant Officer Louis Volage, Kin sat down on his voluminous backpack, imitating his comrades around him. His main worry now was that his message to his mother, transmitted to the distant past via the Time Patrol's Paris outpost, had somehow not made it in time to Sylvie before he would leave Annecy for Algeria. With Lieutenant-colonel Genest authorizing his soldiers to advise their families, in view of the wide media publicity now being given to the Army's deployment to North Africa, most of the soldiers of the battalion had been able to see their loved ones come to Annecy to say goodbye to them on their departure. As for Kin, he was still waiting and hoping for Sylvie Comeau to show up this morning. As he waited while looking around him, his heart jumped inside his chest when he saw a Time Patrol time scooter, a small three-seater vehicle, appear in the sky and start to descend towards the embarkation quay of the railway station. As exclamations went out around him, Kin got up on his feet and waved his arms over his head. He then nearly ran towards one end of the quay, which was mostly empty, as the time scooter was turning towards the railway station while losing altitude. The scooter finally landed smoothly and in near silence only two meters from Kin, who grinned with joy on seeing that his mother Sylvie, wearing a Time Patrol field uniform, was piloting it, while his 'sister' Ani, wearing a simple civilian outdoors outfit, was occupying the saddle seat behind their adoptive mother. Kin's first move when the transparent canopy of the scooter slid open was to go to Sylvie and hug her.

"Thank you for coming, Mother. I was afraid that you didn't get my message."

"I did get it, Kin, but I was on a field mission and had to delay a bit my visit."



Sylvie Comeau



Ani Comeau

"I understand, Mother. And thank you for coming as well, Ani."

Ani, now sixteen years old, warmly returned his hug, then stepped out of the scooter with Sylvie.

"We just couldn't miss your departure for Algeria, Kin. While I am worried about what awaits you there, I understand that you are fulfilling your duty to France. Since you will probably be posted in some kind of isolated position, I and Mother brought you a few gifts for you."

"Just coming to see me off is already a nice gift, Ani."

"But it wasn't enough in our opinion. Here is something that should help you spend your off-duty hours in Algeria."

Ani then handed to Kin a flat, compact protective case made of shock-proof polymer and sporting a long carrying strap attached to it. Kin immediately broke into a happy grin on recognizing the case.

"A portable audio-visual entertainment viewer? Super!"

"It is already loaded with your favorite list of shows and music and I added to the case a dozen extra data memory sticks filled with more shows and music. You will also be able to send and receive messages to us via our Paris outpost with it."

"Excellent! I don't know how to thank you for this, Ani."

"You could start by kissing me." replied the Neanderthal teenage girl with a malicious smile. Kin followed that suggestion at once by hugging her and kissing her on the mouth, with the soldiers nearest to them cheering them up. Sylvie waited until Kin took one step away from Ani before presenting a small leather bag to him.

"This is meant to give you more personal safety during your deployment in Algeria, Kin. However, keep those two objects out of the sight of others, so as not to attract questions."

Now curious, Kin took the bag and opened it to look inside. He recognized at once the two objects in the bag: one was a Time Patrol wrist communicator unit with a leather covering band; the other was a light stun pistol in a molded belt holster and with a spare power cell. Kin had used both items in the past while living at the secret base of the Time Patrol, situated some 5,000 years in the past in what would become New Zealand. The wrist communicator, apart from acting as both a watch and a video communications device, could also be used to send through time an emergency signal and to activate a locator beacon. As for the stun pistol, while a non-lethal weapon, a single burst from it would stun unconscious a large man, or even a bear if set at maximum power. Kin took off at once his contemporary watch from his left wrist and replaced it with the communicator unit. With its protective leather cover band in place, others would take it to be a simple watch fixed to a leather wrist band, of the type many carried in this time period. As for the stun pistol, Kin hid it in one of the cargo pockets of his combat uniform, promising himself to fit it to his belt later on. Giving back the now empty bag to Sylvie, Kin then hugged and kissed her tenderly.

"Thank you, Mother. I love you!"

"And I love you too, Kin."

"Will you stay at the station until my train will depart?"

"We will, Kin. Now, tell us how were your past few months."

Kin was too happy to speak then, telling Sylvie and Annie about the action he saw in the Alps against drug smugglers and about the training he had followed. He also proudly showed them his new Hunter First Class rank insignias, earned a month ago after his unit's mission in the Alps.

"My sergeant told me that I should soon earn my corporal stripes if I continue performing the way I did up to now."

Somehow, that brought an apprehensive look on Ani's face.

"And...after your three-year contract will have been completed, do you intend to continue on in the French Army, Kin? I really miss you."

Kin looked back at her with obvious fondness.

"And I missed you a lot as well, Ani. Whatever I do at the end of my present contract, I will do it with you, that I promise you."

He then sealed his declaration with a loving kiss.

Some thirty minutes later, with his unit's train now stopped alongside the quay, Kin shared a last hug with Sylvie and Ani, then boarded the train, where he and the members of his mortar group were assigned seats in one of the passenger cars. Kin was able to wave goodbye to his mother and sister by adoption one last time as the train rolled out of the Annecy train station. Once the station was out of sight, Kin sat back on his bench, next to Samuel Benchetrit and facing Philippe Bonséjour and Daniel Vaillant.

"How long our trip to Marseille will be?" asked after a few minutes of silence Daniel Vaillant, with Samuel Benchetrit answering him.

"Sergeant Dubreuil said that we should be there in about seven hours."

"Seven hours?! What the hell are we supposed to do in the meantime?"

"You could catch some sleep, for starters."

"Sleep? On this barely padded bench seat?"

"Hey, if you could sleep on snow and rock in the Alps, why not on a bench?"

"Wait!" suddenly said Kin, an idea coming to him. "My mother gave me a gift at the station that could help us pass the time. Let me get it from my backpack."

Watched by his curious comrades, Kin got up and searched for a few seconds in his big backpack, which was stuffed in the overhead rack above their heads. Sitting back down with his entertainment viewer in his hands, he was immediately assailed with questions.

"Hey, what is that thing?" asked Philippe Bonséjour.

"A portable entertainment viewer. It is a technology from the 34th Century which the Time Patrol, to which my mother is part of, routinely use. It is able to record and play both music and video images from its electronic library."

"And what will we be able to view now on it, Kin?"

Kin thought about that for a few seconds before a big grin came to his lips.

"I know what you guys would like!"

He then powered up his viewing unit, then spoke into its integrated microphone.

"Viewer, play the Time Patrol documentary 'Sex and History, an intimate relationship.'"

As the screen of the viewer unit came alive, Kin then shouted out loud at the other soldiers around him.

"HEY, GUYS, WHO WANTS TO SEE THE FAMOUS QUEEN CLEOPATRA OF EGYPT, NAKED AND IN BED?"

Sergeant Dubreuil, who was in the process of stepping out of one of the lavatories of the train, barely had time to hurriedly step back inside in order to avoid being trampled by the dozens of young soldiers now rushing towards Kin's seat.

CHAPTER 7 – A DANGEROUS MISSION



Ain Sefra, Algeria

16:01 (Algeria Time)

Sunday, March 18, 1956 'B'

Ain Sefra Train Station, Ksour Mountains

Saharian Atlas Chain, Northwest Algeria

Kin, leaning out on an open window of his wagon, couldn't help shake his head as the train carrying his unit was slowing down while entering Ain Sefra.

"Damn! I already miss Annecy. This looks like the proverbial hole in the middle of nowhere."

His friend Philippe Bonséjour, who was also looking through the window, nodded his head at those words.

"You are too right about that, Kin. We better be prepared for months of dry, hot and dusty duty. I hope that, at the least, the locals will prove friendly enough."

"Remember what Samuel told us, Philippe: trust no one here. Some of those Algerian extremists may well be watching us arrive right now."

Unbeknown to Kin, his words were prophetic, as a thin man wearing the long robe of a Berber nomad watched the arriving train with barely concealed hatred in his eyes.

"More French infidels! And a lot of them too. Too bad that we didn't learn of their arrival in time to place a bomb in this station."

The man, staying in a discrete corner and half hidden by a pillar, then watched as the train came to a halt, with French soldiers then coming out and starting to take their supplies and vehicles off the train. The FLN¹² man nodded his head when he saw French soldiers lead out of a cattle car over twenty mules fitted with pack-carrying frames: at least those French soldiers understood the value of mules in the region's mountainous terrain. He also noted the wide, pie-like blue berets worn by the arriving soldiers.

"Alpine troops! They are reputed to be elite soldiers. I can count about 400 of them. Boumediene¹³ will need to be informed about them."

The man carefully noted the number and types of vehicles which were then unloaded from the train, along with the approximate quantity of supplies and ammunition taken out of the train, then left the station. Once in the street outside of the railway station, he walked around the nearby streets for a while, with the goal of making sure that he was not being followed. Once reassured about that, he made his way to a small mud brick shop in town that served as the local safehouse of the ALN, where he placed a telephone call to another house situated in the hills outside of Ain Sefra. That house

¹² FLN : Front de Libération National (National Liberal Front). The main Algerian extremist movement which opposed French presence in Algeria. The FLN used assassinations, massacres of European settlers and intimidation as its common tactics.

¹³ Houari Boumediene : A major leader of the ALN (Armée de Libération Nationale), the armed branch of the FLN.

sheltered a clandestine radio transmitter that would be used to retransmit his information in coded form to the nearest ALN base camp, situated on the Moroccan side of the border. Once his call was completed, the man left the shop, intent on finding out where the newly arrived French troops would establish their quarters in Ain Sefra.

20:40 (Algeria Time)

French military truck, valley of El Mekrizene, west-southwest of Ain Sefra, Twelve kilometers from the Algeria-Morocco border

"Can someone tell me why we didn't stay in Ain Sefra and why we are now rolling at night on this dirt track, with no lights on?"

That question, coming from young Hunter First Class Daniel Vaillant, attracted a matter-of-fact answer from the mortar pointer of their detachment, Master corporal Réjean Fortier.

"We didn't stay in Ain Sefra because we would be of little use there, since a full infantry company is deployed there and defending it. We are instead going to take a firing position within mortar range of the border with Morocco, so that we could cover with our fire the trails coming from the border. As for rolling at night with no lights on, the reason is simple and obvious: we don't want the enemy to know where we are going. Got it, Vaillant?"

"Uh, yes, Master corporal." answered in a contrite tone the young soldier. Fortier was tempted to add something like 'even a caveman would understand that' but stopped himself in time: apart from being unwarranted, such a remark would have antagonized one of the best soldiers in the detachment. In fact, thinking about it, Fortier conceded that Kin Comeau had surprised him many times in the past with his demonstrated level of intelligence. Sure, Kin was no rocket scientist but neither was he an idiot. Fortier could think of many past men and teenage boys he had met or known who had proved to be less intelligent than Kin. All in all, Kin Comeau kept surprising him, while also impressing him with his physical prowess. Kin had quickly established himself as the battalion's champion in both Greco-Roman wrestling and weight lifting, on top of proving to have incredibly acute eyesight, something that had helped him become a true rifle sharpshooter. Comeau's shooting skills had quickly attracted the attention of Lieutenant Lepage, who commanded the battalion's snipers' platoon, but Sub-lieutenant Montreuil had immediately opposed Kin's transfer, pleading that Kin's physical strength and

endurance made him perfect for his mortar group. Captain Théoret had then taken Montreuil's side and kept Kin with the mortar group, but had also directed that Kin receive a scope-equipped FRF-1 sniper rifle as a personal weapon rather than the usual MAS 49 semi-automatic rifle, arguing that this would provide longer range local covering fire to his mortar detachment. Looking briefly at Kin Comeau, who was sitting facing him in the back of the truck, Fortier thought that this new combat mission could well prove Captain Théoret right about his decision.

Some twenty minutes later, after having rolled over some pretty rough ground, their truck stopped, with Sergeant Dubreuil then jumping out of their truck's cab and going to the rear of the vehicle to give orders in a restrained voice.

"Alright, men: we are at our destination. Get out and take out our mortar and your kits. Keep your voices low and avoid making loud noises: noise can be heard from afar in the desert at night."

