

Chapter Two

“Hooray for the beach !”

A loud, cheerful voice rang out as four canines raced out across the sands, bright sunshine searing down on them as they waded up to their tails, panting happily. “This IS a jolly spot, wouldn’t you say ?”

Dick Pontephrigh turned, nodding happily as he agreed with his brother Julian. “Rather. I’d say we’ve landed quite definitely on our feet here. Buck up, now, Georgina – I’m sure you’ll get along just splendidly here.”

“George, not Georgina,” snapped his cousin by reflex, her sturdy frame clad in shorts and a khaki bush vest. “Honestly, Dick – some of these classmates we’ve got are awfully odd.”

“Only to be expected, after all,” Anne cocked an ear, looking at her. “Our people have been up on the T’Tairri Plateau nearly a century. Imagine it – a hundred years, pretty much missed out on. Just the same as if when Great-Great Uncle Humphrey had first gone up the plateau, he’d found folk cast away since before Queen Victoria was crowned !”

“Rather odd, I must say.”, Julian confirmed, splashing the clear seawater over his bluff muzzle. All his family were of the bull terrier sort, chunky and powerful rather than elegant. “But whatever, I don’t think we could have done better. Fancy coming down after all this time, and being accepted just like that ! But then, this IS the place where folk of unusual backgrounds do end up. And we all qualified together. Hurrah for the Five!”

“Hurrah !” Came the shout from four throats. George waved to Timmy the Human, who was over on the beach by the picnic basket. “Good old Timmy. She understands every word you say, you know.”

Half an hours swimming and splashing cooled them thoroughly, and in order of age they padded out, shaking themselves dry.

“It’s a super picnic basket Jenks packed for us, isn’t it just ?” Dick trotted over to where Timmy was laying out a big check tablecloth. “Boiled eggs, cress and lettuce sandwiches, a great sticky plum cake, and lashings of pop to wash it all down with. Just like home.”

George looked thoughtful, brushing the sand out of her shorts as they dried. “I’m glad Jenks managed to find such decent grub, out here. When we came down off the plateau, I honestly thought our sandwiches would be the last home-cooked food we’d ever find. All that rice and such, in the native villages on the way to the coast. Ugh !”

“I should say. “ Dick nodded, then shrugged. “I say, that was quite an adventure, getting down – sometimes I didn’t think the glider was going to make it – but funny old uncle Crisp’s design held up a treat, took us eight thousand feet down to the jungle. Saved us a very decent hike down to the river, too. Twenty miles of rough jungle we flew over, unless my trigonometry lets me down.” They had taken a week to float down the jungle river on a homebuilt raft to the coast, while Jenks put his special talents to good use against various water predators. “And isn’t it a small world – just fancy, what they called the island where we met the Outside world.”

“Kirin Island, of all places !” George’s eyes were wide. “Of course, they did name it after the brewery who’d got the holiday resort there, but even so. Quite a coincidence.”

Lying back on the towel and letting the sun dry her fur, George thought back. The Plateau had been home for four generations of Pontephrighs, a great limestone island in the sky, its totally sheer sides holding aloft a pleasantly cool patch of land two by one-and-a-half miles. The edge had been utterly sheer, and none too stable – Sir Humphrey’s Scar was often pointed out, the place on the cliff where the route up had once been. But that was long gone, and until the building of the Glider, the Founding Families had been fairly contentedly colonising one end of the Plateau, and the Native Settlement occupied the other.

He waved as Timmy ran off, exploring as usual.

“And so this is what it’s like Outside ? Never thought to see it, myself.” Julian chimed in, brushing the sand out of his fur and rubbing dry with a big, coarse towel. “Bit different from all those hours we spent looking over the Edge, even when the mists cleared. Beastly weather down there, not like this. And nothing down there but jungle as far as the eye could see, apart from the Twin Spires, two miles away. Wonder if anyone’s ever going to climb those ? And we might as well have been all alone in the world – until folk started sending aeroplanes over.”

“Quite.” Dick frowned. It had been beastly bad luck, that their area had been SO isolated. By the time regular routes crossed that part of Borneo, they had progressed to flying propeller-less aeroplanes, thirty thousand feet over the Plateau, and rather hard to signal to. Thousands of feet below the Plateau was the rain forest, with an awful lot of rain clouds to feed it – and to hide the Plateau from below most days of the year.

“Still – it’s great to be able to play cricket against a proper team, and without losing the ball every time you hit a decent Boundary shot. I bet there’s simply heaps of cricket balls at the bottom of the Plateau back home !”

“Crikey, Dick ! I should just about say so ! And it’s splendid they play it over here – I’m sure they never used to.” Julian nodded, looking over towards the airstrip towards the cricket pitch. “Still – shouldn’t be Too surprised – Japan and England have always been friends, as far as I ever heard – though I’ve heard folk here mention there was some sort of bother in the 1940’s, that’s long past. They were in with us in the Great

War, that's what matters." The Pontephright's family histories were very clear on some subjects, though since leaving the Plateau, the siblings had found the opinions of the rest of the world to be oddly biased.

"Look, Anne!" George cried excitedly. "Timmy's come back. Good Timmy!" She bent down, eyes wide. "What's that? I think she wants us to follow her."

"Splendid notion," Dick agreed, while Anne repacked the hamper. "I bet she's just found all sorts of interesting things on this Island. Let's see what she's got for us this time."

The four Pontephrights hastily shook the sand out of their fur, slipped on their beach pumps and followed Timmy inland, over the beach road, to the start of the settlement by the harbour on Shahaguo Island's south side. Next to the main shopping area was a little corner shop that seemed to answer the descriptions passed down from their ancestors. It had a bulging bay window, with small square-paned glass panels, some of which were "bulls-eye" swellings – inside could be seen neat rows of jars and bottles, and racks of laden shelving stretching right up to the ceiling.

"Well, hurrah for Timmy – again." Anne looked thoughtful. "I say, I bet this is where Jenks gets the provisions in! Looks a super little place. Let's go and make our Introductions – I hope they've not sold out of ginger beer already."

"Better than that native pop the others were drinking at the party," George agreed. "I think there must have been something wrong with it – I only had six glasses, and my head went all woozy. Wonder if they drink it in England these days? "Absinthe Kvass" – funny foreign-sounding stuff, if you ask me."

"Well, you could ask that Granita, she seemed awfully pally with you, and she told me she'd been back there," Anne suggested. "Imagine! It'd be something to just be in the school sports team here, let alone World Champion at anything. And wrestling, of all things! A bit unladylike if you ask me – should suit you to a "T", though."

