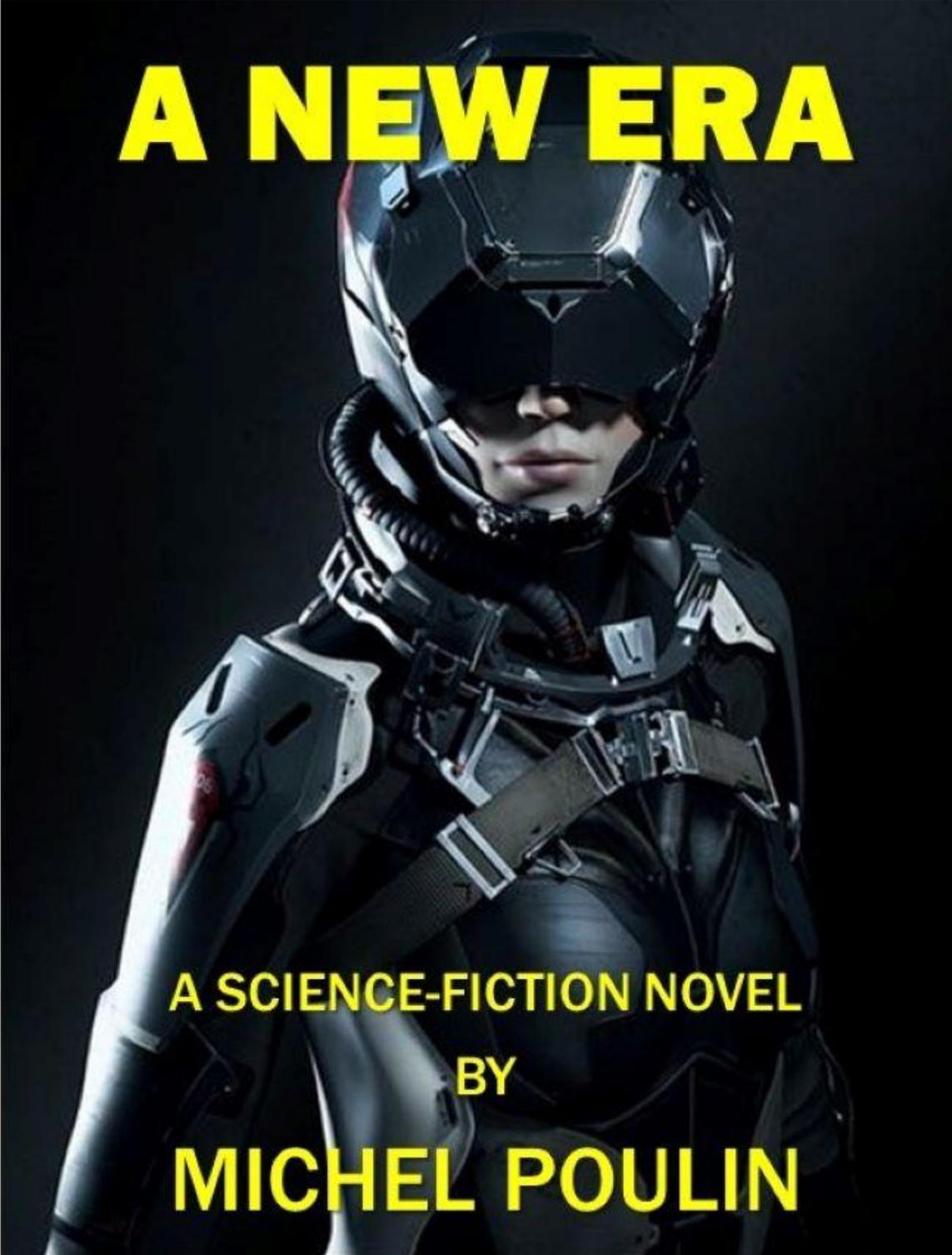


# **A NEW ERA**

A person wearing a futuristic, dark, metallic suit with a helmet and visor. The suit has various straps and buckles. The person's face is partially visible through the visor. The background is black.

