

Road Runner Chapter 16

On the dockside of Shahaguo Island, a small group was assembled. It was a silent group, each of the oddly assorted folk heading to Pirate Island for their own reasons – and none of them too keen on either the trip or the company.

“Load of old tosh!” Rabid-Sama cast a withering glance at the Hughes Hercules that Satori and Temari were crewing. “They’ve got poncey wickerwork seats and walnut paneling in the first-class lounge there. For the white-gloved waiters, ooh, it’s so pretty,” He gave a few mocking, mincing steps. “That’s not an aircraft! Whatever happened to piling into a big loud reeking jet, three hundred of you throwing lager cans down the aisles all the flight – getting so tanked up you just go out there and trash the first bar full of foreigners you come to.” He panted, brushing his authentic white Mohican out of his eyes. “Kids these days. Satori, he’s as bad as the rest. He should be out getting pissed on lighter fuel and cheap supermarket cider – but no, he’s *“fine-tuning the manifold of Number six engine supercharger.”* If you’d gone around talking about fine-tuning manifolds in my day they’d have thrown you off the tower-block.”

The Vicar smiled, a thin smile. It was the smile a twenty tonne boulder on a cliff top might wear for decades as it contemplated which bus to fall on, out of the stream of daily traffic. It might have been a forbearing, tolerant expression – except that it just happened not to be.

“Surr. It be ready.” The massive figure of the Verger appeared, filling the hatchway leading into the aircraft. “We be right ready for the off.”

“Excellent.” The Vicar stood there, poised and elegant, his black cloak flapping in the breeze. A white ceramic collar and gorget gleamed at his throat, and his silver-white head-fur shone in the rising moonlight. “Estimated flight time six hours. Then we shall see – what we shall see.” At his belt swung a long sword in an utterly plain black scabbard – despite admiring looks from the local Society Of Destructive Anachronism, it had remained firmly sheathed on Shahaguo Island. “We embark, Verger.”

Rabid-sama sniffed, and wiped his muzzle on his sleeve. “Yeah. I knew a Verger. Pal of “Birch-tree Partisan Trick” Whicker. What happened to him? You lot don’t talk much, do you?”

The Vicar raised an eyebrow. “I know of the Reverend Whicker. He found it necessary to call down a nuclear strike on what he found in a certain forbidden shopping plaza. Naturally, he had to stay and provide the homing signal. It is customary. His loyal Verger helped to fight off what had already arrived on Earth from that portal, making sure none escaped. Such things as they found would have survived had they scattered more than two hundred metres from the impact.”

The aged pit-bull cast a jaundiced eye over the proceedings as Satori ran a final engine test and trotted along the top of the wing, itself as wide as a three-lane road. Some of the 1925 class biplanes could land on a space not much greater than the huge span of the Hughes Hercules’ wing. “That’s what you say. I heard the whole setup was faked, that’s what I heard. Bet he was never even there – reckon he’s in a Vikka’s retirement home in Tahiti with his feet up. Cos nobody except you lot ever saw those things and lived, did they? Psychiatric trick, I reckon. Lost most of me mates back then I did, all that psychiatric stuff escaping. Big Eddy and Joe Razor, they saw something in a building, bled out and dead from stigmata in a minute flat, ‘cos they understood what they’d seen. Titch he caught it off something that was on TV, it was psychosomatic but it still did for ‘im – burned up spontaneous on the spot, crispy he was. And you lot go about looking for this kind of thing and get away with it – very dodgy.”

The Vicar nodded, unconcerned as they all boarded. His Verger, certainly, had one of the only two types of mind to survive the kind of events he expected they would be facing. The Verger had witnessed scenes that would cause most people to trigger the only defence against monstrous takeover that evolution had ever provided – spontaneous combustion, with every thread of DNA destroyed or damaged beyond use to protect the rest of the species rather than the already doomed individual. A tiny mind has no room for anything to get in, he told himself – and against the kind of thing that often tried to claw its way into mortal minds in their profession, that was a defence in its own right.

“We shall see,” he repeated, as the six engines sprung to life and the Hughes Hercules moved majestically away from the dock, “what we shall see.”

“And this is what we see.” In the hard lights of the abandoned reservoir, Lebeq stood unconcernedly over the great gleaming bulk of the R-Device. “Oh yes, I recognise the basics. Thank you.” He studied a telepathically probed sketch that Mae handed to him, and nodded. “A fascinating piece of adaptation! Oh yes, a lovely piece of work. Herr Valsmann would have been so proud of it.” He tapped the casing. “In a very real

sense, this device knows we're here. Not through the electrical fuses, that part of its cortex is quiescent for the minute. But there are other parts of the... organic component, which are awakening."

"When my technicians got near it with a gamma-ray probe, it started to power up," Pacahuta whispered, the anteater's quiet voice sounding cracked. "But they hadn't even switched it on!"

"But they were thinking about it." Lebeq's long ears twitched. "Just as well you noticed the activity start up. One of the failsafes would have fired autonomously – radiation damage from that sort of probe could degrade the R-Device's electronics – and it would have woken instantly to see what was going on." He straddled the smooth curve, pressing an ear against it. "As it will in ... about nine minutes, or I miss my guess."

"Nine minutes?" Suzuko yelped, her tail fluffing out in alarm.

"Oh, yes. But between us, myself and the charming Miss Tsuko here, we might be able to do something about that." Lebeq stroked a loose flap of the rubbery cladding, pulling it up to reveal a complex row of data sockets. "The main interface – an old EU/DIN type 455, or I'm much mistaken." He rubbed his paws together, and pulled from a heavy satchel an old laptop computer. "Fortunately I kept this – all our former Union now use deliberately incompatible voltages and plugs on all their equipment."

Suzuko looked on, in horrified fascination as Lebeq went to work, whistling unconcernedly. On the way over, he had mentioned that he had performed one final piece of Cybermancy – and seen one very clear route to removing the R-device as a weapon. It had been a very simple thing to do, he had assured her – there was one, and only one way through the futures he had seen which had New Tortuga surviving as a populated island. Already, the Pirate vessels were scattered out patrolling the waters well beyond the burst radius of the Device – it would have taken hours longer, without being put on alert by that oddly faked attack the night before.

Suzuko frowned. She watched as Lebeq finished connecting to the data ports, waved Mae over and seemed to go into some odd communion with the great sinister shape he was straddling. All Suzuko's instincts were telling her to run, but her rational side reminded her that the whole island was equally doomed, and a large chunk of the surrounding waters. She winced, a cold knot of fear in her gut as she realised she had unwittingly brought her friends to share her fate. Mae. Kazuko. Horst, Broohilda, the two new ovine students, plus Mariko and her baby daughter. A cold, hard wind seemed to blow through her spirit.

As the brown-furred lapine worked on the Device, he whistled unconcernedly, breaking through the familiar layers of defences that he had helped to plan so long ago. Ah! There was one he had forgotten about, a little something that Hans Valsmann had thought up just in case the main "heartbeat" sensor was ever jammed. That was a clever device in itself, the heartbeat sensor that sent the coded series of pulses echoing around inside the weapon case – but all its cleverness boiled down to a simple Go/No Go decision voltage on a single connector. If it could just be jammed in "No Go" position, the case could be opened. He applied the voltage, and sighed with relief.

