

Chapter Ten (Five have A Fairly Reasonable Time)

The island of New Tortuga sweltered under a fine semi-tropical October sun, as Captain “Redclaw” DeWaal stood on the poop deck of his ship *The Axebled*, watching as the swarthy robotic rascals made it fast to the dockside. He smiled, sketching a salute to the Bosun, the big Ex-Swiss submariner who had officially taken early retirement and embarked on a second career as a Pirate. Most of the navally-inclined inhabitants of New Tortuga were honest smugglers or Buccaneers, but arrivals from “respectable” nations often went the whole way. Many Chinese and Malay vessels were traditional Pirates – but Swiss and Scandians who took to sea, tended to be full and authentic Pirates.

For a minute he stood leaning on the poop-deck rail, the wind ruffling his ears and head-fur. He was a tall red fox, his fine tail flowing in the breeze that eddied around the opened doors of the poop vertical-launch silos: a black waterproof jacket was stretched tightly over his powerful frame. Green slit-pupilled eyes scanned the surroundings piercingly, and a data jack hidden in the fur behind his left ear connected him to senses far more wide-reaching through the ship’s systems. He was a Pirate Captain, lord and ruler of his own ship, setting into port after a rich voyage, and the world looked good to him that October noon.

“All stop, finished with engines,” he intoned quietly into the speaking-tube. Below him, sweating boiler-room engineers swung the big lever that thrust the graphite moderator into the reactor, and the Captain blew the steam whistle in a long, exuberant blast, letting the whole of New Port Royal know they had arrived. Above him on the satellite receiver mast, a great black flag snapped and waved in the gusting wind, announcing the otherwise unmarked ship’s profession.

“Back in port!” Jurgen, the Bosun thumped on the bulkhead cheerfully, the great bear’s bulk making the metal shiver – “A good trip too. Time to divvy up the spoils, eh, Captain ?”

Captain DeWaal nodded, looking out from the poop deck to the crowded harbour. He flicked a switch on the speaking-tube, the pneumatic repeaters amplifying his voice across the ship, without radiating tell-tale radio frequencies for unwelcome ears to tap. “All hands assemble on the after deck ! Pay time and shore leave – you’ve earned it.” He spotted the prim figure of Merton, the Pirate Chartered Accountant, hurrying out of his cabin with his old-fashioned laptop chained as ever to his wrist.

The harbour of New Port Royal was a great sweep of concrete, overlying coral reef sand, that shielded the inner lagoon of the island of New Tortuga. Facilities were extensive: floating docks and factories were mounted on hulls in the lagoon, saving precious land area. A second breakwater shielded “The Roads”, the main anchoring point in the bay where the really big ships lay offshore.

“Shore leave at last. The working conditions aren’t perfect, but we make up for it.” Captain DeWaal stood on the companionway looking down on the after deck, as his crew assembled. They were a mixed bunch, as could be found manning most Pirate vessels – mercenary helicopter pilots, reactor technicians, various “Street Samurai” in their naval boarding armour, and the usual scattering of police cadets on their student “year out” sandwich course. In the hold was the loot from two automated vessels they had raided: mostly compact, high-value electronics manufactured and shipped by Evil Mega-corporations.

He frowned, as he looked over at the “Lee Tang”, a Chinese-crewed heavy cruiser anchored in the next slot. Most of the Buccaneers and Pirates looked down on that cruiser, which made a habit of holding up passenger ships and robbing the passengers of everything they had: the business was financially small potatoes, and needed a large force of expensive boarders to get the job done before Authority arrived on the scene. His own specialisation was in surprising automated cargo vessels, the only real victims being the Evil Mega-Corporations which owned them (and their Insurance companies. However, Insurance companies had been among the first, along with Accountants, to sample the tax and employee benefits of being officially registered as Evil.)

The Pirate captain’s tail twitched, as he looked out over his assembled crew. He recalled the tales his Grandfather had told him from back in the Low Countries, before rising sea level made them the Submerged Countries. In the days when there had been such things as Psychologists, a high-powered group of them had sunk thirty years of funding research into proving exactly what motivated folk heroes such as Robin Hood to rob from the rich and not the poor.

“That,” Captain DeWaal murmured as he descended the companionway, his crew of forty cheering loudly all around him, “is where the money is.”

An hour later saw the equivalent value of the loot distributed, Merton the accountant looking on with a pained expression as the last crew member cheerfully saluted and headed down the gangplank for some riotous shore leave. Jurgen grinned, exposing strong white teeth as he hefted his own share of the proceeds. “Gold yen coins, exchangeable anywhere on the planet – and a couple of these will pay for getting

blasted for a week! This is just the place to do it, too!” He took the salute of five of the Police Cadets as they turned to face the ship before heading off into the guaranteed lawless streets of the harbour side.

Captain DeWaal nodded to his bosun. “You’ve earned it. And there’s the share of our crew who didn’t come back this trip – those armed merchant vessels are getting tougher.” He nodded, slowly. “Aye, that they are. Those radar locks were on us before we’d even broken out the Black Flag. The Brotherhood Of The Coast will need to download our records about what to expect tackling a Dahaitso Corporation ship.”

Jurgen nodded solemnly, a veteran of the Swiss deep-sea fleet with the medals of ten campaigns stowed away in his locker. Aboard The Axebled the crew wore whatever suited them, as befitted a Pyrate vessel. The usual fashion was to dress in cast-off uniforms of nations the owners personally disliked; considering that their current career was regarded as being a Disgrace to the Uniform by the more hidebound members of the established Military around the planet, disgracing somebody else’s insignia made a twisted sort of sense. “But we bested them this time. And a refit here with the latest hardware and software, should get us through next time.” He gazed over at the far side of the lagoon, where the flags showing a stylised Bulky Disc showed that a Software Pirate ship was moored and busy, linked up to the Worldnet as it plied its virtual wares in a safe physical haven.

Captain DeWaal scratched at his Iranian Naval jacket, considering whether to replace it with a Peruvian one for the next voyage: he had been following the news off the Worldnet, and was very conscious of Public Relations in his job. “Well, into town. The Shore Party’s already on the way – we can just follow the noise. A good old place, New Tortuga. Always something new happening, but – always the same welcome.”

Jurgen tapped his sleeve, an old-fashioned flexible keyboard and screen in the wearable data suit. “Ship’s watch is steady, twelve crew should be enough, and Merton gets all his fun in the counting-room anyway. He’s a steady man to have aboard, though. All set, Capt’n ?”

The Pyrate Captain gave his most ferocious grin, and clapped his Bosun heartily on the back, with a force that would have knocked many a more slightly built fur flying. “That I am, Jurgen. And ashore, they call me Redclaw.”

The main street of New Port Royal was one of the most famous views of the planet, though it ranked with the central pit of far-off Ryleh’ for the extreme ratio between the number of people who had seen it on the Worldnet as opposed to having physically walked there. The buildings were low, generally two or three stories tall, and were either flimsy panel-based expendable structures or massively reinforced concrete blockhouses, often savagely burned and scarred.

“Not quite as the films show, is it ?” Redclaw mused, tipping his hat politely to a well-known and respected Eco-terrorist, as he headed towards an inn. “We’ve been ashore ten minutes, and not heard a shot fired in anger. I expect some of our cadets are a little disappointed.”

