

Chapter Three

Far out in the Pacific Ocean, two vessels rocked in the long mid-ocean swell, as isolated as astronauts bound only by their power and data connecting cables far above the planet. The scene would have appeared tranquil from a distance – but onboard it was a very different matter.

“They’re late!” Captain Mictikutili Evans snapped, looking out over the clear, unbroken horizon. “Bad enough we have to load up on the new equipment in mid-ocean – they at least ought to show up!”

Standing on the long, straight lower wing of the giant floatplane, Ensign Tktlohahn Davies glanced up at the clear blue skies. “Don’t like it, Cap’n,” he confided, “we’re sitting ducks out here. Any old weather satellite, anything with a radar can spot us out here.”

The captain nodded, curtly. He tugged on a loose strap of his pressure suit, pacing back and forwards along the long, slender lower wing. All across the Pacific, the Peruvian strike fleet was scattered, either flying low and slow on their long, albatross-like first stage wings, or tucked into the lee of sheltering coral islands. A few would be sitting next to tankers like his own ship – but that would be a hasty half-hour refuelling in the middle of the night, or under cloud cover – not stuck out all morning under the naked heavens.

Tktlohahn Davies waved dispiritedly across to the crew of the tanker, rolling in the swell some eighty metres upwind of them. It was a nondescript, Liberian-registered vessel, a standard liquid methane carrier of the kind that could be found chugging across any ocean. He doubted the crew were entirely happy about being caught in a compromising position, plugged into a strategic bomber of an embattled nation.

“But then,” he whispered to himself, “The minute they fuel us up, the fuel starts to boil off. Use it or lose it – and we’re not ready to roll yet.”

“Davies!” Came a call from the open fuselage hatch. “Come in here – a call just came in. We’re to offload our bomb load, abandon it if we have to – the tender’s due to meet us any time now. Best get fuelling!”

“Abandon it? “ He scrambled along the wing, acutely conscious of the kilometres-deep blue ocean just off the wing edge. “What’s wrong with what we’re carrying – have iron bombs gone out of fashion or something? “

Iktikmicanhi, the Third Flight Engineer, shook his head. “Something special – I don’t know what, but the order’s got “special handling instructions” and a sealed envelope to open in the Captain’s safe. Anyway, our Irons don’t cost too much, pig iron’s about as cheap as you can get. Still, it makes things easy to get supplies!”

The capybara nodded toward the tanker. “They could sail around any harbour in the world with our supplies on their deck, and nobody could stop them. Nothing illegal about half tonne solid iron darts, or methane fuel – but in our paws – look out, Mexis !”

Tktlohahn scrambled along the lower wing edge, ducking under the sharp, sixty-degree swept edge of the upper wing. Looking back, he watched the morning light play on the waters reflecting on the burnished steel wing underside, its clean seamless expanse unbroken by the tiniest flaw. The Kinkajou wriggled uncomfortably in his pressure suit, wishing the aircraft’s weight limits allowed for more changes of costume – the second crew shift were asleep right now, generally in their naked fur.

“Any news from home ?” He stuck his head in through the hatch, scenting the reek of oil, explosives and unwashed bodies. Faintly to his nose came the rotting-cabbage aroma of the tracer gas put in commercial methane, as the upper aircraft’s fuelling hoses were run out in readiness for action.

“Nothing good,” Ipicic, their priest, shook his head, his llama features twisting in disdain. “The heretics from the North are pushing down from Panama, our ground forces retreating “in good order”. Our tactical squadrons are tearing into them, but – they keep coming.”

“We should be out there, shouldn’t we Sir ?” Natahaho, the dayshift bombardier looked up anxiously from his planning chart. “There’s not a Mexi for a thousand kilometres, I’ll bet – and our ground troops need us in support!” The chinchilla’s red eyes gleamed in the lights from the screen of his laptop that doubled as the ship’s navigation system. “We could be over Panama in three hours at full burn, then”, he gave a chopping motion with one paw, and a whistling noise. “Twenty tonnes of cast iron, launched at over-target speed and accelerating down from ninety thousand feet – just point out what square you want rubbed off the map, and I’ll do the rest !”

“A good notion, Natahaho,” Ipicic whispered, a rare smile showing. “But we have our orders. Be sure our Command has a useful mission for us – and be sure you will find a use for your skills. We are fortunate to have so many crew who can read and write, on this vessel.”

Tktlohahn ducked under the great waveguide that ran the length of the ship, branching off to feed the twelve gun turrets – though “gun” was a bit of a misnomer, and the turrets were flush with the side of the ship. Swinging an external barrel by hand in a Mach Three airflow was really a non-starter, and ballistics tended to be difficult for a shell that might be travelling sideways through the air faster than its vector away from the muzzle. He stepped over Mixinec, the coyote ball-turret gunner already crouching down in his snug seat, and in a minute was at the entrance to the bomb bay.

“Prepare to unship the crew quarters,” he called out, sticking his head in through the hatch. “We’re loading up – we need the access,”

There came a muffled chorus of moans from the second shift – the second pilots and engineers had been up and about for an hour, but the gunners tended to sleep in. There was only room for one in each turret – if their bird ever fully went into action, whichever shift was nominally “off” would be on damage control and substituting for casualties. Providing they could still keep in the air at all ...

Just then, the ship’s lights flickered three times – the Alert signal that had the crew fumbling for their helmet jacks to plug in. Tktlohahn cursed, banging his head on the bomb bay entrance as he slapped the audio jack into the nearest socket. Captain Evans’ voice rang through, loud but tinny in the old earphones, setting neck fur trying to rise inside pressure suits all across the bridge.

“.... I repeat, we have gone to Code Red. As of now, consider us on countdown. As soon as fuelling’s finished, we’ll be starting all engines and heading in to target. We’re supposed to be taking on something special – but if the tender’s not in sight when we’re fuelled, we’re going to sock the Mexis with our irons, just like we practised.” There was a long, tense pause. “Take a good look at the scenery, folks – we’ve been hopping around for a year out here, but whatever happens – we’re not coming back.”

There was a loud splash from beneath them, as the crew quarters were uncoupled and fell into the ocean. A dozen sets of eyes watched it floating, still tethered to the left float as its absence freed up the great steel bomb bay doors to open. Tktlohahn’s tail drooped, mentally waving comfortable beds goodbye, even as he steeled himself for what was to come. Units stationed nearer home lived onboard accommodation ships, changing crews over twice a day – but this far out, their floatplane the “Spirit of 56” had to carry its own living quarters. Or it had done, until ten seconds earlier.

There was a silence, broken only by the distant slap of waves on the floats four metres beneath them, and the metallic crackling of contracting fuel tanks as the cryogenic methane filled them. Suddenly, there came a shout of “Ship ho!” from the mid-upper gunner, his turret giving the best view as the floatplane rolled on the Pacific swells. “I’m getting a transponder signal back off my gun dish,” came a tinny voice from the precarious-looking seat above their heads. “It’s our tender!”

Tktlohahn’s ears dipped wryly, as he began to crank down the bomb bay doors. He cast a glance at Iktikmicanhi, who was flicking through one of the flight manuals on emergency unloading at sea. “Well, it’s not Solstice time for awhile”, he grimaced, “But let’s see what sort of presents they’ve brought us !”

Dawn broke, the first Friday of the new term at Toho. From afar, a visitor out on an early-morning jog would have seen the dozen accommodation blocks to the south side of the airstrip beginning to stir with life.

Suzuko Hohki yawned, uncurling from her comfortable mattress on the floor. She slept as always in a big white T-shirt, long enough to resemble a mini-skirt of old. She shivered, stretching as she reached for her neo-Velcro™ Grooming Robe ® and shrugged it on, fastening the towelling belt tightly.

“The robe that brushes you as you work, rest and play,” she read the label, and looked out at a day of grey overcast. “Much good it’ll do me – I can’t wear it to work, I don’t get enough rest for it to do much of a job, and as for Play,” her ears dipped, as she looked over the clouded island, “the chance’d be a fine thing.”

