

Chapter Seventeen (Five go off in a huff)

A strange shape slowly rotated in the air. Where the sunlight touched it, it gleamed oddly, as if the light reflected to the viewer was being bent through some angle not normally expected of an earthly atmosphere. Any eye that tried to follow the surface of the disc-like shape would blink in bafflement - seeing the inner surface shifting seamlessly from concave to convex, the outer track twisting in on itself like a more solid Moebius Strip. But in the centre was the worst part. As the disc turned, it seemed to be both flat and deeply indented, the inner core seemingly at the bottom of a metres-deep pit housing a strange spiky affair that might have been some strange expression of elder symbols - or just possibly a set of Derallieur cycle gears.

Toemi reached up and caught the back wheel of her Cthulhu Mythos Cycle out of the air, and examined it critically. "Well, it feels unbalanced when I'm riding - but I just can't see where." She shook her blonde-furred head, her pretty green back tentacles waving in frustration. "Does anyone else around here know how to fix these things?"

Princess Cthuline looked around at her friend, extending a webbed hand placatingly. "Is not things we Princesses are learning back home, practical mechanics." She swallowed, her grapefruit-sized eyed dipping down in her skull. Suddenly she smiled, her gills flushing. "You could be asking that first-year girl Trish, the one in the vixen costume - she is doing Historical Engineering!"

Toemi nodded slowly. "I might ask her." News of Trish's actual shape had gone around Toho that day, courtesy of an extremely voluble and now extra-perky Hiroshi, who had been loudly discussing her previous night's adventures all the way to her work at the crèche, where she had very optimistically pencilled herself and Shobban in as prospective customers. "Any idea where she's gone to?"

Princess Cthuline closed her eyes, concentrating her eldritch senses as she divined the vixen-shaped girl's whereabouts. She frowned, her eyes dipping again like footballs bobbing on a green pond. "Is very strange," she confessed, her stub tail twitching in annoyance. "There is only one of her - and I can see her over there," she pointed towards the main Administration building, "and over there as well, hundreds of kilometres away." She pointed a webbed finger towards the far North-eastern horizon, where a mountain chain she had swum around as a spawn rose from the Abyssal Plain.

Where the top of that mountain chain poked out of the water, was an island known to the air-breathers as New Tortuga.

"And that just about wraps up the main action here, folks," Smiley Don addressed the cameras, while the assassin and part-time showgirl Kitrael mimed pulling down a window blind. "Let's look at the action replays!" He nodded towards the main screen. "On one side, three rather cool retro vehicles, with plain rifled-tube projectile cannons - that is SO last-century, but wait, there might be some style points left in that idea. The big one's a Maus Two, a rather nifty valve based - yes folks, that's a glass valve-based computer running it." He paused, and looked quizzically into Camera Three. "Compared with the comp on most wristwatches, let alone the mechs it's opposing, it's an abacus. But if you ask it to do simple enough sums, what the hey ..." He blinked, and an ear dipped. "I'm getting reports from the PR people at Fujisawa Heavy Industries (Evil) Limited, that they do not, emphasise NOT want us to air this next bit, the one showing their suit's performance in real action, not just simulated. What do you think, studio audience?"

There was a five-second break while the votes were counted, and the sabre-toothed compere turned his full ten-centimetre grin onto the audience. "Thank you, thank you. Fujisawa Heavy Industries (Evil) pride themselves on providing datalink security on all their suits, particle beam proof ablative armour and the finest neural networking interface on all their products. Here's what it's worth when their top model's being hit by a 122 millimetre armour-piercing shell, a 90-year old design that still seems to do its stuff." He enlarged the main screen, in close-up slow motion detail. "Tankers like fast ammunition, and here's why, folks. Spot the Doppler score on the screen! This hot little number is closing in at eleven hundred metres a second, while the target's modern missiles cost three hundred and seventeen times as much per round and haven't got fifty metres down range yet."

There was a minute's silence, then the studio audience leaped to their feet cheering.

"Thank you, thank you." Smiley Don and Kitrael chastely took hands, walked towards the edge of the virtual "stage" together and bowed to the audience. "Gear techs may note that Amanda's Arms Boutique says it's stocking that very calibre right now at a very competitive rate in both family and party-sized crates, complete with high-explosive burster charge although " - he turned and winked roguishly at Camera Five- "although you can see it was pretty much overkill against a mech of that size. But who

worries about overkill? Hello, Fujisawa, the good news is your customer won't be badmouthing your products or asking for a refund! So, my lovely and talented guest Miss Kitrael, what do you reckon the score is so far?"

Kitrael took centre stage, while the spotlights gleamed on her long, straight horns. Shining highlights danced in her large, lustrous eyes as she counted up on one elegantly clawed, delicate hand. "Well - on one side we have three K kills, totals, that's Gen, Yashi and one other - we didn't track exactly who from this range. Also one F kill, firepower gone, the remaining mech salvoed his missiles and then - well, that's interesting. I didn't know that model had a jump pack." The screen showed the mechsuit furthest from the sea rising into the air on a column of flame, which then sharply arched over and flashed away to vanish into the dunes.

Smiley Don had pulled up a list of suit specifications. "If that's Osamu, his suit has an emergency escape feature. He didn't even have to trigger it by hand, the suit's smart enough to fire itself out of trouble when it spots another salvo heading its way. Look!" One screen displayed a computer-generated graphic with the manufacturer's logo in one corner of the picture, evidently from an advert. "He's got vertical launch tubes there in the backpack - but the final pair can be warhead inerted, the rockets clamped tight and the boost motors used to flip its wearer out of immediate harm's way." He winked. "Ah, improvised emergency systems, don't you just love 'em?. That's not to say it isn't an awfully rough landing." He pressed a button, and a sound clip of pots and pans falling downstairs echoed through the studio. "But that's his last ammunition gone, and he's got we estimate another twenty minutes fuel left before he has to get out and walk."

Kitrael smiled bashfully. "Not a good performance for the visiting Mech team. But according to our records..." she blinked, the holographic screen in front of her appearing in a golden glow. "Gen and Osamu both served in school as Sixth Lieutenants in the Neo-Tokyo 867th "Yodelling Hoovers" Division, solely specialising in Encounter Battles - snappy, reconnaissance-free little actions with no preparation or warning." She paused while a recruiting video clip showed the 867th's most emulated example, Prokhorovka on the Russian steppe in 1943 with two opposing tank units literally colliding unexpectedly in the fog. "Perhaps this time they had a little too much time to think about it."

"And that about wraps things up, three K and an F kill, versus one M kill - oh yes, all those missiles had to go somewhere, they blew the tracks clean off one of those Toho tanks, but the crew are out and looking at it right now. Good thing the current generation of smart homers didn't really believe the engine heat source was real, or they'd have made that a K kill and seriously skewed the statistics. So unless there's any more developments, we can carry on with our scheduled interview with the popular and talented Miss Kitrael." Smiley Don dismissed most of the camera views and returned to his guest celebrity, picking up his original sheaf of notes. "So, Miss Kitrael, I understand that Wahabase Accounting (Evil) of Okinawa has offered you a long-term contract in their personnel department - or should I say, their anti-personnel department?"

Kitrael smiled, feeling her pulse rate dropping to normal, and inspected her expensively manicured claws. "Why, that's right, Smiley. You see, they're downsizing their staff, and I put in a bid they found very agreeable."

"And?" Smiley Don leaned forwards eagerly, one eyebrow raised.

The sleek feline waved her tail. "When I downsize for a company - I provide an employee severance package that really is like no other."

Behind the scenes in the studio, the camera footage played on dozens of mini-screens and microphones, as the technicians monitored most of Pirate Island, ready to serve up the juiciest bits to the big screens upstairs. One of the technicians, a skinny Panda girl, sighed as she scratched between her round black ears.

"We're getting good pics of the tanks and of Redclaw's team - they should be meeting in about five minutes, then it might get interesting," she frowned, and drummed her fingers on the console. Watching boiler-suited crew playing fire extinguishers over burning rubber road wheels and un-pin damaged track links was hardly prime-time. "Ready to watch the fireworks there, no problem. The last mech is out in the dunes somewhere - we can't see him. And that other lot - what's wrong with our trackers? Why can't we can't get a directional fix on them? Like trying to spot you on film, Cottontail."

A bunny girl on the console opposite giggled, wriggling her tail saucily. True, Cottontail was hard to spot, being as her passport description reading *"a cute bunny, fuzzy and indeterminate, generally shows up as a blurred probability field cored by twitching ears, tail and nose."* She tapped her earphones, and pointed to a spot on the map. "I've got them on audio though! Yes, three of them - one's singing, I'll put it

through now." Her eyes widened, and her really staggeringly twitchy nose wriggled. "Nice! They're the ones who've been dropping mortar rounds on the Mechs all the way across town. 'The singing snipers' - hey, I recognise this song from kindergarten - maybe we can get them in to do a show for us after?" With that she twisted the dial to the loudspeakers and a faint but clear voice was heard, shrill tones backed by a military-spec Karaoke machine:

*"The tracks of the tank go round and round, round and round, round and round,
The tracks of the tank go round and round, all day long
Commander of the tank goes "Panzers! Los! Panzers ! Los! Panzers ! Los!"
Commander of the tank goes "Panzers! Los!" All day long
The loader of the tank goes "Sabot ! Up! Sabot! Up! Sabot! Up!"
The loader of the tank goes "Sabot! Up!" All day long
The driver of the tank yells "*****! *****! *****! *****! *****! *****!"
The driver of the"*

Cottontail frowned, twisting the dial. "I'm losing the signal - and I shouldn't be ... it's not as if they're moving away, it's more like they're going away, if you get my meaning. Like they're switching frequencies - but spatially they're still.. aha! Got them again!" A different voice came on, not Japanese sounding and sounding a little worried.

"..... more ammunition, that was the last round for Mister Thumper."

"Oh well, we've done our bit - better get back while the portal still holds up. It's OK, Trish - just have to switch to Mister Pokey."