"You can get to work, while I hold this down," he waved towards Pacahuta's three technicians, who immediately grabbed heavy cutting gear. "But you'd best hurry – this is only the start. It's like taking an old Swiss clockwork watch apart while it's still running – and this jamming is eating up what little charge the battery had left. We can't turn back now."

He smiled, as he looked at Suzuko Hohki's expression. "In any case – whatever happens in the next ten minutes, New Tortuga should be mostly saved. The Pyrate fleet is out beyond range of its more permanent effect – they will be safe, at least. Thanks to whoever faked that attack on the island they were on alert and ready to sail. And better – they are out of the way, they would have interfered, if they had known what was in here." He cast a hard look at Pacahuta. "As someone here very well knows."

As Lebeq turned to give full attention to his laptop and the three technicians carefully began to nibble the case open with spark-free hydraulic cutters, Suzuko's gaze rested on the anteater. Although his long-muzzled face was hard to read, he was looking decidedly worried – which could of course be accounted for by the strategic Psychiatric Blast bomb in the room with them. But – Suzuko looked around the room, and thought hard.

Mae caught her gaze, and briefly "knocked" at Suzuko's thoughts. In a second the link was made, though an observer would only have seen Suzuko's eyes glaze slightly.

It's him, you know. Mae mentally indicated her long-snouted "employer". *I read him down to what he had for breakfast – though you don't need to be a Psyker to guess that menu. He wanted to be very sure everyone was looking the other way, looking for foreign invaders while he worked on this thing and sold it – so he cooked up an external threat nobody could ignore.*

A H-bomb would have that effect, Suzuko agreed. And he had all the resources right here to fake it. He could take the case out of his own stock and nobody would ever know – he could have programmed the drone that launched it all on his own – or had one of his contacts in the trade launch it, no questions asked.

Bang on the mark! Mae mentally applauded. *But your friend Lebeq – I can't read him. It's weird – it's not like someone who knows they can just defuse it and walk away. He's going to do something. He knows exactly what, but ... he's a blank inside.*

He's not MY friend. Suzuko thought firmly. But she hesitated. The lapine had behaved honourably, considering he could have turned her over to Rai and Shiitake the minute he had picked her brains for saleable information – she was sure her present location had a market price, as Mae had found out in getting here. And although he had been part of a government that many denied ever existed – that had scarcely been his fault, he had been drafted for others to use his talents. A line from Robynist scripture surfaced briefly – *“Remember, a murderer is only an extroverted suicide.”* Another, less comforting quote surfaced just after, reminding her who else could famously quote scripture for his own purpose. She looked at the cheerfully whistling lapine, and broadcast a reassuring thought to Mae. *He said he'd read what was going to happen in the tapes. So he knows it'll be all right – though he had to use the last one in stock to get the details.* Lebeq had explained that his was literally a dying art, with the demise of floppy tapes decades ago and their replacing with high-density Hard Tape. It would in theory be possible to use those for divination, but mechanisms for casting the kilometre long blades as I-Ching sticks would probably be expensive to engineer.

Lebeq paused, and looked around the room. “I have exposed the core,” he said calmly. “It is shielded still from our thoughts – but now I have to remove that shielding. I think it is time for everyone to leave the room while they still can. Miss Hohki, it was a pleasure doing business with you. Pacahuta – you may stay, if you wish to fully understand what you intend to sell wholesale to the rest of the world. This won't take long – we have about ... three minutes left.”

There was a general stampede for the door, Suzuko hesitating a second at the entrance. With her were the three technicians, the wolf, the mongoose and the bulldog.

“Tha's sure tha don't want help on this, Boss?” The bulldog asked, Clem Hodstonworth casting an apprehensive eye at the scene.

Pacahuta was about to reply, but he stiffened and shook his long head vehemently.

He knows they're loyal – but this is a secret worth Billions, and I'm talking yen here not sovereigns, Mae tight-beamed the thought to Suzuko. *He's not that trusting of anyone.*

The ice-white wolf stood at the door poised for a second. He gave a curt nod, and almost seemed to bow his head as if in farewell. He closed the door with a determined crash, and spun the locking wheel before double-timing it back up the access tunnel, Suzuko following a tail's distance behind him.

Back in the chamber, Lebeq busied himself with the final secrets of the Device. The working section was barely two metres by one, most of it the explosive laminate that would power it as soon as the living brain inside the inner core gained consciousness. Half a tonne of Cubane nitrogen, he mused – something like five tonne's worth of old-fashioned TNT. Beside him, Pacahuta circled round with a camera, photographing every stage as the shielding was removed.

“Will flash photography – be safe?” The anteater asked, looking up to where the Belgian Hare sat straddled on the core structure.

Lebeq nodded pleasantly. “It won't make any difference now,” he said, looking at the readout of his old laptop. “The trick is, to demolish the core before it receives its firing signal. Herr Valsmann was a wily old fox, he used all the tricks when he designed this. But he never thought I'd be the one to take it apart. There's a loophole, you see. I can feel exactly how the energy pattern is meant to flow, and I don't have to X-ray it to understand it. The key is this box here.” He patted a small junction box. “It's a timer. It starts when the fuses or the failsafes say “Go.” The organic component needed a certain ... lead time to imprint its thoughts into the telepathic matrix here – and then the main charge could fire and multiply it millionfold. Bridging over these points here – and here – I can short-circuit the timer. And I have done. The fuse input is through this second pair of wires here – as long as they don't touch, nothing's going to happen.”

Pacahuta was a businessman first and foremost, but his business had taught him a lot about mechanisms, and not all the booby-traps in his line of work were financial ones. His small ears went rigid.

“You've – wired the delay to blow the explosives straight away – before the Psyristor's got anything ready to broadcast.” The anteater looked at several billion Yen's worth of technology, the last of its kind in existence. “You've found a way of stopping the fuses too? Thank heavens there was someone who knows just what makes this thing tick.”

Lebeq looked at his adopted countryman. One long ear dipped. “I know, all right.” He said quietly. “You know what I do for a living. I can see the futures, laid out like a map. I used the last of my tapes last night, but that'll hardly matter now. Because, you see, I saw what'd happen as soon as I made the Device safe

– it won't take you a week to reverse engineer it. Long before then, everyone will know you've done it, or you're about to."

He paused. "Right now, the Peruvian government have started fuelling another Road Runner – a modified one, it's going to be riding a heavy-lift booster into space. They don't have the experience to drop an unmanned vehicle on us from that range, so the pilot's going to be riding it on the vernier jets all the way here. Most timelines have it avoiding our long-range defences by going the back route, it'll be over the South Pole by dawn tomorrow, Australia twenty minutes later and here thirty minutes after that. The crew are very brave, Pacahuta. On about a tenth of the timelines, one of their Aztec Gods intervenes and returns them safely to their main temple, about ten seconds before the aircraft hits the top of the atmosphere at..." he consulted his notebook, "at about twelve miles a second, heading straight down. The iron bombs will burn off about a tenth of their mass before they hit, but for New Tortuga that'll be rather academic." He paused. "That'll be around ten o'clock tomorrow, average. Of course, another eighteen Governments and sixteen less regular forces have forces heading this way – but the Peruvians will generally be dropping in first."

Pacahuta's ears went right down. "But you've seen other futures? Ones where we can get it away in time? We can have this on a boat out of here inside an hour – my team can work on the way. I've got contacts and lab space available all over – that won't be a problem."

