

Chapter 76

Mark's account of New Orleans

The wheat was ripening fast now. In a few weeks, the harvest would mobilise the energy of the whole area. People were unconsciously getting as much rest as they could in preparation for those long days and night with much resting.

That afternoon, Joyeux-Tiburon was crushed by an unforgiving sun. Not one person, nor lifeforms was to be seen. Even flies were seemingly having a nap. At a distance, the Gliding Dragon was quietly approaching, sparsely laden. Another person was paddling, his head protected by a turban like an Arab, except that the turban was a large Hello Kitty black and pink scarf.

While the embarkation approached the pier, the man quickly moved the scarf from his head to his groin : this was his only piece of clothing.

The man helped Robert get the supplies on board. These were few, but careful counted : forty-two strings of dried tomatoes, sixty-six strings of dried peppers, eighty garlic braids and as usual twelve pottery jars, filled with salt. A novelty were the twelve pottery lids on them, that were baked using the extra energy associated to Saturday cooking.

Robert took a glass jar of water out of a protected hole in the ground, filled his aluminium gourd with it, then drank exactly two beakers as usual. Robert and the almost naked man turned the Gliding Dragon around, then Robert sat down on it and raised the sail, which gathered just enough wind to lift from the pole. Robert started to paddle, rapidly reaching a regular, almost mechanical paddling rate, propelling the Gliding Dragon northwards.

The naked and barefooted man, his feet hardened like soles, proceeded to the library. When he started climbing the stairs, his pace hastened with anticipation.

A sleepy Erich, his face still not really awoken, opened the door and at first didn't recognise the man in his late twenties. Upon closer examination, Erich realised the man standing in front of him was a late teenager, Mark.

Erich was overcome with genuine joy : « Mark ! I thought I'd never see you again ! »
Mark and Erich fell into each other's arms like old friends.

Erich offered Mark the single pillow on the ground to sit onto, but Mark showed he was accustomed to Spartan life conditions. A slumbering Diane emerged and shrieked with surprise. There was an moment of unease from both sides. Diane didn't know how to greet him, since he had physically changed so much. Erich noticed that Mark had unconsciously taken a defensive stance.

At once, Mark started to tell his tale.

Mark was restless since the relocation and the end of the harvest. The ousting of Erich had left him disturbed and untrusting, the slow pace of agricultural life was too difficult for him to bear. It was Roger who told Mark that New Orleans was welcoming everybody who could still reach it ; Roger was beginning to work with Jonesy, he was in constant contact with decision-makers at Houma. Roger was interested in any intelligence from the New Orleans, he also knew the place was not controlled by sectarian groups and that the situation there was well under control.

The tactical teams were not disbanded while Philip was still in charge. Mark left every useable piece of equipment he had, including clothes, for the teams to use. He left Houma with nothing else than a very worn pair of swimming trunks, holding two days worth of biscuits in his pockets, a pair of flip-flops and the worst straw hat in the area, a torn and badly mended piece of junk that any sane man would have tossed in the fire at first sight. In his hand was a glass beer bottle to carry water.

He had memorised the path to New Orleans and planned to follow highways, walking mainly at night. It turned out that the closer he was to New Orleans, the fewer road signs there were, until the main highway was devoid of any.

He left with a light heart, eager to embrace adventure. The way to New Orleans seemed eerily silent at first. He witnessed a world scorched by the CCC crisis first, then the hunger and then by the storm. He was glad to see his senses were still sharp enough to spot a strigoï at dawn. Both looked at each other awkwardly, like prairie dogs not knowing what to do with the presence of the other.

Mark went on and on the eve on the second day arrived at Boutte, one of the first outer suburbs of the New Orleans area. It used to be a nice place, with modern and expensive houses with brick walls. Many houses lacked a roof, the timber of which had probably been used as firewood early on. Most buildings looked already like empty shells, strewn with debris.

As Mark passed by a large house, a working gang emerged from it and talked him into joining them for the day, ominously saying that « there was nothing else for anybody to do » in New Orleans anyway. To them, New Orleans was a vast working camp, a transit area of sorts, with no other signs of activity : no cinemas, restaurants or even shops.

Mark learned to clear houses. It followed a well defined procedure, upon which the crew first used an adapted drone, the kind of which could be bought for about hundred dollars before the crisis. They used it to look out for traps or hazards, which were frequent. During his two-month presence in the area, Mark witnessed three deaths, one from a grenade trap and two from collapsing beams and roofs, although the drone operators developed an expert eye for these.

Once the hazards in the house were determined, they were addressed first ; when the hazards were removed, the crew would empty the house and bring its contents on the side walk. Every category of objects had its determined place. A table or equivalent was placed near the mailbox and above a table cloth or equivalent material. This was the place for the computers, cellphones and other kind of electronics that could be found. These were the most sought after items. Under the table, they were protected from the sun and eventual precipitations.

The goal of house clearing was to make the place ready for the salvage robots, which appeared themselves made out of salvaged appliances and computers. The typical house-dismantling robot used parts of shopping trolleys and washing machines for their structure, but had dedicated robotic components for their arms for instance. There was a wide variety of components, which gave each robot some sort of identity. Webcams and play consoles sensors were often used. These robots had nevertheless each an elaborate general design, so that they wouldn't appear aggressive or alien. Upon seeing them, one thought of domestic machines such as dishwashers and sewing machines.

Robots took great care of retrieving materials in their most usable form. Cables were not torn out but carefully removed, the same for plumbing and light switches, electrical plugs and such. The robots would enter the houses long after the work gangs left. The work gangs had to remove every loose object and furniture ; the robots were especially sensitive to the presence of rope or tangling cables, loose carpets and clothing. The robots operated their own canary-sized drones to look out for their own kind of hazards.

There was a special order in which to place the objects taken away from the houses, by category. Specialised trucks, manned by dedicated working gangs, would take them into sorting areas where they would be taken care of : either salvaged, and washed, or re-purposed. If re-purposing was not economical, the objects would be disassembled into components and what was not of use sent to the scrapyards or the furnaces.

A mobile service brought processed food to the gangs, even taking individual religious recommendations into consideration. But for everybody it all looked like improved CCC rations. There were next to no fresh produce, since the food came from refrigerated containers on a ship anchored in the city. Tablets were meant to supplement the food with vitamins, but Mark rapidly felt bored with this food.

