

Chapter Four

Far above the Pacific Ocean, the curve of the planet could clearly be seen, the line of darkness now marching across India, distant peaks of the Himalayas glowing pink with the final light for an hour after the valleys around flooded with night. Satellites watched, staring down with unblinking eyes, eavesdropping on conversations or trying to prevent each other from hearing what they relayed in secret.

Satellite JSSF 777650 was a compact, nondescript black cylinder the size and shape of an oil drum, currently hanging high over the central Pacific. Its "eye" was a multispectral scanner extending the full diameter, and its gaze was tracking a few ships and scheduled aircraft making their way across from island to island. One by one, they were checked and matched with either its onboard database, or after a milliseconds long conversation, with the main identification database at Kwajalein Island. For hours the big eye watched, passively spotting and ticking off every trace, happy that there were no unexpected threats entering the territory it stood guard on.

Suddenly, ten bright, hot sparks appeared in its field of view South of Hawaii, heading almost straight West. And then Satellite JSSF 777650 got very unhappy, very quickly indeed.

Tktlohahn Davies cursed, as he banged his head on the forward engineering bulkhead, the hard-edged metal unpadding to save weight and money on an aircraft that was designed for one single flight between major refurbishment.

"Bloody daft idea," he growled to himself, tail twitching. "Dropping our iron bombs into the ocean, taking on board this great whale, that doesn't even come with instructions."

"It's installed all right, though!" Natahaho said brightly, his ears doing their best to perk up inside the pressure suit helmet liner. "Look - I've got the interface loaded, it's reporting everything's connected and configured. The bomb's got more computing power than the rest of the ship put together - after we switch it on, it practically flies the ship." He gestured at the third-hand laptop that was their navigational system, now plugged into the ship's sensors and their new payload. "See? It's scanning the area, and tapping into any public cameras that'll let it. There's one coming over the horizon now, we're getting a data feed already..."

Suddenly, every alarm on the ship burst into a deafening wail, a heart-tearing shriek that combined the urgencies of a fire alarm and a screaming baby. Tktlohahn's ears went right up, as he saw what the JSSF camera was relaying to all ships in the area, of what was approaching them under their radar horizon, still eighty kilometres out across the water. And then his fist hit the big red Emergency Start button, the ship jerking as starting cartridges kicked the three big pulsejets into life below them.

"Engine Ignition, emergency launch!" He shouted into the speakers, as both shifts of crew dived towards their launch positions, "Drop the fuel lines - we're under attack!"

Not ten minutes earlier, the ten Advanced Ibis missiles had surged to the surface from the mercenary submarine currently under Mexican "Letters of Marque" authorising it to fire on all Peruvian targets. As the rocket boosters burned out, air intakes opened and the long, thin wings swept forwards as the flight assembled itself into a formation, a hundred metres apart and a bare ten metres above the Pacific swell. In their computers was an image of the Peruvian seaplane riding exposed at anchor, a bare twenty minutes flying time away - for it had waited in one spot hours too long, and the submarine had been hastening to get within firing range since receiving the public data feeds that morning.

The dark blue ocean shivered as the squadron of Advanced Ibis streaked across its surface, their thin wings bucking and trembling as they knifed through gusts hammering them with vibrations that would have shaken any biological pilot senseless in a minute. First one, then another would briefly "pop up" to two hundred metres, scanning the distant horizons for their prey before sliding down to rejoin its pack-mates at wave-height.

All in all, it was not a good day to be boating on the Pacific Ocean.

"Ah. That's what I like around here," Mangana sighed, as she sat on the balcony at the end of their dormitory corridor, looking out over the harbour of Shahaguo Town, some two kilometres away. "It's so peaceful. Since the Neighbours stopped coming over - you can practically relax, which I could happily get used to. There's some good company this year, and it looks like Gen and Yukio's bunch have decided to leave us alone."

Mariko nodded, her whiskers twitching as she looked around. The balcony was a small structure, little over two metres square, above the entrance porch of the dormitory block that Mangana, Suzuko and half a dozen of the others shared. "Definitely things are improving around here," she agreed, reaching down to the basket by her side to stroke her scaly daughter. "Not a bad bunch, these new students are turning out to be. Some of them are suffering a bit of culture-shock, but that's to be expected." She picked up her book, and contentedly buried her nose in it.

Mangana studied the cover, a black eyebrow raised. "More UnRomantic Fiction?"

"Heh. I do get through a pile of it, between looking after the crèche. This one, the hero has a Designer Disease with symptoms so ... spectacular, that special-effects men from horror films follow him around with cameras and notebooks, out of spatter range of course. And the Heroine's a compulsive Multiple Agent - she's addicted to joining espionage units, regardless of persuasion ... it makes life very complicated."

"Which I've had enough of, myself." Mangana smiled, her big eyes going slightly misty. "It'll be good to just get down to solid work, then look for a job - plenty of vacancies in Arcaneology. An expanding business, no question."

A grey mouse-tail swished, and Mariko peered over her big old-fashioned glasses at her friend. "Thinking of "Expanding" - I see you and Horst must have had a definitely busy Summer together. You've picked up some more sow traits - they look good on you!"

Mangana laughed, blushing slightly as she looked down at her chest. "You could say that. I've had scans, too - most of the changes are internal, coming on very nicely." She winked. "I've got an external corkscrew tail budding, and an internal screw thread that works very happily. I don't know at what point I'll be compatible enough with Horst, but - if we were here next year, I wouldn't be amazed if we'd be providing you with a litter of customers."

"That's great !" Mariko hugged her delightedly. "I'd love to see that !" Her ears drooped a little, as she looked around. "But - that's the thing. I'll be around, and you won't be. Still, one consolation - you're right about the new students being a good lot. "

"Thinking of which - there's Trish, and Suki, coming in for tea." Mangana spotted the only two vixens on the island approaching, far out along the road from the harbour. "Funny thing, with Trish - her paperwork somehow never seems to have caught up with her. I checked with the admin building - everyone assured us that all her qualifications were in order, but nobody really can say what they Are."

"Hmmm." Mariko looked thoughtful, squinting down the road. "Maybe she's like Hiroshi, faked her way in ? The Academy wouldn't mind - if you're well qualified enough to get in that way, and you can pay your bills, they'll let that pass as an entrance exam."

A black bob of head-fur shook. "I don't think so. And I asked Mae to see what she could pick up - she came back ten minutes later, her tail fluffed out like she'd seen a ghost. Said she'd tried sending the lightest mental probe she could, and ... it never came back. Like it fell into a Black Hole, but worse. Mae's sworn off trying anything like that again, and I can't say I blame her."

Mariko waved down to the two vixens, as they came within range. "Evening ! You're just in time - Kazuko's depleting the world's stocks of Thai bonnet peppers and curry leaf - she invited me over for her meal."

Trish looked up to the balcony, and gave a respectful ten-degree bow to the cheerful leather-clad mouse. "Good evening, Mariko-san" she blinked, her nose twitching at the scent that was pooling almost visibly around the building. "I was wondering about that - it is not a chemical attack then ?"

Suzuko's own nose twitched, as she looked around. "Not an intentional one, anyway. Kazuko says it's very good for you, wipes out all bacteria." Her tail drooped, as she took a deep breath of outside air before opening the door. "So does hydrogen peroxide for that matter, but it doesn't leave any other organic matter intact."