The Belgian Hare shook his head. "I know, Pacahuta. I've seen you doing that, too. Inside six months you'll have these in mass production – and they're such an Eco-friendly thing to use, you just won't be able to keep up with the worldwide demand. What happened to my home will happen all over the planet. Inside a year – well, I didn't look past that. I've seen all I needed to see." He paused. "I'm the last one left who's responsible for all this, you see. I've seen it coming every time I cast the tapes for two years now – I've had time to think it through. There's only one way, you see, to save this island. As long as this thing is here, whether it's used or not, New Tortuga is done for. We could claim the Device was destroyed – but who'd believe us? Except, of course, if I do this." With that, Lebeq smiled. And crossed the second pair of wires over.

From two hundred metres away the sight was unspectacular. The ground bulged, a violent tremor running through the sand and coral rock cracking a few old-fashioned glass windows in nearby buildings. Suzuko saw a billowing plume of dust spray from the access tunnel she had just left – and the ground suddenly sagged, a dusty depression twenty metres across.

Next to her, Mae pulled off her helmet and stood, head bowed for a few seconds. "He knew he'd have to do that. He'd known it for ages. They were the last ones of their kind, him and the Device both – he even knew whose brain it had been, inside it. He could feel the whole thing, down to the finest circuit – and he knew exactly what it would do."

The dust blew past them. Suzuko reached down to seal her jacket and suddenly realised there was something in her pocket that had not been there before – exploring, she found a Bulky Disc and a letter. The letter was sealed, with the simple inscription – "*To Miss Hohki. For services rendered.*" She gulped.

Mae's ears went right up. "If I were you," she said slowly, "I'd get that to a reader and see what's on it. He was into Information broking, wasn't he? And I don't think he'd have wanted it to go to waste."

Suzuko's own ears fell. The term "Monkey's Paw" flashed to mind. "Why does this always happen to me?" She plaintively asked the silent skies, her tail drooping in the dust. "I should frisbee this thing into the Pacific – but there's probably things I need to know in it. And hundreds of things I'm better off not knowing."

She was silent for a minute, recalling her talk with Lebeq the previous night. She had complained that nothing on New Tortuga was ever what it appeared to be – though Lebeq had disagreed. "*In the forbidden science of the mind we practiced in my youth, we had a saying - Sometimes a pipe is just a pipe,*" he had smiled mysteriously. "*But it doesn't happen often, that's true enough. There was a case in Augsburg in 1912, and another confirmed near Sao Paulo in 1977.*" She had uncomfortable ideas of Lebeq's notion of a fair repayment; rumour had it that in the EC the ruling tenet had been one of rigorously enforced Fairness, taken to logical extremes. Every true fact released was accompanied by an untrue one, and even every Charity had to have its opposite equally funded. A society who had cheerfully sponsored a Society for the Promotion of Cruelty to Animals was liable to leave some suprising survivals in its wake.

"Suki – it looks like that's wrapped things up." Mae's expression was suddenly noticeably brighter. "Kaz and Mangana are waiting with our tanks in the square, they're all fuelled up and ready to go, Broohilda too. She's brought Tava and Jenni along; they're doing fine as a crew. We can be home by Wednesday, if we start back tonight."

"It looks like it's over." Suzuko nodded. She blinked. The past two weeks were already seeming like a bad dream, one that had started the second the red Alert telephone had rung at two in the morning. Suddenly she felt homesick for her plain but comfy room, her dependable little Cray, and her friends around her. For the first time in days, she smiled, looking at Mae's grey-furred face. "It's over, and we can all go home again."

Mae nodded, fastening her helmet back on, flexing her jaw to seat the sensor switches. She closed her eyes, and reached out with her extended senses. Suddenly she frowned. The overwhelming psychic fog that had pervaded the whole island was still there. It was as if a huge energy source was running nearby – but a questing probe to the dusty hollow that marked the Cybermancer’s resting place showed nothing biologically or mechanically left alive down there.

The Psychic Kitten felt her tail fluff out in shock, as an awful realisation hit her. “Suki,” she said slowly, “the R-device is gone. But something’s still here. Something that was always here – what I thought was the R-device affecting things, changing this island – that’s not changed. Wait a second, I’ll try and scan...”

Suzuko saw her friend’s eyes glaze slightly – then Mae gave an alarmed hiss, pointing up towards an old-fashioned public camera on the corner of the nearest building. The camera was swiveling towards them – and she had a sudden very clear image of who might looking through it at them. But it was Mae who gave a surprised yell, beckoning Suzuko to follow as the feline powered up her hardsuit and sprinted South toward the town square.

“It’s Rai and Gen – but there’s about twenty of them headed our way! Run!”

“Got them.” Rai Gosu’s armour linked to his comrades and cast an indicator dot on their helmet displays. “That’s Tsuko and Hohki – the mind-thief and the Korean. Just two streets away.”

“OK. We have a lock.” Osamu’s slitted Siamese eyes narrowed as the feline fed the information through his suit’s interface. Behind him was a large tracked palette of old Chinese Type 44s, the short-range rockets a popular consumer choice for suburban warfare. As the launcher took the information it twitched and swiveled, the pinewood and fibresteel crates popping open. “Short range profile keyed in. Suits sealed – and go!”

Rai’s light-shielding visor clouded over for three seconds as the launch flames washed over them – but sealed mech suits were built to take far harder punishment. A three-second burn and the engines cut out, leaving the six rockets still half full of fuel and oxidant to add to their impact. He looked up, grinning as a ripple of explosions shook the street, a billowing plume of flame rising out over the houses. “Gotcha! That took out all the cameras though – we’ll take a look ourselves. That’s some social refining and urban renewal done in one sweet package.”

The five armoured figures cautiously advanced round three corners, Rai and Osamu leading the way. Rai’s narrow muzzle twitched in anticipation – he poked a wide-angle camera around the corner, and nodded in satisfaction. “Nothing moving but smoke. I think we did it.” He stepped into a small square, and looked around critically.

Beside him, Osamu scanned the scene. There was a wide area of scorching, the concrete scratched and chipped where airburst shrapnel had scoured the pavement. “I don’t see anything left of them,” he complained. “My scanner can spot protein residues – apart from where someone’s dropped an old fish burger there in the corner, there’s nothing on this side of the street.” He turned round, the invisible laser probe flicking like a snake’s tongue, “tasting” across the scene. “Over there, though – there’s something splashed, it could be them!”

New Tortuga was a handy place, Rai reminded himself. If he had left a fellow student spread in pieces across the landscape at Toho, he might have got into trouble, even if she was Korean. But here – no problem. He smiled, an eyebrow raised. “Mission accomplished. Vermin removed, and a happy ending all round.”

“Ack!” Osamu’s armoured boot nudged one of the larger pieces. “Not yet, it’s not. Since when did cats or foxes have fur that pattern – that’s some pirate leopard or cheetah we got! We missed Hohki – but how?”

Just at that moment, Gen Yakitora gave a yell of alarm – he had spotted two familiar figures, ducking into an alleyway about two hundred metres up the street. But before he could fire, someone beat him to it – as a rocket grenade skipped off the pavement behind them and exploded, fragments sparking off his fibresteel armour. As he dived into shelter behind a concrete bench, his infra-red visor showed him a dozen or so figures moving up the street towards them, ducking in and out of shelter as they advanced in short rushes.

