

Chapter Thirteen

Dawn came as a grey blur over the cloud-covered Western Pacific, a Friday morning like many others. Two time zones ahead Japan still slumbered, the streets almost empty except for revelers returning from a night of mid-week clubbing, most of them staggering home almost too exhausted to wield their clubs. It was not one of the clear, brilliant Autumn dawns of the week before – it was a grey, tired light that seemed like most folk who saw it to be just resignedly awaiting the weekend.

A light, musical snore filled the small room as Trish awoke, curled up on one of the spare futons that Hiroshi had “borrowed” from an unoccupied room before collapsing completely. True, the room had been empty for days, the door proudly proclaiming “Rai Gosu” whom Trish knew had headed out to New Tortuga with his friends. The door had been open, too – Hiroshi claimed that having a plain digital lock with only a six-digit combination was the same thing as having no lock at all, when Shobban was around. The futon was comfy enough, though the effect of its cover proclaiming “NO RIGHT TO PARTY” was rather jarring.

“Ooooh.” Trish wriggled, stretching – sleeping in her suit was nothing new, but she had rolled forward in the night and fallen over the steering wheel and the emergency brake. Rising stiffly, she looked around, and smiled. Hiroshi was curled up in the corner innocently, still wearing her now rather rumpled school suit – and Shobban was flat out on her back beside her, the floppy puppy’s ears spread out wide on each side of her head. Trish looked at the peaceful scene for a minute, then a happy idea struck her. Grabbing her recipe book off the worktop, she headed out and down the corridor to make breakfast.

Half an hour later, there was an anguished wail from down the corridor. Trish’s ears pricked up in alarm, but immediately spotted the problem – as Hiroshi skidded in barefoot, with a pink fuzzy towel wrapped around her as a kimono.

“We fell asleep!” Hiroshi’s broad face was a picture of anguish. “Typing in all those 1s and 0’s was SO, like, boring! I think I did it all, but I can’t remember. Anyway, the computer’s been busily working on the problem all night.” She cocked her head to one side. “I’m sure I can’t have gone too far wrong – if I mis-heard Shobban dictating, it’s a 50% chance I got it right anyway.”

“But it’s not got the aiming solution yet,” Shobban stuck her long snout out of the bathroom, a billow of steam following her out. “It’s stepping through billions of iterations of the formula - it might take hours.”

Hiroshi drooped, but perked up almost immediately. “That’s OK! We couldn’t go right away anyway – we’ve classes all morning. “A gleam came to her eye. “I can always – hurry it up if I have to. I saw a Worldnet show once about someone who overclocked a biological processor – and he was the hero, so it’s got to be right.” She looked around the kitchen, impressed. “Cooking again, Trish? You must have been up ages!”

“Is no problem.” Trish nodded. “Other folk are being up as well. I am meeting with Mipsi, she is practicing.” Outside on the grass, the first-generation Bunny was practicing her skills, trying to hone her nose-twitching to Olympic standards. “She is helping with advice on the fussy cooking you are doing in these places!” Trish’s fine, realistic tail swished in puzzlement. She had heard that some religions forbade their members to eat various things, but wondered at the advice Mipsi had given her on baking soda bread - she seemed quite adamant that Shobban would far prefer it to be made with baking rather than caustic soda. *

“That’s neat! Got to dash – Shobby needs someone to groom that tail of hers or it goes all tangled.” Hiroshi waved and skidded round the corner at full tilt, a loud splash and joyous shriek echoing a second later as she demonstrated that only dull people entered bath tubs feet first.

Trish shook her head, marveling at the strange local customs that her new friends were showing her. Mipsi was a case in point – Shobban had explained that the fuzzy bunny had developed her skills so well that even her exact position was probabilistically fuzzy – the Staff had computers running constant Monte Carlo simulations to estimate where exactly she was at any given time.

*Which was not the most corrosive version Trish found in the cupboard under the sink – the dormitory blocks were heated by Roman-type Hypocausts, which were cleaned with genuine Hypocaustic Soda.

She dusted down her apron, checked the bread was cooling nicely on the oven top, and took another look around at Hiroshi's room. All was much as it had been, except for one detail – the perspex tank's controller unit now had its speed circuits bridged by a large nail – and in the nutrient solution, half a litre of heart-shaped ice cubes from the kitchen's fridge were rapidly melting in the unaccustomed heat.

"I am learning something new here every day, yes." Trish marveled, tuning into the audio diagnostic display of the semi-sentient processor. "I am never knowing that computers can scream like that!"

An hour later, Trish was on the far side of the island where the lecture rooms clustered at the far end of the airfield – she frowned, checking her timetable. Of the various courses, she was having most trouble with Phenomenology – and being late for class would surely not improve Rabid-Sama's notoriously short temper, she told herself as she hurried towards the classroom.

There was a horrified scream and a crashing as someone threw themselves out of a window. Trish's ears perked up in alarm as she looked at the strange one-way timepiece that was standard around these parts – evidently they were handing out assignments already.

"Right! That's the projects for this week, for you miserable flock of Nowheres." Rabid-Sama was just handing out the notes when Trish arrived. The elderly pit-bull spotted her sneaking in late, and singled her out with a piercing glare.

Trish braced herself. But the undyed white Mohican hairdo nodded in satisfaction. "Now that's more like it. Show some disrespect around here, can't the rest of you?"

"Hai, Rabid-Sama," chorused the rest of the class, bowing in unison. With a rustle, one of the tortoiseshell felines stepped forward, having been elected spokesperson for the class after much earnest debate and several rounds of voting. She was impeccably dressed, in a Traditional costume – a dress made from an antique late 1970's bin liner, crafted from authentic polythene and purchased for a princely sum from a packaging museum. "We will get to work on the project right away, Rabid-Sama! None of us shall sleep or eat till we have established a completely uniform standard of disrespect and rebellion, practiced to the highest quality assurance levels!"

Their tutor gave a groan, covering his eyes with his gnarled and scarred paws. He had thought it was bad enough the day before – when he had been respectfully presented with a specially commissioned Bulky disc of all the favourite songs of his youth, recorded by the Kyushu Philharmonic Orchestra. The historical cycle had turned, he told himself, not daring to admit it – as had happened in Europe two hundred years earlier, a new generation had looked at the wild excesses of their parents, and sworn unspoken vows of conformity and Respectability.

"Young Fogys," he growled under his breath. "That's all we need." With a savage gesture he waved the class to sit, and turned to his hand-written notes. His eye strayed to the calendar – the weekend was almost upon them all, and he was looking forwards to a trip to the darker side of Japan, where for decades small decadent clubs had offered live singing and dancing. He hesitated, catching a look at his faded reflection in the mirror-like finish of the door. Some of the clubs still drew their original customers, with a few changes over the years. Undead singing and dancing was something he had had to get used to – few of his contemporaries had lived healthy lifestyles – though there were plenty of unreformed first-generation punks still walking the streets of Earth, he was about the last one of them left alive.

"Ow – this work is impossible!" Hiroshi looked over at the assignments they had been given, as some of the class stayed behind to tidy chairs and dust the room. "A report on the recycling of History – demonstrate ancient modes of thought OR fashion being re-used far out of their original context. Photographs may be used, but no Worldnet data." She drooped like a silver-blonde lettuce wilting in the sun.