There was a click, which both listeners at the media base recognised as a bayonet being fitted to a medium mortar. Then the original singer's voice returned.

"Say, Shobby, is it just me or things starting to get a bit - blurred around here?"

"Oh dear. I hoped this wouldn't happen. How well did you secure the core of that Bachman-Turner Overdrive to the main structure?"

"Full Vague engineering standards! Ten-centimetre wood screws, hammered in tight! And lots of glue squirted everywhere just to make sure."

"Oh-oh. We'd better get back fast - the portal's heading out of alignment. If the wave function collapses before we're back it'll be just too bad."

"We'll get wet?"

"Umm - yes, as in what the Girl Scouts call "A wet job.""

"Oh."

Just then, the panda manning * the console gave a whoop. "I see him! That last mech, just caught a glimpse of his heat trail through a gap in the dunes. Shall we tell upstairs?"

Cottontail concentrated, twisting a long ear at the main show. "Miss Kitrael's giving a commercial on how she can replace expensive redundancy payments and pensions for companies with a tax-deductible, one-time fee. I don't think she wants us to cut in on her. Why, what's up?"

Bear-like teeth grinned savagely, striking fear into the hearts of bamboo potted plants in the corner. "I've got a position plot of that mech and our merry mortar-carrying musicians." She tapped the display. "They should be coming round opposite sides of that big dune - right about ... now."

Even without the half of his onboard systems that the crash had damaged, Osamu heard the loud and cheery voice carried down the wind, as he groggily slogged through the marram grass and sand heading vaguely back towards the town.

"..... gunner of the tank goes "Target! On! Target! On! Target! On!"

The gunner of the tank goes "Target! On!" All round the town

The guns of the tank go "Bang bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang Bang Bang!"

The guns of the tank go "Bang bang bang!" All round the town"

He stopped. The canine's eyes glazed over. Risking a brief drain on his battery, he did a full passive scan of the area - nothing armoured was anywhere near him. Ahead of him, he vaguely recognised the voice from Toho - definitely one of the other camp, the ones who had got him into this situation. His jaws opened in a feral grin.

* Technically the word should be "Pandering" rather than "Manning". Text altered to irk purists everywhere (a worthy cause indeed.)

He was the last one left. Shiitake, Potzu and Yashi had been "disappeared" here on this island of infamy, and his last three comrades - they had "disappeared" so thoroughly that his only consolation was nobody would be serving them up to tourist gourmets in New Port Royal's more exclusive eating houses. His head swum with memories - of Gen's admirable levels of Cultural Hygiene, of Yashi's endless supply of jokes (true, none of them worked unless you recognised that Okinawans had a really *stupid* accent) of Rai's ... well, not everyone had a distinguishing feature.

The voices were getting closer now. He checked his onboard systems, and winced. Twenty litres of fuel left - enough to get him most of the way back to town, where he could arrange for a refuel and reload. But not if he ran - and if the enemy spotted him and signalled for help, he would be running flat-out trying to dodge tank cannons till his fuel ran dry and left him a helpless mark. Unless ... he smiled, suddenly. His chainsword was undamaged, and he had full power for that. If the three approaching didn't get time to call in his location - that would be that. And on Pyrate Island, he reminded himself, you can get away with *anything*. There would be no Secret Police car screeching to a halt outside his house at two in the morning with its infrasound non-wailing siren and its invisible flashing infra-red lights, its agents flashing encrypted permits to take him away to judgement. For the first time, he was glad not to be back home with its ultra-respectable standards.

Osamu shut his turbines to idle, their distinct whine fading, hopefully unheard in the sighing wind and crashing of the breakers. Yes - he was downwind, the two canines in the party would never scent him in time, and the big-eyed human could blindfold date a skunk and not guess the species. He opened his helmet, his own keen muzzle twitching as the fresh sea air washed it clear of the scents of plastic and lubricants plus his own trapped musks. Even in a top quality mech suit, there was sometimes nothing to beat the Mark One Nose for stealthy moves like -

THIS! His spring triggered at the sound of a paw crunching dry sand just around the corner - and half a tonne of fibresteel and ceramite leaped in the air at his command, turbines whining into full power as he leaped into action! Two metres in the air he leaped, chainsword screaming as he slashed down at the nearest figure, a slim vulpine in a first-year Historical Engineering coverall. There was a jarring blow, and he spun round - nothing hit that hard with a chainsword would be causing him any more trouble.

The other two first-years jumped back, eyes wide, one of them suddenly holding a mallet - not the usual gallon-sized wooden head, this was a dull grey affair that looked like five kilos of forged armour-smashing tungsten. The other, the long-eared canine, suddenly dropped free the mortar's heavy baseplate and tripod to lunge at him low with the barrel, its powered bayonet not fully charged and only striking sparks off the fibresteel of his codpiece - typical girl, he found time to curse to himself as he swatted the blade away with a screaming chainsword and crouched forward, ready for the kill.

Just then, from behind him he heard an unexpected sound - something like a large zipper being rapidly undone, and then a low, loud noise as if tonnes of wet concrete or something as liquid was being poured out behind him. A shadow fell over him, cast by something appreciably larger than his bulky mech.

Spinning round confidently, he braced himself for action, chainsword raised ready and grim determination on his face. And his expression changed as he saw what was there. Briefly. Very briefly.

"Are you getting the signal through?" Smiley Don called down to the "back room" as the channel switched to a commercial break. "What happened to the next encounter - it's been ten minutes, already."

Bunny ears twitched resignedly. "You won't believe this, sir. The mech's down, the folk with the mortar headed back towards town and just ... faded away, like they were holograms someone switched off. The rest of the party - the Toho crews, Captain Hohki and Captain Redclaw's crews have all teamed up, they're moving back steadily. Had to abandon the third tank for now, looks like." She held the earphones tight to her adorable ears, and suddenly her foot thumped in alarm. For a minute she stood listening, while Smiley Don watched the clock impatiently, eager for a classic sound bite for his listeners.

"They've found the site, sir - one of Redclaw's crew, his Bosun I think, he's on the line to us." Cottontail's eyes crossed as she spoke rapidly with the Pyrate. "They're asking if there's anyone wants to claim the mech."

"Claim? In what condition?" Smiley Don drummed his fingers on the comms panel. "What do they need, prisoner handling, medics, or body disposal? Always a good deal paid for really fresh supplies at Congo Cuisine down on Crossbones Avenue."

The bunny's ears drooped. "Umm ... I don't think you'd really get full price for him down there." She paused. "They say someone's already eaten his brain."

"Well, all's well that ends well." Kazuko waved as she sat on the engine decking of her Maus II, the first-aid kit open as Mangana and Horst tended to Suzuko's wounds. "That's you rescued, and the last threats to us gone - we even have friends who can help us get home now!" She waved expansively at the Pyrate band. "Told you that being a Pyrate Queen would come in handy someday."

Suzuko winced as her friend treated the Pyrates to one of her biggest and shiniest grins and Mangana treated her shoulder with local anaesthetic. "All's well? We just wiped out four Toho students - you blew three of our class to bits! And the other one -" she shuddered. "I don't know what happened to him. It looks like he ran up against another mech - there's bits of compound armour over there, that don't match his own suit. "

"Depleted Uranium and ceramite, too heavy for most walking mechs to carry." Guarez paused in the task of raking through the evidence with a detector and analyser. "He took a swing at it with his chainsword - broke two of the teeth. But there's no signs in the sand what it was - nothing except his own tracks." The former secret policeman frowned. "It's windy, but there should be some signs left."

"Whatever, I'm sure it was self-defence," Kazuko continued, looking over at the jaguar as she scuffed her combat flip-flops together carelessly. "Hey, and you're a Pyrate Queen, Suki, so they won't go telling the rest of the world about it. They're on your side, against the world. It's like you're all free masons, or enslaved plumbers or whatever." She pinched her snub nose and swallowed, glad that her hearing was returning, though from the sound a host of angry bees seemed to have taken up residence in her ears.

Suzuko's ears went down. True, one part of her registered - everything Kazuko had said was true. Gen, Yashi, Osamu and Satori, had come after her and her friends intent on exterminating them. She was, she registered, glad to be alive - and in the circumstances, there had been no real alternatives. She looked round at the party - Horst and Mangana, now satisfied with their initial first aid, sitting together quietly talking, looking up into each other's eyes. Mae, chatting with Kazuko now, as the big-eyed human described enthusiastically how well everything had worked - how the Zuse ballistic computer had held up marvellously, and not blown a single valve till three minutes after the action.

Her gaze swept round, and a wry smile twitched on the corner of her muzzle. There was Mariko with her lithe daughter, Dracaena's long tail draped cheerfully around her mother's neck like a furry scarf - and the big ram, Tava standing in the slick turret of the Stalin Three, the compound curve of its glacis plate brightly scarred by shrapnel.

She blinked, walking over to him and seeing through the open front hatch that the driver's seat was empty. "Didn't you say Broohilda and that new girl were here?"

Tava nodded, pointing towards the sea. "Broohilda - I've never seen her looking like that before. Jenni's with her - she said they'd got to be alone for awhile." The ram looked back along the beach, wanting to join them. "I suppose it's a Ewe thing."

Broohilda looked out over the breakers, Jenni's arm around her and her furless snout a wrinkled mass of misery. She shivered uncontrollably.

Jenni nodded, content to hold the goat-girl close in her firm woolly embrace. She stroked Broohilda's aubergine hued skin, caressing her soothingly. "Don't worry - we're all right. You helped get us through that. And nobody important hurt - Suzuko's in good hands, Mangana's taking care of her."

Broohilda looked at her, with a stare like the view down a flooded mineshaft. "But we killed them. Gen and his friends. We killed them all."

