

Chapter Eleven (Five get Tactical).

Night lay on the small island of New Tortuga, the darkness of a new moon and a cloudy sky. From afar, a watcher would have seen little out of the ordinary for a holiday resort island – a scatter of lights from beach-houses and hotels, with what looked like the occasional firework lighting up the skies or streets. True, the boats involved were rather more heavily armed than most marinas catered for – not even counting the big carrier battle-group that had anchored out in The Roads late that afternoon – but even that was often matched by the larger Sea Scout jamborees back in Japan’s Home Islands.

What the eyes could not see, told a different story. On the radio bands, the island lay at the centre of a flickering web of energies, gigahertz band and direct laser-links flickering up to touch the speeding satellites high above, their encrypted voices whispering to very select ears across the planet. There were radars too, several generations of them, painting the seas and skies with watchful energies as the ever-alert denizens kept their computers on the alert for friend and foe arriving.

Had they known that an armed Psychiatric Blast device was currently stowed away on a vessel in their very own harbour, the quiet evening would suddenly have become very noisy indeed.

Suzuko Hohki looked up at the single shielded bulb on the bulkhead above her, the old ship rocking slightly in the silent night. She frowned. There was little to work with – she had been thoroughly searched, and all the standard items taken off her, when she had been handed over to whatever locals were cooperating with Gen and his friends. She ran her clawed finger down her flight suit, tracing the cooling cables and electrical heating wires built into its multi-layered fabric. Her suit and a few items such as pens and pencils, were about all she had right now.

The vixen’s ears twitched, and her tail stiffened in determination. “Oh no,” her voice was steely. She looked at the locked door and at the bulkhead light, deciding which plan to go for. “I’ve got more than that.” She had determination, her wits and a quite incandescently burning rage for revenge building within her. “I think I’ll be getting out of here tonight.”

Taking off her belt, she unpeeled a section of tape that had hidden a scalpel blade, which she used to meticulously dissect her pressure suit. It had easily thirty metres of electrical cable built into the fabric, old-fashioned copper rather than modern optical plastic holding the data web and running the heating cables. She cast a look at the door, and nodded. Like most ships of the recent decades, what used to be made of rust-prone steel was fibre laminated plastics, far tougher and lighter. Suzuko’s tail twitched, and she surveyed what she was up against. Rolling her sleeves up, she went to work.

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“It’s so UNFAIR!” Hiroshi’s shrill voice split the murmuring conversations of the corridor outside the Phenomenology lecture room, where she stood swinging her satchel disconsolately. “Nothing goes right for me around here. Kazuko won’t speak to me, the only Monster we managed to summon ran away from us, now Kaz and Suzuko and all the interesting folk are off having a good time and I’m stuck with enough Homework to keep an Elder God busy till the Stars are all wrong again!”

Her friend Shobban twitched her long, flowing reddish ears in sympathy. “It’s a lot of work.” Her own tail drooped as she looked at the reading list for the course. “The prospectus didn’t mention all this – they didn’t say we had to work hard for our marks.”

Hiroshi suddenly grinned, pulling down one lower eyelid in derision. “Yah! What do you know about work! You’ve got your maths coded in doggy hardware, you just – DO it. I thought we’d be out doing neat practicals all the time like Kaz does.” She sighed, her pale blue eyes seeming to fill with highlights. “I mean, all sorts of subjects have exciting Practical these days – down in Celaeno Gate they have a High-Energy Pataphysics department, even. “ She giggled, her humour quite restored. “Or they did till yesterday – it blew up! That was neat!”

The red setter girl nodded happily, her tongue flopping out. Although Shobban herself was not of the large-eyed gene set that dictated a dramatically reduced forebrain, the red setter mind approached the same careless ideal from another direction. “Do they have that course at Toho? Sounds fun!”

Hiroshi bounded down the corridor, her silver-blonde bob of hair bouncing. “Nope! But they do Vague Engineering – just as good!” She stopped, and extracted a crumpled-up envelope from her pocket. “This term, my class projects are to, quote, “Build sorta weird Alien-type Death Rays and shoot them at stuff”. Now THAT’S the kind of project title they like – and none of this multimedia stuff, the design concept has to fit on one used envelope back.” She glanced at her textbook, her eyes glazing slightly. “Of course, it used to be the back of a cigarette packet, a century ago.” In the twenty-first century, it had been realised that putting huge and accountable design teams on large projects was a sheer waste of effort. With most of the energy going into cross-checking, documentation, auditing and accounting, projects such as aircraft that could have been designed and flown in a year in 1950 had taken over twenty years to do so by the Millennium, despite the massive increases in computing power. In most areas, the real

advances came from “lone wolf” scientists in basements and abandoned buildings, working on ideas far too fantastical for any of the old-style Corporations to ever invest in.

Shobban’s tail swished, dipping into a small green book of useful phrases. *“The best things in life always melt – and this is one of them. Sounds just right. So, when do you start work ? Need a helping paw?”*

Hiroshi looked at her friend’s book, eyes wide. “That’s handy. A book of Wisdom, and smaller than all those unspeakable ones. My friend Shinobu had a big Krauss-Bendix GuruMatic™ for her birthday – one of those modern ones that tell you what to believe, down to twelve decimal places. But it broke down, and now she can’t believe in ANYTHING.”

Shobban’s eyes gleamed, turning a few pages onwards. *“If you believe in Nothing, honey, IT believes in you”*. She sighed, clasping the book to her slim breast. “It’s Robynist doctrine. Isn’t it fine? I wish we had someone like that back home.”

“I know a Karaoke about that !” Hiroshi pulled her ever-ready microphone out, tripping up three irate third-years and second-raters. Hastily plugging in Mr. Twirly to the Academy’s power sockets, she sang a haunting lament of Old Ireland, till the plaster began to fracture from the walls.

Sighed the great Celtic poet O’Leary*
 As he sailed to exile from Dun Laoghaire*
 “So little good verse may be written in Erse
 “For the spelling it makes one so waeoraigh*!”

Shobban’s ears perked up, and she accompanied her friend in a cheerful howl that echoed with the gentle harmony of the Music of the Spheres. That such spheres would have to be colliding neutron stars to get those acoustics, was something neither of them cared about in the slightest.

Two doors away, in the staff common room, three of the unsung heroes of Toho Academy winced at the sound and dived for the cover of the Staff Rare room – a more exclusive and better sound-proofed structure reserved for the less expendable members of the faculty.

Rabid-Sama, the elderly pit-bull, was last to the door, shuffling clumsily as he slammed it shut. With a muffled expletive known only to folk historians, he reached down and unclipped the gratuitous restraints from his first-generation strapped trousers. He cocked a scarred and half chewed-off ear towards the mercifully shielded door, and spat. “Load of old [] [] !”

Professor Immanuel Klash-Consett, visiting Professor of Illogical Negativism and Friend Of The Albanian People, nodded sympathetically. His old colleague was a strange survival, teaching at Toho for a standard academic wage when the ancient and stained “Cash through Chaos” T-shirt he wore had been valued by collectors at thousands of gold Yen. If the DNA matches of some of the ancient vomit traces proved it really was from whom it was rumored to be, its value would be almost incalculable. “I’ve just taken those two for a one-hour class. I think we’ll have to devise special precautions to cope with them.”