The six men sitting in the back of the truck obeyed at once, taking out their backpacks before taking out the three components of their 81mm mortar and the mortar bomb containers they had with them. Once the truck was emptied, Dubreuil assembled his men around him and, using a flashlight fitted with a red lens filter, showed them a map.

"Okay, guys: we are here, next to the southern slope of the hill named Senn Ez Zgag, which culminates at an altitude of 1,705 meters. We are also just a bit more than three kilometers from the border with Morocco. We are now going to climb atop this hill behind me and set our mortar near the summit, so that we could cover with mortar fire the two trails that run past both sides of the hill. Detachment Bravo, along with the group's command team, is now going to the adjacent hill to the Northwest, where they will establish another mortar position and a command post covering the valley of the Oued bel Hared. I want you to make sure that you have red light filters on your lamps before we start climbing this hill. Show me your flashlights."

After inspecting the flashlights of his men and confirming that they had red lens filters on them, Dubreuil then made them put on their packs, heavy with ammunition and water, to which were added the tube, bipod and baseplate of their 81mm Stokes-Brandt Mle 27/31 mortar. Due to his uncommon physical strength, Kin got to carry the heaviest piece, the 20.5-kilo base plate, adding to it a seven-kilo mortar bomb holder containing two bombs. Even though Dubreuil knew well by now how strong Kin was, he was still impressed by that demonstration of strength.

"Kin, you would clean up the weight-lifting competitions at the next Olympic Games if you ever participate in them."

"It's in the books, Sergeant!" replied Kin with a grin, making Dubreuil shake his head in amusement.

"Well, since we are all ready now, let's climb that hill."

Leading his detachment in single file, with the three men carrying the mortar components following directly behind him, Dubreuil started walking up the slope of the hill. The gradient was at first gentle but quickly became much steeper, requiring significant effort to climb it. Thankfully, the local March temperatures at night were quite low, with the actual temperature being only nine degrees Celsius above zero, so the French soldiers did not sweat as much or as quickly as they had expected. Still, most of the men were both tired and hot by the time they arrived at the top of the rocky hill...except for Kin, despite him carrying the heaviest load. His friend Philippe shook his head while smiling to him as he put down the mortar base plate.

"Kin, you're a machine, truly!"

"Me, a machine? I am just a caveman, remember?"

That attracted a few laughs around him before Sergeant Dubreuil told them to rest a bit and drink some water while he would explore a bit their immediate surroundings. Some ten minutes later, the senior NCO came back and gave a few orders.

"I found a shallow cave next to a small flat surface a bit downslope, on the northwest side. We will establish our camp and firing position there. Put your packs and loads back on and follow me."

"A cave, Sergeant? You are really considerate with me today."

"Feel free to rate it on the Michelin scale once you see it, Kin." replied Dubreuil, triggering another round of laughter. The seven men then put their packs on and walked for less than two minutes before arriving at the spot chosen by Dubreuil. Rather than being a true cave, the place would have been better described as a shallow rock shelter, a large rock overhang surrounded by some roughly flat surface. Still, Kin nodded his head in appreciation.

"Nice! That overhang should help a lot to cut sunrays, especially since it is on the northwest side of this hill. Could I make a suggestion, Sergeant?"

"Go ahead, Kin."

"I see a lot of loose rocks around this overhang. We could use them to build a low stone wall around this platform, which would then protect us partly from rifle fire coming up from the valley."

"A good idea actually, Kin. We will first set up our mortar, then will build that low wall. Let's get to work, men!"

Contrary to setting up their mortar, something that took only a couple of minutes, building a low stone wall proved to be a lot longer and much more tiring job. However, Sergeant Dubreuil declared himself satisfied about the final result after a half-hour of hard work.

"That will be good enough for me. Take a break, guys, and start spreading out your sleeping bags under the overhang."

Dubreuil was about to call by radio his group commander, to report that he was in position, when he saw Hunter Maurice Panetton take out a cigarette and prepare to light it.

"HEY, NO SMOKING! THE TIP OF A BURNING CIGARETTE CAN BE SEEN FOR KILOMETERS AT NIGHT. DON'T YOU REMEMBER YOUR TRAINING, PANETTON?"

"Uh, sorry, Sergeant. Won't happen again." said the young man while pocketing back his cigarette pack and lighter. Kin nodded to himself in appreciation at that: Sergeant Dubreuil could be rough and short-tempered at times but nobody could deny that he was a true professional soldier with lots of experience.

"Good! We will now establish an observation post a few meters away to the West, with a field telephone linking it to this position. Kin, Fortier, you will be the first to man that observation post. Grab a field telephone and a spool of wire and follow me once I will have called Lieutenant Montreuil."

"Got it, Sergeant!" replied Fortier before taking out of a haversack two field telephones and a spool of telephone wire. Setting up one of the field telephones near the western side of their low stone wall, he then connected one end of the wire to the telephone unit and loosened by a few meters the wire rolled around the spool. Once Sergeant Dubreuil had finished his radio call and motioned him and Kin to follow him, Fortier started walking while unrolling more of the wire along the way. Cautiously advancing in the darkness on the rocky slope of their hill, the trio stopped after about a

minute behind a large boulder situated some fifty meters to the West of the detachment's camp. Looking over and around the boulder, Dubreuil nodded with satisfaction.

"This is a good spot for our observation post. It is well protected from rifle fire by this boulder, while this position gives us an unobstructed view of the valley and trails around our hill. Place and connect the field telephone behind this boulder: I will make a test call once back at our camp. Signal any movement you will see or hear down below. Watch especially for groups of men, possibly with loaded mules, which could show up. I will send a replacement team in four hours. Got it, Fortier?"

"Yes, Sergeant!"

Dubreuil then walked away in the dark, heading back to their camp. Now alone with Fortier, Kin whispered a question to him.

"How will we know if someone who shows up is the enemy?"

"Easy: shepherds don't go around with rifles. Keep watching while I wait for the test call from the sergeant."

Lying down behind a small boulder next to the bigger boulder, Kin then started looking at the lower grounds around them: his Neanderthal night vision, superior to that of modern Homo Sapiens, made that task relatively easy for him. At first glance, he could not see anyone around for a good 300 meters, nor could he hear anything suspect. A minute later, a light buzz from the field telephone made Fortier pick up its handset.

"Fortier here!... No, nothing for the moment... Understood!"

Putting down the handset, Fortier then grinned to Kin.

"Time to watch and listen, Kin."

Four hours later and with nothing to report up to now, Corporal Julien Harcourt and Hunter Daniel Vaillant showed up at their position, walking at a crouch.

"Time for you to go catch some sleep, guys: we are taking over for the next four hours."

"I won't say no to that." replied Fortier while getting up from the ground. "Follow me, Kin."

Before leaving the observation post, Kin gently patted his friend Daniel's shoulder.

"Have a quiet watch, Daniel."

"Thanks, Kin!"

Kin and Fortier then walked back to their base camp, where Fortier quickly slipped inside his sleeping bag after removing his boots and coat. Seeing that Kin was simply lying down on top of his own sleeping bag, Fortier gave him a questioning look.

"Aren't you going to sleep inside your sleeping bag, Kin?"

"Why? It's not really cold, at least not for me."

"Neanderthals!" said Fortier while shaking his head, meaning it as a simple statement rather than as an insult. By now, after having served for ten months with his unit, Kin's peculiarities, including his uncommon resistance to cold, were now well known to his comrades.

That night, along with the following two days, proved uneventful, with only a couple of shepherds seen with their flocks of sheep down in the valleys around the hill. Then, on Wednesday night, the noise of a distant gun battle was heard from the North, waking up the whole detachment. After listening to it for a few seconds, Sergeant Dubreuil spoke up to his men around him.

"That gunfight is at least ten kilometers away to the North, probably somewhere in the zone of our neighboring battalion. Our soldiers must have spotted some kind of infiltration attempt across the border. If that's the case, the enemy may well try again in another sector, possibly ours, on another night. We will have to be extra vigilant from now on. You can go back to sleep now, men."

His soldiers, a bit reassured, obeyed him and returned into their sleeping bags or, in the case of Kin, atop his sleeping bag. Dubreuil smiled slightly at that: while Kin's sleeping habits were a bit disconcerting, it meant for Dubreuil that he had at least one man ready to jump into action in seconds if need be. Personally, he would have been content to have a whole detachment of Neanderthal soldiers under his command, if not for the fact that only one such soldier existed in this year 1956.

02:06 (Algeria Time)

Thursday, March 22, 1956 'B'

Observation post of Mortar Detachment Alpha

Hill of Senn Ez Zgag, near border with Morocco

Being widely recognized to have by far the best night vision in his unit, Kin had been designated to stand observation duties during the riskiest period for enemy activity:

from midnight to four in the morning. This time he had been paired with Corporal Julien Harcourt, the detachment's ammunition specialist. The day before, an army helicopter had dropped extra supplies and mortar ammunition on the ridgeline, some distance away from the detachment's camp, so as to not unmask their position. While the extra supplies had been welcome, that had forced the soldiers to haul the supplies back to their camp along some 400 meters of ridgeline, a back-breaking job. Kin had done his part in that and, after some early sleep, was now back at the observation post. A half moon and a clear night sky helped him see reasonably well to a fair distance, while the crisp mountain air carried sounds far. Kin actually heard something that made him grow more attentive before he could see the first sign of movement below his hill. Pointing the binoculars lent to his team by Sergeant Dubreuil, Kin was able to spot a group of at least twenty men walking in single file towards the Northeast and Ain Sefra. That group had four mules with them and were going to pass to the South of the detachment's hill. Using one foot to shake a bit Harcourt, Kin then whispered to him in the dark.

"Hey, I see a group of about twenty men and four mules heading Northeast some 300 meters to our South. You better call Sergeant Dubreuil and alert him to those bozos."

"Let me look first." replied Harcourt, who then crawled to near Kin and took the binoculars offered by him. He looked through them for half a minute before lowering the binoculars and grabbing the handset of the nearby field telephone and turning its ringing handle. Master Corporal Fortier was the one who answered him.

"Fortier here!"

"This is Harcourt! You better wake up our guys: a group of twenty men and four mules are about to pass to our South, heading Northeast."

"Hang on! I'm going to wake the sergeant. Keep track of that group in the meantime."

"Will do!"

Kin and Harcourt, now fully alert and feeling adrenaline starting to flow in their systems, kept close watch on the suspect group of men and their mules for the next few minutes, until Sergeant Dubreuil showed up at the observation post.

"Alright, show me where that group is."

With Harcourt pointing the group to him in the distance, Dubreuil used his night vision scope to look for a moment, then grabbed the telephone's handset to call back the detachment's camp.

"Hello! This is Dubreuil! Prepare our mortar for action and call Lieutenant Montreuil by radio to warn him that a possible enemy group is trying to infiltrate our battalion zone by passing South of our hill. Here are the map coordinates of that group's present position..."

Once he had passed those coordinates by telephone and was told that their group commander had been advised by radio, Dubreuil then gave one further order.

"Fire one para flare illumination round over those coordinates. Fire when ready." Dubreuil, like Harcourt and Kin, then anxiously waited for the illumination flare to light up in the sky. Some 45 seconds later, their mortar erupted briefly in the night and a bright spot of light soon lit up high in the sky, illuminating the grounds of the valley to their South with a harsh white light. The reaction to that of the group of men down the slopes confirmed their identity to Dubreuil: they either ran to take cover and hide or stopped on the spot and crouched.

"They ain't your friendly visitor types." said Dubreuil in a sarcastic tone before speaking again in the telephone's handset. "Fortier, fire a ranging HE-FRAG¹⁴ bomb at the same coordinates."

Dubreuil then looked at Kin, who lay some two meters from him.

"Kin, do you think that you could nail some of those assholes at this distance?"

"Yes, Sergeant, especially with that illumination round up in the sky."

"Then, start firing deliberate shots. Don't wait for our mortar bomb to hit."

Kin nodded his head, then raised his FRF-1 7.5mm sniper rifle's telescope to his right eye and started aiming his weapon. It took him only a few seconds to spot one of the suspect men, who had raised his head from behind a rock and was obviously trying to spot the French soldiers. Aiming carefully and gently squeezing his rifle's trigger while holding his breath, Kin fired his first shot of this war three seconds later. Dubreuil let out a triumphant exclamation when he saw that suspected guerrilla jerk and then crumble to the ground.