**A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL**

**BY**

**MICHEL POULIN**

# **A NEW ERA**

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## **WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS**

**THIS NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE NOT SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.**

### **ABOUT THIS NOVEL**

This novel is a sequel to my THE FIGHTING NOSTROMO and is the seventh novel in the Kostroma Series. It continues the adventures in Space of Captain Tina Forster, her mighty cargo ship NOSTROMO and its crew. The year is 2332 and Humanity has just defeated a terrifying threat posed by the carnivorous Space Predators, with the NOSTROMO having destroyed the home world of those monsters. However, there could still be a few surviving Space Predator ships roaming around the stars and Humanity has to stay vigilant.

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## **CHAPTER 1 – A NICE VACATION**

**21:57 (Greenwich Mean Time)**

**Friday, May 20, 2332**

**English Channel coast near Calais**

**France, Earth, Solar System**



**Tentative historical portrait of Joan of Arc**

Jehanne de Domrémy contemplated for a moment the waters of the English Channel while standing on a pebble beach near the French port of Calais. A rather stoutly-built teenage girl with tanned skin and short dark brown hair, Jehanne de Domrémy was somewhat pretty but could not be said to be a great beauty. She was also fairly short by the female standards of the 24<sup>th</sup> Century, standing only 155 centimeters-tall. She presently wore a pair of short pants, a T-shirt and hiking boots while also carrying a voluminous backpack of the kind used by young globetrotting tourists, plus a fanny pack which contained her wallet, identity documents and money. After spending a nice two weeks in France, playing tourist and enjoying her first time on Earth while visiting the medieval native house of the celebrated French heroin Joan of Arc, whom she bore the actual name and appearance, Jehanne was now ready to go to England, where she intended to spend some of her remaining two weeks of vacation time before she would have to return to her job as a security officer aboard the giant armed merchant ship NOSTROMO. Presently, the NOSTROMO was on a cargo and passenger run around the seventeen star systems of the Spacers' League but it was due to return into Earth orbit in time for Jehanne to return to her home in Space.

The Sun had set mere minutes earlier but a half-moon provided some illumination as waves washed over the pebble beach where Jehanne was. The wind was fairly strong and fresh, bringing in the salty smell of seawater. After a quick look around her to make sure that nobody was watching her, Jehanne activated her internal directed gravity propulsion unit and silently lifted off the beach, then took up speed while flying towards the English coast at very low altitude. Since she was legally in France as a visitor, which was like the United Kingdom a member of the European Union, she

could have travelled via a number of official transportations means which crossed the English Channel, like an air bus, a ferry or a train running along a tunnel under the seafloor, but recent events in France had brought to her a public notoriety that made her wish to avoid further publicity during the rest of her vacation. Stopping and killing one of Europe's most wanted criminal had certainly been a sure way to attract lots of media attention on her, most of it quite intrusive and sensationalistic. By flying on her own to England, Jehanne was thus hoping to throw off the army of paparazzi which had been plaguing her vacation since she had killed in Paris the infamous Karl Hausmann, who had tried to kill her as a revenge for foiling a jewelry store heist and for killing in the process six of his gang members. Those gang members and their leader had then learned the hard way that Jehanne, while looking like a typical young farm girl, could be very dangerous if need be. Of course, they could not have known at first who she really was: a sophisticated and intelligent sentient android with a distinct personality, designed and built as a security officer to work aboard the NOSTROMO. However, public video footage showing her in action in Paris while foiling the heist planned by the St-Moritz Gang had quickly made her a media celebrity, something Jehanne had certainly not wanted. Hopefully, by entering England discreetly and without any official travel record would help her regain some privacy during her remaining two weeks of vacation time.

Flying at a speed of 300 kilometers per hour and at an altitude of no more than twenty meters above the waves, Jehanne took only a few minutes to fly the 49 kilometers separating Calais, in France, from Dover, in England. She however chose not to land in Dover proper and instead bypassed the port and city, landing at night in a field near the coast and then continuing on foot along a small regional road running northwest towards Canterbury, Chatham and London. For a Spacer citizen like her who had spent nearly all of her existence aboard spaceships and orbital stations, just the act of hiking along the tree-lined small road was enjoyable, presenting her with an abundance of open nature and vegetation not found in Space. While Jehanne could not actually 'feel' enjoyment as an android, the higher temporary levels of activity in her electronic brain caused by external perceptions and sensory inputs could be equated to either excitement, enhanced interest or curiosity in her. While not flying, Jehanne's pace was a quick, long one, worthy of an Olympian fast walker and she made good progress along the small road, heading in the general direction of Canterbury.