Jenni sighed. She closed her own eyes, but there were no tears in them. She suppressed a wriggle, feeling a surge of pleasure at the memory. She had seen everything, and her heart still raced in excitement. Her driver's periscope was slaved to Tava's own gun-sight, and she only wished there had been a recorder running. It had been a tricky shot - Suzuko and Mae had promptly dropped flat at the first warning burst of MG firing tracer aimed high over their heads. Then the field was clear - and without the artificial help of a computer, Tava had smoothly lined up the old Cyrillic engraved aiming grid on the seaward target - and his hard hoof tramped down hard on the firing pedal, unleashing eight million watts of raw kinetic energy.

Jenni shivered, almost to match Broohilda. The noise, she had been staggered at the noise, the slamming pressure-wave like standing too close to the platform when a bullet-train swept past at full speed - her ears were still ringing faintly, but she had no complaints. The auto-loader was right above her, its naked steel scissoring and sliding with a force that could (and sometimes had) rip an unwary gunner's arm straight off and ram it into the breach. She had shut down their engine and locked the suspension the second before, leaving her free to look around as the massive pneumatic arm slammed back and forward,

plucking a fresh, shiny round off the carousel and punching it into the hot, reeking breech with a thrill she had found visceral.

“Temari said something about it being a bad idea to replace a cheap and sturdy Ukrainian farm-boy as a loader with thousands of roubles’ worth of unreliable pneumatics – but I think they got it right,” Jenni murmured to herself reflectively. Through the periscope she had eagerly watched the fiery spark of tracer heading down range for nearly a second - and then the fierce yellow-red fire burst on the beach, the plumes of greasy black smoke rising eleven hundred metres away.

“We’ll do that again,” she promised, under her breath. She remembered the slamming impacts as incoming fragments slashed the manganese steel of their tank, and the following stillness as of a duellist realising that she had survived the brief dawn encounter and that the new morning was suddenly looking a thousand times as sweet as any before.

Broohilda looked up, her eyes wide in shock. Jenni’s own ears went flat for an instant, then slowly perked up again. “Broohilda - they were threatening you. You and our new flock - it was them or us, you have to remember that, always. Even feeling - how we feel - I’d do it again without a second’s hesitation, for you.”

Which, Jenni would tell herself for a long time after, was precisely true. How Broohilda or anyone else interpreted it was, of course, entirely up to them.

Suzuko sat on the rolled-up flotation skirt of Kazuko’s tank, poking a finger idly through one of the many rents that shrapnel and sparks had torn and burned in it. She looked up at Kazuko, who gave an embarrassed grin and waved an obviously inadequate repair kit. Suddenly Suzuko swarmed up the turret side and hugged the blonde human till Kazuko squealed in delighted protest.

Suzuko felt her ears blushing red. She looked around, at the three armoured vehicles, that had swum the Pacific with equipment meant for a hundred metres of coastal waters - for her. “Kaz. All of you. You came here, did all this - for me.”

Kazuko cocked her pumpkin head to one side, and scratched her neck idly. “Of course we did. You’re our friend, Suki. Wouldn’t you have done the same?”

“I would.” Suzuko felt her body relaxing, in the way it had not for a fortnight. She looked down at herself - her fur was bedraggled, and shedding heavily - her dosimeter had been one of the items Gen had confiscated after capturing her, and she hoped she had not gone through everything just to die of rad-sickness like most of the RoadRunner’s crew. “I’d do it in a second - after trying to think of some sane way to do it.”

“Yah!” Kazuko stuck her tongue out playfully. “We got here, didn’t we? And I bet nobody expected us to do it this way!”

“That’s true, that’s definitely truth.” Suddenly, Suzuko felt the edge of the Bulky Disc in her pocket reminding her of unfinished business. She pulled it out and looked at it as if it was a can of suspect meat that could be life-saving nourishment or pure nauseous horror. “Um - do you have a reader for this? It might be important - and some of it might be urgent. I got it from Lebeq, he was a Cybermancer. He could read the futures, and – he hasn’t been wrong yet”

“Sure!” Kazuko reached down, ejected the latest locally pirated release of ‘*Geisha Boy 3000 Interactive*’ from her player and slapped the new disc in, pulling her viewing helmet on as she leafed through the index.

Though her friend’s eyes were hidden by the mirror-fronted glasses, Suzuko saw her expression change as what was on the disc made its impact. Kazuko slowly slid the data goggles off and stared Suzuko in the face, her blue Anime eyes wider than ever.

“I think you should look at this,” she whispered. “It explains a lot. And – if Lebeq was right – you’re not the only Toho friends of ours that need saving right away – but tanks won’t help us with this one.”

Twenty minutes from touchdown, the Vicar relaxed in the spacious first-class lounge of the Hughes Hercules, his elegantly polished long boots reflecting the sparkling sunlight pouring in through the picture window. He gave a brief smile as Temari approached, the rat-girl presenting a selection of in-flight refreshments.

Looking around, his eyebrow raised at the sight of the bruised and torn figures of his Verger and

Professor Rabid, now having fought out their grievances and seeming on quite good terms. He nodded, his wolf muzzle wrinkling in nostalgia as he scanned the data bands and caught a broadcast show. “What goes away, comes back. In my Grandsire’s time, television shows had action heroes trying to persuade viewers that jumping around in costume high-kicking foes was the way to solve real-life problems. Then it became fashionable to sit down and discuss things amiably. Such a foolish thing, fashion.” He idly watched a debate broadcast from the Japanese Parliament – the opposition party’s general Secretary was debating his point in Sumo style against the Government’s fussy Economics minister who seemed to favour the style evolved through the ages by oriental waiters to tackle argumentative customers. *

“Ah. Most refreshing.” He selected a fine Lithuanian claret from the trolley and sipped it meditatively, considering it might very well be his last drink if what he feared was really active on New Tortuga. “Verger, Professor Rabid, they no doubt have something to suit you both. The brand of scrumpy cider you prefer, Verger, is in that quartz glass bottle – I suggest you partake before it eats its way out. And as for you ...”

Rabid-Sama’s eyes went wide, as he spotted a rusty tin on the trolley, snatched it up and read the hazard label. “Glue! Yeah!” He poured a generous double into a plastic bag, and looked around defensively. “What you lookin’ at? There’s nothing wrong with glue that a new liver and kidneys every few years can’t fix.” He grinned fiercely, checking the vintage on the tin – a good year, pre-dating several Health and Safety laws on dangerous solvents in household products.

The Vicar nodded pleasantly as the aged pit-bull sunk his nose into the bag and inhaled ecstatically. He respected folk of steadfast opinions, and indeed by his file Rabid-Sama’s faith had never died – though presumably it had felt rather unwell the day its owner saw the first thick, expensively produced and intellectually incisive coffee-table book of the Punk years.

“Enjoy it while you may – we have twenty minutes left to us.”

Captain “Redclaw” DeWaal stood on the deck of his ship *The Axebled*, frozen for a moment in a rare moment of indecision as a message from Captain Suzuko Hohki on the far side of the island reached him with the highest priority Jurgen’s suit could transmit. He made a rapid check on the data – yes, there was a Toho-registered Hughes Hercules within inner range of the island, and it had been communicating with the ClergySat network. There was a Vicar coming here, and he had a very good idea why.

“Well.” The fox’s tail drooped. “That’s torn it.” For an instant he considered the obvious approach, how many of the world’s most involved and intractable problems were solved – but blasting the flying boat and its crew out of the skies with a salvo of missiles would probably do more harm than good. He winced inwardly, recalling the famous saying “*A Pyrate is more than just a Pirate with a public-relations officer on board*” – certainly, that sort of move would wipe out a large chunk of his dearly maintained good reputation with the Brotherhood of the Coast. Nor would it really do him any good in the long-term – he knew what the Vicar was coming after, and another would very soon follow if the threat to the stability of the world was not removed, one way or another.

Suddenly, he heard an unusual noise from the poop deck, the sound of singing echoing from behind one of the close-quarter defence railgun turrets. Not that singing was uncommon aboard ship, especially recently – but the voice was that of Merton, the ship’s accountant, who was often short-listed for his country’s dourness team in the Olympics.

Intrigued, Redclaw strolled down the deck stairs, his onboard computer working busily on the bigger problem. He stopped, a wry smile wreathing his muzzle. “I might have known.”

Anne Pontephrigh was standing by the deck rail, eyes shining keenly while Merton finished the last steps of a hornpipe executed with more energy than skill. She clapped her paws together, her mouth wide open in a canine grin as the accountant came to a halt.

“Oh, good morning, Captain!” She smiled, curtsying. “Dick and Julian were busy, so I asked this sailor if he’d show me a jolly pirate dance. He does it so well!”

“I see,” Redclaw sketched a bow, inwardly smiling. Merton would usually be up in arms against anyone who called him a mere sailor – he had been the chief financial trouble-shooter of Mosachi Plc, one of the main firms in Kobe, till its staff mostly perished in a hostile take-over bid three years before. But Anne Pontephrigh was right in front of him, looking up beseechingly with a force of belief that was registering on certain specific and highly classified instruments halfway across the Pacific.

* The culinary-based version of Kung Fu, as threatened on many menus disguised as a dish: “Kung Po”.

“Please,” Anne asked sweetly, “sing another merry Pirate song for us. I’m sure you know lots of nice old ones.”

Merton stirred, the black-suited mole now wearing a three-cornered hat that somehow seemed to go quite well with his pinstripe banker’s suit. He cast his mind back, and his near-digital quality memory dredged up a song his grandfather had taught him, on the family frigate cruising outside Tokyo Bay:

“In days of old when ships were bold, just like the men who sailed ‘em
 And if folk showed us disrespect, we’d tie them up and flail them
 Often men of low degree, and often men of steel
 They’d make you walk the plank alone, or haul you round the keel
 Hoist the – Jolly Roger! Hoist the – Jolly Roger! Hoist the – Jolly Roger!
 It’s your money that we want, and your money we shall have!

