

Chapter 6

(Or, Atoll Trek 6 - The Search For Suzuko)

A grey dawn gradually spread over the Western Pacific. The Academy lay quiet, as if waiting for bad news. Two aircraft had landed just at dawn, while there had been some scraps of brightness prying under the clouds - but now the cloud cover was absolute. Two aircraft were hauled into the hangars, where the space for a third lay wide and open like a missing tooth. Quietly, the ground crews had made their way to their rooms, collapsing in relief or sorrow, hoping for a few hours of oblivion before having to face the world again. There was no announcement yet - for the other three hundred-odd students who had slept through the whole thing.

Trish yawned, slowly waking up. Her head hurt, with a sick giddy feeling something like a severe hangover, but more like having one's brain pulled halfway out through the ears then hammered back in with a large and rusty sledgehammer.

"Ooooh," she groaned, not daring to open her eyes. "What did I DO last night ?" She shivered, exploring herself under the cover - everything seemed in place, though she ached as if from a night of dancing the Crusher without reactive armour.

Hesitantly, she opened her eyes - the room was intact, and showed no sign of the point-blank range artillery duel that her pounding head insisted she had just been taking part in. She winced, remembering she had gone to sleep naked for a change, in the stifling heat. "Not a good idea, it seems." She moved over towards her suit, checking it for signs of wear. Thankfully, it seemed to be holding up on the outside, though it had cost suprisingly little, and the sales person had seemed rather shifty. Checking the inside was a much more time-consuming task, but fortunately she had the right kind of torch clipped just inside the entrance chamber.

Eventually, she gave a heartfelt sigh of relief, and zipped herself into the suit. It certainly wouldn't do to have a seam go in class - by all accounts, some of the students and staff were very - prejudiced - about dress code and some ethnic origins. She nodded, remembering what Suzuko had been telling her of the Cultural Hygiene courses - when a small nation on the Russian border had broken away last term, the class project had been to win the National competition - an urgent competition fuelled by the shocking and hideous realisation that the Japanese language had no racial or cultural insults specific to Eastern Karelians.

Trish smiled, slipping on her regulation cotton bobble-socks, white panties, gratuitous (but wholly unnecessary) bra, and slipping the sailor-suit skirt and shirt on top, carefully adjusting the first-year pattern necktie in the mirror. She gave a small twirl, her fine tail swishing happily. "Saturday in Toho Academy - my second weekend. Should be fun!" She unbolted the door and threw it open.

And stopped. In the light of day, she looked down at certain - marks on the floor outside her room, heading in from the outside door. In a way, they were completely familiar, being just muddy footprints that she recognised as her own - but not in the shape that her sandalled feet made, or in a form she associated with a straight, Euclidean corridor.

"Morning!" There came a cheery hail from down the hallway, and Mae stuck her head out of the kitchen door. "Sleep well? Hope Kazuko's curry didn't keep you awake - you were saying it's not the kind of food you get back home. Oh, and you can expect to get a powerful - Reminder, I'm afraid, so watch out for that. Hungry?"

Trish's eyes went wide, her frame rigid in shock. "No," she shook her head, disbelievingly. "I couldn't have...." She was looking across the hall to Suzuko's room. The door was open, and Suzuko made a point of keeping it secured. Looking in, she saw the futon tossed in one corner, with books and engineering tools scattered on the floor in evidence of some sort of struggle.

Mae joined her, the cheerful grey feline looking into her friend's room. "Where's Suki gone? " Her tail waved, in puzzlement. "Look, her clothes and such are on the floor, ready. And her door's never open like this - do you think she went sleepwalking or something?"

The expression seemed to slide off Trish's face. "Sleepwalking." Vague memories flashed back through her pounding head - she had dreamed of an irresistible pull, and somehow woken up stark naked in the open air, with the strangely positioned stars of Einsteinian Space looking down quizzically on her. There was a nasty impression that she had not been alone.