“Quite, Redclaw. They’ll get used to it.” Jurgen tapped at his pipe, which was filled with nothing more illegal than a heavy Balkan blend of tobacco. Although it was true that every psychoactive chemical known to an increasingly sybaritic world was freely available, the Non-Government made sure that they were on sale at strictly production cost prices. This effectively meant that any residents or tourists could buy a lethal overdose of their favourite intoxicant for the price of a day’s food – and in fact, most addicts fairly rapidly did so.

They strolled down the street, accepting various good-natured hails of welcome or insult from their friends and rivals. “No taxes to pay, no legal responsibilities – just a matter of keeping up the popularity,” Redclaw continued, waving at a well-known Pyrate Queen (A title that applied on New Tortuga to leaders of both sexes, as the notorious and peach-coloured Good Ship Venus berthed in The Roads attested). “But that’s why we have to watch ourselves – put a missile accidentally into a cruise liner or a ferry, and next time our suppliers here will charge us double – if they’d sell to us at all.”

“Mmm. We could change suppliers – but we’d need a different crew, if we changed our style.” Jurgen sucked at the briar pipe, sending a thick grey cloud out into the bright sunlight as he exhaled. “Remember that Albanian Pirate ship, the Durres, that used to be the U.S.S. Iowa ?”

“I remember it.” Redclaw’s long, luxuriant tail swished, as if glad to be free of the chem-suit it had been bound into for too long.

“Now, It’s not that I’d want to criticise a fellow Pyrate – but they changed style, and were most of the way to being Pirates by the time it caught up with them.” Jurgen’s deep-set eyes gleamed, as he strode on. “You remember, they turned pretty murderous, trying to win the Teach Trophy against all the competition. Shelling seaside resorts, and such. But they still got in with the Eco bunch after everybody else refused to supply them, managed to persuade them they were fighting shoreline violations, demolishing unsightly tourist developments and such.”

“Which I suppose they were.” Redclaw pointed out. “I see what you mean - the Brotherhood Of The Coast didn’t think much of the idea though, and they turned them out. Lost most of their best crew, too – it’d be a hard life without a place like this to look forward to between trips. If they’re not welcomed here or in the Greenland waters, there’s not many places willing and able to supply a ship that size.” He patted an old-style book in his pocket, the classic manual “Teach Thyself Piracy” which was the main philosophical and ethical guide his colleagues followed. The Pacific was a happier hunting-ground than the Atlantic, and the homeland of the Greenland Anarchist Non-State was definitely lacking in amenities, unless one had a liking for ice-caverns and the strange dances that had taken their name from Disko Island.

“Quite.” Jurgan knocked his pipe out against the ferroconcrete portal of a Pirate tavern, spotting the “No Smoking” sign above the airlock. “The Ecos switched them to their supply chain, all “clean” oxygen/hydrogen binary munitions and such, but even so - the Durres didn’t last long after that.”

“I heard. Some bunch of students used it for target practice with a 1:1 scale model “Blue Steel” stand-off bomb they’d built in class. “ Redclaw shrugged, one ear dipping. “That’s the sort of thing that happens, if you lose your Reputation.”

They pushed in through the doors, the very image of a successful Captain and First Officer of their profession. Redclaw stood there silhouetted against the light for a second, his slitted vulpine eye sharp and glittering, not missing a thing – and Jurgan was at his back, a mountain of calm solidity and experience backed with a raw hulking power as the bear filled his generously cut Californian Free State uniform with what was obviously well-exercised muscle.

The tavern was fairly full, as Redclaw had expected from the number of vessels berthed in the harbour. But his ears raised in surprise as he looked around at two dozen familiar faces now dressed rather differently than he had seen them on his last visit to the port.

“Is this a costume party – or has Fashion changed that much?” He asked mildly, looking at the crowd now dressed in frock coats, three-cornered hats and knee breeches with big, floppy-topped sea-boots. “We’ve not been away all THAT long.”

“Arrrrr.” Nodded a colleague of his, who Redclaw knew perfectly well came from an abandoned Russian naval town near Murmansk. “Things have changed, round these here parts...” He looked around, seeming a little dazed, as if taking in Redclaw’s costume and then becoming acutely conscious of his own for the first time. When he spoke again, his voice was strained, but he held it to nearer his usual Samoyed accent than the unconvincing West-country eighteenth-century one he had started with. “Things changed a few days ago – but what nobody knows, is HOW.”

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“This IS a jolly place!” Julian Pontephrigh commented, splashing out of the beach on the sheltered lagoon side of the reef. “I must say, I was expecting something a lot more seedy and money-grabbing. It’s a real, proper Pirate Town after all!”

“Yes, and not nearly as dangerous as I thought it might be,” Anne spoke up, opening the picnic hamper that Jenks had carried from their base by the airstrip. “Jenks has hardly been called on to perform his Special Duties, at all. But he did them very well when he needed to.”

“Good old Jenks,” Dick cheered. “Always there when you need him!”

Jenks bowed a fraction, his black morning-suit unruffled by the breeze and undisturbed by the sweltering mid-morning heat. Whether there had been a family of Jenks’ relations on the plateau, was something the Pontephrighs had never cared to ask – there certainly had been no female equivalents to establish a hereditary line of them, unlike the various Timmies down the years. Had their ancestors relayed scurrilous gossip about their own servants, one legend would have whispered dark things about there openly ever being one Jenks down the ages, and another would have referred darkly about the – abilities – of a being who was part Pit Bull and part Pit Fiend.

But naturally, it would have been considered extremely poor form to pass that sort of slanderous rumour along, especially about a perfectly good servant who had been with the family for SUCH a long time.

“Quite. And they’re open to suggestion, too,” Dick looked across to the nearest vessel, an ex-Russian aircraft carrier that now flew a cheerfully grinning skull and crossbones, hastily printed on its original plain black flag. “You were quite right to point it out, Anne – as a Jolly Roger, the original wasn’t nearly Jolly enough. That one’s much more suitable. Can’t have a Pirate Island without properly kitted-out, swaggering Devil-may-care ruffians. Just wouldn’t be right, somehow.”

Anne’s ears blushed at her Brother’s complement. “Lunch is ready! Sardine sandwiches, cucumber dipped in vinegar, roast ham cut thick, more sardine sandwiches, simply heaps of tomato and one of those lovely sticky plum-cakes Jenks always manages to find. I cut the sandwiches.”

“Bravo, Anne. We DO seem to eat such a lot, don’t we ?” Julian rubbed his fur dry vigorously, and sat down under the big red and white striped sunshade that clever Timmy had found somewhere. “It’s a good thing you really are such a super little housewife, you know. Someday you’ll have a house that simply sparkles, I’m sure of it.”

“I try.” Anne dipped her muzzle modestly. “I say – where’s George got to today ? Last time I saw her, she said she’s been invited out to a party, with those big sporty-type girls she had the letter of Introduction to. We did say we’d be here for lunch.”

“Silly George!” Julian laughed. “She’ll miss all the fun ! She will look a fool, turning up without even a proper Party dress to wear. Maybe it’ll all be for the best, she’ll knuckle down and find what she really is suited to. At least she seems to be making new friends easily around here.”

Anne nodded vigorously, her ears rippling. Her cousin “George” had stopped confiding so much to her since they had left the Plateau, and especially in the past few days. She had dismissed Anne’s questions as to what she had been doing, as “Exercise stuff – you wouldn’t be interested.” Judging by the keenness George had taken it up, Anne looked forward to seeing her winning medals in whatever it was, whenever Toho Academy held its next Sports Day.