Of all the Pyrates on the seas, the worst of them was Blackbeard
 So damnable a beast from hell, he was the one they most feared
 Any man who sailed with him, was taking quite a chance
 He’d hang them from the gallows, just to see if they could dance
 Hoist the – Jolly Roger! Hoist the – Jolly Roger! Hoist the – Jolly Roger!
 It’s your money that we want, and your money we shall have!
 A-harrrr!” *

Redclaw sighed, shaking his head as Merton swept along with more enthusiasm than he had shown in a year of voyaging. “Blackbeard – most feared. What a rhyme. You might get keelhaunched these days, just for that.” Patiently he waited till Merton finished and stood panting for breath. Looking round, he spotted the returning Pirate ship the Good Ship Venus, its pinkish hue a calculated insult to stealth systems – the only Jolly Roger he knew was a cabin-boy aboard that famous vessel. The post was always very keenly sought-after, he mused – just shows, it takes all sorts to make a world.

“Lady Anne,” Redclaw bowed. “We’re setting sail shortly – of course, you and your brothers are welcome aboard. I’ll tell them later – but here is what we’ll be doing – and I’d appreciate your ideas on it.”

Anne nodded vigorously, her ears perked up. “Of course! I’d be happy to lend a paw!”

“Thank you.” The fox felt his paw-pads sweating in worry as he checked the position of the incoming flying boat through his BUI – any minute now they’d see it with the naked eye. “This is what I want you to do.”

From a height of two thousand feet New Tortuga looked like a mostly eaten pie crust, an uneven rim of solid ground floating cast upon the waters. To the naked eye, it was just another tropical island, sitting peacefully under the streaming sun like any other. There were palm trees, white coral sand beaches and cheerful Natives down there – and heading in from the West, a flying boat heading in just as flying boats had for a century and more. The Natives were traditionally lightly dressed, none more lightly than the muscular polecat who ran screaming down the street waving a samurai sword above his head while Pirates cheered and tourist cameras snapped. It all looked perfectly normal.

The Vicar was looking down on the island as they made final approach, when something happened. A ripple in the air began as a small, translucent globe centred somewhere near the docks – and it blew apart, expanding exponentially as it washed out, fading at the far horizon and accelerating with a mind-numbing eruption of power as it washed across the whole planet.

“What the...” the wolf yelped, his instrument package suddenly growing scorching hot as circuits overloaded and burned out. He looked at the smouldering ruin, mind racing. Those things were designed with a safety factor of a thousand – he had seen an event unrivalled since the final seconds of the EC Empire. But looking down, the island seemed unchanged – although a fraction of that energy in another form would have left a hole in the ocean floor the size of the South Park impact crater.

None of the other passengers had seen it. He felt his fur bristling, and forced himself to stay calm. He would very soon be face to face with whatever had caused it, and then – one way or another, it would all be over.

Had the Hughes Hercules possessed windows in the floor, one minute later the Vicar could have looked straight down on the docks some two hundred feet below. Quite ordinary binoculars would have revealed a standard pirate ship – with a young canine girl in a red silk gown lying very still, being gently carried away on a stretcher.

* (“Jolly Roger”, © Adam & the Ants, 1980)

Half a mile away from the docks, Dick and Julian Pontephrigh paused as they emerged from one of the odd little shops of Pyrate Island, Jenks their butler laden with supplies.

Dick looked around, and scratched his head. "That's rum," he mused, as he turned to his brother. "Did you feel a sort of – strange feeling, in the midriff? Almost like when our aeroplane drops suddenly in a wind gust – sort of feels like your digestion drops a step behind."

His brother nodded thoughtfully. "Funny, Dick, I was just about to say much the same. It's the oddest thing. Must be a coincidence."

Dick's blocky form stiffened, his muzzle straining unconsciously as if his nose strained after the last departing waft of a fading scent. His eyes closed for a second – but his resistance to subtle nuances of psychic flow was almost absolute.

"Yes, a coincidence. That's what it was, one of those." With a cheerful wave forward to Jenks, they headed towards their camp by the airfield, where five neat white cotton bell-tents were pitched – one for the brothers, one for Anne, one shared by Georgina and Timmy, and one for Jenks. Strictly speaking, Dick mused, Timmy should be in one of the servant's tents – he would have to speak strictly with Georgina one of these days.

Suddenly he stopped – outside a café there was a public wall screen displaying local news, not particularly detailed but quite specific as to names and places. For the first time in his life, Dick Pontephrigh blinked in complete surprise as he read. "I say! Look at this! Those chums of ours from the Coll, someone's done for them!"

Julian's tail stiffened. "Surely not! Shiitake said he wouldn't be graduating till next year – can't go around getting killed like that. Smacks of poor planning."

Dick's expression changed. "Here – we have a murder mystery!" He proclaimed, eyes shining. "I know it's not a proper one like we were told about back home – no manor houses around here, and you can't have a really fashionable murder mystery without a manor house with a decent reputation for them. Still..." He smiled. "How's this for that big Adventure we were talking about?"

"Makes sense to me, Dick," Julian assented, his short tail wagging. "I'll bet we can solve it before teatime. Let's look for clues. How does it go?" He searched his memories of sitting on great-grandfather Pontephrigh's knee, while the ancient hound had passed on the essential social skills to the current generation.

"Let's see... I remember, I think." Dick rested in the shade of an armoured gazebo that looked out over the harbour. "*A properly arranged country house weekend should have one murder per eighty guests, in the social Season. Only suitably qualified victims – unless it's more than five years since they were first presented at Court, they're out of bounds.*" He paused. "*No need to involve the village constabulary, a proper house-party has enough magistrates and local squires on hand to handle everything discreetly. Besides, no mere tradesman working for money can compete with a dozen gifted amateurs working for the sport of it, using radical and eccentric methods not found in any official handbook.*"

"Yes, I think you've got it down exactly," Julian's jaws opened, panting in anticipation. "There was more though, wasn't there?"

"Oh yes – It's all coming back to me. I remember hearing about all sorts of methods the amateur detectives use - some who used folk arts taught them by grateful Ruthenian Gypsies they saved from the Bulgars, others who could work out the killer by measuring everyone's skull shape and spotting criminal types that way – splendid scientific stuff like that." He cleared his throat. "*The most popular place for the crime is the drawing-room, followed by the library and the trophy room – carpet-tiles may be acceptable décor in those rooms for ease of cleaning. After dinner on Sunday, the detectives gather in the great hall and announce the guilty party – who is rated by performance, a particularly good showing requiring wit, originality and preferably exotic props from far corners of the world, as may be found in display cases around the house ready for use. The more vigorous crimes are judged by their authors being sent off to the North-Western Frontier for a few years Imperial Service, while a particularly devious one is usually the start of a successful career in the Church.*"

Julian smiled. "That's the stuff! Now, where do we begin? A flatfooted constable would mess around with things like motive and opportunity – but we can do things properly." His gaze roamed the street, picking out a tourist in a Hawaiian shirt bright enough to force its owner to wear sunglasses at night. "What about him? With a shirt like that, he could be capable of anything."

"Yes, and his eyes are too close together," Dick agreed. "Let's follow him, and he'll meet up with the rest of the gang so we can overhear all their plans. This is more like it!"

The two canines stealthily began to stalk the loud-shirted target through the streets of New Port Royal – by yet another coincidence, heading almost straight towards the point where Suzuko and her party

were entering the town along the beach road. Julian followed his brother happily enough, but was conscious of a disturbing sensation in the back of his very solid mind – something was missing.

“Now, this is more my sort of place.” Rabid-Sama declared, clanking down the street four corners away from the Pontephrights, following the Vicar and the Verger as they explored silently. “Yeah! Look at that!” He waved at a riotous tavern, enjoying the sounds of chairs breaking and armoured figures clashing within. “Go on! Don’t be soft, have a fight!” His eyes gleamed brightly, as their course took them past the establishment where Mobile Dancers swung from the gantries supported by their straight-through cranial piercings. “Piercings too! That takes me back. Down my street, used to be, you couldn’t be seen dead without a railway spike driven clean through yer brain-stem.” He nodded curtly, ogling one of the Cyberpunkettes who had a dozen old T11 optical cables threading her skull.

“She pretty,” observed the verger, despite the poodle vixen’s empty stare.

“Pretty! Pretty vacant – yeah, but we don’t care.” Rabid-Sama agreed.

The Vicar nodded, distractedly, hand on the hilt of his black sword as they scanned the street. “A place of extremes, certainly. This island hosted a hidden training camp for sinister clowns, not five years ago. But even before we could act, the locals took care of that for us.” He fell silent.

“Arr. They be hurled into the mosh pits of eternal lamentation, every last baggy-trousered one of ’em,” the Verger confirmed unexpectedly. The stolid ox tossed his head. “It were a nest of them grease-painted ones, back home, started me for the job, with what they did.”

Rabid-Sama suppressed a snarl. There were very few things he respected, but Vicars and their kind had achievements that even he acknowledged. What those achievements actually were, was something most people tried to avoid ever discovering in detail – although on occasion Vicars had let curious members of the public follow them to see exactly what they did for a living. Being exposed to the things that Vicars had to see and the things they had to do had its price: few returned from such trips, and of those, most ended their days shielded behind the thousand tonne doors of a loony bin, a nine-sided spike of bismuth-coated steel piercing their brains and safely earthed four metres into fault-free granitic bedrock.

The Vicar stopped. “That way.” Although his more precise instruments had burned to a charred ruin after being exposed to such an Event that was changing the world somewhere – he could feel the presence he was seeking, like a blind man feels the direction of the sun by its heat.

That heat was fading, he told himself. It had been flaring and peaking like a bonfire kept alight by cups full of petrol being cast over it – and yet even as the flares grew larger, the overall trend was rapidly fading. He frowned, casting about at the junction between two equally promising streets – one more flare-up like the last one, and the world would be in serious danger. It was like – a massively complex program, where someone had decided to tinker with the code and make the constants variable to their whim. Past a certain point, the program simply ceased to run.

He gave a hard stare at two young canines who seemed to be giving a subtle and amusing parody of stealth, as they tiptoed exaggeratedly down the street. Mime-like behaviour was frowned upon in most parts of the world, for good reason – those who practised techniques which could plan and communicate literally unspeakable evil, generally had reasons for doing so.