"I am not being - hungry, thank you." Trish took a step back, shivering. "Not any more." She fled back into her room, and slammed the door. A muffled sob escaped through its blank and flimsy face.

Mae stared at the door, her whiskers twitching. Just then, Kazuko bounded down the stairs, her flat face beaming irritably happily in the grey morning light. "Hidy, Mae! Sleep well?" She paused, looking past her friend into Suzuko's room. "What's up? Where's Suki?"

"That," Mae said slowly, her ears pressing back against her skull, "is a very interesting question."

In the concrete room below the airfield control tower, a small group was gathering, most of them clutching large Cups of Coffee(+4), the hit bonuses sparkling cheerfully above the fragrant steam.

"Well," Fusada-Sama nodded, rolling up the map. "That's that. The JSDF are pleased, which is more than I am." He frowned. "Not that I'd have been happy to let Kobe or anywhere be wiped out like Mexico City - but the world's lost something valuable today."

Horst Graben's face was impassive, and only those who knew him well could have seen his sorrow. "Suzuko."

The Arch-Dean snorted. "What ? What we've lost, is the only surviving Psychiatric Blast weapon ! There were only three of them on the planet - one was surely vaporised and the other two detonated, and they're explosively powered with a tonne of Dodecane, by what the Peruvians have told us. Nothing much left of them afterwards."

He paused. "And yes, I will have to contact Miss Hohki's family today. They're respectable Diplomats - though I've never met them. Never bothered coming out here on Visiting Day, and I doubt they will now. There won't be anything to send back, either."

Toemi bowed her head. "I'm only glad I was the one who - avenged her. Thirty terrorists for Suki - it's not a good trade." Her tentacles flushed deep green with emotion. Her own Father was coincident with all the angles of Space and Time, but often missed Parent's Day.

"Sir - we can't Know that for a fact," Horst said slowly, one hand raised in protest. "Yes - if they were caught near the fireball, they are - " he swallowed, his face turning grim, " they are fallout on the wind. But how accurate were we ? All our radars were out in the last six minutes - and we knocked out the only satellite camera with the flash, that might have seen what happened after."

"There won't be a lot left, and it'll have sunk regardless," Fusada-sama waved a dismissive paw. "The JSDF had their ground radars working ten minutes after the blast, and there was nothing in the air then - and there's no airstrip to land on between here and the Home Islands, on that track. But go ahead and look, by all means." He finished his coffee and headed out - perhaps after this, he mused, the JSDF might re-think about paying for the runway extension. Certainly, they should back off on the threatened cuts that had been worrying him. He smiled. Some good should come of all this. But it would have been SO much better, if they had recovered the Psi-Device for study.

"I'm now off-duty," he swished his tail, heading for the Staff quarters and his own villa half way up the Western side of the main hill that overlooked the airfield. "If anything less than another full-scale attack on the Homelands comes up - don't call me."

Horst's tight-curved tail twitched. Wordlessly, he nodded, calling up weather and satellite images that showed a huge spiral of cloud covering most of the western Pacific. The public cameras were all optical or infrared affairs, blinded by the thick clouds that the forecast threatened would be hanging over the region for the next two days. Radar-equipped satellites were few and far between, and mostly under the control of Military and Corporate users - after an hour's unsuccessfully trying to enlist one, Horst sat back and thought hard. He frowned, running through the remaining options. Finally, he pulled out a list of local phone and data numbers, and began to call in favours.

"Hurrah!" Dick Pontephrigh put the phone down, his tail wagging at escape velocity. "We're wanted on a rescue mission! That Korean vixen Suzuko, folk reckon she's lost at sea somewhere West of here - everybody with an aircraft, is invited out to look for her."

"Hurrah!" His siblings chorused, eyes wide.

Julian looked around, frowning. "Well, there's Timmy, there by the door - dreaming of rabbits, no doubt. But where's Georgina gone? It's not like her to be late for Breakfast."

Anne was silent, biting her lip in indecision. Her Brothers turned to her, spotting her expression at once.