“Natives, twelve or thirteen or them,” he snapped, “heading this way.” He hesitated, while the Doppler radar on his helmet mount snapped off two shots from his point-defence system, deflecting another incoming grenade. “We can fight here – or get Hohki.”

“If we stay, they can bring up big stuff, heavy stuff our suits can’t take.” Yashi shouted, before going to direct suit-to-suit laser link. “I say we go after Hohki – then grab whatever sails or flies out of here. No need to ask nicely – we’re not coming back.”

“Right!” As the rearguard, Gen set his backpack to scatter “ghost” mines along the street as they retreated, the almost colourless plastic discs no bigger than a gold yen piece, but easily powerful enough when

stepped on to give New Tortuga's revived trade in wooden peg-legs a useful boost. He grinned, following his friends out at a power-assisted trot, the heat haze of their suits' exhaust rising in the clear skies as turboshafts spun up to power jamming, countermeasures and locomotion systems. "That should keep them busy!"

As cameras swiveled to track the action, in one of the heavily reinforced basements a data-suited figure kept track of the action for interested parties. New Port Royal was a complex place – its rigidly enforced anarchy depending on a constantly up-to-date intelligence gathering system that fed the details of exactly what was being done to whom, to the Brotherhood Of The Coast. Many countries had outwardly similar intelligence agencies – but few of them had decided to also make it fun.

"And here today, it's a lovely September morning for your military entertainment," With a glittering of perfect teeth, a grinning sabretooth dressed in a sequin-studded tuxedo strolled into the camera view, a large old-fashioned microphone in hand. "I'm your host for this afternoon's shootout, Smiley Don, and my lovely assistant Kitrael, who's taking a break from her busy schedule as our dear island's foremost freelance assassin. He winked at the camera as it panned over a slender lynx-like feline distinguished by long, slender straight horns, and a contact number flashed up on the screen. "She'll be back at work next months, folks, so if you've people standing in your way – inheritance, promotion, sibling rivalry - why don't you give her a call?" There was a cheerful burst of music, from the Executioner's song in the classic Gilbert and Sullivan opera "The Mikado" – *"I've got a little list – who never would be missed..."*

With an expressive swing of his free hand, the compere triggered a live composite picture of the streets of New Port Royal, displayed covering the whole wall behind him. A whole string of interactive channels became available for his audience to concentrate on selected parts of the action while he provided the running dialogue. It was his family trade – after a first career inventing deliberately annoying "buzz-words" for an Evil Marketing company, his Father had become one of the first Infotainment Imagineers.

"Yes indeed folks, it's a real brawl out there. Let's see just what we have here." The main screen flicked to show a black-armoured feline helping a bleeding vixen along at a desperate trot, heading West towards the centre of the town. "Oho! We have one of our own captains here, Captain Suzuko Hohki of the Sea Vixen and First Cub, it looks as if she's bitten off more trouble than she can chew. The very lovely Captain Hohki is enjoying her very first outing to our fair island, let's hope she survives it." The screens flashed up available data on Suzuko, including her dress size, star sign (Year of the Dragon), blood type (AB Vulpine Negative), favourite food (smoked salmon) and latest reported grades in class (tries hard, should concentrate more on her classwork).

Turning to face the camera, Smiley Don forced his ears to dip. "Oh yes, folks. Just four minutes ago, Captain Hohki and her friend were within ten seconds of being sliced'n'diced on the corner of Fraud Street. If they hadn't spotted the attack coming and suddenly ducked around the corner – this'd be down to a two-sided fight, and not a three-sider. Next screen please." He raised an eyebrow quizzically. "And following her, these are some familiar faces on the island this week – a student team who've been making their opinions very much in evidence. Brave folk. They're determined, they're well equipped with "A" Grade light mecha, and they're stocked with the best that Ivor Thief's Bazaar can provide them with." A contact number flashed briefly on the screen, with Ivor's latest estimates on when his shelves would be resupplied. "Give a big hand for the visiting team, folks."

The camera shifted, and the compere nodded significantly. "Bringing up the rear, a surprise team-up. We have another of our Captains – Captain DeWaal, "Redclaw" by name and red-clawed by nature." He winked. "Our Captain DeWaal is the only active member of the Brotherhood not currently at sea following today's Alert – still, someone has to keep the home campfires burning and guard the rum kegs, don't you think? With him are three of his own crew and seven of the crew of a certain Peruvian bomber, who Captain DeWaal released yesterday from captivity. And listen to this tidbit, people – the one who shot them down in the first place is none other than our own Captain Suzuko Hohki, who's out in front! So it's a three-sided matter, just sit back and watch how events unfold." With that, he waved to the technician who was tracking the cameras, and settled back in a comfy leatherette-effect chair to take his own advice.

Smiley relaxed, nodding appreciatively as the chase ran through the mostly deserted streets of New Port Royal. He loved his work – he had done this for years, mostly on the Japanese networks. There was always a price to be paid for choosing to work for Evil Mega-Corporations though – after five years or so of daily exposure, the Networks regularly made room for new blood by spectacularly spilling that of the old. He would have ended up as a contestant and no longer the host of his own show, "Pro-celebrity Pit-Fighters", had he not decided to vanish that fateful day and head for one of the only pieces of the planet the Corporations tacitly agreed was neutral territory.

"Well, Miss Kitrael," he said at length, clasping his hands together earnestly and turning his best profile to the studio camera. "We have Miss Hohki and friend heading towards where their Tank-toting

friends from Toho were when she left them – and “were” is the word to use. Pursued by the team led by Rai Gosu and Gen Yakitori of Japan. You’ve met them both, I understand. Any comments for our viewers?”

The long-horned feline scratched a tufted ear, as the camera zoomed in to a previously recorded still shot of Gen. “Biggish and priggish,” she offered. The picture was replaced by one of Rai, frozen in the act of raising a bottle of Narco-pop. “Thuggish and druggish.”

“Well, there you have it,” Smiley beamed. “Bringing up the rear, our very own Captain Redclaw and party. Dressed in a very fashionable ALC-55 boarding suit, with aerials of what looks like the new seasons’ electronics counter-measures suite, available from Amanda’s Arms Boutique at a special introductory price, five software upgrades included!” Again, another mini-screen popped up, transmitting sales and ordering data to any interested viewers. “The whole ensemble accessorised by a Mark 3 bis Neo-parrot, nasty-looking thing, that same model’s taken off a lot of ears and fingers in this last week. But a fine reconnaissance probe, for all that.” His ears raised. “Here’s where it gets interesting, folks – Captain Hohki has just turned into Small Packet Plaza, where her friend left their transports. But what you and I know is – they’re not there.” Leaning forward to address the lens, he nodded seriously. “Let’s tune into Small Packet Plaza shall we, and take up the action from there, as it unfolds.” Just as modern political science consisted of breaking down complex socio-political issues to the point where a good bayonet charge could solve them, so did modern news reporting aim to condense its subject to nice quotable sound-bites.

The sabretooth grinned alarmingly at the camera. The Gods know, he reminded himself, how I love this job!