"A HIT! Well done, Kin! Keep firing at other targets."

¹⁴ HE-FRAG : High-Explosive Fragmentation projectile.

Kin had time to fire two more shots, downing two other men, before the first 81mm mortar bomb exploded on the ground, some twenty meters behind the suspects. Dubreuil quickly called in a correction to his mortar's aim while Kin fired his fourth shot. By now, the panicked extremist guerrillas were firing blindly towards the top of the hill and the observation post but their shooting proved to be wild, with no bullets striking or even passing anywhere near the observation post. Then, a quick salvo of three mortar bombs exploded among the guerrillas' positions, spreading panic in their ranks. Kin was pained to see two of the mules fall to the ground and thrash in agony while screaming in pain, hit by mortar shrapnel. Those poor beasts did not deserve to die like this. With a number of the guerrillas now running away and trying to escape the mortar fire, more targets presented themselves to him, so he used that opportunity to fire three more aimed shots that downed two men before the light from the illumination round extinguished itself in the sky. Thankfully, his concentrating on aiming his shots made him avoid seeing the deaths of the two remaining mules brought by the guerrillas. One mule dropped dead on the ground, instantly killed by a mortar bomb fragment to its heart, while the last remaining mule was dismembered and projected into the air by a near-hit from a mortar bomb. The rain of mortar bombs also killed or wounded over half of the still surviving guerrillas, forcing the remainder to stay low and immobile behind rocks in order to avoid being hit. Kin used renewed light from a second illumination bomb ordered by Dubreuil to shoot his seventh enemy as the man was trying to crawl to a nearby ditch for extra protection. That was when hands started getting up as the surviving guerrillas shouted to signify their surrender. Dubreuil immediately ordered a stop to the mortar firing and called for two of his men at the camp to join him before looking at Kin and Harcourt.

"Once Vaillant and Bonséjour will have joined up, we will go down and take prisoner those surviving guerrillas. Don't take any bullshit from them and search them at once for weapons. Once they are all tied up and lying down, we will see what their mules were transporting."

"It is a good thing that Samuel was not here tonight, Sergeant: he would have been heartbroken to see those four mules die."

"Unfortunately that's war, Kin. You should have seen all the horses killed during World War Two: nearly as many horses as men died in that conflict and it was even worse in the Great War of 1914."

Kin lowered his head in sadness then: he could accept having to kill men who would be ready and willing to kill him but those mules had been nobody's enemies.

Vaillant and Bonséjour showed up less than a minute later, then went down with Dubreuil, Harcourt and Kin, climbing and sliding down the slopes towards the surviving guerrillas, who now stood in the open with both hands up. The first guerrilla Kin approached turned out to be a very young and very scared man who appeared to be under shock from the mortar fire which had decimated his comrades. Kin didn't say a word to him and he quickly searched him, relieving him of a rifle's ammunition bandoleer, a knife and a grenade before pushing him down to his knees. It turned out that only five of twenty guerrillas had survived the fight intact, with four other men seriously wounded and with eleven dead sprawled around. Dubreuil slowly shook his head after summarily examining the four wounded.

"They would need immediate medical treatment at a casualty's station in order to survive and getting a helicopter to show up here would take at least half an hour: these men will probably die tonight. Alright, men, tie these prisoners up while I go see what those mules were carrying. Harcourt, Panetton and Bonséjour, you will administer first aid to these four wounded men."

The first mule Dubreuil went to was still alive and thrashing around, pushing pitiful cries of pain. Taking out his pistol, Dubreuil shot the animal in the head, cutting its suffering, then looked at the wooden crates attached to its back: it contained rifle and pistol ammunition. The second mule, dead by now, carried a dozen submachine guns, lots of spare magazines and two crates of bullets.

"Twelve Soviet PPSh-41 7.62mm submachine guns, along with 71-round drum magazines. That could have hurt us bad."

The third dead mule, the one that had been ripped apart by a mortar bomb, proved to carry wooden crates full of grenades, while the fourth mule had carried a mix of plastic explosives, detonators and rudimentary clock mechanisms meant to act as delay detonators.

"We probably avoided a lot of hurt to our unit in the near future with this success. Lieutenant Montreuil will be happy with this. I better call him now to ask for a pickup for these prisoners and ammunition."

Using the compact short-range radio he carried with him, he then called Master corporal Fortier, who had stayed at the mortar position, and asked him to relay his request for

transportation. Once that was done, he toured the dead men to see what he could find of interest on them. Most of them only carried rudimentary sets of identity papers, possibly fake ones. However, one dead man had a backpack radio and carried a map, along with a notebook with Arabic writing in it.

"Now, that could prove interesting for our intelligence section."

He carefully noted on which frequency the backpack radio was set before resuming his round of the dead men. He however didn't find more items of true interest, thus went to see how his men were doing with the wounded guerrillas. When asked, Harcourt looked up at Dubreuil with a non-committal expression.

"One of those four men just died from massive blood loss. We patched up the three others as best we could but we may lose at least another one before a helicopter could arrive here."

"Well, too bad! We really can't do more for them here."

No helicopter came for another two hours, until the Sun rose over the horizon. As predicted by Harcourt, another guerrilla died from his wounds before the arrival of the helicopter. That same helicopter also proved to carry the battalion's intelligence officer, Captain Fernand Rivet, along with two armed soldiers. Dubreuil took a few minutes to brief Rivet on the night action and handed him the map, radio and notebook taken from the presumed leader of the guerrilla group, plus the identity papers found on the dead and wounded. Rivet appeared quite pleased by Dubreuil's finds and the successes of the mortar detachment, including Kin's kill score.

"Seven men shot down at night and at a distance of at least 400 meters? That's damn good shooting."

"Indeed! Up to now, Hunter Comeau has performed in an exemplary manner. If it would be depending on me, I would give him his corporal stripes right away."

"I will pass that tidbit to Colonel Genest, along with all this info. Again, great job from you and your detachment, Sergeant."

"Thank you, sir!" replied Dubreuil, puffing up with pride. Some seven minutes later, with the surviving guerrillas and the captured weapons and ammunition aboard, the helicopter took off in a whirlwind of dust and sand, to head East towards Ain Sefra. Dubreuil watched it fly away for a moment, then looked at his men.

"Alright, men! Let's climb back to our positions on the hill. This war is only beginning for us."

CHAPTER 8 – POLITICAL COWARDICE



French Parliament in session.

11:03 (Algeria Time)

Wednesday, September 12, 1956 'B'

Headquarters of the French Forces in Algeria

Algiers, North Africa



General Raoul Salan, Commander of the French Forces in Algeria, was both pleased and frustrated as he was reading the latest intelligence and operational reports from his units in the country. Pleased because his army units had been able to nearly completely seal the border with Morocco, thus starving the FLN guerrillas of weapons and ammunition and also preventing the entry of more guerrillas into Algeria. While the French forces had suffered some casualties in return for that success, they had thankfully been light up to now. However, the situation inside Algeria itself and particularly in the larger towns and cities was far less satisfactory. While the more elite troops of the French Army, like the paratrooper and mountain units, had performed admirably to date along the borders, the French gendarme units and their Algerian auxiliaries controlled by the General Government of Algeria, which was still directed by France, had done a much less satisfactory job of preventing terrorist attacks

in the various towns and villages inside Algeria and in providing security to the ethnic-European settlers. While frustrated by that, Salan was not really surprised to see such poor results. For one thing, the number of French Gendarmerie units in country was way too small in his opinion in view of the immense task of providing security inside such a large country. Another thing was the fact that the Algerian auxiliary troops supporting the gendarmes were both poorly armed and equipped and were also poorly trained and supported by the General Government. In turn, Salan could blame the French government for being miserly in its financial support to the General Government of Algeria. Because of all this, the FLN guerrillas operating inside Algeria had been able to continue their campaign of intimidation, terror, torture and massacres against the 'Pieds Noirs', the settlers of French origin established for generations in Algeria, and against those Algerians seen as collaborating with France. Salan was sure that the FLN could be defeated in the long run if adequate resources and support would be provided by France in this war. The problem was that he still didn't see such commitment from the French government towards winning the war. In fact, French public opinion was more and more showing signs of being tired of this war and of wanting to see a quick end to it, even if that meant that the nationalists of the FLN would win control over the country.

Salan was still reading the reports when his telephone rang, prompting him in grabbing its receiver and speaking in it.

"General Salan here!"

The voice which he heard then made him instantly stiffen: it was that of Guy Mollet, the Prime Minister of France! That the Prime Minister would call him directly like this, instead of passing through the normal chain of command, was highly unusual and probably meant bad news for him. In that, Salan was quickly proven right.

"General Salan, this is the Prime Minister. I know that calling you directly like this is both unusual and outside of your military chain of command, but I wanted to give you a heads up about something before you get a brick on the head from Paris. As you must know, the war in Algeria is quite unpopular here in France, with many complaining about the drain on resources it causes to our country and also about the apparent lack of long-term satisfactory conclusion to it."

"I do know about the popular opinion in France, Mister Prime Minister. However, we could have had a satisfactory solution to the war and a comprehensive defeat of the

FLN by now, if France would have provided adequate support to our troops in country and to the General Government of Governor Lacoste.”

“Well, there was little that my government could do about that, General. The Parliament has been systematically opposing and cutting down our military budgets concerning Algeria and have been blocking most of our legislative attempts at supporting the General Government. However, things are about to get worse for us: a majority in the Parliament is now pushing for a vote of non-confidence concerning the situation in Algeria. If that vote succeeds, then my government will fall and will probably be then replaced by a leftist coalition led by the PCF¹⁵. If that happens, then such a new government will most probably order an immediate and complete military withdrawal of French forces from Algeria.”

“But that would be pure folly!” exploded Salan, instantly angry. “You realize the kind of mass massacres of European settlers which would follow such a withdrawal? We would then have the blood of tens of thousands of people on our hands.”

Discouragement then appeared in Mollet’s voice.

“I know, General, but few people in France seem to care much about our settlers. In fact, a clear majority of the French public is of the opinion that those ‘Pieds Noirs’ are only a burden on France and that they should either live with a FLN-sponsored government or leave the country.”

“Leave the country? To go where? France? You saw as well as me what kind of reception such refugees would get on arrival in France: they would most probably be sent to so-called relocation camps, where they would basically be forgotten and left to rot. As for living under a FLN-sponsored government, that would only deliver them with their hands tied to the torturers and executioners of the FLN. Just yesterday, a group of farms in which a number of settlers were living was attacked and stormed by FLN guerrillas. When one of our regular army units was finally able to get to those farms, they found a total of 83 dead men, women and children. The men and women had been tortured and mutilated before being killed, while the children had their throats cut. Many of the young girls had also been raped before being killed. And our government would be ready to condemn our settlers in Algeria to such a horrible fate?”

There was a noticeable pause before Mollet replied to Salan’s objection.

¹⁵ PCF : Parti Communiste Français (French Communist Party).

"Look, General, I do not like this any more than you do but both the Parliament and the French public opinion are against us on this. The chances of seeing the Parliament ratify supplementary budgets for the military effort in Algeria are nil, while protests are growing about the losses of French soldiers in this war. My only alternative to letting the PCF gain power soon and then see them order an immediate and complete withdrawal of our troops from Algeria is to compromise, to at least effect a gradual and controlled withdrawal which would allow us to relocate the settlers who will wish to leave the country. I am already in secret negotiations with the Communist and Socialist Party leaders in order to effect a gradual and controlled withdrawal of our forces from Algeria, along with effecting a humane resettlement of our citizens to France. I am sorry but that is the best we can do right now, General."

Salan repressed with difficulty his anger and frustration then but had to concede that Mollet was truly in a bad spot.

"Alright, Mister Prime Minister. What do you expect from me then?"

"First, my government will soon announce that French military units rotating out of Algeria at the end of their six-months tour period will not be replaced and that, in compensation, the local auxiliaries of the General Government will get more equipment and weapons, in order to be able to control the internal situation in Algeria. You do have some of your units due soon to rotate back to France, correct?"