After a good day of work, he was taken to an apartment building where people were sharing available space following a generous density calculation. There was about six square yards per person, a mattress, a blanket, a towel and a salvaged bar of soap per person, with spares in the basement. Disabled or low mobility people were working at these housing buildings, maintaining hygiene and comfort. People were not allowed to retrieve objects from the salvage operations and were not allowed to have backpacks. There was only so much stuff people could carry in pockets, and for many there was no point in doing so. Two objects carried almost universally were small knives and fire lighters.

Close to these places were concentration of laundromats, where clothing was triaged, often pre-washed and then thoroughly washed. The clothes were then inspected. Clothes in good shape were sent further inside the city : these would be traded with other areas. Clothes that needed mending were given to the workers following need : one could borrow some thread and needles and mend these oneself. Unwearable clothes were sent to reclamation area, where large scraps were prepared then exported as well as mending materials, and all others saved for reclamation of fibres, in order to make new yarn out of it.

There was running water and electricity, but no radios outside nor any unnatural sound. The places were eerily silent, and much to everybody's disgust, small canary-sized drone randomly visited the buildings. People avoided trouble, generally because nothing was really worth it. But everybody knew that troublemakers were either expelled from the system with no food , sometimes completely naked, or as punishment sent to the hazardous material facilities, to do the jobs the robots couldn't.

Robots had a lot of trouble dealing with elastic materials such as shampoo bottles, and then a human had to jump in. Robots as a rule avoided contact with all types of textile. Work in the hazardous materials involved sorting out and pouring household chemicals into plastic drums, which were then reprocessed in standardised products. For example, household detergents and washing powders were mixed with additives and formed a liquid washing solution for the laundromats, whereas shampoos, conditioners and odd bits of soap and similar items were reprocessed as general-purpose bars of soaps.

At first the economic finality behind this effort could not be guessed, but Mark noticed the vast majority of people didn't even care. All that mattered was to have food and shelter. Mark often heard people, who used to live on very little or were homeless before the crisis, that they had it better now.

Mark worked for weeks on these working gangs, but he was still too far from the city. The foreman

in his team told him that there was no more work to do there, and that very little people were employed, mostly in the City Centre, where the most valuable goods ended.

Work was monotonous but the pace was really generous. People could work a whole day and feel somewhat tired, but not exhausted. As a rule, people did not engage beyond practical conversation : the present was obvious, the future was unknown, and the past was rejected.

Working on a salvage team showed the considerable waste and bitterness of what life used to be in post-industrial society. There were houses crammed full of junk, lone women living with cats and a twenty-year old pictures of a young man they used to know back then, heaps of porn magazines, crazy hobbies that led nowhere and more madness of the same kind. All these houses were open books into the inhabitant's souls. The worst, still, was the expensive stuff that turned out to be useless, frail or of bloated importance. Yuppie houses were full of designer objects with little value, typical housewives accumulated kitchen appliances that were never used.

Within the survivors that worked in the gangs, very few were from the middle-class. Most were accustomed to hardship and a violent life, but also to patience and thrift. On the long run, gang members made it only so far. For most survivors, the strategy was to avoid trouble. Thugs would not bother chasing them : after all, they had nothing, and were unmistakably looking just that way. The middle-class people were worthy of more persistence and determination from the thugs.

Some houses had a story to tell : one could see how it had transformed during the CCC crisis, then through the various stages of collapse. There were traps, messages written on walls, names written inside large hearts, crosses and symbols of various religions or new-found faith, or the ubiquitous « FUCK YOU » written in all kinds of sizes and calligraphy.

One guy, who stayed for one week only before moving on, used to work as a repairman in the area, and told anecdotes on the few houses he had seen before. It was interesting, but then in the end all the house's contents had been brought outside and sorted the same way. It was all salvage material now, and once the house was stripped of anything valuable, it was just another soulless shell.

After several weeks, Mark noticed a nice girl, Angelina, in another housing unit. Elaborate courting was a thing from the past, people sought a comforting presence and some casual sex as a way to maintain their feelings, so that these would not wither away.

Surprisingly, all kinds of contraceptives were still available in numbers and for free. Like the vast majority of people, Mark used preservatives. Everybody shared an universal fear of STDs, and many workers refused to touch sex toys or related material when clearing houses.

Angelina was fascinated by Mark, who told her of his many adventures. She probably only believed the stuff he made up, and held the real stories as inventions, often of poor taste. He finally stuck to the invented or glorified feats, because they were of good taste. It tuned out Angelina, like everybody, had lived through very real and unsavoury things herself, but she still preferred the stories with taste, a moral at the end or well-established felons and heroes.

Mark was growing dissatisfied with his life on the working gangs. He told her of Joyeux-Tiburon, the fields of wheat, the vast spaces and the good people of the Program. In his nostalgia, he tended to prefer the better stories himself, and to dismiss the memories of Philip's betrayal as a minor glitch.

Mark's mind was set, he was going to leave for Joyeux-Tiburon, with or without her. After another week, he convinced her to come along with him. It was, after all, only a two days' walk.

One night, after work, he went to take her at her housing unit. They left together in the warm and gentle night.

The vast sea of stars above him, the smells and sounds of a blossoming nature reinvigorated Mark. He found his favourite kind of environment again. But after two hours of walking, Angelina didn't want to go on. She told him she loved him, and that there would be a better future for them and their children in New Orleans.

Mark insisted, but to no avail. He had a very strong urge to continue all alone, and to leave Angelina to her own fate. But a part of him doubted, and Angelina worked on this part.

Mark finally gave in. When he started to walk back, he knew immediately it was a grave mistake. He was betraying himself. Angelina, however, was much nicer to him from then on. While they entered Boutte, a couple of canary drones fluttered in the air around them, like two birds in love.

When they were about to each leave for their own housing unit, Angelina held Mark very tight and cried profusely. He consoled her, she calmed down, then they parted.

The following day was difficult for Mark, due to the lack of sleep. He nevertheless relished that tiredness, that brought back memories of his training sessions in the Bayou. He had visions of friends sitting around the rigged TV at Trois-Chênes, or darting pirogues in the narrow canals.

Mark noticed the foreman was looking at him differently. Like all foremen, he was in constant contact with two dedicated engineers he had never met, who were giving his very precise and well thought-out advice. They were always surprisingly calm and soothing, even in the worst situation, but also knew to be assertive when needed. They never had anything to tell about themselves and didn't have any opinion on whatever happened or was going to happen.

At the end of the day, the foreman told Mark that a transfer had been arranged for him and his girlfriend to the City Centre. They would be brought there the following morning. On that very evening, Angelina assured Mark she didn't ask for anything and was as surprised about this as he was. Although she sounded genuine, Mark grew suspicious, and became even more suspicious when she invested herself totally into amazingly good make-up sex.