Rising to her feet, she rolled up her mattress neatly and stowed it in one of the floor lockers. It was a narrow room, she mused, narrow but her home for two years. If anything, it resembled a fitted kitchen, with a continuous worktop at waist height running the full length of one side, with flush-fitting cupboards above and below. Pulling out a more conventional brush, she stood in front of the mirror and tidied up her sleep-tousled fur.

Just then, she heard a noise from the corridor outside – an oddly slow, ponderous liquid sound, as if heavy oil was sloshing back and forth in some great echoing fuel tank. She blinked, and opened the door into the corridor.

Her fur rose. The sound was coming from directly opposite, from Trish’s room. She knocked loudly. “Trish? Are you all right in there ?”

There was a pause, and the noise altered – a gurgling, splashing sound as if the heavy liquid was being poured into a container. “I am all right ! Just a second please – I’ll put something on.” It was Trish’s voice, sounding a little flustered, rather than alarmed. Half a minute later, there was the sound of bolts being drawn back, and Trish poked her snout around the door. “Good morning!”

“Good morning,” Suzuko bowed a few degrees. One ear dipped quizzically. “I – heard a noise. Are you sure you’re all right in there?”

Trish’s ears blushed. “Morning exercises. Am sorry, I’ll try and be quieter tomorrow. “

Suzuko nodded slowly. “That’s all right. I wouldn’t have disturbed you, but – it’s time for breakfast. I think we’ve all got classes first thing. “ Looking past Trish, she caught a glimpse in the mirror at the far end of the room – evidently her new neighbour did her exercises entirely in the fur. “Sorry to bother you.”

Trish bowed hurriedly, and closed the door. Suzuko shook her head, mystified, and went to make her morning bowl of rice porridge topped with nutritious dried prepared squid. Her mouth watered, not at that prospect, but at the delicious aroma of frying bacon wafting down the corridor.

“I might not be having a relaxing time,” she told herself, as she braced herself for whatever the new day had to throw at her, “but round here, a Fortean Time is easy to find.”

In the kitchen, Mangana and Kazuko were cheerfully squabbling as usual. Kazuko broke off, and waved happily. “Morning, Suki ! We’re doing breakfast – want a share of ours?”

Mangana sniffed, pulling out her databook. “You should watch your budget, Kazuko. It’s always the same – first week of the term, you’re buying in kilos of Turkish Delight and luxury chocolate – by the last month you’re down to eating Moldavian Disgust and Grinding Brutal Poverty margarine substitute.”

Suzuko hastily reached for her napkin before she drooled on the floor at the bacon aroma. “If you are, Kaz, I’ll share my supplies with you. I’ve got about ten kilos of dried squid, and some nice Chinese salted dry jellyfish.”

Mangana raises a black eyebrow. “Oh dear, Kaz. It might put you off a bit, eating things that look like your usual dates. She doesn’t eat things with tentacles, Suki – well, not in That way, at least.”

There was a howl of unconvincing protest, and a sound as of a large rubber mallet hitting something hard.

Suzuko sat down, smiling as she shook her head and helped herself to crisp bacon before it went cold. Sometimes, it was good to be back.

After a hastily swallowed breakfast in a kitchen that somehow looked like the aftermath of one of the fabled “martial Arts Duels” she had heard about, Trish hurried into class. The Phenomenology class was packed, and she only found her seat just as the lecturer arrived. The whole class respectfully rose, and bowed ten degrees. “Good morning, Rabid-sama,” they chorused dutifully, sitting down with attentive smiles.

In front of the class, an elderly pit-bull shuffled onto the dais. He was dressed in one of the Traditional costumes, that most of the class had only seen in films – a black jacket of real PVC, with rusting metal bits, and a faded set of square-patterned fabric trousers with what looked like climbing belts swinging from various points.

Rabid-sama snarled incoherently, slouching into a chair. “Right, you wimps. Phenomenology. You’re s’posed to learn it, I’m s’posed to teach it. What is it ? Starters – you can say it’s the science of asking a good question.”

Trish put her hand up. “What is a good question, Rabid-sama ?”

The elderly professor looked at her as if she had crawled from under a rock. “That is.”

Trish blinked, confused. “So what is being a good answer ?”

Rabid-sama’s snout twisted derisively. “This is.”

Trish shut up, and shuffled through her notes as the class swung into its stride. Though a confusing course, she had read that there was a very experienced staff teaching it – Rabid-sama was a classical Earth type called a “punk”, a belief he had held unswervingly for half a century. He still sported a splendid vertical plume of head-fur, but these days no longer had to artificially bleach it white.

As the hour progressed, Trish’s notebook filled up. At last, Rabid-sama threw his pen down on the floor, and stood up. “Gods, I’m Bored,” he spat. “Just look at you – bunch of sheep.”

Trish’s eyes widened, flicking through the species index in the back of the book, and not spotting any classmates that matched “Sheepie!” in the spotting guide. She frowned.

Rabid-sama thumbed his nose at them. “Now, in my day, young folk hated Authority – what’s happened to you all ? You all want to grow up to be Quantity Surveyors, Doctors, Firemen, and socially useful clones like that. Paid-up members of the Nowhere League. You ought to be free-spirited Rebels at your age”

On the front row a Siamese stood up and bowed respectfully. “Hai, Rabid-sama ! We will elect steering teams and committees, and work on it day and night ! By next week, we will all be up to fullest Bromley Contingent Standard, exact in tiniest details!”

Rabid-sama rolled his bloodshot eyes in exasperation. “That – Is – Not – The- POINT! “ He growled, gave the class a vigorous gesture Trish didn’t recognise, and stomped out, the class standing up and applauding politely behind him.

“He’s very good, isn’t he ?” Trish’s neighbour, a vampire bat wearing an “Invite a Vegan for Dinner” shirt, hiked up his wings in appreciation. “But he’s hard to please. Last term, the class before us gave him a mass formation James Dean impersonation, wonderfully choreographed. But he was sick all over them. It’s not every lecturer who’s multi-skilled like that – there’s only two Universities that do courses in Projectile Vomiting, and they’re both down in Australia.”

“Mmm.” Trish nodded, checking her guidebook’s section on musical styles. There were a few entries on Guitar Heroes, Ukelele arch-Villains, and the like – but very little applicable to Toho. One of the references did point out that the instruments used in the current “Alpenrock” style used extensive aerospace technology, sometimes being scaled down to use as satellite boosters. “I’ll have to do some background research on that lecture.”

The bat nodded. “Oh, he’s brilliant. I’d never have managed to put two and two together the way he does – I’d seen on my Grandfather’s tapes, that Saint Sid of Vicious wrote the track “Something Else” – and Eddie

Cochran somehow retrospectively pirated it twenty tears earlier – but I hadn't taken the next step. Proves there was working time travel available as early as the 1970's, beyond any doubt!" He waved, and headed out with the rest of the crowd. Trish was left looking through her notes, trying to make sense of the section on "Collateral Thinking – beats Lateral any day."

Just then, someone tapped her on her shoulder, with a cheerful "Konichi-Waaa!" Trish turned, to see a figure she recognised – one of those who had been in Mae's group being shown around the Academy on the first day. She was obviously a Citizen of the Home Islands, to judge from the stylish trench mortar slung over her back like the samurai swords some other students carried in class.

"Hidy!" The new arrival waved, eyes lighting up. "I'm Hiroshi – you're in the same block as my sister Kazuko, aren't you?"

Trish blinked. There was a definite family resemblance, as she studied the Anime girl. Hiroshi was shorter than her sister, with even longer legs and bigger eyes on scale, and absolutely silver-white head fur worn in a nodding bob cut. Huge pale blue eyes blinkblinked, highlights sparkling like pools of mercury.

Trish nodded, bowing slightly. "Yes – I'm in the building. I haven't seen you over there, though."