"Correct! Two mountain battalions and two paratrooper battalions are due to rotate out by the end of this month, having completed six months of service in the country. Those battalions, like the rest of our army here, have performed admirably here and have managed to strangle the guerrillas' supply lines across the Morocco border. They have thus amply deserved to be relieved. However, their departure will open a wide hole along the Northwest border, in the Atlas Region, a hole that the FLN will quickly exploit to send in more weapons and combatants. I doubt very much that the armed auxiliaries of the General Government will be able to plug that hole, Mister Prime Minister."

"Well, as I said, there is little that we could do about that, General. Proceed with the rotation out of those four battalions as if it is a routine movement of troops but don't publicize yet the fact that they won't be replaced by regular army units along the border. With luck, the FLN will believe that it is still facing regular French troops along the border and will not try to infiltrate through the Atlas Mountain."

Salan nearly laughed out in derision at Mollet's wishful thinking.

"With all the French leftists who had been supporting the FLN from the start and who have been spying on behalf of these bastards? The FLN will know what is happening the moment that our troops will start to withdraw. Remember the way that French Communists in France and in Indochina opposed and directly sabotaged our military efforts there, even attacking trains in France which were carrying our wounded soldiers back from Indochina and beating our men as they lay on their stretchers?¹⁶ The truth is that too many leftist French politicians and their supporters would easily deserve to be called 'traitors', in my opinion."

"Be careful about voicing such an opinion in public, General: it could cost you dearly."

"So what? Maybe it would be time for us to grow some backbones and to deal properly with such leftist traitors."

Salan then slammed down his telephone receiver, cutting the line with the Prime Minister of France. Still furious, Salan thought over for a long moment about what he could do next. Unfortunately, his options right now were strictly limited.

15:11 (Algeria Time)

Friday, September 14, 1956 'B'

Field command post of the 27th BCA

Ain Sefra, Atlas Mountains Region

Lieutenant-colonel Laurent Genest was still wondering what this surprise visit by General Salan meant for his unit as the helicopter carrying Salan was landing in the empty field behind his battalion command post in Ain Sefra. The radio message he had received only half an hour ago had specified to keep General Salan's visit discreet, so Genest had done without the kind of guard of honor that such a high-ranking visit would normally warrant and was thus alone to greet his commander, save for four armed soldiers providing protection for the landing area. However, Genest had no illusions about this visit staying secret for very long: the FLN assuredly had spies and sympathizers living in the village. Walking to the landed helicopter, Genest was able to greet Salan with a salute and a handshake as soon as he stepped out of the helicopter.

¹⁶ Such outrageous incidents actually occurred during the Indochina War, when French troops were still fighting the Communist Vietminh.

He however had to nearly shout over the noise of the helicopter rotor and engine in order to be heard by Salan.

"Welcome to Ain Sefra, General. If you will follow me inside my command post, we will then be able to discuss in a quieter environment."

"Then lead the way, Colonel Genest."

Both officers then walked to the guarded entrance of the building used by Genest as his battalion command post, entering it and going to the private work office of the battalion commander. Once in that office, Salan made a point of closing its door before looking somberly at Genest.

"Colonel, I have both bad news and a request for you. First, the bad news. Prime Minister Mollet called me two days ago to warn me that, due to a pending vote of non-confidence being prepared by the leftist parties in Parliament against our military intervention in Algeria, his government is being forced to start gradually withdrawing our army units from Algeria. The Prime Minister intends to do that by not replacing our units due to rotate back to France after completing six months of service in-country. I strongly objected to that, telling him that this would leave the FLN free to gain control of Algeria and to commit more atrocities and massacres against our settlers, but that did not deter him. Technically, I am obliged to obey his directives but I have thought of a possible way to at least mitigate the worst future consequences of such a short-sighted move. I have already visited the other three battalions due to rotate out with your battalion at the end of this month and I am now going to ask you the same request that I asked of them. My plan is to delay the departure for France of our army units by a few months, in order to gain enough time to properly train and equip our auxiliary territorial units and make them able to resist future pushes by the FLN. As new equipment and weapons to refit our auxiliary units, we will use the weapons and ammunition captured to date from the FLN, plus will use any reserve stocks we still have in country. Some of our senior NCOs will also train those auxiliaries to at least an acceptable basic standard of military proficiency. Now, my request to you, Colonel, is to keep your unit in place here for at least a few more months and to hold the line along the border while our auxiliaries are being trained and reequipped. I know that this may come as a bitter pill to swallow by your soldiers, who have performed admirably to date and who amply deserved to go back to France and see their families, but this is the only way I can see to prevent some horrible tragedies to our settlers at the hands of the FLN. So, do you think that your men

would be able and willing to lengthen their stay in Algeria by at least two to three months?”

That left Genest silent for a moment as he mulled that question over in his head. He finally nodded his head once while answering Salan in a firm tone of voice.

“I have full confidence in the commitment and sense of duty of my men, General. We will hold our line along the border for as long as you need.”

“Excellent! Now, do you have some stocks of captured enemy weapons and ammunition here which could be distributed to the local Harki¹⁷ defense unit?”

“We did capture a sizeable quantity of weapons and ammunition from guerrillas we killed as they attempted to cross the border inside our sector, General. I have already distributed those weapons and ammunition to the Harkis and UT units in my sector and had my more senior NCOs here train them in their use and care. We were able to reequip and train a total of 156 men, who are now actively protecting Ain Sefra and the villages surrounding it.”

“Even better!” said Salan, grinning with approval. “I must commend your sense of initiative, Colonel. Thank you for accepting to stay a few more months on the line: I could have simply ordered you to do so but you and your men deserved to have a say in this. Well, I will now leave back for Algiers before my presence here attracts too much attention. Keep doing your good work, Colonel!”

Salan shook hands with Genest before the latter saluted him and accompanied him back to his helicopter. Genest sighed as he watched the helicopter lift off and fly away towards the Northeast.

“Let’s hope that our extended stay will indeed prevent a tragedy in this country. Now, I have to break the news to the men.”

10:08 (Algeria Time)

Saturday, September 14, 1956 ‘B’

Position of Detachment Alpha, Mortar Group of the 27th BCA

Hill of Senn Ez Zgag

¹⁷ Harki : Name of Algerian armed auxiliaries used by the then General Government of Algeria to defend against FLN attacks.

Kin Comeau, who had been promoted in the field to the rank of corporal two months ago, was resting in his detachment's improvised camp, located under a large rock overhang, when Captain Robert Théoret, accompanied by Lieutenant Louis Montreuil and by Chief Warrant Officer René Fonck, walked in, having been dropped by helicopter some distance away. Having been warned by radio of their arrival, Sergeant Dubreuil greeted them with a salute.

"Sir! To what do we owe your visit to my mortar detachment?"

"To some important news which I need to pass to all. Are all your men present here at this moment, Sergeant?"

"No, sir! Two of my men are presently manning an observation post some fifty meters to the west of our camp. Do you want them to return to the camp, sir?"

"Yes! However, what I have to say won't take long, so have them come back here for a few minutes."

"Right away, sir!" replied Dubreuil before walking to the field telephone laid inside the low stone wall protecting the camp and calling the observation post to tell the two soldiers there to return temporarily to the camp. Less than four minutes later, Corporal Harcourt and Hunter Vaillant arrived in the small camp site, where they lined up with the other members of the detachment in a semi-circle facing Captain Théoret. The latter looked briefly around him at the seven men facing him before starting to speak in a sober tone.

"Men, I have some unsettling news to pass to you. We will not be returning to France at the end of this month. Instead, we will stay here along the border for at least another two to three months."

Despite being a bit shocked by that announcement, nobody exclaimed himself or interrupted Théoret as he continued on.

"By the way, the same thing will happen to all our field units stationed along the border. We can thank a political decision made in Paris for that. To make a long story short, our present government got cold feet after Parliament threatened a vote of non-confidence if our army units were not withdrawn from Algeria, letting the General Government of Algeria alone to fight off the FLN. If you will think that this was an act of rank cowardice by our politicians, then I would agree with you. However, we military men are supposed to obey our politicians' directives, even when they don't make sense. When General Salan got the word about this by telephone, he decided on a compromise that could avoid a horrible disaster if we withdrew to France too precipitously. Basically,

General Salan decided to continue to hold our lines along the border with Morocco for a few extra months, time for us to rearm, refit and retrain our Harkis and Territorial Units, so that those units could have a chance to contain and stop by themselves the FLN and to prevent the massacre of civilians. That may not sound much of a solution but it is our only solution, short of abandoning Algeria in the hands of the FLN."

Many of the soldiers, including Kin, shivered at the thought of what that would mean. During the over five months they had been deployed in Algeria, they all had heard about the multiple atrocities committed by the FLN against European settlers and against the Algerian Muslims supporting the government. Théoret then went on further.

"I know that you were all anxious to see your families again after those five rough months in the field, but tens of thousands of lives may depend on this ultimate effort by us. I know that you are able of such an effort and I have full confidence in your dedication and professionalism. Now, do you have any questions or comments, men?"

"Yes, sir!" answered at once Kin, never one to be subtle about his opinions. "Our politicians make me shit!"

A concert of laughs greeted that statement, with Théoret also laughing before he smiled to Kin.

"Always direct and to the point, Corporal Comeau. I like that and, yes, our politicians also make me shit. However, they are OUR politicians and we have to follow their instructions...to a point. Now, here is an important point for all of you. We will do our best to hide the fact that we are not rotating out as previously planned. On the scheduled date initially set for our departure, our battalion command post and support unit will vacate Ain Sefra and will do as if they are leaving town in order to return to France. In reality, our command and support echelons will reroute once out of sight and at night, then will travel along trails towards the border before establishing a new command site not far to the East of us. As for us in the frontlines, we will hide in position as much as possible, so that those FLN bastards will think that we are gone and will then rush in to occupy in force this region. Fulfilling this ruse will necessitate that we use our fieldcraft and stealth to the maximum, so that we could suck the FLN into our trap. This will mean for us no camp fires, no smoking at night and no loud noises or talk while in position. Tomorrow, helicopters will start dropping near each of our position extra quantities of water, rations and ammunition, so that we could give the appearance of a complete lack of resupply activity after the coming week. With some luck, the FLN and its local spies will then think that we withdrew at night from our positions. Well, that's all

I had to tell you, men. Again, congratulation for your field performance to date and keep up the good work.”

Théoret, again accompanied by Lieutenant Montreuil and by Chief Warrant Officer Fonck, then turned around and left the small camp to return to his waiting helicopter. Once the trio was gone, Sergeant Dubreuil walked in front of his men and addressed them.

“Alright, you heard the poop from our bosses. Starting this evening, we will avoid shining any light at night, while we will move as stealthily as possible during the day. Harcourt, Vaillant, you can now return to our observation post. Fortier and Bonséjour will replace you for the evening shift, while Panetton and Comeau will take the graveyard shift. Dismissed!”

“Well, since our politicians make me shit so much, I will go have a dump.” announced Kin, making the others laugh again.

Ostensibly grabbing first a roll of toilet paper and a shovel, Kin then walked out of the small camp, climbing up the steep slope to the ridgeline, then climbing down the opposite slope for a few meters before arriving near a large boulder. Making a show of pulling down his pants before crouching behind the boulder, Kin then opened the canvas and Velcro band covering his ‘wristwatch’, which was in reality the advanced temporal communicator unit given to him by his adoptive mother before he left the Annecy train station five months ago. Opening the upper plate of the unit and uncovering both a small screen and a tiny keyboard, Kin activated the communicator and punched in a call number, using the point of a pen to use the miniature keyboard. His call, relayed by one of the secret orbital satellites put around Earth by the Time Patrol, nearly instantly linked up with the Paris outpost of the organization. Kin smiled with satisfaction on seeing the pretty face of Field Agent Frida Winterer appear on the tiny screen.

“Hello, Frida!”

“Hello, Kin!” replied Frida in a most friendly tone. “I see that you are wearing a helmet. Are you in the frontlines in Algeria?”

“Yes, I am! I am presently in a field position atop a hill Southwest of the village of Ain Sefra, in the Atlas Mountains. But don’t worry about me: the situation around me is presently calm. I am calling instead to warn the Time Patrol about a worrying development.”