The next day, they were both riding in the cabin of a self-driving modified old truck that was carrying electronics to the City Centre. Sitting at the self-turning wheel he didn't dare touch, Mark didn't understand the landscape, which was a sort of mix between a city park and badlands, until he understood that all that remained from a vast suburbia were concrete slabs and some heaps of salvaged building materials. There were no fences, no walls, not even any vertical structure left. Some accurate levelling force removed the chimneys and the concrete blocks, the telephone poles and the mailboxes. There wasn't even any rubble left of those. All there was were slabs of concrete and lush grass.

At a distance, one could see the sparse skyscrapers that were making New Orleans' skyline. He travelled to New Orleans only twice but remembered an immense suburbia, some places with small dilapidated houses, other with mansions and even castle-like structures. Now everything had been made equal, everything was waste ground, up to the distant highway overpasses. Beyond those overpasses, one could see buildings and warehouses, curiously devoid of life or character. Mark understood all signs and advertising had been taken away. Street art and various spray-painted insults remained, to fade away over time.

Exactly four thin lines were cutting through the dust on the highway : two for the tires of the trucks entering the city, and two for the tires of the trucks leaving the city. There were no tire tracks to be seen outside these tracks, not even by a few inches, and even when the trucks turned, they remained on the very same exact track. No cars, no litter nor any other objects than sprouting grass and thin dunes of dust were to be seen on the city's streets.

Angelina was not sharing Mark's repulsion at all. She was looking at the skyscrapers at a distance, obviously mesmerized. A metallic fence, watched over by regularly paced cameras, separated the City Centre from the rest of the continent. An automated gateway slid open, watched over by a remote weapon platform mounted on a giant concrete caltrop in the middle of street. The platform had a vast array of cameras and sensors, as well as a missile launcher and a machine-gun.

While the gate opened, Mark witnessed a few traces of human activity inside the fence : children or people with small feet had walked to the fence, stayed a while, and then walked back. His tracking skills were not going to be of use in this environment.

Inside the city, the streets were swept and a few people could be seen. Although they were not working, they seemed active. Nobody was idly loitering around.

The truck drove to the base of a skyscraper, protected by another steel gate. The truck stopped and a gentle but firm voice told them to disembark there, which they did.

Inside the gate were two guards, whose uniform was based on army fatigues. They weren't wearing any webbing, and the shirt was loosely worn over the trousers, just like policemen did in many tropical countries. The two soldiers each carried a scoped short-barrelled assault-rifle, for close combat, but Mark couldn't see any magazine pouch or even a bayonet scabbard. They were equipped to deal with the occasional lunatic, and they weren't meant to take prisoners.

Mark wanted to chat with them but Angelina insisted to go on. To reach their destination, they had to cross the French Quarter, once famed for its jazz clubs, the main tourist attraction in the city. The place had evidently seen urban rioting, wanton destruction and subsequent decay. The traces of that had been removed, and much to Mark's disgust, some clubs were rebuilt with neon signs salvaged here and there. But the arrangements were evidently not made by the kind of artistic-minded people that used to run these highly touristic places : they were as cold as museum recreations, made without taste or even sense.

Angelina was on the contrary enthusiastic : this meant that city life was sprouting again, after all. Mark didn't want to convince her it would only be a living museum, haunted by the kind of people who never would have been found there before.

They walked past housing units, segregated by class : the higher class had individual houses or large flats, the middle class had one room per couple or two per family unit, the workers would have a slightly larger space allowance than in Boutte. Of course, both were going to live in the latter housing units.

The housing unit was the place they had to report to. An old disabled black man gave them each the key to their room,, which they would share with another couple. He also gave them another key, to their individual mailbox, which was about the only place that was truly theirs. Inside the mailbox was a smartphone with 0000 as a code. They would find out the rest through that phone.

The room would have been spacious if it had not been fitted with four mattresses. A few clothing items had been thrown onto the two mattresses that were already taken, the meagre earnings of their

renters. By then, Mark already knew that he would not stay there, and Angelina be damned. But he had to gather as much information about Centre City as possible before leaving.

The smartphone had a very well made presentation on life in Centre City. They would be notified their daily assignments eight hours before having to report there. Most activities took place during normal working hours, but any worker had to be ready to start his shift at any time, night or day, rain or shine.

The payment was made in goods. Each person had an individual planner with a suggested consumption plan for the upcoming thirty days. If they accumulated points by sticking to the plan, it unlocked treats like drinks at a bar. If they had an emergency they could buy better items on the spot, but it would severely restrict their future purchasing power until the account was balanced again. The system was very easy to use, but the economic logic behind it was difficult to understand. It was easier to follow the recommendations, which were made based on the immediate availability of the goods and food, than to try to game the system.

Some services like lunch could be paid on site, as for other goods, they would be deposited in the mailbox within hours and the user notified per phone.

Before Mark could work out the whole system, Angelina had already ordered herself an expensive shampoo and a can of tuna fish. Mark tried to reason her into not going into debt, but the appeal of consumptions was simply too strong for her to resist. Mark told her he would stick to the most frugal solutions available instead. When Angelina tried to convince him to buy her a drink at a bar later that evening, he lied and pretended it was to build up a buffer of value for both of them, a sock under the mattress so to say. The reality was that he didn't want to owe the city anything, so he could leave at a moment's notice.

Angelina was miffed, and when he asked for a little shampoo from her in order to avoid having to order one himself, she flatly refused. In order to avoid a fight on their first night together, he went outside to a local food point, where he ordered the cheapest food there was.

The food point looked like a large cash dispenser, that handed out meals in a brown paper bag. The nutritional value provided by the interface was well made and allowed him to program a balanced meal. The meal was apparently prepared by a machine just underneath the delivery point. Mark took his bag, sat on a bench nearby and was pleasantly surprised to find his oriental noodle dish with vegetables hot and very palatable. The vegetables were fresh and tasty. They were indeed making life in the city quite easy for him. Upon eating the hot meal, he surprised himself thinking about staying longer.

When he was done eating, he discarded the Styrofoam bowl but kept the paper bag. This drew the attention of a middle-aged man who looked less active than the others.

The man said : « You're new here, aren't you ? »

Mark said yes.