"Hmm." George's tail swished, trying to remember. Granita had been awfully friendly, though she had laughed rather rudely when George had pointed out she was every bit as good as a boy. In fact, though Granita had agreed enthusiastically, she had pointed out several of the male students and said something about "If you're only as good as Them, you'd not be up to much."

"Yes, I can just see that," Dick nodded. "Sounds like you've found some friends, George, I heard Granita saying all the big girls would be just lining up to meet you – or something like that. But enough of this jawing – let's go in."

They filed into the musty old shop, under the shade of its gambrel roof. A bell tinkled above the door, and in a few seconds a little old lady appeared behind the counter. Exactly how she appeared there, was hard to describe, but by the time the Five had looked around, there she was.

"And what can I do for you, dears?" She peered at them over bifocal glasses. "Be you strangers in these parts?"

Dick nodded briskly. "We're here at the Coll., Ma'am. Let's see.. "his eyes wandered around the shop. The general layout of it was familiar through ancestral tales, and he knew just what to order. "We'd like ice lollies, some of those big jawbreaker gobstoppers, and lashings of ginger beer!"

"Certainly, my dears.." The grey-haired feline shuffled over to the big jars of sweets, taking down the jar next to the one labelled "Spring Surprise". Oh – I'm afraid I'll have to order some more. One of the little worries of living on an island all the way out here, dears – it's so hard to get anything ordered in."

"Well, it looks simply splendid pop, anyway." Anne hefted one of the five-litre flagons. "One apiece, should last us till nearly teatime. And here's something for Timmy." She spotted a big decorative display of Pemmican, over by the door, next to the low-calorie mineral water. "Mustn't forget dear Timmy!" There had always been a Timmy in the last four generations, though sex and species had varied somewhat. Similarly, there had always been a group of Five keen-spirited youngsters in each generation, except the one generation when there had been Seven. But as Anne reminded herself, that was secret.

Just as Dick was paying for the snacks, the doorbell tinkled and two of the Native girls walked in, dressed in the neat uniform of the Coll. They were both vixens, but obviously not related – one had cranked legs and short head-fur, and the other had straight legs and reddish head-fur almost down to her tail-root.

The shopkeeper smiled sweetly. "Good afternoon, dearies. And what might you be wanting?"

The short-haired vixen looked worried, glancing around herself as she pulled out a long list. "Do you happen to have – a spare turret unit for an Alkett-werke built King Tiger? I was told you could order things."

The little old lady behind the counter threw up her hands in surprise. "Mercy me! And what would a nice young lady like you want with a thing like that?"

Suzuko, for it was she, winced. "I'm way behind with my Project – I need to buy in some spare parts. It's official Academy coursework, here's my Authorisation." She rummaged in her satchel, and pulled out a long parchment.

"Well now, deary ... I could look in the stockroom.." With that, the greying tortoiseshell vanished behind the counter for a minute, while strange sounds could be heard coming from some undefinable direction. At last, she reappeared, dusting her shawl down. "Porsche or Henschel design, deary?"

"Henschel! The Porsche's got a nasty shot-trap under the gun mantlet." Suzuko's ears rose. "Do you have the – L45 cannon? And the late-model commander's cupola?"

The shopkeeper pursed her lips. "We only have those on a Tuesday, dear. Unless – we just might have one in the back, but I fear it's not painted. Would that suit?"

Suzuko nodded, tail swishing. "I'll take it! That, a couple of crates of main gun and coaxial MG ammo, and lashings and lashings of "Zimmerit" anti-magnetic mine paste! Thank you!" She turned to her companion, who was looking around a display of cosmetics. There seemed to be a wide display of all the modern varieties, product of genetic technologies, which could engineer apple-scented shampoo and shampoo-flavoured apples. "Anything you want, Trish? Better get it now, it's one of those shops where things are never the same when you go back to them the day after."

Trish looked over the cosmetic fur treatments, variously labelled "Regular" or "Cruelty-free". She nodded, selecting a bottle of fur conditioner. "This one claims it's got 20 percent extra Cruelty for the same price – I'll have it."

"You seemed in a hurry," Trish commented, as they headed over towards the cafeteria. "There was a lot to see in that shop!"

Suzuko winced, and stopped in her tracks. "Trish. That was a grey-haired little old lady, with a shawl and bifocal glasses. She even had her hair up in a bun! Those are the most dangerous sort around – only butlers and vicars are worse. Maybe you've not seen the films – one arrives in some tiny village where nothing's happened in centuries, and soon folk are having to move the bodies with bulldozers. I'd FAR rather be in a room with drunken Mecha wearers spoiling for a brawl. Besides," – she hesitated. "When I said it was one of those shops, I meant – "One of THOSE Shops". It's not quite a fixture here – nobody seems to know when it arrived, or what was there before it. But I had to have the parts – I won't lose too many authenticity points buying it off the shelf, the design I'm building had a standard turret anyway."

Trish nodded, as they walked on. "I have class after lunch. This evening – I would like to work late in Heavy Engineering Labs. Do you have the keys?"

Suzuko blinked. "Well, yes. But you're only doing a split course in Historical Engineering – they won't give you any Practical work till the end of term. Aren't you doing maths mostly?"

Trish nodded happily. "Is exciting stuff!" Mathematical research at Toho was Interesting, though not without its hazards. Professor Brandon was here for a term, on sabbatical leave from Celaeno Gate College. Like most of his colleagues, he was a wild, roaring, swaggering two-fisted researcher who had fought with rivals out on Deadman's Curve, and thought nothing of wrestling Dragon Curves with his bare mind. "No, I want it for Social life. I want to learn to dance The Crusher, with the rest of them."

"Oh – a little battlesuit? Sure – but those are tricky to get right. I've used Mae's, and it's always going wrong. You've got to fit the control interfaces just right, you know." She paused. "Do you want help measuring yourself up for it?"

Trish's eyes widened, in surprise and a little shock. "Oh, thanks but No, Suki, definitely No." She cocked her head to one side. "You might say I know my figure well enough – I'm a rather strange shape, for this part of the world."

Suzuko looked down at Trish's straight, plantigrade gait. "I noticed." She blinked, her tail swishing a little in puzzlement. Trish. There was something definitely odd about the vixen that she couldn't quite place. Blue eyes rather than the standard vulpine green – that was one thing. Straight legs were a common enough variety for folk with Anime gene sets, though Trish had very little obvious Anime blood in her. The occasions when she had accidentally brushed her fur, coming through doorways and such – that was harder to explain. Possibly the fur conditioner might help with the rather odd coat texture – Suzuko had herself been bleached to Arctic Fox pattern once, but even that had not given her fur that felt like nylon.

Both noses twitched as they entered the downwind trail of the cafeteria. "Hungry?" Suzuko smiled, her ears perking up as they strolled in through the door. "You can get most things here. If you get a part-time job in the kitchens, you might even play around with the menus yourself. Get whatever ethnic food you like on the menu!"

