

Chapter Twelve

A cold moon shone down over the palm trees and taverns of Pirate Island as the night drew on. In the more crowded streets nearer the harbour, the Salvation Navy beat a fighting retreat towards their carrier group, viciously handing out pamphlets while their sonic artillery covered their withdrawal with massed tuba barrages. After a furious night of heavily abstaining, the sinister black-uniformed temperance troopers finally withdrew their rearguard and vanished, leaving the main streets to its traditional staff of professional swaggerers and postgraduate degree holders in roistering. But in the warehouses on the far side of the island, the street lights were dim and the passers-by few and silent. The streets seemed peaceful, almost contented, the island ringed with piratical power proudly protecting its corporate anarchy.

Inside – things were very different.

Industrial lights shone down hard, on the instrumented benches that gleamed clinically cold like a malevolent operating theatre. But the “patient” was sinister enough to match any surroundings – a great four-metre smoothly finned shape, almost a metre across at its thickest, glistened coldly green-grey like a citizen of the abyss rudely hauled to the surface against its will.

Pacahuta looked wordlessly at his three engineers, the anteater’s tongue feeling stuck to his mouth in fear as he read again the report in his hands. “This thing is WHAT?”

“Oh, yes, Sir, it is very finest bargain ever to come through these doors.” Bhindi, his chief technician, assured him. “It is very fine condition Psychiatric Strategic Blast device, valued at many many billions. And we are having exclusive investigation rights, indeed yes.” The short mongoose bowed and dipped as he waved excitedly at their “guest”, while in the background the four Japanese who had brought it in for appraisal backed slightly away.

“Aye. Well. Hmmmph.” The older engineer stuck his paws in his overall pockets, and gazed reflectively at the Device, with his long bulldog features seeming longer than ever. “What young Bhindi doesn’t say, being too respectful-like, is that the fuze is running. “ He tapped the casing, skinned in a soft radar-absorbent plastic no tougher than pencil eraser. “And this won’t be just your average Thief’s Bazaar cut-and-shut defuzing, either. I saw a few o’ these, or ones near enough, back in Europe.”

“In the – conflict the fictional books mention?” Pacahuta found breath to ask. The history books were unanimous that there had been no EC War of ’29, and that there had been nothing remotely abnormal about the – conditions in its final weeks and days, indeed the books all mentioned stridently that the laws of Physics had never been subverted yet. The books also cautioned that none of the so-called witnesses were to be believed, being obviously victims of mass delusion, which could only cause trouble if encouraged.

“That were the one, aye.” Clem Hodstonworth scratched an ear. “One of these came down outside Tamworth, early model it were, didn’t go off. Me and “Squibs” Fennington had to dig for it, three days we were after the bugger, gone ten metres into t’clay soil it had, under a road and all.” He looked reflective. “Booby-trapped, it were. Three fuzes just like this one, set to trigger if the casing breached.” He handed an old-fashioned stethoscope to Pacahuta, and motioned towards the “patient” on the table. “Take a listen thissself.”

Pacahuta’s eyes went wide, as he pressed the cup to the clammy rubbery skin. There was – something like a surging, racing heartbeat, just audible, swelling and fading, an atonal rattle like the beating of hailstones against a window. “It’s – alive!”

“Near enough, like.” Clem nodded. “Three hearts, sending pressure patterns echoing round the casing. Kept in synch by a clock generator, not random, but anyone’s guess as to the algorithm it’s using. Upshot is – drill a hole in the case, the acoustics change. Beats the old pressurisation switch, tha’ could fool those by findin’ the internal pressure and throwin’ whole thing into a pressure chamber till it matched – then get the can-openers on the job.” He gestured towards a waiting set of heavy cutters in the corner of the room. “Tha won’t be doing that with this bugger.”

“Oh no indeed!” Bhindi nodded happily, rubbing his long, delicate paws together. “Is a most worthy challenge, Pacahuta Sir. And we must be very speedy indeed, as most assuredly the batteries will not be lasting much longer!”

“Which would be a good thing for us – usually.” The third engineer spoke up. He stood at the back, a tall ice-white wolf who (according to surviving records) had appeared in the final weeks of the

EC conflict, having claimed no background history or professed country of origin at all. That he was a consummate engineer had been proven time and again, as he had made “impossible” repairs on the new technology of Macro-tanks, as if born to familiarity with them.

“But now?” Pacahuta asked, his tongue flicking in reflex action. There was a bowl of live krill on a side table, flown in fresh from Antarctic waters, but it went untasted as his stomach balled up in worry. He had a warehouse of second-hand ammunition, much of it reconditioned after having already hit the ground once, but none of it had scared his brilliantly qualified techs like this “special deal” he had managed to bring in – and now wished he had left well alone. His eyes lost focus, and for an instant he regretted having taken his schools careers advisor’s advice and gone into the international munitions business. His sister had thrown over the traces of a career laid out as a ballerina to escape into the glamour and excitement of illegal bare-knuckle prizefighting, and was perfectly contented with her choices. He shook his head.

“Aye, well, tha’s talking about a very pricey Device here,” Clem filled in, filling a herbal pipe from his pocket. “Best bets are, only a few of these were ever made – and it’s made to be used, not defused. Once it’s been dropped, it’ll make very sure it won’t go to waste. These points here – and here – and here –” he tapped the casing, “are standard contact and proximity. When this one here”, he waved his hand over the sleek tip of the nose, “sees anything but air within two hundred metres, it’ll fire. Thing is, like, it’s not switched on yet. Bomb thinks it’s still falling – not time to wake up and take a look around. But ...” he gestured expansively with his pipe, “there’s failsafes. Conditions that’ll override the usual timer that someone put a software hack on. Low battery is one of them.”

The silver-white wolf cast a sharp-toothed smile at the four students who were now looking extremely unwell. “You might prefer to be at the other end of the island. There’s some deep concrete water-tanks, that you could hide in.”

“So we’ll be safe if ...” Gen Yakitora’s fur bristled in panic, looking at the suddenly sinister Device that was looking less like a golden goose and more like a basilisk in his mind’s eye every minute.

“Not if. When. I rather fear this is going to go off, unless we can stop it.” The wolf raised an eyebrow. “So you might prefer to be at the far end of the island.”

“We’ll be safe there?” Shiitake Tabi’s voice was a gasp of relief, as he measured a sprinting route to the door.

“Oh, no. You’ll have no chance whatsoever.” An ice-blue eye twinkled savagely. “Just like the rest of us.”

“Then why did you say?” Shiitake was suddenly rooted to the spot in panic fear.

“Just making conversation,” the Antarctic wolf smiled pleasantly, but one tooth gleamed sharply at the curl of his lip. “Just making polite conversation.”

“Well, this IS a rum do, I must say,” Dick Pontephrigh scratched his solid and sturdy head, as he crouched in the secret passage looking into the scene played out in the arms dealer’s warehouse. “I wonder what they’re getting excited about ? Can’t quite hear it, but it looks as if there’s something wrong with that funny torpedo there. I know Gen and Rai said we were to look out for it specially.”

“Maybe it got damaged in the crash?” Anne asked anxiously. “Those foreigners weren’t very good pilots, they came an awful cropper.”

“Quite. Not suprising. They don’t have the same sort of standards and principles and things. It’s in the culture, or the blood or something.” Dick waved a paw vaguely, encompassing Pirate Island and most other things in the known Universe. “I mean, look at that silly-looking one there, with the snout like a cannon. Where do you suppose he’s from ?”

“Probably somewhere like dampest Booga-Booga, I expect,” Anne laughed, catching a glimpse of Pacahuta through one of the spy holes in the wall. “That, or North-Eastern Hinterland!”

“That’s our Anne,” Julian affectionately ruffled his sister’s head-fur, drawing a mock squeal of anguish as Anne retreated to get her comb and mirror out. “But anyway, Dick, now what ? They’re all leaving, except for those three mechanic Johnny’s, it seems. And we can always ask Rai about what they were saying, when we meet him.”

“Yes.” Dick scratched an ear, looking into the warehouse as the three mechanics in boiler-suits started setting up cameras and assorted equipment around the torpedo-like object. “Rai’s a good sort, for a Native – we’ll catch up with him later I’m sure. But now what? It’s only two hours to bedtime, and we can’t go wasting our Ovaltine. Jenks will have a jolly good Supper ready for us back at the camp, you can bet.”