The man went on : « But you want more, or you don't want to stay around too long. »

Mark asked : « How would you know that ? »

The man pointed at the paper bag : « There are cameras everywhere in town. They interpret what you're doing. Paper is perhaps precious where you came from, but not here, evidently. Why keep it ? Because you plan to use it to project your thoughts on it. You plan to use it to think. Thinking means you want to regain control of your life, because this environment is not good enough for you. »

Mark admitted : « It kinda makes sense. »

The middle-aged man went on : « This is a company town, you're not going to avoid going into debt. There is a rumour that says that the cheap food is laced with a bit of feel-good drugs. Even if you try to save, you're going to stay and get into one of their many traps. The rumour also has it that people discovered this by scientific method. »

Mark asked with a very serious voice : « How long before I can't leave ? »

The old man replied immediately : « From seven to ten days. Leave in six, at worst. »

Then the old man stood up and left without greeting nor turning back.

Mark tossed the paper bag in the garbage bin and returned to his housing unit. He found Angelina already lying naked on her mattress, smelling good. There was an empty can of tuna, licked clean, in the garbage bag next to the door.

Angelina squirmed with sparking eyes and moaned : « Come make love to me... »

Mark undressed and complied. Today was the feeling-good day.

Shortly after they were done, the door opened, and a couple entered. The woman had splendid hair, and the man a nicely toned skin, but both looked bitter. The woman pointed her finger downwards and cut the room in two : « This is our part and this is yours. »

Angelina was immediately upset, but Mark had a provocative smile : « I agree, and since I'm in a good, mood, I'll let you use the door as well, since it's in our half. »

The man understood no humour, and took a menacing attitude.

Mark observed him with calm. Although the man was rather well-built, Mark knew how to kill it with his bare hands, and was relishing with the thought. It had been a while since Mark killed anybody, and a part of him was firing up for the kill.

The man must have sensed something, Mark thought, when he broke his aggressive stance and started to undress.

Angelina's phone vibrated : she was assigned to the central hospital at 06:00.

They didn't lose much time and quickly fell asleep, but Mark's phone vibrated at 02:00 : he was assigned to a technical centre at 10:00.

The next morning, he rose up with Angelina and took her to the food point, warning her about what he heard the evening before. Angelina dismissed the information as lunacy, and instead insisted on Mark earning enough for both of them to be reallocated to a better unit. Mark tried to tell her they would end like the other couple, but his arguments fell on deaf ears.

Mark was assigned at the gasoil works, where plastics were converted into fuel for the trucks. The plant was evidently fully automated, but several positions had nevertheless been manned. There were surveillance cameras everywhere. Mark's position was at the conveyor belt after the shredder, where the plastic fragments fell.

Shortly after Mark started his shift, a plastic fragment fell over the side of the conveyor belt and gripped gears below ; Mark had to stop the belt, take away one of the lateral metal sheets and finally remove the fragment. He mounted the sheet back into place and restarted everything. He was used to think in a military kind of way, and with a glimpse understood everything this was about.

There were an unnecessary number of gears below the belt that served no other purpose than being gripped by the odd plastic fragment. These fragments were falling because the sheets on the side of the belt were vertical and leaving a gap. A simple repositioning of the side to act as funnels was enough to end the problem once and for all. It would take two to three occurrence for a person of

modest intelligence to see the problem.

This meant the real purpose of his presence here was the evaluation of his personality. How was he expected to act ? His mind was obstructed by the unnerving anticipation of the next outage. They were going to count the number of occurrences.

At this very moment, another gripping took place. Mark acted instinctively. He stopped the machine, removed the fragment and inspected the sheet mountings. They allowed several funnel configurations, and Mark simply selected the one that looked right for him. Once the sheets were in place, he switched the machine on again.

His reasoning was that they already had a good idea of his intelligence and character since he worked for them. The canary drones would have been sufficient for this. What they wanted to evaluate was his capacity to double-guess tests like these. If he fixed this on the first time he was either not double-guessing enough or perhaps very intelligent. Not being that intelligent, Mark had no way to know. Doing this at the third attempt or not at all was trying to bullshit the testers in a vain attempt for them to underevaluate him.

Soon, a foreman came along and played the outraged boss, forcing him to restore the original configuration. Mark simply replied : « I will do my shift but then I want to leave Centre City. »

The foreman was just a bad actor, he shouted some more but already knew that the test was over.

Mark spent the rest of his shift ungrinding the unnecessary gears. In the end, as he anticipated, a lot of small fragments were coming out of the machine, making the job more difficult. Mark also realised that the level of noise and its frequency was unnerving him. He could have considerable patience, but preferred not letting them know. He indulged in much cursing, but never actually hurt the machine in any way.

In the final hour, the only question he had left was whether he would tell Angelina or not. He decided he would not tell her, so she would associate his departure as some kind of death. Perhaps it would push her over the edge, but he doubted it. He had told her enough for her to understand both his actions and what she was supposed to do.

At the end of the shift he switched his phone on again and read a message from her : « I wiped old people's butts all day. I really needed that frappuccino. I made a friend at work today. See you soon, I love you, your Angel. »

Mark did not reply and went for the shower. While washing he witnessed his foreman go to the bench and take away all his belongings. Mark asked what that was all about, upon which the foreman calmly said it was the usual procedure : he would exit Centre City naked, his former possessions would be taken as compensation for the trouble.

The foreman then said very clearly : « Don't come back. »

Mark was surprised but had to accept his fate.

The foreman took him outside the factory building and told him to wait for the next self-driving fuel truck to be ready to leave. At first, Mark was worried the foreman could text nasty things to Angelina, messing with her head. But then there was nothing he could do.

All of a sudden, he thought about what happened at the Fish Factory in Joyeux-Tiburon. Was this the reason why he was naked ?

Mark looked around frantically at any possibilities to escape. There were none immediately visible.

Before they would get him, he would try to kill a guard, take his weapon, and maybe set fire to the gasoil plant. It would perhaps benefit the Program in some way, delaying a mechanised robotic assault by maybe even a year.

Thinking as a soldier energised him. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but he felt as any drugs still in organism since lunch had been consumed by the surge of adrenaline.

The fuel truck halted at Mark's level. Mark went inside, and was driven right up to Boutte. The truck halted in the housing unit area, while the working gangs were returning from their working day.

The foreman had a sorry look, turned around and said : « Remember, no eye contact, no communication with him ».

The gang members were looking at the road immediately in front of their feet, and passed him by without any sign or murmur whatsoever.

Still, at one moment one of them yelled : « My scarf ! My Hello Kitty scarf ! It's lost, now. »

Mark turned around and saw that the wind was gently pushing a large scarf in the air. He ran and caught it, then yelled : « My oh my, what a great scarf I just found ! »

Then without turning to look at the gang, he walked away, not stopping for the entire night, thinking about the prison he just left, and where he found support among inmates.