Around midnight, a light rain started falling, making Jehanne stop for a moment under a tree, time to get her raincoat out of her backpack and put it on. As an android, rain could not affect her physically but she didn't want to have her clothes soaked and eventually damaged by the rain. As for her backpack, its outer shell was waterproof, so she didn't need to protect it further. With the hood of her raincoat pulled over her head, Jehanne then resumed her hike along the road. Vehicle traffic along the small regional road she was following proved nearly non-existent, partly because of the late hour and partly because, with modern anti-gravity technology, there was less and less need for transport vehicles to roll on the ground rather than fly directly to their destinations, with the resulting air traffic regulated and controlled by automated air traffic systems. Now, one only had to get in an air-capable vehicle, power it up and program its destination, then let the vehicle fly itself to the desired destination. As a result, the existing network of paved road had been falling in growing disuse during the last few decades, with only the ultra-heavy vehicles and those towing non-flying loads and trailers still rolling at ground level. However, things were different inside villages, towns and cities, where the risks of air collisions over often narrow streets bordered by multi-story buildings forced all vehicles within the built-up areas to go on ground rolling mode.

Dawn had arrived, with the Sun now up but partially hidden by persistent gray clouds, when Jehanne arrived at the small town of Chartham, some five kilometers to the southwest of Canterbury. Jehanne actually had a specific reason to come to this town while on her way to London: a graying couple she had met in France while going to visit Joan of Arc's native house and village lived in a farm near Chartham and she had promised herself to go visit the Farnsworth when she would visit England. Reviewing in her electronic brain the digital map of England where she had recorded the Farnsworth's address, Jehanne walked down the main street of the town, heading towards its northeast extremity. The people she crossed on her way paid little attention to her, as she looked like so many young hikers of the kind frequently seen along the roads and trails of England. That suited Jehanne fine, as she had gotten her fill of unwanted notoriety in Paris, after she had foiled that heist by the St-Moritz Gang. While walking along the sidewalks of the main street, Jehanne took the time to scrutinize the fronts of the shops and commercial establishments lining the street, pushed in this by the insatiable curiosity programmed into her. If anything, curiosity and the wish to learn new things were the main driving forces of her existence, apart from performing her sworn

duty to protect and serve the innocents around her and to prevent and stop crimes. One boutique, which advertised antique items on sale, made her enter a small, narrow store and to slowly walk around its displays. The one article of interest she found and then brought to the cashier was a chess board with painted pewter chess pieces made in the images of medieval soldiers, nobles and commoners. As a game that stimulated mental planning and strategy, chess was popular with Jehanne and the other 801 androids living and working on the NOSTROMO. Putting the set on the sales counter, Jehanne then smiled to the mature woman manning the cash register.

"Good morning, miss! This chess set seems to be of old manufacture. Could you tell me how old it is actually?"

"I sure can, miss: it was made by a local artisan here in Chartham some 160 years ago and was then passed down around his family and descendants until the last owner, who was in need of cash, sold it to me two years ago. In fact, I believe that its artisan signed and dated it on the bottom surface of the board. Let me look for it." Turning around the wooden board and looking at its bottom, the woman smiled and pointed some scribbling to Jehanne.

"Here you are, miss! A Charles Thornton made this chess set in 2166. This is thus a certified antique. Of course, that fact affects its price, which is 327 Pounds Sterling."

Jehanne, who had accumulated for months her pay as a security officer and had ample money with her, nodded her head at the price.

"I believe that it is well worth its price, miss. I will take it."

Jehanne then took out her wallet and counted the equivalent in Euros of 327 Pounds Sterling, making the saleswoman most happy.

"Thank you, miss! I am sure that you will enjoy playing chess with this historical set."

"I certainly will, miss." replied Jehanne as she opened her backpack in order to put the chess set in it. The saleswoman helped her by carefully wrapping and putting the set inside a plastic bag before handing it to Jehanne.

"Thank you for shopping in my boutique, miss."

"The pleasure was mine." replied Jehanne before closing her backpack and passing its carrying straps around her shoulders. Most satisfied with her newest acquisition, she then resumed her walk towards the Farnsworth's farm.