Just then, he felt the signal fading. A quick check with the ClergySat network high in orbit confirmed that no vessels had left New Tortuga – which meant one thing. Whatever had been emitting such a signal, was doing it no more.

“I can see clearly now the rain has gone/ I can see all obstacles in my way...” Mae sang, perched on the turret of Kazuko’s Maus II as they ground into the main square of New Port Royal. “Suki! The psychic jamming’s stopped! I can use my powers properly now!”

“Good.” Suzuko sat next to her, the sun on her fur and the salt breeze clean in her nose, mixed with the diesel fumes and hot oil reek of the massed Maybach engines. She looked down at the Bulky Disc, extremely tempted to throw it down to be ground under the tracks, erasing knowledge that was probably too dangerous to know. She sighed, watching her friends laughing and joking. Things were looking up – but Mae was not the only one to see obstacles in her way. Suzuko’s seemed to look up like the main Himalayan range.

“My poor aircraft – gone. My class project – stranded, a long way from Toho, with a metre of track links and three suspension units smashed. And folk will come looking for Gen and the rest – what do we tell them?” Her tail drooped. Landing her Lippisch on a tidal shoal had been the only thing to do at the

time – but the next satellite sequence Horst had been able to scan in had showed it was there no longer.

Kazuko popped her head out of the driver's hatch as they halted, clad in a freshly laundered tank-top and tank-destroyer shorts. "Don't tell them anything, why should you? Your trouble, Suki, is you worry about things. They came here, and things happen to people here. Somebody just "disappeared" them – night and fog and all that stuff."

"Shiitake knows I was here," Suzuko pointed out. "He was captured – he'll tell everyone what happened when we get back."

"Could be a problem. But it's just his word against ours." Mae admitted, but her tail swung cheerfully. "He had you kidnapped, that's illegal too – I don't think he'll be too keen to say what he was doing here. What do you think, Mister Jurgen?" She turned to the Pyrate bear who stood on the running board, hanging onto the infantry handholds like a Tokyo tank commuter.

"I don't think he'll be a problem." Jurgen confirmed. "In fact, I'm sure of it." He flicked his suit microphone up, and spoke briefly in a language Suzuko just recognised as Romanesque. "He can make up for things by helping the Peruvians get home – they have some ideas of their own about that." He glanced over at the half dozen tired aircrew clinging to the running board of the Stalin 3 behind them.

"See? Come on, Suki – you're a Pyrate Queen, this is New Port Royal – why not have fun for once? We can get the tanks shipped back – this time next week they'll be in Toho, with some practical running time in the log books. It'll get us shedloads of points in the course" Kazuko looked around the square, now populated by a colourful crowd and mercifully short of unfriendly mechs aiming missiles at them. "We'll worry about the other stuff later – time to party." From one of the taverns whose clientele seemed to be hard-line Eco-warriors, their distinctive music could be just faintly heard. Ever mindful of noise pollution, the musicians singing Rhythm'n'Greens always played quietly while their audience danced their strange lumbering dance to the low-energy sound of four beats per minute.

A vixen tail bristled slightly as its owner followed Kazuko's gaze towards the roistering dens. "For you, it's always time to party." Suzuko observed, a little sourly.

Her friend looked up at her, the anime girl's large head cocked aside a little. "Well, it's a matter of making time. I get things done, but I enjoy myself too – what's the point in not having fun? Where does it get you?"

Suzuko was silent for a few seconds. She had to admit, Kazuko had a point. Some people seemed to positively enjoy gloom, but Suzuko was not one of them. But as she thought back, it was an awfully long time since she had dedicated any time or effort into simply having fun. Not that she equated fun with Kazuko's probable suggestions of heading into the nearest tavern and trying to drink the place dry before being gleefully carried off by the most adventurous rogue or roguish adventurer available for the night – although it had been not her but Rai Gosu who had first mockingly commented "*if you didn't throw up, it can't have been a good night out.*"

She shrugged, letting her breath out with a deep sigh. "All right – when we get back, everyone's going to believe that's what we've been doing anyway, no matter what we say. I'm with you."

"Great!" Shutting down the banks of engines as they parked tidily in the corner of the square, Kazuko climbed out of the driver's hatch, locked it and stretched as she stood balanced on the towing loop, a hoop of Krupp steel as thick as her wrist. "I'll be back in half an hour – got to make arrangements. Lots to do!" With that, she vanished into the crowd, her bobbing blonde mop of head-fur soon swallowed up in a sea of black tricorne hats and scarlet-spotted bandannas.

Mae slid up from the turret, wriggling luxuriously in the fresh air. "That's not a bad idea – we'll see if there's any of that nice grog left to drink, and I could use a decent meal. This Salmagundi's fine stuff – I'll see if I can get the recipe, I'm on kitchen duty next week." She looked up at Suzuko's horrified expression, and winked. "Only kidding! We'll get something decent, if we have to take the tanks out and fish the reef from them. Things are looking up now, don't you think?"

Just as Suzuko was about to hesitantly agree, things began to look down – like a mineshaft inspector, she told herself as her ears drooped. There was a familiar shout of "OI! F****N' OI!!" from the street behind her, and she turned around with an icy feeling running down her spine.

"Hello, Rabid-sama," she dipped her head respectfully, bowing to her tutor as the grizzled pit-bull shuffled towards her with the straps of his tartan trousers clanking. "This IS a surprise!"

Three streets away and four minutes later, another unexpected reunion was taking place. George and Timmy were heading out of one of the many gyms, panting and glowing from an hour's wrestling with some of the female Pyrates from the Spirit of Desolation.

George stopped, affectionately scratching Timmy behind the ears. “That was fun, wasn’t it, Timmy? And they liked you too – said you were nicely trained.” A far-away look came to her eyes. “One day we’ll meet Granita there, I’m sure – the staff said she comes here in the holidays sometimes, teaches modern dance.” Granita’s photograph hung on the hallway wall, listed as a qualified instructor for both folk and ballet style slam-dancing. Around her brawny neck was what looked like a small steel rosette, but was actually ballroom slam dancing’s highest award – the Iron Tutu, First Class, with crossed diadems and oak leaves.

Just then, her cousins came round the corner, sidling obtrusively. George suppressed a moan at the sight. “What ARE you doing? You look ridiculous.”

Dick grinned, his tail wagging happily. “What ho, Georgina! We’ve a mystery to solve! Someone’s done a super big murder, we’re looking for suspicious characters who might have done it. “

“They don’t have crimes around here,” George pointed out patiently. “Captain Akeritsu explained it to me - they do things differently on Pyrate Island.”

“Well, they certainly have police – though they’re very discreet, haven’t seen any since we found that treasure chest,” Julian chimed in. “But it’s those folk from the Coll who got done in, Rai and Matsu and their crowd. I bet it was the Bolshevists did it! We’ve looked and looked but we’ve not seen any of those,” he hesitated, then his eyes lit up. “Which proves ... which proves, they must have been hiding and lying in wait all the time.”

“Or the Neo-Bolshevists,” Dick mused. “Maybe they were working together! That’ll make it a criminal conspiracy for us to defeat – I say, this is a super Adventure, isn’t it? You can come along, Georgina, as long as you don’t get in the way or scream at the sights we’ll see.” He cast a speculative glance around. “We’ll look for a library. A public library should be big enough for lots of crimes, and it’ll have plenty of clues – books still open with pictures of deadly poisonous sea-shells, all that sort of thing.”

“And I suppose a tavern’s more or less a drawing-room,” Julian added excitedly. “We’ll have to get statements from all the witnesses, and get them to contradict each other – the one who makes the most mistakes is the guilty party. Then we follow them till they return to the scene of the crime, and that’ll prove it!”

George blinked. “There’s no mystery about THAT,” she said flatly. “Some of my Pyrate friends saw it on those instant newsreel things they have here. Rai and Gen and the rest all went to hunt down Suzuko, who we’ve been looking for. I’ve met her just round the corner yesterday, so that’s all solved. They tried to kill her – it was a fair fight, and they lost. Tank shells don’t take prisoners. They all got blown to bits.”

“And when we’ve found the Neo-Bolshevists, and the crypto-Bolshevists, and the para-Bolshevists, we’ll take them to the police and they’ll make them all confess to...” Dick slowed down like run-down clock as what George had said penetrated his sturdy brain. “Oh, come on, George, be serious. We don’t just meet people in the street if we’re looking for them – we rescue them from dungeons or shipwrecks. We’re Pontephrights, I mean! And as for two sets of Toho students fighting to the death – that’s ridiculous. They’re all in the same school! It’s unheard-of!”

“Fact,” George assured them. “It was on their local news, and newspapers don’t lie. Anyway – Rai’s bunch did kidnap Suzuko first, didn’t they? I don’t think folk round here have the sort of standards we’re used to.”

“But it just can’t be true.” Julian looked at his cousin, his eyes wide with horror. “People just don’t do that sort of thing. Why, that’d spoil the whole Adventure before it even started.” He looked around, slightly impatiently expecting the situation to resolve itself in the usual manner. Nothing happened. He waited another minute, his foot tapping, as nothing continued to happen.

George shrugged, hoisting her heavy kit bag on one shoulder, bought for her by the very friendly Captain Akeritsu from the local equivalent of Famous Army Stores, the Infamous Naval Chandlers.

“That’s the sort of folk we’re dealing with around here. Hadn’t you noticed?”

There was a silence. Dick’s tail drooped. “We can’t be having any of that nonsense,” he declared. “Well, that decidedly swings it. We’re going off with Captain Redclaw, and not going back to that Toho place. Can’t let these nice new Pirate hats go to waste, you know. The Captain’s a jolly decent sort, just needs a little polishing.”

“Right-o!” Julian’s own tail wagged, his expression going from shocked to elated in record time. “Never mind about that other thing, this must be the real Adventure we’re here for. Doesn’t do to get side-tracked.”

“After all, there isn’t even a proper manor-house around here, so it couldn’t have been much of an investigation anyway,” Dick confirmed. “Come along, Georgina – we sail on the tide, and it won’t do to

keep it waiting.”