"Come on, Anne - out with it !" Dick barked excitedly. "Give us the Gen !"

"Yes - tell us everything, all at once!" Julian chimed in. "Where has silly Georgina got to?"

"Well," Anne said slowly. "I was up early, doing my morning exercises - there were a lot of folk coming into the dorm, which seemed awfully funny for that time of morning. One of them was Georgina, almost hanging on the arm of that big girl Granita. I don't know where they went, but George isn't in her room."

"Ah! That'll be all right then." Julian's tail wagged vigorously. "I can't see any harm coming to Georgina with her around. And she looks a great chum for her to have around here, I must say."

Dick frowned, leading his brother aside. "You don't think," he began hesitantly - "There's something funny about that Granita?"

"Funny ? Well - she's got the complexion of a standing stone, but one can't help one's ancestry. How do you mean, Funny ?" Julian's head tilted to one side. Suddenly a look of alarm flashed over his bluff features. "I say - you don't mean - like Uncle Crisp ?"

"I mean exactly like Uncle Crisp. Though different, of course." Dick shook his head, slowly. "I mean, she's hardly what you'd call ladylike."

Julian's eyes widened. Suddenly, he laughed. "Remember what Uncle Archibald told us - when he gave us that growing-up chat last year ? There's no such thing for girls - Queen Victoria said so."

Relief washed over Dick's face, and his tail wagged again. "Of course ! I'm a chump, I should have remembered. So that's all right, then." He strode determinedly towards the hangars. "Well, it wouldn't be the first time George has missed out on an adventure. Come on, Pontephrights! We'll get Jenks to cut us some sandwiches, ham and turkey and piles of tomatoes, perfect for investigating strange goings-on. And wake up Timmy - we might need her talents. Hurrah for the Five!"

"Hurrah!" Anne and Julian leaped high in the air in excitement. "Our very first flight, a real Adventure!"

Dick brandished the flight manual for the Fleet Shadower that his new pal Gen had kindly lent them. "It'll be easier than the glider, it's got engines." He grinned happily, politely not letting the tongue loll out of his mouth. "I've read the book through twice, and there's simply heaps of pictures - this powered flight thing looks a doddle!"

As the Pontephrights trotted briskly towards the runway, another three figures arrived at their block from the far side.

"Well, there's only ten blocks here to look through," Kazuko pointed out, relieved. "You sure she's not in our block?" She strolled down to the kitchen unit and looked inside hopefully, always eager to clean up on an abandoned beef teriyaki or Durian Surprise.

Mae nodded. "I could detect her. When you know someone that well - you can spot his or her aura. We've all been together two years, living in each others' pockets - believe me, she's not there."

"And we've asked everyone who's there." Broohilda looked around, her slitted pupils wide. "Horst and Mangana weren't answering, but their door was locked - I think they must have been, busy."

Kazuko grinned. "Lucky Mangana! I mean, Horst may not be the life and soul of the party, but when you need him, he's there. And when he's there - you know about it." Her huge blue eyes crossed, remembering her first term at Toho, before the boar had settled in with her cousin. "That's the thing about boars - you can bet when they do party, they've always got their own corkscrew handy!" One eyebrow raised as she looked at Broohilda. "Oh - that reminds me. When's Rashke coming back ? You must be lonely, with him in the Home Islands."

Broohilda bowed her head, smiling a little as Mae stood in the doorway of the next block and concentrated on finding her friend's aura. "Well. It'll be another two weeks, he's got - two "visits" to make, on opposite ends of Japan. He's very good to me, contacts me every day. He wasn't going to accept this, um, meeting, but I told him I didn't mind. He needs money to stay here - and, Direwolves are so rare."

"They'll be a little less rare now," Kazuko enthused. "I know it takes two, but - it's a good thing the folk who pay his fare and such can afford to look after BIG litters of pups. And you do the paperwork, you said?"