"Oooohhhhh." Trish stopped stock-still, a strange expression on her muzzle. "I Can?" Her eyes glazed over, as if concentrating nostalgically. Taking the tray Suzuko offered, she walked almost mechanically down the line of servers. First was Mariko, the cheerful mouse waving to them from behind the salad bar – then a doe, a sheep, and two rabbits, that Suzuko vaguely knew by sight from the other courses. Trish looked at them fixedly, piling food onto her tray without really seeming to notice it.

Suzuko blinked, as Trish followed her to the table. "Are you really going to eat all that?"

Trish's gaze snapped down to the overflowing tray. "Oh! Am being sorry – mind was elsewhere." She cast a glance back towards the serving staff. "Do you know if they are – very intelligent?"

Suzuko frowned, one ear dipped. "Well – I only know Mariko, she's about top of her class. The others, I think are doing things like modern sociology, learning to convert vicious drug-frenzied street gangs into healthy urban cricket teams, and visa versa. But the entry exams are pretty fierce, to get here at all – unless you get a Toho Scholarship, that is."

Trish's eyes lit up, nodding. And she fell on the tray of food like partisans on a Eurocrat, devouring it at a rate that made two wolverines at the next table stand up and applaud.

That's another odd thing, Suzuko mused as she watched her new friend gulp food like fuel through a scramjet – she's the first of our sort I've met who seems to like salad.

They ate in silence, except for the scraping of plates. Suzuko shifted, restlessly as she finished her meal, looking around herself. Her combat Spork tapped on the table, its curved brain-scooping edge glittering in the sun as she tried to calculate how her course marks were adding up. "Not fast enough," she told herself, ears drooping. "Not nearly fast enough."

There was a quiet beeping, and she looked down to see a self-propelled Tamagotchi looking up with imploring eyes. Reaching down, she tickled its buttons, "feeding" it and letting it fall asleep. As her gaze swept around, she noticed Trish staring at the little virtual pet in amazement.

Suzuko's ears blushed. "I try to be kind to small mechanisms," she explained. "I know Kazuko says you should be firm but cruel, and Osamu takes them out on "Safety tests" to see how long they hold up against cyclotron beams – but I can't bring myself to do that."

"Is Compassionate!" Trish nodded. Her own watch beeped, and she frowned. "So sorry, am having to go for Maths class. We are having a lecture where Professor Brandon is speaking against Cosmic Censorship – he is saying mature Mathematicians should be able to look at Naked Singularities if they wish to. After that, am looking for evening job, several places to try."

"Have fun!" Suzuko waved as she departing vixen. She stood up herself, as she reminded herself there were ways of earning points for her course in a hurry. And with her marks at their present level, there was no time to waste in starting to earn them.

At the edge of the runway, two or three of the Historical Engineering Course's latest and greatest efforts could usually be seen inside high piled earth berms, their noses pointing straight towards Monster Island. The jungle-clad shores seemed closer some days than others, and today was almost lost in a dense sea haze.

Suzuko stepped out of the Ready Room; an undistinguished metal box dug in at the side of the airstrip's one runway, and yawned. She paused as she passed the nearest revetment, where Toemi's project sat on its chocks under the scorching sun.

"Toemi ! Time to change over !" She called, waving to the blonde-haired demigoddess in the Perspex nosecone of the Leduc 022. "You can give your legs and tentacles a stretch !"

There was an answering wave from the cramped, bullet-shaped cockpit. The Leduc was a first-generation ramjet from the 1955 course, its fuselage a smoothly stretched barrel-shape with the cockpit inside its cavernous engine inlet. The aircraft as a whole looked like a giant engine with minimal, straight wings – and indeed, most of the bulk was an engine that could punch it up to eighty thousand feet in two minutes.

The cockpit canopy slid forward, and Toemi slid lithely out. "Afternoon, Suki!" She greeted the vixen. "Not a lot happening. I shouldn't think we'll be flying today." She stretched, wrapping her tail around the curving canopy top as she balanced herself in the warm sunlight.

"That's a relief." Suzuko's ears rose. But then they fell again, as she looked out towards Monster Island. "Do you know, the JSDF just refused the Academy's funding request for a longer runway ? Said we don't need it like we used to

Toemi's glossy green tentacles waved angrily, their colour darkening. "Don't I know it ! And we needed those extra nine hundred and fifty metres ! A lot of folk who're building bigger aircraft were rather counting on that." She winced, thinking of the Miyasishchyeve M-50 strategic bomber currently half built in Number Three hangar. "And not everyone can launch from our catapult, or use RATO."

Suzuko nodded, waving as she rounded the corner into the next revetment. And she stopped, looking at her little run-around in pride and abject terror. "This certainly wouldn't pass the 1945 class authenticity exams now."

Her own aircraft had always looked dramatic. Pure delta wings on a smoothly tapered cylindrical body made the Lippisch N-13 look like a stylised arrowhead, the pilot sitting in the tail fin which rivalled the wing in size and matched it in shape. And though the original models had reached Mach 2 in wind tunnels in the spring of 1945, since passing her second-year exams Suzuko had been free to make some extensive modifications. Building in plywood and chipboard where others used stainless steel and titanium, was an interesting challenge for even a Toho Historical Engineer.

"At least I can take off without a catapult – that was a major pain in the tail, and I don't mean just the G forces." She stopped, and looked up at the tail fin towering over her. Well behind her (but not far enough) was a three thousand litre tank of hydrogen peroxide, the fuel of choice amongst the more gung-ho Anime pilots on the Historical Engineering degree. But that would power the Lippisch for about ten minutes as a pure rocket fighter: the hard work had been in the rest of the propulsion system.

Suzuko's ears seemed to be more down than up these days. "I hate High-test Peroxide," she reminded herself, "But I suppose I could do worse." Her friend Mariko was the longest-serving student at the Academy; having taken time off for Family reasons and working part-time courses, she was the only student who had been around when the 1925 class of Historical Engineering had been running. Then, the hangars had reeked of fabric

dope and castor-oil lubricant: the solvent dope got its users definitely happy, while the castor-oil aerosol flung from the leaky engines at least kept their bowels regular. Now, the 1955 class was happily throwing together triple-sonic Lockheed Rapiers and Avro Arrows burning borane “Zip fuel” – a direly inflammable fuel that was toxic enough for a World War One class chemical weapon.

Climbing up onto the wing, she unlocked the sharp “V” section canopy, and swung it with effort upward to slide above the cockpit. “Checklist ... I seem to spend half my life reading checklists these days. Ah ... here it is ...” Settling in the ejector seat, she wriggled her tail into its clipdown sleeve and pulled the safety belts round to lie loosely, as she prepared for the remote possibility of flight.