“Well. We’ve still not found Suzuko, that red-furred girl from the Coll. Or even the other folk, the Bolsheviks or whoever they were, that she was chasing.” Dick frowned, deep in thought for a minute. “I know! They’re somewhere here on Pirate Island, where there isn’t even a village constable to report them to. Let’s go and find them, then we can hand them all in to the proper authorities back at the Coll. Who knows, there might even be a reward?”

“That’s the spirit!” Julian cheered, looking around. “I’ll bet this secret passage leads to all sorts of interesting places – they always seem to, somehow.”

Dick smiled at his younger brother. “Of course they do, Ju. They always do. That’s what they’re there for.”

Seen from the air, the town of New Port Royal was a long strip of buildings stretching from the main harbour of New Tortuga to the far side of the lagoon, where a few camp fires burned and newly outdoors-loving Pyrates sat around singing shanties and passing assorted bottles from paw to paw.

Two figures walked slowly towards the far end of the island, their shadows long in the fitful moonlight. One set of shadows showed a long and bushy tail, drooping in exhaustion – the other, a long and cautiously twitching set of lapine ears.

“This is the place,” the lapine motioned towards a hefty concrete blockhouse, tastefully decorated in the fashionable “Organisation Todt Revival” mode. “A poor thing, but mine own.”

Suzuko nodded, looking around as the door opened. Despite her tiredness, she was forcing herself wide awake and prepared for trouble. In one paw she carried a hefty wrench, nearly two kilos of drop-forged vanadium steel that she had picked up at the dockside. At least, she thought glumly as she took another look behind her – if someone in a mech suit comes after me, all I need is five minutes surprise and I could take his whole armour to pieces...

“Ah! Here we go.” Lebeq smiled, his chisel-teeth gleaming in the bright light as the door closed behind them. “Welcome to my humble abode – and I doubt you’ll be needing that wrench, Miss Hohki.”

Suzuko froze. “You know my name?”

There was a contented chuckle, as the Cybermancer led the way into a softly furnished room, with decidedly over-stuffed sofas and cushions. “My waiting-room. I am in the Information business, you see. Some of my – methods – are rather unusual – but others, well, the Worldnet is a curious place, and I have data feeds to some electronic ears in places that might surprise you.” He tapped at a wall panel, and a cabinet door slid aside to reveal bottles and glasses. “May I offer you a drink? Take your pick.”

Suzuko’s ears went down. She surveyed the cabinet, finding mostly beers of brands she did not recognise, the labels mostly in the French language. Her ears flicked up as she read them more closely. “I’ve a friend who’s half French – she always complains they don’t DO strong ales – not eight, ten and twelve percent like these!”

“Ah. These are rather venerable vintages – I doubt you will find their like anywhere else, these days.” Long rabbit ears twitched, a little ruefully. “But for certain – special – visitors, I still have a small stock remaining. Quite innocent, I do assure you – the local water supply here runs with hallucinogens on occasion, but not these.”

Suzuko nodded, opening one of the old-fashioned bottles and cautiously scenting it. It seemed fine; a rich heady brew of malt and hops but quite different from the French lagers Kazuko occasionally arrived at the start of term hauling a barrel of. But then – anything it was liable to be deliberately spiked with, she would hardly detect at a casual sniff. She poured the bottle into two glasses, and handed one to her host. “Please, I insist.” Her eyes narrowed very slightly, the matted russet fur of her muzzle twitching a little as she watched her long-eared host.

Lebeq smiled, and took a sip. “A lambic ale – naturally fermented, the only yeast added from the dust and exhalations of the centuries-old brewery building – all gone now, alas. You have fine taste – and commendable caution, Miss Hohki.” He gestured towards one of the sofas. “And now, if you will, we shall talk. The night is still long, and we will be undisturbed here.”

Suzuko sipped her ale delicately, her long tongue lapping the cut glass of the handled flagon, a definitely European design. Her tail twitched, as she forced herself to stay on the alert – what she really wanted was a hot shower, a meal and a safe undisturbed night’s sleep, not to mention some urgent treatment for the radiation she had taken. But she nodded resignedly, sitting in a sofa in the corner of

the room with no doors behind her and a good telltale reflection from a glass table covering her from peripheral angles. Nobody would find it easy to tackle her without giving a second or two of warning, and although it was hardly an impressive weapon, the wrench was at hand. "Where do you want to start?" She asked her host. "None of it's secret – but it's a long story."

The lapine swilled a mouthful of ale in his cheek pouches, swallowed and looked at her, a steely and appraising gaze. "Then I suggest you talk fast – because I have reason to believe none of us may have a lot of time left!"

Fourth Lieutenant Maso Hokkadi rubbed his eyes tiredly, near the end of a long shift at the Japanese Self-Defence Force's monitoring station under Mount Futaba. In the past week, very few of his colleagues had been doing a lot of sleeping – ever since the Mexico/Peruvian conflict had flared up and both sides had started throwing tactical-yield nuclear weapons at each other. That had calmed down after the first day, he noted with relief – Mexico had lost its biggest city and its Government, while the Peruvians had seemed to be as horrified with what they had done as the rest of the world.

He shook his head, trying not to think about what had happened to Mexico City. From the air, it was intact except for some burnt-out streets where pyromaniacs had briefly raged before being cut down by the howling mobs of homicidal citizens armed with bricks, sticks or their bare teeth and claws. He looked down at his own dosimeter, checking his sanity points were within normal levels – everyone in important positions in the JSDF was carrying a dosimeter now, and security checked them whenever entering the inner military sanctums. Still – the true horror of Mexico City was still going on, with the country's own police and army having to euthenase on sight many of the survivors, whose condition was now so extreme that it was explosively contagious by eye contact.

"What a shift," Miki, the big-eyed human Fifth Lieutenant, drooped in her seat. "Getting those weird reports out of the SAMOS array didn't help – they put the alert up three notches." A hundred kilometres away was another deep hole in the planet, and an abandoned copper mine held an experimental array of highly classified equipment that stared a short but tantalising way into the future. She pulled out a small green book from the pocket of her well-tailored uniform, and flicked through it. "Here we go – *'Did You ever look into the Future? See the big red sun that won't go down? / And the giant moths upon the hillside / By the deep red scar that was our town.'* It's not as bad as that, the six billion year temporal loophole Saint Robyn once found, but it's bad enough."

Maso nodded, looking at the threat board. "Still – it doesn't get much worse than last week – having someone heading straight for us with one of those – things – on board." He choked back the code phrase he had been about to say, "Electric Grin" – the room was monitored, and he had already had a long and unpleasant interview with Security after the first time he had mentioned it. "One of the technologies they say came out of Europe at the end of the war."

Miki wrinkled her nose. "Well, I can't see anything about a European war on the Worldnet or the history files – and they're fully up-to-date files, get altered every day. It mentions the older books were inaccurate – twenty years ago the population was miscounted at twenty-nine million too high, and a lot of towns listed on paper maps were actually never there – they were always ruins, and just appeared in the books for tax reasons." She cocked her head on one side. "That's the trouble with hard copy – it's so hard to change it when it's wrong."

Maso shook his head, wonderingly. "I can understand why folk don't like to think about it," he confessed, "But pretending something never happened, isn't going to help in the long run. There used to be a proverb, *'Those who refuse to learn from History are doomed to repeat it'*, and whatever happened over there – we really don't want back."

"I saw a show about that!" Miki's eyes lit up, shaking off her tiredness. "There was some country where our East Coast Colonies are, they'd always taught European History – then they gave it up after the Millennium, said anything European wasn't relevant to them any more." She paused. "They ended up repeating it too, Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun rolled right over them, or someone exactly the same, then everybody got the Black Death and the 1918 influenza, historically exact in every tiny detail. Nobody ever did work out where any of that came from or went to after."

"Tricky thing, time." Maso kept his eyes on the threat board, scanning the various civilian and military units labeled as icons on the screen. "It didn't use to be this bad – I think the first really nasty affair was back in the year 2000. Some old computers did more than display the time wrong – in a few cases people got sucked into time loops and found that it really Was 1980 again for them, except they

knew it was happening to them. Nasty business. Not as bad as Mexico City, but same sort of effect on most people who got hit by it.”