In the early morning found a dilapidated bus stop to sleep in, then walked on, stopping for a moment to make himself a walking stick out of a branch, then resumed and stopped again an hour later, to take several feet of vine. He walked on, very thirsty, until he found the canal he saw on the way to the city.

He laughed, swam, drank copiously. Then he walked along the canal to find a place where people his age would have loitered in the past. He dived and found a treasure : a dozen empty beer bottles at the bottom of the canal, along with some broken ones.

Using vine and his walking stick, he managed to bundle five bottles at each end of his stick and filled them with water.

He resumed his long walk ; road signs appeared again. Now quite exhausted and hungry, he made more frequent stops until he found a road sign which carried familiar names.

From this moment on his feet wouldn't stop walking, and by the end of the second night, he appeared in a Perimeter farm. He delicately put his treasure on the ground and laid down beside it. He was sleeping while they washed him and carried him to bed. He awoke only in the evening, ate a solid meal at the compound while telling told his story to over hundred listeners, then couldn't wait to meet Erich and tell him the same story.

« And now » asked Mark, « What's the plan ? »

Chapter 77

Building a team from scratch

Mark was full of energy and ambition, not only for himself but for the town. He repeatedly said about Joyeux-Tiburon : « This is the only place left worth living in. »

Erich knew he had all that was needed to become a great leader for his people. But people, just like Mark, were poor in everything but good spirits.

After lengthy discussions with Erich, Mark took upon himself to build up another team, literally from scratch. He left for the Perimeter wearing nothing but Erich's shorts. For almost a week, Erich had to wear the Hello Kitty scarf pretty much like improvised diapers. The town's nudist tried to persuade Erich to get rid of clothes altogether, to which Erich pointed out that after his belly dance at Water Wells he didn't want to tarnish his reputation even further. Finally, somebody donated Erich a dark pareo, and thus Mark would be able to keep his short.

Mark returned with six young volunteers, one pirogue, the two laser training rifles and a battery charger for them. He didn't even manage to get a pair of trousers for himself. None of the volunteers belonged to any team. Their volunteering was respected within the farms they belonged to, but the leaders didn't appreciate their leaving shortly before the harvest.

The volunteers, all boys, were aged from eight to twelve. They came with clothes that had turned to little more than rags, and they had no shoes. They even had to leave their straw hats behind, taking two bales of straw with them as compensation and to make new ones.

Mark decided to spend a few days in Joyeux-Tiburon to complement his equipment. At first he would go from door to door with his three oldest volunteers, asking for any piece of gear, string or metal that could still somewhat be of use. They stopped at the end of the second day, which yielded nothing at all.

They turned to salvage whatever was still lying on the bottom of the canal, something which was actually a good introduction to their training. They simply brought everything they found to the surface and onto the pirogue mothership. Mark understood that the town was so poor that even the smallest piece of material, like broken glass bottles, still had some tiny value.

The boys took turns diving. When they weren't active, they would sit close to the pottery oven and weave their hats patiently. Once their hats were ready, they turned to weave straw pouches and make straw rope. The youngest boy, a fast weaver, discovered he could weave a basket around a pottery jar, thus further increasing its value. The weaving method was soon perfected, then shown to a quite weak old townswoman, giving her the means to complement her meagre earning through that menial job.

Mark and Gus worked out a reward for this activity. Mark came with a salvaged flat piece of rusted steel, which Gus heated in the pottery oven using all his biogas reserves. The workshop lent his blacksmith and makeshift anvil as a contribution to the cause. After an hour of work, Mark's team took possession of a large bushknife.

Erich happened to be present at the moment. Upon seeing these emaciated but joyfull young people, Erich thought of the start of some medieval Beggar Monk order. These used to shake the world now and then.

Erich invited two team members at a time to the library, in order to have a conversation with them about duty and combat. He told them about allies and enemies. He also showed them the facial composite drawing the barman made in Gus' room, based on his descriptions, showing DHS torturers and intelligence personnel. There was a name under each portrait, and every relevant information Gus could recall.

Over three days, the divers accumulated enough material to engage in an elaborate bartering session with the townfolks, which ended with the large Saturday dinner.

On Sunday morning, the team's equipment amounted to one bushknife, three blankets, three pieces of broken mirrors, a nail clipper and a cylindrical straw basket holding a clear, sealed glass bottle filled with clear water as a firestarter.

Mark carried the HQ straw basket, which held a plastic perpetual calendar from the seventies, a cheap plastic compass, a pencil stub and a straw-protected beer bottle, sealed with plastic cork, that held some scraps paper watertight. Most paper was blank, but there was also a complete Morse code, patiently retranscribed by Diane on the back of a peeled tourist postcard, the image of which provided a rudimentary map of the area.

The team members' uniform consisted of a straw hat and a pair of shorts, the belt of which was straw rope. A sturdy straw rope crossed the torso, carrying a large pouch made of weaved straw. Inside the pouch was the individual spoke knife and the water, consisting of three beer bottles, all protected by weaven straw and all made watertight by some piece of cork, complemented by two salvaged plastic bottles with their original plastic caps, that were the two field gourds a member was supposed to carry at all times. The canal still harboured more of these hidden treasures.

The straw bales were now depleted, but after the harvest there would be plenty of them again. It was planned to weave a gourd holster for each plastic bottle and a wood sheath for the spoke knives, with rope loops to carry it on the belt.

Erich was afraid that these barefooted, ragtag children would be nothing than laughing stock for the townspeople. But on Sunday morning, when as usual the religious-minded gathered on the central square for a short common prayer, Erich felt an atmosphere of dignity, even gravity.

Mark's team prayed with the others in unison. When the prayers ended, people didn't immediately return home, but remained, looking at the children with a sense of pride. Mark seized the opportunity to thank the town for its support. Some people applauded.

Mark then turned to Erich, in anticipation of a speech.

Erich was taken by surprise, but rapidly improvised. Words weren't hard to find in this sincere moment : « We salute the courage of these young men who have all volunteered to face hardship and danger. Their strength will strengthen all of us. »

Mark made some eye contacts with his team members. The team arranged itself as a row behind Mark. Mark made a military salute, immediately followed by his team. Erich made a solemn salute in return. Among the townfolks, a lone voice started to sing The Star Spangled banner. All of a sudden, several voices joined, and more followed.