“Electric’s, check.” She flicked the master switches on, lights in the cockpit flashing red, then steadying to green as self-test routines completed. “Flight surfaces, check.” She craned her head around the open canopy as she pulled on rudder, spoilers and flaperons to check they moved on command. “Engine fuel, check ... four thousand two hundred litres heavy oil, three thousand litres T-stoff peroxide.” She winced as she thought of three tonnes of peroxide sitting a couple of tail-lengths behind her, having been exposed to its bleaching influence quite enough already. It had taken two terms’ growth to wholly get her fur colour back, and that had just been the vapour – flesh and tinder-dry wood burned equally enthusiastically in contact with the pure liquid. “Engine controls...” She hesitated. There was no easy way of testing the combined cycle engine she had built, without switching it on – and after a test run, the whole engine and its piping had to be painstakingly doused out to remove peroxide traces. “Engine external controls, to manual, and test.” Rising slightly in her seat, she saw the sharp inlet spike of the engine smoothly slide forward about half a metre, then return to takeoff position. “That works, anyway.”

There was a crackle in her headphones, and in obedient reflex, she nodded in reverence towards the control tower. “Miss Hohki, ready to launch. Do you have any air traffic expected ?”

“No, Suki,” She recognised Horst’s voice, and sighed in relief. “You relax – do you want the usual traffic relayed to you ?”

Suzuko nodded, then caught herself, a smile wreathing her reddish muzzle. “Please, Horst – I’ve no computer on this aircraft, there’s not a lot to do but listen to the radio.” She looked around, at the sparse plywood instrument panel. No radar either – being a rocket and ramjet aircraft, the Lippisch was definitely short of rotating parts to power a generator – and batteries were heavy. In flight, thermocouples sat in the white-hot afterburner and provided a steady flow of current as their other end warmed the fuel on its way to the engine, but on the ground .. ruefully, she shook her head.

“Patching you through now.” The boar flicked some switches on his own radar console, two hundred metres down the airfield, and Suzuko saw lights shining inside her helmet visor. “Hardly the music of the spheres – but it tells you things you are needing to know.”

Suzuko relaxed, wriggling down into her seat. The pressure suit was one thing she had invested heavily in: her Lippisch’s plywood cockpit was impossible to pressurise, and a high-altitude flight was as near full vacuum conditions as made no odds. Her helmet fitted comfortably, its toughened glass gold-mirrored on the outside and phosphor coated on the inside, where laser displays salvaged from an old games console gave her a basic head-up display.

“All set ? Here’s the link.” Horst’s voice came through.

For a second, nothing happened. But then the swirling patterns on her faceplate settled down, into moving lines and dots. The great Stealth Radar array that ran the full length of the runway fed into an old hacked copy of the SAGE ground defence system, that past students had rewritten to work on modern machines. And what it saw...

Suzuko seemed to float high above the Academy, as if she soared in some invisible balloon at the top of the atmosphere. But no sun or moon lit this landscape: the overall effect was that of a city at night, car headlamps cutting wide or narrow beams across the darkness. Toho itself was dark, except for a few dim glows where narrow-band radio transmitters pointed straight up to the satellites hovering twenty-two thousand miles above, relaying the island’s traffic.

Far out on the Northern horizon, was what looked like a city at night: a great confused glow of every colour showing where the Home Islands lay. Two giant pillars straddling it were the vast microwave power beams that fed the energy-hungry nation: the fraction of power they lost scattered in the atmosphere lit up the radio bands all across the western Pacific.

“And what’s ... that? Looks like the Kobe-Hong Kong route.” Suzuko nodded, concentrating on one moving white dot some two hundred nautical miles North. As she looked, the old game controller switched her headphones on. A steady, sobbing beat of a civilian radar on weather and collision watch, came faintly to her ears as the signal was translated into an audible tone.

“Sony RL 6790, same old thing.” She did not need to ask Horst to check the transponder for the aircraft type. This was something she heard passing by twenty times an hour, though few direct air routes went over Toho. Swinging her “gaze” South and East, she looked out into the silence and darkness of the Pacific Ocean.

That great expanse of water was wide and bare. But not entirely silent, when she strained to “look”, the twelve hundred metre antennae array now processing harder what few signals it found. Far away was a shipping lane bound for Australia, the deep slow booming of maritime radars echoing across as reflections and sidebands

skipped off the water. Further and further off, she caught a few strange flashes, like lightning through a distant fog bank. The tone was odd – nothing that she recognised immediately.

“Oh. But I HAVE.” Suzuko reminded herself. A year before, she had been at Kawajalain Atoll, picking up a cash payment for some friends, when that same odd tone had warbled in her ears. Her screen had tentatively suggested it as an old “Drill Scream” nav/bombing radar, presumably named after hearing a blunt drill bit trying to cut into hardened steel. There had been dozens of strange aircraft around there, even a Pirate carrier battlegroup, and she had never identified its owner.

Pulling out her log book, she carefully noted the event. And Suzuko sighed, as the signal faded and she settled in for another four hours sat in the cockpit. Some days, she reflected, it got simply dull around here.

“I’ll get you for that !” A heavy iron wok skimmed Kazuko Leclerc’s blonde mop of head-fur, and crashed off the wall next to the kitchen sink.

“Says you!” Kazuko gave her most irritating grin, picking up a large chopping-board and raising it as a shield against any more incoming objects. “Anyway – your brother said I could have a sandwich. Good stuff, this Tropical-strength Vegemite.”

“Half-Brother,” corrected the fuming ewe, looking at the scene, the kitchen of the dormitory block next to Kazuko’s own. The evidence was overwhelming – a loaf of pumpnickel, a carbide-tipped breadknife, and two jars of vegemite, scraped meticulously clean. “That was my supply for the term – you put it all in one snack ?”

“Sure !” Kazuko nodded, raising the board as one of the empty bottles splintered against it. “Usual specification, equal thicknesses of bread, spread and bread. Tasty stuff, too. You should get more of it in.” There was a second splintering crash. “Oh, and you ought to remember this is your kitchen you’re trashing.” Picking her way carefully across the debris-strewn floor, she headed out and back to her own block, waving the black-dripping half of the sandwich. “Now, if I’d made one of my inch-thick tomato ketchup efforts, you might have a reason to complain ... they’ve a pretty good spatter range”

The anime girl ducked out of sight, dropping the board thoughtfully outside the kitchen entrance, and beat a hasty retreat.

Jenni Maunatikka stood alone in the kitchen, her bar-pupilled eyes wide in rage. She stood barely one and a half metres tall, from her unshod hooves to her thatch of blonde head-fur. Her other fur was a tightly coiled, almost felt-like short coat of wool covering all except her naked forearms and legs from the hocks down. She caught a glimpse of herself in the kitchen mirror, and smiled ruefully as her pulse rate gradually slowed.