Suzuko looked around the corridor cautiously and unlocked her room, the second from the door on the left. She smiled, briefly. "Come on in, Trish - Kaz won't be serving for an hour. I've got some new tea in, should line our systems a bit." She briefly grimaced. For some reason, her cafetiere was tasting VERY strange these days.

The blue-eyed vixen's ears twitched. "Thank you ! I am learning local cooking styles - is good, yes ?" She sat down on the mat by the window, while Suzuko fussed with the kettle that always simmered over the cooling fan of the little Cray 90-90 on the desk.

As Suzuko's back turned, Trish frowned. Her first experiments at local cooking had not been wholly successful, or at least had not gone according to plan. She had decided not to start with a native Japanese dish, but something foreign that folk might not notice as much if she got it wrong. The recipe book had recommended "Lox and Bagels", and the local corner shop had provided the ingredients - it had looked perfectly simple on paper.

Trish's tail drooped, recalling the previous night's cookery trial. She had the bagels, and a big vacuum flask of pure LOX from the Tank Farm, the liquid oxygen busily filling the room with fuming condensation. The trouble was when mixing the two together - one slip, and the chilled pastry smashed like paper-thin glass into a thousand fragments.

Suzuko smiled as she turned to her guest, filling the teapot and putting it on a bamboo tray with a pair of teacups. "I hope you like this one - it's a bit different from the stuff they put in vending machines here. You should always be careful, when a vending machine claims its selling "Food-like Substances" or "Beverage-type liquid." "

"Hai!" Trish nodded dutifully, as Suzuko poured the tea. "Is very different back home. If you want to know the quality of a meal, you can ask it."

Suzuko blinked. "You mean you've got voice-controlled intelligent vending machines ? We had one last year in the Weird Science department - it lasted about a month before it went mad. Started putting mayonnaise on things, so the Davy Crockett Fan Club had to tow it outside Academy waters and launch a Davy Crockett at it."

"No, not vending machines. We always ask them before we ..." Trish suddenly clapped a hand to her muzzle, looking awfully embarrassed. "Excuse please ! Am still learning Japanese."

"That's all right." Suzuko handed Trish one of the cups. An ear cocked towards the window, where a loud conversation was going on outside. "A lot of people have problems that way. " She stood, and waved at the group

outside. "Folk work it out one way or another. That's the new bunch next door, Dick and Julian Pontephright, talking with Gen and Yukio."

Trish stood and followed her gaze. She frowned, her ears straining as the conversation drifted down the wind. "Suzuko-san. The two sides are conversing easily - but not speaking same language at all."

"Ah. Well, Gen and Yukio refuse to speak anything but Japanese with strong home village accents. But everyone of that bunch knows for a fact that if you speak to a Native very loudly and slowly, waving your arms around, they'll understand."

"Does that work here ? Would make things greatly easier." Trish's ears rose.

Suzuko shrugged, gazing out at the four canines. "Around here, Trish - that's the sort of thing it's best not to ask. It works for them - but if anybody ever sits down and tries to work out just HOW - chances are, it'll never work again."

"That old Fleet Shadower in the hangar ?" Gen Yakitora looked the two new students up and down, approvingly. "Certainly, you can use it. Belonged to my friend Obato, he graduated last year. But as he never claimed it, it's Academy Property, and if you can put it to good use - we'll arrange fuel, spare parts support and flight testing."

"That's Jolly decent of you !" Julian Pontephright's tail wagged, as he shook hands warmly. "I must say, it's splendid to find pals like you all the way out here. We're awfully keen to get in the air again, and that looks like just the machine for us."

Gen smiled. "Think nothing of it." He turned to Yukio, the Siamese feline's slanted eyes half-closed in contemplation. "What say we test them out for the Cricket Team ? We can always use more players, if they're the right kind of people."

"Indeed." Yukio's ice-blue eyes glittered, as he looked at the new arrivals. "I hear you've been enquiring into our Cultural Hygiene classes - always a healthy sign, shame they're fully booked. Otherwise we'd be happy to sign you up."

Dick Pontephright nodded over towards the distant hangars. "We'd better get over to check on how Jenks and Timmy are getting on. It's a responsible job there - and well, they're as good servants as you could hope to find, but - you have to keep an eye on them. More for form's sake, really."

"That's right !" Julian chimed in. "Grandfather always used to say you can't get servants like you used to. In fact, that's always been a traditional saying in our Family." One ear pricked up. "We thought it a bit odd, that nobody else has any around here. " He gestured towards Yukio's flashy Sports Tank, squatting on its folded hover skirts by the roadside. "Folk seem to be able to afford anything else."

Yukio's tail swished. "Well - there's a good reason why we have such automation here and at Home. It's quite OK to have a robot clean your house and clothes, but you wouldn't expect a proper Citizen to do the job. Homelands Citizens are real people, Registered DNA and everything, they get to vote, unlike plain Empire Citizens. And - well, you wouldn't let Foreign servants into the country. It'd lower the tone of the place."

"Quite. But I thought you had Koreans and such for that ?" Dick cocked his head on one side. "There was something about it in the newspaper."

The Siamese laughed. "Oh yes. Robots are valuable pieces of quality engineering. You wouldn't risk them on any really life-threatening jobs, not when we can always round up a few dozen natives from the Neighbour Country. They don't even speak Japanese, so ..." He shrugged. "By the way, I've noticed your Timmy never seems to say anything. Can she talk ?"

Dick frowned. "I'm not really sure. Great-Great uncle Pontephright, who settled the Plateau, got up there with three dozen assorted porters, cooks and bearers he'd picked up all along the way. Of course, they had about two dozen silly Native languages between them - so our Great-Great Uncle taught them to speak only Esperanto and Volapuk, he was sure that everyone Outside would be speaking that by now, if they weren't speaking English."

Gen slapped him on the back heartily. "Good idea ! Some of us don't like hearing our language in foreigner's mouths. I mean, you never know what they might say with it. Teach them all Volapuk - that'd be a good idea. Ugly-sounding name that, should suit them perfectly."

As the four strolled towards the hangars, Dick pressed his snout close to his brother's ear. "This is awfully rum," he whispered, "Nobody seems to admit they're speaking English. You'd think they'd be proud of it."

Julian nodded, puzzled. "Bit of a rum do, I must say. Still, this is the Future - we shouldn't be prejudiced about things like that."

Yukio's sharp ears pricked up, and his whiskers twitched as he overheard. "The Future isn't what it used to be," he commented sagely. "We've made a lot of progress, but it's been steady rather than revolutionary. And the big projects - " He waved vaguely skywards, where Japan's second starship the Musashi II was being assembled in orbit. "It didn't turn out as easy as you'd expect. Yes, we can beat light speed, the way the stories said we would, but it's not trivial, not at all. You have to accelerate to nine percent of light speed in a conventional way, get the gravitational shockwave starting to bend back from the centre of mass - then, and only then, can you kick in the Bachman-Turner Overdrive."

"Everything took longer," Gen confirmed. "Of course, there was the Millennium, the turning of the Great Mayan Year which wiped out a lot of momentum. Everything had been steadily improving every year before then, computers had done more computing, the beef Teriyaki in the restaurants had been getting beefier, even the rubber ducks in the bath were getting more rubbery by the month." He winced. "I've heard it said that even the plush toys on the shelves were getting P" He yelped, breaking off as Yukio clouted him across the head.