The third figure turned around, to show a severe black uniform, the white crush-proof collar on his neck gleaming with the pure white of exotic ceramics. His form was that of a tall, lean wolf, thin to the point of emaciation, but still with concentrated, wiry strength visible in every sparse sinew. “As the Vicar Militant for this part of the Pacific Rim, I must agree. My investigations have unearthed some disturbing things around here – although those two are not severe threats in their own right, they could have – deleterious effects. I was able to measure how keen and perky the younger Leclerc girl was, at ten metres range.”

“And?” Professor Klash-Consett queried, adjusting the motor of his bow tie. The Vicar named a figure, and an ashen silence fell in the room.

Rabid-Sama clanked over towards his locker, rusty studs and buckles scraping against the steel locker as he opened the door. Reaching inside, he pulled out an ancient rectangle of plastic, something like a databook without a screen, which he plugged into one of the modern wall screens. There was a quiet bleep, and ancient text hieroglyphs crawled up the screen. “Right! I wrote a program for that – have it here.” He delved into the locker and pulled out not a Bulky Disc, but an equally ancient audio cassette that any Cybermancer would have paid Rabid-Sama’s yearly official wage to lay hold of. He slapped it into a chipped and battered player, and waited as the arcane engine began to process.

- Pronounced Leary, Leary and Weary respectively. Yes it is!

Professor Klash-Consett, in the meantime, had pulled out an even older artifact, a thing of circular discs of different sizes on a pivot, graduated with scales and pointers. One ear dipped in concentration as he twisted the discs of the modified Weapons Effect Calculator, squinting at a final result revealed in one of the cut-out windows in the innermost disc. "That's deleterious all right! We'll have to make sure nobody's exposed for more than two hours a day, max." He patted his jacket; a modern affair lined with the most potent runes available to the civilian market.

The aged canine reached the same conclusion as his paws tapped along the flat membrane keyboard, but used more expletives as he hurriedly shut down his machine. Any more modern computer would have perished in nanoseconds as the awful meaning of what it was being asked to think about triggered self-destruct mechanisms – fortunately, the old plastic box was not only ruggedly stupid enough to survive, but had proven to be Great Mayan Year Compliant.

Silence returned, before the Vicar began to pace up and down. "I traced a – Disturbance to this island, that I spotted from the far side of the planet. It's not constant – it's flaring up and dying away, seemingly at random. As if –" he hesitated – "the nearest thing our computers could compare it to, was a heat trace of an unstealthy aircraft. When it's pointing its exhausts towards you and hits the afterburner, you see it all over the sky. When it's shut them down and cruising – you don't see it. Right now, I don't see it – and I've searched the island thoroughly."

The other two nodded. They knew that when a Vicar Militant made a thorough search, he would have searched from the hilltops down to the bone middens of the ghouls in the sub-basements. "What sort of disturbance?" Klash-Consett queried, amazed that the normally closed-mouth cleric was sharing information on such things.

A wolvern pair of ears dipped. "Something of power. Something with the sort of power that it could ... make lasting changes in natural laws all around itself. The Legomancers of Brussels attempted that, and to an extent they succeeded. But this has not their particular – flavour. Taint, I should say."

"This is the sort of place you could expect to find that type of force – or machine? Or person, even?" Klash-Consett agreed. "They have a Temporal Mechanics department here, and folk have brought items from out of their own time before now. It's caused a lot of trouble." He winced slightly – his own regular employer, Celaeno Gate, had had its time-travelling rights revoked, after a severe scandal the year before. They had been caught buying worthless computer chips from recycling centres, and selling them ten years earlier as second-hand in the month they had been brand new and commanding leading-edge prices. Flooding the market had almost bankrupted the company who had made them in the first place, which would have had all sorts of unpleasant future repercussions.

Rabid-Sama sniffed. "Serves them right if they get caught. The past's tricky to mess with. Some of the timelines are better – bloke came over from one that was exactly the same as ours till sixty years ago. We traced it back – on his line, Ringo Starr wasn't the major film star of the late twentieth century. Chaos theory! Makes you want to puke! Earliest change we found, was the TV series "Owl-Stretching Time" was called "Monty Python" or something in his history, and everything snowballed from there."

The vicar raised a grey eyebrow, and consulted an arcane instrument on his wrist. "Exactly so. What we are dealing with, is a force that can mold reality around itself. That is exactly the sort of power we do not want running loose."

Klash-Consett raised an eyebrow, and reminded himself – when Vicars stopped things running loose – they were rarely in a condition to run, or indeed move again.

"Just in time!" Hiroshi bounced in happily through the door, as Shobban turned on the ancient two-metre flat screen TV they had found in a skip. "Isn't it great? All the way out here, we can pick up my favourite show – "Trivial Crimes Squad." She crash-landed on one of the reinforced chairs. "I almost missed it last week – and they hunted down the Usabi Square Chewing-Gum Dropper, found him hiding out in the New Belgian Congo. Fined him all his saleable organs, too. That'll teach him!"

Shobban nodded happily, her floppy ears swinging as she relaxed with a large book of formulae. "Fun!" She waved up towards the second floor of their dorm block. "Is Mipsi coming down to watch with us? She's nice."

Hiroshi consulted her databook. "I've got her timetable here. She has to spend two hours a day being fuzzy and adorable. She has to work at it, with her ancestry." Her big blue eyes widened till they were in danger of overlapping in the middle. "I think it's SO romantic. Her mother Miki was a human just like me – one of those costumed bunny wannabes. She lived with a whole warren of real lepinies, and just got bunnier and bunnier – when she was bunny enough for two, Mipsi came along." She giggled. "And she got better at it – I've seen Mipsi's family pics, her siblings are in big batches – bigger litters every time. Really mixed ones, too – some of them are Hares, just about every breed except Belgian Hares, and that's just 'cause there aren't any of those. They were really rabbits, anyway."

Shobban's head tilted quizzically. "I don't think I've heard of those. And I used to know a lot of rabbits back home, all of them more or less bunny. Where did you find out about them?"

Hiroshi's eyes misted over. "Father brought a lot of books when he came over from France – he's a Doctor, you know, same as Mangana's going to be. It was in an ancient book – so old it had a first-generation hologram on the cover! I've not seen another reference – and when I tried to look it up on the Worldnet, my 'puter caught fire and four big folk in black suits and shades came round late that night and told me not to." She scratched her head, looking a little puzzled. "It seems a bit odd now I think about it, but I didn't think anything of it at the time."

Shobban panted contentedly, flicking through the broadcast channels. "Yay! It's "Pro-Celebrity Jailbreak" on after this! Stars get framed for real crimes – and if they don't get themselves and their cellmate out in a month, they serve the whole sentence." She paused, her eyes gleaming. "That gives me an idea. Why don't WE go over and rescue Suzuko first?"

Hiroshi sprang to her feet, clapping her hands together in glee. "That's a super idea! I bet Kaz will appreciate me loads if I do that – Suzuko's her bestest friend! It's only a few hundred kilometres away, and we've got all weekend to do it. Let's think of a way quick, and then we can do our homework." She pulled out her Thinking Cap, a traditional Japanese Baseball Cap modeled on the tenth-century originals brought back by the Temporal Engineering students, clapped it on her pumpkin-like head and devoted her full attention span to the problem. Shobban stared into space happily, absent-mindedly admiring the light show as highlights twinkled from the stainless steel, titanium and highly polished leather of her new boots, a lightweight pair of Performas* weighing scarcely three kilos each.