Erich could not turn around in this solemn moment, but he heard voices strangled by tears. He didn't know the words and thus had to remain silent, concentrating on the team facing him. He felt awkward in his dark pareo like some polynesian chieftain, until he understood.

As ill-equipped as these children were, they actually had equipment. All they carried looked orderly and new, whereas the townfolks were themselves looking increasingly shabby : these children were the future.

Hence, the United States, or the idea of them, were not entirely dead. Although, for all one knew, there were no airplanes carriers and launchable atomic weapons left, these half-dozen kids equipped with straw were proof that this idea had survived centuries of corrupt politicians, bloated military bureaucracies and the recent generalized decay. Perhaps there was also the feeling that it was once again their own army.

Once the song was over, people cheered. Mark's face was ripe with emotion, he barely managed to shout a vague « Hayyy-hop ! » military order, upon which the team promptly broke the line and gathered their meagre gear.

Many townfolks followed them to the southern pier, where the pirogue and the Ticonderoga waited. The boats were carefully loaded ; after all, some of their gear was made of glass.

Soon before the boats left, the nudist appeared from town and hurried to the pier with a pair of swimming goggles in his hands. He donated them to the team and declared : « I don't pray with you, as you know, but here is my contribution. »

As awkward as the sight was, nobody scoffed. Indeed, some people nodded in approval. The boats left for March Island, greeted by about dozen townfolks. Erich took the presence of the nudist as an omen : perhaps the future was to become natives again.

Mark's intention was to reclaim a Trawler Island at March Island and base his training program there. His team would not have enough time and energy to assist in gardening, but would help harvesting.

While Mark built up his equipment, Erich went to see Cheryl on his way to Three Acorns, and had a hard time convincing her of the advantages of their presence. All she saw was the additional burden of seven more mouths to feed, although her place was the most thriving of all.

Cheryl, like all those on March Island, had become weary of the outside world. They didn't even venture to Joyeux-Tiburon anymore, but instead used the Western Trawler as a depot. Robert seldom met any of them there.

Mark's team rapidly found it difficult to stay at March Island. Although every side avoided problems, or perhaps because they avoided to say things that had to be said, there was no common chemistry. The team felt like they were overstaying their welcome from the first day on.

After a week, the team relocated to Kieffer Island, the garden of which had been left unattended since the storm. Drought killed most of the plants, and the few surviving ones were small and scattered. Mark instantly knew that it would require more effort than they could spare to live off this barren place. Also, it was too far away from the bayou, where the training was supposed to take place.

The same evening, the team left for Three-Acorns. Mark was surprised to see that a wind turbine had been rebuilt, and that a lamp lit up when they came close to the shore.

All of a sudden, babies cried, and there was some movement on the land. When Mark was about to land, Kathryn racked the pump of her shotgun and yelled : « Go away ! »

A cold chill ran on Mark's back, but most of all he felt sad. The place, Kathryn's procedures, everything lacked the warmth Trois-Chênes once had. It took Mark some minutes to convince Kathryn of his identity. He realised a couple of months had turned him into a different person.

Kathryn and Sue gave the team a much warmer welcome than Cheryl. To Kathryn, the return of the teams meant the place was leaving its backwater status, there would again be celebrations and joy on its shores.

Mark had first envisioned to ask for Three Acre Island, but there was more than enough room at Three Acorns for everybody. An important factor for the team was the availability of enough shelter and blankets : they didn't have to rotate the use of blankets, and could now sleep at the same time.

Sue and Kathryn were living under what could only be called a roof on the ground. With the car wreck used for storage, there was enough room in the two tents for the entire team.

Save for Mark, all team members were seasoned farmers. The team's presence made things easier and smoothed several organisational problems out. Erich and Robert were coming in infrequently and could not engage in important work over the few days they were there.

Mark was delighted to find the electrolysis pit in good shape. Some scraps of metal were still present, and they salvaged more from around the island with the swimming goggles, including fragments of the bombs. Using the gas burners, team members managed to forge metal loops for their belts and ropes.

On the first Saturday evening of their presence, Kathryn killed two old chicken and cooked a feast. All seven dishes were filled with food, fresh and cooked, filling the air with a smell of abundance. For Mark and Kathryn, it was a return to the old days. For the team members, it was another memorable event of their aventure.

The training started the following week. Frictions emerged from the start and eroded the energetic mood. It took two days for Mark to realise he was asking too much of them. By then, his authority has eroded.

Mark tried to make the team participate in corrective steps, but his approach was suited for late teenagers and young adults, not preteens. Team members mistook Mark's democratic approach as a failure to decide, but still respected him as a person.

At the end of the week, Mark stopped giving orders altogether. There still was order, mostly born of habit and chores, but little discipline. These kids wouldn't go the extra mile, and in the end there was no point in leaving Three Acorns anymore.

For the upcoming week, Mark managed to reduce training to the proper mastery of basic tasks and the Morse code. Some discipline came back, but fleetingly. Mark was growing nervous and impatient, increasingly mired in self-doubt.

A most somber day for the team was when Mark threw a hissy fit : a boy transmitted NOT FOUGHT instead of NOT THOUGHT. Mark knew the boy had not been schooled properly since

the crisis, but he nevertheless got carried away by anger and frustration. Until then the boys had held back their own anger because of the legend behind Mark. But Mark was not living up to the legend, and thus they yelled back.

Mark withdrew and walked to the southern beach, or what remained of it. As a sign of the continuing subsidence of the area, the beach was now frequently underwater. Mark sat down and watched the ocean for hours. Evening came, then night. Finally Kathryn walked by to check him up.

Kathryn sat next to him in silence. To her he was still the angry teenager with family issues that came to them last year. But his body had indeed changed into that of a man. Mark had a brimming energy, he was full of life and future, unlike Erich whose body felt parched by the events. It was as if Erich was repeatedly crushed over by a steam roller and lost something every time.

In the hot August night, hearing the gentle repetitive splash of the waves, Kathryn became suddenly and uncontrollably aroused by Mark's presence. The sexual desire exploded in her after a slumber of several months.

Her head was spinning, and she stood up to undress. At a distance, she heard her son screaming, and for the first time she decided she would let him. Her heart was pounding with excitement but her mind was torn. This was, after all, the beach where she used to have sex with Erich. Henry had been conceived here.

There was a part of morals and a part of superstition in her hesitation. Mark looked up to her and saw her body twitching with desire, but he also noticed her hesitation. He stood up and, without a word, walked back to the Highlands.