"Oh. She hasn't invited me over yet." Her eyes misted over. "It was going to be a big surprise for her, me turning up – I wasn't planned to get here for a couple of years."

"You do look – young to qualify," Trish checked her pan-species mammalian recognition chart. "How did you manage it?"

Hiroshi gave an alarming grin that had Trish rethinking her ideas about human jaw structure. "Read this! It's what my old school wrote about me. Neat?"

Trish took the proffered printout, and looked it over. "This student," she read, "must in any circumstances be trusted with any hazardous items. She can be left alone without causing extreme hazard to all around her. I can in any conceivable circumstances recommend her for a placement at Toho Academy, or anywhere else except the far side of Mars – signed, Principal, Tomobiki prep school, signature squiggle." Her tail flicked. "It sounds good, certainly. Are you sure you're Kazuko's sister?"

Hiroshi giggled. "Oh yes. She's good with computers, same as me. I deleted the word "not" three times from the original document before it got to Toho." Suddenly her face fell. "You don't think she's worried about me being here? She knows the – the full set of facts, you see."

Trish shook her head, gesturing vaguely towards the far end of the runway, where Kazuko's rather modified Bachem Natter was standing on its launch rails. The fuselage had been stretched by three metres, the chipboard nosecone reinforced against atmospheric re-entry stresses, and with a big cluster of solid fuel boosters and a dashing set of go-faster stripes, the little interceptor now made sub-orbital hops. "I don't think Kazuko worries about things like that," she opined, "In fact – I don't think she worries about things, at all."

"It's OK, she's busy talking to Trish," Mae nodded to a certain elder sister, having psionically scanned the lecture theatre they were hurrying past. "Come on – you can't avoid her forever, you know. What's wrong with her anyway? Looks cute enough, for a human."

Kazuko winced, breaking into a trot till they were out into the open air again. "She wasn't supposed to be here till I'd gone. I'll bet she's forged her age again on the documents – you can't trust her on that."

"Or you either," Mae purred, smiling, her whiskers twitching. "I seem to remember a few little insurance claims on a policy about being *"Dragged off and ravished in distant dimensions by Abnormal Entities, and made late for Monday classes."* And I know as a solid fact, Kaz, there's no insurance company on the planet that'd insure you for that, under your real name."

Kazuko's eyes grew misty for a moment. "I've hardly seen Hiroshi in five years – well, about five weeks total in all that time. Our holidays and things just never overlapped. I always just thought of her as an excessively chibi kid, still worried about spiders in the bath and monsters under the bed. I knew she'd have grown, of course, but ..."

Mae's ears perked up. She risked a friendly mental probe, and laughed. "Oh yes. I see your problem. She doesn't disapprove of monsters under the bed, any more. In fact, she's going to be attracting all the major Things and Entities in the area, that's what you're worried about." She shook her head slowly. "It had to happen, Kaz. If it weren't her, it'd have been someone else after your record. "She cocked her head to one side. "By the way, isn't "Hiroshi" a boy's name?"

It was Kazuko's turn to grin. "Oh yes, blame Father for that. He's French, you know – very stubborn. My parents agreed to alternate in choosing names, Mother got to go first, she named me after an internationally Infamous singer, pre-Millennium. Father chose Hiroshi's name, after the prettiest girl in the village."

"And?" Mae prompted.

"Oh. Well, Father wasn't too good at spotting some of our local genetic variants. Prettiest girl in the village, everyone else knew was a "bishonen" – actually a boy, but you really couldn't tell. We just assumed Father had a

good reason for choosing the name – it was too late after the naming ceremony, and like I say, he could raise Stubbornness to sell for export.”

The Psychic Kitten’s tail drooped a little, her eyes suddenly distant. “At least you’ve GOT younger siblings. I certainly haven’t.”

Kazuko nodded. “It’s really weird, the way folk back home look on Psionics the way they’d look at an extra head – but all sorts of – Powers, they don’t mind at all. Still, you’ve got an older Sister, haven’t you ?”

Mae sniffed. “Oh, yes. My big sister Akane. She’s never let me forget it. I’m a walking taint on the feline genome, blight of the family, it’s my fault my parents aren’t allowed any more kittens. Still – she can’t talk about a shame on the family, she’s a Creative Accountant, only works for Evil Mega-Corporations.”

“I’ve heard of those ! They actually publicly register themselves as Evil Corporations, get some sort of tax breaks. It’s very popular.” Kazuko kicked a stray pebble, as they strolled along the crushed coral path between the lecture theatres and their dormitory block. “Specialise in hostile take-over bids, and they really mean Hostile! One of those takes over your company, chances are you’ll end up on a Game Show.”

They rounded the corner, and stopped. “What’s the crowd for?” Mae’s ears went up in surprise. There were about twenty students standing expectantly in front of the door, looking up at the balcony above it. Suddenly, the balcony door opened, and a familiar figure stepped out and waved to the crowd. There was a massed sigh, and to Mae’s Psionics there was an impression as of heart-shapes rising like bubbles into the air.

“Oh - Princess Cthuline’s back, I see,” Mae commented, heading round to the fire door at the back. “Always draws a crowd – not surprising, she’s been voted Miss Toho three years running now. I heard she’d been delayed getting back this term.”

“That’s right ! I heard it on the news – she always surfaces near Ponape, takes the flying boat service here at the start of term – and Ponape’s seaplane port is quarantined off. There’s an outbreak of Vitas Gerulaitas in the town.” Kazuko grinned, as she elbowed her way through the dozen males of varying species who were staring raptly at the stairs hoping for another glimpse of Cthuline. “Out of the way ! This is Our dorm !”

“Ohh ... she’s so lovely...” murmured one of the second-years, his ruff of white spitz fur bulging halo-like from his uniform collar. “Those eyes ... eyes the size of crash-helmets, skin like oiled emerald.”

Kazuko suppressed the urge to practice the “stealth rabbit-punch” Granita had taught her, and headed up the stairs. “All right you lot, the show’s over, you’ve seen her,” she called out cheerily. “Go on, scram !” She waved at the Princess, who was standing on the balcony while cameras flashed outside.

Princess Cthuline turned, shining ocean-green in the sun in all her froggy loveliness, a traditional tiara of Archaean gold mounted on her outstandingly elliptical head. “Is good to be back!” She smiled, extending a webbed hand. “Not the same in the Holidays, away from Toho.”

Mae’s tail swished in interest. “I see you’ve needed a new uniform,” she looked at her batrachian friend with interest. “Looks like you’ve been busy working on developing your mammalian lookalike features the whole summer.”

Cthuline nodded happily – for a Deep One, she behaved awfully shallowly at times. “Down on Abyssal Plain, is not a lot else really to DO. Is centuries and centuries of freezing darkness at two tonnes per square centimetre – is good for very long lifespans, but nothing ever happens. Fits us to talk with Deities down there though, we have much the same attention span.”

Mae nodded. “It must be interesting, being able to remember Elder Aeons like that,” her grey tail swished. “What was it you said last term ? You don’t just talk with Deities, your Mother’s old enough and noble enough to have invited the Voodoo Pantheon’s Baron Samedi round for tea, back when he was just a baronet.”

The froggy girl smiled, stretching. She wore an adapted version of the Academy uniform, the main exception being the lack of any footwear on her long webbed feet. In a fit of inspiration she had improvised gaiters to match the colour and style of the white knee-length bobble-socks the rest wore as part of Full Dress Uniform.

“Back to exams and classrooms!” She bubbled cheerfully, her Shoggoth-hide satchel bubbling and deliquescing in agreement. “Next year I am going to a Cram-school in either Tokyo, Neo-Tokyo or Mega-Tokyo – after life on the Abyssal Plain, I think I can stand the pressure better than most folk.”

“Ah, Tokyo ... The Enchanted Sewer itself,” Mae’s eyes went dreamy. “The times we saved that place. I suppose they should have given us the freedom of the City – instead, all we got was hate mail from reconstruction companies, for stopping the place getting trampled.”