"Enough of that," Yukio hissed warningly. "We want these two to keep their Sanity Points as long as they last. What with Osamu and Potzu in strait-jackets already, we're under-strength."

"I say," Julian blinked. "Is it - usual - for folk to lose their marbles like that around here ? Two in a week sounds a bit steep, I should have thought." His tail twitched, recalling ancestral stories of Bellington Hall, and the Thing In The Gazebo that had been brought back from a temple in darkest Gloucestershire by their Great-Great-Great Uncle Algernon. It had had its uses, as many an unwelcome guest had very briefly found out.

The Siamese shook his head. "We expect half a dozen a term, sure enough. With some of the courses the Academy runs, you have to expect a certain ... casualty rate, one way or another. But Osamu and Potzu weren't doing that sort of course - you'd expect it of that Korean vixen Suzuko and her friends, who they were..." He suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, and his eyes widened. "Well, now. That's very interesting. Very interesting indeed." He pulled Gen over, and whispered urgently in his ear.

Gen nodded, his ears dipping as they resumed their walk. As they arrived at the hangars, he turned to the two new arrivals. "If you're game for it," he smiled, his eyes narrowing as he looked back towards Suzuko's accommodation block, "we've got a little project you can lend a paw with..."

"Main Engine Start !" Tktlohahn Davies screamed at the top of his voice, as the engineering crew scrambled to their stations and the aircraft shook as if trip-hammers were beating it, as the pulsejet engines thundered to life beneath them. "Captain - if that satellite's not lying to us, we've got a squadron of sea-skimmers six minutes and closing!"

"Confirmed!" Captain Evans slid into the main Pilot's seat, clipping into the internal power supply and scanning the big instrument panel - the only instruments that were not mounted in pull-out panels that a crew could take to the next expendable airframe. "Ipicic, up here please - we've got trouble." His screen pulsed red in one corner as one of the missiles approaching from the south-east rose above the wave tops and illuminated them with its radar. "They're homing in - they've seen us." The Captain pushed the throttles wide open, and the giant floatplane surged forward, in ten seconds rising up on its "step", its floats now skiing rather than wallowing through the water.

The RB-25 was big, but it was cramped, every cubic centimetre of the fuselage space crammed with crew or fuel. Mostly fuel, the Captain reflected for an instant, considering the wings were less than thirty centimetres thick at the roots, and almost solid steel. He turned, to see the thin llama wriggle out of the access tunnel that arched over the forward fuel tank with its thirty tonnes of space-cold liquid methane. "Lift off - we're clear of the water. Status checks everyone!"

"All engines in the green, Cap'n, cycling hundred and fifty Hertz!" Koahic called up from the Senior Flight Engineer's bay. "Up to full throttle, no problems. Speed two hundred knots."

"Fuel load sixty-three tonnes, tank pressure half a bar, forward tank fifty Kelvin," sang out Mirikitlahi over the intercom from his crew station behind the bomb bay. "We only took a ninety percent load, but the tanks are holding."

"Weapons systems Cold, Sir!" Jones the Capacitor shouted, the strain clear in his voice. "We were about flat yesterday, and we had to discharge before refuelling, standing orders."

"Missiles incoming, four minutes to impact." Captain Evans announced to the crew, trying to keep his voice even. He looked back in the rear view periscope for an instant: the fuel tanker was surging away at right angles to their course, as fast as it could go - he hoped they made it.

Captain Evans unplugged the intercom for a second as the Priest came up to him, his haughty llama features seemingly unmoved. He passed him the intercom plug, and in a few seconds they were on a private link.

"Four minutes, and closing," The Captain nodded towards the intercom screen. "Our capacitors are empty - we can't fight. And in cruise configuration - we can't run. Our only chance is to drop the cruise wings, light the ram and try to out-run them."

"In the wrong direction!" Ipicic hissed. "We are sworn to drop this - Special - payload on Guatemala City, where the Mexicanos have their headquarters. If we drop our cruise wings - by the time we out-run the missiles, we'll never have the fuel to get back - and we can't land and refuel without the cruise-wings."

"Three minutes and closing... we've got no choice, Ipicic, we can run or die. These orders," he tapped the thin grey folder of edible rice-paper, "These orders say we can't waste the "Device", in any circumstances - if we can't drop it on the Mexicans, we'll save it for later. I'm dropping the cruise-wings."

"No !" The Priest jerked rigid. "We must follow our first orders ! The heathen's missiles cannot have much fuel left - we may outrun them yet. Keep going."

"Can't do it. I'm dropping the cruise wings. Evans ! Hit the solid boosters, emergency start all systems. We have to ..."

The Priest seemed to bristle. His eyes narrowed dangerously, and he sprang between Captain Evans and the flight console, slamming his override transmitter into the ship's system.

"Huescahanti ! Pixepictlal ! To the cockpit, take over!" Ipicic shouted for his Acolytes. He flicked the address system to broadcast. "All crew, witness this - I am taking control, your Captain is to be delivered for Sac.."

Tktlohahn Davies saw things happen, as if in slow motion. Ipicic's hand reached for his sidearm - but Captain Evans was quicker. The Captain's old-fashioned automatic blasted twice, almost unheard in the shivering roar of the pulsejets - loaded with fishing shot cartridges, it kicked the llama a metre back, his chest torn apart in a messy welter.

"Oh shit." Tktlohahn moaned. He glanced at the Captain, and hit the emergency engine start. There was a bellowing roar that made the pulsejets outside sound like a gentle base beat, as the two solid-fuel boosters ignited, fifty tonnes of thrust kicking them forward on what was now a one-way trip into the open ocean.

Looking back, he saw a sight that would stay with him forever - Pixepictlal had almost got into the cockpit, when the four gravities thrust of the booster had kicked in. The opossum was wedged in the mouth of the long tube, that had become a deep pit as gravity suddenly pointed backwards rather than down - and with a cry of fear, the acolyte slipped and plummeted back out of sight.

"Keep going," Captain Evans's fur was bristling in shock. "Stand by to drop the cruise wings - reaching critical speed, three hundred knots." The acceleration pushed him hard into his seat as the great hybrid floatplane surged forward, the slender cruise wings bending up three metres at the tips under the weight of the loaded upper body, and starting to vibrate as their long, straight profile was pushed to fly faster than their rated design speed. In about ten seconds they would tear clean off, as the air speed passed four hundred knots under the bellowing thrust of the solid fuel boosters. "Status check all stations! Missiles two minutes and closing!"

"Fuel load normal, ready on the balance pumps," Mirikitilahi called up from the Flight Engineer deck, paws sweating as he leaned over the switches. "Captain - Pixepictlal hit the bulkhead beside me - I think he's dead."

"Carry on!" The Captain's voice was level, but his eyes widened. "Report!"

"Weapons systems still flat cold."

"Pulsejets losing power, the valves are choking up - ready to jettison."

"Visual sighting!" This was from Jones the Upper Tail-gunner, in the rear turret. "Twelve of them, they - oh. Eleven of them. One hit the tanker, it's gone. Getting infra-red flares from the rest - they hit the afterburners, they're climbing at us."

"Dropping cruise wings," The Captain unlatched a covered compartment on his panel, and pulled hard on a toggle. "We're on our way. Navigator ! Break out the charts, give me some options."