“Here she comes! There’s Timmy, running ahead of her as always. What a pair.” Dick stood up, waving cheerily. “Hello Timmy ! Been having fun ?” He scritchd Timmy behind the ears, smiling. “Good Timmy.”

“I say, George,” Julian frowned. “What on earth are you wearing ? That cap makes you look like a ...” he searched his small store of handed-down invective, as he stared at the black patent-leather peaked cap his cousin now sported. “Like a – chauffeur! Or a railway-guard!”

George sniffed, taking off the peaked cap, with the very large, glossy peak, and polished it on her sleeve. “Well. This happened to be given me by Akeritsu, a very well-respected Pirate Queen. She’s been showing me all sorts of fascinating local customs, and I think it’s jolly fun. She dropped me off from her ship just after breakfast.”

“You’ve been staying out all night?” Dick’s ears went right up. “Whatever will people think?”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s all right,” Anne assured her brother. “I heard about it from Mariko – even perfectly respectable people these days have “Pyjama parties” – it’s all the rage. I’ve never been to one yet,” she finished, a little wistfully.

Georgina set the cap on her head rakishly, and looked at her cousin coolly. “Well, I don’t think you’d really fit in with Akeritsu,” she opined. “You’re not really her – type. But me and Timmy seem to be getting along with her and her friends quite swimmingly.”

“It must be super to be so popular – to party and dance the night away till dawn,” Anne closed her eyes, clasping her hands together. “How splendid !”

Georgina patted Timmy, and sat down on the picnic rug. “Something like that, anyway. Gosh, Jenks has laid out a super spread again, hasn’t he just ? I’m famished, after all that.” She sat down, joining her cousins as she tucked into the repast. “What a lovely picnic ! I’m glad we can find proper food out here. Still, Jenks always manages to find something – he even managed to lay out a good spread that time we were heading down the river through the jungle.”

“Plum-cake and all! And Timmy came back with a tablecloth to replace the one we’d used for a braking parachute, that got muddy when we landed. Timmy’s awfully good at finding things, aren’t you Timmy ?” Anne patted their human, smiling.

Tossing Timmy a nice meaty ham-bone, George frowned for a second. It had been something the Pyrate queen had asked her at breakfast, when George had commented on their usual fare at home – the pirate ship’s galley had been out of smoked haddock or even Sardines, though she supposed a little sloppy domestic service was probably to be expected amongst Pyrates. Akeritsu had listened with interest to George’s story, of her life on the high Plateau, where traditions had been handed down for generations. But then she had asked one question, quite innocently – on a wholly isolated plateau where the last contact with the outside world had been four generations ago – *where did the sardines come from ?*

George’s eyes glazed briefly, and dismissed the thought. A proper picnic required sardine sandwiches – therefore, naturally the sardines were there. To have things otherwise would be unthinkable, and between them the Infamous Five sometimes did quite a lot of thinking.

“Anyway,” Julian said with his mouth full. “We’ve been here three days now almost, and haven’t scented a whisker of the folk we’re here to find – and it’s not that big a place. Let’s take another look at the book. It’s been right so far.”

“Yes, let’s.” Anne’s eyes lit up. “I’ve been reading the index for medium-sized Adventures that aren’t too scary. “ Her tail drooped, as realisation hit her. “Oh dear. Maybe it’s not in that section.”

George cast her a withering glare, which fortunately missed. “Anne, you couldn’t be wetter if you’d swum here instead of flown. Let me have a look at that book!” She grabbed the mysterious volume with both hands, and looked through the back pages. “Here we go – ‘Hideously dangerous, colossal

Adventures that'll make you...' ” she broke off, puzzled. “Why does it say we'll need a change of underwear ? As if we wouldn't carry spares anyway!”

“Odd sort of book, all round,” Dick agreed, looking over George's shoulder. “I'm sure I didn't see that entry before, when I looked through it. Or rather – it didn't seem to be quite there - like seeing something out of the corner of your eye. Rum thing, that. Still, it's what we can use now, so that's the important thing.”

“Hmm.” George leafed through to the middle of the book. “This is more like it! How about some nocturnal raids on desperate packs of brigands and “Organ-leggers” for a start ? Should be a full moon tonight, perfect for that kind of thing. I've been watching some films, it all looks easy enough. “

Julian raised an eyebrow. “That's our plucky George. Should we spend some time in watching the place, wherever it is, and see just what we're up against ? Or should we just wade in regardless ?”

George sniffed. “What a silly question. We're Pontephrights. We always wade into Adventures regardless. Remember Great-Great-Great Uncle Isembard's motto – “Time spent in reconnaissance is time wasted”. And he was at Galipoli, so it's got to be right.”

“Quite right, George. “ Julian conceded, looking at his stocky, glowering cousin, her brown curly head-fur spilling out from under the exceedingly polished leather cap. “Some times, you really are nearly as sensible as a boy. Let's stock up with all the necessary items – I think the book mentions iron spikes, dark lanterns, lengths of rope and a ten-foot pole are in style for this sort of thing – and tonight we're off on Adventure!”

“Yes, at last. I was wondering when we'd get round to it,” Dick's tail wagged happily. “It's been a bit slow, lately, don't you think ? Even on the Plateau, we managed to have at least one full-blown Adventure a month, plus a few small ones. And this should be different, too – the style's like that special Boy Scout troop that Great-Great-Great Uncle Charles raised when he came back from being a Missionary in the Far East.”

On his return to Bellington Hall after World War One and a few years in Japan, the elder Pontephright had brought back a trio of servants who he had deputed to re-organise the local Scout Troop. The Bellington troop were soon the pride of the county, as in their distinctive head-to-toe black uniforms and masks they could be spotted climbing buildings, trees and church towers, rescuing stray domestic cats and suchlike Good Deeds.

“Hurrah!” Three voices raised in cheers. “Hurrah for the Five!”

Captain DeWaal plugged his cranial data jack into the socket of the shielded cubicle in the corner of the tavern, and concentrated hard as he brought the BUI (Brain-user Interface) to mind. His model was an experimental one that had not yet cleared the five-year medical tests the rest of the world demanded on direct nerve interfaces – but on New Tortuga, most things were available. As the image steadied, he diverted a stray worried thought to the waste basket, of the definite risks involved with the no-guarantee surgeons on the island. People with similar versions to his own implant had suffered side-effects that had added whole new chapters to the textbooks on brain disorders – but his enhanced abilities had certainly saved his life and his ship many times over, so he lived with the risk and accepted it.

His thought settled on his supplier, a very recognisable fur of a rare species in this part of the world, and he smiled as the inner screen lit up. “Pacahuta! How's business these days?” And he blinked, looking at the familiar figure of the ant-eater. “What in the name of Blackbeard's Ghost is that thing on your shoulder ?”

“Ah, my dear Captain DeWaal. Do you like it ? All the rage this week.” The anteater's voice was soft and quiet, the microphone on his tubular muzzle amplifying it several times over. He cast an eye at the metallic thing that squatted on his shoulder – it was garishly silver, green and blue, and had a head that looked like an industrial bolt-cutter with beady, evil-looking scanning eyes. “Would you like one ? Three days ago, the demand for trained biological parrots went through the roof, so – “ he shrugged. “I had our contractors program one up and send the template files to our own fabricators. We used some of the programming from an assault robot, and some from an air-to-air missile. It works rather well.”