They strolled arm in arm to Kazuko’s room, oblivious to the hungrily adoring stares of half a dozen male students still watching from the stairwell. Mae turned to face them, her eyes narrowing a little as she stood in the doorway. “Haven’t you got somewhere you’d better be right now ? I mean, right NOW ?”

There was a hurried stampede as two of the adoring crowd turned and fled down the stairs. Mae shook her head sadly, fixing the other four with an intense gaze. “I rather think there is.”

The nearest, a small-eyed Human, gave a strained gasp, his eyes crossing. “Oh No!” He wailed, heading towards the bathroom in a strange shuffling run. Behind him, the other three chose discretion rather than valour and laundry bills, and vanished as fast as their legs could carry them.

Mae smiled, her tail waving. “According to the rules, a Psyker’s not allowed to affect folks’ conscious thoughts,” she purred. “I don’t think enough of us can tweak involuntary nerves, to put that little misdemeanour IN the rule books yet.”

Kazuko closed the door, as Mae and Cthuline sat down on the gel-filled inflatable chairs. “Well ! Long time no see, Princess – we’ve missed you. Not the same way as those folk outside, but – we’re glad to see you back. Adds tone to a place, having an Elder Entity around.”

Mae frowned, her whiskers dipping a little. “Thinking of which, Princess – you don’t have any relatives visiting the area, do you ? I was down at the hangars this morning, testing the Stealth Radar on my old Ju 287, with Suki and the new girl, Trish. I just switched it on, and – I got the strangest image I’d ever seen. Looked like something miles across, and miles away – other direction from Monster Island. I called the vixens up to have a look, but it’d vanished as soon as they came round the side, let alone got into the cockpit. It’s very odd.”

Princess Cthuline shook her head, mystified. “Nobody I know. It’s term time down there this decade, all the Elder Things are busy educating their Younger Things. Except those that are sent out elsewhere for their education, of course.”

“Strange stuff ! Just the sort of thing I love about Toho!” Kazuko enthused, her big blue eyes shining. “Isn’t it great being somewhere Truth is stranger than Fiction ?” She waved towards the splashproof bookcase, holding a wide selection of astounding stories and Astounding Stories™ from decades gone by – fantasies by Stephen King, Brian Lumley and H.P.Lushcraft dominated.

“Hmm. Anyway, Princess, we’ve got to arrange something for poor Suzuko. She’s working herself to exhaustion – doesn’t get any relaxation, she hardly even drinks.” Mae tapped Kazuko on the shoulder with her tail. “Thinking of which – no more classes today, Kaz – bring it out !”

The anime girl nodded, reaching up to a big wardrobe door. “It’s ready at last. Genuine ethnic Chang – sorta fermented millet mush, it’s very big in Nepal.” Opening the door, she pulled out a fifty-litre pot of bubbling, milky-coloured liquid. “Saves on washing cups out - you get a thin bamboo straw each, like this.” Taking one of the arm-length bamboo stems, she dipped it in the foaming cauldron, and sucked vigorously. Her friends saw the pupils of her eyes contract to only a couple of centimetres as she broke away, spluttering. “My, that’s good!”

Mae cocked her head to one side. “All very well for you,” she commented, “we don’t happen to have lips and cheeks that can DO that. Any better ideas ?”

Kazuko hummed briefly, then her huge eyes lit up. “Got it !” She sprang to her feet, and raced out of the room, the sound of her bare feet on the stairs leading down. In a minute she was back, holding a coffee jug with filter. “Borrowed Suki’s cafetiere, she won’t mind. Should do the trick.”

Princess Cthuline’s basin-like eyes seemed to widen, as she looked on. “That’s another thing I miss, back home,” she said, “the cuisine here’s better than on the Abyssal Plain. Even we get bored of marine worms cooked in their own hydrothermal vent, after a few centuries. I’m glad we came back up, definitely.”

Mae accepted the proffered bowl of milky liquid, and lapped delicately. “Umm. Better than that batch of Durian Daiquiris you made last term. Not quite as good as that condemned batch of out-of-date Kvass they’ve got on sale in town, though...”

Cthuline’s gills swelled slightly, as she drank. She was used to an environment of crawling, seething liquescent Horror, and Kazuko’s homebrew held few terrors for her.

Kazuko stuck her tongue out. “Anyway. Here’s to Old Friends. Kampai!” She raised her dripping straw, and giggled. “Looks funny, doing this. Must be good stuff, Chang, it fuels folk who run up mountains.”

“They live IN the valleys, and run UP the mountains,” Mae murmured, throwing the bowl back, realising it went down better if it missed her taste buds on the way down, “I assume they’re trying to get away from this...”

Cthuline smiled. “You have old-style Television, too! The reception back home is awful. I was watching some fine series at the end of last term. Is “Vegetable Hospital” still running?”

Kazuko closed her eyes, recalling the afternoon series starring Sir James DeTurgent. “In last week’s thrilling episode,” she recited, “A young turnip is rushed into casualty, critically ill with third-degree leaf miner. Meanwhile, on Ward Three, Doctor MacFaddian battles with the Stem Rot epidemic that threatens to break out of the Isolation Ward and engulf the town. Romance blossoms with the Norwegian exchange student Nurse Helga, and a patient, a handsome Swede ...”

Mae checked her watch. “It’s on in about five minutes. Come on, Kaz, fire up that receiver ! It’s so old it’s still got silicon chips in it – but I have to admit it works.” Her eyes twinkled. “Maybe we’ll get to see Nurse Helga getting pollinated again, in full-colour multi-angled slow motion... by the way, Kaz, did you ever hear from that exotic chap Florian ? I’m sure he could act as a body double on this show.”

Cthuline swallowed, her cannonball eyes dipping in her flexible skull as she did so. For at least one term, she had had someone else to take the public exposure of being the most Exotic student at Toho. Florian had been on a year’s course in Combat Ecology – although Cthuline naturally took the long view over environmental issues, the sentient plant had been even Greener than her, in every respect.

Kazuko reached up to switch on the battered set. The picture flickered, and settled down to a Special Report – evidently, something more urgent than the young intern fainting at the sight of root-sap. A map was displayed, a photographic mosaic overlain with generated symbols and large red arrows sweeping Southwards.

“Ooh – that’s taken from one of our JSDF orbiting battlestations!” Kazuko jumped to her feet, rubbing her hands together. “One of the new ones – I remember the bake sales they held all over Japan to pay for them, just the month before I started here at Toho! “

Mae shushed her. “Pipe down, Kaz. This isn’t a soap opera – this one’s real. Look – they’re giving a full-spectrum view. Ow ! Haven’t those folk ever heard of Stealth ?”

On the screen before them, the south end of the isthmus of Panama was a tangled skein of radar plots and tracks, as traced by the orbiting battlestations swinging low over the scene. Optical cameras were there too, the screen suddenly zooming in on a loose flight of a dozen silver darts that had appeared from over the Caribbean, their naked steel glittering in the harsh glare of a hundred radars.

Kazuko shook her head, sadly. “Aww, Mae – they’ll never make it. They’re two hundred clicks off the coast – you can see missiles coming up to get them. The Mexicanos have SnowPole Fives, fifth best interceptor thingy Japan makes. They haven’t a chance, they’ll be ...”

She broke off, mouth still open. Something was happening below, the dozen steel jets had seemed to blur and shift like mirages – and still kilometres ahead and below them, fireballs blossomed as the buyers of the fifth best Japanese missile exports presumably wanted their money back. “What happened ? Five, six – seven – twelve – eighteen interceptors just self-destructed !”

Mae had grabbed Kazuko’s 2032 edition of “Jane’s All The Worlds Aerospacecraft” off the shelf, and was busily leafing through it. “Those are RB 25’s, JSDF reporting name “Road Runner”, she whispered, her tail fluffing out in shock. “It says they’re useless – they’re one-shot bombers, virtually crewed missiles – at top speed they can only go in a straight line, and by the time they wind up to full speed, they’d never have the fuel left to make it back to base...”