The aircraft jerked, as if it had been kicked. Explosive bolts fired, and with a rippling shudder the glider-like lower wings, lower engines and floats separated, tumbling free. One float tore off, the whole assembly crumpling as it spun away, swiftly losing speed and dropping. Freed of the drag, the Spirit of 56 surged forward like a spurred horse, entering a shallow dive as the airspeed built up towards the speed of sound.

"Ram pressure in the green, Cap'n," Koahic had swivelled to the second bank of instruments, scanning the pressure and temperature readings of the great ramjet engines. "Fuel pre-heaters - On. Fuel injection - on." The great needle-nosed bomber trembled, as its main engines lit with a thump of detonating methane. "Number one, number two - ignition."

"One minute to impact, they're accelerating after us ... but we're running now ... we're in with a chance." Captain Evans scanned his instruments, nodding curtly as he pulled out of the dive. "Mach one point two, five seconds to booster burnout." Already the big boosters were shuddering, their low-technology solid fuel burning unevenly, sparks in the exhaust plumes showing where scraps of fuel were breaking away as the structure broke down. A few seconds later, their thrust faltered and faded, and more explosive bolts sheared them away to tumble into the airflow.

There came a cheer from Jones the Upper Tail-gunner. "Two missiles gone! They went for the boosters! Nine left, estimated three kilometres. Still coming." His muzzle twisted as he looked at the quadruple mountings for his electron beamers, and the winking array of red lights warning him the capacitors were flat. "Tracking them in my sights ... two point four kilometres, closing."

"Taking us up," Captain Evans ordered, watching as the air speed increased, the nose beginning to rise. "Eleven thousand metres altitude - engine efficiency's increasing nicely." He winced, spotting the nine dots approaching on the main screen, almost glad he could not see them directly. "Thirty seconds to impact. Point defence missiles, go!" He had kept these till last, knowing their performance was poor at low airspeeds and altitudes - like the rest of his ship, it was optimised to fight on the edge of space at three times the speed of sound, and fairly hopeless at anything else.

"Point defence one, two, running," came the cheery voice of Natahaho, on the lower tail turret. A pair of ports on the side of the tail fin popped open, compressed air rams ejecting what looked like a pair of conventional air-to-air missiles. "Throttling them back ... they're backing in." With one paw on the old games controller linked to his laptop, he cut the engine power on the defence missiles and they fell behind, the pair of silvery darts trailing behind the Spirit of 56, their flaring exhausts a tempting target for the nine homing missiles. "Feeding them back - detonating!" There

was a pair of thermal starbursts on the rearward scanners as the nine were reduced to seven. "Uh-Oh, they're either command controlled or Smart - they've broken formation, starting to weave. Two kilometres, closing ..."

Only three people onboard could clearly see the facts - the Captain, Tktlohahn and Natahaho, whose laptops were running the Command and Defence programs. The icons on their old screens were starting to flash dangerously as the final seconds ticked away and Natahaho threw another pair of defence missiles back at their pursuers.

Suddenly there came a whoop of triumph. "Cap'n ! One of them's dropping back - and another - they're out of fuel!" Natahaho pounded the breech of his still-useless tail guns in relief, as within ten seconds the remaining Ibis 10s' engines sputtered and died, the wings sweeping forward as the airspeed dropped away, as they made a valiant but fruitless attempt to keep up with their escaping quarry.

Captain Evans gave a deep, shuddering sigh of relief. One second later, it became a grimace, as he surveyed the blood-spattered cockpit. "Davis, look you, we're in trouble, I'd rather be over the Mexicanos lines any day of the week. Folks back home won't condone this." He nodded at the dead priest. "We'll have to ... give him a burial at sea, Pixepictal too if he's dead. We might have to climb to our cruise height, and you know what that means."

Tktlohahn shivered, nodding as he checked the seal of his pressure suit. At twenty kilometres, blood boiled even in the icy air - and their maximum altitude was nearer thirty. "I'll see to it, Sir - get some of the Night-shift crew up here." He shivered at the prospect, looking at the narrow tunnel leading back to the main engineering spaces and the escape hatch that the bodies would have to go out of. "On my way."

Ten minutes later, Satellite JSSF 777650 tracked the unmarked silvery dart now moving due West at just above the speed of sound, suddenly accelerate and start to climb again, its engines breathing easier as ram pressure increased with the sudden speed in the cold air of the stratosphere. Despite its advanced optics, Satellite JSSF 777650 had not seen the three bodies shoved unceremoniously out of the lower escape hatch, tumbling down to be lost in the great blue expanse of the Pacific.

High and cold in the Gamma Orbital band, JSSF 777650 scratched its metaphorical head as it tracked the bomber. The Japanese Self Defence Force had no interest in the current South American struggle, but this small part of it was not going in any expected direction. Towards Mexico was the usual direction, not across the central Pacific, heading for Asia or Australasia. Puzzled, Satellite JSSF 777650 opened up a data feed and decided to call Home about it.

"Options, me boyos, give me Options!" Captain Evans' voice was taut with worry, as he broadcast to his crew. "We want a friendly landfall, and a chance to ship ourselves and our ... cargo ... back home afterwards. Navigators ! What's within range ?"

In the cramped crew position above the bombardier, two opossums tapped diligently at their laptops. "Sir ! Our regular charts ... in half an hour, we'll be flying off the edge of them. No military information, no navigation beacons - we'll have to use the general World Map, and the Naildown Inertial Guidance to navigate from here." One of them tapped the beige box duct-taped to his laptop. "But we were a long time swaying about on the ocean, I think it's a bit off by now."

There was a minute's relative silence, while the cabin crew watched their instruments. The great ramjets were running on economy mode, just at the bottom of the stratosphere, keeping their infrared signature low. The "Still" was running smoothly, using the space-cold fuel to condense out and store liquid oxygen from the air, ready to use as coolant and high-altitude oxidant - at thirty kilometres high, they would be flying above ninety-nine percent of the atmosphere, and needed to carry their own along with them. No voice was heard, while the navigators tapped on their computers and compared flight paths to one unwelcome destination or another.

"Two choices, Cap'n," Came the voice of Tihucabo, the lepene Night Shift navigator. "We've an embassy of sorts on New Tortuga, that they used to call Wake Island - we, umm, buy and sell equipment there. If we can get down there at New Port Royal, it's only two hours away. Our maps just about cover it."

"New Tortuga ?" Captain Evans barked in astonishment. "You're mad ! It's the Pirate Capital of the planet ! They'd kill us for the price of our saleable organs, and barbecue the rest!"

"Then it's North Korea or nowhere, Sir - we've only just got the range for it. We'll have to glide in to the Honego valley, there's an emergency landing strip on the mud flats that's four kilometres long. And - we'll have to let them know we're coming. They're a bit touchy about that sort of thing." Tihucabo flicked through the world map, which only summarised the national defence systems. "We've only got the VHF radio working right now, line-of sight about eight hundred kilometres from cruise height. That'll mean ..." he tapped again at the specially adapted keyboard, fingers stiff in the pressure suits that were becoming harder to work in every minute "That'll mean we'll have to make maximum altitude before we contact them. It's an in-flight Emergency, I'm sure they'll let us through their airspace far enough to land." He winced. Once its great belly-skid hit the ground, a Road Runner was going nowhere except to a repair and recycling yard.