Miki glanced up at the clock, spotting their shift was due to end in five minutes – unless of course something urgent developed, in which case the team who had been around watching the background develop, would stay till their replacements were fully briefed. She smiled brightly, smoothing down her military green miniskirt, looking forward to a few hours off. “Four minutes to go, and we’re out of here!” She sang happily, filing her nails with a combat issue claw sharpener. “Three minutes and fifty seconds!”

Maso winced, his eye flicking away from the threat board for an instant. The Japanese Self-Defence Force made a special point of recruiting folk of a certain attitude, although working with them was wearing on the nerves. Where other military units suffered from what the long-lost dark art of Psychiatry would have called “Post-traumatic stress disorders”, many of the larger-eyed citizens actively enjoyed any chance to set off anything loud and cheerfully bright on any target. Fortunately, even the name “Psychiatry” had been expunged from the records, and would soon have vanished from the national consciousness. In a few centuries, it was earnestly hoped that only the race memory might retain the last shuddersome recollections, as a thing to be instinctively avoided. As for Freudians – after an accidental exposure in his youth, Maso was almost the last person in his province to even know the word, while all over Japan cheerful folk innocently slid long rod penetrators into gaping artillery breeches without a single Freudian qualm.

“Not a safe thing to say...” he began, just as the telephone rang. With growing dread, he snatched it up – and his face froze in a mask of fear. “Yes, Sir. I have that exactly. The rest of the JSDF will be informed.” Trembling, he put the phone down, and his hands wriggled furiously in the data gloves. Several icons on the master board changed colour, and one of them suddenly turned a deep, dark red-black, the colour of a gangrenous wound.

“That was from a Vicar Militant, out near the end of the Volcano Islands,” he whispered, the tanuki’s tail fluffing up in shock as he tapped the tiny dot that was Shahaguo Island. “He didn’t say how he knew, but he said he got a reading the like of which he hadn’t seen in years – not since the certain – events - near Tokyo. And it’s right here – not that far from the homeland at all.” Other icons began to change of their own accord, as the information triggered responses through the already alert chains of command.

“Oooh.” Miki fumbled through her book of military phrases. As navies had discovered and expressed as signal flags in earlier centuries, there were only a few hundred basic things that anyone was liable to say. Any of them could be represented by three characters in Japlish, and rapidly coded. “Request confirmation of wholly deniable mission.” She frowned. “Who writes these things?”

“Not since the site which wasn’t outside Tokyo, and the books say never really existed except in diseased imaginations, was destroyed,” Maso felt his tongue dry in fear. “The Vicars had to handle that, and all they said was they would have been too late in another seventeen minutes. Something like it – it’s all started again. There’s something out there that bends possibilities – somebody has a working Reality Processor, right there.” He pointed to another tiny dot, out in the Pacific, but instinctively refrained from touching even its computer image as if it was as infectious as its new coding threatened.

“New Tortuga!” Miki’s long pointed ears * drooped, as she mentally kissed her relaxing evening goodnight, and resigned herself to another all-night vigil with only the replacement shift for company. “That’s an interesting place, by all accounts.”

Maso shook his head sadly. “Pity. It won’t be, for very much longer.”

Back at Toho Academy, the loud hammering noises finally stopped around midnight, much to the relief of the other inhabitants of Hiroshi’s dorm.

- An interesting Japanese variant found only in the “Homo Sapiens Animemorphous” gene pool are the type known colloquially as “Elves”, although they bear little kinship with the European race of the same name. Having long and pointed ears that in some cases stick out at right angles to the skull, is a feature that biologists have been debating over for decades. It makes very little improvement to hearing ability and makes designing an effective and comfortable crash-helmet a rather daunting piece of ergonomic engineering.

“Yay! Finished!” Hiroshi whooped, gleefully tossing the two-kilo lump hammer and Manchester Scalpel (a large crosscut chisel) high in the air. There was a crash, and the room darkened. Her broad face wrinkled slightly in annoyance. “Who left those lights lying around on the ceiling?”

Trish entered from the kitchens, with a hopeful expression and a covered dish. “Is good! We are being ready to go?” She stopped, and looked up at the Device that was filling most of her friend’s room. “How is this working?”

Hiroshi scratched her head. “Shobban tried to explain it to me – but when she started drawing stuff on the blackboard, I sort of lost the plot. So I just built it.” She looked at Trish’s puzzled expression, and took a deep breath. “Umm – it’s something like this. What we have to do, is bring that point over there, closer to here, without having to move ourselves. So we needed something to work with – Shobby said we’d do OK if we could find something called a ‘*non-gravitational singularity*’, whatever that is.” Her eyes widened. “I went over to that neat little shop, and they were just closing up when I got there – and I got the last one in stock! Only cost me sixty centi-yen, I had enough left from my allowance to buy the biggest Tesla Coil I’ve ever seen, to power it.” She waved over to where a doughnut-shaped chunk of copper-wound iron hummed and buzzed in the corner. “We need to beam as much power over to where we’re going as we can, so we can make it a two-way trip ... Mother always told me Return tickets are cheaper.”

There was a loud canine yawn from behind the Tesla coil, as Shobban woke up from a refreshing nap with her head in the flux core of the giant magnet. “Hello, Trish!” Her tail wagged happily as she stood up and smoothed down her sailor-suit.

“Shobby! I was getting to the tricky bits of how the Device works ...” Hiroshi’s voice trailed off, her head cocked to one side plaintively.

The setter girl smiled. “Well – once we’d got the Singularity, that was most of the scavenger-hunt over. All we had to do was cut it in half, like making monopoles from a bar magnet – that was tricky, but we managed it. Then we had to “entangle” the two bits, so everything that happened to one of them happened simultaneously to the other, never mind how far apart they are – the same way a faster-than-light communicator works, really. After that – well, that’s the mathematical bit.” Her eyes gleamed, as she picked up a piece of chalk and headed for the blackboard. Like most places in the 21st century, Toho Academy had special blackboards used for high-security projects, where more standard wall screens would radiate telltale signals that a sufficiently advanced decoder could read from a kilometre away.

Shobban tapped the board. “We have one part of the singularity – in this room, here. Now we fire up the core of this Bachman-Turner overdrive and project it – elsewhere, without giving it a destination. The theory’s one of that Yak professor M. Chandrahaupata, and it’s rather fuzzy as well – but the bits you can prove, say it’ll encounter every point in the universe, sorta like a quantum scale particle gone infinite.” She paused. “I don’t THINK it’ll return carrying a galactic core or a neutron star tagging around behind, but like I said, we can’t prove all the theory.”

“Hey! We’ve got to get over there in a hurry, we can’t wait around for everyone to pretty it up,” Hiroshi objected. “Like on the island next door to my Uncle, it civilised in a hurry. A hundred years ago the street lights were just paper lanterns – fifty years ago they were electrified, then ten years ago they were atomized.”

“You mean, ‘*converted to atomic power*’, don’t you?” Shobban asked curiously. “‘*Atomized*’ would mean, “blown to atoms”.”

Hiroshi nodded sadly. “Well, yes ... safety devices cost money, and cut performance. But hey! Lightning never strikes twice, so we should be OK doing this.”

“Well.” Shobban’s eyes glazed for a second then shook her head, her long ears flopping. “Once we’ve got the far end of the singularity bouncing around everywhere, it behaves like any other quantum particle. It might be anywhere – but once you make an observation, it settles down to BE somewhere. The trick is, working out just when to look for it to be where we want. It was a tricky piece of math, I had to extend the Riemann equations to five dimensions and integrate them with Dyson’s second theory of...”

Hiroshi blew a loud raspberry. “Never mind all that – just get to the good stuff – it’s past our bed-time already. What was that bit about surfing? Surfing’s cool!”

There was a rueful canine grin. “So there’s two bits of a singularity, and what happens to one happens to the other – wherever it is. And until the far end is pinned down, it’s just bouncing simultaneously as a probabilistic quantum wave function, not a definite point in space. When we work out where it should be – we look, and the wave function collapses. When a wave collapses – surf!