There was a nine-second silence, and Hiroshi stood up, shaking her head. "Nope! Can't think of anything. Let's go and see Trish – she's nice, and she's got brains and stuff. Off we go!"

The room echoed to a stereo cheer as the two bounded out of the door and down the corridor, raising a storm of dust and howls of protest from furs with trampled paws and no steel pawcaps to protect them. There was a thunder of receding boots and slamming doors, and silence returned to the dormitory.

Trish stood in the kitchen of the mostly empty dormitory block, looking intently at the cookery book in front of her. She scratched her ears, tail twitching in puzzlement as she translated some of the recipes, and wondered why the local cuisine had such a bias towards pre-killed ingredients. The next day was Friday, when she was due to cook a meal for her dorm, as was the Toho tradition.

Standing in the empty kitchen, Trish's tail drooped. "Suki-San, Mae-Chan, Broohilda-San, Kazuko-Chan, Mangana-San and Horst-San are all away on Pirate Island," she told herself. "Only me and Cthuline-Sama left to kook for – and the recipes are all for a crowd." She winced slightly, at the prospect of trying to make small-talk for an evening with Princess Cthuline – everyone described her as the prettiest girl on the island, and Trish felt definitely shabby next to the gorgeous batrachian. Plus – a few times she had caught the Princess looking at her sideways, as if trying to line her up just right against the light – against advanced senses such as Cthuline's, Trish wondered if her suit was actually as opaque as the salesman had promised.

Suddenly, there was a thunder of boots in the hallway and Hiroshi skidded in squealing happily as she half skated across the polished floor, Shobban just behind her. "Like, Hidy!" Hiroshi bounced, eyes wide and shining as she looked around the room. "Gosh, is this your kitchen? It's exactly like ours, but the shape and the furniture are all different!"

Shobban nodded happily, her nose twitching. "Teatime already? Smells very – Different. Is this one of your dishes from back home?"

Trish shook her head, gesturing with the cookery book. "No – am not being allowed to eat such things in here – not in Japan. Books say half-animal people in the war off to the West eat like at home, but all the accounts seem – very Negative about their diet." She tapped the recipe book. "Is a local style meat dish, am practicing for tomorrow."

- Fashion Editor's note: in the mid 21st Century, the essentially serious-minded students no longer wear "Trainers" or similar lightweight, flimsy fashion footwear *. Most of the Civilized world wears Performas™ - not meant for training, but for the things a previous generation were training FOR.
- Shobban's pair are modeled on the Mark XVIII Close-quarter combat boot originating in the EC wars, which had been rushed into production for the great battles of the Thirsk Salient when the Mark XVII had demonstrated poor anti-armour performance. Naturally, the civilian version is slightly "toned down", not having several of the offensive systems onboard, but naturally retaining the defenses and most of the non-classified electronics. It is also available in a more civilian tone of deep black.

“Neat!” Hiroshi bounced into a chair, and looked around. “Hey Trish! We’re going to go and get my sister’s friend Suzuko back tomorrow. We’re all set for the weekend – just have to work out how. I’ve got to be back for Monday morning, there’s a Weird Science practical I just can’t miss.”

Shobban pulled out her Remote_Impersonal computer, and brought up a map display. “Suzuko’s on this island there – Mae, Kazuko and the rest are about a hundred kilometres away still. We’ll have to hurry up if we’re to get over there in time to help.”

Trish stared at the screen, her head cocked to one side. “Why are they so far away from where they want to be?”

Hiroshi grinned. “Their tanks are really neat-o! I’m going to be doing Historical Engineering next year.” Her big eyes grew misty. “I suppose I’m just like everyone else, really – what I really, really want in life is a big, expensive main battle tank, all specialized for thumping discarding sabot shot across burning suburbs at its own kind – and I want one all my very own. Great for social occasions – like Granita says, ‘You can get along in life better with a 155 mm gun-howitzer and a smile than just the smile.’ But they’re not very good at swimming – they’re very slow in the water.”

Trish scratched a russet ear. “No. What I am meaning is – if they wanted to be there” – her paw tapped New Tortuga on the screen – “and they started from here – why are they at that spot there, which they don’t want to be in?”

“It’s a Great Circle route,” Shobban offered. “It doesn’t look flat on the map, but it’s the shortest arc across the planet.”

The vixen shook her head impatiently. “No, no, Shobban-chan. If they want to go to there – why not just – GO there?” She frowned, flicking through her Japanese phrase book for a minute. “Like so.” She picked up a piece of paper, and drew two dots on opposite edges. “I thought they were taking the scenic route – they are doing this.” She drew a line between the dots, right across the paper. “But if they are in a hurry – why not do – this – like any sensible person would?” She folded the paper so that the dots touched each other, and stuck the point of the pencil through them. “They could have been on this Pirate place days ago.”

Hiroshi squealed, clapping her hands together. “I didn’t know you could DO that !” She cocked her pumpkin-shaped head to one side. “But then – nobody ever told me you couldn’t, so I suppose it’ll be OK.” There was a pause. “How do we go about it?”

Trish’s eyes widened, and her ears blushed. “You just do it. What’s the problem?” Suddenly she slapped her forehead, and looked embarrassed. “I am sorry, I was forgetting where I am! Is it being illegal in this space to take short-cuts?”

Shobban had been looking at the paper, her expression one of dreamy rapture. “You couldn’t even describe how it’d work, in standard topology,” she whispered, a smile lighting up her long-snouted features. “You’d need a whole new field of mathematics to even express it.”

Hiroshi nodded vigorously, her eyes sparkling. “Now we’re getting somewhere!” She tossed Shobban a notebook and pencil. “You do that, while I run and get some bits to build a machine out of. I saw someone do this on TV once – we’ll need a big console with flashing lights, lots of bubbling liquids and big electric arcs jumping everywhere.” She paused in her dash out of the door. “It’s a rough place, Pirate Island – you’d better get some weapons, Trish – if Granita hasn’t been training you, build yourself something big and loud. Back in a tick!”

Trish blinked as the silver-blond haired humanoid vanished in a whirl of dust and papers. “Granita-san did offer to teach me,” she addressed the visibly red-shifted retreating back. “She said there is a lot of demand for staff qualified with the glaive-guisarme and the Bohemian Ear-spoon, in all sorts of places these days.” She looked round at Shobban, but the red setter girl’s eyes were glazed and her long tongue hanging out as she doodled in her notebook.

Trish hesitantly waved a paw in front of Shobban’s snout, but there was not as much as a twitch. After a minute she stood up, brushed down her sailor-suit and glanced at the map of the Academy on the wall. Her gaze traveled to the Engineering sheds, where she knew the fabricators held materials and template files that could churn out almost anything the planet’s technology had ever achieved from a flint axe to the discreet, quiet little products such as Kazuko’s Maus II.

“After all,” she told herself as she headed out into the breezy October day, “they say it’s an awfully dangerous place out there!”