The fox's muzzle wrinkled. “What is going on with this place? Fashions are one thing – but I've seen the most hard-boiled Pyrates and Pirates, even, looking like extras from a film set. And these are folk who'd split you stem to stern if you tried to argue fashion details with them.” He blinked. “Ahhhg! It's happening to me now – I've never said “Split you stem to stern” in my life!”

The anteater chuckled quietly. On his shoulder, a metallic bird hopped from one steel foot to the other, a harsh hiss of amusement spitting from its guillotine of a beak. “Three yen, for the Neo-Parrot, to such a fine customer as yourself. Arr, Matey, that ye be.”

Redclaw stared at him in horror. “What, you too ?”

Pacahuta's tiny mouth gave a very small grin, and his tongue flicked in and out. “Only joking, Captain. I've no idea what's been happening to this place, to tell the truth – and it really doesn't worry me.

It's all business, you know. Thinking of which – I hear you've had a good voyage. Will you be sending in an order for new supplies to my humble establishment ?”

Redclaw's ears dipped, pressed back to his skull. “Later, later,” he snarled, his muzzle wrinkling. “One way or another – I'll get to the bottom of this!” With a sharp thought, he cut the connection, and pulled the data jack from the wall socket with a force that sent alarmed stars dancing across his perception.

Sitting in the shielded booth, he stared out into the tavern through the one-way mirror. Though in his profession he owed no actual allegiance to any flag but the pirate one, he fiercely loved the island and its joyously seething mass of the truly Free. No laws bound his ship to defend the place, and yet – he knew he would do so, backed by his crew, against any open invasion by outside powers.

“But there's more than one way to invade, than sailing up with a fleet or hammering us from orbit,” he told himself, concentrating on the cheery crowd outside. Much of it was familiar: there were two large ungulates brawling in one corner in a good-spirited way, probably settling some quarrel in a way forbidden to them onboard their ship – and a dozen or so Pyrates cheered them on, taking bets as to the victor. But few of the crowd seemed to be drinking the usual island brews, not even the trendy retro “Alco-pops” or modern “Narco-pops” with their secret ingredients that only rarely took revenge on their devourers with catastrophic liver or motor neuron failure. On the polished wooden bar, he could see a newly installed dispenser, with the word “Grog” hastily hand-written on the pump handle.

For five minutes he thought hard, his eyes flicking from face to face as he sat unseen, his sharp wits working at full speed, without needing to call for help to the arrays of computing power available through the hard-wired gateway in his skull. At last, he nodded. “Something very strange arrived on this island three days ago,” he told himself. “It shouldn't be beyond me to find out what. And then – to put a definite stop to it.”

Berthed out in The Roads, that outer protected piece of water that currently sheltered a score of vessels, a somewhat rusty ex-freighter rocked at anchor. The early afternoon sun shone scorching on the bare metal deck, as two metallic-clad figures sat supposedly on guard, their Remote_Impersonal_Computers switched on. Of all the things they had expected to do on this island, Homework was not one of them.

Potzu scratched his head, the slender human still twitchy after his spell in the Psychiatric casualty ward following experiences that had been officially diagnosed as 87 percent too hideous to comprehend. “I can't believe Yukio is making us carry on with Cultural Hygiene exercises,” he complained. “This isn't my idea of a swashbuckling time, not by a long way.”

“Hush.” Shiitake Tabi tapped his screen, his helmet and gloves off and neatly stacked at his side ready for emergencies. “The Arch-Dean gave us permission to come here as a field trip – not a holiday. And we've tests next week, so we'd better get revising.” He frowned, looking at the questions. “Here's one for you. *In the year 2017, Leader Cheung of Myanmar and President Brown of California reached the final round of the Iron Fist Prize for the most corrupt and brutal regime on the planet. Despite great efforts, their attempts at increasing brutality had both reached the point of diminishing returns, so the prize would be settled by corruption. President Brown accepted a large bribe, to withdraw from the contest, and did so. Question – who did the judges give the prize to, and why ?* Work that one out.”

Potzu stared at the screen, frowning. “If President Brown withdrew from the competition, he lost.” But then he blinked, looking round. “But if he accepted a bribe and his opponent didn't, then – he won.” His eyes widened. “That's insane! I'm not meant to think about anything like that for at least another month.”

The pug grinned, hitting one of the links to the sound archives and his ears twitching at a fine swinging tune. “If you think that's bad, the whole thing was predicted nearly forty years before it happened – this track * was recorded before most people believe time travel was even invented. I'm doing second-year Phenomenology, and it's definitely proving useful at times like these.”

“Umm.” Potzu's eyes crossed. Though he was of the Anime race, his eyes were far smaller than the females of his kind, and his hair was a sensible black rather than the natural blondes (and frequent natural blues, greens and pinks) that seemed to be passed down the female genetic line. He winced, trying not to recall the Thing In The Launderette that he had been exposed to with such consequences – but he had a sneaking suspicion that none of his sisters would have a problem with it.

- “California Uber Alles” by The Dead Kennedys, 1982.

“You can’t complain – the Medical Centre say you had a mild case, not even contagious.” Shiitake pointed out. “A few days in the isolation tank – why, what’s that ? And if you’d needed anything more major, our medical staff could have handled that too. Doctor Faustus has done dozens of Craniopuncture treatments, and several of the patients are walking around alive and sane to this day. You’re lucky you live in such a high-tech age, thirty years ago the treatment wasn’t even available. We studied it in Phenomenology last year – one of the great accidental discoveries of the Millennium.” Just as Acupuncture had been discovered in legend by a soldier pierced with arrows discovering some of his long-running illnesses were cured, so had Craniopuncture been discovered a few years after the Rupture, when a bored warder made a surprising discovery as he enlivened a long shift by nailing patients’ heads to the floor (it had been a wet Wednesday with nothing much to watch on the television).

Potzu frowned, staring at his screen without actually reading the words. Coming here had seemed a good idea at the time – Gen and Yukio had sounded very plausible, claiming that some real fieldwork would do wonders for his grades, especially in such a Sink of Depravity. They had painted a rosy picture of him standing at a street corner, able to point out why almost every single thing and action around him was fundamentally and criminally Wrong, giving him enough material to shudderingly collate and discuss for the rest of the year.

“And another thing,” he tapped his screen. “Why are we here on guard duty when they’re all off in town, getting cranked up on those “Narco-pop” drinks? I know we’re meant to be here to study this Sink Of Depravity – it’s not meant to be a Bathtub Of Depravity, to jump into and enjoy.”

“Ah.” Shiitake nodded. “You’ve heard their reports of what it’s like down there – you wouldn’t last a minute before relapsing, with the sheer Un-Japanese, anarchistic Horror on those streets. Why, Osamu was carried back in a stretcher last night, screaming about purple things crawling all over him – and he’d only been in three bars to measure the levels of Infamy. Plus, although our team have got the Terrorists stowed away onshore - we’ve still got to mind the baby.” He jerked his thumb down towards the ship’s hold. “It’s a position of trust. Imagine if the locals found out we had it so near their town! “

Potzu stiffened. That was one problem that had not occurred to him before. “I don’t think the local howling Mob would like to find out we’d brought it over here,” he admitted. “I know I’ll be glad to be out of range, myself.” His eyes crossed as he thought about it – only in the former Unites States had private ownership of weapons of mass destruction been exactly approved of, after well-paid lawyers had managed to prove it was a Constitutional Right *

“And we will be,” Shiitake soothed. “As soon as we’ve found out how to dismantle it.” His eyebrow raised, as he looked out at the island, remembering what Gen and Yukio had taken him aside and suggested. They needed to understand the workings of the Device, true enough – but hopefully leave it in repairable form afterwards. New Tortuga was already a famous island, but he nodded cryptically as he thought of another kind of fame it deserved to acquire.