“Next batch I order in – I’d Love to see you trying to eat it, Miss saucer-eyes Leclerc ...” she addressed the mirror. Her short bob of tail twitched in annoyance, as she looked around under the sink for the dustpan and brush.

A few minutes later, she was sweeping up the last stray splinters when the door opened behind her. The footsteps were the distinctive click of hooves – she stopped for an instant, closing her eyes and sniffing delicately. Suddenly her black lop-ears perked up.

“Tava !” She whooped with glee, spinning round on the spot and leaping up to hug her half-brother. “Where’ve you been ?” She looked up at him, pressed tightly against his broad woollen chest. “I was worried!”

Tava smiled, a little embarrassed, picking one glossy black three-fingered hand from off his shoulder. “Well, we’re meant to choose a job, share out the small tasks around the island . Couldn’t take you with me – anyway, you’re looking for one too, aren’t you ?” He blinked, looking around at the disordered room. “Doing some redecorating ?”

Jenni’s nostrils flared a little. She breathed deeply, pressing her nose into Tava’s musky wool. “Oh – nothing I couldn’t handle. How’s the job-hunting going ? “

“Hmm ? Her half-brother looked distracted, rummaging through a satchel. “Oh – I’m working at the sick bay. They needed someone strong enough to hold down some of their patients – I lent a hand, they gave me the job. Funny thing – two students in the last couple of days, brought in with Diminished Sanity. Feline chap they brought in last night, he’d do nothing but cower in a corner with his hands over his eyes, screaming about something “Like a crab and an octopus and a helicopter all gone in together.” Poor bloke, nothing to do for him but wait till we get enough Points to give a transfusion.”

“Mmmm.” Jenni nodded, approvingly. “You’re Quite strong enough.” Her tail twitched at the scent. “I don’t think they’d find better. Certainly not a herbivore, and I’m told they don’t like fanatical carnivores in charge of wounded patients – they’ve had accidents that way.”

Tava nodded. “I’ve checked the rosters, we’re the only sheep on the island, apart from two old ewes on the Admin staff.” He stirred, pulling away slightly. “I suppose I’ll have to live with it. Now – sorry, Jenni, I’ve got some forms to fill in.” He gently disengaged, and left the room in an embarrassed rush.

Jenni smiled, a delicious shiver running through her. Since meeting her half-brother from the far side of the mountain a year ago, she had managed to follow him first out of the mountains, then through the qualifying exams to Toho. Both their families were Traditional, living high in the uplands – she had grown up with her Sire, her mother and the fourteen other “aunties” and their children. When her brothers and male cousins grew

mostly up, they would leave the flock and wander till they either attracted enough ewes for their own flock, or gave up and married outside their kind.

“Which,” Jenni mused, looking at the open door through which Tava had left, “Would be an AWFUL waste of ram.”

Across the island, evening light fell low on the great assembly shops and hangars. Classes had finished, but a few of the senior students were staying on to show the new arrivals the sights, and recruit for extra labour. At Toho, there had been a traditional shortage of staff willing to work on an island so regularly trampled – and though the Neighbours from the next island had been quiet for the past two terms, the tradition remained.

“And that’s the main fabrication shed, wood, metal and composite assemblies,” Toemi wound up, closing the door as she finished her tour. “It’s the only way we can actually build aircraft and such without a huge workforce – entirely automated modern machinery ! You can take any vehicle, or whatever, and reduce its components to a Template Spec for the computers – once we’ve full material and treatment details coded, our fabricators can turn them out at the cost of the material and energy.” Her thick tail swished, as she smiled at the two canines. “It’s very handy ! Given raw materials, we’re almost self-sufficient in basic goods here – and as the template files are distributed over the WorldNet, we can all keep up in Ques.”

“Ques ?” Julian Pontephrigh blinked, looking at the strange Native. Toemi was an Interesting girl, though rather coarse at times. He frowned – by all accounts, her Pater had been one of the Outer Gods, and her Mater a tea-house waitress – an awful scandal there, he assumed.

“Of course ! The very latest styles – by the time folk shipped them out to us from the Home Islands, they’d be hopelessly outdated. What did you think the opposite of Antiques was ?”

Dick hummed, looking around. “Well – we’re willing to look after these hangars, if that’s the job. We’re not exactly rolling in pounds and shillings, till the lawyers back home work out the Family fortune. So – we keep the hangars tidy, saves the aircraft eating stray nuts and bolts and getting engine indigestion, what ?”

Julian reluctantly picked up a yard brush. “What about the aircraft themselves ?”

Toemi waved one of her back tentacles nonchalantly around the hangar. “You’ve no need to worry about those, if you’re not on our course – just keep the place safe, stop folk welding old fuel tanks without draining them, or playing French “boule” with cluster bomblets. Nothing to it!”

“Good show!” Dick nodded vigorously, his eyes wide. “Of course we’ll do it! Sounds a piece of cake!” He looked around the echoing hangar, spotting a rack of spare RATO bottles with their arming wires dangling out on the floor. “Stuff like this? Looks like it needs moving out to the ordnance sheds, if it’s not in use.”

“That’s the spirit!” Toemi’s kangaroo-like tail slapped approvingly on the ground. “I’ll leave it up to you. Look after it!”

The two Pontephrighs watched her leave, then turned and nodded to each other. Julian put down the broom he had been wielding, and grimaced. “A bit “infra dig” for us, sweeping the floors and tidying spilled fuel. Can’t these folk afford servants? I mean, what is the point of all this wealth and technology if you can’t even hire a parlourmaid ?”

Dick smiled, his tail wagging. “We’ll get Timmy and Jenks on the job. Which’ll give us some time to get familiar with some of these fine craft.”

His brother’s ear dipped. He looked at the front row of the hangar, where the current class projects were in flight trials or final assembly. Though the course rules said nothing about what class of aircraft to build, most of the enthusiastic students had gone for sleek, needle-nosed interceptors, all polished steel and K-monel alloys. The roof lights cast jagged shadows on the floor of swept, cranked, clipped, saw-edged, dog-toothed, glittering wings of razor-blade thickness and actual razor sharpness. “Can’t say I fancy these, somehow,” he murmured. “Not pukka aeroplanes, to my way of thinking. Anyway, all these have owners, who wouldn’t care above half for us borrowing them.”