Kin then took a minute to tell Frida about the news brought by Captain Théoret and the possible consequences of the French government's decision to withdraw its troops from Algeria. That made Frida's face quickly sober up.

"Damn politicians! Ready again to stab their soldiers in the back and to abandon people to a cruel enemy. You did well to warn us of this, Kin. I am sure that Mike will act on this."

That made Kin nod his head with satisfaction: Mike Crawford, the Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol, was a decisive man and a very effective field agent and commander.

"Good! Frida, I also wish that Natai, in Jerusalem, be warned about this. The potential for atrocities and human suffering here is sickening me. Algeria definitely could use an intervention by her."

"She will also probably want to kick some asses around the French government and Parliament when she will hear about their cowardice and selfishness. Count on me to pass the word. Stay safe, Kin: we love you!"

"I know, Frida, and it warms my heart to have such good friends around me. I will call again if things get too hot."

Kin then terminated the call and closed his wrist communicator before pulling back up his pants and returning to the detachment's camp, feeling better now that someone of consequence could come to the help of the Algerians if things soured up.

CHAPTER 9 – DOING THE RIGHT THING



19:55 (Algeria Time)

Saturday, September 29, 1956 'B'

Village of Ain Sefra, Atlas Mountains

Near the Algeria-Morocco border

Ahmed Krim felt triumph as he watched discretely from the corner of a window the long convoy of French military vehicles starting to roll out of Ain Sefra, apparently heading North. The Infidels were finally on their way out of Algeria after years of murderous fighting and violence, and that mostly thanks to the cowardice of their politicians. Ahmed, who had spoken in passing with many French soldiers during the last few days and weeks, had heard them swear at their political leaders, and for good reasons. That had in fact invalidated the long-established FLN policy which said that, however powerful and dangerous the French Army was, perseverance on the part of the FLN fighters would eventually wear down France's will to fight. Now, that day had come and the departure of the French soldiers was going to open Ain Sefra and its surrounding area to the valiant nationalist combatants of the FLN. Then, the traitors who

had supported the French, along with the French settlers living in Algeria, were going to pay with their lives. Once the French motorized column was all out of the village and out of sight, raising a dust cloud along the road heading North, Ahmed went to his telephone and formed a number, then waited for someone to answer him.

"Yes?"

"This is Ahmed, in Ain Sefra. They're now gone, heading North. What is your situation?"

"The local soldiers also left town via a road convoy and headed North. I will now be able to pass the good news to all our friends."

"Excellent! I can't wait to greet them here in Ain Sefra. Allah will soon smile on us."

Ahmed then hung up and returned to his window. The only soldiers he could now see were some of those hated Harkis, traitors to their country, who were now alone to defend the village. Those Harkis looked very nervous indeed, and for very good reasons.

01:16 (Algeria Time)

Monday, October 01, 1956 'B'

Observation post of Mortar Detachment Alpha

Hill of Senn Ez Zgag, 3.5 kilometers east of the Algeria-Morocco border

Kin had started his night watch duty with his friend Daniel Vaillant a bit over an hour earlier when his sharp night vision alerted him to some movement downslope, to the West of his observation post. At nearly the same time, the wind brought a faint noise of vehicle engines, also coming from the West. He gently elbowed his friend's right-side shoulder and spoke to him in a near whisper.

"Hey, Daniel! I think that we have someone below us, near the foot of the hill. I also can hear a bunch of vehicles approaching from the direction of the border."

"Are you sure, Kin?" asked his friend while squinting his eyes. "I can see or hear nothing."

Kin could not help repress a sarcastic smirk then: Homo Sapiens were definitely behind Neanderthals in terms of sensory skills and physical strength and endurance, if he could judge by his personal experience.

"Yes, I am sure, Daniel. You better call our camp and signal that someone is coming."

Despite still not detecting anything yet, Daniel took Kin at his word and cranked the hand lever of their field telephone while picking up its handset. He quickly got Sergeant Dubreuil, who had elected to sleep during the day and stay up at night because of the higher danger of an enemy attack then, to answer him.

"Sergeant Dubreuil here!"

"Sergeant, Kin is telling me that he can see people approaching our hill and that he can also hear vehicles approaching from the West."

"If Kin says so, then I believe him. I'm going to get our team on full alert, then I will come and join you at the observation post. In the meantime, stay sharp!"

Putting back down the telephone's handset, Daniel tried to see if he could detect those incoming men but failed at that.

"What can you see, Kin?"

"We have about twenty men, advancing in two parallel columns and climbing our hill towards us."

"How could you have such a good night vision?" asked Daniel, a bit jealous, making Kin smile to him.

"Easy: I'm a Neanderthal and you are a mere Homo Sapiens, Daniel."

Daniel cringed at that barb from his friend but didn't reply to it, instead concentrating on trying to see by himself those climbing the hill. By now he could finally hear them as they made small rocks roll down under their feet. A minute later, Sergeant Dubreuil joined them at the observation post and lay down behind the low stone wall built as protection during the last weeks, taking place between Kin and Daniel. Dubreuil, on top of carrying on his back the detachment's tactical VHF backpack radio, also had in his hands the lone, somewhat bulky night vision scope of the detachment. Raising his night scope to one eye and scanning the slopes and terrain below the OP, he smiled after a few seconds.

"You were right, Kin: there are men climbing our hill while trying to be as quiet as they can. I can count 22 of them, split in two files, and they are all armed: these are no shepherds."

"I can still hear vehicles approaching from the West, Sergeant." said Kin, making Dubreuil nod once.

"I am also starting to hear them, Kin. I better alert the lieutenant about this: his own position could also be in danger."

Grabbing his radio handset, Dubreuil called his officer while keeping his voice down, and then described to him what he could see. After a one-minute exchange on the radio, Dubreuil hooked back the radio handset to his web gear and spoke to Kin and Daniel.

"We will wait a bit before engaging those assholes climbing our hill. The lieutenant wants to see what size of vehicle convoy is approaching from the border. Those 22 men climbing towards us were probably sent to check if our hill is occupied or not. Hold your fire for the moment, guys."

Now quite tense, the three men observed and waited as the noise of engines became clearly audible. Dubreuil, who was constantly using his night scope, suddenly spoke up.

"I can now see a bunch of trucks led by a jeep turning the bend of the trail some 400 meters ahead... Damn! I can count over a dozen vehicles now approaching, with more probably following. This is major! I am going to call back the lieutenant on this." After another quick radio exchange, Dubreuil spoke to his two young soldiers, some tension visible in his voice.

"The lieutenant wants to concentrate the fire of our two mortars on that vehicle column, which means that we will have to take care by ourselves of those men climbing our hill. However, we won't fire a single shot before our first mortar bombs explode."

"Then, those approaching could be quite close to us by then, Sergeant." replied Daniel.

"I know, but those trucks are now the priority targets for our mortar group and the lieutenant wishes to keep the element of surprise for as long as possible."

"I could lob a few grenades then, Sergeant." suggested Kin. "I can throw a grenade easily past fifty meters. Maybe those assholes will then think that they also are coming under mortar fire."

Dubreuil did not laugh at Kin's suggestion, knowing from experience that he was not bragging. Back in Annecy, Kin had easily won the competitions for weight-lifting, weight-throwing and javelin-throwing, with some of his throws approaching or even equaling standing Olympic records. His suggestion also proved that he was no idiot either.

"Kin, if I could get a whole squad of Neanderthal men like you, then I would be as happy as a pig in shit."

Both Kin and Daniel had a chuckle on that before falling silent and concentrating on the approaching enemy. Dubreuil, again using his radio while observing the incoming trucks, passed the grid coordinates of the first vehicle to Lieutenant Montreuil, then smiled to his two soldiers.

"Shit is about to hit the fan! Kin, you think that those assholes are now close enough for you to greet them with grenades?"

"Are you kidding, Sergeant? I could have started throwing grenades a full minute ago."

"Then, here: take my two hand grenades and throw them as soon as our first mortar bomb will fall."

"With pleasure, Sergeant!"

"Vaillant, give as well your grenades to Kin: let those bastards think that they are under sustained and rapid mortar fire."

"Have fun, Kin." said Daniel while giving to his friend his two hand grenades.

"I will!" replied Kin while adopting a kneeling position behind their low stonewall, so that he could better throw the four grenades now lined up in front of him.

"Incoming!" said Dubreuil in a low voice as the soft whistle of a falling projectile passed overhead. There was however nothing soft about the explosion of the first 81mm mortar bomb, which hit the ground a mere twenty meters from the leading jeep of the enemy convoy. The 3.13 kilo high-explosive projectile, its fuse set on 'instant' detonation, exploded against the rock and sand surface of the ground, projecting deadly fragments around in a wide radius. One of those fragments pierced the front right tire of the first truck, while another fragment hit one of the passengers in the lead jeep, gravely wounding him. As the FLN combatants were left confused and terrified for a moment, Dubreuil sent a correction by radio to Lieutenant Montreuil, so that both mortars of the group could adjust their fire. The guerrillas climbing the hill occupied by Kin and his comrades, not knowing for sure what was happening, flattened themselves to the ground at once and waited anxiously what would happen next. What came some twenty seconds later was a second registration mortar round. Dubreuil barely held in a scream of triumph when that round achieved a direct hit on one of the enemy trucks, sending pieces and bodies around and creating a big fireball as the truck's fuel tank ignited. Another twenty seconds later, a rain of mortar bombs started exploding among the FLN convoy, causing panic in their column. That was when Dubreuil looked at Kin.

"Start throwing, Kin!"

Kin did not reply to that, instead pulling the safety pin of his first grenade before throwing it. Even though he had personally witnessed Kin's exploits during the Alpine Corps competitions in Chamonix, Daniel Vaillancourt was still stunned to see Kin's first grenade land and roll in the middle of the group of climbing men, now some sixty meters away

from the OP. Kin's second grenade was in the air before his first grenade exploded, with a third one following a mere three seconds later. Those grenades exploded in quick succession among the guerrillas and sent both steel fragments and loose pebbles around at the same time as the truck convoy was bracketed by exploding mortar bombs. Most of the climbing men fled in panic despite the angry orders shouted by their team leader, who kept his ground with only three other men. Kin's fourth grenade interrupted the FLN team leader in mid-sentence when it exploded a mere two meters from him. The blast overpressure was sufficient by itself to kill instantly the guerrilla, with his shredded and dismembered body projected in the air. Seeing the remaining three climbers give up and flee downhill, Dubreuil gave at once an order to Kin.

"HOLD THE GRENADE THROWING, KIN. GET THOSE FLEEING BASTARDS WITH YOUR SNIPER RIFLE!"

Kin obeyed at once, lying back down on the dirt and grabbing his FRF-1 scoped rifle. His first shot downed one man, prompting the remaining two guerrillas in climbing down the hill even faster. Still, that did not save them, as Kin shot them down before they could get to the foot of the hill. Kin then looked at Dubreuil while still shouldering his rifle.

"Permission to snipe at that convoy, Sergeant. It is within my effective range and those burning trucks are providing plenty of illumination for me."

"Go ahead, Kin!"

Raising his scope to eye level, Kin carefully aimed at the head of a man who had jumped out of his damaged truck and who was trying to find some shelter from the mortar bombs in a shallow depression. Dubreuil nearly applauded when he saw that man's head explode, hit from a distance of over 500 meters. Instead, he continued directing the mortar firing of his group, sending short radio messages to Lieutenant Montreuil, who was positioned with the other mortar of the group on top of the adjoining hill to the North. Then, the noise of gunfire from another firefight came in from a distance, punctuated by dense salvos from heavy machine guns marking the opening of a separate battle a few kilometers away. Dubreuil had a mean smile on hearing that gunfire: the traps prepared by the various companies of the 27th BCA were now being sprung, with the FLN being the mice getting stuck in them.