Trish looked down at her own assignment. "Give examples of opposing philosophical points of view settled outside the political/diplomatic framework. Give practical examples only. Solutions may be in danceable OR military format. If danceable, recorded backing groups may be used, but not to include session musicians. If military, platoon-sized infantry assaults with either 20 units of long-range artillery fire support OR one helicopter gunship are permitted."

Shobban scratched her head, looking at her own assignment that seemed to be mostly in equations, while the class spokesperson Fujiko peered over her shoulder. "Mine's kind of hard to describe," she admitted. "It's very technical."

The tortoiseshell cat sniffed, wrinkling her nose. "It can't be that bad, if they give it to a First-year foreigner. Let's take a look."

"Umm – I'm afraid it really is VERY technical," Shobban's ears went up in alarm, as Fujiko tried to snatch the paper. "You wouldn't like it."

"I'll be the judge of that – and I'm the Class Representative. What's the question?" Fujiko demanded, smoothing down her luxurious bin liner frock.

Trish felt Hiroshi tugging at her sleeve, as the other students scattered towards the exits with frightened expressions. Curious, she followed Hiroshi out, the humanoid girl carefully shutting the door.

Trish's ears swiveled back towards the classroom, her expression one of puzzlement. She could not quite make out the words, but recognised Shobban's lilting voice patiently and carefully explaining something. After a minute, there was another voice – or rather, a whimpering sound. Barely half a minute later there was a high-pitched muffled shriek – and the door slammed open, Fujiko hurtling out with every hair on her pelt bristling in shock and terror, as the feline bolted out of the building in panic.

Shobban followed, walking out as she tucked her assignment into her satchel. The setter girl shook her head mournfully. "I told her it really was much too technical," her ears drooped as she gazed after Fujiko. "But some people just won't listen."

"Yah!" Hiroshi agreed. "Like they say, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing – you could explain that stuff to me all day and it'd go right past me, wouldn't hurt a bit. But once you start thinking about it – it's like that nice old lady in the shop said yesterday, when she sold me the naked singularity – nobody should look at it who knows about maths – except for someone like you, Shobby." She giggled. "A good thing too – that way, I got her to throw in a hand-knitted Singularity cosy, free!"

They strolled contentedly across to the cafeteria for a snack, chatting happily. Trish relaxed, as they entered the long room, some dozen or so of the other students being there already. Mipsi was there, her early morning practice paying off already – it was one thing to practice being adorably fuzzy, but another to have a circle of admirers sitting round in full-scale religious Adoration.

"She's doing that twitchy thing with her nose and whiskers again," Hiroshi enthused. "Isn't it neat? Back in a few minutes, I'm going to Adore it a bit." With that, she dashed off to join the rapt circle.

Trish's tail drooped, watching her go. She had fine-tuned the surface mapping of her suit, but knew there were limits to the emulation built into that model. "She's very nice, no?" She asked Shobban as they collected trays of high-sugar caffeine-enriched snacks and found a table.

The red-furred girl nodded happily. "It's nice to be popular! And she's sort of Exotic – not like you and me. She's 16 percent Bunnier than the average lapine born to pure-stock lapine parents! I suppose she just tries harder."

Shobban leafed through her databook, and tapped at one of the entries. "This really is the place to study, you know. Just the mathematical school, let alone the genetics they study here – they're world-class. See here? It says that at the start of their eugenics program three generations ago, half the population was below average in all measured abilities. But the current figures say that only three percent are below average, and most Citizens are in the top six percent! Now, that's an achievement. The statistical math alone, is really impressive."

"Fancy." Trish nodded, lapping at her wide bowl of Washi-cola. "Is a lot of not-average people here at Toho, yes-no? I am being hearing about it all the way back home."

"Oh, yes." Shobban's eyes swept over the crowd. "You've met some of our real stars, Toemi and Princess Cthuline? There's nowhere like this on the Japanese mainland, and we're even level with the New Miskatonic on Bermuda." Her tail drooped, as she spotted Toemi sitting on her own at the far side of the room. "But you can be TOO famous – some of Gen's friends, their fathers are heads of Evil Mega-Corporations, they're too rich and too thin to be popular. And Toemi – well. Kazuko told me she sorta frightened off most of the boys the first week she got here."

"She is being very pretty, though." Trish noted, looking at the strong, lithe back tentacles and thick squamous tail of the demigoddess. She hesitated. "I am thinking, some of the people here who are having trouble looking at Interesting things – are worried about being taken home to meet her Father?"

Shobban felt her ears blush. "That wasn't it. She's got feeder tentacles in all sorts of places, she can do sort of ... party tricks with them. I've seen her drinking a glass of sake with them. But she'd been showing that trick a few times too many at a party and – showed another one. She can crush a golf ball."

Trish's eyebrows raised, looking over at the long-haired demigoddess. "With her bare hands? I am thinking, she is not looking that strong."

Shobban shook her head. "Umm – no. That's not where she crushed it. Like I said, none of the boys have really dared date her since."

Trish nodded, impressed. An idea struck her. Scooping up a stray object, she first washed it carefully in the hand basin and then retired towards the toilets. Two minutes later, she emerged, carrying a smashed chunk of tough rubber, looking like a ripe apple that had been stepped on.

"I am not being able to afford the clubs and such for Golf in Japan," she said conversationally, dropping the smashed debris in the bin. "But from what I have been watching – cricket is my game!"

On New Tortuga, the morning was well advanced when Captain "Redclaw" DeWaal switched off his Brain-User Interface and rejoined his crew. His heart sank at the sight as he entered the tavern outside the hospital that the members of the Axebled's shore party were quartered in.

"What ho, Captain!" Dick Pontephrigh grinned cheerfully, striking a jaunty pose while wearing an over-large black three-cornered hat with an equally large and grinning skull and crossbones neatly embroidered on it. "I say, these are jolly costumes! Did you make them yourselves?"

Redclaw's eyes flicked from one member of the group to another – both Jurgen and his mink second mate LaVassier were wearing matching headgear, without a trace of embarrassment – and Guarez wore a red and white spotted bandana around his ears as if he had been born to it.

Redclaw shook his head, as if to clear it. "No," he gritted, closing his eyes. "They're a new fashion over here."

Anne smiled happily. She liked an orderly life, without too many surprises – and when she thought about it, real jolly Pyrates would be bound to get along well with people who announced themselves by swinging in through windows at them. It was a very Pirate thing to do, she reminded herself. Everything had gone perfectly to plan, except that Suzuko had not been in the building – at least, they had found people who had recently been in touch with her.

"Well, I think it's very fetching," she ventured. "Everyone here's so colourful! What about those folk, over there in the fur-paint and the big riding boots? They look awfully fierce."

LaVassier looked over to a band of what might be described as Land Pyrates, who had come over for a convention and might not be returning home in the same costume they had arrived in. A distant, ancestral memory stirred, as he looked them up and down. "They're the dandy Highwaymen, who you're too scared to mention." His tail twitched, as he felt a strange current of thought sweeping him along, pervasive as gravity. "They spend their cash on looking flash, and grabbing your attention."

"Well, and quite right too." Dick agreed. "There's too much skulking around in this business, if you ask me – folk should dress honestly, so you can see just who's who. Don't you think so, Anne?"

Redclaw's whiskers twitched in alarm, as a sense older and less technical than the software in his brain implant triggered something deep in the back of his mind. He forced a smile, and shook hands firmly with Dick Pontephrigh, switching in the sub-skin electrical circuitry of his palm.