On the same page, he told himself – in a different section, but on the same page - as Bikini Atoll.

In the hold of a less rusty vessel not two kilometres away across the lagoon, Suzuko Hohki paced the narrow cell she had spent the past two days in. She knew roughly where she was, and who had brought her there – although the suit visors had been down, there was no mistaking Shiitake’s high-fashion Mecha. “Anyway,” she muttered to herself, looking up at the barred, thick glass of the single ten-centimetre porthole above her head. “Who else apart from Mae would have got Satori to fly his Spruce Goose out here, but Gen’s lot ?”

Sitting down in the corner, she smoothed her matted tail, trying to avoid getting yet more tangles in its damp fur. Her cell was on the waterline, as she could tell from the sound of waves lapping directly outside, and the occasional spray breaking over the porthole. The room could have been smaller, true – two metres by three, with a bucket and a flattened cardboard box on the bare metal plates as its only amenities.

*Case of Ezekiel Graham Jr. vs. The State, August 2008. After barely escaping a lynch mob larger than any portable supply of projectile ammunition could have dealt with in self-defence, the defendant had taken to carrying pressurised litre-sized bottles of anthrax spores, on Deterrent lines. Having won the legal battle, the next case concerned a similarly equipped travelling salesman, who was slain by a sniper before having time to trigger his pint of botulinus toxin deterrent. It became popular to link the Self-Defence Deterrents with a heart rate monitor such that, once the circuit was armed when entering dangerous situations, the wearer’s demise would cause it to release.

Of course, with a few thousand people walking around every city similarly equipped, accidents will happen...

She sighed. She had been bundled into here two days ago, under cover of darkness, with the crew of the Road Runner somewhere following behind, hustled by her enemies from Toho and a dozen strangers, mostly large lepinies to judge by their ears silhouetted in the darkness. Food and water came once a day, and her bucket was emptied at the same time --but nobody was interested in speaking to her. Whoever Gen had contacted over here, she realised, obviously had a fair degree of local power.

Suddenly, she felt a faint vibration in the hull plates she sat on. She shifted – pressing her lightly furred palm to the cold metal. There it was again – a sequence of double and single beats, in the same pattern, repeated over and over.

Her ears went up. “That’s the Peruvians, I’ll bet. They’re here too, somewhere. They know I use Morse code – what’s this, though?” She thought for a minute, playing the pattern of banging through her head. Suddenly her eyes widened. “You can’t do long and short bangs – I’ll bet the double raps are meant to be dashes. If they are ...” She closed her eyes, concentrating.

“SOS ... SOS ...” she translated. Fortunately, Japlish was a neutral language when in plain-text mode. She unfastened her parachute harness: the main buckle was a hefty titanium forging that she grasped in one paw, ready to reply. Suddenly, she stopped. Simply hitting the wall would make a lot of obvious noise, and whoever was keeping them all captive was liable to hear it and stop her. She reached into her helmet and unclipped the thick, felt-like synthetic fibre insulation lining, wrapping around her paw and muffling the noise as she tapped “DAK ... DAK ...” – data acknowledged, a code group used by transmission systems all over the world.

The other vibration stopped immediately. Suzuko closed her eyes again, trying to think in code. It would have been no trouble to work it out on paper, but she had been searched and stripped of such items – even the wire saw she had hidden in her boot. She supposed she had Yukio to thank for that, as the Siamese cat had attended the same First-year aircrew course she had, which had given a guide to concealing useful tools and weapons in case of capture.

‘QUERY PERU CREW REPLY’ She tapped on the wall.

‘DAK. REPLY’ came the answer a few seconds later.

‘QUERY NUMBER ALIVE + DEAD. ONE HERE REPLY.’

‘SIXTEEN HERE OK. FOUR SICK TWO GONE.C.O. GONE. YOU PILOT QUERY REPLY.’ The message was tapped out differently – Suzuko recognised a different Morse “hand” at work, as distinctive as a signature. Her tail twitched. From the few words she had managed to exchange with the bomber crew, they were claiming they were aiming not at Japan at all, but for a landing in the friendly territory of North Korea. She blinked, very unsure of how much of it to believe. True, North Korea had taken on the discarded title and legal trademark “The Happiest Place On Earth™”, and enforced it by making sure anyone suspected of showing less than a complete contentment with the regime, was given far more pressing things to be unhappy about. Even in Japan, the Spontaneous Demonstrations Of Patriotic Support were not always compulsory, or timetabled in the newspapers the week before.

‘LOCATION QUERY. TRUCE QUERY REPLY’ Before she had thought of her own reply, a second message vibrated through the floor. She thought briefly, then nodded. Even if the Peruvians had set out to wipe out one of her favourite cities, they no longer had the bomb – she had seen six Mecha-clad figures straining to carry it from the carved-open fuselage of the Road Runner, their snowshoe-like feet sinking deep into the sand at every step.

‘TRUCE OK. HERE NEW TORTUGA. ‘ She frowned, hesitating as she held the buckle against the wall, poised to tap again. ‘NO JSDF HERE. SOLO. GOT ALLIES QUERY REPLY’

There was a long pause, while presumably the other crew discussed amongst themselves. Then the reply came back – ‘HAVE EMBASSY HERE RECEPTION DOUBTFUL. ALLIES DOUBTFUL REPLY.’

Suzuko stared at the wall, mournfully. “Their own Government doesn’t want to know – I bet they’ve thrown them to the wolves to save face.” Her whiskers drooped, and she took a deep breath. “The cavalry aren’t coming for us. We’ll have to get out of this one ourselves – one way or another.”

Standing up straight, her expression set grimly. “There has to be a way out of here.”

Captain “Redclaw” DeWaal strolled slowly down a narrow alleyway, one paw on his Shocker – something like a cattle-prod that assumed very large and tough cattle wearing armour needed severe discouragement. Holstered conspicuously at his belt was a one-shot flamer – he had never used it on the Island, where incinerating local residents was frowned-upon by the general population. This end of the island though – here was somewhere even he trod cautiously, and would not have come alone by choice.

Looking around to check the alley was empty, he knocked three times on a plain metal door – there might be insect-sized cameras watching his every move, but it never hurt to eliminate the obvious risks first. The building was one of the older, hefty concrete structures that had survived earthquakes, typhoons and various large-calibre neighborhood squabbles.

The door slid open, and he strode boldly inside. A corridor lined with light salmon-coloured wood led into the interior, through windowless walls a metre thick. He nodded – he had been here three times before, in search of information not otherwise available – the prices were high, but he had the gold.

At the far end, a lighter door opened. “Ah – my good Captain. It IS good to see you again!” A voice came from the darkness beyond.