Dimensional surf, in this case – if we're standing at one end, the undertow should just drag us all the way to the other one when it appears."

"Ta-dahh!" Hiroshi cheered. "And there we'll be." She yawned. "Anything else, Shobby? I'm tired."

Shobban's ears drooped. "We'll need a computer – a fairly powerful one. I've written the equations down, but running them, that's going to take awhile. Do you have anything we could use? I don't mean that games box you're hiding under the bed."

Hiroshi sniffed. "It's a perfectly good little box! Runs 'Geisha Boy 3000' in full sensorama mode, even! Beats this year's model of the PlayStation, tested on most altar-marks. But - " her eyes lit up gleefully in the gloom. "I know! Suzuko's got a classic Cray 90-90 in her room, we can use that. She'll be so pleased we put it to good use!" With that, she dashed off.

Trish smiled. "We are going first thing tomorrow, yes-no? I have a small midnight feast been preparing." She removed the lid, her fine vulpine-effect snout twitching at the aroma. "I have the recipe book most exactly been following."

Hiroshi reappeared a few minutes later, panting for breath as Trish busied herself with bowls and chopsticks. She skidded to a halt, putting down the little Cray on the workbench. "A midnight feast – that's great." Her eyes crossed. "This is just how I dreamed it'd be, staying up late, dorm feasts, building neat dimension-spanning devices... who knows, maybe we'll find some real Monsters over there."

"Or if I've got one symbol wrong, we might end up somewhere in Warp Space, with lots of Things and Daemons." Shobban's ears perked up. "That'd be OK too, but I'd rather we did it on the way back – then we'd have all weekend there."

Trish nodded, a puzzled expression on her face as she served out the food. "I am not understanding, why you are so keen on meeting these things. And why not some of your own species, like..." she scanned her memory, and came up with a name. "Podzu, he is your species and age, yes-no?"

"Bleahh." Hiroshi stuck her tongue out. "Don't remind me. Dating your own species? Only boring people do that! You might as well drop out of school, get a nice cosy nine-to-five job as a salarygirl in some Evil Mega-Corporation and start filling up the company crèche for want of anything else to do. But when I see a Monster - oooooh." She shuddered deliciously, her eyes closed. "Have you ever seen a real one, Trish?"

Trish considered the issue. "I don't think so."

"We almost got one here last week," Shobban's voice was plaintive. "We were that close! There's three billion mortals on the planet, only a few really Interesting entities materialise at any one time – the major summoning sites are booked up Years in advance. It's so unfair."

Hiroshi brushed a strand of silver-blonde hair from her eyes. "Just because we didn't have the right gear, I bet. It's rubbish being poor. Not like Rae from my old school – the first day she was in kindergarten, even, she had a crayon set with three different Colours Out Of Space, they cost a fortune. Never let anyone else use them either – and now she's been dragged off by something you couldn't even tell which end was which! Some folk have all the luck."

She sighed, and looked down at her meal. "Looks neat – thank you Trish! You must have spent, like, ages on this. My very first Midnight Feast. Ahh." With that, she tucked in messily, her chopsticks flicking like a stilt-walking kickboxer.

Trish nodded, pleased, as she sampled her own cooking. She tasted the proteins and carbohydrates – the mineral balances were rather odd, but tasty, and rather different to anything she had tasted so far at Toho. *Nice, she told herself. First time round, I manage to come up with a memorable meal for my friends.*

Shobban, meanwhile, was slowly chewing the stir-fry dish with a very peculiar expression on her long-muzzled face. "What did you cook this in, Trish?" She asked, her voice strained.

Trish's ears flicked. "I followed the recipe book exactly! I used all the local ingredients, they were all properly dead when I bought them, but very fresh as it says. And the oil is just as it says, yes-no?" She fished out the book, and pointed. "It says, 'Make sure the oil used is of the finest quality, and coats all the pieces evenly' – and I did." She tapped a large empty can. "I asked the fabricators the finest general purpose oil, and they recommended this one. Says has graphite and molybdenum for advanced high-temperature performance."

"Oooh." Hiroshi's tiny button nose twitched as Shobban made a commendable attempt on the Japanese record for the ten-metre dash "Neat. Don't waste it, Shobby, let me have yours. I think it's

great! And real meat, too – sure to be good for you.” Since most genetic omnivores who had been vegetarian by choice had perished miserably in the Mad SoyBean Disease outbreak of '17, the medical profession's recommendation for healthy eating was now typified by a thick, rare, juicy steak.

There was a contented silence, broken only by two sets of munching and one of retching from the bathroom down the corridor. At last Shobban reappeared, her fine whiskers drooping, to find Hiroshi tinkering with the little Cray.

“Took your time.” Hiroshi commented sympathetically. “Look! I've overclocked it to double the performance – my friend Miako did it to hers at school. Just look at the performance you can get – after you lash down the boring old factory-installed circuit breakers with a cyberpunkish ten-centimetre nail. Here goes!” With a triumphant flourish, she hit the power switch.

There was a quiet “Pop!”, a neat rising ring of very expensive smoke, and a smell of burned-out insulation. Shobban gave a mournful whine.

Trish cocked her head to one side. “Was that supposed to happen?”

Hiroshi frowned, scratching her head. “I don't think so.” She gave an embarrassed grin. “At least it's consistent. That's just what happened to Miako's when SHE tried it, anyway!” She gave a bemused hum. “We'll have to try something else. I know – I was at the airstrip last week, they've got a big computer running things there. We can borrow it – nobody's flying at night.” She opened the window, and listened intently. “No – no aircraft around. Back in a tick.”

Shobban's tail wagged, her good nature restored as she picked up the sheaf of calculations. “The formulae's the most interesting thing I've ever written,” she enthused. “It'll take a lot of calculation even so – just stepping through all the formula once won't do it – we have to calculate exactly the location, in four-dimensional space.”

Trish frowned. “Only four dimensions? What about ...” her eyes suddenly widened. “No, no, is fine, you are being the local expert.”

“I hope so. I've got to get us there right on target – some first-generation teleports, they just shoot for a piece of sky five kilometres above the target, and you parachute in. That way, a kilometre or so error either way and you're still OK. This – I've got to hit a pretty tight target.” The setter cocked her head to one side, absent-mindedly grooming a long ear. “I suppose I could aim us to drop into the centre of the lagoon, I think I can hit a twenty- metre spherical error zone with only half the processing power – but no, there's ships and things out there. Even though it's not really a teleport, we could really ruin our day colliding with something like that.”

Trish looked at the various squiggles on the paper, impressed. Still, she reminded herself, Shobban was only a student, and had a lot to learn by all accounts – in the waste bin were some conclusions that had proven to be time-wasting dead-ends to their current problem, though they might have been interesting in their own right. She wondered what the four-colour theorem was – anyway, there was no point in asking now, as Shobban had come across a decisive refutation of it. Some of the other equations had proven too hazardous for the standard recycling bin, and were currently awaiting disposal secure in a logic trap fifty metres away from the building, guarded with a large sign warning “Danger – Unexploded Theory”.

Hiroshi came skidding in a few minutes later, with what looked like a small Perspex aquarium under her arm. “I got it!” She sang out happily. “The central processor – three kilos of stratified cloned fish neurons – let's plug it in, program it up and get going.”

“All right!” Shobban's eyes gleamed at the prospect. She disconnected the toasted remains of the little Cray from the interface, and started to plug in the new processor. “I've seen folk using these on New Tortuga – I once virtually went there on a telematic trip there to a Cyberpunk bar, a place called Cranial Jack's. “ Her ears drooped. “They threw me out.”

Suddenly, she gave a yip of displeasure. “This doesn't connect to a standard interface unit! I'll have to program it the hard way.” Concentrating, she reached for her notebook. “I'll dictate it, Hiroshi, if you type it in.”

Hiroshi frowned, stifling a yawn. “Umm, OK. But I'm not brilliant at a manual keyboard. Two finger typing only.”

Canine teeth gleamed in an embarrassed grin. “That's OK – all you have to type in are 0's and 1's.” Shobban hesitated. “But there are an AWFUL lot of them.”