Sitting outside a café in the fading light of evening, Captain “Redclaw” DeWaal was talking earnestly with his ursine bosun and five of his crew, shielded by a pocket jammer from the more routine types of surveillance.

Redclaw raised his pewter mug full of Grog – the watered mix of crude rum and lime juice was actually quite refreshing, he had discovered to his surprise. “Well, me hearties – sorry, I mean, Crew – you’ve noticed there’s something seriously wrong with this place. Exactly who or what is doing it, I’m not

entirely certain. But we're on the dirty end of somebody's mind-control experiments." He paused. "And most folk who were here when it started, aren't even convinced it's happening. But then – their perceptions have warped to fit."

Guarez, his Security chief, dipped his ears as he looked around. "Are you so sure, Chief?" He asked, surveying the passing street life with the practiced eye of a Secret Policeman, which indeed he had once been. "This isn't what you call a normal place at the best of times. And a lot of the regulars haven't changed."

"True on both counts – as far as it goes." Redclaw tapped on the table, the vibration sensor on the pocket jammer instantly analyzing it as a possible carrier beam for sound detectors. He nodded towards a familiar figure, a muscular polecat running down the street stark naked, screaming wildly and waving a samurai sword above his head. "There's that naturist chap again, who calls himself Frank Psychosis – he always does that when there's tourists or camera teams in town. Adds local colour, to be sure. But hard-wired extroverts like that are pretty much unshakeable. It's us Pyrates and Corsairs who've taken the brunt of it."

"I'm with you there, Redclaw," Jurgen backed up his Captain. "There's a mecha fanatic I used to know in the Navy, arrived here last week. He's not done anything out of the ordinary, just what most of his kind do – repaints the armour, gets it restyled, drops his voice tone half an octave and walks in that odd striding way. Started striking poses on rooftops and calling himself something like 'DETONATOR X'."

"In capitals?" The fox asked mildly.

"In capitals. What he's not done, is replaced his power-fist with an iron hook, like half a dozen of our comrades have suddenly decided is the right thing to do. Not what I'd call an upgrade."

"So." Redclaw looked around. "I invested some of my profits in information, yesterday. At the Cybermancer's, you know." He looked around keen-eyed at his crew, seeing tails fluff up with shock as even the hardened Pyrates took that information with a shudder. "It all fits the pattern. Five days ago, there was a major JSDF scramble all across this side of the Pacific, and they authorised firing live nukes in the atmosphere. Must have been important, they'll be paying in Eco-taxes for years. Four days ago, something arrived here – and things started to change. Coincidence? I don't think so. And here's what I paid to learn – there's two keys to this mystery, one of them's a vixen being held captive. I've put the word out, and we might hear something soon on that. The other key – it's not a person, or if it is, it's a damned odd one. We're not the only ones looking for them, buckoes, but we'd better be the first to find them. And fast."

The crew was silent, as a red bandana-wearing cook brought in a huge steaming dish of Salmagundi, which seemed to have dominated the local cuisine in the past few days.

Jurgen looked over at the mess. "What is in it? Or don't we want to know?"

The waiter grinned rakishly. "Proper fare for a swashbuckling knave, it be! There be salt pork in it. Salt beef, salt fish, turtle's meat and eggs hard-boiled. Pickles and ship's biscuit! Stewed long and slow with fine spices, wines and port of the Main, and a dash of rum just before serving. Eat hearty!"

Guarez poked at the steaming mass with his Bolivian Navy boarding Spork. "Has anyone analysed this stuff? I'm thinking of tailored hallucinogens."

"Been done. Nothing but the contents of whatever shelf of mixed goods was within grabbing range," Redclaw filled his own bowl. "It's a symptom, not a cause. Supposedly, it's a Traditional celebration meal made from looting the galley of a captured ship and stewing the lot. Anyone remember doing that for real?"

Jurgen scratched his head. "Not that I recall, Capt'n. There WAS that Iranian resupply ship we took last year, we looted some of their drinks supplies. Three cases of Sunni Delight, if memory serves. Nothing like this."

The fox captain sniffed the steaming stew, and sampled it cautiously. "I've had worse. We'd best stoke up on this if there's nothing else – and then get out hunting!"

His crew followed his example, grimly swallowing the traditional stew, with as much enthusiasm as they had tried the newly authentic seventeenth-century privvies of the tavern. Guarez pointedly ignored the drinks the piratical waiter had served them – he was a connoisseur of smooth, finely blended Sipping Whiskeys, and had discovered the nearest available equivalent now was a brand of Swigging Rum that was pretty good if only as a mecha fuel.

Still, as Redclaw thought to himself as he washed the nauseously mixed stew down with hot grog – it all made for a highly motivated crew of extremely savage Pyrates – which just now was exactly what he needed to lead!

As Trish watched the fabricators finishing her new fashion accessories, her ears perked up to the sound of a familiar high-pitched voice singing merrily to the thumping backing of a familiar Karaoke machine.

Hiroshi skidded into the light engineering workshop, beaming a smile of considerable wattage. “Isn’t this Neat-o? I got lots of bits – all we need to do is put them together, when Shobban’s done her stuff with the theory.” She cocked her round head to one side. “Actually, I’d thought of just building the machine anyhow then tweaking it till it does something – that’s the grand tradition of Vague Engineering. What do you think?”

Trish hastily tucked her new accessory into her purse – it was one she had made up with offcuts from the spare fabric of her suit, and didn’t show internal bulk at all. “Will not Shobban be disappointed?”

Hiroshi stopped dead in her tracks. “Yes! She’d be heartbroken! She loves maths and thinking and stuff!” Her eyes brimmed with tears. “Oh well, I’ll wait for her to finish. Look at all the bits I got, people had just left them lying around in their rooms and safes and things. Isn’t it neat!” She spread an assortment of debris out on the bench. “This is from the main field winding coils of a Bachman-Turner Overdrive, this is the targeting head of a JBLU-87 smart missile someone had abandoned and left hanging under their aircraft. But the important bit is this one here.” She connected up a bench power supply, and jammed a test probe into the mechanism. A loud, echoing beep made the windows rattle.

“It’s the workings of a real antique Moog – a real one, not one of those synthesized ones!” Hiroshi beamed, as she applied the voltage probes and an unearthly chorus of wails emerged. “Don’t worry – I didn’t take all of it from the museum, just the inside bits. And we’ve just got to have something that beeps at the dramatic moment, or the whole thing won’t work.”

Trish frowned. “Is it all right to borrow things like that?”

“Oh, sure – we’ll put it all back afterwards.” Hiroshi waved a soldering iron around with abandon, trying to remember if it was metal or plastic it was meant for. Her eyes crossed, as she played with the classic Moog, bringing out sounds that normally only came down from Outside on hilltop stone circles at really good parties. “Oooh. You wobble these joysticks – they weren’t designed for this instrument, they’re scrap metal that got built into the design because it was lying around at the time. That’s the way to do things! First generation kit’s neat, don’t you think? There’s always bits that you wobble.” A look of unholy glee spread across her broad features. “Come on – let’s see if Shobban’s finished yet.”