As the fox stepped into the void beyond, the lights slowly came up, revealing a figure seated in an armchair. The armchair was large and soft, of an old design that had seen better days – knowing what its owner earned per consultation, Redclaw knew there must be more than met the eye there. And its owner – a tall, brown-furred lepine stood up to greet him, clad in what looked like a well preserved pre-Millennium T-shirt with some strange band who appeared not to be playing Alpenhorns.

The rabbit smiled, bowing his head slightly. “And what can I do for you today, Captain ? Sailing schedules for worthy prizes again ? No guarantees, as you know – but my reputation is my fortune, and I try my best.”

“Nothing like that, this time.” Redclaw clenched his paws behind his back, pacing to and fro restlessly. “You’ve noticed, something’s – happened to this island this week ? I just got in – and found the place Changed. Not that it’s exactly disastrous – but something’s affecting the minds of everybody on this island. If it can make the changes I’ve seen in this short a time – and some of the folk affected could win gold medals for strength of mind – what else might it do ?”

“I’ve noticed.” The rabbit’s ears dipped, smiling pleasantly. “I thought it quite amusing, myself – but if you want to find out why – I can try and discover. But it won’t be cheap, and you may not like the answer.”

Redclaw nodded impatiently. “I know that. I’ve never believed “What you don’t know can’t hurt you” – quite the opposite. Give me the facts to chew on – if I like the taste or not, is my business.”

Long lepine ears nodded. “Very well. I shall take the case.” The rabbit stood, stretched, and suddenly seemed to grow in presence as he walked towards an inner door, as if a cloak that masked his inner power was thrown aside in preparation. “If you’ll wait twenty minutes - I have things to make ready.”

Nineteen minutes later by Redclaw’s cesium atomic wristwatch, the brown lepine returned. He carried a stack of flat circular metal cases, with about the proportions of coins twenty centimetre across. “Stand there – and please make no sound, until the casting is done,” he directed Redclaw, pointing to a raised area of the floor in one corner. Stepping onto a prominent black tile in the centre of the room, he brought out a remote control device and touched one of the buttons. Wearing a black cloak with what looked like fine, gleaming copper embroidery, he threw the cloak back, revealing a grey, utilitarian boiler-suit underneath that stirred odd memories in the Pyrate fox looking on.

Slowly, the floor began to sink, leaving the owner standing on what was now a metre cube of black, obsidian-like material, and Redclaw standing on what had become a balcony. With another touch of the controls, the lights dimmed – except for a tracery of light that crisscrossed the floor like a security beam network made visible.

“We begin.” He opened one of the cases, and brought out an ancient-looking plastic reel. Holding it above his head, he began to chant:

“O you who look down upon the data seas, watcher over the first and last of packets
O you who are the one and the zero, the all and the void
That take delight in the feasting of viruses
That take delight in the crashing of discs
Whose name can never be recorded, whose face can never be imaged
Lord of Errors, look favorably upon these our sacrifices!”

With that, his muscles bulged, and there was a sharp crack. The room suddenly became very cold – Redclaw’s fur fluffed out, as he realised – there was no draft, as there would be from any form of air conditioner cooling the place at this rate. The buck tore the spool apart and threw its contents into the air – hundreds of metres of what looked like thin dark brown ribbon looped and coiled as it flew through the air, writhing as it fell to tangle all across the floor, lit and traced by the brilliant web of light beams.

“SO!” The buck’s eyes blazed, staring intently at the thrashing mass of slowly moving tape, like an archaeologist reading some obscure manuscript. He pointed to one loop of tape, his ears twitching. “That configuration there – I read mental power – not a psyker, not an ordinary one. Something – blind, unknowing, but such power behind it ... “ His eyes widened. “I’ve not seen that configuration since I left – Europe. And there’s another one – a different one, but linked to it by circumstances – that arc there shows it. “ He frowned. “Both are hidden. One is hidden and does not know it – the other one is kept hidden by others. Imprisoned.”

“On this island?” Redclaw queried.

The Cybermancer nodded. He looked down at the oracle he had cast, using rare 2400 foot reels of ancient tape laden with data that had never been restored – once cast once, it would never be useable again. “On this island. I see speed and fire in their backgrounds – atomic fire.”

Redclaw nodded slowly – although only a few ships had been close enough that early Sunday morning to see the bursts of light high in the Southern skies, the Worldnet had speculated about what the JSDF had been up to – the JSDF themselves being tight-lipped about the whole business. “Anything else?”

The rabbit frowned. “Many associations – but very jumbled. I see a fox – she is the imprisoned one. She has the key, but she does not know it. I see many forces converging on this island, drawn by the same thing – some are here already, some are on the way. The word is spreading, that here is something nations will fight to possess.”

Vulpine ears went up. “Interesting! Anything more on this fox? “

The Cybermancer shook his head. “Only – that she is in the hands of her enemies. They are in a hurry, or they very soon will be. There is a danger they will very soon realise, before anyone else does.” His whiskers went rigid in alarm. “There’s three future lines diverging there – one of them is very short, for everyone on the island! But – its nature is obscure. That tangle on the time line back there, was atomic fire – the one the other line leads to, is – as deadly, but of a different nature. It’s part of the force that was brought here.” He slumped, panting as if he had run a marathon. “The image is fading – that’s all I can see.”

There was a minute’s silence, as the lights came up and the floor raised back to normal – looking around, Redclaw noticed that the tape was no longer there. His tail bristled, but he nodded slowly. “Now, that, was – Interesting.” Silently, he paid the agreed sum and took his leave, thoughtful but not so preoccupied that he failed to check the alleyway and street carefully before stepping outside.

“I have a date, I know what to look for,” he told himself, heading towards the parts of town where less arcane forms of information could be purchased. “A vixen, eh ? Could be – interesting.” He strode on, his fine muzzle twitching. There was a restaurant nearby, the scent of fresh fish appetising on the evening breeze – only at the top end of town were the “specialist” cuisines served, and mostly to tourists and newcomers. Eating the flesh of protected species had never appealed to him, and as for sentients – there were good biological reasons not to eat things too closely related to yourself, however well cooked. Some of the more decadent tourists carried back with them souvenirs they had not expected when they paid the bill.

“But as for food – yes, and then to find the crew.” Redclaw told himself, waving to a popular and wealthy assassin he knew slightly. “If any of them are up for a little land action tomorrow morning – just because you’re a Pirate, doesn’t mean you can’t work on overtime.” His stride lengthened as he headed South, recalling what the Cybermancer had said – something was on this island that could cause nations to start looking very hard at New Tortuga – some forces were already in place. Who they might be, and who the ones arriving might be – was something that would be worth quite a lot to know.

Between New Tortuga and the scatter of islands that held Toho Academy, the Pacific Ocean was wide, deep and empty. The major shipping lanes avoided such a notorious Pirate haunt, and the peering satellites looked down on quite unfrequented waters, usually broken only by the pirate fleets heading to and fro.

Swinging over on its orbit, Satellite JSSF 45339 scanned the open waters, its onboard image analysis programs looking for anything unusual. Two hundred kilometres from the nearest land, it looked down and metaphorically blinked in surprise at what it saw. A faint wake across the long swells led to a triple dot, a triangular formation of slowly moving metallic objects that JSSF 45339 scanned through its entire database trying to make sense of.

Giving up in bafflement, the onboard computer decided to call home, and relay the picture to its home base for analysis. Whatever this little fleet was – it was nothing that usually ventured into the Pacific Ocean.