Georgina nodded, motioning Timmy forward as she followed her cousins back towards the docks. She smiled, casting a glance back towards the gym and waving at the distant figure of one of the Pyrate girls emerging. As a base, New Tortuga certainly had its attractions.

“Yes, Timmy,” she patted the human who trotted beside her. “I think we’re going to like it here.”

Although Pyrate ships were not noted for having willing visitors onboard them, Captain DeWaal’s ship *The Axebled* was hosting two parties that lazy Sunday afternoon. The dapper fox bowed to the lean, angular Vicar who he had invited over after spotting him casting about the docks, evidently looking for something. “Feel free to search my vessel, Reverend. I’m sure you hunt in far stranger places than this at times. Any clue as to what caused these changes to New Tortuga – we’d all be pleased to know the answer to that. I’ve had to spend a fortune kitting-out my crew with frock coats - the price of lace has gone through the roof this week.” He dabbed at his cravat with a classically tailored glove – reprogramming lace looms to handle kevlar and ceramic fibre had taken New Tortuga’s artificers several days, and they were busy churning it out while the fashion boom lasted.

Jurgen looked up from the main deck, the bear’s muzzle contorted in worry. He took the steps up to the poopdeck two at a time despite his armour being powered off, and looked his Captain in the eye.

“Redclaw,” he whispered urgently, “Capt’n, you know who caused it – and how. You know what he’ll do when he finds her – Vicars can’t let that sort of power operate unchecked. She’s crew, you said – and she’s already brought us thousands of yen’s worth of treasure!”

“Wait.” Was all Redclaw would say. He relaxed, nonchalantly tuning his BUI to catch the local news – Smiley Don interviewing a representative of Fujisawa Heavy Industries, who was explaining that the day’s events could not have possibly happened in real life, and were only a statistical artefact.

Ten minutes later, the Vicar emerged from the main aft hatch with a baffled expression. He sketched a bow to the Captain and strode down the gangplank with a solidly built ox bodyguard behind him, and they resumed searching the docks.

Redclaw opened up one of the speaking tubes, their electronics-free Stealth technology a great boon for delicate work. “Sickbay, how’s our patient?”

A voice replied that Jurgen recognised as Mangana Kohaki, the black-haired Anime girl having presented her medical qualifications and insisted on looking after a fellow Toho student. “She’s just fast asleep, Captain. I’ve ran all the scans and can’t find anything wrong – it looks like she just fainted.”

“There.” Capping the tube shut, Redclaw strode over to the side of the deck and stood, looking out across the harbour and the reef to the limitless expanse of the Blue Pacific. He scratched between his ears, meditatively.

“There’s a story my Grandparents told me, an old Dutch tale passed down from very early times,” he began, looking his bluff, honest Bosun in the eyes. “Every year the folk who lived by the River would sacrifice to it, throwing in flowers and fruit and other things. And the spirit of the River was pleased, for on the first day of every year a great river-grey cow would walk up out of the waters, and stand on the village green, willing to be milked. The villagers knew that it would willingly fill any container, and their winter-time fare was rich with the cheese they made on that one day before the cow walked back to the river.”

He paused, looking around. “This might have gone on forever. But the times changed, and the newly made Bishop in the city heard about it. He took off his gold-stitched robes and put on a plain herdsman’s costume – and he was there on the day, to take care of the competition for his new cathedral. He milked the cow dry, draining it, for he milked it into a sieve that it could never fill. And after that the river spirit never sent it back to feed the people of the land.”

Jurgen might not have had half a kilogram of cybernetics hard-wired into his brain, but he was almost as quick as his Captain even without it. “You gave her a job she couldn’t do – and it blew her fuses. Why, Redclaw, why? She was our golden goose, you said so. And ... what did you get her to believe, for her talent to work on?”

The fox’s russet ear dipped. “Why? It wasn’t such a waste as you think. It would have happened soon anyway. I asked about her relatives – it wasn’t easy, but I think I’ve pieced together how their family talent behaves. It all fits the early psyker research on “poltergeists” – the power builds up over the years to a peak, then at about her age it can vanish almost overnight – especially as they get other interests. “His eyebrow raised, and his tail swished. “Did you ever watch an old incandescent light bulb, about to burn out? It’s always at its very brightest, just before it goes. As to ‘why now’, yes, I’d have liked her to have found some more treasure for us – but that wasn’t going to happen. Once that Vicar started homing in – if he’d spotted her power, then all the Pyrates on New Tortuga couldn’t have stopped him. You know what

they're like."

He smiled, his fur ruffling in the fresh breeze. "Do you subscribe to geological Worldnet channels, Jurgen? And I don't mean for likely strata of buried treasure."

The question took the bear by surprise. "No, Capt'n," he huffed. "I've other things to do."

"So have I, but I think you'll find this of interest. And it might answer your second question."

Redclaw patched his BUI into one of the display screens, and motioned Jurgen forward to look at it.

The bear blinked as he read. Shipping warnings were being issued for European waters of tsunamis - very small ones, but rippling out almost constantly across the North Sea. "Unprecedented seismic activity," he read out, "epicentred on the old shoreline of the Rhine delta, currently submerged under four metres of water at high tide. Dutch Geologists baffled at continuing steady up-thrust on previously unsuspected fault zones..." he stopped, and looked at Redclaw with a mixture of awe and admiration. "You didn't. She couldn't. Surely not."

"I did." A contented smile spread across the fox's features. "I told her how when this was all finished, I could retire a rich and respectable sea-captain. I told her how I could take this ship up the estuaries of my homeland, looking out over the tomato glasshouses and tulip fields - the landscape just as my Grandparents told me." His tail thrashed. "She was convinced. It'll happen! I don't ask for the tulip fields gratis, but given the land back my folk will plant them again soon enough." He paused. "Of course, I could have convinced her we'd find a billion yen in unmarked notes - but which do you think is better?"

Jurgen nodded, slowly. "Oh yes, Captain. I think she's certainly paid for her berth onboard. And for her brothers too. We're taking them along, then?" His ear dipped at the thought - but he reminded himself that the most surprising people turned out to have useful qualities. Looking across the harbour, the peach-coloured cruiser the Good Ship Venus was flawlessly docking - whatever else he thought of their crew, he had to admit they were top-rate at their profession, and their Chief Petty Officer was as petty as any of his rank in the world.

Redclaw nodded, relaxing. "I was going to take the whole Pontephright team anyway. Other ships pay a fortune for tactical computers, with all the best and latest military algorithms for stealth and surprise tactics. The trouble is, the opposition have them too. I'm inclined to see how the Pontephright brothers handle the planning - I expect they'll come up with schemes that no computer would ever believe, let alone have prepared a counter to. So far off into lateral thinking it wouldn't even show in their peripheral vision."

"Aye-aye, Capt'n!" Jurgen saluted, his eyes gleaming as he looked at his Captain with admiration. "We'd better get in some of those cheap cast-iron cannon from Amanda's Arms boutique, though. It'll save money with the Pontephrights onboard - otherwise they'd probably want to fire off 'twenty-one guided missile salutes', poor Merton would have a heart attack when he saw the bill from that." He sighed with relief. "We can cope with that. It's a good thing there won't be any more world-shifting Powers around, though - the treasure's good, but I couldn't cope with the strain."

"Not without a rest - I wouldn't ask anyone to. But still..." Redclaw turned away to look out over the open ocean. Anne had chatted happily about her family, and he had listened with both ears and his BUI very alert. Seven day's cruising Westwards would take them to the coast of Borneo, where there was a certain Plateau the Pontephrights called home. And in a few years, another Pontephright avalanche might well descend on an unsuspecting world - half a generation more advanced in their abilities, and this time there would be seven of them. Knowledge really was power, he reflected. Only a Cybermancer could have predicted such an event and be waiting with a plan to make the most of it - and New Tortuga had seen the end of the last of the Cybermancers.

Jurgen frowned. "Are you sure Anne won't suddenly get a final surge, before her power goes for good?" He looked back over the dock. "That vicar's still nosing around. It wouldn't take much to spot her at this range."

Redclaw was silent for a minute, and then a slow vulpine grin spread across his features, even as his BUI began to dial a certain contact number. "Well. If it's anything like the medical case studies on poltergeists - providing her with other interests should drain that battery flat. And I know just who can help us with that." He stretched, and there was a long minute of silence on the bridge.

"Oh well," Redclaw mused, saluting the current menaces to world stability as Dick, Julian and Georgina boarded the gangplank below, Timmy and Jenks bringing up the rear with the baggage. "It should keep life interesting. I wouldn't be a Pirate if I wasn't keen on Adventure too."

"Right! That's it for you lot - you're heading back to Toho, right now." Rabid-Sama fumed, his aged white

Mohican head-fur shaking with rage. “Them posh folk won’t be back – but you’re in class tomorrow at nine or else.” He looked around, grimacing as the errant students lined up and bowed a respectful nineteen degrees in unison.

“I don’t think your dress-sense pleased him much,” Suzuko whispered to Broohilda. The goat-girl was wearing a corporate logo shirt with the exhortation ‘*CONFORMITY – PLAY THE SYSTEM!*’ which she had borrowed from Mae.

“Sorry - I shouldn’t have lent it to you – it’s my sister’s. You know, the lawyer. I pinched it off her.” Mae’s whiskers drooped. Hers was not a happy family, but it was certainly a talented one. Her older sister had returned from overseas after a year of foreign exchange work proving her talents in a Greek divorce court, the current cutting edge of her profession. While Greek weddings had always involved a lot of joyously smashing sets of crockery, modern ecological imperatives had added an extra legal twist. Divorcing couples now needed teams of archaeologists who could find and reassemble all the pieces, as well as lawyers sharp enough to get the original china shop to accept it back for a refund.

“We’re missing one. Miss Kohaki I know about – she’s on the way here. It’s Miss Leclerc, as bloody usual.” Rabid-Sama glanced up at the side of The Axebled, and gave his usual one-fingered salute.