01:59 (Algeria Time)

Southern outskirts of the village of Ain Sefra

The leader of the FLN Katiba¹⁸ unit about to stealthily enter Ain Sefra hesitated and slowed down his pace as the noise of a distant battle, including what sounded like artillery fire, started resonating from the West. However, going over his surprise and confusion, he then signaled by hand to his guerrillas to continue advancing, with himself picking up the pace. He was about to get to the first house of the village when something appeared out of nowhere in front of him. The thing now blocking his path was about the size of a big man but you could not mistake it for a man for an instant. Rather, it looked like a sort of machine mounted on a set of double tracks, with a wide metallic torso from which protruded four articulated arms. Instead of a head, it was crowned by what looked like a machine gun turret sporting a number of lenses.

“Wha...”

The FLN man did not have time to complete his first word before the machine gun pointed at him erupted, puncturing him in the chest with a salvo of three 7mm bullets and killing him nearly instantly. The 112 men of his unit did not survive him for long, as three more combat robots appeared out of nowhere and started firing their machine guns nearly non-stop. The few FLN guerrillas who managed to shoot once their rifles or submachine guns saw their bullets ricochet against some kind of invisible walls surrounding each of the four robots. Before the small contingent of Harkis tasked with protecting the village could even start to react, all 112 FLN guerrillas, who had expected to easily take the village, lay dead in the dirt just short of the first houses. Six guerrillas who were still alive but wounded were unceremoniously finished off with head shots before the four robots disappeared in brief flashes of light.

The same scenario basically repeated itself that night in the various villages of the region attacked by FLN Katibas of the Wilaya 5¹⁹, with a total of 1,863 of its guerrillas massacred that night by combat robots of the Time Patrol. Added to that were the 771 other FLN combatants ambushed and killed near the Moroccan border by French Army units in the Atlas Mountains. However, more painful losses to the FLN quickly followed around the whole of Algeria and in Morocco as well that night.

¹⁸ Katiba : Regional commando unit of the FLN which normally numbered around 120 men.

¹⁹ Wilaya : Numbered operations sector of the FLN inside Algeria. The FLN operated in six such sectors inside Algeria. The Wilaya 5, which covered the northwest part of the country next to Morocco, counted a maximum of 3,750 combattants around 1956-57.

04:03 (Algeria Time)**FLN border area headquarters and rear base in Oujda
Morocco**

"Colonel! Colonel! Please wake up!"

Shaken progressively harder by someone, Houari Boumediene opened his eyes, groggily recognizing one of his officers.

"Uh? What is it, Abdi? What time is it?"

"It is just past four in the morning, Colonel. We have lost radio contact with all the units which we sent out on operations tonight."

That made the thin, 24-year-old revolutionary wake up in a hurry, anger flaring in him.

"What? How could that be? We had nearly 2,600 men ready to assault the border areas vacated by the French two days ago. We can't possibly have lost contact with all of them!"

"Well, we did!" replied Houari's aide. "The last radio contact was made around one o'clock. After that...nothing! We did get reports from villagers in Figuig of noise of short but intense battles on the Algerian side of the border. I am afraid that our men may have fallen into ambushes prepared by the French."

"That's impossible! The French Command is too obtuse and inflexible to come up with such devastating ambushes. Alright, give me a minute to dress and wash up a bit."

With the aide then leaving his small room, Boumediene got up from his camp cot and walked to a dresser on which a wash basin and a pot of water lay. Quickly splashing some water on his face and rubbing it, he then grabbed a folded towel and dried his face. He was turning around with the towel still in his hands when he froze in alarm: a woman now stood in the middle of the room. She was very tall for a woman, much taller than Boumediene in fact and, contrary to the skinny revolutionary, appeared quite strong and fit. She wore a white and gold embroidered robe and a pair of laced sandals and had a sort of gold crown on her head. Her expression was hard as she stared down at Boumediene, who could only stutter a question, stunned by her apparition.

"Who...who are you? How did you get inside my headquarters?"

"You may know me as the Queen of Jerusalem and Overseer of the Holy Land of Palestine. I am your death!"

Before Boumediene, now frozen with fear as he recognized her as possibly the most powerful human being presently living on the planet, could say or do anything more, the woman pointed an index at him, from which a small, crackling blue ball of energy shot out, hitting Boumediene at the speed of lightning. The ball then exploded on impact, incinerating the guerrilla leader and turning him into ashes. Natai coldly looked down at what was left of the murderous psychopath she had just killed, then vanished from where she stood.

A few seconds after that, as a number of FLN men were reacting to the thunder-like noise that had come from Boumediene's room, the massive shape of the Time Patrol battlecruiser CERBERUS appeared in the sky, high above the headquarters building. Two of its three heavy caliber electro-magnetic rail guns then pointed down at the building and fired, sending out two 250-kilo shells at a muzzle velocity of 4,000 meters per second. Their kinetic impacts were enough by themselves to vaporize parts of the building before the shells exploded after digging themselves deep underground. The whole two-story building, along with its various annexes, was then projected high in the air and blown to pieces, killing all the FLN members working inside it. Its task done in Oujda, the CERBERUS then disappeared, heading towards its next target.

04:18 (Algeria Time)

Royal Suite, Royal Palace

Rabat, Morocco

King Mohammed V of Morocco was gently shaken awake by someone standing next to his bed. Thinking that it was his wife, the sovereign looked up, then jerked in surprise and fear: the tall woman near him was neither his wife nor one of his maids. Looking quickly at the place where his wife had been sleeping, he saw that she was still in bed, unmoving. The intruder then spoke to him in Arabic.

"Do not worry: your wife is presently in a deep sleep and won't wake up for another twenty minutes. I came to give you a warning, a warning that you better heed for your own good."

Slowly sitting up in his bed, King Mohammed looked up at the tall woman, whom he now recognized.

"Queen Nancy of Jerusalem? Why did you come to my palace like this? And why are you threatening me?"

"I am not the one threatening you, King Mohammed, as I came as a messenger of The One. Know that those murderers from the FLN paid the price for their crimes earlier this morning. In turn, The One is enjoining you to stop supporting them and to stop letting them attack the French in Algeria. If you ignore this warning, then I won't be the one coming back to see you: The One will! His patience with the tin pot dictators, religious fanatics and crime lords of this World has run out and he has decided to become more active, a lot more active in fact, in dealing with those who inflict so much misery and pain around them. He also knows exactly who would deserve punishment around Earth. Remember that all the persons on Earth harbor a tiny part of The One inside them, something often call 'the Human Soul'. Thus, hiding from The One or denying one's bad deed would be futile. You remember when tens of millions of racists around the planet suddenly saw their skin turn black, pushing many of those racists to commit suicide? Well, something on the same scale could happen again if The One's advice and warnings are ignored. So, have your army and police put a rein to the FLN members and sympathizers who will survive this day and abandon your projects for taking by force territories from your neighbors."

"What about the French?" hotly replied Mohammed, getting angry. "They took plenty of territories from others in the past and are still trying to cling to Algeria, despite their pious promises to grant independence to it."

"Don't worry about the French, King Mohammed." replied calmly Natai. "They are next on my visiting list. Now, make sure that the FLN stops being able to use your country to attack Algeria, and don't take forever to take the appropriate actions. If you don't do that or prove lax in that task, then you will get another visit."

Natai then disappeared from where she stood in an instant, leaving behind a seriously shaken King Mohammed V.

17:40 (Algeria Time)

Headquarters of the French Forces in Algeria

Algiers

General Raoul Salan, assembled with his senior officers around the large map table occupying the center of his operations center, nodded his head slowly as he looked

at the markings and symbols written on top of the transparent plastic film covering the Algeria map.

"So, the FLN forces in Algeria are basically being exterminated by those Time Patrol combat machines, and this over the whole country."

"That's correct, General," replied his senior operations officer. "However, we have received reports saying that there were a number of attacks against the FLN outside of Algeria, notably in Morocco and Tunisia. The known headquarters of the FLN in Morocco were blown up and utterly destroyed early this morning by a huge ship of the Time Patrol, with the top leaders of the FLN killed in that attack."

"Good riddance!" said Salan at once. "Those murderous bastards deserved nothing less. So, do we have at the least an approximate count to date of the losses suffered by the FLN today?"

"We do, General!" answered his military intelligence officer. "However, more reports of those losses keep coming in, so what I have now can be viewed only as partial figures. From what our troops on the ground have reported, we presently have a confirmed number of 37,902 FLN combatants and active supporters found dead, either in hidden field camps or in safehouses around the country. Our patrols also found out that the weapons and ammunition of those dead FLN guerrillas had been picked up and neatly stacked next to the bodies. Those Time Patrol robots did a very thorough job of cleaning up the FLN today. Our units are now in the process of picking up those weapons and ammunition and bringing those to our own depots."

"This brings a question to me, General," said his chief of logistics. "What are we going to do with all those weapons and ammunition? Destroy them? Right now, our depots are about to overflow with them."

"No! Keep them for the moment, Langlade. They will help complete the reequipping of our auxiliary units and of those of the General Government, including Harkis and Territorial Units. Blanchard, what has been the response or reactions from the Moroccans about this massacre?"

Salan's head of military intelligence nodded his head once and quickly looked at a report on top of the thin pile of documents he had brought with him before answering.

"Up to now: nothing but silence and inaction, General. Even King Mohammed has stayed silent about the attacks on FLN installations in Morocco, something very uncharacteristic for him. One big question I have right now is: why? Why did the Time Patrol do all this?"

"Let me answer that question for you, gentlemen." then said a male voice coming from behind Salan. Salan, like his officers and the other French personnel present in the operations center, turned around at once, to see a big man wearing some sort of sophisticated armored suit now standing some five paces from the map table. Salan recognized at once the suit worn by the newcomer, as he had seen similar suits some fourteen years ago, when the Time Patrol had intervened to put a stop to World War Two by destroying the German and Japanese armies around Europe and in the Pacific.

"The Time Patrol! Whatever your reasons to do all this were, I must thank you profusely, mister: you basically put a stop on a most murderous and bloody conflict."

"That is actually the reason we acted, General: to stop that conflict and to bring peace back to this country. Let me present myself: Mike Crawford, Chief of Operations of the Time Patrol."

The newcomer then opened and raised the armored visor of his combat suit, allowing Salan and his officers to see the face of a handsome man who appeared to be in his late thirties. Crawford then slowly walked to the map table and presented his gloved right hand to Salan, who shook it.

"You just saved France from bloodshed...again, Mister Crawford. I saw your troopers and robots in action in 1942, when you chased the Germans out of France. The Time Patrol has always acted to promote the good of all but what pushed you in acting today? There have been many other conflicts since 1942 in which you did not intervene."

"A relevant question, General. The answer is that, this time, the scale of suffering and deaths caused by this insurrection became too much for us to tolerate. Remember what Nancy Laplante said at that big peace conference in Paris in 1942, after we put an end to World War Two. She and the Time Patrol then pledged to prevent future wars and abuse of the innocents by eliminating those who would be the cause of such wars and abuses. The massacres of civilians and the tortures and mutilations committed by the FLN decided us to act...that and the political cowardice of your politicians and government."

Salan and the other French present stiffened on hearing that last sentence but Mike Crawford continued on before they could state objections.

"The sad truth is that the government of France, along with the general attitude of the French people, contributed a lot to create this conflict, both by not granting true

independence to the Algerian people and by being ready to abandon your own settlers in Algeria and washing your hands of the blood of the ones you call 'Pieds Noirs'. We acted in order to prevent further deaths of innocents, not to preserve the hold of France on this country. Nancy Laplante was very clear in 1942 about what she thought about the various European colonial empires still existing at the time, including that of France. Unfortunately, the various French governments which succeeded each other since then mostly neglected or ignored the need to let go of this colonial grip, something that only created Algerian public support for the FLN. I can tell you now that the Queen of Jerusalem has paid a visit today to your government in Paris, both to encourage it to give true independence to the Algerian people and to rebuke it for its bad faith and missteps about Algeria. Know as well that we reacted not only to the abuses and crimes of the FLN but also to those committed by certain portions of French government entities in Algeria. I am talking about the too common willingness of your secret police and of some of your military intelligence units to use torture and summary execution of suspects. Some of the worst sadists in that lot already paid at our hands for their crimes."

"YOU KILLED SOME OF OUR PEOPLE?" shouted the representative of the French Deuxième Bureau²⁰, anger flaring in him. Mike Crawford stared at him with cold eyes.