Broohilda's naked spike of a tail drooped. "Yes. It was my idea to start with, too." A muscle in one corner of her mouth twitched, as she reflected. Rashke was not only one of a rare breed, but one of the finest people she had ever met. A slight smile flicked over her features. Having more folk like him on the planet was a fine idea, regardless of circumstances. But then her ears drooped, recalling why she would not be contributing to their number herself. With most mixed-species couples outside the Greater Liechtenstein Reich, the problem would be that they could never have children together without the hideously illegal Genemeld treatment - but Broohilda had a unique problem.

"We could, very easily indeed -" she whispered to herself, "But I don't dare." At Toho, she could sometimes forget for awhile that she was an Enterope - the non-species that were the fecund servants of Chaos on her and Mangana's homeworld, where the prejudices against them were totally justified. She herself had been ritually cleansed of their hideous innate tendencies at birth - but for any children she might have, it could be a very different story. She glanced over to the distant Military Microbiology building, wishing the potential threat she carried in her patchwork genes was something so easily controlled.

"Not here either," Mae declared, coming out of the light trance. This was still quicker than a physical search - if Suzuko was literally anywhere in range - wading through a ventilator, tied and hidden under floorboards - she would find her.

"Next one - nine to search." Kazuko pointed out, strolling back towards the entrance. "Whoops! Look out there!" She dodged a large ram, who dashed past her into the laundry room with a basket and an embarrassed expression.

Mae's fine nose twitched, and she smiled. "By the scent of that, Kaz, Horst and Mangana aren't the only ones who've been having a busy night - a Very busy night."

"Oh my." Broohilda stood stock-still, her nose twitching as the scent hit her. Her eyes went wide, and her upper lip reflexively curled up as she sniffed the air. "W - who IS that? I've seen him around the dorm, but we've - never - met."

Kazuko gave her a playful hug. "That's Tava Maunatikka. Prime cut of New Zealand meat, mm? He's in one of my Secret Societies, but I'm not even allowed to think about which one. It all gets a bit confusing, till you learn to stop worrying about that sort of thing. Nice, isn't he? Just your type, too!"

Broohilda nodded dutifully, allowing Kazuko to lead her out in trail of an increasingly worried-looking Mae. She recognised the robe the ram had been carrying, even encased in plastic - at a guess, Kazuko knew him from one of the secret Martial-arts Societies.

"I certainly should recognise it," she nodded to herself, "it's just like the one Jenni lent me yesterday."

Mid-morning saw a few scraps of sunshine break through the clouds, a fleeting beam or two shining through the upstairs window of the furthest accommodation block. In the bathroom, a very annoyed Mariko Itziki stood with her tail swishing, looking up at Granita.

"Oh dear, oh dear," she said heavily, adjusting her big, round-framed glasses as she stared up at Granita like a climber surveying a difficult rock face. "Granita - just what have you been doing with that Pontephrigh girl? That's a rhetorical question, by the way." Mariko had walked past Granita's room half an hour ago, and the soundproofing left a lot to be desired, especially when the action inside seemed to be between two playful battle tanks.

Granita's tail drooped. Three quarters of the island's population would have found themselves balled up and used for shot-putting practice after asking a question like that, but Mariko was her friend. "I wasn't planning on it," she caught Mariko's steady gaze, and looked quickly away. "All right, I was hoping for something of the sort - but nothing like so soon. Yes, I know it's not Done, to - bed a new arrival, before they've had time to find their feet and look around. But - after last night and what happened to Suki - well, you know how it is after a battle. It just - happened. "

Mariko's ears went rigid. "After what happened to Suki? I heard some aircraft in the night, they woke Dracaena up. I was going to complain, folk aren't scheduled for any night-flights this week."

Granita looked at her, open-mouthed. "Nobody's told you? Nobody's announced what - Happened last night at all? I thought the news'd be all over the planet, let alone all over the island!"

Just then, they both recognised the cheerful sounds of Kazuko singing downstairs. It was an old religious pre-millennium tune Mariko recognised - either "Jesus Wants Me For A Sunbeam" or the original, "Satan wants Me For An Ember." She smiled for an instant - adherents of both factions had ended up exactly the same way.