“I should say ! But you should look at the back row – there’s four abandoned ones, their builders left them behind when they finished an earlier class – either lost interest, or they couldn’t keep them back home. Just take a look over here.” He beckoned, ducking under the sharply swept leading edge of an Avro Arrow to stroll into the dim-lit shadows at the back of the hangar . There were four dust-sheeted forms, slumped forlornly in the corner unregarded. Striding forward, Dick swept the sheet off one side of the nearest survival from the 1935 class. “And what do you say about THIS ?”

Julian’s ears went right up. “Crikey !” He breathed. “This is more like it !”

Revealed in the dim light at the back of the hangar, was an aircraft as interesting in its way as any of the front row. It was quite small, with a high, plank-like wing carrying four suprisingly small engines equipped with two-bladed wooden airscrews.

Julian whistled. “Now, that’s more like an aeroplane should look ! Proper wood and canvas, just like our glider. What is it ?”

Dick squinted down at the unfamiliar controls of the databook he was carrying. “Not sure I’ve quite got the hang of this. But unless I miss my guess, it’s the prototype “Fleet Shadower”, designed to hang around for hours and keep an eye on battleships ... crew of three or four, and not too fast – a decent ninety miles an hour cruise, should be enough for anybody. What say we learn to fly it ?”

Back across the island, Anne Pontephrigh leaned over one of the inhabitants of Toho's well-populated crèche. She cooed sweetly, looking at the three fluffy balls of fur snuggling there in the blankets. "Aren't they just Adorable? Whose are they?"

Mariko smiled. "Those are Fujiko's latest. She picked up a nice New Year present for herself, wouldn't you say?" Looking round, the grey-furred mouse checked her own lithe half-draconic baby was curled up asleep. "Why don't you sing them a lullaby?"

Anne frowned, but nodded. "This is one that was passed down to us – it was in a book my great-great Grandmother had on the voyage out – all our family were brought up on it. Bending low, she began to croon softly to the cubs:

"Hush-a-bye Baby! Hush quite a lot!
Bad babies get rabies, and have to be shot!
So suck the right fingers, and dream the right dreams
And don't you wake up with *Psymbolical Pscreams* !" *

Mariko blinked. "I've never heard that one before. Is it Traditional where you come from?"

Anne smiled. "Grandmother told me it helped us avoid growing up to become Polymorphous Preverts. She never told us what one of those was, but I'm sure she was right to be against it."

A mouse-tail twitched in amusement. "All right ! You've got the job, Anne. I'm sure it'll be an education for you, too. Things have changed a bit since your ancestors left Europe."

"I fear so. I've been reading about it. In great-granduncle Pontephrigh's day, they used to hang criminals as a matter of principle – and there was no computer or credit card crime back then. Which just goes to show you!"

"Hmm. So, at least you've got a quiet job to look forward to here." Mariko's ears twitched as a sound reached her from the engine test-beds on the far side of the airfield. Where once the purring of rotary engines had soothed her charges to sleep, now she was discovering how rockets such as the Hawker Siddley Screamer got their name, even using the Academy's big "Detuner" water-cooled muffler. "I don't need the money, myself – but it's handy working here to look after little *Dracaena*." Her tail unconsciously swished towards her daughter.

"Oh!" Anne nodded wide eyes. "Everyone I've met says they need the money or the marks – are your Family rich?"

"Well ... you could say we're well off. The family firm just about cornered the Japanese market in Optional Oils." Seeing Anne's baffled stare, Mariko reached into her desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of perfume. "See what the active ingredients are, in any perfume?"

Anne peered at the fine print. "Water, alcohol, lauryl sulphate, and – oh, I see ! Essential oils."

Mariko grinned. "That's right. Optional oils are what's left over. Not as valuable, but there's an awful lot more of the stuff. Right – if that's all arranged, you can start work tomorrow night. See you then?"

"I should just say so! I'm sure I'll get on with the pups just swimmingly ! Till tomorrow, then?"

Mariko waved her new assistant farewell and sat down, feeling exhausted. Just as she was relaxing with a good book, the door opened again.

"Hidy, Suzuko !" Mariko rose, smiling. "I was afraid it was Anne coming back. Nice girl, but – hasn't really got the mental entry qualifications for the Rocket Science course. But come in – I hardly see you around here."

Suzuko nodded. "You could do worse than Anne, I'm told her brothers have been getting on rather too well with Gen and Yukio and that crowd. I wonder if it's something cultural ? Yukio's absurdly proud his family have never left their home island before."

Mariko grinned. "They've got something in common, all right – walking examples of what happens if your family marries nothing but first cousins for too many generations. Anne was asking me if they'd let her on the Cultural Hygiene course – you know, the one where you look at local beliefs and customs from round the world, and have to say why they're wrong. I had to disappoint her." She waved towards her charges. "At least, most folk round here have healthy wide interests, even if they can't manage as well as Toemi's mother."

Suzuko sighed, sitting down. She spotted what Mariko was reading, one of the latest generation of UnRomantic Fiction titles – unlike previous styles, the hero's gun constantly jammed (assuming he could find ammunition to fit), the heroine suffered constant headaches and unpleasant internal disorders, and everyone spent the final ten chapters dying of dysentery. "I'm worried about the news, Mariko – South America. I know there's no Citizens involved, but a lot of my friends are out there. You know Pathwan ? He's working full time on his offshore bank, last time I heard they were east of the Galapagos Islands."

"Ooh." Mariko's big ears dipped. "I was reading about that. It's hard to decide which side to support, neither are exactly governments you'd vote for. I'd vote for the Peruvians, myself – they didn't start it, and they're good devout Mythos worshippers. Unlike those Revivalist Aztecs running Mexico, they don't sacrifice folk just for the sake of it." She paused. "Unless it's Tuesday, of course."

Suzuko was silent for a minute. Mariko looked on, her whiskers twitching. For a vixen, her friend was quite outstandingly chaste. In fact, she mused, Suzuko and Kazuko between them had two average-sized libidos and two average helpings of common sense – just that the qualities were rather lopsidedly spread between the two friends. And a severe lack of money was another common factor, though from different causes; Kazuko went on spending sprees with whatever debit cards she could lay her hands on, while Suzuko managed to find herself saddled with huge bills for unexpected and unavoidable adventures. Mariko's own family had been wealthy for generations, since her great-grandmother had hit on the idea of doubling the active ingredient in the already popular Ylang perfume to create the best-selling Ylang-ylang (and generate more Optional Oils into the bargain.)

Mouse whiskers twitched. “You should go and see him, Suki. I know you need points for your coursework, but ... you spend far too much time thinking about machines. There's more to life than air inlet ramps and peroxide catalyst turbopumps. It's not as if you're one of the big-eyed type, who all want souped-up Convair B-58 Hustlers to fly at weekends just because they look cool.”