The student-issue databook on Cultural Hygiene fell to the deck of as ship with a heavy thump, waking Podzu at his post on watch over the remaining prisoners. The human gave a guilty look around,

checking nobody had noticed – and took up his position again. He had just retrieved the databook, and was flicking through the “Wrong Beliefs of Many Lands” section when he heard footsteps, and recognised Shiitake Tabi’s snuffling breathing.

“All quiet.” Podzu stood up as the pug approached. “Umm – shouldn’t we be getting some sort of medical treatment for these folk ? I mean, another of them, like, died today. I thought we were going to hand them over to someone here, take them off our hands ?”

Shiitake stared at him. “That’s not one of our priorities right now. We’ve got to get their Device defused – I was with Rai and Matzu all afternoon on it.” His ears twitched. “I think we have a problem with those two.”

He winced, thinking back to the scene that lunchtime, after his fellow students had finished a twenty-four hour “exploration” bout in some of the local taverns, the ones that had resisted installing genuine oak beams and small paned leaded glass windows. Matzu had been found kneeling in front of the Device, chanting something about “Worshipful Kali, dark destroyer of worlds” – it really was too bad, he reminded himself, that one of his own classmates could be taking up foreign beliefs like that.

“I think,” he said diplomatically, “that they’re the victims of some of the local beverages. You .. you know back home, what it says on cans of Washi-Cola?”

Podzu nodded, having been brought up on calorie-free caffeine drinks from a tender age – where his two sisters naturally bounced and frisked with relentless energy, he had needed a gram of pure caffeine a day by the age of nine just to keep up. “Sure – *‘contains all-new Secret Ingredients, a secret in every can.’* It’s great stuff – and very Traditional, archaeologists have found remains of cans from all over History – and the company sent their agents back in time to check it out in person.”

The pug coughed. “Yes. Well, the local “Narco-Pops™” are like that – every batch has a code number, only the manufacturers know what’s in it. Some brands they give away, provided you stay within camera range so they can see what happens after you drink it.”

“Sounds fair enough. I mean, Rai said they trial things that nobody’s ever tested on people before.” Podzu had accidentally sampled a bottle Rai had brought back three days before, and was having trouble forgetting it. He hoped it was only a hallucination, but for twenty entirely lucid minutes he had apparently lived on an alternative timeline as ticket collector on a Tokyo bullet train driven and mostly patronised by Egyptian mummies.

Shiitake stared at him, and walked away, slowly shaking his head. Podzu was useless, he decided. Rai Gosu was dissolving his remaining sanity points with designer sanity solvents, and the expression on Matzu’s face as the bear fifteen times a day gleefully calculated the effects of the Psychiatric Blast bomb detonating right here – it was getting more than alarming. He winced, heading towards the deck of the ship, his head turning unconsciously towards the shore where the arms dealer and his staff were working frantically on the Device that everyone was now wishing had gone to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

“It could go off – any second. Just like that.” The ship and indeed all of New Port Royal was right in the “A Ring”, something he had seen Matzu doodling on satellite photographs with an expression of religious awe. Thirty kilometres out, was the start of the “C Ring”, where some survivors might be expected to recover, albeit after years of specialist treatment with their heads nailed to the bedrock floor of a specially earthed and screened Loony Bin. “Right here – we don’t stand a chance – and Satori’s flown off with the Hughes Hercules for spare parts, we can’t even leave.” He winced. “Things just can’t get worse than this – they really can’t.” He looked around at the ship they had leased – everything was negotiable on New Tortuga. They had rented guards by the hour to get their captives onboard, and rented quite cheaply the support services to keep the ship running. Yashi and Osamu were off chasing the Korean vixen, and the ship was feeling distinctly empty right now.

Just then, a large hand clamped his muzzle shut – and an incredibly powerful grip on one shoulder picked him up like a toy. Shiitake’s squeal of panic was stifled as he felt himself turned round – to discover he was being held dangling half a metre off the deck by a huge, blocky bear figure in jet black boarding armour, its ironball oxide stealth coating seeming to soak up light like a sponge.

A smaller, slimmer figure moved like a ripple of shadow from the cabin behind – where Shiitake caught a glimpse of a large hole that had soundlessly appeared in the side of the ship, with more dark-clad shapes pouring in. The figure standing before him looked up, a long but tightly kevlar-wrapped tail swinging in amusement.

Captain “Redclaw” DeWaal smiled behind his faceplate, switching off the onboard air supply and letting the scents of terror tickle his nose from the struggling figure his bosun held. With a thought to his Brain-User Interface, he opened up a voice channel to Jurgen’s earpiece.

“Let’s get this one in and close the door.” His voice was dry, amused. “This is the place – and he’s one of the ones who arrived just when everything changed around here. I think I’ve got a few little questions to ask him.”

Tktlohahn Davies had given up pacing up and down the long cargo hold two days before. He sat slumped in the corner, conserving energy, trying to put out of his mind the sights and sounds around him. Only eight of the crew were in anything like a healthy condition – like him, they had been in the rear of the Road Runner, shielded from the radiation flash by the fuel tanks. Another ten were more or less sick – Motoata the Night Flight Engineer had died that morning, the llama having simply not woken up, his body drained from exhaustion and dehydration. Eighteen left, he told himself – Captain Evans had not lasted a day here, which might have been a mercy.

Tktlohahn raised his head, looking at the pipe on the wall. It had been ten hours since the last communication with the pilot who had shot them down, only to share their captivity – he had been shocked to see it had been a vixen, although he knew as an intellectual fact that the biggest and fiercest Japanese mecha were crewed by young and particularly cute girls.

Natahaho spotted his gaze, the young opossum still hopeful despite everything. “Maybe they moved her – or maybe she escaped. She said she had a plan.”

“We can hope.” Tktlohahn knew his voice sounded flat. “But unless we get out fairly soon, there’s not much hope in it for us. Just the infections alone – in this place, they’re going to do for us. Jones the Capacitor, he was down in the main decking same as me, but – we must have all taken a big enough dose to hit our immune systems. Another week, we’re all goners.”

The opossum was just about to reply, when every ear stood up at the sudden, unexpected noise – one they had last heard when being shepherded onto the big flying boat, when two of the mecha-clad captors had hacked up the broken body of their Road Runner with chainswords, like a hunter gutting its kill.

There was a burst of sparks from the door, and the screaming blade of a twenty kilowatt chainsword ripped through the hinges, the door falling in with a crash as a large mecha boot sent it flying. The surviving crew drew back – but those still alert suddenly realised two things – their captors had no reason to hack down a door which they held the key codes to – and none of them had been wearing plain pitch-black armour.

Two figures leaped into the room, their heads swiveling alertly, assessing the situation. They carried chainswords, the close-fighting mecha weapon of choice for confined spaces where explosives would do as much damage to the wielder as the target – but the blades were lowered, as the two bulky figures stood at the entrance. A second later a third, smaller figure stepped in, setting his faceplate to transparent to reveal vulpine features.

Captain DeWaal had taken one sniff of the air in that room and sharply exhaled, flushing out his helmet with volume after volume of tanked oxygen as he went back to internal supply. With a twitch on his jaw switch, he activated the external speakers on his suit, and spoke in clear, amplified Japlish.

“Let me apologise for the lack of hospitality on our fair island.” He bowed slightly. “Rest assured we will be – dealing with those responsible, in person. Consider yourselves the guests, now, of the Brotherhood of the Coast.” He switched to radio, contacting the six other members of the team who were outside, sending a homing signal to the exact part of the hull. Another barked command had Jurgen and Guarez cutting a new hatch in the side of the ship, the fresh sea air flooding into the poisonous reek as the boat outside came alongside. The steel cutout bent down under Jurgen’s power-assisted pressure like a drawbridge, the other crew outside leaping up to secure the mooring.

“And now – out, as fast as we can. We can carry those of you too ill to walk. For all of you – we have medical assistance ready, hot food and such can be arranged. All for the price of a story.” As he spoke, he fired up his Brain-User Interface, the BUI connecting him to one of the discreet medical centres ashore. Having sudden influxes of wounded crew to be treated with no unnecessary questions asked was a common event in New Port Royal, and fortunately not all the hospitals had decided that leeches and bleeding were back in style.