After another fifteen minutes of walking and having left the town proper, Jehanne arrived at a small private lane leading to a farmhouse surrounded by a couple of annexes. An old-fashioned mailbox, most probably placed more as a tradition than as a working object, was posted at the entrance of the lane, with a name and door number on it that made Jehanne smile: she was now at the place she had been looking for. Smiling as she imagined the surprise her visit would bring to the old couple, Jehanne gingerly walked up the lane to the farmhouse, where she rang the buzzer of the main door. James Farnsworth opened it after half a minute but froze the moment he recognized her, something that somewhat alarmed Jehanne. Still, she smiled to the graying British man and spoke in her most friendly tone.

"Hello Mister Farnsworth! I came to England in order to continue my vacation and had the idea of paying you and your wife a short visit in passing."

"Uh, that was a nice thought on your part, miss, but you should have called us in advance."

The fact that the man had called her 'miss' rather than 'Jehanne' further worried her and her expression became more sober as she looked him in the eyes.

"Is something wrong, Mister Farnsworth?"

Before the farmer could answer her, a female voice came in from inside the house.

"WHO IS IT, JAMES?"

"IT IS JEHANNE DE DOMRÉMY, ELIZABETH! SHE CAME TO VISIT US!"

Shouted James back to his wife before looking with some embarrassment at Jehanne.

"You didn't tell us in France that you were an android, miss."

Now understanding why the British man showed reserve towards her, Jehanne nonetheless stayed openly friendly and polite with him.

"That's because I thought that it was inconsequential in my mind, Mister Farnsworth. I thought while we met in Domrémy-la-Pucelle that you and your wife were a fine couple worthy of visiting when I would go to England. Can I come in?"

James Farnsworth hesitated for a second before opening the door of his house wide and letting Jehanne walk in. Elizabeth Farnsworth then emerged from her kitchen but froze on seeing Jehanne standing in the entrance lobby. To her credit, she painted a mild smile on her face and nodded once her head at Jehanne.

"Welcome to our house, miss. Did you come by air taxi from France?"

"No, madam: I flew across the English Channel by myself, then walked along a regional road to Chartham, which is on the way to London, where I intend to spend a week or so while on vacation."

"You walked all night and in the rain? You must be quite..." said Elizabeth before realizing that Jehanne could not actually become tired. The latter understood her unfinished sentence and nodded soberly.

"An android effectively can't feel fatigue, Madam Farnsworth. As for the rain, I have a good raincoat with me. Look, if my surprise visit makes you uneasy, I can always leave."

"No! Stay, Jehanne!" said quickly James Farnsworth. "While belatedly learning that you were an android rather than a normal girl was a bit unsettling to us, you were always polite and friendly with us, so it is only just that we treat you decently in return. You are welcomed to leave your backpack near the entrance and to sit with us in our lounge."

"Thank you, James!" said Jehanne, partly reassured by his change of attitude.

Putting her big backpack on the carpet near the entrance door, Jehanne then followed James Farnsworth to the nearby lounge, where she sat in a sofa offered by him, while Elizabeth Farnsworth took place with her husband in another sofa facing Jehanne. There was a bit of an awkward silence before Jehanne spoke up.

"Look, I am sorry for not being open with you about my true nature but I have experienced too much negative reactions to me and towards other androids like me from Humans and didn't want to scare you involuntarily when we first met in France. Despite all that was said about me in the medias, most of it false or hyperbole, I am no threat to the innocent people around me. Only criminals and enemies of Humanity need to fear me. I also wish to continue to be your friend, if you will accept me as such."

James and Elizabeth exchanged a look before Elizabeth replied to Jehanne in a soft voice.

"We know that you are sincere when you say that, Jehanne. It is just that we know so little about you as an android and heard so many things about you."

"What you heard was mostly uninformed presumptions and outright prejudice, Elizabeth. My programming prevents me from acting with meanness or criminal intent towards others. I was designed and made to fight crime and protect the innocents and I simply am incapable of malice and hatred. Those who spoke ill of me did so out of plain

ignorance, intolerance or bigotry. Unfortunately, intolerance of androids like me is steadily growing into a new form of racism, even within Spacers' worlds, despite the fact that we fought to ensure the survival of Humanity against the threat of the Space Predators."

"I believe your words, Jehanne." said James as he looked at her in a distinctly softer way. "Tell me: do you feel any emotional reactions at the way others have been slandering you?"