"And South Korea, and Japan." The Captain nodded. "North Korea shouldn't be too bad for landing permissions - Kim Sung the Fourth, the Cool Leader, he's got treaties with us. Tihucabo ! Get on the Emergency

frequency as soon as we're within range, try and get us clearance." He drew a deep breath. "I hope you like noodles, rice and Kim Chee, people, as that's what we're headed for, for the foreseeable future." His long tail twitched, as he thought of the Priest and the two acolytes, now feeding the fishes some ten kilometres below and hundreds of kilometres behind. Pixepictlal's death had been an accident, and the Priest had left them little choice to save themselves - but Huescahahiti had gone bezerk at the heresy, and had to be - dealt with, by the Night Shift crew. There was no room for prisoners on a supersonic bomber.

Natahaho's voice rang thinly through the speakers, sounding puzzled. "Capt'n," he said slowly, "I'm looking at the interface program on this Device we're carrying. As soon as we're off our maps, we'll be flying almost blind - but this has got a comprehensive world map built in. Just dial a target, and it'll tell us where to go, accuracy ..." he consulted his notebook. "Circular error of probability about the same as our wingspan, anywhere on the planet."

The Captain considered. "Well, it may claim that," he nodded, whiskers twitching inside his pressure helmet as they cruised at their best Economy setting. "But I'll believe it when I see it. Tap in the first landfall as somewhere prominent on the Japanese coast, then we'll see how accurate it is when we get there. After that, we'll just tap in our landing point in Korea, and let it take us straight in."

Tktlohahn Davies winced, as his display updated from the much more comprehensive map carried by the Device that sat ten metres behind him in the gutted bomb bay. "I hope that thing knows what it's doing," he muttered to himself, running through the checklist of his pressure suit as the indicated course recommended maximum cruise altitude, "or the food where we're headed will be the least of our problems."

"Curry-O!" Kazuko called out cheerfully, a blast of steam and stinging vapours preceding her as she opened the modified fume cupboard that protected the stove. "Everyone hungry?"

Putting the heavy stainless steel Balti dish down on the long kitchen table, Kazuko beamed happily, studying the faces of her friends, proud that they were such good actors as they pretended to be horrified by the prospect. "Eat up, Tripe Tindaloo's good for what ails you!"

Mae's whiskers drooped. "Even if you're suffering from the long-term effects of last term's Leclerc cuisine?"

Kazuko gave what would surely count as a (Grin +4, Save Vs. Gaze Weapon at (-6)) as she opened the lid with a flourish, her black rubber apron glistening with condensation. "Enjoy! It's the start of term, I'm in funds!"

"I had heard about that," Trish nodded, her blue eyes wide. "I was with your Sister, she was explaining the Japanese for "Recursive", showed me a tin of your end-of-term food stocks." The can of Moldavian Disgust had a label depicting a starving peasant in traditional costume, throwing up his hands in horror and loathing as he looked into a newly opened can. The label on the can he held could just be seen to carry the same image, which was presumably repeated recursively down to quantum sizes. "Is not your Sister coming over?"

Kazuko winced, averting her huge blue eyes, trying not to remember that Hiroshi's eyes were bigger and bluer than hers, and her nose even smaller. "No! She's not meant to even BE here! The only properly registered new student her age is that red setter puppy Shobban O'Branigan - the maths star."

"Ah." Suzuko corrected gently. "That's spelled Shobban, but you actually pronounce it Siohain O'Bhaine. It's in Erse, for better or worse."

"Oh." Trish nodded sagely, while Kazuko ladled oniony. "Have met her. She was asking today if folk can do a square dance on Earth, could they do a cube dance in no-gravity?" She opened her muzzle, about to explain about her Hypercube dance prizes back home, but decided against it.

Mangana raised an eyebrow. "If you won't invite Hiroshi over, Kaz, I'll invite her myself next week. She's my relative too, you know! Jealousy doesn't suit you."

"Eat up!" Kazuko forced a grin, but one lacking in hit bonus points. "OK, I'll invite her round. But she's not using my Dimensional Portal, and that's flat." She turned to Mariko, who was wearing a fashionable antique Russian chemical warfare suit protecting her expensive leathers. "One portion or two?"

"One and a half," the mouse smiled. Reaching down to the bronze mesh crib she carried, she stroked its occupant. A little forked tongue flicked out, and then her daughter's scaly head popped out inquisitively. "Little Dracaena's old enough to sample this now."

Trish looked on with interest, as the baby mouse/dragon seemed to flow out of the basket and onto the table, batting for balance with her wings. Dracaena was a definite mix of her parents, having a mouse's bald tail and big ears, but otherwise resembling dragons as she had seen them in local pictures. "Did not know there were any of that species round here."

Mariko laughed, her long whiskers twitching. "There aren't, more's the pity. I know the idea looks a bit far-fetched - and you might say Dracaena was fetched from pretty far from here. Her Father isn't one of the big dragons - about two and a half metres, most of that neck and tail." Her own tail twitched nostalgically. "I doubt I'll get the chance to go back to that place - the Travel Company lost too many scouts, didn't reckon it'd really sell to the mass market."

"Oh, I don't know," Kazuko chipped in brightly, her good humour quite restored. "Gives a holiday a bit of excitement - and if the company raffled off the value of the return tickets of the folk who didn't get back as a lottery, think of the good publicity! Cheaper than advertising on TV." She waved at the old one-metre flat screen in the corner, a design so old that it was all-digital. "A good ringside advert on MassacreBall costs hundreds of gold Yen a screen exposure."

Trish frowned, nodding as she tried again to make sense of the game show. It was obviously a popular sport, with a big stadium of screaming fans looking down on a kilometre-wide oval track as two teams vied for some sort of supremacy. On the inside lanes of the track, one sort of player clumped around determinedly in old-fashioned lead Divers boots and carrying scalpels - on the middle lane were unicyclists swinging heavy iron balls on chains, while around the outside a variety of aggressively upgraded steam-rollers roared and bellowed around the track, great plumes of diesel smoke snorting from supercharged engines.

"Do we HAVE to have that on, Kazuko?" Suzuko asked plaintively. "It's not in very good taste - I mean, you never know whose friends and relatives have been killed on Game Shows. Last thing I heard, it was the likeliest cause of death apart from old age, beating heart disease."

"Hey! Hands off that TV, Suki!" A blonde thatch of head-fur bristled as Kazuko saw her friend reach for the remote control. "Better than hanging on to a hundred and twenty, collecting artificial organs and bedsores. Might at least go out scoring points, with all the world watching and cheering - when you've got to go, you've got to go -" she blinked, eyes going wide as the crowd roared. "Ooooh! Just like that. Nice in-swipe by that steam roller, got to be twenty points there."

Suzuko sighed, sitting down to eat her tripe Tindaloo - a dish she had got used to, as well as getting used to managing without her sense of smell for half an hour afterwards. She looked around, watching her friends cheerfully arguing, and gave a wry smile. I shouldn't be surprised at this kind of thing by now, she told herself. The world had changed in many ways since the return of the Great Old Ones after the Millennium, who had put the world to rights, and brought about the present golden age.

Mae's eyes focussed on Suzuko, and she smiled, her whiskers twitching. "You're thinking so loud I don't have to deliberately scan you, Suki!" The whiskers twitched again. "You're thinking of what Mangana told you from her Arcaneology lessons - let's see - "And that time would be easy to know, for those on Earth would be wild and free as the Great Old Ones themselves, beyond good and evil, laughing and shouting and killing as it pleased them.""