“If that’s where they intended going,” Kazuko’s eyes seemed to be bulging wider than ever. “Just look at those radars they’re swinging ! By the size of those power spikes on the side display - they’re not just radars, they’re excimer electron resonant beams, I’ll bet – you could bounce those energy pulses off the asteroid belt.”

“Or swat anything electronic right out of the sky,” Mae’s ears were right up, her whiskers twitching. “You could, you know. But I don’t understand how they make them work in atmosphere – those things only pack a punch in vacuum.”

Cthuline’s webbed hand gestured to the radar plot. “Ninety-two thousand feet,” she bubbled, impressed. “Is not far off vacuum if you tried to breathe it! And they wait till Snowpoles get close – then melt them like snowball in Hell.”

Now the fourteen silver darts were approaching the coast, visible by the comet-like trail of their exhausts. One of them suddenly crumpled and burst into a fireball for no visible reason, but the rest stayed on track towards the big supply depot that the news reports’ display was suggesting as their target.

“Oh my. They’re covering ... looks like twenty miles a minute, in atmosphere,” Mae flicked through the book. “They can’t do that ! The book says they’re built out of scrap computers and boiler-plate steels – have to have a crew of a dozen because they’ve got no avionics!”

“They’ve got engines, though,” Kazuko sounded impressed. “What more do you need ? At that speed, even with a SnowPole missile you have to launch eighty miles in front of where you think it’s going to be – and if you miss, by the time you’ve found out they’re out of range.” Suddenly her eyes went wide. “Whoo-hoo! Look at that ! There goes the Neighbourhood!” On the screen, a wide splash of infra-red showed on the ground as the headquarters of a Mexican armoured division was wiped off the map.

Mae looked at her friend, ears down. Complaining about her enthusiasm for generic violence was a sheer waste of effort, to someone whose genetic makeup had the usual danger avoidance instincts cross-wired to the pleasure centres. Eyeballs the size of grapefruit had a disadvantage apart from the price of contact lenses: with the skull volume of the eyes and the vastly expanded visual cortex to support them, Anime gened folk had room for little forebrain in the usual sense of the term.

“They’re slowing down, turning towards the South – going home,” Mae commented, as they watched for a few more minutes. “Over their own front lines – that’s odd. They’re switching off their engines, while they’re still at altitude.” Her tail swished in puzzlement. “I don’t think those glide too well, especially at eighty thousand feet, not a lot of air up there.”

“Out of fuel, Mae – happens to the best of us,” Kazuko had her laptop out, and was busily calling up a flight simulator. “They’ll make it, though – that vector should take them all the way to the plains South of Bogata, they’ve laid out grass strips the size of Tokyo. Biggest runway you could wish for. Neat tech they’ve got ! And dirt cheap, too !”

Princess Cthuline took another sip of the foaming Chang, her eyes bulging more than ever. “The book says they cut all the safety features out to save weight, Kaz – gave them structural limits nobody else would put on a missile, let alone a manned aircraft. I bet that one we saw break up, tried to alter course or something excessive like

that. You don't want one like they build, really you don't." She reached over to her satchel, and pulled out a few small sandwiches. "Sanity Rolls, anyone ? I made enough for everyone."

"Lunchtime!" Silver-white hair bounced out of her eyes as the younger Leclerc on the island queued up, tray in hand, at the cafeteria. "It looks great!" She scampered dizzily across from one section to the next, piling up foods as they came to hand and pouring teriyaki sauce over everything. "Try some of this, Trish ! Very fresh, island-grown Wasabe root – you'll like it !" She rushed to a table, unslung her trench mortar and bounced down on the springy chair, sending it creaking protestingly.

Trish's fine vulpine nose twitched, as Hiroshi crunched on one of the white, carrot-sized Wasabe roots. "No thanks – I can scent it from here. " She looked down at the randomly piled, sauce-dripping bowls Hiroshi was balancing precariously, and winced. "You're applying for a job in the kitchens, too?"

"I'll say I am !" Hiroshi somehow managed to land her plates on the nearest table right way up – if she had a tail, Trish was sure it would be wagging. "I've got a cookery book – it's got pictures, even. I want to do lots of real Ethnic Japanese dishes you can't get in the markets back home – I mean, preparing Fugu fish can't be THAT hard, can it ? Mother always said, if you haven't got the skill for something, just use enough enthusiasm and everything'll be OK." She ate ravenously, checking her diet sheet for sufficient caffeine and sugar to maintain her perpetual bounciness.

"Oh. I was wondering why Kaz had not invited you over. I see." Trish averted her eyes as Hiroshi devoured messily something called a "burger", which was apparently only available in the Japanese Empire these days. She looked down at her own meal, an eyebrow raised quizzically. "Is this right ? I ordered one of the 'Baked Potatoes with Various Fillings', it says on the menu – the filling just sits there. It doesn't vary at all."

Hiroshi's blue eyes suddenly brimmed with tears. "That's like those lessons this morning. It's so hard !" She wailed, kicking her satchel over, dislodging a satchel charge and her homework.

Trish's tail drooped. "You think so too ? I was hoping it was a cultural thing." She picked up Hiroshi's notebook. "A staunch Citizen with a shovel takes eighty minutes to dig a hole in homogenous ground one metre by two metres by eighty centimetres," she read. "How long will it take him with three shovels ?" She frowned. "That's not the same question I got. Here – see if you can make anything of mine." She handed over her own notebook.

Hiroshi's wails shut off instantly, and she brightened up. "A feckless Native can produce enough sago from a grove of sago palms in only twenty days labour, to provide food for a year," she spelled out, decoding Trish's handwriting. "Question: what condition will he be in next year ?" She blinked. "Any idea how long an answer they want ? I mean, do they want two pages of tensor calculus with pop-up figures, or something like "Who Cares?" I heard one of last years class got the top marks available, but she had an answer she could only properly express using glove-puppets."

"Hmm." Trish scratched her head. Her guidebook had cautioned her against communicating in gestures – it seemed there had once been things known as "mimes", who had been instrumental in almost bringing about the dissolution of truly organic life on the planet. Just as there was a theoretical limit to the resistance of any electrical insulator, there was a limit to the concepts that could be expressed in words. Beyond a certain threshold value, truly unspeakable Evil could only be planned and communicated in mime.

Hiroshi giggled, her tears instantly forgotten. "Well, back in my old school, we did a production of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" entirely in semaphore," her eyes brightened. "It wasn't bad, but we had to translate it from the original Sixteenth-century Japanese. Getting the accents right took Ages." She tucked in to another of the classical Japanese "Burgers", munching loudly and messily. "You've come to the right place, Trish – we've got the world's best Mecha and computers and History even – we keep revising as well as updating it all the time." Hiroshi gestured over towards the windows, where eleven fierce-looking carnivores dressed in impeccable white shorts and dangerously chunky pullovers were stalking in. "Like, that's our First Eleven cricket team. Mother tells me she can remember when we never had it in the Empire – but now we've been playing it for six centuries, and in a few years time we'll have had invented it. Isn't that neat ?"

Trish's ears rose. She had been wondering whether to apply for a module in Practical Metaphysics or Applied Interactive History herself. "I'd heard you were flexible people over here," she murmured, having taken in the Anime species' lithe figures and excessively wide hips, which her guidebook had mentioned cryptically with references to head size and mammalian childbirth, "But temporally too – that really does give things a whole new Dimension."

Down by the main docks South of the town, there was a hive of activity centred on a huge flying boat that had just arrived from the South. Across most of the world, the unloading would be a simple matter of hooking up conveyor belts and letting the dockside machinery scan and sort the standard pallets and containers - but this was Toho.