“Fixed it!” Kazuko Leclerc grinned, wriggling out of the engine hatch of her Maus II, waving a large wrench. “Number Three generator had shorted out – I bypassed it, switched the power train round. We’ll be a bit slower until I replace the field windings, but we’ll get there.”

“Finally.” Mae sat on the edge of the turret, her glossy black silicone suit glittering with spray that blew over the high flotation screens keeping the two hundred tonne tank from becoming a tracked bathysphere. “OK, Mariko !” She shouted down into the turret, where the mouse sat relaxed in the driver’s seat, some three metres below the water line. “Take it gently – same course, and let the rest know we’re moving!”

The three land vehicles had been hastily converted by fixing high waterproof screens around them, their shape rounded slightly to provide reasonable streamlining and storage for fuel for the trip in rounded flexible bladders. Heavy ceramic fibre cables linked them twenty metres apart, far enough apart for the rolling waves not to throw them together, but firmly enough so that any two vehicles could tow a third – a feature Mangana had insisted on, despite it taking precious minutes to configure.

“Engaging drive,” Mariko called up. There was a low rumble from the engine deck as the six 1945 vintage Maybach diesels slowly built up to power. Mariko nodded, letting in the “clutch” – the electrical transmission worked smoothly, but she dreaded the prospect of salt water getting into the works. The scent of ozone and chlorine was already heavy enough in the tank for them to need all the hatches open.

“Off we go.” Kazuko sat astride the barrel of the main gun, looking at her pocket directional locator. “Three points Nor’nor’ Eastwards, steady as she goes!”

“That’s minus two mils – or about a notch left, to you,” Mae translated down, sitting in the Commander’s cupola. The turret was lit and heated by the cheerful orange glow of glass filament valves, which not only made up most of the radio equipment but the Zuse ballistic computer that Kazuko had spent most of the Spring programming and debugging with a soldering iron.

“One notch left – and lock.” Mariko nodded. She relaxed, leaning back in the ersatz canvas seat, looking around. A Mouse driving a Maus, she told herself – that’s symmetry for you. The motion of the floating tank was a little unnerving – it was little more than twice as long as it was wide, and wallowed rather than cut through the water despite the best streamlining they had managed. She kept an eye on the air pumps: as the diesel fuel was used up, air bladders in the flotation screen inflated to keep the structural shape and buoyancy balanced.

Her ears itched, and she looked at the mechanical clock on the dashboard, fine Swiss clockwork protected from shock by a “floating” mount of fine Ersatz rubber. In just another hour she could change position with Kazuko and get some fresh air: her daughter Dracaena was curled up in a makeshift hammock slung from the breech of the 88 mm spotting gun, to the left of where Mae was now sitting. She smiled, looking up at Mae silhouetted with the open hatch behind her. “About another twenty hours, and we should be there. It’s a good thing we got the time off, like this.”

“I’ll say!” Kazuko nodded vigorously, strands of her blonde hair escaping from under the rim of the black tanker’s crash helmet she wore, sticking her head into the turret. “Good idea of yours to put it down as a special project for Historical Engineering – it’ll even get us points on the course!”

Mariko nodded, looking up at her friends above her in the turret. “When you’ve been around the Academy as long as I have, you know what you can and can’t get away with,” she smiled. “Just taking off with a note *‘Gone off adventuring, back next week’*, isn’t going to get you very popular with the lecturers.” She gestured towards the kitbag, with the waterproof case that held her cameras. “As long as we document this, though – you can add it to your folio.”

There was a comfortable silence, as they relaxed to the contented rumble of the Maybach engines behind them. Kazuko waved over to the other two vehicles of the little fleet, as their speed picked up to a respectable six knots – about the same as a sailing junk in most conditions. “Good job that Doctor Faustus got back early, or Mangana and Horst, they’d be stuck in the medical bay still,” she observed. “And they’ll take good care of Suki’s Emperess Tiger, Mangana helped build it with me.”

“The JS Three’s doing well too,” Mae opined, looking the other direction at the big Russian-designed tank, visible only as a long gun barrel poking out of the fabric flotation screen. “Temari would be proud of it. Shame she had to miss out on the trip.”

Mariko’s ears dipped. “Yes.” Her big, round spectacles gleamed as she looked up towards the turret hatch. “Shame. It was rather a coincidence, don’t you think? Just as she was getting ready to launch, after she’d showed Tava how to drive it – her going down with food poisoning like that. Rather convenient.”

“Well, she’s better now,” Kazuko beamed. “She was on the radio just a couple of hours ago. Whatever infection it was, went through her like a dose of salts, as the folk used to say. Must have been something she ate.”

“Temari’s a rat, in case you hadn’t noticed,” Mariko’s tail twitched. “Out of the whole Academy, she’s the least likely to come down with anything like that – and even for a rat, she’s got a real cast-iron stomach. We’d all be in intensive care before she even lost her appetite.”

Mae looked down towards their diminutive driver. “It seemed a bit odd, I thought so myself. But the symptoms weren’t like anything Mangana’s seen before, and she gets to see a lot of new stuff leaking out of our labs.” She raised the gunner’s periscope, and swiveled it around to show the tank keeping formation to starboard. “The Joe Stalin’s floating pretty well, I can see Broohilda’s on lookout. She looks happy enough – as far as she ever is, that is.”

“She’s a super loader,” Kazuo enthused, rapping one of the 180 mm cartridge cases stowed in the turret. “I mean, you have to be strong to shift these around – but if you were Granita’s size, you’d hardly fit even in here – let alone that Russian shoebox. Talk about power to weight ratios! Broohilda’s a walking

example of Hybrid Vigour.” She cocked her pumpkin-shaped head to one side. “Perfect vision, too – she’d be an ace gunner, if she wasn’t so soft-hearted.”

“Only eats free-range vegetables, and then only if they were humanely killed,” Mae confirmed. Her whiskers twitched, and she sent out a questing thought across the water. “Hmm. She’s troubled. Still, if she needs to give us a shout, she’s in charge of their radio – even if it is an original 1945 model, it’s better than those silly signal flags.”

Mariko was silent, looking up through her drivers’ periscope, its extension peeking just above the flotation skirt. She had her own problems – having left Mipsi in charge of the crèche back at Toho Academy, she hoped the bunny would manage to cope. Suddenly, she smiled. If there was one thing bunnies were very good with, it was bunny babies, and that covered most of the current population of the crèche. Anne Pontephrigh had been promising at the job, but even she was absent – in a few days, she hoped to find out exactly where. She smiled. Anne had been a calming influence, seeming somehow to radiate a certainty that all offspring were adorable infants, backed by enough faith to make it actually true while she was in the room.

“I suppose she’s all right,” she told herself, settling down in her seat and pulling out another UnRomantic fiction title (fifteenth in the “*Staggering tales of poverty and Squalor*” series) – “Broohilda’s in a tank, with Tava looking after her – and with those poison glands, she’s pretty much “Armed to the teeth” even in the bath. If there was anything wrong, she’d let us know.”

“They’ve fixed the motor!” Tava stood up, spotting the waving figure in the lead tank, which now surged ahead. “Same course, Jenni – a bit more power – hold it, that’s fine.” He relaxed, gripping the rim of the flotation screen as he breathed deeply of the cold, salt-laden air.