"Yes, we did and we will continue doing so if your people keep using illegal means in Algeria...and in France. This is a case where the end doesn't justify the means, and this comes not from the Time Patrol but from The One. As Nancy Laplante revealed at the Paris Peace Conference in 1942, every human alive has a tiny part of The One inside him or her, a part commonly called 'The Soul' by many. This means that The One knows at all times what everybody does or think and can thus choose to act accordingly. After being very patient for millenniums, and especially with the advent of nuclear weapons, which could utterly destroy Earth, The One has reached the end of its patience and will now react forcibly to future major acts of abuse, cruelty, hatred and intolerance which could or would cause the suffering or death of innocents. In this case, a mix of religious extremism and political abuse of power caused The One to intervene via the Queen of Jerusalem and us in this conflict. Next time, if such abuses and crimes

²⁰ Deuxième Bureau : Old name for the French Secret Services in the 1950s.

continue, then it will be The One who will intervene...directly. This will be the only warning he will give to all of you. Heed it or regret it!"

Mike Crawford then disappeared from where he stood in a brief flash of white light, leaving behind a stunned and shaken group of French officers.

CHAPTER 10 – BACK IN ANNECY



14:48 (Paris Time)

Saturday, October 20, 1956 'B'

Annecy train station, Haute-Savoie

France

Kin, who was like most of his comrades sticking his head out of one of the windows of his wagon, felt joy when he saw both Ani and his adoptive mother Sylvie waving at him among the crowd of relatives who had gathered to greet their loved ones now back in Annecy. He waved back at them while shouting out loud in Neanderthal language.

"ANI, SYLVIE, I AM HERE!"

Both heard him and renewed their waving with even more enthusiasm. Kin then noticed that Sylvie was wearing a set of civilian clothes rather than her Time Patrol uniform, something that he appreciated. While the war in Algeria was now over thanks to the actions of the Time Patrol, not everybody in France had been pleased by that

intervention. The more extreme leftist elements of the French Communist and Socialist Parties in particular had been miffed by it, since they had been clandestinely but actively supporting for years the FLN and its anti-French campaign of insurrection and terror. In turn, that less than enthusiastic French reactions to the actions of the Time Patrol, which had in the words of a far-right French political television commentator 'interfered with the legitimate rule of France in Algeria', had thoroughly soured Kin to French politics. During the few days of travel by sea and then by train back to Annecy and to his unit's barracks, Kin had a lot of time to think about his future in the French Army. While he appreciated the comradery he had found within his unit, the last few months had shown him that the French military was too often called to enforce directives from the French government which could be said at the least to be made to favor in priority the rich and powerful rather than the common good.

Waiting on the quay of the train station, along with his most senior officers, who had flown with him back to France, Lieutenant colonel Laurent Genest embraced that enthusiastic welcome by the relatives and friends of his soldiers present at the station. Taking a quick decision, he then spoke to his most senior NCO, Chief Warrant Officer Louis Volage, and to his second-in-command, Commandant Pierre Fabius.

"Pass the word to our officers and NCOs: we will let our troops mix up for fifteen minutes with their relatives and friends before they will have to board the buses to return to their barracks."

"Understood, sir!" replied Volage before going to one of the doors of the train, which had just immobilized itself along the quay. Opening that door, he climbed aboard and stood at one end of a wagon full of soldiers.

"LISTEN UP, MEN! YOU HAVE NOW FIFTEEN MINUTES FREE FOR YOU TO MEET YOUR FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES, STARTING NOW! AFTER THOSE FIFTEEN MINUTES, YOU WILL BE FORMED UP IN THREE RANKS AND WILL THEN BE MARCHED OUT OF THE STATION, WHERE BUSES ARE WAITING TO CARRY YOU TO YOUR BARRACKS. ONCE AT YOUR BARRACKS, LOCK UP YOUR WEAPONS, DROP YOUR FIELD KIT AND FORM BACK IN THE CENTRAL PARADE SQUARE, WHERE COLONEL GENEST WILL ADDRESS YOU. NOW, GET OFF THIS TRAIN!"

Volage did not have to repeat himself, as the soldiers immediately grabbed their weapons and kit and started filing out of their wagon. Satisfied, Volage then went to the next wagon to pass his message there.

Carrying his pack on his back and his rifle slung to one shoulder, Kin hurriedly walked to where Ani and Sylvie were waiting for him as part of the crowd contained by temporary barriers. He felt pure joy as he hugged tightly Ani, then Sylvie.

"It is so good to see you again after all these months. We were just told that we have fifteen minutes before we have to form back in three ranks and go to our barracks."

"And it is so good to see that you are well, Kin. I missed you a lot." said Ani, tears on her cheeks, before kissing Kin again on his lips. As for Sylvie, she let her two adopted children time to exchange hugs and kisses before also kissing Kin, but on his cheeks.

"How was the war for you, Kin?"

"It was mostly a quiet one for me, save for a handful of fights we had with the FLN, Mother. Thankfully, my group didn't lose anyone in the fighting, but some of our other units were not as lucky. The most important thing for me about that war is that Algeria now has a good chance of finding peace after years of suffering and hatred. I must thank profusely the Time Patrol for its actions in eliminating those murderous FLN thugs: it prevented thousands of additional deaths among innocent civilians."

"Well, you are partly responsible for making the Time Patrol act, thanks to the warning you sent us, and you can be rightly proud of that. Do you know when we will be allowed to visit you at your unit's barracks?"

"Not yet, but our colonel is supposed to speak to us once at the barracks. I will call you as soon as I know more."

Sylvie nodded once, then lowered her voice to a near whisper.

"By the way, many politicians and their supporters in France were less than enthusiastic about our intervention in Algeria. I would thus counsel you not to talk about it with other French people or even with your comrades. This whole thing is still a political powder keg in France."

"Thankfully, politics didn't exist when I was a kid living in a cave with my family. Talking of my family, do you think that it would be possible for us to visit the cave in the Dordogne where my family and that of Ani were buried by you and the crew of your time ship?"

"We will do that as soon as you get some permission time and are able to leave the barracks, Kin."

"Thank you, Sylvie: that would mean a lot to me...and to Ani."

"You are right about that, Kin." approved Ani in an emotional voice. "I truly want to go pay my respects to my original family."

"I just wish that the Time Patrol could go back in time and prevent their deaths at the hands of those cave hyenas." said Kin softly. Sylvie shook her head in response.

"You know that it can't and it won't, Kin: what is done is done. They would have eventually died from other causes anyway, while our intervention gave me the chance to save two wonderful children then. Well, I believe that your officers are about to call you back in the ranks. Go and join your comrades. We will be waiting impatiently for your next call."

"And I will be waiting impatiently for the time we can be together again, Mother. I love you both."

After a last exchange of hugs and kisses, Kin then returned to his mortar group as it was being formed up, his heart heavy for having to let his relatives go, even if it was only for a few days.

10:19 (Paris Time)

Friday, November 02, 1956 'B'

Battalion parade square of the 27th B.C.A.

Galbert Barracks, Annecy

"CORPORAL KIN COMEAU, STEP FORWARD!"

Ani and Sylvie, watching with other relatives and friends of the soldiers of the 27th B.C.A. the men of the battalion assembled in parade order, felt pride fill them as Kin left his place in the ranks and walked in military fashion to where Lieutenant-colonel Genest stood, stopping two paces in front of his commander and saluting him. Genest saluted him back, then nodded to his aide, who then started reading out loud from a document held in his hands.

"CORPORAL KIN COMEAU, MEMBER OF THE MORTAR GROUP OF THE 27TH BATTALION DE CHASSEURS ALPINS, HAS BEEN SERVING IN THE ARMY AS A VOLUNTEER ENLISTEE SINCE MARCH OF LAST YEAR. DURING HIS NINETEEN MONTHS OF SERVICE TO DATE, CORPORAL COMEAU HAS PROVED TO BE A

MOST MERITORIOUS AND EFFICIENT SOLDIER, DEMONSTRATING OUTSTANDING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ENDURANCE, STRENGTH AND ABILITIES. DURING HIS SIX MONTHS OF SERVICE IN ALGERIA, CORPORAL COMEAU ALSO DEMONSTRATED REMARKABLE COOLNESS UNDER FIRE AND ALSO PROVED TO BE A TOP NOTCH SNIPER, HELPING GREATLY BY HIS ACCURATE SHOOTING TO REPEL A STRONG ENEMY ATTACK AGAINST HIS UNIT'S POSITION. HIS PERFORMANCE IN COMBAT, HIS CONSISTENT STANDARDS OF SERVICE AND THE EXAMPLE HE HAD SET IN THE EYES OF HIS COMRADES HAS THUS EARNED HIM AN ACCELERATED PROMOTION TO MASTER CORPORAL. LIEUTENANT-COLONEL GENEST WILL NOW CHANGE HIS RANK SHOULDER SLIP-ONS TO REFLECT HIS NEW RANK."

As proud as a peacock, Kin stood rigidly at attention as Genest, helped by Chief Warrant Officer Volage, removed his old corporal rank slip-ons, to then replace them with the triple chevrons (one white, two yellow) slip-ons of a master corporal. When Genest was finished with that task, his aide then spoke further.

"LIEUTENANT-COLONEL GENEST WILL AT THE SAME TIME PIN ON MASTER-CORPORAL COMEAU THE COLONIAL MEDAL, ALGERIA CLASP, FOR HIS SERVICE IN THE FIELD IN ALGERIA."

Once the small medal had been pinned above the vest pocket of his parade uniform, Genest took a step back and saluted Kin as a mark of respect to him.

"Well done, Master corporal Comeau! Your service to date has been most exemplary. You may now return into the ranks."

"Thank you, sir!" replied Kin while saluting back, then pivoting on his heels to return to his place in the ranks.

A few more soldiers were called forward after Kin, to also get either promoted or publicly congratulated by Genest. Then, the rest of the members of the battalion who had served in Algeria received their Colonial Medals. At the end of the ceremony, Genest spoke out loud to his troops, with the spectators still watching on.

"MEN OF THE 27TH B.C.A., YOU MADE ME MOST PROUD TO BE YOUR COMMANDER, BOTH HERE AND IN THE FIELD. YOU ALL MERITED GREATLY FROM FRANCE AND I AM THUS HAPPY TO GRANT TO YOU ALL WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE A SPECIAL TWO-WEEK LEAVE

PERMISSION. I WILL THUS SEE YOU ALL AGAIN ON NOVEMBER NINETEEN. BATTALION, DISMISSED!"

Loud cheers from the ranks and from the spectators greeted that announcement before the respective sub-unit commanders made their soldiers walk out of the parade square, so that they could return to their barracks. Kin, having anticipated the announcement of a special leave and having packed in advance a kit bag with civilian clothes and hygiene items, was out of his barrack in minutes, nearly running to the main gate, where Ani and Sylvie were waiting for him. Sylvie let Ani hug and kiss Kin first before hugging her adopted son.

"I am so proud of you, Kin. Fernand and Jean are also most proud of you."

Kin smiled and nodded at the mention of the two field agents of the Time Patrol who had previously been members of the French Chasseurs Alpains.

"And I will take great pleasure in discussing my service with them, Mother. Well, I'm all ready to go."

"I parked my time scooter near here. Let's go to it, then we will visit our main base in the past for a day or two before going back to this year and visit your family cave in Dordogne."

09:45 (Paris Time)

Sunday, November 04, 1956 'B'

Rock shelter near Roufignac, Dordogne

France

Kin, like Ani and Sylvie, felt growing emotions as he approached the wide entrance of a cave visible at the base of the rocky cliff face they had been following on foot. As he had expected after nearly 52,000 years, the cave's aspect had changed a bit, while its floor was now much higher, thanks to millenniums of dirt and soil accumulation. The only indication that this cave was special in a way was the presence of a metallic plaque bolted to the rock face next to the entrance. Ani took on her to read it aloud once in front of it.

"Warning to passersby and researchers: this cave has been declared off limits by the Department of Patrimonial Resources of France to any digging or excavation work. Trespassers will be prosecuted. By order of the Minister of the Interior, June 08, 1946."