“Heave ! Put your backs into it!” Granita commanded, throwing her own considerable bulk and muscle into the fray as ropes creaked and pulleys groaned under the weight of supplies. “That’s it – we’re clear of the hatch. Pull the stay rope, George!”

Georgina Pontephrigh blushed with pride and exertion, grasping the thick synthetic rope to swing the suspended cargo net away from the airship and toward the dockside. Thankfully, it was a cool, breezy day, but still she panted from the past hour of heavy labour. Standing on the old concrete dock, she scented fresh food in the load, and a mixed aroma of chemical supplies she was sure should have been packed separately.

“Load’s safe – let it down!” She called across to the eight hefty students working the main rope. Or rather, seven predictably large and muscular ones, and one suprisingly slim, black-skinned girl who nevertheless had earlier been carrying around bales that even Granita had to tackle with care.

“Letting down – that’s the last of it.” Granita played out the rope, letting the net settle gently to the dockside. She panted, muscles flexing beneath her tough hide, white dust flying as she clapped her chalkdust-coated hands. “Last of the bulk supplies, anyway. The small stuff’s coming separately.”

As if in response, two more hatches opened in the fuselage of the huge flying boat – a “Dornier X”, Georgina had heard it called – and a sheep girl wriggled out to stand on the stubby lower wing and take packets and cases passed through from inside. The white-woollen girl waved vigorously up towards the unloading team, which included a large horned ram.

“Mmm. “ Granita strolled over, casting an eye over the others loading the bulk freight onto trailer waggons for the two hundred metre trip into town. “You did well, George. But in a few months, you’ll be amazed how much – better it’ll be.” She clapped a hearty hand on Georgina’s shoulder, smiling. “Like Tava there – now that’s muscle. And if he worked hard on muscle Definition, he’d be even better.”

“Just you watch me!” Georgina’s tail wagged furiously. “I might not have your natural Advantages, but I’ll try harder.” Granita had told of her parents: her Mother had been a rhino, a professional wrestler from a long circus tradition, and her Father had been from what most folk would think was a mythological tradition. Exactly where a Sumatran Rhino girl and a Gargoyle had met up, was something that puzzled Georgina, but she had heard that some modern holiday destinations were difficult to describe on a conventional globe.

“Excellent ! We’ll definitely make something of you. Tonight, eh ? Tonight’s the first wrestling sessions at the Gym, half past six sharp. I’ll be breaking in a new bunch.” Her deep-set eyes twinkled, and she flexed her great hands with a popping sound. “I hope some of this team turn up, they’re a promising lot.”

“I’ve met some of them at Registration,” Georgina nodded. “So many species – it was just us canine Pontephrighs on the Plateau, and the various Servants and Natives – they were mandrills, boars, humans, and there used to be a family of deer till Mother’s time.” Genetic diversity had been a problem, with so small a population and only half a dozen species. Georgina had never quite worked out the ancestry of McTavish, the gruff old Scots Gardener – regardless of there never having been other stags around, it was simply an accepted fact that regardless of circumstances, a respectable household should have an Gruff Old Scottish Gardener, and so naturally there was one. “A lot of cats, around here – but I’ve not seen anyone like that ram, Tava.”

Granita grinned, waving down towards the floating bulk of the seaplane, where the ovine girl was hurriedly still passing packages out to a waiting boat. “Well, there’s one. You generally get them arriving in a bunch, if you see them at all – deer, sheep and goats, have a lot in common. Generally their husbands.”

Georgina blinked, confused.

“Ha ! It’s different for them. If I had a mate – now, there’s a thought – any other girl, had better keep her paws off ! But for those species – a Stag who’s already got half a dozen Does, say, is going to be Mr. Popular with all the unattached ones. Like, he’s a walking advert that he can keep them happy. A dozen, is twice the attraction.” Granita’s tail swished speculatively, looking over towards Tava. “It’s a biological thing, works by scent I believe. Good thing the males are built to handle it, else I don’t think they’d hold out for long.”

Georgina’s snout wrinkled. “I say ! I’d heard some of those foreigner species had pretty below-par traditions, but that about takes the biscuit ! “ Her nose twitched, scenting the mixed musks of the hard-working team now relaxing for a minute on the dockside before heading back towards town. “Jolly glad I don’t have to do that sort of thing, just because of my species.”

Granita smiled, stretching as she limbered up. “Quite. Oh, I’m sure you’ll find quite enough around here to keep you satisfied, as it is. Wrestling tonight then, six o’clock sharp ?”

Georgina’s tail wagged happily. “I’ll be there !”

Jenni Maunatikka piled the last load of small items into the pontoon boat, and sighed with relief. “All packed!” She called up to the cockpit of the huge flying-boat, from her stance on the thick, stubby lower wing – the “stummeln”, she had heard it called.

There was an answering wave from the cockpit, and the hatches beside her shut with a bang. “Stand clear – we’re taxiing in five minutes,” a leather-helmeted figure shouted down. “Thanks for the help!”

Jenni scrambled over to the boat, laden with small and delicate items in boxes, and began to haul on its ferry rope. The rope tethered it to the slipway, where a pathway of big bronze rollers led up to the top of the docks.

"This," she panted to herself, muscles straining under her wool as she heaved her way towards shore, "Is TOO much like hard work." With a groan of relief, she reached the slipway in a couple of minutes, swapped the floating tether for a winch cable and stepped off onto dry land, calling up to the unloading crew above. "Boat's secure, haul away!"

The winch at the top of the ramp ground into gear, pulling the boat protestingly up as Jenny followed it on foot. Suddenly, her hoof caught in the slack towing cable, and she fell heavily onto the central part of the slipway – the section with the freely turning rollers.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeep!!!" Her alarmed squeal rang out as she fell on her back, and slid back down like a bobsled on its track. For a second she was paralysed, shocked as the water seemed to race up toward her – then there was an echoing splash, as the surface of the harbour closed over her, none too warm in the shade of the quays.

Jenni's momentum carried her out into the harbour, her dense wool soaking up a great weight of water by the time she surfaced, shaking her blonde thatch of head-hair out of her eyes. Belatedly, she realised why the aircraft here were double-roped to the quay – the tide was running, and she could already feel a strong current tugging at her as she struggled towards the shore.

"Hang on!" A voice came from above – and with a loud splash, a figure dived in beside her, carrying a rope and life-belt. In a few seconds a black-skinned figure bobbed to the surface, dog-paddling over with the rope. "Grab onto these – I'll pull us out."

"Thanks," Jenni gasped, treading water. Her slender hooves were a poor design for swimming, and in the mountains of her home the only lakes placid enough to practice in had been far too cold for comfort. "I've got it ... I'm OK." She slipped the life-belt over her head, and grasped the rope. Through water-streaming eyes, she could barely see the figure of her rescuer heading towards the shore, following the rope – but soon a powerful tugging showed she had reached the ladder and was hauling the life-belt and its occupant to shore.

Jenni gratefully grabbed hold of the weed-encrusted iron ladder, set in the sheer four metre dock wall, and rested for a minute, panting. She wiped the head-fur out of her eyes, and got a good look at her rescuer for the first time. Jenni's ears raised in interest – at first she had not recognised the species, seeing only naked purple-black skin, but up close, she could see ...

"I'm Jenni," She smiled, her eyes widening as she looked across at the slender figure clinging to the ladder next to her. "I'm pleased to meet you – I didn't think there was anyone else of our kind here!"

"I'm Broohilda," that worthy blinked the water out of her eyes, her glossy aubergine-hued hide sparkling like fresh obsidian with pearls of water running off in the afternoon light. "I'm glad I could help – but I'm afraid I'm not a sheep – technically, I'm not even a goat."

Jenni caught a whiff of her scent as she clambered past her and up the ladder. "Oh, you're close enough," she whispered to herself. "I'd say you're Definitely close enough."