"We quite like to keep some mystery and intrigue going around here," he concentrated on the hearty canine's expression. "After all – even we Pyrates like a surprise now and then. And thinking of surprises – since everyone arrived from Toho Academy, things have been very – different – around here. You wouldn't happen to know why?"

"Different? It looks perfectly fine to me." Dick returned the firm grip. "It's exactly the way we'd hoped it'd be – we wouldn't change it if we could!"

Redclaw's face was expressionless for a second, as the implants in his skull processed the reading from the orgone receptors in his palm, a far more sophisticated sensor than any purely electrical lie detector, and one that worked perfectly well through clothing and fur. He winced inwardly – Dick was telling the absolute and unblemished truth, and some of the signals could be interpreted as meaning he would have extreme difficulty in doing otherwise.

I just said we like a surprise now and then, Redclaw told himself wryly, *let's hope that's the last one we see for awhile.*

"So – we're no nearer to finding out what really has happened," he said aloud, fighting an urge to add 'Arr, Dick lad'. His eyes flicked from one Pontephrigh to the other – three unbelievably keen and enthusiastic expressions, all radiating a cheerful determination the like of which he had rarely seen without advanced neurosurgery. "And last night, someone tried to wipe this island off the chart – we don't know who. It's not likely to be the Japanese, they wouldn't use old-fashioned fission/fusion bombs so close to their own homeland – they'd use antimatter. We might find get a clue when the Ecos fish out what's left of the nuke, assuming there's a serial number on it."

“And assuming whoever made it, launched it, Capt’n,” Guarez put in, his wits seeming to be no duller despite the cutlass he had acquired from somewhere and thrust into his belt. “Take a stroll down the Thieves’ Bazaar any day, you can take your pick of whatever hardware you want, from whatever nationality you want to incriminate.”

“True.” Redclaw mused. “So, that leaves us with the other possibility – it’s linked with the Device the Peruvians were carrying. Even they don’t know what it really is – Mexico City found out what one does, but not how.” He had Podzu and Shiitake safely secured onboard his ship the Axebblade, whether the crew were holding democratic debates over whether to make them walk the plank or keelhaul them. Unfortunately, neither of them knew where Rai and the rest had gone on the island – and New Port Royal, though not a large town, was packed with places specially designed for people and items to stay securely hidden.

Julian scratched his head. “I must say, it all sounds a bit rum,” he confessed. “Here’s Rai and Shiitake and our college chums, heading off on a rescue mission to save Susan-something and hand over these South American whatever’s, and they don’t do either of those things. They lock Susan what’s-her-name up, and throw the rest into something like the back hole of Calcutta. And that funny device they’re wheeling around on the trailer, they’re trying to sell the bally thing! I heard that much, when they were talking to that odd-looking native with the snout like a bicycle-pump.”

Redclaw stiffened. “Could you run that past me once more?” He asked slowly. “You’ve actually seen the Psychiatric Blast Device – here on the island?”

Julian nodded. “Just last night, in one of those warehouses over there. I didn’t hear everything, but I did hear them trying to get the local shopkeeper or whatever to take it off their paws. He didn’t seem too happy either way. It must have been past its sell-by date or something, the shopkeeper was worried about it going off.”

“An arms buyer. Who has a warehouse here. And a definitely – outstanding snout.” Redclaw nodded. A phrase from his cubhood briefly surfaced – you didn’t have to be a herbivore to know how many beans make five. “I think I know the very gentleman we want to talk to.”

Gen Yakitora risked a quick scan around the corner with his electronic periscope, and waved the hunting party forward. The sharp-featured canine frowned, looking around at the crowded streets of New Port Royal, his narrow muzzle wrinkled in distaste at the lack of proper food odours.

“Damn. We still haven’t found Hohki. She must have gone to ground somewhere – if she was wandering around the streets, we’d surely have spotted her by now.” He stood up, and looked at his four companions, every one of them securely clad in mecha – Rai Gosu, Matzu, Yashi and Osamu. They had been hunting one defenceless Korean vixen all night, and had not spotted a whisker of her.

“No news from our ship, either.” Yashi tapped at his communicator. “They’ve fallen asleep again, I bet you they have! Or Podzu’s had another of those Narco-Pops, and is spaced out somewhere between here and the Andromeda Galaxy. You shouldn’t leave it lying around, Rai – he’s only a first year.”

Rai Gosu nodded, his eyes glazed. “Not used to it. Folk who can drink as much Sake as me an’ Matzu, can handle anything. That’s right, Matzu!” He looked up at the polar bear, whose suit was creaking as the bear swayed rhythmically.

Matzu’s stubby white tail trembled, as he looked around. In the ammunition locker of his armoured pack was one last bottle of Special Recipe 7775J, which he had made the acquaintance of on his second day. He shook his head, resisting the temptation to finish the last bottle – it had been produced in a trial batch, and cost surprisingly little – though the barman had grinned unnervingly at the time, and cameras had been swiveling to follow his actions ever since.

“Alcohol. Fuel. Burn.” He nodded. “It all should burn. Everything here. Everything must burn, then the world will be clean again.”

Gen looked over in alarm, but Rai clapped the bear on the back with a reassuringly solid clang. “Sounds like Matzu’s been reading those Salvation Navy pamphlets,” his eyes shone with glee. “Nothing wrong with that – they’re a fine Japanese tradition, it’s good to see them all the way out here.”

Gen’s tail flicked slightly, beckoning Yashi over. “I don’t like the way things are going. Hohki vanishing, the Device liable to go off with us right at Psi Zero and no way to get off the island. If Satori was here – I’d just say head out at full speed and let the whole place go up! That’d clear the whole slum off – we could use robots to weather-seal the buildings, in a couple of years it’d be safe to come back and open up the town. We found out a bit about how the Device works – not enough to build one, worse luck.”

The Siamese looked around, wincing at the street scene. There were freshly renovated seventeenth century taverns on both sides of the street, with swaggering pirates falling out of them even in mid-morning. He had been to Theme Parks before – near Kobe there was an amusement park themed on the Mongol massacre of the Chinese peasantry in the 14th Century – but this one was disturbingly authentic. Despite his armour, he flinched as a naked lunatic with a sword ran down the street screaming, only to have the roisterers wave or cheerfully raise a leather or pewter tankard in salute.

“It looks like it’s leaking already – to look at the locals.” His voice sank to a whisper. “And I think Matzu’s going off the deep end. Never mind waiting for Satori – I vote we get off this island any way we can, the fastest way we can. Our documents will cover it.” He patted the sheaf of old-fashioned stamped papers, with detailed permission to re-enter the Japanese Empire after exposure to the cultural taints outside. “Oh – here’s one we made for the Korean vixen – so we could get her in, at least.”

“Let’s see that.” Gen’s eyebrow raised. He looked at the impeccably forged passport and visa, and smiled despite himself. “The description’s spot-on. The particulars are perfect, too - Korean third-class citizenship, habitual criminal record, occupation “hospitality girl”, and – oh, that’s good. Name, “Miss Yippy Wolfstoy.” Who thought that one up?”

“Shiitake, I think.” The feline slitted eyes narrowed, his tail flicking inside the armour. “I vote we have one last look around, then back to the warehouse – they may have defused the Device by now. If they have – it’ll be safe to take back to Toho for some reverse engineering. The Arch-Dean’s going to write us top-rate passes for this without us needing a sniff of an exam paper!”