Mangana nodded. "That was it, all right. Then it goes "Then the Great Old Ones would return from Beyond the Stars, and teach the mortals new ways to laugh and shout and kill." Which explains a lot, really." She gestured towards the screen.

"And yodelling," Mae added, before tucking into her steaming, fuming meal. "We all like yodelling, mortals and immortals alike. " She looked over at Princess Cthuline, whose eyes dipped right down into her skull at the marvellous taste of the curry. "Thing is, we haven't got as much time to practice as the Princess and her relatives have, so we have to try harder."

Princess Cthuline smiled, bowing graciously. "You surface-dwellers have some excellent ideas." She gestured towards the fuming dish in front of her. "My Grandmother's been writing down recipes since we standardised the Aklo language in what you call the early Eocene era, but we never thought of this one." Her rubbery green-grey gills swelled in appreciation, as she swallowed more of the tasty dish.

Suzuko looked around the room again, sitting back quietly as night fell and Kazuko swapped Recipes That Humanity Was Not Meant To Know with the gorgeous batrachian Princess. She finished her own meal, waved a happy farewell and went along the corridor to her room to study, glad for some quiet and privacy after a long and busy day. She looked out into the night, as she drew the blinds, her ears perked up happily for almost the first time that day.

"At least," she told herself, as she pulled a book off the shelf in the narrow room, "At least - now I can relax. It's over for the day."

Three hundred metres away from the accommodation blocks on top of the hill, the moonlight shone pale on two determined figures, crouched around an array of paraphernalia.

Hiroshi Leclerc looked up from the scribbled runic circles, her huge eyes reflecting the moon with dozens of twinkling highlights. "I couldn't get Asafoetida or Henbane in the cafeteria - I should think soy sauce and ground chilli should do the job. " She blinked, her night-wide eyes shimmering like pools of mercury in the moonlight. "Do you think the Sinister Stars are Sinister enough tonight?" She wriggled, her long legs pale in the rising moonlight, her second-best sailor-suit neatly arranged. "I bet we'll get something with more slimy pseudopods than you can possibly imagine, even if you sat down and thought about it for hours."

"Sure!" A red-furred canine girl, likewise dressed in the sailor suit of a first-year student, wagged her tail happily as she imagined a fifty-digit number multiplied by a fractal exponent. "Good time of year! We should - get something Interesting, one way or another. And it's Friday - at my old school, the Seniors used to do their big Weird Science classes on Fridays, so when they got dragged off, they had all weekend to get back." She cocked her head on one side, her eyes wide and vacant-looking as she panted happily, her tongue flopping out of her muzzle and her long ears swinging. "Hasn't your Sister showed you how? Mine did."

"Kazuko's so MEAN!" Hiroshi wailed suddenly and loudly, bursting into an immediate flood of tears, kicking over the bargain basement Dimensional Portal. "She wouldn't lend me her Portal, wouldn't even invite me round to check on her collection of Unspeakable books!"

The floppy puppy awwed in sympathy. "Most folk getting here already tried that sort of thing," she suggested helpfully. "Didn't you take Weird Science at your old school?"

Hiroshi bit her lip. "Well - some classes, yes. I was going to do the rest, but I got here instead." She looked down at Shobban, who was playfully rolling on her back, ears flopping everywhere. "Not like you - did you really take ALL your exams three years early?"

Shobban nodded vigorously. "Sure! It was easy ! The maths ones were all problems other people had done first, so ... " she gave a vague wave. "It's like a jigsaw. Once you know there's a picture there, it all falls into place."

Hiroshi blushed. "Too hard", she muttered to herself, looking at the precisely calculated Pathological Curve in the pages of the book, and drew a squiggle of about the same shape on the ground instead. "Squiggle, squiggle ... I couldn't get proper ground rock dust from the plateau of Leng to draw this in, I used talcum powder. Well, it ought to work," she finished up defiantly, crossing her arms as she looked down at the mystical shape drawn on the ground. "At least, we should get Something interesting happening!"

An hour after the meal and the inevitable squabbling about washing-up, Trish took the downstairs corridor to her room, the second from the entrance and opposite Suzuko's. She sat down on the narrow bunk, stretching luxuriantly, checking the door was securely bolted and the window blinds locked tight.

"It's a friendly place, all right," she told herself, "but it'd be nice if I could just ... relax, really relax once in awhile. And the food - it's good of its sort, but not really..." She frowned, reaching for her dictionary and fruitlessly flicking through it for an equivalent Japanese word.

Despite being September, the night was warm, and the budget-conscious Academy rooms entirely innocent of air conditioning. All the other rooms' windows were open, and Trish looked at hers longingly. A blind would flap in the breeze in front of an open window, and she could not risk more people looking in.

The vixen sighed, standing up. Her hands caressed her long head-fur, unfastening the band and letting it fall free, down to her slim waist. Her sailor-suit was next, and soon the rest of her garments were neatly folded on the clean floor all ready for tomorrow. Trish smiled, catching her reflection in the mirror. Black-furred paws stroked down the reddish fur that had already invited some admiring words, from the various other students - though the one called Toemi had been staring at her rather oddly, as if not quite sure what she was looking at.

"This could be a problem," Trish nodded, experimentally twirling round in the mirror, liking the way the tail swirled behind her. Toemi was rather better-equipped, but still more - limited than the display Trish could put on at home. She shook her head. "Toemi - she might be able to *see* me - from some angles. The Princess, too."

Experimentally, Trish jumped up and down. The fur swayed in the slight breeze, her ears waved, and her slim figure jiggled in all the right places, just right for its estimated mass. She was getting quite used to this - but of course, the suit had some definite disadvantages as well. She had been itching all day, in a spot that did not translate directly to anywhere mapped to the suit's surface. It was stifflingly hot, too. Looking around, the fur-clad vixen checked the blinds were tightly drawn.

"Just this once - a really comfortable night's sleep," she promised herself.

Had anyone been listening intently outside her door, they would have heard the sound of a large zipper, a strange swishing noise that did not seem to come from anywhere definable in the room - and then a happy sigh, as Trish stepped out of the suit and settled down to sleep.

"This is boring." Hiroshi looked up at the night sky, stamping her foot impatiently. "It should work - is the moon leeringly gibbous enough, and the sinister stars portentous enough?"

Shobban squinted at a small pocket instrument and nodded, the red setter's fur seeming almost black in the dim light. "Should be ! Are you sure you said the words right?"

Hiroshi poked her tongue out - and hurriedly pulled it back, realising it was one more competition where Shobban was certain to win. "Of course I did ! I saw it on TV last month, and I said it just like I remembered it." She blinked, her foot shuffling in sudden embarrassment. "Do you think I should have written it down?"

Shobban was about to reply, when suddenly her ears perked up at a distant noise. It was a familiar sound in its way, a sort of - unnameable jelly-like sloshing, as if a colossal rolling sponge was being soaked and squeezed in a bucket of endless echoing immensity. It was making slow, steady progress up the hill, moving in a determined, almost unconscious way towards the Summoning.

She wagged her tail, ears perking up. "I think we did it ! Bit different from Wednesday afternoons in school - it's coming from downhill, not from the "unguessable rifts between the dimensions." But we've got some company !"

Hiroshi's ears were no better than a standard human, but her eyes had a light-gathering ability eight times as good at night. She squealed excitedly, spotting what was lumbering up the hill towards them, moving in a way not convenient to describe in vectors known to any sane or wholesome mathematics. "We did it! I've invited over my first

monster !" She wriggled, adjusting her tartan sailor-suit, and looking up at the Entity that towered and writhed in a sanity-shredding way Hiroshi thought pretty. "Are you a nice monster or a nasty monster ?"