At the top of the ladder, Granita was standing by to pull them up, and surveyed the dripping two critically. "There's a few phrases about drowned rats that come to mind," she sniffed, eyes twinkling under the heavy armour of her brow ridges, "except rats swim better than that. You! Sheepy! We do swimming classes here – recommend you join them, right? For now – off to the gym, get cleaned off and dried out, before you come down with something. " She waved towards the Military Microbiology building, across the harbour. "Them folk SAY they clean their wastes out, but some of them are saucer-eyes, can't trust them with a burned-out match."

Jenni bristled soggily as best she could for an instant. But then her expression altered, a slow smile spreading as she bowed respectfully. "Hai, Granita-san," she agreed. "We'll go straight there. But – I've a consignment of goods in today's load, I'd like to pick up as soon as I can. We'll be back to collect them before Evening meal."

"Shoo! Out, and don't drip Pan-Species Mange and Nameless Sao Paulo VII cultures over my nice clean gym!" Granita waved them away, grinning broadly. "Move!"

Watching the two ungulate students leaving a damp trail back towards town, Granita turned to the rest of the team, now finishing loading the last items onto the flatbed transporter. Some of the boxes were open, and were being re-sealed with tape before their owners found out.

Georgina's tail twitched, ears dipping in puzzlement as she carefully re-sealed a lead-lined box marked with half a dozen garish warning labels. Inside, were long thin bottles of thick glass, carefully separated by rigid partitions – a rather wasteful way of packing, she told herself, seeing that the manufacturers could have easily put three times the density of bottles in the crate.

"Danger, do not exceed twenty gram (spherical) critical Mass," she read out aloud, as she re-sealed the box and taped it over. "Gosh! Quite a mystery here," her eyes lit up at the prospect. "According to the outer Customs document, it was shipped as biohazardous waste – but the inner box is labelled foodstuffs." She very gently put the box down on the flatbed truck, and secured it with double lashings. "Produce of Australia, they both say. What on earth can it be?"

Granita was silent, her craggy face losing a fraction of its habitual fierce expression as she edged away from the boxes. She hoped in time to introduce “George” to various new experiences. But as for Highly Enriched, Weapons-grade Vegemite – she shook her head wonderingly.

“Must be one of the Eldritch Things on the island ordered it,” she whispered to herself, as the flatbed started up and headed away inland, “Because I can beat any mortal here – and that stuff scares ME!”

“I’m all right, honestly,” Broohilda protested mildly, as Jenni ran the shower to “Full hot” and waved her in. “That’s the one thing about not having fur any more – I dry out a lot quicker. I just need a rub down and a change of clothes, and ...”

“I won’t hear of it !” Jenni grinned, stepping into the shower and seizing a brush. “You heard what Granita-san said – that harbour might be dangerous. Got to get you cleaned up – and I’ve got to make sure I’m thoroughly – decontaminated. Can’t be sure I’ve scrubbed my own back properly, without a mirror in here.”

Broohilda’s naked spike of a tail twitched hesitantly. “Well – all right,” she nodded, carefully peeling off her soaked T-shirt. “These have to go in a sealed bag, we can irradiate them in the reactor down the road – what’ll we wear then?”

“All taken care of.” Jenni pointed across the room, to a row of martial-arts robes hanging on the wall. “High style round here, you know – even if we’ll look like the lead pair in “Shaolin Piano Assassins”. We can drop them off after we get a change in our rooms – you’re in my dorm, after all.”

Broohilda nodded, nervous still. “I suppose so.” She stepped out of her shorts and sandals, and picked up a bar of disinfectant soap.

“That’s the spirit ! I’ve heard about these baths in Japan – there’s two public ones that I know about here. I’m trying to acclimatise to the idea. I’d be so grateful if you’d help me, Broohilda. We don’t do mixed baths at home, you know.” Jenni leaned back into the hot spray, soaping her head-fur and letting the cleansing foam run down her body. Whatever the truth might be about the local bugs, she certainly had picked up a petroleum taint from the leaky engines of the ancient aircraft in the harbour.

Broohilda smiled. “Oh. Is that it ? Well – that’s all right, then. Of course, I’ll help. I’m glad I could help you already today – that harbour’s deep, folk have been swept out to sea before now.” She rubbed herself down thoroughly with lather, paying attention to the insides of her ears and working down diligently. Decontamination procedures were a part of everyday life at Toho, occasionally proving vital for continued Life in any sense.

Jenni wriggled, turning round as Broohilda soaped her back and scrubbed vigorously, the chemical scent of disinfectant filling the steamy atmosphere. She caught a full glimpse of her rescuer, and the smile in her thoughts was not the smile that showed on her face. Broohilda, eh ? Furless, but a skin colour the same as her own where it showed – the same as hers and Tava’s. Small horns, a goat-like feature rather than an ovine one – but she knew many ewes with horns, even in the most respectable old families. And strong – definitely strong and healthy. Yes, Broohilda was quite a find ...

The shower finished its ten minute cycle, and ran dry. Jenni looked up, a little disappointed as her reverie came to an end. A black lop ear twitched. “Ah well – that’s better. I should think that’s done the job.” She stepped out of the big stall, and grabbed a pair of coarse white towels from a rack. “If we hurry, we can be back at our dorms and I’ll get these washed and back here in time for tonight’s opening at six.”

Broohilda nodded, relieved, as she rubbed herself dry. “I’m grateful – I’ll be busy tonight. After all, Granita did say we were to clean up here when we’d done.”

“Oh, and I will. Everything just where it belongs, trust me.” Jenni handed the goat-girl a hock-length martial arts robe, a plain white costume evidently from one of the saner traditions *. “I think it closes with this sash here, like a kimono. Make sure you don’t catch cold, like that !”

“I’m used to it,” Broohilda’s ears dipped, as they headed towards the exit, each clutching double-sealed plastic bags of clothing now pungent with bleach and disinfectant. She sighed. “I used to have such pretty fur – a light gold, it was.”

“Oh ? “ Jenni stopped in her tracks for an instant, then caught up with Broohilda at the door. “It’s not – genetic, then ? That’s – very interesting. There’s always hope, then.”

She nodded, her own ears perked up. This was sounding good – in fact, sounding better all the time.

- After more than seventy years of staging Traditional action films, the current generation of eager young “Mashafilmen” (Martial Arts Film Men, of whom 40% were women anyway) had been driven to be Creative in depicting centuries-old techniques. One old tradition had concerned specialist techniques based on the movements and poses of craftsmen who put them to more energetic use outside working hours, such as the “Blacksmith”, “Weaver” and “Woodcutter” styles. The new films concentrated on styles so secretive that the film producers could claim copyright on producing the manuals and T-shirts; one of Mangana’s Uncle’s films features a duel at a dinner party. As one opponent is fighting “Waiter” style and another in “Gourmet” style, they can get on with a serious contest without the other guests knowing a thing about it ...

.....

“They want us to do WHAT ?”

Evening light was falling over the central Pacific, clouds gathering on the endless open horizons, as Tktlohahn Davies stared at his chief engineer, who had just returned from the supplies tender.

The engineer shook his head. “Sounds strange to me, too. We’re to not only dump our Iron bombs, but the shackles and triggers in the bomb bay. The new Device is too big to fit our racks, and it comes with all its own fittings – seals right on to the main support spars. It’ll be a long job.”

“A long job ?” Tktlohahn exploded, his tail trying to bristle out inside its pressure suit. “A long job ? We’re five hundred miles from land, look you, in the middle of a war, and we’re to start taking the belly out of Spirit of 56 ? Out here ? “

“A workshop would be my choice,” the nightshift flight engineer nodded, looking as the tender approached, its loading cranes already slung out overboard and ready. “Orders, you know – this is something special. It doesn’t have a recognition code, even. Must be experimental.”

Tktlohahn swore sulphurously, but sketched a mock salute in the direction of Peru. “Orders, I know. We’ll tear the guts out of our perfectly working ship and plug in something we’ve no idea what to do with when we’ve got it plugged in there. Orders, all praise be to them, boyo !”