Anne Pontephrigh stood at the railing, next to a tall, stern-looking mink in a plain but exceptionally severe black police uniform. She was dressed in her scarlet gown, and though looking a little unsteady on her feet, her eyes shone brightly. “Happy travels!” She called down. “This is Chief Inspector Sugob, he’s coming along to keep us on the straight and narrow – and investigate anything that needs it.” She looked up at the impeccable figure shyly, but her tail wagged vigorously. “Don’t worry about us – we’ll be well taken care of.” The mink nodded gravely to the group on the dockside, his lithe frame poised like a honey-bronze statue.

Mae suppressed a chuckle, under Rabid-Sama’s withering gaze. “I bet you will. I hope you find all the – investigations – satisfactory,” she called up, as Mangana descended the gangplank.

“Just Miss Leclerc to go and – OI! You can’t bring that ‘ere!” Rabid-sama had spotted the final member of his class returning an hour late, and not alone. He had not seen her till she was across the street – her Toho “oak-leaf pattern” tank-top had been replaced by a local blue and white “willow pattern” suit, which perfectly blended in with the pagodas and delicate river bridges that some homesick oriental had built.

“He followed me home, Sir – can I keep him?” Kazuko gave a grin that could have punched great holes through a steeply angled ten-centimetre plate of bismuth-laden polycarbonate armour. She scratched between the ears of a long-eared grey quadruped. “He won’t be any trouble – he’s house-broken and trained and everything.”

Her new acquisition brayed, and nuzzled her happily with his long ears raised.

“NO!” Rabid-sama yelled. “No pets! Get rid of him, and get your arse on that Spruce Goose right now!”

“Aww. He’s very friendly. And he doesn’t seem to have an owner – he just found me in the street.” She slipped off the single ribbon she had looped around the sturdy, wiry-furred neck.

Mae cast an enquiring thought over – and smiled, intrigued. This was a figure who she had mentally “scanned” before, evidently a Genemeld quadruped whose intelligence and psychic powers were well disguised from inheriting his physical form entirely from his other parent. And he was very definitely what they would call an “entire”, she noted with amusement.

You’re one of those quads from the Greater Liechtenstein Reich? She cast a tight-beam to the equine’s mind, as he snuffled Kazuko goodbye. *You’re a long way from home. Not many of your type around these parts.*

You’d be surprised. Anyway – there’s more of us than you think. It’s something I’m working on. The black-tufted tail swished, as its owner trotted off towards the town centre. *Good to meet you – welcome back any time!* Fifty yards around the corner, a dishevelled-looking lion decided the apparently unprotected quadruped looked like a good free meal – and suddenly collapsed, holding his head screaming as he discovered that not all psykers were bipeds or had moral compulsions about what they did with other people’s minds.

Two minutes walk along the dock brought the Toho students to beaching slipways where flying boats and the occasional WIGEV pulled up. Their Tutor pointed towards the Hughes Hercules’ open cargo hold, while Satori and Temari were getting busy in the cockpit ready to start engines.

“Yes, you lot are travelling cargo.” Rabid-Sama’s grin was unpleasant. “All the trouble you put me to – we ain’t handing out complementary first-class tickets. Think of this as an uncomplimentary one.”

As the Toho crew trooped onto their flight home, on the far side of the Pacific a greatly relieved Peruvian crew was tearing up their one-way tickets to New Tortuga.

Patamikicoholan Evans looked up at the second Road Runner he had been slated to fly, as it was carefully separated from the heavy-lift booster that would have taken them on a ballistic trajectory half-way around the world that morning. He decided to keep the navigational briefing as a souvenir – it was not every day, thankfully, that you flew a fractional orbital dive-bombing run. The final stage was probably unique in manned flight, involving a projected touchdown nose-first at four kilometres a second, with the computers predicting the destination would be missing from future maps of the Pacific area. Sighing with relief, he looked past the cold steel of the nose to the stars, shining clear in the dry cold air of the Andes.

His tail-gunner, Mipanhochli Ap Rhys, leaned against the cold concrete of the blast deflector. “We were half an hour from launch,” he commented, rubbing his ears. “Another thirty minutes and we’d have been on the way – they could have cancelled the strike but it wouldn’t have made any difference – once those solid boosters light, you’re on the way.” He paused. “Why DID they cancel? Not that I’m sorry for the reprieve. But – it would have been something, to take a crack at one of those Japanese orbiting battlestations if they’d tried to stop us.”

“We wouldn’t have been easy to stop,” Patamikicoholan nodded. “No fuel or volatiles left onboard, the Road Runner unpressurised – you could punch holes in most of the fuselage and not hit anything important. Those are pulse lasers, they couldn’t cut us up - and the skin’s so thin, there’d be very little fragmentation from the laser blast.” Around his open space-suit collar he wore a silk flying-scarf that had wire stiffeners to help it “fly” properly in the vacuum. “As to why they cancelled – Launch control got a priority call from the big temple complex under Mount Patahoraxo – you could say they were ordered off by a Higher Authority.”

“Who, the Priests?”

Patamikicoholan grinned, shaking his head. “Oh no. A Much higher authority. You might say of all the reasons to cancel a launch, this was one NASA never had to deal with.”

Back at Toho Academy, Hiroshi Leclerc gave a whoop of joy as she looked up from the terminal of her remote impersonal computer. “They’re coming back! They’re all safe, and they’re coming back!”

“Is good!” Trish beamed, relaxing on the rolled futon of Hiroshi’s room, tired but contented. “We are saving them, yes-no?”

“Tricky one, that,” Hiroshi admitted. She cast an eye over the dismantled Device, which had shut itself down two hours before. “We can’t ever know, because if we ever found out what we’d done, we wouldn’t have, or something. Shobby said something about us having heavily weighted the probability over most of the alternate time-lines ... why after all these years can’t they get a nice straight common-sense answer out of quantum physics? Still, she’s a great maths brain.”

Trish nodded, happily. She wriggled inside her sailor-suit, and more so inside the suit underneath it. Somehow, she felt replete, satisfied – as if she had just enjoyed a really excellent home-style meal, of the sort she had been unable to find on the menu at Toho. She pulled out her “*1001 essential platitudes for everyday life*” pocket edition and randomly opened a page. “Brains are better than brawn”, she read, agreeing heartily. “Where Shobby gone to?”

“She went down to the crèche. I like it down there – let’s go and help her out!” Hiroshi stood, stretching, smoothing her first-year tie. “I hope you weren’t too disappointed last night, Trish - we only got two big gribbly monsters, not three like we planned. It’s like your book says – *‘there are no strangers, only friends we’ve not met before’*. They might be Unnameable Entities to other folk, but they’re Cyril and Tarquin to us now.” Her eyes widened. “Oh, yeah! Shobby said she was going to work out a new branch of math after tea – I said Cyril was nicest and more Eldritch, but you can’t really say how in three dimensions.” She scratched her head. “You know, after last night – I think I can see the fourth dimension just a little, if I squint.”

“I hope not.” Trish hastily smoothed down her suit, still a little embarrassed. Her Mother had sent her to what was supposed to be a nice respectable planet, and would not be too happy to find out it was becoming a popular destination for sex tourists. Even so, she had found it an interesting evening although the local drinks menu seemed a little arbitrary – white rum was a spirit, she reminded herself, but for some reason white spirit was not rum. “Shobby said she worried about the Singularity thing getting bigger – with all the energy we put into it.”

“Maybe we can get the shop to take it back,” Hiroshi offered as they strolled along the coral sand pathways towards the “town” by the harbour. She blinked, looking around. “Hey? Didn’t there used to be

that little shop here, with all the neat stuff in it?" She looked at the row of existing shops, surrounded by gardens with mature fruit trees. "It was right there," she pointed, baffled. Finding a smoking crater where a building had been was an everyday occurrence –but there was a regular row of trees, all established for years. "It's gone! And – it's even taken with it the place it was built on."

"That could make it hard, getting refunds," Trish agreed. "Do you think they heard us coming?" They strolled on, the early Autumn sun ruffling their fur, until they reached the crèche and heard the familiar chorus of happy and unhappy voices. Suddenly there was a strange lurching feeling, as if everything around them had instantly been squashed and stretched as if they were figures drawn on a rubber sheet.

"Gravity wave!" Hiroshi squealed happily. "At least, I think so. Let's wait and see. It's eight and a half minutes to the sun each way." She sat down on the West-facing grassy bank and looked out at the setting sun – sure enough, seventeen minutes later it flickered noticeably before resuming its multi-billion year slow burn. "When you see a falling star you should make a wish – apart from the wish not to get hit by space junk. When you see a flickering star, they say you can hear Nobel Prizes for Physics being written, if you listen hard enough."

"Fancy," Trish marvelled as she dusted off her pleated skirt and they walked in through the shattered remains of several design attempts at cub-proof doors.

Shobban was sitting on the floor, a big book in her hand, reading aloud to the usual assorted youngsters. The Toho crèche had a population reminiscent of a rain forest's ecosystem – full and varied, but one was never likely to see the same species mix on any two trips. She waved at Trish and Hiroshi, turning over the last page in the book.

"... and so it happened that after crossing the final mountain range they found at last the great, Eternal Fountain Of Filth," Shobban read on. "Tekeli-li was so thrilled he almost deliquesced away entirely at the sight, and he had to go away and bubble in peace for hours until he recovered. While he was busy, the Wizard returned. He had been busy dealing with the Paladins and Investigators who always were causing trouble for honest and devout Cultists, like a shadow on the edge of all the old stories. That night, he rested until Tekeli-li seethed out of the improvised pit of crawling, seething liquescent horror he had dug in his spare time.

"A nice night for it," The Wizard remarked conversationally. "What do you think of the stars?" Tekeli-li spread himself out in a big splodge, forming eyes at each corner just like a rangefinder as he looked up, measuring the angles between the Yhg and the Nhr. "The stars?" He fluted in mocking tones. "I suppose they're all right."