“Where’ve they gone?” Mae screeched to a halt, blinking for a second. The plaza was empty, and only scratch-marks on the paving showed their friends had been there. Suddenly she noticed what looked like large tin cans littering where the Maus had been parked. But she took a second before she recognised what they were, and the realisation sunk in.

“Look - empty tank gun shell cases – they’ve had to fight someone.” She looked around, and her jaw switch triggered the radio. “Hello, Kazuko, Horst, anybody? Where are you? We’re in the square, with Rai on our tails!” She switched channel after channel – but there was nothing but a tearing wail of jamming. Wincing, she remembered that Rai and Shiitake had both mounted the new season’s fashions in communications jamming on their suits that term. “Ack. We’re jammed. I wondered why they didn’t radio to say they were moving out.”

She concentrated, scanning the local area for traces of her friends. She spotted their range and bearing – it would have helped if any of them had been Psykers, but that would have been too much to hope for. There were psykers around on the island, though – some of them of very strange forms. She caught a stray emanation from nearby – a GLR Psyker, of rather strange form. He was thinking hard about a certain two-legged girl – and “Two-legged” was an exotic idea to him. Mae smiled for an instant, shaking her head and snapping back to her surroundings.

Suzuko panted, pressing her paw against her bleeding shoulder. Mae had given them enough warning to get around the corner, but a stray piece of shrapnel had laid her upper arm open. The cut didn’t seem too bad, she told herself – but running flat out was not doing it any good. “There’s only one way they can have gone,” she pointed along the beach road. “The other streets are too narrow, the corners are too sharp. You’d never get round there in the Maus.”

Mae nodded. “Right! Let’s get going!” She cast a worried glance back down the way they had come. “I don’t suppose Rai’s far behind.” Her own armour was scratched and torn in places; the lightweight fibresteel looked like ripped-up carpet as it had absorbed energy by delaminating – one of the impacts had thrown her flat on the floor, and she knew with a sick certainty that only her armour had saved her life. As she helped Suzuko along, she spared a moment to reflect – having right on your side was nice, but when it came to it, a good thick layer of boron fibre was what made the difference. She cast a thought towards Mangana, the most receptive of her friends – and got a fleeting impression of a beach, with the sun overhead and to the left.

The armoured feline hesitated, looking at the trail of blood Suzuko was leaving. “Let’s look at that cut first – then we’ll get after them.” She closed her eyes while Suzuko kept a sharp lookout, and probed into her friend’s injured body. No arteries or major veins severed, thankfully – but she had guessed that by the steady seeping, not pulsing or jetting. The cut was a slashing blow from hot shrapnel, luckily a clean gash with no fragments left in the wound – but it was a pawbreadth across, and had deeply nicked the collarbone.

Mae concentrated, “seeing” inside her friend’s damaged aura. She felt the severed edges of blood vessels, squeezed them together and applied a burst of heat to seal them – thirty delicate vessels, none thicker than a strand of spaghetti. As she always did, she pushed into the back of her mind the reverse ability that she had never practiced. It was a matter of control rather than raw output power – but she knew she could lethally

wield a psychokinetic scalpel inside someone without leaving the slightest external trace. As she finished her patching-up on Suzuko, her tail twitched.

“Being an assassin,” she told herself, “would NOT be a good advert for the rest of us Psykers!”

“And now, folks, while there’s a lull in the action, a few words from the popular and beautiful Miss Kitrael, our very lovely guest commentator on today’s show.” Smiley Don strode across to the horned feline, her ears almost the size of a lapine’s. “For anyone new to our fair island – she’s a fully licensed Terminatrix, street-legal in Japan, holds a Government permit, but is available for you, yes you, to hire for all your surplus personnel problems.” The sabretooth cast a soulful look at the camera, as he held up an admonishing paw. “But don’t make the mistake of thinking she’s just another hired gun, she’s a deep and wonderful person, does important assassination work for charities, and truly appreciates the value of life.” A price list flashed on one data channel, indicating the financial truth of that. “Believe me, she’s here to help people – on average, and only counting the customers’ votes of course. And yes, she sings too! A big hand, folks, for the lovely and talented Miss Kitrael!” With a flourish and bow, the sabretooth anchorman and public relations person handed over the microphone.

The horned girl gave a shy smile, and strode out into the centre of the studio. The lights glistened on her unfashionably glamorous showgirl’s costume – the Sunday best of someone who spent so many boring hours sitting waiting on rooftops with a particle rifle disguised as a bird’s nest. She swished her tail and began to sing in a cheery, tuneful voice:

“You might well have noticed, right up to today
There’s people who’ll spoil every game that you play
If you were Yakuza, you’d order a butcher
“Dispose of them neatly within a car crusher!”

“But what can I do?” Do I hear you ask
“I’ve no organisation to help with the task.”
So I’ll tell you some things that I’ve done in my time
(Making sure every one’s an unsolvable crime.)

First, when I was eight (this is crude, but first-rate)
A bigger boy slammed my tail in a gate
So to make his death look like the work of a nutter
I put arsenic oxide into his butter!

Electrical fireworks formed my next game
As with water-pistol I took careful aim
Discharging an unbroken mercury stream
With one hundred Amps there was no time to scream!

I played a nice joke on November the Fifth
When an enemy turned to a gaseous whiff
The banger he knew how to light up so well
Was linked to a hollow charge anti-tank shell!

With such merry games I have spent all my life
And my seventh rich husband just “fell on his knife”
The Police have not caught me, right up to today
So I know where YOU live – and I’m coming to play!”

Kitrael bowed, ears dipping modestly as she handed back the big old-fashioned microphone. Smiley Don clapped discreetly, giving one of his most generous glinting grins to Camera Three while the other data screens showed running figures and occasional bursts of firing – nothing for a place like New Port Royal to find particularly interesting.

“Ah, me,” he sighed nostalgically. “A song of old Europe, back from the days of the EU, when language was graceful and indirect. They’d always call a spade a Manually Operated Monopiece Bladed Fulcrum Soil-manipulation Utensil, and every humble village hangman was a Judicial Population Downsizing Operations Executive. And now, back to our regular program. This commercial break sponsored by Miss Kitrael Downsizing Enterprises, remember their motto is “Yes, we CAN make it look like an accident.”

The main camera zoomed in to the corner of Bullion and Doubloon Street, where Yashi and Rai had run out of mines and were busily setting up a trap in an alleyway. A motion-detector would awake after a ten-second time fuze let them get clear – after which, a shower of cheap Chinese cast-iron grenades would scatter across the street over whoever went past next.

Smiley Don raised an eyebrow. “An interesting dilemma, folks – we have Captain Redclaw’s comms frequency right here. Shall we tell him? What do the studio audience think?” He raised his eyebrow quizzically, looking straight into the main camera. “Voting in five seconds time, registered subscribers only please.” He dipped an ear, while Kitrael posed shamelessly by a large stage-prop red button. “Oh, and this is a surprise! Somebody’s mortaring them – where did that come from?” High-speed action replays clicked into life – tracking a pale lilac projectile dropping into the alley five metres behind Yashi’s crouching form. The blast blew him over, his armoured bulk scattering the trap intended for Redclaw and the lightly armoured Peruvians picking their way down the street. Yashi and Rai picked themselves up and dashed round the corner to join Gen and Osamu.