As the cranes on the tender creaked into action, gasps and whistles of surprise came from the bomber crew seeing their new payload.

“Capt’n – what IS that thing ?” One of the gunners asked incredulously, his thin chinchilla tail twitching. “Must be ten metres long – can we carry that ?”

“Twelve metres. And yes, we can, with some modifications.” Captain Evans scratched his head, lost in thought for an instant. Suddenly he snapped into action. “Evening watch, lend a hand with the loading there ! Double cables, make us fast to the tender – we’ve got a valuable cargo, and wherever we drop it, it won’t be in the drink ! Day shift, help the engineers in the main bay – we’ve a lot of bolts to undo.”

Two hours of frantic work followed, first the iron bombs and then most of the bomb bay fittings dropping into the depths of the Pacific, while the tender and its load gradually crept closer, cautiously lining up with the huge, fragile floatplane in the rolling mid-ocean swell. At last, the rigid docking struts were locked down to fix the ship and the aircraft a constant distance apart, and the crew could breathe more easily.

Iktikmicanhi waved the tender forward, the copybara engineer keeping a close eye on the steel cables, creaking and groaning in the swell. “Steady ! Steady does it – three metres – two – one – handy with the docking clamps.” There was a final flurry of activity as twelve gunners struggled with the stiff cables and transferred the huge burden over to the floatplane’s own winches. “Done it!” He stepped back, cautiously hanging onto the streamlined strut that braced the giant float, now settling a little heavier in the water as it supported the extra burden. “Cap’n – we’ve got it onboard.”

Natahaho slid down the ladder from the bomb bay, and stood for a few seconds looking at the huge, shrouded shape in awe. “I’m going to drop THAT ? And it’s not my birthday till January ! What’s the yield ? Looks like we’re going to cut South America clean off from the North, a hole that size in Panama.”

The engineer cast a wry glance at the young chinchilla, whose thin tail was lashing in excitement. “Like your job, don’t you ?”

Natahaho nodded vigorously, sketching a salute towards the East and the New Aztec Empire. “Of course ! This is here for us to do some serious stomping, and enemies of the State and Faith exist to be seriously stamped on. Don’t you like the...” his eyes widened, a dreamy expression passing across his features “The symmetry of it all?”

Iktikmicanhi winced, reluctantly looking at their new cargo as he unclipped a tool pouch from his waist belt. “If its safely margins are anything like the design of this floatplane, you’ll need this.” He fished around, and pulled out a thin sheet of cardboard, passing it to the raptly attentive chinchilla. “Here – stuff this inside your flight suit.”

Natahaho took the cardboard, and sniffed it cautiously. “What’s this for ?”

The engineer grinned. “I should think it’ll at least double the radiation shielding between your cajones and the warhead. Something this big – rather you than me, lying flat in the midsection right over it.” He pulled out his Geiger counter, and switched it on.

Natahaho saw his friend’s face change expression, surprise and shock following an instant after. He instinctively took a step away from the huge Device now being slowly winched up into the gutted bomb bay. “It’s not ... not THAT bad – is it ? “

Iktikmicanhi swept the tube of the detector around – there was a low background crackle, rising to detectable ticking when he scanned his old-fashioned luminous watch, a few milligrams of radium in the paint. But then he scanned towards the Device, hanging creaking in the cradle as both shifts of gunners heaved away at the

winches. Slowly, carefully listening to the little probe, he walked forward till the tube was touching the featureless black casing.

“This thing isn’t what you think it is,” his eyes were wide as he turned round. “Not a tick out of it. There’s no markings, no external identification codes – and just one data link. The Captain’s told me we’ve only got three of these things – by the way he said it, I got the idea there ARE only three, total. But I’ve no idea what they are.”

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Evening fell on the Pacific, the evening gloom falling on Toho Academy just as a certain floatplane now South-west of Hawaii closed its cavernous bomb bay doors and puzzled with a mysterious suite of programs that came with the new arrival.

Suzuko and Mae finished their labours in the Heavy Engineering sheds, and strolled back in the evening light, talking lightly of small things as old friends will. Mae cast a shrewd glance over her companion, relieved to see her smiling for once. “Should be good, to get up a bit later tomorrow – and after one of Horsts’s great meals. It’ll soon be time for him to do the alpine winter dishes, with that mulled wine and brandy – gluhwein, he calls it.”

Suzuko laughed. “Ah. Remember our first term ? Kazuko heard about it, tried to her own version. Turned out interesting – though I tried to tell her it didn’t really translate as “Glue-Wine.” A sticky situation.”

Mae’s whiskers twitched. “It wasn’t just her bank balance that was “solvent”, I remember it well. Two years ago.”

“Mmm. Two years. Makes you think.” Suzuki’s ears went down briefly. She looked down at her coveralls, stained with oil and hydraulic fluid, and winced. “I’ve still got the same set of these I had then – they can definitely do with a wash. Better drop them off before we get changed for tea.”

They arrived at their dormitory, where they wriggled out of their coveralls and carried on towards the bathrooms in their tank-tops and half-track shorts. The washing machines for the block were in the downstairs bathroom – and by the sound of things, they were already in use.

Suzuko stuck her snout round the door. Yes, she told herself, all three busy – and three users patiently waiting for the cycles to end. Mangana was there, a book on her lap but staring into space – Cthuline was there, probably contemplating the Elder Aeons she had witnessed, staring into time. Trish was there, certainly looking somewhere, but something told Suzuko that following her gaze would be a big mistake.

“Cheer up, Trish !” Mae called out, spotting the vixen sitting glumly in the ground-level washroom. “Why the long face – I mean, longer than usual ? “

Trish blinked, and gave a surprised jerk. “Oh ! Is first time I use these machines this morning – I lose a sock.”

Mae frowned. “So ? I’ve lost steel helmets before in these things. You can buy replacement socks and most things down in town. They’re dearer than the Home Islands, but not too bad.”

“Ah no. I don’t think I could get one to fit. Is an INNER sock, I wear inside the suit, I ...” Trish suddenly blinked, as if aware she was about to say something and regret it. She stood up, somewhat forcing a smile. “Is all good ! It will turn up !”

“That’s the spirit,” Mae’s ears perked up. “Come on, Suki, put these coveralls in the sink, we’ll leave them to soak. Half an hour to tea, then there’s a great football match from Europe on the Worldnet - Real Madrid against Barcelona Virtualé. Granita’s fought for the Madrid supporters, she says it should be great !”

As the five girls left the room a few minutes later, silence fell in the bathroom. After a few minutes, a furtive noise could be heard from one of the shower stalls. A noise of rustling cloth, and doors opened in an attempt at silence that did not quite work as planned.

Suzuko was just sitting down to eat in the kitchen two rooms down the corridor with her friends, when a scream rang out. She had heard screams before – this was a scream of horror and denial, of someone faced with something that in every sanity-shattering sense, should not BE.

Trish was the first to move – her ears pricked up, and she dashed down the corridor, with a look of alarm – alarm and something else. Suzuko followed, scarcely five paces behind her.

In the bathroom, Suzuko saw Trish, furtively stuffing something into her pocket – and a Homelands human male she vaguely associated the name of Potzu with. He was lying on the floor, gibbering quietly, his hands over his eyes, a stream of incoherent denials bursting out of his drooling mouth.

Trish looked up, gesturing at the open window, her tail twitching. “Is a peeping Tom, I think ! He came in, looked for clothing – all he is finding is one odd sock of mine I lost. Should say thank you really – in spite of all.”

Suzuko nodded, before calling down the corridor for Horst and Mangana to take Potzu away to somewhere with lingerie that fastened securely up the back. “Umm – that’s all right – I’m glad he didn’t find more than an odd sock.” She looked at Trish, her tail twitching slightly.

I wonder, thought Suzuko to herself – what sort of paw would be a good fit for a sock THAT odd ?

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