The ram passed a hard-hoofed hand through his short head-fur, scratching at the base of his luxuriantly curled horns. He counted to ten, looking out at the other two vehicles ploughing across some of the deepest ocean on the Planet. One exceptional wave swamping their flotation screens, and they would turn into bathyscapes heading on a one-way trip to the ocean trench nine kilometres below them.

He shook his head, grimacing at a sudden absurdity – although swamping was an ever-present possibility out here, it was not the problem uppermost on his mind. They had been on the high seas for ninety hours now, slowly churning their way across the featureless waters. His real problem was not a possibility but a fact – or rather, two disturbing facts there was no escaping from.

“Tea’s ready,” Broohilda slid up from the turret, her slender figure clad in a yellow antique PVC waterproof – with no sweat glands on her naked skin, she had no need for breathable fabrics. “Jenni’s found the manuals, there’s a water heater sort of wrapped around the exhaust manifold, it’s handy ...” She broke off, her eyes wide as she looked at the ram, standing trembling with his hands tightly gripping the edge of the screen, his nostrils flaring as he resolutely looked out towards the horizon. “Oh My. Is it very bad?”

Tava nodded wordlessly, his jaw clenched. He nodded gratefully as Broohilda put the insulated flask down beside him and backed away to the far side of the “deck”. He risked a look round, and gave a shudder. “I’ll have to stay up here the rest of the trip, I think. It’s getting worse.”

Broohilda looked at him, her brown eyes wide, sympathetic. She found herself thinking that Tava was looking very well, physically – in the last week, his already broad shoulders and powerful neck seemed to have bulked up, as if he had been doing extensive exercises. Her own nose twitched as the ram stood upwind of her – and her expression softened. The first two days in the tank had been – interesting, with the three of them crammed in at close quarters, Jenni sitting down in the driver’s seat, complaining about the heat as she stripped down to shorts, shirt and tanker’s helmet. It had been cramped, and between them, the scents of oil and hot metal had slowly been overpowered with a light, exciting musk that filled the vehicle however many hatches they kept open. Sleeping on the engine deck had been impossible, with the fuming diesel exhaust belching carbon monoxide at deck level, and so they had been forced to pack themselves into the turret, clearing out enough ammunition to make rough sleeping shelves.

The slender goat-like girl trembled, closing her eyes as she recalled the dreams that had brought her.

“Hey, Broohilda!” Jenni called up from the driver’s seat – “Any more of that tea left ? It’s hot down here!”

“Sorry – on my way.” With a last look over to Tava’s broad back, the goat-girl slid back down the turret hatch, pulling another cup from its clip on the turret side. She had to kneel to get to Jenni, whose seat was wedged in the angle formed by the sloping hull, its original Chelyabinsk-forged steel armour was now externally reinforced with blankets of ceramic fibre. “Here you are.” She handed her new friend a steaming cup, as she crouched behind her in the turret cage. “Chinese ‘Pu Ehr’ brand, Mangana always said it’d wake an Egyptian Mummy.”

“Mmm. That’s nice.” Checking the steering and engine controls were locked, Jenni turned to look at her. She stretched, wriggling her white tail as she pulled off her tanker’s helmet to let her long black ears fall freely over her blonde head-fur. She smiled, stroking the short, off-white wool of her thighs – and Broohilda noticed that her coat seemed to have gained a rich glossy sheen to it not usually expected from days of sitting in a cramped metal box.

Jenni looked at Broohilda from over the rim of the enamel mug, dipping her narrow snout into it. For a minute she sipped, before putting the cup down and raising an eyebrow. “So, Tava’s not coming down to keep us company?”

Broohilda shook her head. “No. It’s... too distracting for him. He has to keep on watch.”

“Yes. He’s a very devoted male, isn’t he?” Jenni’s gaze took in Broohilda’s twitch of embarrassment. “Not many like that. And considerate, too – this is a very unnatural position we’re putting him in, you and me.”

Broohilda blinked, her eyes wide. “What can we do about it? It’s a ... biological thing, you were telling me?”

“Oh, yes. Very much so.” Jenni turned to put a reassuring black hand on Broohilda’s shoulder, feeling the tense muscles below the waterproofing. “It’s this time of year – at least, it is here, the days are getting shorter, and everything has to get settled before Winter. Back home, a ram’s either fighting to get himself a flock, or – keeping them happy. Very happy.” She looked square into Broohilda’s face. “And any unattached ewes are – shopping around, you might say, for the best available flock to join.” She squeezed Broohilda’s shoulder, gently. “Now, that’s perfectly natural and healthy. Don’t you think so?”

Broohilda nodded, nervously. She cast a glance up at the open turret hatch, towards where Tava was keeping sharp lookout, protectively. “It’s just hormones, then ...”

“Oh, that’s not such a bad start.” Jenni tilted her head to one side. “I don’t say everything’s Chemistry when you get right down to it, but it helps to have that right. You’d certainly – notice – the effect even if Tava was sour and psychotic, with hideous personal habits. But he’s not, is he? Now, I know you’ve got that canine of yours, when he’s not too busy to see you – but does he make you feel this way?”

“Rashke’s not like you think!” Broohilda burst out, desperately. “I know he said I was to – have fun, but – I don’t DO that, like the others. It’s just not me.”

“You’d be surprised what’d suit you, if you gave yourself a chance.” Jenni massaged steadily, feeling the tension relax a little. “After all, this isn’t your fault, is it? And neither will a little Autumn Adventure be your fault. That’s nothing to what your carnivore’s doing right now, if you think about it. But – leaving such a fine ram in the state he’s in...” She shook her head, sorrowfully. “It’d be such a waste. Gather your rosebuds while you may, as the old saying goes.”

Jenni smiled, watching as Broohilda’s eyes crossed and she began to shiver violently. Relaxed and sleek herself, she cast an amused glance at the cramped interior of the tank – and recalled just how the three of them had managed to be there. It was Temari’s vehicle, but while training them up, the rat-girl had been showing a strong puritanical streak, insisting on separate sleeping quarters for Tava. A little medicine had solved everyone’s problems – Anne Pontephrigh had been eagerly showing off her First Aid and Home Physician medicine chest the week before, stocked with items not generally used in the twenty-first century.

“You look like you could use some fresh air,” Jenni’s eyes twinkled, shooing Broohilda up towards the deck. “I recognise those symptoms. Off you go!” She turned round herself, settling back into the driver’s seat and moved the periscope to look back over the exterior, as Broohilda and Tava stood at a mutually respectful arm’s length, looking out together over the ocean.

Timing, Jenni told herself, was everything. Getting the two of them all to herself at just the right time of year, was a chance she had to make the most of. And as for Temari – the rodent had needed to train them up on the vehicle, and make all the arrangements – but she could not be allowed to spoil the “Arrangements” Jenni had planned for Broohilda, Tava and herself.

“It was perfectly good medicine, after all,” Jenni’s ears twitched at the memory – involving a discreet raid on the Pontephrighs’ unoccupied room, and a little sleight-of-hand involving the fearsome compound of rhubarb, senna and croton oil with which she had managed to spice Temari’s meal an hour before they were all due to start. “It’s not my fault if it didn’t agree with her – I’m sure nothing so extreme would have happened to the Pontephrighs, anyway. It’s their old family recipe.”

She grinned, humming a century-old tune that Anne Pontephrigh’s ancestors would have recognised as ‘Slow Boat To China.’ Her black ears twitched, as she luxuriated in the sensations the season was bringing to her.

“But then – folk were tough, in those days!”

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