“We’re tracing the trajectory that came in, and ... hello, we have an unlicensed tap into our own camera grids. It’s whoever it was with the mortar, leeching our data feed! Should be backtracking into their system shortly and ... well, this IS interesting. Someone’s not using a computer interface – they’re working out our ranging and direction from camera data, by hand. A big round of applause people, for someone who likes to do it the hard way – we should have camera six on them now.”

The camera two hundred metres from the alleyway scanned its area – and caught a brief glimpse of three figures trotting off, one of them carrying what looked like a cute blue fibresteel trench mortar, its long bayonet glistening in the sunlight. Smiley Don turned to the camera, eyebrow wagging up and down.

“I’ve always wanted to say this, folks, so please indulge me.” He drew in a deep breath. “Who ARE those sailor-suited heroines?”

“Whoever they were, they saved our tails,” A minute later, Tktlohahn Davies glanced at the ruins of an obvious trap. “Wonder who did it?” Captain Redclaw’s onboard Doppler system had spotted the incoming round heading in their general direction – he had yelled for the lightly armoured Peruvians to get down, but it was the Japanese team that had scrambled out of the alley with their armour smoking.

“In a place like this? Could be anybody.” Natahaho grimly hefted the borrowed grenade launcher. “They could be aiming at us next, just for the hell of it.”

Tktlohahn hastily tightened the straps of his cloned spider-silk vest, wishing for something more solid. The six of his comrades who had felt well enough to fight, had volunteered right away when Captain Redclaw had told them the target. All eleven had wanted to go. Having been thrown into the hold and left there to rot was not something the survivors would forgive. “There’s four of them – the ones Redclaw captured are locked up safe, in more comfort than they gave us.”

Just then, the largest of the armoured Pyrates popped his helmet, the bear they had heard called Jurgen. “That way,” he pointed down an alleyway. “We know where they’re going now – we can head them off at the beach.”

“Right!” Natahaho’s furlless opossum tail thrashed in glee. “They’re running out of Island, that direction – and you’re the ones who’ve got all the boats!” He checked his load: ten large rocket grenades, with a couple more in the pouches his friends all carried. Having mecha had only turned the wheel another circle, he told himself – the battlesuits were bulletproof and shrapnel proof, but plain infantry such as his friends were that morning, had long been carrying anti-tank weapons. The trouble was, he mused as they set off down the street – a dozen or so rounds were all most furs could carry around all days, though the Swiss bear looked as if he could carry twice that even without his powered suit.

“There!” Two minutes later, they emerged onto the white coral beach to the North of New Port Royal. The beach curved gently away, to the far corner of the island. About two kilometres away, some large dark shapes were outlined against the sand.

“Are those beached boats they’re aiming for?” Natahaho shaded his eyes, spotting four retreating figures heading towards the distant features. But Jurgen shook his head, his visor’s telescopic sights kicking in.

“Not boats,” he said, his solid figure blockier than ever in the jet-black armour. “Not boats – though they did float here.”

“And here we have the situation, folks,” Smiley Don waved towards a tactical display. “The backstop is the Toho Tanker Team – three pieces of classical mean, mean metal parked at the end of the beach. They survived an urban encounter in our fair city an hour ago, and found they yearned for those wide open spaces once more.” He winked at the camera. “Heading towards them is Captain Hohki and her friend, but they’re

really running out of steam – and if Captain Hohki survives this, she may be pleased to know that Barbara’s Barbary Coast Barber Surgeon’s Boutique has a stock of AB Vulpine Negative whole blood available, at very competitive rates.” An advert flashed up in one screen showing a joyful Pyrate waving a new power-fist.

The sabretooth’s glittering tuxedo shone in the studio lights as he tapped four faster-moving dots. “Oh dear, and it looks like their classmates and rivals are catching up fast. There’s only four hundred metres between them, and – yes! Look at the infra-red flares off those exhausts, they’ve really picked up the pace. The loose sand’s slowing everyone down, but unlike Miss Hohki, it won’t be tiring out her pursuers. In last place on the beach are Captain Redclaw DeWaal, and his Peruvian team-up. Going slowly, fishing out mines, looks like the mech ahead of them are set to lay at random, half are just plain foil decoys that their pursuers are having to treat as real regardless.”

The long-limbed assassin draped herself over one of the tactical display projectors, miming a photographer “squaring up” a shot with her fingers. She silently pointed to another, smaller screen.

“And yes indeed, thank you for reminding me, Miss Kitrael.” Smiley briefly fixed his attention on the lesser monitor. “One team is sticking to the roads, they’re not going down to play on the beach. Maybe they remembered their sailor-suits aren’t swimming costumes! Hello, whoever you are!” He tapped three dots on the tactical display. For some strange technical reason, the cameras were having trouble directly observing them – they were somehow getting fuzzier, but not in the furry sense. The sensor nets were reporting larger and larger tracking errors, as if they were deploying jamming devices, or somehow simply becoming vaguer.

“Yes indeed – they’re still leaching into our data feeds, despite our ‘Pretty-good™’ data shielding. Perhaps we may,” his voice was hushed, reverend almost, “have an actual Hacker-Priest over here, from our Greenland homeland? At any rate, they’ll be in range for their mortar – it’s identified as a Ballisto-Happy Corporation “My First Barrage-Maker”, regular school issue. So, in the next two minutes it looks like there’ll be employment for a fan-cleaner, as my dear old Sire used to say. Stay tuned for all the news, all the action!”

“What we need,” Jenni commented in a voice that dripped boredom, “Is some news. Face it, we’ve been here an hour. We’re meant to be supporting Mae and finding Suzuko – sitting here on the end of a sand-spit won’t do that.”

“True.” Tava nodded. His face was pressed to the gunner’s eyepiece, as he tirelessly cranked the turret to scan the beach and wished for a powered traverse. “But neither will getting blown to pieces in a sneak attack from down some alleyway – remember, we’re their ride home. If it hadn’t been the Maus that Matzu aimed at first...” Tendons twitched grimly in his muscle-corded neck at the thought.

Broohilda was feeling a little more relaxed, as she looked out through the top hatch. It was a beautiful day. The surf was crashing over the reef a hundred metres offshore, and frigate birds wheeled in the clean air above them. There seemed to be occasional explosions from the direction of town, but nothing out of the ordinary.

Suddenly, the intercom crackled and Broohilda’s keen ears picked up a shout from Mangana in the Tiger ten metres away to their left.

“Target, Mech two o’clock – don’t fire, Mae and Suki are there!” Mangana’s six-centimetre eyes had the resolving power of a 20 X binocular scope when she used her contact lenses – and at two kilometres she recognised Mae’s slender black suit and Suzuko’s conspicuous russet tail. Almost right behind them were four bulkier shapes, heat-haze rising and loose sand scattering from their blasting turboshaft exhausts. As she watched in horror, two plumes of kicked-up sand sprouted a few metres away from Mae and Suzuko – who dropped to the ground. She breathed again as they struggled to their feet and came on, Mae obviously supporting Suzuko.

“They’re here – and so’s the opposition.” Tava swung the turret till the gunner’s sight zoomed in on the scene, his rangefinder marking nineteen hundred metres range. “We can’t shoot !” The beach was narrow, with Suzuko and her enemies almost one behind the other from his angle, and with the flat tank cannon trajectory a shell aimed at the four hostile mechs would be hard-put to clear Suzuko’s head.