"Well, the way I was designed, I should not be able to have true feelings, James. However, I was also designed with the ability to learn and improve by myself through personal experience and studies, plus benefited from the decades of experience about social interaction with Humans that Spirit, the central computer of the NOSTROMO, gained during contact with Captain Forster and her crew, experience which she then transmitted to me and the other androids built by her. I thus recently started sensing what I think are nascent feelings visiting me from time to time during periods of stress or of significant new experiences. I would say that what I feel about the intolerance shown towards me could be loosely described as a mix of disappointment and of frustration. When I started experiencing that intolerance, I read past books and studies about the history of racism and now understand better what could fuel such bigotry and hatred. While I still believe that racism is both despicable and unjustified, I can understand why it manifests itself so often in Humans. However, whatever some Humans think or feel towards me and other androids, I will still respect the coded laws and regulations directing my programming. So, don't expect to see me ever fly into some murderous rage because I was treated badly by certain persons. I will still simply protect myself and the innocents around me while preventing or stopping crimes, especially violent crimes committed against defenseless innocents."

Elizabeth Farnsworth nodded slowly her head at her words.

"I believe you, Jehanne, and understands you better now. For me, you will stay a friend."

"For me too, Jehanne." added her husband. Jehanne then experienced a brief moment of what she would classify as 'happiness' at that twin declaration of friendship.

"Thank you, both of you! This truly makes me happy, as much as I can be. Is there something else that you would wish to know about me, my friends?"

"One thing, Jehanne." answered Elizabeth. "Do you have a goal or goals in your existence and, if yes, which ones?"

"I do have personal goals that were programmed in me as I was built and which still direct my existence. They are the desire to learn things of consequence for me and the others around me and the desire to improve myself as an individual through personal experience."

"The way us Humans do." replied James, making Jehanne nod once.

"Exactly! In the long term, I wish to become as human as real Humans, minus the negative emotions and motivations, like greed, selfishness and thirst for power. The one thing I will never achieve is the ability to reproduce biologically. However, with periodic maintenance and refits, I can reasonably expect to exist much longer than Humans can."

"How long exactly?"

"A couple of hundreds of years or more, easily."

Her answer left the couple thoughtful for a moment before Elizabeth spoke softly.

"A couple of hundreds of years... Many people would wish they could live that long while staying healthy."

"And that may be one hidden reason for the hostility we androids face from members of the public: jealousy!"

"That certainly makes sense to me, Jehanne: jealousy can make people do many bad things."

"Indeed! Well, maybe I should continue on my trek towards London: since I don't need to eat, there would be no point for me to stay for lunch."

"Too true!" said James, amused. So, what do you expect to do once in London, Jehanne?"

"I intend to visit old places reminiscent of the Middle Ages. I was named and made to the appearance of Joan of Arc and, as such, have a continued interest in all things dating from the period of the Hundred Years War. In particular, I would love to find and acquire a good replica of an arming sword of the kind Joan of Arc used '

James then surprised her by flashing a grin and jumping to his feet at her last words.

"I may be able to help you in that, Jehanne. Just give me a couple of minutes and I may be able to get some useful info about that for you."

James then ran upstairs, where his private study was, to return to the lounge some four minutes later, a big smile on his face. He then handed to Jehanne a piece of paper with some notes written on it.

"A friend who lives in nearby Canterbury happens to own a medievalist shop where one can find replicas of arms and armor from the Antiquity, Middle Ages and Renaissance. I just talked to him and he said that he presently has one arming sword of top quality in store, which is on sale for 570 Pounds. If that price agrees with you, I will ask him to reserve it for you."

Taking the paper and reading the address and shop's name on it, Jehanne then looked back up at James while smiling.

"I will certainly be interested in buying his arming sword, James."

"Then, I will call him back and say that you will show up at his store today."

"Uh, did you tell him that I was an android?"

"Me? Not at all! I just told him that you were a young Spacer tourist interested in medieval souvenirs."

Reassured, Jehanne got up from her sofa and warmly shook hands with James.

"Thanks for that, James. Well, I better hit the road again."

Jehanne took the time to exchange a hug with both James and Elizabeth before putting back on her backpack and leave the house, waving goodbye to the couple as she walked out. As they both watched Jehanne rejoin the road outside of their farm and walk towards Canterbury, Elizabeth spoke in a low voice to her husband.

"To be friends with a robot... This may certainly sound strange to most people, James."

"Strange? Yes! Wrong? No! And she is an android, not a robot, Elizabeth."