"Yes, indeed they are!" The Wizard smiled. He clapped his hands, and the twelve cultists appeared, all prepared and nicely dressed in their best robes. Such a party they had! They all danced round and round the Fountain, singing their special song and throwing in all sorts of things they had brought with them or captured along the way. Tekeli-li discovered then that despite what was written in the great cardboard book of Zoth, there really was a practical use for Sociologists and Economists. And then the Great Old Ones came down to join the party all the way from Outside, having heard the music and scented the nice party snacks that were cast into the fountain. And they ate up all the unnecessary people in the world and took up again their rightful rule and dominion of Earth, and everyone else was happy forever and ever after. The End."

Shobban smiled, closing the book and putting it down. "That's all, kits and pups. Bedtime for most of you! " There was a chorus of disappointed voices, but the wave of juvenile forms mostly washed towards the cots in the other room.

"That was a super story, Shobby!" Hiroshi smiled. "And it's good they get started on History so soon – it'll give them a big start in life."

"Well, I had to read them something," Shobban's ears went down. "After what happened to most of the toys."

Hiroshi flushed with embarrassment. "That wasn't my fault! You can't expect me to, like, read warning labels!"

Trish cast her an enquiring glance.

Shobban rolled her eyes. "Hiroshi's "contribution" to the Toybox was one of those modern autonomous toys, a Barbie doll – this was the Klaus Barbie model. It sized up all the other toys, and if it thought they were made out of inferior plastic, it sent them off to the plastics recycling bin." But then she smiled. "Still, it gave me an idea. I was a bit worried about what to do with that Singularity we used to power the Device. Did you notice the gravity wave awhile back? It made quite a splash - there'll be folk on Alpha Centauri spotting it washing past them five years from now."

"Oh, yeah," Hiroshi assented casually. "I meant to ask about that. Was that the singularity?"

“Right! It’s gone now. I gave it to the pups to play with – and you know, they really can break ANYTHING.”

“Well, I don’t care if it’s cliched, but I think the stars really ARE particularly right tonight.” Kazuko stretched, as she stood at midnight looking over the familiar skyline of Shahaguo Island, the Bridal Stones on the hilltop above silhouetted against a rising and excitingly gibbous moon. “Back again – and no casualties! I don’t count Gen’s lot – officially we don’t know whatever happened to them.”

“By the way – what happened to the Peruvians? Horst said he was arranging something with them. Are they going to be stuck on New Tortuga for the rest of their lives? They can’t go home, and I don’t think they’d really like to go to North Korea.” Tava put down the luggage he was carrying on the dockside, blinking in tiredness. “I read about that – they bought up the trademark of “The Happiest Place On Earth” – and they mean it. Every morning the State radio tells every citizen to “Have a Nice Day” – and plain-clothed police randomly stop folk in the street and measure the pleasure centres of their brains. You don’t get caught twice not having a nice day.”

Horst seemed to materialise from the darkness, the grey boar merging with the shadows. “I gave Shiitake and Podzu a chance to help them out - Captain Redclaw was going to make them walk the plank, in traditional style,” he said quietly. “It would have been such a waste of life, to feed them to sharks.”

Tava frowned. “Shiitake and his pals were going to kill US – and you let them come back here for a second try?” He looked over at Jenni, and Broohilda whose freshly oiled skin glistened like a black pearl in the moonlight. Jenni had not been his idea of the first ewe of his flock – but it had happened, and he had vowed to do whatever it took to protect them now.

“Oh no. I just didn’t waste anything. I gave them to the Peruvians – they set up and consecrated a temporary field altar to one of their gods, Mixecutli or somebody like that, and sacrificed them both – full ritual.” Horst shook his head. “It worked – I heard on the radio, Mixecutli appeared incarnate at his main temple near Machu Pichu and told the High Priests there to let the Road Runner’s crew come home as heroes. There’s no arguing with that.”

“Serves ‘em right. Back home we’d have tied them two to a creek bridge with Number Eight baling wire, and left ‘em for the eels.” Tava looked around. “I think you done right, there. Don’t tell Broohilda right away, she wouldn’t like it though.”

Horst shrugged. “She’s into religious tolerance though – and let’s face it, some Gods just like that sort of thing. You take their wages, they expect service.” He sighed. “I think Suzuko’s found that out the hard way.”

“What do you mean?” Tava looked at him. “I thought she in was one of the regular, undemanding religions – Broohilda said she’s got a Shinto shrine in her room. You don’t get much less demanding than that – don’t even have to give up meat on Fridays.” There had been several deities in evidence on New Tortuga, the harbour being overlooked by a neon-lit shrine featuring the familiar confidently grinning human with the pipe clenched between perfect teeth.

“Her family are – and so is she. But – she found out something, this trip. You’d better ask her about it.” Horst’s face lit up as Mangana emerged, carrying both her regular medical kit and a much older, brass-bound chest. “Mangana! Did you treat Suki?”

“I did. I’m hopeful.” Catching sight of Tava’s bemused face, she set the chest down and opened it to reveal carefully packed pill-boxes and glass bottles. “Anne gave these to me – she said they might help. I’ve tested some of the mixtures, and I’d be onto a world prize if I could reproduce the results without her.”

She drew out a glass bottle, with faded but highly lurid advertising claims. “This is a hundred and ten years old – it’s a Patent Medicine, that’s been in the Pontephrigh collection all this time. They never needed it – if you ask them, they’d tell you clean-living folk of good stock shouldn’t ever get ill. But this has come down from days before medicines had to do what the advertising claims on the label – and Anne’s sure it’ll help. She was sure it’d help even before she left here.” She turned the label to catch the moonlight. “Cures ... well, about fifty very different things, and – here’s the bottom line – *‘highly effective against all other disorders’*. There should be enough here to treat her radiation sickness. How about that?”

“Excellent!” Tava waved, as he joined Jenni and Broohilda and they made their tired way together, back up the moonlit road towards their dorms and a most welcome sleep.

Half an hour later, Suzuko stood with Mae and Kazuko in the porch of their dorm, watching the trees swaying in the night breeze. She sighed, relaxing. “Well, here we are again. Class on Monday – eight hours’ time. At least our tanks will be sent on, as soon as Captain Redclaw arranges heavy transport. Shouldn’t take too long.” She fell silent.

“Suzuko – what was on that disc? Did you have time to play it through?” Mae asked her, concern in her voice. Her friend had spent four hours looking through the Bulky Disc in growing dismay, before deliberately dropping it out of the window to be swallowed forever in the limitless Pacific.

“Yes, I did.” Suzuko’s ears drooped. She turned to the feline and the human girl, their night-wide eyes upon her. “Lebeq – he set down how he worked, how he measured the way the future changes. You’ve heard of a “weirdness magnet”? Let’s say he worked as a weirdness Magnetometer – and when he measured me, it went right off the scale.”

“Things do happen to you, Suki,” Kazuko agreed. “I’d like that sort of thing, myself.” She relaxed, a highly satisfied expression on her face. “What a trip. Back to normal now, though.”

“I’m afraid not.” Suzuko looked at both in turn. She fished in her pocket, and pulled out a pretty ribbon of some light hue that gleamed in the moonlight. “Umm – you know, I sort of agreed awhile ago to be the High Priestess of a Goddess ... it wasn’t something I had much choice over at the time. I don’t really like the idea – and I’ve not been doing any of my duties. That’s when things started to go wrong.” With a sigh, she fastened the ribbon on her ear, and forced a smile. “She’s so nice, though – I didn’t think she’d really mind. But it seems to be a sort of universal rule about annoying deities, no matter what she does or doesn’t do.”

“Kawaii!” Kazuko cheered, looking at the ribbon. “You know, you DO look better like that. Come along – we’ll get a good nights sleep then tomorrow we’ll start fresh and rested. You can get on with your studies and your duties too – we’ll all help! Come on, Mae, let’s get to bed. You’ve decided to straighten things out with your Goddess, you got back here alive and you’ll soon be well – what more could you want?”

“She’s right. Cheer up, Suki! You’ve got your friends and your health, and the term is young. There’s lots to do, and it ought to be fun. It’s not so bad once you face up to things. You’re a Pyrate Queen, and you’re respected for it – in the right circles. You’re a full Priestess, not just some part-time Pope or anything – you’re the Chosen of your Goddess.” Mae hesitated. “If you play your cards right, you can find some acolytes who really WANT the job – then you can hand it over to them, all square.”

“I suppose so.” Suzuko’s tail and ears rose, and she forced a ghost of a grin. “Anyway – that’s one less thing to worry about. Good night – as the Pontephrights would say, it’s been a smashing Adventure, at any rate. I’m just glad it’s all over.”

Mae laughed. “They’re never really over, you know. One thing leads to another. Still – that can wait till tomorrow.”

And with that, the lights went on in the dorm as the three friends came home.

EPILOGUE

But there was one thing they had forgotten about. Suzuko had been racking her brains all the trip back trying to think of what it was – as she sat in the hold of the Hughes Hercules again, she had been remembering the last time she had been there, arriving on New Tortuga in such very different circumstances. It was a voice, a face, seen just once onboard and then not again – one person not accounted for.

Yukio. They had forgotten Yukio. The sole survivor of his friends, the ginger feline reached the docks just in time to see the great six-engined flying boat heading out towards the harbour entrance, a minute too late.

He groaned, and sank to his knees on the cold, uncaring harbour as he watched his ticket home leaving without him. For most of the first week he had joined Matsu in sampling the local “narco-pops” – and after sampling a particularly virulent batch, he had been unconscious, forgotten in the back room of a Pyrate tavern for the crucial day when Suzuko had escaped. He had pieced together what had happened while his head cleared – and now he was sure he knew almost everything.

The slight figure stood looking out as the departing aircraft became a speck on the horizon. He was all alone in unfriendly territory, a long way from home. But still he stood.

“I’ll be back,” he vowed, facing into the setting sun, his school issue katana drawn and the red sunlight seeming to twinkle down its length like dripping blood. “How or when, I don’t know. But you’ll know it, Suzuko Hohki – I’ll be back!”

The End