The two first-years piled the components on one of the workshop trolleys, and trundled it across the two hundred metres to Hiroshi’s dorm. Shobban was there where they had left her, but now surrounded by piles of scrap paper, waving her pencil like a conductor’s baton as she visualised the intricate equations forming in the air in front of her, and captured them with a quick scribble in her notebook.

“Hidy! Finished yet? We’ve enough bits to make a start if you’re ready.” Hiroshi bounced down onto the chair, scattering papers left right and centre. “What’s this? It looks neat-o!”

Shobban blinked, her eyes coming back into focus on the room. “Oh – just something I came across on the way. It’s a way of subtracting a big number from a smaller one – nothing that’ll help us on this, though.”

Hiroshi pulled one eyelid down, and stuck out her tongue playfully. “Yah! I did negative numbers in class years ago!”

“No, no – not a negative number. I don’t think anyone’s ever found this before, but I’ve got rigorous mathematical proof it works.” Shobban pushed the papers aside, staring at some squiggly symbols she had needed to create for the main project.

“Well, that’s no good. Come on, it’s been ages – and I’m getting hungry.” Hiroshi crumpled up the paper in her hand, and tossed it into the recycling bin. “What sort of machine do I have to build? I’ve got enough screws and nails for a big one – and some glue. We’re very into big hammers and nails on the Vague Engineering course.”

Shobban fished around in her satchel, and shared out some bars of peanut brittle and walnut ductile. “I’m almost there – but the equation’s not something you can write down just like that – it’s a self-modifying one, like...” she hesitated. “Like a plume of billowing smoke, not a photograph of one. Once it’s set up, we’ll have to feed it with parameters to get it growing the way we need to. I need more time to work out just how the wave-functions will collapse, so we can sort of surf in on them.”

Hiroshi clapped her hands together. “Surfing! Neat! I can wear my swimsuit, the pink one with the pretty fringes and ruffles.” Suddenly she drooped. “Mother wouldn’t let me bring along my virtual one, like Kazuko’s got. I don’t see why, it’s modest as anything, at least till the battery runs out. Have you seen those, Shobby? All you can see is a holographic interference pattern – just shows up on cameras as a sort of blobby mass of big pixels. And you get an even tan, too.”

Trish, meanwhile, had been carefully folding a piece of paper into the shape she could not find a description for in her phrasebook. It had proven much harder than expected – she had had to face away from the two local girls, very quietly open up the top part of her suit and folded the paper inside its event horizon to get the right shape. “Is this a help?” She asked mildly, handing it to Shobban.

The red setter's eyes went wide, as she excitedly followed the twists and contortions of the paper, which was something like the labels she had seen pasted on the insides of Klein bottles. She nodded vigorously, her long ears dancing. "Yes – that's it exactly!" "Furiously, she grabbed a spare piece of paper and began to scribble notation as she traced its surfaces. "That's it – just the input parameters to calculate, and we'll be all set." She tossed the interestingly folded origami towards the recycling bin, but missed. A draft blew it out of the window, onto the path outside where students crossed between the dorms and the rest of the Academy.

There was a horrified scream from outside, and a thud as if an unconscious body had hit the floor.

Hiroshi looked out of the window, and thumbed her nose cheekily. "Everyone's a critic, all of a sudden!" She turned round to Trish, smiling. "That's Ken, I was going to ask him if we could borrow his big unicycle, the one with the cannons. Now he won't be needing it awhile – so that's saved time."

Trish looked from one eager face to the other. "Why are some people here not – affected by seeing these things?" She wondered out loud. "And some seem to have problems." Outside, two first-year paramedics were dragging a sobbing, gibbering figure towards the medical centre for treatment.

Hiroshi giggled. "Some of us have, like, ancestors from really neat places!" She pointed at her six-centimetre blue eyes. "Girls get these mostly, it's passed down the female gene lines or something. Father's a regular squinty-eyed human, but none of the rest of the family will be, it's sort of dominant. Only started in the 1960's, but it's spreading." She sighed, wistfully. "Of course, you get some folk who manage better than just nice froggy eyes and a tolerance for interesting things – look at Toemi. She started off as something like fish fry, spent years at the bottom of the Abyssal Plain, changed forms radically about six times over and came out as a vertebrate – for the time being. But she might have hundreds and thousands of years more to develop in – after all, she's one of *'That which Always Was, and Ever Shall Be'* on her Father's side of the family."

"And it's not just her," Shobban chipped in. "It's not just one gene in one species, it's a whole package deal, lots of different species got it. There's lots of cats, but only the big-eyed ones are really kitty cats. And there's a lot of rabbits, but they're not all as bunny as Mipsi. I think it started when some of Princess Cthuline's relatives started making friends with regular mortals – they were sort of popular." Her tail wagged, and she dashed out of the room, to reappear with a T-shirt blazoned with the slogan *'Teratophiles have a Monstrously good time.'* "I got this at school – even over in Europe, there's lots of us who're Monster fans, we're sort of built to cope. Of course, nothing like as many as you get in Japan – they're so lucky."

Trish nodded slowly, as Shobban returned to her work and started to doodle self-modifying equations. This, she told herself – this would explain quite a lot. She looked out of the window towards the crèche, where she had seen proof that despite outward appearances, some of the locals and some very far-traveled people indeed were – Compatible.

Far out on the Pacific waters, three small dots could be seen from the air, a little flotilla slowly chugging across the ocean resolutely heading North-East, still a day's travel from the nearest land. Closer in, the dots resolved themselves into a trio of heavy tanks, now four days out from Toho and making decidedly slow progress.

"Ninja!" Mae swore, spotting another seawater seepage leaking in through the high canvas screens that kept the Maus II from plummeting to the bottom of the Abyssal Plain and annoying Princess Cthuline's relatives. "Not another leak! That's the eighth one today – we're going to run out of patches at this rate."

Kazuko popped her head up from the turret. "I'd planned for us to already be there by now," she admitted, pulling off her black leather tanker's helmet and scratching her rather dirty blonde mop of hair. "Losing that engine's really put us back. Those screens aren't really designed to hold up indefinitely."

Mae nodded, sealing the patch with moisture-reactive adhesive. She stood up, stretching, and looked to starboard at the sleek Empress Tiger, Suzuko's class project currently being crewed by Horst and Mangana. She closed her eyes, concentrating, and frowned. "Mangana's worried they're getting low on TONKA fuel. Whatever that is."

"Uh-ohh." Kazuko winced. "I hadn't thought of that. Suki's tank has 1945 vintage turbine engines, they're awfully thirsty. And she gained lots and lots of Authenticity points by designing them for TONKA – it's a sort of ersatz JP-7 aviation fuel. Made out of whatever the refineries could make that nobody else needed, blended to a sorta consistent energy value. We've got a piece of the refinery and tank farm at the Academy churning it out for everything from 1945 rockets to motor-bikes." She paused. "I don't think it's ... been available anywhere else for ninety years."

The grey feline's tail swished. "Wonderful. And when we get to Pirate Island – we rescue Suki, and then turn round and drive back? With these screens? And what'll we use for fuel? Are we expecting a mall specialising in Antique Propellants maybe? I hope your plan's got more than just buoyant optimism keeping it afloat."