She looked at Granita, gesturing downstairs to where she spotted Broohilda following Kazuko in. "Why don't we go down, and you can tell us all about it?"

At the entrance to the twelfth accommodation block, Mae looked around angrily, her tail swishing. "Kaz - where's she gone? Oh, what's the use." Her ears went right down, her claws extending. "The attention span of a mayfly, and half the brain capacity, that's what she's got."

Suddenly, her ears rose again as she spotted Trish, slowly walking past the block on the way towards the town. "Well, now. So, what did happen last night?" Mae's dreams had been disturbed, as if picking up emotional stress in the neighbourhood. Everything had seemed to be in order in the morning, with no obvious sign of any reason for panic - except that Suzuko was missing, and Trish had been behaving oddly, almost guiltily. "As if she had done something she really regretted. And the look on her face when I mentioned sleepwalking. Plus - those marks on the floor, at the entrance to her room and Suki's. Just what was walking our dorms last night?"

For an instant, Mae hesitated. Her tentative surface scan of Trish's mind the week before had shown her very little except that there was something almost, but not quite, totally unlike a vixen in there. In fact, the nearest thing she had come across it was at various Parent's Visiting Days, when Toemi's father had made an appearance. Going uninvited into Trish's mind, even if she could manage it, was not only going to be a dangerous, totally hostile and illegal act, but exactly the sort of thing that gave Psykers a bad name. But then she remembered what she had picked up that morning - Trish had been radiating shocked thoughts concerning Suzuko and certain dietary habits - which Mae had not liked the associations with at all.

"So, Miss Trish, you look very - convincing - in that sailor-suit," Mae hissed quietly, her eyes narrowing. "Very much the Girl Next Door. But - next door to WHAT?" And with that, she hurled every spark of mental power she had, in a needle-sharp probing attack, straight at the vixen!

In the armour simulator Mae had on her Remote_Impersonal_Computer, there were several possible outcomes for the old question of a supposedly unstoppable force hitting hopefully unmoveable objects. At one combination of material, attack angle and energy, the projectile punches straight through the armour, though breaking up and melting with the stupendous force of the impact. In other circumstances it hits hard and sloped

surfaces, and ricochets away. But in a third case - it hits hard and square, transferring every erg of kinetic energy to its target - the shock knocking out crew and smashing electronics, and yet, not absolutely making a hole in the suddenly white-hot armour.

Exactly that third case happened, as Mae's hard-flung mental bolt hit the burster plate of Trish's psyche, with all the pent-up worry and frustration of the morning's search, and the hard edge of fear at what she might find in there. The Psychic Kitten threw everything she had into that tearing bolt, with enough power to literally turn most minds inside-out - but what she hit, was like nothing she had ever collided with before.

Trish's eyes went wide with shock - for certain reasons, a physical attack on her would probably have missed due to the parallax and refraction effects of her suit - but this was focussed and targeted at her specific being, and hit fair and square. She stiffened, and for an instant the air around her swirled in a mirage-like effect, as if a burst of unusual light had lit what was normally invisible in that spot. With a muted yip, her eyes glazed over and she collapsed bonelessly to the ground. A similar thump a second later was where Mae keeled over and slumped in the doorway of the building, eyes open but staring unseeing.

Ten seconds later, Kazuko was kneeling at her side, her normally tan skin looking almost ashen-pale. She checked Mae over, and breathed a sigh of relief. "Fainted, it looks like - she's breathing. What, Trish too? This isn't our day, today. Suki, and now this." She ran over to Trish, and pressed her pumpkin head to the vixen's modest chest. In a few seconds, she stood up, eyes wider than ever.

"Is she all right?" Broohilda had dashed into her room for her first aid kit. "What's wrong with her?"

Kazuko shook her head, slowly. "Well, you can listen for yourself, but I'm pretty sure - the bad thing is - she doesn't seem to have a heartbeat. The good thing is - she's alive and breathing, and it doesn't seem to be bothering her at all."