Kathryn sat down and started crying. She thought of pleasuring herself in spite but her sorrow promptly overcame her desire. She spent over one hour weeping in frustration and sorrow. She finally undressed and entered the cold ocean. For a while, the thought of liberation through suicide crossed her mind.

What she would be liberated from was unclear. Her mind was upset, but the cold of the ocean calmed her down. She floated on her back, looking at the stars, and remembered her father's amazement when she brought him here. She remembered Chicago. The winter. The cold.

She immediately swam back to the shore, in a reflex of survival. Back then she wouldn't let the cold get her, and here she wouldn't let whatever was currently in her head get her down either. She walked back to the encampment, to find the team members scattered across the Lowlands.

The two youngest team members were crying. Kathryn instinctively wanted to soothe them and walked up to them. She saw they were turning away from her, not wanting to appear weak in front of the others.

Kathryn stopped within talking distance of them and declared : « Here, on this island, I cry too. A lot. Life is hard, and good times are rare. You have to get used to it, and get used to crying as well. Good night. »

She walked back to her baby and breast-fed him. The feeding gave her a calm, constant kind of bodily pleasure that felt less scorching than the arousal she experienced before.

Team members were still not talking much when it was time to eat breakfast. Worse still, Mark didn't even get up at all.

Kathryn and Sue exchanged looks. They knew what despair looked like, for they had experienced it routinely in their lonely nights on this distance place. Some kind of action had to take place.

Sue rushed to the tent where Mark slumbered, and simply took all blankets with her. Kathryn gathered the team members around her and said : « Okay, so it didn't work out this time. Big deal. You've seen the bomb fragments. I can tell you that on that day, things didn't work out too well either. We just have to carry on. »

The young team members looked at each other without conviction. It was yet another adult's speech.

Kathryn knew she wasn't convincing but she surprised herself when she said : « You feel like you're being let down ? Well let me tell you this, Erich left me two days after the bombing. Everybody left me that day. Erich was busy helping you guys out of town, people he didn't even know. I mean, fuck that ! I was his fucking wife and he left me ! We just buried Lizzie two days before, you know. »

Words were pouring out of Kathryn like a waterfall. Her face was becoming more agitated and passionate. Team members were looking at her with fresh interest.

Their interest fed Kathryn's ego. She went on : « Next thing I hear, he hung two boys, just like that ». She snapped her fingers.

Her voice trembled : « Oh, but no, he's doing God's work, you see. He prays, even when people are not there to see him, because he's so sorry, and then the next thing you know, he orders some more killing. And me ? I'm all alone here and play the good housewife. And what next ? I hear about some, some some... crazy nazi cannibal factory, you know, and people look at you and ask themselves what it must feel like to be that man's wife. »

Kathryn's voice reached a higher pitch : « Then I told myself, well, that would make me the queen of his fucking little kingdom, but no, he gets back to me with nothing. Nothing at all, and I still have to wash his shirts. Of course now he longs for his lost kingdom, and he leaves me alone again, and plays the wise man over some shitty Reader's Digest books while I dig for potatoes. »

Mark walked out of the tent in a hurry, still adjusting Erich's former pants around his waist. One look at Kathryn's exorbitated eyes and Mark knew she was about to lose it.

Kathryn, now in a sort of transe, shrieked with a singing voice : « And now he's belly dancing, and he doesn't even own trousers ! He's gone completely... »

Mark walked up to her and smacked her.

He yelled : « For God's sake, Kathryn, get yourself together ! »

Kathryn colwed in reflex, then reeled from the emotional shock and sat down. After some unstable seconds she burst into tears. Sue walked up to her with an intense look that was meant for Mark, but she took great care of not looking at him.

Mark ordered the kids back on the Lowlands. While they were still standing, he announced : « Okay, you're too young for what I had in mind. It's not your fault. You all volunteered, and not one of you wanted to leave. That's a good start, because I know people who were older and stronger than you but left. »

One of the older team members asked : « What should we do now ? »

Mark said : « Well we promised Cheryl we would help her during the harvest. So you have to stay here until this is done. After that you can go back to the Perimeter, or stay here, or actually do whatever you want, you know. »

The older member replied : « What will do until then ? »

Mark : « We try to set up a force, but we still lack everything. I think some of you could form a diving team, and retrieve what you can from the bayou. Another can weave high grass from the islands around, and finish your kit, make hats, or rope, you know. If you have any other ideas, let's speak about them. The thing is, we must move forwards. »

The others agreed, and soon organised themselves into groups of two or three. As for himself, Mark proceeded without words with the bioreactor chore.

Kathyn resumed her work in a make-believe normalcy. The younger team members didn't even notice her efforts and were happily busy, weaving loops for their sheathes.

The greatest effort was put into splitting dead branches and using the flat inside surface to carve the complete Morse alphabet on them. In the end, the branches formed a well readable panel. Mark was fascinated to see these natural shapes transformed into elaborate information.

Three days passed in mild but constant activity, when at noon, all of a sudden a team member rushed to the others and told them with a low voice to hide inside the tents.

The others complied immediately, with only Mark still outside, calmly finishing his levees-inspecting chore. In each tent, the team members took turns in peeking outside.

A large darkened canoe, in very good shape, approached from the east. Kathryn was on the ground, her shotgun aimed at the approaching boat. Aboard were two soldiers of the Department of Homeland Security, wearing blue fatigues and leather boots.

Kathryn decided not to shoot and stood up, her gun still in her hand. The men landed on Three Acorns without ceremony, the leading soldier just saying : « Connolly told us we could get a meal here. »

Kathryn answered : « Yes, but without meat. »

The man replied : « He told us that would be a complete meal. »

Kathryn was very insistent : « The deal was about meals without any meat, fish, eggs or cheese. »

The man shrugged and walked to the kitchen area, helping himself.

Kathryn raised her gun : « Don't you touch that food, soldier ! »

The other soldier laughed : « You probably don't have any cartridge left for that. What you and Connolly decided is not our problem. Give us some proper food and there won't be any trouble. »

Kathryn was fuming but had to give in. Mark approached slowly, observing the men with caution. From visual memory of the facial composite drawings, he managed to recognize one of the men as one of Gus' tormentors.

Mark's face remained unchanged. He considered these men were not a threat right now, and as for their past crimes, it was just part of what the world had become. He didn't hold grievances over things that happened to others.

Mark joined the men and told them about his experience in New Orleans. The two men were very interested and asked many questions. Mark didn't want to outsmart them, because if what Gus said was true, they were more likely to outsmart him. Mark nevertheless managed to find out the men's general location in the area, where they were learning horseback riding.