"Hmm. Actually, I was playing on buoyant optimism quite a bit, now you mention it." Kazuko slumped down in the commander's ersatz canvas seat, running her fingers over the hard ersatz metal of the turret rim. "Maybe we can see if someone's left a tank landing-craft on the beach with the keys in the ignition? Something always turns up."

Mae looked at her friend, wordlessly. Kazuko's round face was streaked with oil and grime, uneven smudges of yellowish skin showing where the sea spray had washed some of it almost clean. Like all of them, she radiated tiredness – how Horst and Mangana were managing their tank with just two crew when it needed five, was a frank mystery. "We should have just taken two vehicles – we'd not have had a full crew even then. Goddess knows what we'll do if we have to fight in these."

Kazuko cocked her head aside, waving at the other tank, the Russian JS3 ploughing along a cables length behind them. "At least Temari's tank's got an autoloader," she offered. "Even if it is one of those authentically nasty ones to use – there's probably still some old Russians walking around with one arm after getting tangled in that model."

"Well, we'll see when we get there. No point in worrying. We're on course, and not too far off schedule – I just wish we knew what was happening with Suki. She's alive, and in more or less the same place – I've tried to contact her, but we're still too far off." Mae closed her eyes, concentrating. "No. Maybe tonight – if she's in a receptive mood. I'll try and get through to her then."

Despite everything, Mae smiled as she followed Kazuko's gaze across to the JS3. Contacting Suzuko was a special case, where she felt more than justified in trying to intrude on a friend's thoughts. Being a Psyker, she held a responsibility not to peek where uninvited. She could "hear" a lot of things as casual background noise, picking up strong thoughts and emotions from people she knew well – but that was a long way from actively trying to enter their thoughts.

Some of Broohilda's emotions in the past few days had been loud enough that she was glad they were far out in the Pacific, with no other Psykers anywhere nearby.

"I don't know about Suzuko," Mae told herself, consciously walling off the sensations she was receiving from the following vessel, "but someone's being about as ... "receptive" as it gets, around here!"

"Just one more night's travelling, and we should be there before lunch tomorrow." Jenni called up from the driving seat of the JS3, looking up at her crew. She smiled. "At least now, we can all sleep indoors."

Broohilda nodded shyly, feeling her ears flushing hot. Her nostrils flared, as she pressed them close to Tava's warm, musky wool, the scent filling the cramped turret where she sat in the loader's seat next to the ram. Her ram. She winced briefly, but looked up at him smiling, her bar-pupilled eyes wide as his own in the dim light.

Tava kissed her, wordlessly. His hand stroked her furless blue-black skin, as he leaned closer to her. In the past days, his musk glands had run quite out of control, the presence of the two females in such close quarters sending his seasonal cycle into top gear. His tail twitched, looking down at Jenni, who smiled and blew him a kiss. He had always hoped to start a flock of his own, but this had not been quite how he had envisaged it starting.

"I suppose – that's right. There's not really any point in going out on deck, any more." Broohilda said quietly. "It's a bit late for that."

"Hey! Why the long face?" Jenni looked up. "Could you pick better company if you tried? And imagine if Temari was here – sure, it'd be easier to drive with four, but she'd get in the way. It's not healthy to bottle things up – ask Kazuko any time, she'll tell you." She smiled, relaxing, looking sleek and contented, very much at peace with the world.

"Yes, but I'm not her." Broohilda felt her conscience twinge, but relaxed a little. Her tail wriggled of its own accord, as she took a breath laden with Tava's intoxicating musks. It was one thing to argue with Jenni about the rights and wrongs of following chemical instincts – but her tail was telling her there was nothing remotely wrong with her new situation. Certainly, other species depended on sight and intellect more so – her friends Kazuko and Mangana had noses that were little more than stubby bumps on their beach-ball heads, and their lives were balanced in rather different ways to her. But – she could see the ram as well as they could except in near-darkness, and as for the scent they would be missing out on – she shivered, relaxing deeper and deeper despite herself.

Broohilda looked down, her aubergine-black hands pressed close together. As far as Jenni and Tava were concerned, she was a slightly variant ovine, not one of the creatures of Chaos that infested a distant world so fearsome that it had only seen one wave of Japanese tourists. She was an Enterope, and

Enteropes were not generally creatures of conscience – on her home world, she supposed she had half-sisters and half-brothers she had never seen. An Enterope saw all other living beings as potential mates, food or preferably both in rapid succession – not as friends or lovers. In a very few of her darkest hours, she had envied their brutal simplicity. Now – she smiled shyly, remembering both her Direwolf in Japan who had told her to enjoy herself, and the ram in touching reach with whom she had done so. And – she told herself, not as a promise but as a fact – would do so again.

“Well.” Tava looked up through the commander’s periscope, at the rapidly greying waters and sky around them. “If we’re going to be driving all night again, I’d better lash the steering down. Get the old Number Eight Fencing Wire out, then we can have the others tow us while we do some running maintenance. Can’t run even a tank engine this tough for days without servicing.”

Jenni grinned, lazily reaching up to squeeze his hoof, the only part within reach. “And when you’re done with servicing that – there’s another two items in need of your attentions!” Her nose twitched, scenting Broohilda’s own musk adding to the delicious mix that was acting as a self-feeding cycle as their seasonal cycles brought each other into synchronisation. Broohilda, she told herself – without Broohilda, none of this would have happened. With twice the attractive chemistry Tava had hardly had a chance in the confined space – and once he got started – it would have been like persuading a blazing fire not to ignite one particular pool of oil. And even better – the goat-girl had no idea of the prerogatives and traditions enjoyed by the First Ewe of a flock.

Tava nodded, smiling as he resigned himself to his fate with a shrug. He had fought against his instincts every step of the way - but if his resolution had been armour, even his best defence would have failed under the continuous attack that had reached its conclusion the night before.

“Not one but two hits,” he told himself, looking around at the cramped interior of the heavy vehicle, with nowhere to escape from the maddeningly tempting scent – “Point blank range, straight through the glacia plate.”

As darkness fell over the central Pacific, the lights came on to show the streets of New Tortuga in its usual barbaric splendor. The harbour and the Roads were full, a major meeting of Pirate, Pyrate and corsair fleets already docked or still arriving, filling the taverns and grog-houses with a noisy crowd of revellers.

Dick Pontephrigh stood in the main street, tapping his foot impatiently. “Where IS that cousin of ours? Honestly, anyone’d think we were heading out for a picnic, not a proper Adventure.”

“With lots of mysterious villains, secret passages and rooftop escapes, and all in time for Supper and cocoa afterwards!” Anne chimed in. She felt very strange wearing slacks, and had taken some persuading – until Julian had pointed out they might do a lot of swinging on ropes above the heads of Foreigners who might be ungentlemanly enough to look up.

Anne’s tail wagged. “Here she is! And George has changed costume too – I like those breeches. I might say they’re nearly as good as yours, Dick.” She hesitated. “But of course, I won’t.”

“Good egg.” Dick’s ears raised, as he watched his cousin approach, laden with supplies. “But she’s found herself a smashing pair of Plus Fours, true enough.”

“Plus Fours, with at least (+4) or maybe (+5) bonus points, as they’d say back at the Coll.” Julian agreed. “Buck up, Georgina! We had to wait nearly a minute!”