“I know. “ Suzuko's russet tail drooped. “But I'm so far behind – I have to spend most of my free time sitting on the flight line on Alert - it's all that keeps my marks up. Kaz keeps telling me I should date Rashke for a couple of days a month – Broohilda's happy with that. But I'm not. Rashke's not mine to borrow, and if I have to keep up with the Season Suppressants – I have to.”

Mariko winced. “You poor girl ! You'll do yourself some permanent damage, on Suppressants – they're only meant to cover a time or two, like exams. Even the military don't use them over and over – I know some women officers in the JSDF, they just ... try and make sure they get a few days leave at the right time. You wouldn't try and stay awake on sleep suppressants forever, now would you ?”

Suzuko's muzzle twisted in anguish. “I know, I know ! But what can I do ? I can't leave my work without a valid excuse, something that'll get me default marks. And – I tried it the first year, it doesn't suit me to just – let things happen, once a sixweek, with just a male who happens to Be there conveniently. There's no other foxes around this year – most of the canines don't seem to like me much, and I'd never ... just go with one to fill the need. Horst, and Rashke are already taken – Mangana and Broohilda are happy to lend them out to me, but I'm not.”

The mouse girl nodded, giving her friend a sympathetic hug. “You're definitely going to have to do something, Suki. Whatever chance you get, be sure you pounce on it.”

Suzuko's ears blushed. “Pounce on it ? If any chance of meeting Pathwan comes my way, it'll think an asteroid fell on it!”

In the gaggle of buildings clustered around the docks, a wide variety of services were on offer to folk with the cash or Academy credit points to pay for them. There were cheap food shops and general stores, a few eating-houses, and some other assorted enterprises. They had many things in common, working on Shahaguo Island – a cheerful approach to hardship, and a long string of rejections from every property insurance company. Lying in the main trail of footprints from Ogosowara Island to Tokyo had lasting effects.

“Well, this is an Academy-registered building, even if they don't own it.” Granita waved a meaty arm around the gymnasium. “Takes a lot of work, running it, keeping it clean! Wait till the weekend, and it's full of folk working – working hard. Sweat and fur flying in all directions. Oh, if you want this job – you'll have to really labour at it.”

Georgina Pontephrigh looked down at her new costume. It was modest, simple, but – definitely unfamiliar. Granita had taken her shopping that afternoon, just across the plaza, and picked out a pair of regulation shorts, extremely clinging in some elastic fabric, and a top to match. The taut-stretched fabric felt odd as she moved, almost ticklish. “I'll work hard ! It looks interesting.” She gazed around, taking in the various exercise machines and equipment. “How does this work ? I'm good with juggling Indian Clubs and the like, that's something my Family passed down. A healthy mind in a healthy body, and all that.”

Granita nodded, giving a pleased-sounding growl. “Quite right. We'll get you very healthy, round here. Try this for starters.” She gestured towards a padded weights bench. “Lie flat on that ... that's right. Now, let's start on the small weights.”

Looking on as the stocky canine strained, punching a light barbell up and down, Granita smiled. “That's the spirit. Once you've looked around the place a bit, you might enrol in some of the courses. “ She locked her hands together, flexing her muscles. “Other folk do gymnastics, and all that streamer-twirling stuff. I teach wrestling and unarmed combat – regulation or military Freestyle.”

“Freestyle ?” Georgina panted, resting the weight on her chest. Her shorts were riding up, but there was nothing she could do about that without breaking rhythm and getting off the bench. She wriggled, her ears blushing slightly as Granita looked her over with a smile on her rugged features.

“Freestyle. Can't do that in the Home Islands, folk complain about teaching killing blows, unless you're a registered Martial Artist or on a Game Show. I do Martial Arts, sorta collect them,” Granita nodded towards a row of plaques on the far wall by the office. “You'll like them, I'm sure. Very cultural, very refined – you can leave your opponent smeared all over the pavement like three tins of cheap pet food, and still be into Peace and Harmony officially.”

Georgina's ears twitched, as she started to lift the barbell again. "I'm not sure about ... learning foreign stuff. It's not really our cup of tea, you know. Do you have any European ones I could try?"

"Ohh ... funny you should mention that." Granita's club-tipped tail swished. "I'm qualified to teach the Welsh native one, Llap-goch, and a rather ethnic Northern English style you might find interesting. Should be quite up your street, eh? And the more you practice, the better you get – by the time you've finished here, you'll be safe anywhere in the world, which is more than can be said for your neighbours."

Georgina's eyes brightened, as she found her second wind and pushed the weights vigorously. By tradition, the Pontephrigh's family estate of Bellington Hall, had been a risky place to inhabit. Her great-great-great Uncle Bertie had decided to rationalise things, and relieved the library and drawing room of their secondary duties by building a specially darkened cypress grove next to the croquet court, for the murders. Their family's military tradition was heavily influenced by the alternatives to be found living at home: compared to the endless social rounds of house-parties and shooting-parties, a few years on the Somme or Passchendaele could heavily reduce your insurance premiums. "Jenks has ... been teaching me a few tricks," she panted. "He's ... very good, you know. Loves his work."

The half-gargoyle grinned, exposing quartz-sharp teeth. "Mmm. Maybe we'll wrestle sometime. I love my work too, you know. There's all sorts of – unexpected bonuses." She nodded, scenting Georgina's damp fur. "The harder you work, the more your body adapts to it. All sorts of Appetites get greater, and it's such fun slaking them."

"Ah ...", Georgina's nose twitched, as she put the barbells down after a few more minutes. "I see what you mean! I'm sure a few hours of this a night, would be quite a tonic. And couldn't I simply tear into a roast chicken or two!"

"That's the spirit," Granita grinned, clapping her new protégé on the back, feeling quite promising muscle under the fur. "Come on, now, I'll show you the rest of the facilities. I'm sure you could use a shower."

Georgina's tail wagged happily, and she nodded. Working at Toho, she told herself, promised to be FULL of new experiences!

As darkness fell, Mangana and Horst closed up the medical centre and headed home. Mangana double-checked everything: the windows were locked, the alarm set, and Osamu was safely locked in his straitjacket for the night. They had put him in the sensory deprivation tank, which was soundproof and prevented his screams disturbing the rest of the neighbourhood.

She yawned. "Quite a day! It's hard work, getting back into the swing of studying Arcaneology again after a summer like that." She and Horst had been working in the Home Islands as paramedics all Summer holiday, at a special trauma unit for Fashion Victims. Sometimes it had been a matter of tackling their patients in the street, and having to perform emergency amputations of forty-centimetre flared trousers or dangerously loud ties.

Horst nodded. "It is being difficult," he agreed, his tusks glistening in the light from the distant assembly building. The health centre was behind a substantial quarantine fence two hundred paces from any other building, just in case any of the micro-organisms being cultured in the Military Microbiology building ever decided to go exploring. "And indeed, is last time we are coming back from such a holiday." He looked up at the Autumn stars wheeling under the tropical skies, clear and sharp this far from Japan's bright skyglow.