“Hey! We promised that arms dealer he’d have first crack at doing that – he’s already paid us fifty gold yen apiece!” Osamu objected. His ceramic fibre armour glittered lacquer red-brown in the hazy sunshine filtering down the alleyway. “We can’t break the deal – that’s not honourable.”

“He’s a foreigner – so that doesn’t count,” Yashi pointed out patiently. “We can’t let him have that sort of information, can we? The thing to do, is give it back to our Arch-Dean, then make sure the Self-Defence force know about it – they’ll “request” he hands it over, and we get rewarded twice. Pirate Island loses something it shouldn’t know about, and our brave boys get hold of something we definitely should – it’s that simple.” He smiled, tongue caressing sharp teeth. “If it makes you feel fetter, I expect Pirate Island will get it back pretty soon– or one built to its design. I’m sure this place is a prime case for a piece of pre-emptive Self-Defence.”

They turned round, at a low chanting sound. Matzu was crouched in the alleyway, swaying slightly as he stared unseeing towards the warehouse complex just visible over the rooftops. His voice was slurred, indistinct. “Dark Kali, worshipful destroyer..... Cleansing fires... Let us all burn before you... flaming grass before your terrible swift sword”

Gen looked down at his comrade, a look of cold loathing crawling over his features. He hit the infra-red communicator setting on his helmet, keying it only to Yashi’s channel.

“You’re right about that. See what happens to people here – our Authorities were dead right about controlling who can get back Home after exposure to this place.” He hesitated. “If there’s just four seats on whatever transport out of here we can find – that’ll be fine. And I don’t think you’ll have to carry his visa around much longer.”

Not sixty metres from the alleyway where the Toho students crouched, another of their number was sat relaxed in a comfortable chair. Suzuko Hohki looked around the reception room, feeling decidedly better than she had been. Her host had proven as good as his word – she was fed, washed, well rested and had no cause to complain of their arrangement – Lebeq had even arranged for a medic to call round and administer a course of anti-radiation treatment. And all for the price of her story.

“Information!” The brown-furred rabbit had mused, when she had finished her tale and answered half an hour of keen questioning. “That is the trade to be in. Easy to store, easy to sell – and unlike a bar of smuggled gold, one may sell it several times over and still have contented customers who will be back for more. Of course, one cannot sell facts by the kilo – knowing who will buy, and seeing what they will pay for the best and freshest data – THAT is what makes or breaks a player in this business.”

That had been eight hours earlier. Lebeq had been busy elsewhere in the building behind locked doors all morning, having first shown Suzuko the exits but advising her against using them right away – he had data feeds into private cameras in the streets, and several times Suzuko had spotted a familiar group of Samurai-styled mech suits flitting across streets in an attempt at stealthy hunting.

A door opened up soundlessly, and her host reappeared, clad in a grey form-fitting boiler-suit and a strange half metallic cloak. He looked exhausted, his ears drooping.

“I trust you will forgive my absence.” Lebeq slid onto the old, over-stuffed sofa. “I have been at work, since last night and the attack on this island. Many folk are asking who did it – and why.”

“I can see it’d be a busy time for you.” Suzuko nodded sympathetically. She looked her rescuer over, and smiled slightly – if Lebeq was typical of the infamous island’s natives, she was sure its danger and lawlessness must be greatly exaggerated. “Did you find out?”

The rabbit laughed, dryly. “A word of advice, Miss Hohki – avoid asking me questions, till you have read my price list. But – no, I have not found out.” He paused. “And that answer alone, was worth substantial sums to some of my customers who have used my services before.” His sharp chisel teeth shone in the soft light. “I can tell you some very strange things though, entirely free and gratis – possibly you might repay me with any observations that occur to you. Two heads are better than one, they say, though perhaps some of our more outré medical researchers here have sometimes taken that rather too literally.”

He paused, looking around. Suzuko noticed his accent, though faint, was showing when he became agitated. Closing his eyes, the brown lapine spoke slowly and clearly, his fingertips pressed tight together.

“As a matter of public knowledge – someone attacked us last night, getting a long way into our defences. They chose the timing very well – but not the route. In fact, whatever they tossed our way, went right over our best defended sector, even without the Salvation Naval fleet in dock – and their defences are world renowned. Coming in from the other direction would have been much harder to spot, and harder to stop.” Lebeq relaxed in the chair, opening up one eye as he gazed reflectively at his guest.

“But... that makes no sense.” Suzuko’s ears rose. “Whoever knew those sorts of details, whoever got the timing exactly right, could have looked at a public satellite photo and spotted all the extra ships in the harbour, and known just who they were. They wouldn’t have had to aim right at them, with a nuke.”

“Indeed. And if anyone is that determined to wipe us off the planet, more than one attack would definitely be expected. Just one vulnerable and yet very expensive bomb, no decoys, distractions or jamming – rather amateurish, in most people’s professional opinions. Almost as if they wanted us to hit it. But of course, we might have dropped the ball, so to speak – in which case, farewell to New Port Royal.” Lebeq opened his other eye, and stared hard at Suzuko. “Apart from that – I have ... methods of my own for predicting events of that scale. And I saw nothing. That worries me deeply.”

“I can see it would.” Suzuko’s muzzle wrinkled in worry. “There’s one piece of information that might clear up the whole problem – if you could get hold of it.”

“Which is?” Lebeq rose, his slight frame almost trembling with excitement.

Suzuko told him. The lapine stood as if thunderstruck, and then laughed, a deep, rich laugh of revelation. Striding over, he seized Suzuko’s paw and shook it warmly.

“My dear Miss Hohki,” he smiled. “I can get that information. If I can buy the exclusive knowledge of it for even an hour – believe me, I will be most deeply in your debt.”

Had Suzuko stood on the roof of Lebeq’s sturdy home and trained a very ordinary pair of binoculars to the South-Western horizon, she would have seen the defences of Pirate Island springing into action again – but less noisily, against a rather slower invading force than had headed in the night before.

“This IS Pirate Island, isn’t it?” Kazuko Leclerc stood on the commander’s cupola of the Maus II, hands on her hips and glaring across to the hydrofoil sloop that was standing between her little fleet and the shore. “Supposedly the Anarchist capital of the planet? Home to brigands, cutthroats, assassins and members of the Haircut 100 Fan Club? So why can’t we get in without filling in forms in triplicate?”

Bandsman Blake was unimpressed, looking down at the lashed-together squad of wallowing land armour. “We’re on full alert. Someone tossed a bomb our direction last night – and only known Citizens and their associates are coming ashore. We’re quarantining and searching on BlackTail’s reef, ten kilometres that way,” he waved a black-uniformed arm.

Kazuko fixed him with an expression that had been known to cause robots to dump their memory cores in kernel panic. But the Bandsman simply pointed towards a low atoll, visible to the East a few kilometres past the main island.

“Right. Fine. We’re on our way.” Kazuko seethed, dropping down into the Maus turret and slamming the hatch behind her. “Mariko! Hope you packed your swimming things – we’re going to be marooned till they look up our credentials. Does anyone belong to any Secret Societies that have branches here?”