George cast him a dirty look, that Timmy neatly fielded and trotted off to clean. “It’s not easy finding someone who takes proper money,” she pointed out. “And then I’ve got to do all the sums, shillings into gold Yen or Doubloons – all the shops have stopped counting in tens, and gone over to pieces of Eight.”

“Well, never mind all that,” Dick smiled tolerantly, “Have you got all the equipment? Lots of rope and grappling-hooks and all the usual things. It’s a proper Adventure, we have to be prepared.”

Anne nodded excitedly. “Jenks and Timmy have cut us two rounds of sandwiches each, wrapped up in special Adventure-proof greaseproof paper!”

“Good-o, Anne,” Julian playfully ruffled her head-fur. “Our lucky mascot – I don’t know just what we’d do without you! Every adventure you’re on, things always go just exactly to plan.”

George raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as she unslung the pack from her shoulders and distributed the equipment. Actually finding it had been the easy part – on Pirate Island, for some reason there were several specialist shops selling ready-prepared kits for people whose job seemed to be scaling things, boarding things and breaking into things.

Dick stood aside respectfully as a platoon of black-uniformed, hard-faced folk of various species resolutely marched down the street, heading into the nearest tavern with an air of grim determination. “Hmm. Let’s see. “ He pulled out the small book they had bought back at Toho Academy. “Here we are – that tavern’s Evil Eric’s bar, it’s patronised by roguish knaves. So, across the street – that must be

Steaming Jakes', whose regulars are mostly knavish rogues, it says here." He nodded seriously. "One learns to tell the different sorts of Natives apart, in time."

"I like the uniforms," Anne's tail wagged. "Much neater than the regular natives around here. Who are they?"

George sniffed. "I've heard all about them." She waved a paw out towards the Roads, where some squadrons of old four-engined jets were landing on the two supercarriers. "Those ships are the SNS Volstead and the William Booth, main strike force of the Salvation Navy." She paused, her ears perking up at the mingled sounds of close-quarter melee and savage euphonium playing now emanating from Evil Eric's bar. "They're so teetotal, they try and make it contagious."

"Well, hurrah for them." Julian commented, an eyebrow raised at his cousin. "Our family have been strictly on the Pledge for a century, and if it's good enough for us it's obviously quite good enough for them. After all – on the Plateau we could hardly waste resources – a simple life and a healthy diet, that's the ticket."

"And they've got a military band. I DO adore brass bands!" Anne strained her ears, picking up the strains of a four-nozzled tuba from the crashing of wood and splintering of glass. "Remember those summer concerts Uncle Egbert used to give at home – massed cornet and tuba displays, he'd have our own Natives training for months just for the evening's performance. With Mam'zelle, our funny French teacher, accompanying on the grand piano." Anne scratched her head. Something in the back of her mind seemed to be itching, an uncomfortable nagging as she almost began to consider the practicalities of maintaining a comfortable Barseshire country-house existence on top of a remote Borneo plateau. But she bravely fought the disloyal sensation off, and reminded herself that she was a Pontephrigh – and Pontephrighs simply did not concern themselves with grubby mundane things like that.

"Well, off we go," Dick decided, looking down again at the book. "So – here we are. Over on the far side, there's a row of warehouses run by "organ-leggers" – funny thing to smuggle."

"Probably there's still some savage countries who refuse to let the Missionaries reform them," Julian explained to his sister. "I expect they have to sneak in church organs and bells and everything."

"That's using the old grey matter, Ju !" Dick held the book up nearer a streetlight. "But right next to there, are three other warehouses claimed to be abandoned, but really run by seedy foreign types with shifty eyes, funny accents and species one normally associates with zoological gardens, not civilised society." He paused. "So it says here."

"Right! We'll go there first." Julian strode confidently onwards, clad in his best Adventuring knickerbockers and a heavily reinforced tweed jacket. "There'll be secret passages into the place – just a matter of pressing the right combination of bricks in the wall, usually." He consulted his big brass compass, held out his thumb to measure the position of Orion rising in the easterly skies, and led the party down towards the graving docks and the repair sheds.

The lights were dimmer here, and the riotous crowds were reduced to a few furtive wanderers – disgraced Eco-terrorists caught using aerosol hairspray, wandering ocarina salesmen and a few haunted figures who might just have been the last survivors of the Sique Sique Sputnik Fan Club. After ten minutes, Julian halted in front of a plain brick wall, and looked up at the blankly solid expanse of building.

"This is the place." He declared, rubbing his paws together. "Come on, look lively, we've some Adventuring to do! Let's find that passage, for starters. Here you are, look after this while Dick and I get to work." He shrugged the haversack and coil of good stout manila rope off his shoulders and handed them to Anne. "Just keep a look-out, there's a good scout." The two Pontephrigh brothers began to tap and press at the featureless wall, muzzles creased in intense concentration.

Anne sighed happily, as she watched them at work. Her brothers were so good at this, she told herself. Wherever they went and whatever they did, there was always a ripping Adventure just waiting round the corner – never a disappointing one with lots of tangled loose ends, and always just the right size. She had tried reading some of the modern books at the Academy – but writing had decidedly gone downhill since her ancestors had left Barseshire, in all the important ways. A lot of them had main characters, supposedly heroes, with some quite shocking bad habits – some stories had perfectly good friends and loyal allies getting wounded or even killed in sheer accidents or bad luck, just because they happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Some of the "Mysteries" never even got solved! It was all just too bad – really, the world just couldn't be like that, she told herself determinedly. It really shouldn't be.

Anne felt her ears flush, her small fists balling up in concentration, her tail rigid and trembling as she watched Dick and Julian try pressing different combinations of bricks in the wall. She felt the usual sensation building – and then a release, the stars seeming to shiver above New Tortuga as if it was a clear pool of water disturbed by a sudden ripple.

"That's the spot!" Dick cried happily. "Hurrah!" As he had pressed the fifteenth combination, there was a low rumble and part of the wall slid aside on hidden rollers. "Just the ticket – a pukka secret

passage, going in just the right direction. And not too dusty inside, even. That should keep you happy, Anne!"

Anne Pontephrigh smiled shyly. "It's a very nice one. Let's see where it goes!"

Julian and Dick led the way, stopping to light their torches just inside the passageway. There was a quiet hissing and a smell of acetylene as they lit the carbide headlamps, and revealed a narrow staircase leading up sharply towards the corner of the building.

"Just as I thought," Dick hissed, his tail wagging in the gloom. "I can hear voices, sounds like a lot of them. There's a room straight ahead."

Georgina was rearguard as ever, and saw only a few dim yellow spots of light reflected on the wall as her brother opened up a peephole. A growing unease had been spreading through her all day – she had been studying the "outside" world intently, and had never found reference to anyone else managing these things so easily. She checked her watch – yes, it was eight o'clock, time indeed for a strenuous adventure and still be back by Anne's bedtime. But how? She watched Anne concentrate furiously ahead of her, and smiled. Same old Anne.

"I say! Just take a look at this!" Dick breathed, peering through to where a large workshop held some familiar figures. "It's our pals from the Academy – what are they doing here?"