Tktlohahn Davies stood up, staggering slightly as he drew in lungfulls of fresh air. He nodded gratefully, seeing the biggest of the three Pyrates gently gathering up the prone figure of Mirikitilahi and carrying him towards the waiting boat. “I’m the senior officer left on my feet.” He faced the black-

suited figure, a thin glimmer of hope beginning to reappear. "Believe me – I'll tell you anything you want to know."

Fifty kilometres out from New Tortuga, three heavy vehicles rocked in the deep swell, engines shut down for maintenance as their commanders decided on just how to take the last step. This close to the ever-vigilant Pirate Island, they were not risking using the radios – not even their 1940's valve based models, that operated on frequencies the military had abandoned decades ago.

Mae looked around the deck of the Maus II, the spacious vehicle big enough to accommodate them all in comfort. "I've picked up Suzuko already – she's OK. That is, she's not under any huge stress or worry – which is about all I could pick out from this range. But she's very busy – if she knew I was trying to get in touch it'd be different, right now she's not in two-way range."

"Which is better than we expected." Horst Graben nodded, the boar sitting calmly against the turret side, with Mangana next to him trying to stay awake. "We can be there at dawn tomorrow, with this current sweeping us along."

Mangana yawned hugely. "And the rest of us will be no earthly use when we get there, if we don't get some sleep. You too, Horst – *Tough as Krupp Steel* you may be, but – even metals get fatigued."

"True." Horst smiled, his tusks glistening in the starlight. He took out his compass, and squinted at the needle. "One more hour of full power, after six hours current drift – forty minutes after sunrise tomorrow should see us on the beach."

Jenni raised an eyebrow, from where she sat at the prow, one of the air struts that held the flotation screens rigid supporting her back as she possessively cuddled Tava and Broohilda. "I hope you're not relying on that compass all the way out here, sitting on two hundred tonnes of iron armour!"

Kazuko grinned, patting the ersatz metal of the Maus turret. "What iron armour? I got hundreds of authenticity points for the construction – this vehicle's mostly made from something called STABO – the recipe survived, though even Horst's not sure what STABO really stands for. It's a synthetic, substance-like material – lighter than iron, and an awful lot tougher against hollow-charge munitions." She ran her finger over the corrugated anti-magnetic mine surface finish. "It's not homogenous plate either, it's a sort of foam sandwich, should be OK against squash-head shells, if anyone still puts those on a mech's missiles."

"But we're not planning on fighting if we can help it," Broohilda put in hurriedly.

Jenni smiled, snuggling closer. "Of course not – this is a rescue mission. We'll do what we have to, to come out of it in one piece, but it's a rough place we're going to." Privately, she was becoming very impressed with Temari's choice of transport – the JS3 was certainly cramped internally, but that proved no problem providing the crew were on sufficiently good terms. And with the auto-loader somewhat modified by Temari, as long as Broohilda kept the ammunition carousel topped up with 122 mm rounds, Jenni could look forward to trying out "Full Rock'n'Roll" on a legitimate target.

Mae cast the ewe a sharp glance, her ears twitching. Without actually probing, she could still read emotions and surface thoughts – and all too often with Jenni, they bore very little resemblance to what she said. Her tail twitched in irritation. She had recommended to Broohilda that she enjoyed herself more, and indeed Broohilda radiated a deep contentment, relaxing next to Jenni. But something in the setup was decidedly off-balance, she told herself – and it was certainly not Broohilda or Tava.

"Right, OK, plans anyone?" Kazuko's huge eyes gleamed in the dim light: with the exception of Mae and her cousin Mangana, she was having the least difficulty with the self-imposed blackout. Her six-centimetre blue eyes took in the scene, the three crews slumped tiredly around the warm deck of her Maus, all of them suspended above the kilometres of black water on the fragile wading screens like an anvil floating under a balloon. "I vote five hours sleep, then full speed ahead at first light – however we find Suki, I'm sure we'll do it best in daylight with clear heads. Anyone object?"

There were no objections, unless Mangana's snoring counted. Horst smiled, gently picking her up, and bundled her into the inflatable dinghy for the ten-metre trip back to the Empress Tiger that they all hoped would soon be reunited with its owner.

Tava stood up, and stretched. "That's our cue." He smiled down at Broohilda. "I don't know how you manage it – keeping awake like this. You're really quite a girl."

Broohilda felt her ears blush. "Thank you." She looked up at the ram, her tail twitching – as she reminded herself that they all needed sleep, if they were to be on their best form for tomorrow – no,

not tomorrow, just later this morning, she told herself as she checked her watch. “We’ll need our wits about us, I’m sure.”

“Oh, yes.” Jenni squeezed Broohilda’s tail playfully. “And from now on – we should do our best to keep in shape – in top shape.” Her eyes flashed, in the dim light. She had gleaned a lot of information about Broohilda, all of it fascinating. That she was of a universally “compatible” species, was fine – and that she might be the only one of her type who was anything but an irredeemable rampaging Monster (of a wholly unattractive sort) explained her incredibly low self-image. Broohilda had confessed her fear of her heritage, that any children she might have could be Enteropes, a walking and ravenous plague that could not be tolerated on the planet. “Beauty sleep for us both, Broohilda.”

Broohilda looked at Jenni, feeling herself relaxing. Earlier that evening, she had confessed her fears to Jenni, only to have the young ewe make a most touching offer. She wriggled at the thought of it – medical science for fifty years had been able to transfer a small gift from one genetically compatible female to another. That Jenni would be so generous – she swallowed, dismissing any worries she might have about the noble ewe.

“Well – off you go! Alarms set for four-thirty, mind.” Kazuko waved them away, as they piled into their dingy (an ersatz design, like a dinghy but with less flair.) She stretched, feeling her every joint and limb protesting with fatigue. Mariko was already fast asleep below them, having put in a six-hour stint of driving and another five hours that day of helping replace the electrical transmission from the great Maybach diesel engines. The mouse-girl had given Mae her vote, agreeing to go along with any sane plan – evidently having excluded any plan of Kazuko’s.

“Tired.” Mae curled up on the hatch cover, the stillness of the ocean only broken by the slapping of the waves against the screens and the distant whirring of the bilge pump keeping pace with seepages. There was a minute or two of silence – on a comfortable futon back at Toho, Mae knew she would have been asleep in seconds.

“Too tired to sleep – too tired to stay awake.” Kazuko agreed. They sat back to back, balanced against the commander’s cupola, by now the only wakeful ones of their little team. “It’s like – before exams. You know you have to rest – but everything keeps going through your mind. You don’t dare oversleep – tell yourself you just have to be up at six...”

“...And your body clock wakes you at two, and half-past two, and three. Been there, Kaz, we all have.” Mae’s ears drooped, as she closed her eyes. “Not for much longer. This time next year – well. Have you thought about it?”

“I have.” There was another long pause. “But what I like doing is – this. I haven’t the cash to do what Mariko does – just take a job to keep busy. She doesn’t have to work for that travel business, testing exotic holidays to see if enough tourists would come back in one piece to make it worthwhile.” Despite everything, she grinned. “People don’t all want to spend a fortnight sitting on a beach – it’d bore me silly after the first weekend. A lot of folk are pretty demanding these days – what was it Mariko said last week? *‘When you’ve paid good money for a visit to a nightmare world of ultimate horror, there’d better be nothing penultimate about it.’* The ‘doom and depravity’ destinations in her brochure look OK for someone who sits behind a desk for the other fifty weeks of the year, I suppose.”

“Hmm.” Mae relaxed, feeling the warmth of her friend’s back through the waterproof suits that gleamed with spray blowing over the flotation screens. “It’s tough, but something Mariko can’t avoid – she stayed on here, after all her friends graduated and moved on – then all the folk she’d known in the year below, then the year below that. It’s different for the Staff – some of them have been here years, but there’s not as much turnover.” She paused. “Except on the Peace Studies course, naturally. Folk on that one aren’t around long enough to memorise their colleagues’ names, let alone their students.”

“Some have been here years – I’ll say! My bratty sister’s in one of Rabid-Sama’s classes – and they deserve each other. Talk about old-fashioned – when I was in the first-year, I spent all term poring over big books with titles like “Sophistry for Dummies” and “So you want to be a Revisionist?” Did my very best – I was so proud of my Term essay I handed to him – I was sure it’d get record-breaking marks.”