Mae’s tail tip twitched. “Well, I know someone who does. Remember, Suzuko happens to own the title deeds to those 2 submarines? I think they’re technically freebooters, not Pyrates – but I’d be amazed

if they don't make dock here sometimes. Nowhere else for them to go – and their fuel's not the sort of stuff you get at just any holiday marina. Pure Hydrogen Peroxide isn't the sort of thing most chemist shops keep by the tonne, and the Sea Vixen's an awful fuel hog. It's so old it's actually Soviet-built, my grandfather could have sailed on it. First Cub's a sweet little system – but even state-of the art subs need somewhere to dock for makeovers." She paused. "Quite a little fleet Suki's got, when you think about it."

"That's right!" Kazuko's scowl vanished, to be replaced by a beaming grin. "I suppose that makes her a Pirate Queen, she probably qualifies for a vote in the Brotherhood Of The Coast!" Her shoulders drooped again. "But to get her to clear us, we've got to find her, and we can't land and look for her till we've already found her. Ack."

"Setting course three points larboard for BlackTail's reef, aye-aye skipper." Mariko called up from the driver's seat, two metres below the waterline. Sitting in the ersatz plastic seat, she frowned. "What made me say that? We've been driving half way across the Pacific, and I've avoided sailor-speak so far."

"Probably just the general piratical ambiance of the place," suggested Mae. "You know, when in Rome do like the Romans – Granita went there once, and found these cute Sabine boys and ..." she shuddered. "Umm, probably not a good idea to go into that."

"There's nothing wrong with Granita," Kazuko protested. "She's got medals, you know. She's been all over the place, when she was in school even she fought semi-pro in the European football matches. That Spanish team Ultrasur signed her up for two seasons – she's got the Distinguished Brutality Medal in gold with bars and crossed lead pipes – they normally only hand out those posthumously, apart from her I've only seen ghouls and undead wearing them."

"Hmm. Anyway. We'll be at our nearest point to the main island pretty soon – if folk can try and keep quiet, I'll try and get through to Suzuko, full power." Mae settled herself down in the gunner's seat, the Krupp falling-block breech of the 88-mm spotting gun propping her elbow. "Here goes." She closed her eyes, and concentrated.

SUZUKO. We're here – close. Radio band 5. BlackTail's Reef. Get there or signal us. Mae formed the image of her friend in her mind, and drove out the signal with all the power in her slight frame. With a stranger, it would have been impossible, to find one mind amongst the thousands on the island, at an unknown location – and to "broadcast" her message might be a very risky business. Although only the Japanese had a blanket dislike of Psykers, many nations disliked them, quite often for good reason. Having the ability to enter another person's mind was no guarantee of having peaceful intent – and in lawless areas such as New Tortuga, psykers certainly might be employed by agencies with an unfriendly interest in strangers.

Mae sent her signal out three times then tried to empty her mind of thoughts, making it quiet and receptive to whatever signal bounced back. Suzuko was in no sense a Psyker – but the various experiences the vixen had survived, had left her with a more than standard mind, and one with a decidedly distinctive "signature".

Mae relaxed. She imagined her mind as a great drifting net, spreading out across the island – no, more a radio receiver of exquisite sensitivity, tuned to the frequency of her friend's thoughts. She knew she was there – there were echoes and stray emissions, bouncing around the crowded astral plane like a running figure glimpsed far-off in the disturbing angles of a hall of mirrors.

SUZUKO ! For an instant, Mae knew she had a direct line in to her friend – this was the real thing, a directional fix and not one of the shifting reflections. *We're here! BlackTail's reef, Radio Band 5! Send word!* She drove the signal hard, and even felt the vixen start up in shock, and knew the message had gone through. But then the currents of the astral plane shifted – for some reason there was an awful lot of interference in the area, like running a communications dish next to one of the giant microwave downlinks from the power satellites that kept the street lights on and Police cattle-prods charged in Japan.

Mae felt her own body twitch, like waking from a dream, as she link broke. "I found her!" She gasped, smiling as she looked up into Kazuko's broad, moon-shaped face across the turret from her. "No directional fix, but that shouldn't matter. I'm pretty sure I hammered in where we're going – from what I could scan of her, she's free to move around over there. She can find us, or get in touch."

"Yay!" Kazuko enthused, bouncing happily in the seat. "Well, OK, let's get parked over on that reef so our very own Pirate Queen can spring us out of quarantine. I'm sure she'll have made the most of her rank, the one place on the planet it's an asset and not a liability."

"Yes." Mae dipped an ear, looking thoughtful as Mariko engaged another notch of the electric drive and the Maus II picked up speed, following the patrol boat. "It's been a liability, all right – Suzuko told me last year she doesn't even like to think about it. And she doesn't, any more."

The slight feline frame stiffened. “Kaz! She really hasn’t mentioned it to anyone! I was sure there was something I didn’t find, that I expected to. I only had one quick look around when I contacted her, and I was busy making sure the message got hammered in. But – she hasn’t let anyone know who she is. She’s been chased around the island, and she’s keeping low. I got that much.”

“Ninja!” Kazuko swore. “Now what?”

Mae grimaced. “We’re heading for BlackTail’s reef, and that’s as near to Suzuko as we’re liable to get – unless you want to try an amphibious assault on that place.” She followed the Anime girl’s gaze towards the main cannon breech. “NO, Kazuko. We’re not.”

“Wah!” Kazuko complained conversationally. “I was looking forward to giving all these systems a full workout – that Zuse computer’s only fired in simulations! And I didn’t learn 1945 “PlanKalkul” programming language for nothing.” She looked round at the glowing array of glass valves. “Of course, the simulations said we’d probably break a valve somewhere after a few shots, but that’s all good Authenticity points.”

The Psychic Kitten sighed, rolling her eyes. She looked down past the turret cage to Mariko, the mouse’s ears showing as large bulges in the fashionable black leather tanker’s helmet. Her baby Dracaena was curled up on her lap, the furred dragon’s tail swinging gently as the tank rocked from side to side in the ocean swell. Rescuing Suzuko was the kind of mission they were all prepared to take risks on – but she wished Mariko had left Dracaena safely back in the Toho Academy crèche. Some things were harder to replace than a broken valve.

Swaying in the ocean swells on the far side of BlackTail’s reef, three specialist vessels rode at anchor. Two of them were bulky, ex-commercial salvage and submarine support vessels – the third was a sleek but entirely recycled warship, the ESS “*Gaia’s Revenge*”. Every scrap of metal aboard her had sailed in a previous incarnation: the Pacific Ocean was a rich scrapyards of wrecks for those with a less than fussy regard over whose bones they returned to the ecosystem along with the decades’ worth of marine life.

“Any contamination trace?” The loudspeakers crackled from the warship, reaching across to the largest salvage vessel. A tall sea otter stood up, switching his data visor to transparent as he focused on the view from the deck and not the cameras of the submersible some forty metres below.

“Radiation normal – nothing detectable of the trigger. We found casing fragments, though,” Breen Wilson called back across, knowing the Ecos disliked using radio unless essential. “Regular commercial stealth skin, no markings.” He looked down at the glistening wet shards being picked over by a small team who had their chemical suits currently unsealed. The sea otter frowned, drops of spray beading on his whiskers. “There’s something very fishy about this.”

“Here, Sir!” The green scales of a local girl, a Komodo Dragoness, gleamed in the bright autumnal sunlight as she held up a charred fragment with tweezers. “This looks like residue that’s not washed off – the only bit of the core we’ve found. I’ll get it analyzed.”