"It is a good thing that the Time Patrol petitioned the French government to restrict access to this cave," said Sylvie. "With all the paleontological teams scouring the Dordogne region in search of prehistoric remains and items, someone could well have come and dug out the skeletons of your families. In fact, one such scientific team nearly came here to search for artifacts a few years ago. Thankfully, the government refused their request for a digging permit."

"I don't know if I could have avoided becoming violent if I would have found someone digging up the graves of my parents today."

"Yours would have been a most excusable reaction, Kin. I will let you and Ani enter the cave first."

"Thanks, Mother!"

Kin, with Ani at his side, then walked the last few steps to the entrance of the cave and entered it, stopping over a precise spot and then kneeling on it, gently touching the dirt with both hands.

"This is where my mother Nana should be resting, next to my father Kem."

"Let me check that quickly, Kin," said Sylvie, who then put down her backpack and extracted from it a hard-cased sort of briefcase. Opening the briefcase, which had thick foam padding inside, she grabbed both a sort of tablet on wheels and a handheld video unit with a control stick. Putting down the tablet on wheels next to the spot where Kin was kneeling, Sylvie switched on her portable ground penetrating radar unit and started making it roll slowly around, its belly only a few centimeters above the ground, while looking at the display screen of the monitoring and control unit. After a few seconds, she invited Kin and Ani to come and look at the display screen.

"Nana is still there, some 130 centimeters below the surface. You can see her skeleton, which is missing its left side forearm. The spear you put beside her before we covered her body is also there."

Looking at the screen made tears appear in Kin's eyes, while an invisible hand gripped his heart.

"I wish so much that she could have survived that attack by those cave hyenas. She gave her life to defend me and Ani. Can you check now for my father's remains?" Sylvie, also having a lump in her throat from the emotion of the moment, nodded her head and made her radar unit roll for about two meters before stopping it, then making it roll left and right.

"Kem is also still here, Kin."

Sylvie let Kin and Ani look at the monitor's screen for long seconds, then made her radar unit roll again to a new location nearby.

"If I remember well, my radar is now over the remains of your father, Ani."

Ani, already quite emotional, broke down in tears and cried after looking at the screen for a couple of seconds.

"It is my father Tar alright. The remains of Kiri and of little Rana should be over there, some two meters deeper into the cave."

The trio then moved again, following the rolling radar unit to a new spot, where its monitor showed two sets of remains: those of a small woman and those of an infant. What remained of that infant was however both partial and badly mangled.

"Poor little Rana, killed and then half-eaten by a hyena after being snatched from her mother's arms."

"The lives of Neanderthal Humans were certainly hard and brutal, as our research team documented on the spot. In fact, your family group lived and died only about 10,000 years before the extinction of the last Neanderthals in Europe. It is a credit to your specie that Neanderthals lived on Earth for over 300,000 years before becoming extinct. Well, nearly extinct."

The trio stayed silent for a long moment as they reminisced about the tragedy that had occurred here 52,000 years ago. Ani finally looked somberly at Sylvie and spoke in a subdued voice.

"Sylvie, I do not want for me and Kin to be the last Neanderthals to live. If Kin agrees to this, I wish to have at least one baby with him."

As Sylvie was left nearly in tears by those words, Kin gently passed an arm around Ani's shoulders and kissed her head.

"I very much want to do so as well, Sylvie. Do you foresee any problems with us having children, me and Ani?"

Sylvie had to clear the lump in her throat before she could answer Kin.

"Only that such children would then be truly the last Neanderthals to live. Even if you had multiple children, they would then face the problem of consanguinity if they tried to couple between themselves once adults. Only by introducing fresh Neanderthal blood would we avoid that consanguinity problem for your future grand-children."

"But, where would we find such fresh Neanderthal blood?" asked Ani, confused. Kin was the one to answer her question.

"In the distant past. Sylvie, I would be ready to return to around 50,000 years ago with Ani, once we could have had at couple of children and once those children would be at least a couple of years old and less fragile, so that they would have a fair chance to survive the environment of the Ice Ages. Once in the past, we could join a roving band of Neanderthals and live the rest of our lives with them. If we refrained from bringing modern tools and from demonstrating our ability to write, then I believe that the integrity of the past would not be at risk, as we would represent only a minuscule factor in that time period."

"I...I believe that you are right about that, Kin. However, I would have to talk with Mike first to gain the approval of the Time Patrol for such a project. It..."
Sylvie then has to stop talking, sobs strangling her voice for a moment before she could continue.

"It would also mean that I would lose both of you, forever. I don't know if I could live with that."

Touched by his adoptive mother's response, Kin passed his other arm around her, making the trio form a tight group.

"And we will always remember you fondly, Mother, but I do not wish to see my children grow as isolated oddities and objects of curiosity in France, or in the Global Council of the 34th Century. Me and Ani could officially marry during our vacation, so that we could quickly work on having a child. It could be born here, in France, while I serve in Annecy. However, I wish to complete my three-year enlistment contract before leaving France and return to the main base of the Time Patrol, where we would let our children grow a bit, so that they would be less fragile to the conditions of life in the Ice Age."

With that said, Kin then put down his own backpack and took out the bouquets of roses he had brought for this occasion. He and Ani then distributed the roses around the graves with utter reverence, watched by Sylvie. After a long minute of respectful silence, Kin caressed Ani's cheeks with one hand and spoke softly to her.

"What do you say that we use the services of the Padre of my unit to get married, Ani?"

"That would be fine with me, Kin." answered Ani, bringing fresh tears to Sylvie's eyes.

CHAPTER 11 – BACK TO THE ROOTS



Mid Afternoon (Western Europe Time)

Late Spring, Year 49,950 B.C.E.

Valley of the Vézère, future region of Dordogne, France

The group of nine Neanderthals, which included four young children, had been walking along the right bank of the river, which would much later on be called the Vézère, looking for anything worthy of picking as food as they went. There seemed to be quite a few fish in the river so Tur, the leader of the small group, had promised himself to try some fishing once they would stop and establish a temporary camp in the evening. Up to now, this territory seemed very promising to Tur, with the river being an easy source of water and the forests and prairies on each bank sheltering animal life and wild berries and nuts. The river also flowed in a valley between two lines of rocky hills and cliffs, where the group could find shelter in case of rain. The temperature was above the freezing point and was quite reasonable in this late Spring, allowing the Neanderthals to travel with only a light attire of furs and deer skins. However, things had not gone smoothly for the group this year: one of their only three hunters, Nokta, had

been killed by a wounded bison during the last Winter, leaving behind his wife Ouni and his young son Naru. Also, Agi, the wife of one of the two remaining male hunters, had lost one baby at birth during that same Winter. That child's death had struck the group as hard as the loss of Nokta, as every child was most precious to the Neanderthals, as children represented the long-term survival of the group.

Tur was still thinking about the situation of his group when he spotted what looked furiously like the column of smoke from a campfire. Freezing at once, he pointed at the distant smoke while looking back at the members of his group.

"A FIRE! CLOSE TO HERE!"

The four adults and four children following him also stopped and stared into the distance at the smoke, which apparently came from a spot near the river, past a line of trees. Bini, Tur's wife, felt a mix of anxiety and hope at that sight: anxiety, as one never knew how strangers would react to the group; hope for possibly finding new members which could then reinforce and secure the group by providing it with more hunting hands and more women able to produce children.

"How do we know that those ones would prove friendly, Tur?"

"There is only one way to find out, Bini. Let's go see but have your spears ready, just in case."

The group then resumed their walk, heading in the direction of the column of smoke. Every adult, plus eleven-year-old Targ, now carried a spear at the ready, ready to defend themselves if need be.

Cautiously advancing through the trees behind which the campfire had to be, the group finally emerged into a long but narrow clearing which was bordered on the right by a high rock cliff. There was effectively a campfire burning some distance from the riverbank, with some sort of wooden rack suspended over it by poles. A number of eviscerated fish were suspended from the poles over the fire while a woman and a young child watched the fire and cut open more fish. Looking towards the river, Tur saw one big man and a small child standing in the stream in a spot where the river turned into a small set of rapids. A few large rocks split the river into five narrower streams at that spot. Tur also saw what appeared to be numerous wooden branches stuck at the vertical and very near each other in the river bed, forming a sort of barrier. He then understood the goal of that barrier when the man in the river bent down and caught a

fish with both hands before shouting in triumph while holding the fish over his head, making the woman and the two children also shout in joy. Tur looked at Krom, his other hunter, and smiled to him.

"They are catching fish and then smoking and drying them. Maybe they will accept to provide us with a few fish for our group."

"But will they accept to give us fish, Tur?"

"We could offer them a fur in exchange. Or we could help them catch more fish. Let's approach them but let's be friendly with them. Spilling blood now would not help anyone, while we could use new members for our group."

Tur then straightened up and signaled his followers to approach.

"A family of four is catching fish and then smoking them. We will see if they accept to provide us some fish for our supper."

Kin, still holding the latest fish he had caught, was walking towards the shore to bring it to Ani when he saw a group of Neanderthal adults and children come out of the trees nearby. Instead of feeling fear then, he felt elation: the plan he and Sylvie had devised had worked! That group of newcomers had been spotted a few days ago from the air by the Time Patrol scoutship BRITANNIA, which had been transporting Kin, Ani and their two young toddlers, Kar and Nani. Kin and his family had then been landed on this spot along the presumed route of the incoming Neanderthal party and had erected a fishing camp next to the Vézère River. Now that this group was here, he had to find out if it would act in a friendly manner or in a predatory one. Putting down his latest catch next to the fire, he then spoke in a low voice to Ani, speaking in French.

"Keep your spear nearby but don't grab it yet: I will go see in what kind of mood this group is."

"Be careful, Kin." replied Ani, a bit apprehensive about what could happen next.

"I'll be!" said Kin before starting to walk slowly towards the newcomers, both of his hands empty and raised in welcome. He then spoke in the Neanderthal dialect used by his old family, hoping that these Neanderthals would understand him. At the worst, he could always use basic gestures and signs.

"WELCOME! ARE YOU HUNGRY?"

The newcomers stopped as one and looked at each other, either in confusion or in indecision. The leading man in the group, who was a bit shorter than Kin and carried a

spear, finally nodded his head and spoke in a variant of Kin's dialect which was intelligible to him.

"Yes! We are ready to exchange furs for some of your fish."

"Then, let me and my family feed your group. We are inviting you."

The leader of the newcomers smiled at those words and visibly relaxed before looking back at his group.

"We are welcomed here. Lower your spears and let's be friendly."

With the tension evaporating quickly, Tur walked to Kin and presented his right forearm to him, which Kin grabbed and shook with his own right forearm.

"I am Tur, leader of this group."

"And I am Kin. These are my wife Ani, my son Kar and my daughter Nani."

"You are alone here with your family? Where is the rest of your group?"

Kin didn't have to fake the sadness that then appeared on his face.

"The rest of my group is dead, killed two years ago by a band of cave hyenas as we camped at night in a rock shelter. My friends were able to kill many of the hyenas before being overwhelmed, allowing me to kill or chase those hyenas left afterward. Since then, me and my family have been roaming around this area, searching for another group to join for our mutual protection. You are the first ones we met since then."

"A tragic story indeed, Kin. Every loss of life is always painful. So, you met no one in those two years until our arrival?"

"Correct!"

Tur thought that over for a moment while looking at Kin's wife and two small children. All of them appeared in good health and also were a bit taller than usual, like that Kin, who appeared very strong indeed.

"My own group lost one good hunter and a baby last Winter and we could use more hands to protect ourselves better as a group. With your two children added to my four children, our long-term survival would also be more assured. Would you be ready to join my group, you and your family?"

"Only at one condition: nobody touches my wife but me. In exchange, I won't touch the women of your group."

"We have a deal!" replied Tur, grinning, while shaking forearms again with Kin.

"Then, have your group sit around our fire. My wife will start roasting a couple of large fish for your people's supper. While she does that, I will show you how we catch fish. Follow me!"

Tur's satisfaction then turned to outright happiness: learning new ways to survive was always useful. On his part, Kin briefly looked up at the sky, where the BRITANNIA was floating at medium altitude, hidden by its cloaking field device, and spoke to himself in a whisper.

"Goodbye, Sylvie! Goodbye, my friends! We will be alright now. I will always remember you fondly."

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