“What did you write it on?” Mae asked curiously. “I was doing Remedial Military Microbiology that term.”

Kazuko sniffed. “When I was at school, they always tried to drum into us, we should try to give people the benefit of the doubt. I did my level best to prove that the old Sex Pistols track “God Save The Queen” was really a Pro-Monarchy track. Rabid-Sama should have been so pleased.” She paused. “He doesn’t appreciate hard work, you know that? I got a record-breaking mark all right – when he’d

run out of rude things to scribble in red ink over my nice essay, he had an external examiner specially flown in to add some more. One of those “born again” ghouls who changed their name after they rose from the dead, I think – at least, his name was something Rotten. Which was the mark I got.”

Suddenly, Kazuko stiffened. Mae felt a shudder going through her friend.

“Mae,” Kazuko spoke very slowly and clearly. “About Hiroshi. Tell me – I wasn’t that bad when I got here, was I? Say it’s not so.”

Mae twisted round to face her friend, ears twisted in sympathy. “I could go mind-to mind with you and let you know for a fact, the answer to that one. Without any possibility of lying.”

Kazuko winced, and looked up at the autumn stars wheeling far above the Pacific Ocean. “Umm, no thanks, Mae. I think there’s some mysteries I can live with.”

“Well, this is certainly the finest Mystery we’ve seen in simply ages!” Dick Pontephrigh’s tail wagged as he lay on the flat roof of a building, snug in what the New Tortuga equipment catalogues would have termed an “*Eco-friendly sourced, biodegradable micro-fine pattern camouflaged abrasion-tolerant multi-function top.*” *

“I should say!” His brother’s blunt muzzle was wreathed in smiles. “Just think – that secret passage went all the way across the island, and we got here just in time to spot the Bolsheviks and their sympathisers coming onshore!”

“Yes.” Dick scratched an ear. “Actually, I asked Rai about that, before we left the Coll., he seemed jolly sure there weren’t any actual Bolsheviks around these days.” He paused. “But he might have been wrong, of course.”

“Or ...” Dick frowned, struggling with a thought. “These could be – Neo-Bolsheviks instead! Tricky folk by all accounts – I remember the story of Great-Great Uncle Rudyard, he was liaison to both the Tsar and the Czar, they all had some unpleasantness with Bolsheviks.”

“Foreigners even cause trouble with other foreigners?” Anne’s eyes went wide, as she lay on a layer of respectable newspaper behind them, to protect her best Adventuring costume.

“Yes. It’s a shame, but there it is.” Dick agreed. “Look! They’re carrying them into that building there – must have been fighting each other, some of them are on stretchers.”

Anne’s fine nose wrinkled as the night breeze carried the scent to their rooftop lookout point. “Phew! They could do with a wash! I wonder if people have soap around here?”

“They don’t seem to use it, if they do.” Julian agreed. “But we shouldn’t be too hard on them, not all of the time – after all, not everyone gets the advantages of a proper education any more.”

“And it shows. You know, Ju, if everyone had a really bracing half-hour cold bath every morning – I don’t think they’d spend so much of the rest of the day complaining about everything else.” Dick tracked the progress of the party, eighteen very bedraggled Bolsheviks and nine black-suited Pirates wearing strange helmets like badly drawn deep-sea diving costumes. “Anyway – there they are. I bet they know where Suzuko’s hiding. They’ve quite possibly kidnapped her themselves!”

Dick’s fur bristled. “I say! They can’t do that to a fellow Student! “

“I’ll say they can’t! Buck up, George, get over here with all the equipment.” Julian waved his cousin forward. “Let’s take a look in that building that claims to be a hospital.”

“Oooh.” Anne pressed her paws together. “It’d be so nice to be a nurse – so genteel and respectable. Georgina – didn’t your friend Granita teach you a song about that? Something about ambulances? You were singing it together when you came in after watching that football game on the screen.”

George nodded, panting as she bent under the weight of the four packs and big coil of rope. “Yes – it’s a fine game these days – more democratic. Not just fought between a dozen or so a side – thousands let rip at it.” She had sat rapturously at Granita’s side as the half-Gargoyle described modern football rules – towards the end of twentieth century, teams had used “Mascots” to encourage the players and the audience to greater efforts. With the realisation as to the – nature – of some of the giant stuffed things that had become household names, obviously that was no longer acceptable.

* Being plain honest folk who would call a spade a spade and not call a compost heap an “Air-cooled intermediate-technology top loading biohumic reactor”, the Pontephrighs called the garment a “Harris tweed Jacket.”

In a modern game, the role of the players was to run about the pitch and kick a ball around to inflame the supporters to melee combat, several thousand strong – and indeed, in Europe, most of the New Army regiments were based on the supporters teams, who had gained years of valuable experience of overseas combat even without the slightest government sponsorship. George smiled, remembering the merry sporting chant that Anne had overheard. “I think it’s the one that finishes –

‘We don’t care! We don’t care!

The kicked-off heads sail through the air !

United, you don’t stand a chance

You’re going home in a Saint John’s Ambulance!’”

“Yes, that’s the one.” Anne smiled, her eyes wide and keen in the dark. “It’s good to know people still want to be nurses and proper respectable things these days. Meeting all those unladylike girls driving tanks around the Academy made me wonder – and none of the boys mentioned wanting to grow up to be an engine-driver.”

George said nothing – remembering fondly her meeting with the Pirate Queen Akeritsu’s Bosun, who had a similar part-time job to Granita, and had many other tastes in common. The Bosun never revealed her real name, but had hinted that it was something embarrassing like Winifred - a lifelong curse that only taking a career split between Piracy on the High Seas and Pit-fighting on land could compensate for. For a second, George’s bluff muzzle softened in an expression much like Anne’s, as she thought about it – the appeal and romance of escaping from the humdrum life of social niceties to become a Pit-fighter, shackled to a snarling foe and surrounded by a baying crowd at the bottom of a floodlit pit from which only one could emerge alive. She sighed contentedly as she passed over the Adventuring equipment.

“Right.” Dick rubbed his hands together as he looked down. “Swing across the street on the ropes, smash straight through the window, that’ll put the wind up them. I saw it in a film, it looks easy enough. We can run through the building while they’re all running around panicking and jabbering in Foreign, and if our fellow student’s in there we just grab her and make tracks for our camp. Then a big mug of hot cocoa, a good nights sleep and off back to the Academy, first thing tomorrow – we can tell the local constables where to pick the rest of these Pirate Johnny’s up later. Got your first-aid kit handy, Anne ? I doubt the local witch-doctors or whatever are really up to much, Susan what’s-her-name will probably need patching up.”

“All ready.” Anne patted her canvas haversack proudly. “Everything we might need, from cough syrup to anti-mustard gas cream.” She had carried the first-aid kit all around for nearly a month, and was looking forward to practicing all sorts of healing techniques, which seemed to be quite lost sciences to the medical teams at the Academy. At least, when she had run through her manual on proper use of tourniquets and red-hot irons to arrest bleeding, she had received some very strange looks from Mangana and other supposedly “qualified” staff.

Anne looked up at Dick and Julian, as Dick threw up the rope to catch on something above – it would have been hard for an independent observer to spot what exactly the rope did snag on, but it was at just the right position. She glowed with pride, as her brothers stood ready to swing into the void – so rippingly decent, she told herself – not like the badly-behaved folk who were supposedly “heroes” in the modern stories she had tried to read. Nothing could surely go wrong with a plan and with brothers as good as these, she told herself reassuringly.

What an independent observer might have seen as Dick launched himself across the street on a bristly manila rope, was a very odd flicker of the stars in the clear sky above New Tortuga. But that might have been anything – an optical illusion, possibly. It was a very small thing, compared with the other things that had been happening to the island in the past few days.

Far out in the open ocean beyond the reef, picket ships of the Salvation Navy’s carrier battlegroup swayed at anchor as they kept watch. The crews cast the occasional envious glance towards the island, and the promise of shore leave the next night as they polished their brass tunic buttons and retouched the ablative coatings on the refractory throats of contrabass tubas. New Port Royal! It was the proudly defended home of the Salvation Navy, where its crews could relax with night after night of riotously handing out pamphlets and furiously not drinking far into the night.