“Right! We’ll keep looking in the area you found that. There’s got to be more down there.” Despite the bright sunshine, Breen shivered inside his environment suit as he looked out over the clean-looking waters. The stealthy projectile had been blasted apart by railgun strikes, each finger-thick dart carrying the impact force of a six-inch shell from the century before – radars had tracked the debris to land on this piece of water, but waves and currents had scattered what was left.

His broad tail twitched as he switched his visor to display the camera view. Spectroscopes had spotted a large quantity of burning lithium and uranium that had been on collision course with his home; a decidedly “low-tech” device but one that even in defeat could cause a lot of pollution, for generations to come. Unless they could find and isolate the nuclear core – his stomach sank, as he realised he might have eaten his last abalone fresh-caught from the reef. It had been such an unspoiled spot, too – unlike his homeland on the Californian New Coast, which would take centuries of marine colonisation to replace the ecosystems that had vanished a hundred metres beneath the waves when The Big One™ radically reshaped what had been the West Coast of the former U.S.A.

“What’s that? Off to the left?” His co-worker, a bovine Eco-warrior similarly in exile from the domains of Emperor Norton the Second, tapped a marker dot on one side of the screen. The distant submersible fired its engines and shot across to the outward face of the reef, following a shallow gouge that showed up chalk-white with smashed and damaged coral. “Looks like something dense hit that and slid down.”

“Yes ... and it’s down too deep to be a dragging anchor,” Breen agreed, focussing the cameras as he worked his paws in the data glove, the manipulators on the submersible flexing far below him. “Look – that shelf there. It’s a debris cone, like an avalanche dump. The track ends there – whatever went that way is still there.”

“Radiation count, nil. Wait – I’m getting something, but it’s slight. It’s tiny. The gear we used with the Geiger Knights * wouldn’t even have spotted it. If that’s the main core – I don’t understand it.” Wearing data gloves, the bovine resisted scratching her head, avoiding sending the expensive submersible cartwheeling into the reef edge. “There’s got to be more than that.”

“There!” Breen steered the lights towards the side of the debris cone, where a smooth shape could just be spotted under the mud and coral rubble. “Call the Gaia’s Revenge, let them know we found it. And let’s get the recovery gear fired up, and some containment gels to hold it if it leaks – it doesn’t look too bad, the core must be intact still.”

As the salvage ships moved over the spot, Breen stared at the debris pile with increasing unease. The stealthy shape had been clear on the radars since the first railgun round had torn into it, and from the tracked deceleration it had been hit hard – hard enough to break the core wide open.

“It’d surprise me,” he told himself, “if down there, we didn’t find something very surprising indeed.”

Georgina Pontephrigh stuck her paws in the pockets of her tweed breeches and glowered convincingly at her three cousins as they tried to convince her of Dick’s latest plan.

“Oh, come on, George, don’t be such a wet blanket,” Dick urged, patting the new Pirate hat he was proudly wearing. “It’ll be a super Adventure! We’ve never gone treasure hunting before with a real, live Pirate chief. All we have to do is show him the secret passages – he tells us what we’re looking for, and we’ll use our skills to find the ill-gotten gains. Somehow Pirates aren’t good at secret passages.”

“Yes, that Captain Redclaw was quite amazed when we showed him the one we’d been using,” laughed Julian. “He went round all the buildings with plans and surveying gear, but never said a word. I think we made a big impression on him.”

“I don’t care.” George said bluntly. “There’s something very wrong about this. Wrong, wrong, wrong.” She hesitated, hardly able to put into words just what exactly was the matter. True, it was a Pirate Island, and ill-gotten gains were manifestly there for the taking and handing over to the Police – but there was something about the fox captain that she did not at all like. The more involved they became in the local affairs, the more strained and puzzled everyone around them became.

An image came to mind – when they were very small, their clever Uncle Crisp had made the Five a trampoline, using a thick sheet of natural latex rubber. When you stepped on it, it stretched: just a little at the edges, but steeper and steeper the closer to your feet as it distorted against the pressure. George remembered watching it distort as they bounced on it, the trampoline secured right next to the cliff edge where Uncle Crisp had promised them the finest views on the whole Plateau. She looked around at the island, her seething brain almost spotting a pattern in it all. Nothing ever went wrong for them – though it did for other people. She remembered a lot of the Natives who had sneaked across to bounce on the trampoline had never been seen again, but of course that had served them right.

“What’s wrong with it?” Anne cocked her head, curiously. She had dressed herself in a long silk skirt with stays and a bodice, something like George had seen in Granita’s photos of Destructive Anachronism rallies. “You’ve always gone along before – it’s just an Adventure, the sort we always have.”

- Quote from “World’s Elite Units, 2036 edition. “Geiger Knights. A marine/submarine environmental task force, originally founded in 2028 by the Greater Liechtenstein Reich to salvage the corroding remains of ex-Soviet submarine reactors and similar “hot merchandise” dumped in the Arctic Ocean. They attracted a lot of world attention with their exploits, and gained devoted and (effectively) suicidal overseas volunteers from militantly Eco-friendly individuals and organisations. Some of the survivors became disillusioned when discovering that the salvaged nuclear material was being used for the GLR’s own nuclear power program, which they violently disapproved of. The Geiger Knights remain active below the Arctic seas, fighting with the Russians over ownership and often with their own former comrades opposed to the continuing salvage program.”

But that, as they say, is Quite another story.

“Yes!” George almost shouted. “I know! It always “just happens”, doesn’t it? Redclaw will point out things he wants to get, then somehow you’ll just get them. Just because they’re Pirate treasures, doesn’t mean they’re there for the taking.” She imagined her jolly chum Akeritsu waking up one morning and finding the hard-earned nest egg she and her crew had worked for all the years, vanished forever.

“I say, George – are you feeling all right? You were never like this on the Plateau.” Dick looked at his cousin closely. “I mean, of course they’re Pirate treasures. Why not try one of these hats on for size, you’ll soon get into the swing of things again.” He proffered a big, rakish black hat with a merrily grinning skull on it – not so merry as the one he wore himself, of course, but perfectly decent enough for George.

“No! I’m off! Timmy – you can stay with them if you like – I don’t care.” With that, Georgina Pontephrigh dashed away towards the main street of New Port Royal, her thoughts in turmoil.

Timmy looked at her and the others, gave a low whine, and trotted off after her mistress.

Anne waved. “Good Timmy! She won’t let anything happen to Georgina. I hope she’ll snap out of it soon, then we can wrap everything up and get back to the Coll. There’s a needlepoint class next week that I mustn’t miss, we’re going to learn to make “Main Battle Tank Cosies” whatever they are.”

“Well said, Anne. Right!” Dick rubbed his paws together briskly. “Off we go again! Captain DeWall’s got a list of lost Treasure, and we’d best get after it – time and tide wait for no man. Hurrah for the Five!”

“Hurrah!” His siblings chorused, their enthusiasm stronger than their arithmetic. Anne felt a faint twinge of worry, but suppressed it with the ease of long practice. George was George, and always had been difficult to work with, even back home on the Plateau – but whatever happened, she was a Pontephrigh above all else, and sure to come around in time.