It appeared that these men were not looking forward living the kind of existence Mark was describing. Houma itself had a more primitive version of New Orleans' economic system, and although these two men clearly had privileges within that system, they nevertheless looked for more. Mark couldn't detect if they looked at the outside world as a fallback plan or a leisure park.

For desert, the men ate the precious few berries that Kathryn managed to grow on her island. In the meantime, Mark went away to the Lowlands and looked for a piece of tarp, a remnant from the island's own workshop. When he found it, he quickly placed it inside the offal pit, above the large bucket on its bottom.

The men were already in the process of leaving, but Mark insisted that they should at least contribute in the biogas generation. They each went to the toilets, with an amused smirk, as if to say : even our shit is a treasure to these hillbillies. The former tormentor had a disgusting way of smirking, that both terrified and infuriated Mark.

They left shortly after. The boy that first spotted them walked out of his tent and cautiously approached the shore. When the canoe was far enough, he told the others to come out.

Mark was busy smelling the men's droppings ; The team members were intrigued but also disgusted.

Mark also dipped his fingers in it to inspect the consistence of it, then finally declared : « They're eating well. They had meat, I mean, real, fresh meat, for breakfast. And a mix of maize and vegetables, evidently. »

One of the boys asked : « Why do you want to know that ? »

Mark answered : « I wanted to know how their diet was. If they were not eating well, we could have made some deals with them. But now I know they have all they need. It didn't cost me more than that to gather this information. »

But another boy exclaimed : « But one of them tortured Gus ! Why didn't you kill him ? »

Mark : « What for ? They are thousands of people in Houma, waiting for a good reason to take what is ours. This place is paradise to them. »

The boy asked : « Does it mean you're going to do nothing ? »

Mark : « As for myself, I don't plan to do more than this. But if you want to find out more about them, I know where you can find them. »

This arose the team's interest : something was happening for real. They asked Mark some more questions, until Mark declared that he would not participate in any eavesdropping mission. But they were free to do so.

The six boys decided to give it a try. After all, they said, if something went wrong, they would stab them to death, like Mark has trained them to. Brimming with excitement and temerity, the team members prepared for their nightly mission, under Mark's scrutiny. Mark rehearsed the plan with them, especially the delicate landing phase, and by the evening they were ready. After a quick dinner, they left on the pirogue.

Watching them leave, Kathryn asked with a sour voice : « Isn't it dangerous to let them go like

that ? »

Mark turned to her and told her, looking straight into her eyes : « There is possible danger, yes. But, given my training's failure, this is the only chance they'll have to learn what I wanted them to learn. »

Kathryn : « And if they fail ? »

Mark : « Not all of them will fail. I'm sure at least one of them will return. »

Mark's nonchalnce made Kathryn uneasy : « How can you be so calm ? »

Mark answered : « I'm not calm, Kathryn. I am worried for them. Perhaps there's another danger out there, like a band of strigoï or something. If they don't come back I am finished. But you can't afford to think that way in war. It paralyses you, and prevents you from deciding. So I have to put my fears aside and try to be unemotional, as much as I can. »

The pirogue came back at sunrise. Mark saw the first rays of the sun hit their faces, ripe with a mix of exhilaration, tiredness and resolve. Six faces. He counted them twice.

Mark knew his bet had paid off as soon as they landed : they all wanted to speak at once, but then let their leader speak. They organised themselves into an efficient group. The leader was not accustomed to making reports, but with Mark's help he managed to carry all informations across.

The sun had set for a couple of hours already when they landed on the large island. There was tall grass everywhere, and thus it was not easy approaching and locating the encampment without making noise. In the final approach they carved a path into the high grass by folding the grass towards them before moving on.

They were not sure on the way to proceed once they found themselves in immediate vicinity of the tents. There was one large tent, with a capacity of up to six people, and a much smaller tent, for two people at best. After some observation, there wasn't anybody to be seen on sentry. Solid snoring came out of the large tent, but it seemed only two people were snoring. No snoring came out of the small tent, and so the boys had to consider that if anybody was inside it, he was perhaps awoken.

It was decided that nothing would be taken or disturbed in the camp ; Still, one of the boys entered the camp area, and went up to the camp fire. He discovered two empty tin cans and salvaged them, then came across an empty whiskey flask, with its top still screwed on top. He also took it and quickly walked back to the entry point.

They remained on observation for a long time, but had no means to measure time. After a while, they decided to walk back to the pirogue and return home. The night started to fade soon afterwards.

The trophies were shown with pride. Mark had to laugh out, proud of his team, but also at the grotesque situation of cheering the retrieval of what was minor rubbish one year ago. The tin pots were even considered the start of the team's own kitchen.

Mark also provided some astrological reference points in order to have a general idea of elapsed time at night.

On the following day, Kathryn asked to take the Ticonderoga and find Connolly about the meals. Mark showered her with recommandations regarding operation security.

Kathryn left in the morning, Connolly returned instead of her in the afternoon.

Connolly informed Mark and its team that the DHS soldiers had left for Houma : they had to leave the city at night, with a certain degree of confidentiality, as not to provoke unwanted attention. This is why they can only be absent for about 48 hours, one fourth of which spent paddling in the bayou.

Connolly announced he reached an agreement with Kathryn : she would receive one shotgun cartridge per meal where meat had been eaten. Houma was paying in various goods, including civilian ammunition, and Vonnolly was more than ready to make up for any inconvenience.

Mark realised how exposed Connolly must feel, living all alone with the excess wealth of two horses, having to deal with Houma and relying on Kathryn as a backup.

Connolly suddenly recited the conversations the team had on his island. They were very accurate, and embarassed the boys considerably. But Connolly concluded that they did an excellent job for a first run. After all, he was used to be on the watch on long silent nights.

He gave them several tricks and promised to show them how to be a good sentry when they would get back with him on his island later that evening.

The news came in as a big surprise, and the kids were overjoyed. Connolly explained that he owed Kathryn a lot for having taken care of his horses for so long, and thus he would train the team in horseriding, giving them the exact same training he was giving DHS.

The training was spread out over five days, in between two DHS sessions. Every team member, including Mark himself, took immense pride in riding a grown horse around that island, that wasn't that large when riding horseback.

In the end, when Mark's team left for the harvest at March Island, the training had exceeded the expectations. Mark exchanged a few phrases with Kathryn, acknowledging he was in her debt for having intervened at a critical phase.

They never spoke about what happened at the southern shore, but Kathryn knew he was a man of honour. It was up to her to get her problems straight before even honour would not be able to keep lips sealed.