Georgina squeezed past to take a look. In the middle of the room was a low-loader trailer with a long, streamlined shape on it, something like a metallic shark. There was a very funny-looking native with an incredibly long, tubular-looking snout talking animatedly to Gen, Rai and Matzu. Though she could not hear their conversation, from their expression they seemed extremely worried about something.

"Now this," she told herself, settling down to observe, "looks more like an Adventure to me!"

Suzuko Hohki held her paw over her eyes, blinking furiously, trying to rest while the purple spots fogging her vision went away. It was another hour till the slot in the door was opened to feed her more of the anonymous meat hash her captors provided twice a day – and that was a dinner appointment she intended to miss.

"Nearly there." She smiled grimly, checking the delicately rigged wires that trailed across the cell from the broken light fitting. Unwinding the copper data web from her flight suit had taken two hours, after which the fiddly bit had started. According to the light bulb, the ship's power was a steady twenty-four volts, but available at a hefty amperage to power motors and doors. Winding four metres of wiring around a large iron bolt she had managed to unscrew had provided her with a step-up transformer after another few hours of painstaking labour – something like three hundred volts at the output, as best as she could estimate.

Shivering with cold and fatigue, Suzuko faced the door again. The locking bolts were tough fibre-reinforced plastic, that she could have pounded all day at with a hammer without doing more than scar the surface. But if there was one thing Toho Academy taught its students, it was that there were always alternative ways of doing any job.

With a careful pressure on the plastic belt that held the old-fashioned pure graphite pencil leads apart, she brought them close, and "struck the arc", the little smear of lightning a bare four millimetres across at its maximum. Back at Toho, she had used spark-gap erosion machines, computer-controlled precision instruments that could fabricate complex shapes in tough materials – but those were massive, heavy-duty devices powered by tens of thousands of watts. Her hand-held version – well, she had to admit, it was doing its job. Very slowly, the arc nibbled through the plastic matrix, heating fibre after ceramic fibre to critical point. Two bolts were already cut through – and in a few more minutes, the last one was starting to look frail.

The vixen coughed – vaporising plastics at this range was definitely not a healthy occupation. As a trial, she put her weight on the bolt, and was delighted to feel it give a little. She struck the tiny arc again, pressing its white-hot flame against the final unbroken side of the bolt for another ten minutes, hoping there were no over-zealous smoke detectors in the corridor outside – and then threw her weight against the door.

There was a loud crack, a splintering, and the door flew open. Suzuko Hohki staggered out into the empty corridor, red-eyed from the smoke, looking and feeling extremely feral, her claws clenched out and her matted fur trembling with relief and rage.

The corridor was long and empty. But right in front of her open door was a cheap "golf-ball" camera, its eye suddenly flashing red as it detected unscheduled movement. Though there was no sound, somewhere on the ship, an alarm was ringing.

"Ninja!" Suzuko swore, pulling her carefully built transformer away from the socket and hurling it at the camera, smashing it with a trail of smoke and sparks. This wasn't a regular prison – the décor was that of a standard though rather old mixed cargo/passenger carrier, and the corridors leading off left and right had no automatic doors slamming shut in the distance.

With barely a second's hesitation, Suzuko chose the right-hand passageway, the one she had arrived along, and she knew led to the open deck somewhere. She sprinted, back bent as she poured out her frustration in one long burst of explosive power – had one of her treacherous “classmates” appeared in her path at that minute, it would have gone very badly for him, starting with the eyes and proceeding rapidly to the throat.

“Hey!” She heard a voice in an intersecting corridor, but did not turn for an instant – there was a flight of metal stairs she remembered, and she was up them like a grimy russet streak, as a door began to open just behind her. Out on deck! Her nostrils dilated with fresh air – she took in the scene in an instant, the ship moored at a buoy two hundred metres from land – and without stopping to think she vaulted over the deck railing, one smooth arc of motion, a clean dive into the night-black waters below.

The cold sea closed over her. She felt her body bruised and tired, but kicked strongly to the surface, heading for the shore in a steady crawl, the shredded remains of her inner pressure suit slicking down her fur, providing a vestige of insulation. Behind her, lights and voices came to life, as what seemed to be a less than professional team realised a captive was gone and running.

Black water surrounded her, chilling through her fur in a few seconds, as she set her course for a steady light on a harbour wall. For a minute she swam – and noted to her horror that the light seemed to be slipping away to the left, hardly getting nearer at all. A strong current, she registered in alarm – and one that was intent on sweeping her out to sea.

“Ahoy!” A voice came from shoreward – not shouted, but almost hushed, just above the noise of the distant foam. Suzuko stopped to tread water and rest for a few seconds, wiping the salt water out of her stinging eyes. There was a shape approaching – as she saw it outlined against the shore lights, it resolved itself to a single figure in a small boat.

“He’s not come from the ship I was in – and he wouldn’t attract attention if he had,” Suzuko told herself, heading toward the silhouetted shape, feeling the cold water sapping her strength by the minute. Poor food and a lack of rest were taking their toll – at her fittest she might have fought through the current, but the risks now seemed smaller with the unknown rescuer. From what she could see of his silhouette, he was a species unlike any of her captors she had seen.

“There you are – in you come.” Strong arms reached down, pulling her over the gunwales into the boat, a standard four-metre runaround. She gasped her thanks, as her rescuer turned the prow for shore and engaged a quiet water-jet engine, the black vessel vanishing into the shadows.

“Thanks!” Suzuko rubbed her head-fur, shaking herself dry and wiping the water from her eyes. “You got here just in time,” she panted, feeling her body start to tremble violently. She accepted a rough towel, and turned to face her rescuer.

In the dim light was a fur of average height, dressed in a waterproof suit and a life-jacket – oddly enough, both were dark coloured, unlike the usual bright safety colours of such equipment. By the voice he was male, of European background, and by the ears he was a lepine of some sort. The eyes were not huge, but rather average in size – not one of the excessively bunny rabbits, Suzuko thought with relief.

“Well – I was out here for reasons of my own – I have an interest in that ship you just left the hard way,” the lepine said, looking at his passenger with one eyebrow raised. “How about this – I’ll take you to a safe place, then you can tell me about that vessel and what it’s carrying.”

Suzuko nodded, cautiously. On a place such as Pirate Island, randomly finding Good Samaritans were not what she would have expected. But she had a choice – to accept the offer of help that might even be sincere, or to strike out entirely alone into the darkness of an unknown and reputedly incredibly dangerous land, with Shiitake and their unknown and unnumbered allies already after her.

She extended a paw, looking at the brown-furred rabbit as they approached the shore. “I’m Suzuko Hohki, from Japan. I’m pleased to meet you.”

He smiled, exposing sharp chisel teeth. “You can call me Lebeq. I live here these days – and it’s certainly an interesting place.” The Cybermancer raised an eyebrow as he made fast his vessel and helped the dripping, shivering vixen ashore. He was pleased to see her as well – under the seat was equipment intended for a stealthy boarding and search of the vessel he had known she was on, and she had saved him a lot of trouble by escaping on her own.

He had made his money on New Tortuga by revealing a lot of useful information to customers such as Captain DeWaal. But he had stayed alive by keeping some of it to himself – and as he remembered with photographic clarity the dire possible futures his divination had shown for this island – of his whole career since fleeing the fall of Belgium, this looked as if it would be the time to be thankful for it.