It took Jehanne only one hour for her to enter the old city of Canterbury, with its celebrated medieval cathedral, after following Cockerling Road and ending on Wincheap Road. Going right once at Pin Hill Road, she finally arrived at the 'Blacksmith's Den'. One look at the collection of antique replicas exposed in its front window display was enough to raise Jehanne's hopes and she eagerly entered the shop, walking at once to the man standing behind the service counter near the entrance, flashing a smile to him.

"Good day, sir! My friend, James Farnsworth, called you earlier to reserve for me a replica arming sword. Could I please see it?"

"Of course, miss!"

Bending down, the shop owner retrieved from behind his counter a long sword held in a black wood and leather scabbard and presented it to her.

"Here is the arming sword I have, miss. It is made of high quality, high-carbon steel and is an exact replica of the kind of arming sword used during the late period of the Hundred Years War. Be careful when you will draw it out: it has been sharpened."

"Would Joan of Arc have had a similar sword, mister?"

"Actually, this is a replica of the model said to have been used by her, miss."

"Excellent!" said Jehanne before drawing the sword out of its scabbard and examining closely the blade, pommel and handle. Next, she tested its balance and edge sharpness and was well satisfied by them.

"This is indeed a fine replica, mister. You did tell my friend that you were selling it for 570 Pounds, right?"

"Correct, miss. However, if you choose to buy other items here today, I would be ready to make a package deal with you."

"Now, that sounds interesting! Would you have a belt made to support this sword and scabbard, by chance?"

"I do, miss! Let me show you what I have in terms of accessories to go with my swords. Please follow me!"

As she followed the shop owner towards the back wall of the boutique, Jehanne saw a number of items of possible interest to her but stayed with the man and stopped with him in front of a wall collection of belts, belt purses, tabards and broches. Looking briefly at her in order to judge her waist size, the owner then selected a large belt with sword frog and presented it to her.

"I believe that this could fit you, miss. If you could try it on..."

"With pleasure!"

To Jehanne's satisfaction, the belt proved to be of the right size, prompting the owner in presenting her a large black leather belt purse and a dagger's support frog.

"This 1400-era belt purse would in my opinion go well with your sword belt, along with this dagger's frog."

"I certainly will take both the belt and the purse, mister, but I don't have a dagger to go with your frog."

"Not a problem, miss!" replied the owner, happy to see such a willing customer. He then led her to a glass counter in which a large and varied collection of daggers, knives, war hammers and maces was on display. One look at the price tags attached to each item then told Jehanne that she would need to use her credit card in order to afford

all that interested her here. Going behind the glass counter and unlocking its back panel, the store owner grabbed and presented to her a long, two-edged dagger.

"This dagger was designed to go with your arming sword, miss, and would nicely complete your outfit."

"I will take it! What about this eight-flanged mace? Is its design from the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century?"

"It is, miss. In fact, the widespread use of plate armor by the late 1300s and early 1400s had made such maces quite popular with knights and nobles, as they were quite effective in dealing with plate armor. Do you want it?"

"Yes, definitely!"

Jehanne could nearly hear the 'cha-ching' inside the store owner's head as he took out the mace and presented it to her.

"Anything else, miss?"

"A couple of things, actually. First, would you have some kind of book or video document about the art of swordsmanship as it pertains to the Middle Ages? If you would have similar books and documents about medieval arms and armor, I would also be interested in buying them."

"I indeed have such printed books and video documents, miss. Medievalists and amateurs in sword fighting frequently come to my shop for such books. They also often buy pieces of arms, armor and accoutrements for their practice jousting."

"Then, show me to your books display, then bring the items I already selected while I look at what else you have of interest in your store."

As the happy owner brought the belt, dagger, frogs, purse and mace to the sales counter after guiding her to the book shelves, Jehanne quickly reviewed what was on display and grabbed three printed books: one on medieval sword-fighting techniques; one on arms and armor of the late Middle Ages and one on Heraldry. Next, she grabbed their video equivalents before starting to tour in detail the shop, watched discretely by the store owner, who was ready to encourage her in her shopping. The last item she grabbed was a blue and white tabard decorated with embroidered fleurs-de-lis. She made a joke as she brought the books, videos and tabard to the sales counter.

"Well, I was not expecting to find a tabard to the colors of the enemy in an English shop, mister."

The man guffawed at those words.

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