The Medical centre was six hundred metres away, at the South end of the airstrip by the heavy Engineering shops. While Kazuko had contacted the Centre on her Rigid_Immobile_Phone, Mariko had kick-started the Merlin engine on her Bren Gun Carrier, driven it around the front of the building for Granita and Broohilda to gently secure the two unconscious patients onboard, and handed it over to Kazuko as the faster driver as she roared off towards medical help at a track-rattling thirty kilometres an hour.

"Medic!" Kazuko yelled in her loudest Combat Karaoke voice, charging through to the desk. "Mangana! There you are! We thought you and Horst were in your room."

Her cousin raised large brown eyes, bleary through lack of sleep. "I wish we were. You've - heard, about what happened? Suzuko." She shook her head. "We don't know exactly what happened up there - but we know how it finished, you could say. Nothing could have got past those two Genies they let out of the bottle."

"It's Mae and Trish now - they're flat cold unconscious," Kazuko blinked, as Granita carried one of the rigid stretchers in under each arm. "We don't know what happened there either - we were in Granita's dorm, and just came out and found them."

Mangana vaulted over the counter, and checked over the two prone figures. She nodded, a minute later. "I don't see anything physically wrong with them. Were they - exposed to anything? A gas, maybe?"

"Shouldn't think so," Kazuko thought hard. "They were both in the open air, fifty paces apart - anything that extensive, it'd have got us too. Could be mental - what if something that Road Runner carried leaked, like fall-out? It'd have reached us by now."

"Could be." Mangana brushed her jet-black hair from her eyes. "I hope not - we're understaffed here, Horst's kept on at the control tower, trying to find out what happened. There's just us Paramedics on this morning, Doctor Faustus went off for the weekend to Kobe for a seminar on Diseases of the Rich. Our mental injury facilities are in use already, for those sorts of problems ... we can hardly have folk sharing Isolation Tanks, it wouldn't really work. If there's something in the air, Osamu and Potzu might get worse, and we'd have to give them full Craniopuncture treatment."

Kazuko's eyes lit up for a second. "I've seen that done on TV! Can I help you with it? It looks a fun operation to carry out!"

"NO, Kaz," her cousin shook her head firmly. "Nailing someone's head to the floor takes special equipment and skills, or it's liable to do more harm than good. We need to have the floor specially earthed and shielded, which only a few square metres of our operating theatre is set up for right now. And the precision -" she shook her head, slowly. "It's not just bashing in railway-spikes with sledgehammers, despite what you see on TV."

"So, what do we do?" Mariko had arrived, with Broohilda in tow as they jogged in from the entrance. "Mae's the only Psyker we've got - she could get into a sleeping mind and take a look around - if she wasn't one of the patients."

Mangana stood up, critically surveying the two prone figures on beds, laid out in the Recovery position. "Watch and monitor - and wait. Right now - not a lot else we can do."

Down at the airstrip, three sets of tails were wagging happily as the Pontephrights watched a small tracked tug tow their Fleet Shadower out of the hangar. The dust sheets had been removed, the engines checked over and the fuel tanks filled - the whole fuselage gleamed and smelt of a heady mixture of fabric dope and polish.

"Jenks did a super job on polishing the propeller, didn't he just?" Julian enthused, looking up at the high, plank-like wing. "Looks a terrific crate!"

"And it's so clean, inside," Anne poked her head into the fuselage hatch. "I see what you mean about it being built for long trips. Look! It's got a bunk bed, even, so the pilot can have a nap if he gets tired." She sniffed it cautiously. "Properly aired and turned down, too. Good Timmy."

The tug driver uncoupled the coupling from the Fleet Shadower. "Well, the aircraft's ready for flight." He handed the form over for Dick to sign, and scratched his head. "I've not seen you on the flight line before. Are you sure you're qualified?"

Julian nodded determinedly. "Of course! We've flown and landed aircraft where no aircraft had ever flown before! And our Great-Great Uncle Gerald was in the Royal Flying Corps all the way through the Great War - Father was named after him. Besides, I've read the manuals."