There was a tumultuous thunder of engines as the Maus on his right revved its banks of Maybach diesels, and Kazuko pumped her clenched fist up and down in the air. “Yee-ha!” She whooped exultantly, pointing dramatically down the beach. “Panzer roll!” The Maus dug its wide tracks into the soft sand, and as its electric drive kicked in, started to trundle forward at a steady trot. Kazuko dropped back into the turret and closed the hatch – they were short-crewed without Mae, and even with the Zuse computer she would have her hands full commanding the turret alone.

Tava’s radio crackled, as Mangana’s own Panzer began to move. “Mangana here – let’s get over there! Break left when we get to Suki, I’ll break right, give them some cover. Kazuko’s going straight on to tackle Rai and Shiitake.” She assumed the pug would be in the forefront against them, as ever.

“Rolling!” Jenni called up from the driver’s seat, as she stamped on the throttle of the V-12 diesel, flames and black smoke belching out of the twin exhausts as she laboured with the heavy “crash” gearbox. “OK, Tava – up to you now. We’re with you all the way.”

“I’m trying to raise Mae’s suit radio – but it’s jammed.” Broohilda slid down into the commander’s seat, the heavy hatch slamming shut above her like a coffin lid. She barely had time to dislike what she was about to do, as she fiddled with the modern piece of communications kit that was being deafened by another one just like it. Behind her in the turret the glass valves glowed cheerfully in the 1945 vintage wireless that was working regardless of anything a 2035 vintage jammer threw at it, disbelieving anyone would still be using such a frequency. She drew in a deep breath, and focussed her view through the rangefinder at the four charging suits. “Target Mech, half-past twelve.”

“Not seen,” Tava cranked the turret slightly, the muscles bulging under his coveralls. The sleek, rounded turret swung, like the muzzle of a hunting dog. “Seen! Target Mech, on! Loading AP.” He leaned well clear of the canon breech and pulled the left-hand lever of the viciously dangerous auto-loader. Half a tonne of pneumatics grunted into action, the scissor arm flexed, and a 122-millimeter armour-piercing shell was plucked off the carousel and rammed into the breech. For a second all was still, as still as a rumbling armoured vehicle gets on an undulating beach.

“All loaded and ready,” came Mangana’s voice over the intercom, grim and flat. “Rai and Shiitake have suit sensors running. They should see us by now. And I don’t see them surrendering.”

“Enough to make you just want to give up. Kids these days!” Rabid-Sama threw down the headphones in disgust, having worked through all the music channels within range as the Hughes Hercules droned across the Pacific. “I hear one more yodeling band and I’m going to puke.” The kids on the street, he had to admit, were certainly putting out a lot of music. But oompah-bands powered by gas turbine fed tubas and alpenhorns were not what he wanted to hear from them.

“Now we used to have real groups, once.” The elderly pit-bull threw himself back into the wickerwork chair, which creaked alarmingly. “Back in the mid ‘70’s. London SS! They were a proper band!”

The Vicar raised an eyebrow, and his wearable computer accessed arcane records from a very different era. “A band who never did a “gig” as you call it, or released any records,” he commented mildly.

Rabid-Sama curled his lip. “Yeah, well, the punk scene wasn’t really about the music.”

“Oh.” The Vicar gave a gesture towards his bovine assistant. “Old Tom here is a musician of classical European tracks, I believe. Verger, you may entertain us.”

“Ay, surr.” The stolid ox opened his pack, and as Rabid-Sama looked on in unutterable horror, pulled on a chunky white woolen Aran sweater. He stood braced, put one finger in his ear, and gave a low-pitched “Oooooooooooooooooohhhhhhh” before commencing to sing in a low, flat voice: * (1)

*“Oi be a computer Programmer, Oi comes from Milton Keynes *(2)*

Where gaffers they be very hard, on us poor coding teams

We works all day and works all night, our ‘eads like disc drives spin

While they be down the old Wine bar to drink Designer Gin...

Old Jarge ‘e works in Marketing, they works him very raw

Like Harry who be gaffer here and does Commercial Law

But worst of all’s Accountant Sam, they makes him...”

There came a tearing howl of rage from Rabid-Sama, as he struggled to untangle his strapped trousers from the seat belt. “Folkie! He’s a F***** Folkie! If there’s one thing I hate worse than a Hippie it’s a Folkie!” Snarling, he threw himself at the Verger, foam flecking his jaws. “Die, Folkie!”

The Vicar looked on, aloof, an expression of sardonic amusement on his high and austere face as the two grappled up and down the aisle. In-flight entertainment had indeed moved on throughout the years.

“Ah me,” he sighed, shaking his head. “I blame modern Society, myself. “ His ears twitched slightly. “When I grew up, we had none of this trivial bickering – we had full-scale Artillery duels in most suburbs at weekends. We’d go out on a sunny afternoon between barrages, and watch for bodies floating down the river. We’d throw stones at them. You don’t get that any more. No wonder young people aren’t the same.”

* (1) I’ve no idea why Folk Singers do this. But I’ve seen and heard it done. For the benefit of denizens of planets with more evolved civilizations, the generic Folk Song tends to be a protest against conditions which the singers are at least a century too young to have experienced.

* (2) One of the (happily) few British cities produced from scratch to suit then-fashionable Planners’ theories rather than evolved by People. Which says it all, really.

Just then, his communicator wristwatch alerted him with its discreet tapping. The Vicar looked down, reading the highest priority “Flash” message beamed off the Clergysat network. His tail stiffened for an instant, and then slowly he nodded.

Ignoring the duel behind him, he unclipped his seat belt and strode along the aisle between the elegant wicker seats of the first-class lounge. So, he mused, the R-device on New Tortuga had been destroyed, which was one threat removed for the present. But only for the present – there was a chance it had been triggered in a destructive test – leaving its testers with the knowledge of how to make another.

“Pilot,” he said softly, Satori jumping at the voice, “I require local radio and Net access to our target, ahead of schedule. We are out of range – unless we gain altitude. Arrange it.”

Satori shuddered, nodding as he advanced the throttles and pulled back on the stick. “We should be arriving in an hour,” he offered, tapping the roll of paper map scrolling under the stylus of the 1945 vintage navigational display. “This is all the speed I can make.”

“Enough,” the Vicar nodded, returning to the seat. He cast an eye over the continuing struggle, noting that both sides had switched to spurious Martial Arts – his Verger was swinging what looked like a half metre of black rubber hose in the Lancastrian “Eccy-Thump” technique to counter the aged punk’s furious assault in the Welsh “Llap-Goch” mode.

Relaxing as he watched the fight, the Vicar sat and thought with the hard, clear concentration of his profession. New Tortuga was certainly a place that attracted unusual people, who in turn tended to trigger unusual events. Exactly what was going on here, he wondered? His link to the SAMOS array had no answers – the instruments were sensitive, but peering more than a certain way into the future was a tricky business, especially when histories were approaching points of gross divergence and chaotic effects threatened to swamp the smooth momentum of history. Which, he mused, the present moment appeared to be.

So. The R-device was gone, and with it the immediate threat – happily, an exhaustive investigation into the Peruvian end had proved conclusively that nobody had managed to duplicate the three that they had obtained. Could the inhabitants of New Tortuga have understood its workings? And how did that link to the strange psychic smog that was hanging over the island, and had been since the arrival of the Peruvian crew?