At her words, the Entity seemed to jerk suddenly, halting its steady uphill progress. Various extensions flailed around wildly, as if it was casting around in shocked surprise. Drawing itself almost together, with a panicked-looking shiver it turned and fled downhill, vanishing rapidly into the night.

Hiroshi collapsed to her knees, and burst into floods of tears that threatened to dehydrate her. She kicked miserably at the squiggly lines drawn in talcum powder, and the sinister symbols outlined in cafeteria chilli powder. A human and a canine voice rang out together from the lonely moonlit hilltop, in shared anguish and despair.

"It's SO Unfair !"

The moon was rising high in the clear skies, half an hour after midnight, as Tava finally finished up his course work and headed out to bed. He yawned, stretching, his lithe muscles rippling under the short pale grey wool as he pulled off his shirt and stood poised for a second, looking into the single narrow mirror of the room. He glanced at the door, the sole exit leading into the corridor, where his half-sister Jenni was presumably fast asleep three by now three doors away.

The ram's short tail flicked, in irritation and something more. Jenni was proving to be a growing irritation, always turning up ahead of him, and hanging around whenever there was work to be done.

Tava's nostrils widened a little, at some half-unconsciously perceived scent. "But then - " he frowned, shaking her head. "It's nothing bad she does. She's helpful - she's always ready to volunteer for anything. And she did help me out with all the paperwork. A pretty ewe, too - the only one around. Just a pity - she is who she is." He shook his head, opening the built-in wardrobe, and took out a dressing gown. It was a plain white belted robe, looking perfectly clean. Jenni had kindly handed him the robe when his own dressing-gown had vanished in the wash that evening, pointing out that it was easier to wash shed wool off a robe than a futon mattress.

Slipping out of his shorts, Tava sat down cross-legged on the mattress, and drew the white robe around him. It was a little tight, but he was used to difficulties finding perfectly fitting clothing for a ram his size. He yawned - taking in a deep breath, covering his mouth politely with the sleeve, though there was nobody else in the room. He blinked. Or was there? There was a definite presence that he could feel himself aware of, though it was hard to say exactly how.

Silently, he strode to the door and threw it suddenly open. "Jenni ? If you're ..." But he broke off, blinking as he looked down the perfectly empty corridor. Only shadows walked in the moonlight that night - but he had been somehow so sure of another presence in close company with him.

"Probably just another ghost." He nodded to himself, glancing over to the Academy guidebook, which had more than a few mentions of the subject. "Nearly seventy years of running courses like they have today, and Monster Island next door all the time - not amazing, that a lot of folk over the years didn't live to graduate." His nostrils flared again, as he hastily drew the robe around himself. Relaxing on the mattress, he felt wide-awake, as if some deeply buried instinct was telling him there were far better things to be doing than sleeping right now. He firmly suppressed a memory of Jenni bending over to pick up the laundry - besides, the scent was definitely not hers, though it was maddeningly similar.

Suppressing a groan, Tava buried his head under the pillow, making a sketchy Elder Sign into the air. He felt sure that if there were ghosts around here, they would be pretty female ones - and ones determined to catch up with what they had missed out on in life, before trampling Monsters or badly built aircraft projects cut short their careers.

"The worst kind," he winced, feeling his body respond at an undefined scent. "Right now - the worst kind."

Fourth Lieutenant Maso Hokkadi tapped irritably at the console of the threat board, in the Japanese Self-Defence Force headquarters deep under Mount Futaba. The board showed a huge slice of the Pacific Ocean, all the way from Tokyo Bay out towards Hawaii, and he could at a second's notice call up any display of the rest of the planet.

It had been a peaceful evening shift. When he thought about it, Maso recalled that all the shifts were peaceful these days - with the Self-Defence force pre-emptively challenging potential aggressor nations in the far flung corner of the world, the only regular Alerts had been when the denizens of Monster Island used to break out and go dancing on towns. But that had ceased a year ago - the cost savings from putting Fourth Lieutenants on watch rather than full Colonels, had bought a lot of sake for the Officers' Mess.

"So, what is this one ?" He tapped at the red dot speeding across the Pacific, now at twenty kilometres, "cruise-climbing" as its fuel load burned off. The peering satellites had identified it, certainly, imaging the radar-bright silver dart from low orbit with a full spectral scan. His banded Tanuki tail swished irritably, the racoon-like mask of dark fur around his eyes lending him a permanently sour expression.

"It doesn't make sense," he noted, turning to his colleague, a huge-eyed Fifth Lieutenant who was busy memorising a manual of JSDF standard phrases. "We've scanned it - nothing on neutron detection, nothing on pion flux, which rules out nuclear payload and even anti-matter. The Road Runners operate in squadrons when they're bombing on conventional missions - so what's this doing, Miki ?"

"Sir, sir - our weapons are useless against their Advanced Alien Technology..." Miki murmured intently, quoting Page Four in the book. She blinked, turning round. "What?"

Maso frowned. "We'd better keep watching this one. The Big Board says Peru is a friendly nation - but what's this aircraft doing? It just got away from a Mexican stand-off missile pack - you'd think it'd be heading the other way." He repeatedly pressed a function key on his "retro-chic" keyboard that had replaced data gloves in the more cost-conscious departments. "No - this Road Runner has its responder switched off. Definitely looks like it's on a war footing." Bringing up a new screen, he contemplated the array of pre-set responses that could swing the JSDF into action, from the orbiting battlestations down to the humblest trooper, and calls to the nuclear deterrent held by the Girl Scouts for safe-keeping.

"Maybe there's some more Mexican submarines we haven't spotted, and it's heading for them?" Miki said brightly, switching to the screen covering the southernmost Homelands island. She looked at the tracking data, and gave a soft "Oooooooh", as she took in the situation. "This is, like, SO early Cold-War retro! Nobody's been flying bombers at that altitude since mini-skirts were new fashion!"

Just at that moment, there came a sound that they had only heard on simulations. It was a long, cold, sobbing note, ringing from every loudspeaker in the building. The screens in front of them began to flash, and the characters "FIRESTARTER" blinked in blood-red overlaying the main image.

Maso gave a startled yelp, as he fumbled for the code books - after a series of disastrous security penetrations the decade before, all the really secret information was kept nowhere near a computer. "Firestarter - imminent massive attack on Home Islands," he read, his mouth dry as he started to hit the "confirm" keys at every prompt as the computer threw up pre-calculated response plans. "Where's it coming from? How? There's nothing in the orbital scans - and anyway, who'd dare?" Suddenly the Road Runner heading across the Pacific changed on the screen from a red dot to an eerily pulsating, black and scarlet splash as its threat status increased to the maximum possible level. All across the board, the responses were coming in as defences sprang to life, configuring all possible units between the intruder and its projected target. Some of these he had never seen listed on any JSDF charts, and many of them only carried cryptic code names. Suddenly there were three harsh, spitting hisses of spectral white noise relayed from the old LOVE HOTEL chain of geostationary satellites swinging high above.

"Spike One!" Miki yelled. "Central America. Spike Two! Spike Three!" Her ears went rigid. "Three large energy releases - the satellite cameras shut down."