Anne sighed happily, smoothing down her modest silken frock, which matched the proper knee breeches, ruffled shirts and three-cornered black hats of the Pirate gentlemen. She had seen the very same model in a picture somewhere, with a jolly tavern scene and some pretty ladies standing outside, presumably waiting for a carriage home. Whatever, she was sure it was a perfectly respectable dress to wear, far more so than the boyish slacks she had needed for her dusty rooftop explorations the night before. The bodice was a little draughty, but she had always been told that fresh air was good for the fur.

“A healthy mind in a healthy body,” she reminded herself. “And I’m sure George will come to her senses – she’s said she’s been getting all sorts of physical education, since she got here.”

George slowed as she rounded the corner, out of sight of her relatives. There was a bench a hundred paces further along, that she slumped down on to watch the world go by. Timmy came trotting up, pleased to see her as always. George smiled, patting Timmy’s head-fur, stroking behind her ears. “Dear Timmy. You’re always there when I need you.” She fished out a bar of compressed pemmican from her pocket and tossed it to the human, who gratefully grabbed it and wolfed it down.

In her other pocket was a map and compass, which George studied carefully. Unlike her siblings who preferred to navigate by luck, pluck and rule of thumb, she was a great believer in knowing where she was. As her great-uncle Hugh Pontephrigh had taught them, Geography was an important thing to learn – without it, one might not be able to recognise an isthmus or a watershed in case one was suddenly wanted, or even be able to spot if you were a Native or not! The lessons had been meant for the boys really, but even at an early age George had been sitting in on them.

“So – one main street, heading for the harbour. Doesn’t tell you much about what’s on it.”

George briefly regretted not having the interesting book that had brought them so far, but had memorised some of the more believable sections. Her friend Granita had furnished her with several letters of introduction to people she knew on the island, and they had all been very pleased to see her – she had learned all sorts of things in a very short time, at any rate.

On the map, Doubloon Street ran straight for four hundred paces, lined mostly by taverns and eating-houses, many of them specialising in the tourist trade. Not that many actual tourists set their real paws on the street – camera trolleys and robots tended to cater for the more risk-conscious part of the trade. It was on the branching side-streets that the locals lived, in less showy areas that were not there to be blown apart in semi-staged gunfights, unlike erring tourists who decided that “anything goes” included the décor of a serious Pirate’s favourite haunt.

“Hmm. Where to go?” George idly traced the mean streets with a claw tip. She had several addresses yet to visit – there was the fight school where the Bosun relaxed after a stressful mission, where

pit fighting was a popular and healthy recreation. Georgina shivered, smiling. “She liked you, didn’t she, Timmy?” She stroked Timmy’s head-fur, recalling. “That’s what I call an athletic record – in the pits, she’s fought to the death eleven times, and always won.”

Suddenly, Timmy sprang to alert, pointing urgently along the street. George’s eyes widened, as the human ran around in a small circle, and tugged at her jacket. “What’s that, Timmy? Do you want me to follow you? Lead on, then!”

She followed Timmy across the street, eagerly looking around. The human led her through several streets, to a large concrete building with a plain metal door. Timmy scratched at the door, and whined.

George looked up, spotting a camera at the top of the door. She waved cheerfully, and boldly knocked at it. There was a minute or so of silence, then the three-inch thick portal slid silently open, to reveal a long-eared Native and a long-tailed figure she recognised.

George Pontephrigh and Suzuko Hohki stared at each other for a full five seconds. When they spoke, it was at the same instant.

“What, *You?*”

“Yay! Teatime, and the weekend’s here already!” Hiroshi bounced, running into the kitchen with her silvery hair bouncing cheerily. “Teatime and then off to Pirate Island for everyone!”

Trish followed cautiously, scenting the pureed Wasabi root that Hiroshi was mixing with chillies and pouring thickly over her rice, adding a liberal garnishing of salted vegetable. “Is good! Has Shobban-chan finished the calculating?”

“Just finished ten minutes ago.” Hiroshi beamed. “Now I can put that biological processor back where it came from, it’s done a good job.” She paused. “I think I’ve cheered it up, at least it’s making lots of happy giggling and babbling sounds.”

Just then Shobban entered, but the pup’s expression was downcast.

“What’s up, Shobby?” Hiroshi asked. “Found some more zeroes and infinities in the equation? Just multiply them by each other, maybe they’ll cancel out or something.”

“Not the problem.” Shobban sighed. “The equation’s fine – I can get the other bit of the Singularity bang on target. The trouble is – it looks like the tunnel between them stays open for exactly zero time, as soon as any mass enters it. We need to prop it up with negative energy, and we’ve not got any.”

Hiroshi blinked, and Trish had a strange mental impression of gearwheels slowly turning in her pumpkin head. Suddenly her expression lit up. “I know! What if ... what if we just – put the batteries in the other way round? Isn’t that negative energy?”

“Afraid not.” Shobban pulled out her notebooks. “You need some force with characteristics like this –” and she scribbled some equations, adding a diagram of what would happen to an Every Girl’s First Electro-Fun Workshop Kit if plugged into the circuits. “It exists in theory, but not in practice.”

“You mean – like an honest politician?” Hiroshi’s eyebrows raised till they went behind her fringe, but oddly enough stayed visible. “Maybe the honest politicians nobody’s ever met have it all stockpiled, cornering the market?”

Shobban coughed. “I don’t think so. These theories are provable.”

“You never know.” Hiroshi glanced round cautiously. “Like – nobody really believed in the Illuminati for years and years, even though they kept playing ironic jokes on the rest of the world. Jump on any train or bus even nowadays, and look at the door release – you can bet your tail it says *‘Push when Illuminated’*. Though it works even if you’re not, just to put people off the scent.”

Trish reappeared, looking slightly flushed. “I am finding these – I bought them at home, where there are not being such restrictive laws,” she said, “will these be suitable, yes-no?”

Shobban’s eyes widened, almost to the size of Hiroshi’s, as she hooked the round power units into a test rig. She yipped in surprise. “HOW? Where did these come from?”

Trish’s ears blushed in embarrassment. “Is being very personal. Not all private items you are discussing in polite company, yes-no?”

“Oh. I see.” It was the red setter’s turn to attempt to turn redder. “Well – I hope we don’t use up all the charge – there’s three of us to transport, and any items of gear. Not more than...” her eyes closed and her tongue protruded for a few seconds “Not more than twenty kilos apiece, clothes included.”

“Spoilsport!” Hiroshi stuck her tongue out to match. “I’ve got the template files to build a Some_Terrain Vehicle, I was hoping we could drive through the gate – I was going for an All_Terrain vehicle, but I’ve used too many credits up already. Twenty kilos? I might have to leave Mister Twirly behind, or cut down on ammunition!” She hefted her cute blue fibre-plastic trench mortar, and looked at the pink pom-poms attached at the muzzle next to the bayonet lugs. “I can’t let Mister Thumper here go hungry, can I?”

Trish’s eyes widened. “How are you measuring the mass? With a set of spring scales or inertial?”

“Spring scales, I should think, against gravity,” Shobban replied absently, doodling in her notebook, “Why – is there a difference?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing,” Trish replied hastily. “But I am thinking I can add some to my weight allowance, that will not be interfering.”

Shobban’s ears went up, as she looked the vixen-shaped girl up and down. “If you can hide mass so it doesn’t show on the scales – go ahead. And I should think you can sell the secret for a few billion yen to some slimming magazine, any time you’re short of cash.”