"Mmm." Mangana kicked a pebble off the path into darkness. "It is, sure enough. Still, we'll be qualified Arcaneologists this time next year, pretty much able to name our fees, working for some deniable Agency or other. It's the big upcoming thing, ARCINT, Arcaneological Intelligence gathering." Looking around, her huge nocturnal eyes were at their fullest width in the dim light. "Thought of anyone we might apply to early? Next year, the rebuilt New Miskatonic in Bermuda, they're getting their first graduates out. Toho and Celaeno Gate won't have the monopoly any more."

They walked on a little, hand in paw. "I did see an advert, one of those anonymous ones, for a job in the Middle West," Mangana offered, "Not too sure who's hiring, but I know where it's from. The message transmission used that old Israeli coding protocol, the Protocols Of The Elders Of Zion." She frowned. "But then, I really don't think they'd like to read your resume, seeing the timeline you grew up in."

Horst shrugged. "Cannot be helped. But I am not going home, even if I could. Folk would not be happy back in the Furred Reich, to find out about us." He hugged Mangana, his grey fur sliding on her smooth skin, his triangular-tipped snout twitching as he scented her. "We will find somewhere."

Mangana nodded, looking around. Suddenly she frowned, shading her six-centimetre eyes against the glare of the distant runway lights. "What's that? Over there, Horst, by the Fabrication buildings. A sort of – glow. It's not on fire, is it?" She broke into a run. "Come on!"

The pair sprinted across the short grass, towards the buildings. As they neared them, Mangana's night-wide eyes spotted it more clearly, a strange glow coming from the windows. Not a reddish fire glow, she realised – this was a pale, shifting pale lambency like an Aurora Borealis, or the blueish Brehmsallung radiation from Nitamo's reactor project that heated the Academy swimming pool.

Just as they arrived at the doorway, the glow cut off, as if a switch had been thrown. “Door is unlocked,” Horst panted, cautiously opening it a crack. “Can scent hot machinery, ozone, and ... something else, chemical.” He frowned, his snout twitching. “I know it ! Is ceramic welding solvent, used on composite armour ! “

“Hello ?” Mangana called out, hitting the light switch. “Is anybody in there ?”

For a second there was silence, and then the sound as of things hastily and furtively being moved, and put away. Horst bristled, cautiously dropping into a half-crouch position, advancing towards the inner door with an almost silent stride.

“Hello! It is me !” Came a voice they recognised. Trish opened the door to the main fabrication shops, dressed in a bulky coverall and looking a little flustered. Behind her came the wafting scent of machine oil, and more of the pungent ceramic solvent. “Suzuko said it was all right to work in here tonight.” She dangled a ring of keys, in proof.

Mangana sighed in relief. “We were worried. We saw a strange sort of light in here.”

Trish’s mouth opened in surprise. “Ah.” She thought for a few seconds. “I was welding, and also ...” she looked around the room, taking it in. “I was using the computer, also. That must be it.”

Horst raised an eyebrow. “That was a strange sort of welding, like nothing I’ve seen since leaving my home time. It looked like the Vrill Energies at work. What are you making ?”

“Oh, Suzuko approved it. I’m making a small hardsuit, so I can take part in your exciting local folk dancing.” She paused. “The ones you can buy here, would not fit properly.”

Mangana looked around the room, noticing the scraps and offcuts of Chobham armour in the waste bins and the safety notices from an empty palette of depleted uranium plating. “Must be quite a suit – with those materials, you’re talking twenty centimetres minimum thickness. The sort of thing Suki’s Uncle keeps trying to sell the JSDF, though they always tell him where to stick it.” She smiled wryly, recalling the official report on the “Maxiforma 3000”, and the hideous cost overruns involved with getting the robot to transform convincingly into a harmless-looking school bus. The inventor had been trying to explain about the next series combining a squadron of them into one “much bigger, cooler-looking vehicle”, when the hastily summoned JSDF security had thrown him out again.

“I’d be interested to see it,” agreed Horst. “Where are you keeping it ?”

Trish blinked, embarrassed. “It’s already finished. It’s ... “ she gave a confused wave. “It’s around.”

Horst gave her a hard stare, then shook his head.

Mangana smiled. “Well, just be sure you tidy up and lock up when you leave tonight. You gave us quite a scare.” She patted Trish on the back, an expression of surprise flashing over her features. “Well – good night.”

Outside the building, Mangana looked up at her muscular mate, and together they turned to look at the closed doors, from where they could hear mechanical noises suggesting tinkering with large wrenches and Birmingham Screwdrivers *. “You know, Horst – there’s something definitely strange about our new vixen.”

Horst nodded. “So I thought. But what in particular ?”

Mangana’s eyes widened till they seemed in imminent danger of overlapping in the middle. “That was definitely full-spec Chobham composite armour she was welding together in there. Twenty centimetres thick, maybe thirty, and it looked like a few tonnes depleted Uranium lining behind it. Serious sized Mecha, we’re talking about.”

“I know the spec.” Horst’s ear twitched.

“Yes, I know you do,” Mangana looked up at him, eyes reflecting the stars in dozens of twinkling highlights. “But when I slapped her on the back, that coverall wasn’t big enough to hide even a regular bullet-proof vest – and she was certainly wearing some sort of hard armour under it ! Where could it fit ?”

Horst gave a long, slow nod. “It fits somewhere. You are right as usual – we have one VERY unusual dorm mate in this our final Autumn term.”

As Mangana switched out the lights and pressed close to her bristly mate, on the far side of the Pacific less pacific preparations were under way. Moonlight shone bright on the far side of the world, on a far-scattered constellation of three hundred Peruvian aircraft now spreading out to rendezvous points on waterways around the Americas. To the East of the Panama conflict, huge floatplanes touched down in the lee of Caribbean islands and coral keys, their long wings drooping, relaxing like tired shoulders as the water under the floats took up the burden. To the North, only a few scattered tribes of cannibal hillbillies looked up in awe at great shapes heading for wide rivers and the Great Lakes, out of radar range of the Japanese colonies. To the West – far out in the Pacific, the furthest-flung aircraft flew not in squadrons but alone, hidden in the vast expanse of ocean awaiting the message to return.

Moonlight glittered coldly on the sharp, thin wings and pointed noses that came, one by one, to point like arrowheads back towards the land of their manufacture, now threatened by an implacable foe. Like the sharks swimming endlessly below them, these lean predators never slept.

- Ten-pound lump hammers. Folk don’t mess around with fiddly “precision” Engineering in some parts of the world.