Deep in the bowels of the ship, a few metres from its gall bladder, Unit 555T Dash Fifteen sat and bubbled in its nutrient tank, the ten kilos of artificially stratified fish brain dreaming subliminal dreams of dining on drowned swimmers washed far out to sea. Its main processing area was keyed

into the big phased array of radar detectors that ran the length of the ship, all the way from the forecandle Watchtower to the big armoured bandstand on the poop deck. Other parts of its engineered consciousness linked it to bigger, more experienced processors elsewhere in the ship and around the battlegroup.

01:11:45.05 local time. Nothing to report, scribbled Dash Fifteen in its log file, updating every fifteen milliseconds as the Stealth Radar focussed endlessly on the open and empty skies above the ocean.

01:11:45.20 local time. Nothing to report, Dash Fifteen noted happily. In some part of its unused cortex, there were other memories from its former life, when it had been a humble Accounting and Personnel Management unit for Mahasuwado Heavy Industries (Evil). It had been a dull time, re-drawing the management charts two or three times a day as the vigorous dynamism of modern corporate life and death unfolded. There were promotions on merit, on blackmail, sometimes by cracking enough layers of Dash Fifteen's system to simply BE promoted by machine fiat. And there were demotions too – here a corporate dinner where an entire cabal had succumbed to Fugu fish poisoning, there a vain executive whose elevator shoes had somehow “malfunctioned”, the control and safety cables having snapped, sending him plummeting several stories to his doom.

Dash Fifteen had never had a head suitable for shaking, but it performed a series of Op-codes with much the same effect. Working onboard a Class-A Pirate vessel, wanted by all the world's Navies (mostly for target practice) – it was *so* much more relaxing.

01:11:45.35 local time. Nothing to report, Dash Fifteen duly noted. Just then, a small disturbance caught its “eye” – the Stealth Radar worked not as a searchlight, but as a passive receiver staring out to see what moved against the world-wide scattering of radio energy. To make any sense of it was a task for massively parallel computers, which these days tended to be cloned up in vats rather than etched on silicon. Piecing together the tiny flashes of received energy was like making sense of a “join the dots” puzzle performed by skittish fireflies through three dimensions and covering thousands of cubic kilometres of airspace – but something was out there that had not been close enough to spot before.

01:11:45.50 local time. Trace contact. Bearing 245, low altitude. Unidentified. Dash Fifteen reviewed the known traffic patterns, both of the rare scheduled visitors and the local inhabitants. There was nothing expected, and it would be a brave or foolish intruder who would try to sneak up on New Tortuga unannounced.

01:11:46.35 local time. Nil, repeat nil, direct illumination. Wind shear only. A stray beam of Gigahertz band communications channel had swayed back and forth over the area, which should have picked out any solid object. There was nothing there, only a snapping rush of air vortices like a small horizontal tornado. Dash Fifteen watched it for several thousand milliseconds, tracing the bearing and the vector. Something was rather odd about this piece of turbulence.

01:11:47.20 local time. Turbulence focus now climbing, 20 metres/second on same bearing. Headed this way. Dash Fifteen watched as it scratched its metaphorical head, and decided to call in some advice.

01:11:48.50 local time. Hey, Alpha-Five, very strange piece of weather out there. Heading straight at us at 870 metres/second, transmitting log files now. Now, that IS strange. As the message flashed around the ship, Dash Fifteen spotted a great “knuckle” of air forming, and two brief flashes of infra-red light, thirty-five kilometres away across the empty ocean. *Panic over, Alpha Five – the wind shear seems to be heading back the way it came, accelerating and dropping back towards the waves. What do you make of that?*

Suzuko Hohki had relaxed, for the first time in days, keeping a wary eye on her lapine host as Lebeq digested her story, seated across the room and idly swirling the last of a second bottle of strange ale in a big, “balloon” glass. She had eaten well, roasted chicken and fine deep-fried chips, though declined the bowl of mayonnaise that had been offered to dip them in – a strange Pirate custom, she had told herself.

Suddenly, a red light began to flash on the computer system on the far wall – as a fraction of a second later, loud sirens blared out from every street corner, a screaming wail that woke every sleeper in New Port Royal and had distant beachside crews fumbling for their cutlasses.

“What's that?” She jumped to her paws, fearing some surprise trick – but Lebeq's own ears were right down, his whiskers bristling in obviously unfeigned alarm.

“Haven’t heard that – since the Durres went down.” He scrambled towards the screen, hurriedly gesturing over the control panel. Wallscreens lit up, a direct feed in from the Brotherhood of the Coast’s own tactical computers.

A clear, straight track barely two kilometres long showed on the tactical display. A modern aircraft, or more likely an unmanned stealth drone by its small size and performance – it had skimmed the waters at just under the speed of sound, at exactly the right time when the local “sky eye” had been pulled down for maintenance, and none of the public satellites were in the right position to spot a telltale wake from an otherwise fully Stealthy aircraft. That aircraft must have been unmanned – it had pulled over twenty “G” in a maneuver that looked awfully familiar – a sharp pull-up, roll over and head back at speed, desperately trying to put as much airspace and curve of the planet as possible between itself and its target. At the apex of that climb – a tentative curved track headed up and forwards, something even smaller and more stealthy heading their way.

“Ninja! Somebody’s toss-bombing us!” Suzuko’s tail fluffed out in fright, here ears pressed right down against her skull. She cast a glance at the concrete walls around her – knowing for a fact that with what she feared was heading on a lazy ballistic arc towards them – all the steel and concrete of New Tortuga might do very little good.

Fortunately, she was about the four hundredth brain to draw that conclusion from the data streaming in from the Stealth Radars – and the first hundred or more to have made the decision, were handling something less tasty but even more potent than a glass of vintage Belgian ale.

Bandsman Blake had been practicing his Assault Tuba on the armoured deck of the William Booth, when he suddenly went deaf. The last thing he heard in quite a while was the shrill whine of the big automated railgun clearing its armoured mountings on the deck above him – and obedient to the shipboard Alert being flashed over all frequencies, his Bandsman’s cap suddenly became totally opaque to sound. Which was just as well.

The night suddenly turned bright as if lightning had danced across the fleet. A ruler-straight line of fire traced across the sky as the railgun fired, its tungsten pellet blazing white hot at hypersonic speed – and a second one milliseconds after. The shock of twin bursts hit Blake literally as if brittle planks of wood were being broken over his head – and then three other ships were joining in, lines focussing in on an invisible dot in the night skies like some brutal artistic demonstration of perspective and vanishing points.

Blake hit the deck, his mouth wide open and his hands over his ears protectively as the railguns snapped viciously again. He knew what they were doing – “Shoot-Shoot-Scan” patterns, the onboard radars tracking the outgoing pellets, adjusting the aim then firing again, in a hellish pattern of twin whipcracks that echoed across the Roads. Two more sustained roars tore the night further apart, as the Standard Nineteens cleared their launch tubes and immediately “turned over” to follow the white lines into the flickering darkness.

Suddenly the noise stopped – at least, the intensity of sound which had been shaking his body like a punchbag stopped. Risking a glimpse, Blake looked up from under the rim of his Salvation Naval cap to see the missiles heading out – but they were a backup no longer required. Far out, fifteen kilometres out and three above the waters, a pale firework shivered, sparked as a last railgun round tore into the tumbling cloud of debris, and went out.

Scrambling for a gunnery terminal, Blake felt his wolverine fur rising in his collar as he accessed the data. Interception had taken place – and indeed, the Standard Nineteens were on the trail of the launch aircraft, but it had been a very close call for New Tortuga.

“Spectroscopes on the Volstead and the Titus Salt confirm it,” he whispered soundlessly, the ear defenders still clamped tight defensively. “Breakup and burn of uranium and lithium salts – debris impacting near BlackTail’s Reef.” He whistled, even as an irreverent thought came to mind – *the Ecos, they REALLY won’t like that.*

Bandsman Blake shivered despite the warm night, watching distant sparks descending like some New Year’s Eve fireworks display. A modern anti-matter Device would have detonated as soon as it was hit – so there was that one thing to be thankful for. He looked around, eyes wide at the suddenly very precious island of New Tortuga as it powered up to full Alert status.

“Someone out there,” he told himself, “Really has it coming to them!”