But Trish shook her head mournfully. “Oh, no. I am thinking – it might be more than anyone expected – if they really DID end up with a figure like mine.”

“Well – never mind that. Let’s get going. Give me five minutes to pack Mister Snappy and some film for him, and we’ll be off. At last!” Hiroshi scurried out, eyes wide and bright with anticipation.

Shobban smiled, her eyes taking in the expanse of the Device they had built – the Tesla coil was already humming and sparking, stray magnetic fields wiping out old-fashioned computer memories several rooms away. At its heart was the naked singularity, still covered from casual view by a specially hand-knitted Singularity cosy, embroidered with cheerful scenes of mutated kittens playing on tesseract tiled floors.

“It’d have taken us longer if we’d built it to the old rules,” she said defensively, spotting Trish’s gaze dwelling on the core of the space-drive secured to the framework with ten-centimetre nails. “All that ‘Quality built-in’ stuff is SO Twentieth-century! These days we just build it and anyone who wants quality can buy it as a bolt-on item. Much faster.” Her tail wagged as she looked at the big lever and the big red button that would propel them outside normal space and time. Soon she would be getting to use *The Laugh* – that special triumphant cackle that was not exactly taught on science courses, but nevertheless was as important part of the profession as the bedside manner was to a doctor.

“Is good!” Trish’s gaze took in the chalked circle on the floor that marked the limit of the singularity’s effect – she was pleased to see that Hiroshi had provided a safety string, to pull the lever from a distance. Having one’s arm poked outside the transporter radius to turn it on struck her as a bad idea, even though she had read somewhere about reptilian folk being able to regenerate limbs.

Trish nodded, running down her checklist as Hiroshi skidded back in with a fiendish grin and a pile of olive-green metal cases with stenciled lettering and warning symbols on their sides. Trish patted herself; the overall hiding the armour she had built the first weekend she had arrived at Toho. Reaching inside, she pulled out a large-caliber hand cannon and slipped a shell bigger than her thumb into the breech.

“Oooh! A Gyrojet!” Hiroshi’s eyes sparkled. “That’s neat! We learned all about those in self-defence classes in the Girl Scouts – you can blow a hole a metre wide in a potential mugger half a kilometre away!”

“Folk are saying, one must be prepared, yes.” Trish nodded, having made the weapon safe and returning it to the holster. She had modified the original design slightly, adding a safety catch and using much higher energy propellant – she had been hearing from her friends about the kind of experiences the famous motto “Be Prepared” covered these days.

Shobban took a deep breath. “All right. Everybody ready? When I pull this lever –“ she gave an illustrative tug at the knotted string leading outside the circle of effect – “the far end of the Singularity should appear on New Tortuga. For a few seconds, everything on that end will be exactly twinned with everything on this end. Which means – all we have to do, is walk out of the area over there, before the tunnel collapses behind us.”

“Cool.” Hiroshi added her scientific judgement. “OK, go for it.”

Shobban braced herself. She gave *The Laugh* – that deep, resonating half-hysterical laughter that was the sound of modern science in action, and gave the carefully knotted string a pull. A sinister skirling sound echoed her, as the Moog fired up, its arcane tones blending with the crackling as electric arcs leaped up the “Jacob’s Ladder” and the lights dimmed in the room.

“Singularity exposed – three two, one, Fire in the hold!” With that, Hiroshi thumped the big red button, and the windows shivered as the power generator two hundred metres over the hill fired its charge. There was a strange, squeezing sensation as if every molecule of their bodies was being independently turned sixty degrees counter-clockwise – and then a silence.

Hiroshi burst into tears. “It’s not worked! We’re still here!” She wailed, looking around the recognisable Toho Academy dorm room, unchanged except for the stench of ozone that had Shobban running to open a window. “Nothing happened after all our work! It’s so Unfair!”

Shobban scratched a long ear, looking puzzled. “The mathematics was right – I rigorously proved it. And the conditions were perfect. It had to have worked. Everything that was inside this circle, should have appeared on New Tortuga. It didn’t have a choice.”

“But we are still being here, yes-no?” Trish observed.

Shobban looked at her notebook, and scanned the recordings of the energetic event. “Yes. But let’s see if we can get a camera link into New Tortuga and see if there’s anyone we recognise. I’ve got the strangest, strangest feeling about this.”

The salvage ship rocked gently in the ocean swell, its deck peopled only by robots and four figures in specialist radiation-shielded mecha, the power suits carrying armour against neutron and gamma radiation rather than shrapnel and laser blast. The crane heaved, chains rattled and a heavy shape dropped into a wide trough of boronated polythene, itself shielding part of the area from what had been lifted off the sea bed.

Breen Wilson cautiously approached, holding a detector on the end of a two-metre pole, hearing a faint crackle. “I’m not getting anything but background – are these detectors saturating?”

His colleague pointed hers away from the suspect object. “No – it’s just not registering. I’ve seen chunks of natural granite hotter than this. Let’s take a closer look.”

Breen shuffled closer and forced himself to relax, the otter’s tail stiffening inside his mecha, turning his form into a stable tripod held against the swaying deck. He scraped away at the shape – some of it was just what he expected. The forward part was lightly damaged, glistening organic “Stealth skin” of a wholly standard model, that he could have bought empty by the dozen at the Thief’s Bazaar over in New Port Royal. The back part – that was blown apart, two railgun strikes had simply blown it away, exposing the contents.

“What the hell...?” He blinked, setting his onboard camera running as he kneeled close, still watching the radiation counter in the corner of his screen. “This is nothing I’ve ever seen before – bundles of rods, packed in some soft matrix – I’m getting a sample.” He passed a small fragment to a waiting robot, and waited a few seconds. “Analysis complete. Aluminosilicates, in other words clay. Wait – this is different.” He dug deeper into the matrix, and fished out a polythene bag the size of his fist filled with light, silvery metal cubes. Taking off his glove, he hefted the bag. “Feels as light as plastic. I’ve got a hunch about this.” He slit the protective plastic, and looked carefully. A stray drop of sea-spray landed on the silvery metal, and it hissed like quicklime.

“I recognise this stuff – bulk lithium metal. Not the deuteride they’d use in bombs! And these rods – they’re old armour-piercing shot, depleted uranium rods! But when we hit it – same elements, they burned like the real thing. If we’d missed it – the tip’s armour piercing, it’d have gone fifty metres into the lagoon mud and we’d have been a week just looking for it. It’s that dense.”

Breen Wilson stood up, keying his microphone to broadcast – except that due to a very lucrative “malfunction”, the data would be routed to one particular address until the buyer had sold the information. “This bomb’s a phony – someone put it together from stock materials and a commercial case you can buy for fifty yen over here. There’s not even any explosive in here that our sniffers can find – whoever threw it, either wanted us to wipe it out to the tiniest fragment or have it dig in deep, intact with the stealth skin hiding it. It’s fifty to one odds we got to it like this.”

The otter looked around, his whiskers twitching a little guiltily as he gave in his report – everything was thorough and honest, and he had assurances that the information would soon be freely available to the Brotherhood Of The Coast who needed it. But as he fruitlessly scoured the remains of the dummy, the thoughts kept running through his mind. Even as a dummy, the materials would have cost hundreds of gold Yen, plus the state-of-the-art drone that had launched it and vanished again to points unknown.

Who would have wanted to do this – and why?

End Chapter Thirteen