The Vicar’s ears twitched, and he rapidly checked his notes. No, he told himself – the psychic smog had been around first – the Device had been brought there to meet it. A fully functioning Reality Processor was somewhere on New Tortuga, right that second. Somewhere, something was causing radical breakdowns in reality – the very thing he and his kind were sworn to stop.

“For once that wall is broken,” he nodded, though of all people on the planet he knew best, “we know what is on the other side. And we know what it considers a treat.”

“I say, this IS a treat.” Dick Pontephrigh enthused, as the majority of the Infamous Five sat down under a big cheerful sunshade to watch the distant fireworks display. “Do you suppose it’s some local festival? It’s sounded like firecrackers and such, going off half the morning.”

“I expect so, Dick,” His brother nodded solemnly. “You get these queer celebrations and things in Foreign lands. Not like back home – I asked back at the coll, and they told me they don’t even build proper snowmen at Christmas!” He waved disparagingly at the semi-tropical beach. “But they still fill up their calendars with festivals, no wonder nobody gets any work done.”

Dick’s ear dipped. “Well, Religion’s a jolly good thing, the right sort and in moderation anyway – like vitamins. Keeps the tone of the place up. We should encourage it. Harvest festivals and things.” In his knapsack rested his morning’s souvenirs, where a street-vendor had offered him a wonderful bargain of votive figures – not merely rare but guaranteed almost unheard-of Methodist Saints. He had wondered a bit at the odd geometry of some of the figurines, but the vendor had assured him that it merely proved the authenticity, the crude dimensional distortions indicating the work of Primitive Methodists.

Anne smiled, graciously accepting a tray of big sticky buns as Jenks handed it around. “Thanks awfully, Jenks. I wonder how Georgina and Timmy are getting on? It’s been simply Ages since we saw them. That nice Captain Redclaw said last time he heard, she was going to study under that lady Pyrate captain.” Anne smoothed out her long red gown, almost scarlet in colour. “I think he’s a very nice, jolly sort of Pyrate – he’s been such a help to us! Just the sort that deserves success. Don’t you think so, Dick?”

“Umm,” Dick assented with his mouth full. “I’m thinking of taking him up on his offer. Well, we can at least try it in the hols, even if we don’t go for it full tilt. It seems there’s a lot of things these days that need putting right again – and we’re the ones to do it. What do you say, Anne?”

“Hooray!” Anne and Julian chorused, their tails wagging. Julian bit into his bun, though a worried look came over his face.

“You know, though,” he said slowly, “I think we’d better not take too much time over it. I mean, we’ve been Adventuring for years, up on the Plateau. We’ve had an awful lot of trips, too! Grandmother

Pontephrigh, you remember what she said? It all stops suddenly one day, then you settle down.” He blinked. Back home on the plateau, he had seven cousins who were just learning to read. They were just pups, of course, but he had started Adventures when Anne was only a few years older. “There’s never two lots of us around at the same time.”

“Ah well, plenty of time for one really super Adventure, at least.” Dick said firmly. He had thought about their seven cousins back home himself, who were obviously going to have Adventures one day – but that seven was a secret still. “I don’t count finding Suzuko and taking her back, that’s almost done. No, what we need is one really brilliant one we’ll remember always. And for Adventure, I should just think running a Pirate ship would be jolly hard to beat. A Good Pirate ship – like Robin Hood on the ocean wave. Now, that’d be something, don’t you think?”

Anne nodded her head obediently. She brushed a crumb off, her ear twitched in annoyance as it fell down the front of her bodice. It was a little drafty at times, she had noticed – but she had been complemented several times on it, so she supposed it must be all right. She noticed she was still looking down her front, and pulled her gaze away, blushing. Before they had left the Plateau, she certainly had not had a ... figure, that her new dress would have fitted. It must be the fresh air on her fur, she told herself.

“Oh yes, it’d be really something.” She closed her eyes, dreamily. “We could meet all Sorts of people – Georgina says everyone’s very nice to her, they just can’t get enough of her company. They keep inviting her out to parties and everything. That’d be nice.” An unfamiliar shiver ran through her, as she thought of the tall and wonderfully turned-out Policeman she had met on BlackTail’s Reef, and wondered if he was ever off duty.

“Right! That’s agreed, then! We’ll talk some sense into Georgina, get back then finish up the term at the Coll and off again with Captain Redclaw.” Dick rubbed his paws together briskly. “Plenty of bracing explorations and healthy outdoor work. That’s the ticket! It’ll do us the world of good – hard work never killed anybody.”

“And so, Miss Kitrael, how do you bet on the outcome to this one?” Smiley Don leaned forward with the microphone. “Your colleague Mister XXY, has fifty gold Yen on our Captain Hohki being slain in the next five minutes, by either her mecha-clad classmates or the Peruvians behind them. What do you think?”

Kitrael sniffed disdainfully, her long feline whiskers drooping. “Mister XXY,” she declared, “his idea of a sure assassination is to post the target a plastic bag with the “*Do not put over your head*” warning crossed off. If he was a shoplifter, he’d raid charity shops at sale time – and get caught.”

She inclined her horned head to the multi-screen display, where the gap had dropped to three hundred metres. “Gen Yakitori, Rai Gosu, Yashi and Osamu have all brought the wrong kit for the job. They have close-combat chainswords and mech-homing missiles – but not a single beam or shell weapon, or this show would be over by now. Ahead of them, Miss Tzuko’s armour is putting out far too little heat to register on a sunny day at the beach – her pursuers’ long-range systems will not lock! And here comes the armoured cavalry. This should be interesting.”

Smiley Don gestured expansively. “Thank you, the wonderful and talented Miss Kitrael!” He gave his trademark soulful stare into Camera Three. “Remember, folks – she can mail the assorted parts of the target to addresses specified, and STILL make it look like suicide.” On the screens, three large shapes blossomed in low-level heat as engines fired and exhaust plumes rose over the sands. “The Empress Tiger, though, is something you could see from space. Very crude gas turbines, just spewing exhaust heat – I’d hate to pay their fuel bills. And ...” he tapped his audio implant, accessing an incoming call. “Yes indeed, Pam’s Propellant Parlour tells me they’re good customers, Pam’s always wondered who was going to take that consignment of TONKA-250 off her paws. Vintage stuff, she assures me, and fully compatible with HyDyne ® rocket fuel for all you amateur missileers out there.”

“This should be more decisive,” Kitrael’s long tail thrashed. “Oh! The Mechs have stopped – they’re plugging in their sights, breaking out the anti-armour shells.” The cameras flicked from one scene to the next, as tension mounted. “Here we go. Twelve hundred metres range and no cover, an easy shot both ways.”

“A tense moment here, folks”, Smiley intoned breathlessly, watching the screens. “Tank against mech, it’s beach party time – three against four, any second they’ll – Yes!” He pounded the desk, as the tactical screens erupted in harsh blooms of infra-red light.

“Yes!” Smiley Don shouted, his razor teeth gleaming. “Missiles against tank guns, on this very beautiful September morning – they shoot – they score – three columns of greasy black smoke rise above our beach – clean hits every one, bang through the front plates.” The studio audience were going wild.

“They think it’s all over,” the compere announced, winking into Camera One, “And it is now!”

End Chapter Sixteen