"The world screen - we're getting EMP pulses - somebody's used nukes," Maso whispered. For an instant, there was a hush before they dared to look up at the detailed readouts.

Miki's long and pointed "elvish" ears were drooped and trembling in shock, as she silently pointed towards a screen displaying tactical data on the Central American conflict. Three large red spots showed where nuclear fireballs were rising above the Colombian provinces of the Peruvian People's Republic - legally registered, "clean" anti-matter bombs that had probably been built from Japanese produced anti-hydrogen. But that was not the real problem - the computers were already writing it off as expected retaliation for what had happened five minutes earlier.

"Mexico City," Maso's jaw dropped wide in horrified astonishment, as he hit every reaction key on his console. "What happened to it?"

The console showed him, layering a sequence of data from satellites, remote ground sensors and one surviving Artificial Sentience surviving in the heart of the New Mayan Empire's capital city.

Thirty kilometres above the Yucatan Peninsular, the RB-25 "Road Runner" had been flying for an hour since its launch from the wide Mississippi delta. It had punched through the Mexican defences on the Colorado, its keen-eyed turret gunners hosing through half a dozen missiles punching up through the atmosphere, climbing the planet's steep gravity well in a vain effort to catch the sleek dart. Just south of the old border, it had turned and accelerated, the engine plume showing brilliant as its ramjet became a ram-rocket breathing the liquid oxygen it had distilled from the atmosphere on the way up.

"But there's nothing onboard it!" Miki complained, her ears drooping. "Look - it's going right under our JSSF 77931, not fifty kilometres away. We could spot a nuclear hand-grenade even, at twice the distance."

"That's not what it's carrying," Maso was staring at the screen in appalled fascination. "It's still a hundred and ten kilometres away from target - less than two minutes, the speed it's flying at. Look at the heat traces! You don't need the infra-red cameras, you can see it glowing!"

Miki shivered, her ears right down. She could see the faintly ionised traces of the dorsal gunner firing at another missile - the cramped ball-turret gunner would be looking through a windscreen something hotter than the tip of a soldering iron. "They're going to cook in there..." she blinked. "Oh. The console says they use the fuel for coolant - there's a whole lot of stuff about thermal energy recovery - that's how they can soak at that speed all the way to Mexico City. But what are they going to do when they get there? The Mexicans are well up on chemical and biological defences - we sell them the latest antidotes to Designer Diseases, before they're ever "accidentally" released anywhere that deserves it!"

Hitting the Fast Forward button to a minute later, they found out. The console flashed, spotting an object dropping away from the bomber - exactly the sort of thing the software was designed to spot. The object was big, the size of a small aircraft itself, and plummeted winglessly down in the near-vacuum from twenty-eight kilometres above

Mexico City. On the screen, its vector flashed a brutal red, crossing the exact centre of the biggest city of the New Mayan Empire.

The view shifted. The central plaza was a huge expanse of paving, laid out by the Spanish Conquistadors half a millennia before, flanked by the great cathedrals that had survived the theological holocaust of the Rupture, itself a quarter of a century ago. An Artificial Sentience ran the security monitors, its cameras tracking the population running helter-skelter for cover in the summer swelter, the air-raid sirens on the fall-out shelters blaring as something vectored in towards them through the defences, eight miles high and falling fast.

Maso winced, looking away from the flash he expected. But when he looked up again, the device had gone from the screen - or rather, its solid trace had shattered into a tumbling scatter of falling debris. "It broke up? But what hit it? Another five seconds and they would, but ..." He waved dumbly as the Snow Cone 5 interceptors homed in and detonated, scattering the fragments further across the skies. But then he looked up at the ground cameras of the central plaza, and his voice faltered.

Mexico City had suddenly transformed into a giant madhouse. The citizens within camera range were variously laughing wildly and screaming aloud, running wildly around, or grappling each other in homicidal frenzy. As he watched, figures appeared in free fall from high windows - and in a minute, wisps of smoke began to appear from some of the buildings.

For three minutes they watched, tails fluffed out in shock, while the JSDF computers queried the silicon brains they could contact in Mexico City, the only minds left intact.

"*Total psychic devastation within ten kilometre radius of Psi Zero*". The console announced, its mechanical voice sounding shocked. "*Psychic contagion risk Absolute. Estimate ninety-five percent fatalities in 'A' Ring by cumulative homicidal/suicidal frenzy within fifty minutes. 'B' Ring and 'C' Ring out to thirty kilometres, rapidly spreading madness, compound exponential growth of pyromania, catatonia and suicidal Pantophobia.*" The screen flickered a few times, running through possible causes, and finding none. But ten seconds later, some cross-reference engine deep in the JSDF system scanned ancient records, and came up with a single entry. "*One point four percent correlation, tentative. Overseas section, unconfirmed, EC conflict, reporting name Electric Grin.*"

"Just what, in the name of everything unholy, was the Electric Grin?" Maso whispered. But a growl behind him cut his question short. Turning, he and Miki saluted, to see a hurrying crowd of senior officers and extremely hard-faced Security guards, mostly minks and cold-blooded Komodo Dragons, crowding into the room.

"One more word about that, and you're for a ten-year posting to the Antarctic Front, Lieutenant," barked a Kitsune wearing a General's uniform, his tails all held rigid in concentration. "Never, ever repeat that phrase - you are NOT cleared to know about it." He strode over to the console, checking that the computers were kicking the JSDF and all possible allies into instant action. "All defence plans active? Good - because the exact twin of that Road Runner - is on an attack run, straight in to Japan!"

All was quiet in the dormitory. The nicely gibbous moon shone down over the peaceful island, as Suzuko quietly padded down the hallway from the bathroom, regretting that last late-night pot of tea that had awakened her at three in the morning. She yawned, drowsily eager to return to her comfy futon, and get back to sleep for another few hours before daylight. Sleep was one of the few times she could get away from her worries. For a moment, she paused. It was a peaceful night, with only the faint meeping and glibbering of the ghouls seeping up from the sub-basement.

In front of her room, she looked around at what the slanting moonlight revealed. Trish must have been out for a midnight stroll, to judge from the traces of mud on the floor ending at her new friend's door - oddly, the mud was not in the expected paw print patterns, but more of a smeared, rolling track as if someone had rolled muddy blankets across the floor under great pressure. She shook her head, smiling. Trish must have tried to clean her prints up, and given up till the morning light. A conscientious student, Trish was proving, and indeed, there seemed to be definite hidden depths to her.

As she stepped into her room and closed the door, Suzuko's tired eyes scanned her shelves. There was her Summer and her Winter uniform hanging up, her bathing-suit, and little else except her pressure suit and helmet, kept by the door. Next to her little Cray 90-90*, there was the only communicator she owned - strictly speaking, it was loaned to her as part of her place on the Alert scheme where Toho academy agreed to protect the island's airspace from the giant insects and monsters, and other such threats.

Suddenly, the red telephone rang.

- Suzuko's desktop machine was a thoroughly unfashionable device, a Personal Computer. Most people had moved onto Remote_Impersonal_Computers, but not Suzuko. The Cray 90-90 was bought cheaply since it could only take one old-style block of 90 Gigabyte memory, and run at a paltry 90 GigaFlops. Suzuko usually used it for typing shopping lists, merge mail and the occasional brute force hacking attack of Evil MegaCorporations™. Plus, its exhaust cooling fan runs hot enough to make a really GOOD cup of tea.