"Great-Great Uncle Gerald went to the Front with six hours training on his Sopwith Camel," Dick said seriously. "I've heard it takes longer to train nowadays, but we'll try and stay out of fights for the first few trips. And we've got everything we need to fly - we've got the jodhpurs, and silk scarves, and boots from a very respectable outfitters."

With a shrug, the driver took back the form to be filed with all the rest. Satori, for it was he, fired up the tractor and headed down towards the harbour. His Hughes Hercules was missing an engine, awaiting spare parts, or he would be out searching for Suzuko himself.

Checklist in hand, Dick walked around the Fleet Shadower. It was a fine design, dedicated to advanced low-speed flight, with its straight high-lift wing sitting in the slipstream of four twin-bladed wooden propellers. According to the manual, in a fifty knot headwind it could effectively hover above a patch of ocean, staying on patrol for ten or twelve hours of vigilance. Dick smiled, holding his hands over his ears as one of the 1955 class jets made a "carrier" landing and screeched to a halt at the very edge of the runway, braking parachutes billowing and thrust reverser blowing huge clouds of coral sand into the air.

"Fat lot of good they'd be!" He called up to Julian and Anne in the cockpit, "If they can't even land on a good beach when they find someone to rescue."

"That's right," Julian agreed. "Awfully showy things those - and I bet they burn pounds and pounds' worth of petrol every day, too. I'm glad we found this one."

Anne said nothing, but her eyes shone, as she leaned her head out of the cockpit window, her ears flapping in the breeze. She quite agreed with her brothers - if going to Mach Three made it impossible to stick your head out for bracing fresh air, she didn't want to go there, wherever it was. A diligent search of the local atlas had shown no such place, which probably meant it was Foreign anyway.

There came a polite cough from behind, just as Dick was preparing to clamber into the cockpit. He turned, to see his new chums Gen and Yukio, the two senior Prefects.

"We just came to see you off," Gen smiled, extending a paw to shake. "It's very decent of you to put yourself out like this - and on a weekend, too."

"Especially for Suzuko, who wasn't even born in the homeland," Yukio added. "Really, she's not Japanese, despite what her Passport says. It'd be a better world if all Foreigners were sent right back to where they came from."

"Yes, and further!" Dick nodded. "But still, we're all at the Coll. together, we need to show the proper School Spirit. And by all accounts, she was defending the Island when she went down."

"Yes - that's what we'd come to mention," Gen's smile vanished. "If you find any - debris - we'd be very interested. We know the Arch-Dean would want to see if there's anything that we could salvage. You see, the bomber was carrying a Secret Weapon onboard."

"Gosh!" Dick breathed. "An actual, pukka Secret Weapon? Made from stolen plans, smuggled out Abroad and put together by sinister scientists in mysterious old castles and heavily guarded country mansions?"

"Sinister scientists with wild beards, thick accents and awful tastes in clothes?" Anne put in, her eyes sparkling. "That's exactly the sort of Adventure we're good at!"

Gen looked the Three up and down, and nodded. "I knew we could count on you. Off you go - have fun, and let us know first, if you find anything." He nodded towards the control tower. "I hate to speak against a fellow student, you know, but some of them are - not quite our sort." His look changed to one of concern. "Let me know when you've had the chance to look at some mid 20th century history books, and I'll tell you where Horst Graben's from."

"It wouldn't surprise me if he had a hand in the whole business," Yukio tapped the side of his snout meaningfully. "Think about it - that bomber was crewed by Foreigners - and he's one as well. Makes you wonder."

Dick shook his hand, enthusiastically. "Thanks for letting us know! Forewarned is forearmed, and all that." He sprang lightly into the cockpit, carefully fastened his seat belt and reached for his goggles, flying-helmet and instruction manual. "Chocks away, please! We've a Mystery to solve!"

After sitting with Mangana at the medical centre for an hour watching over her unconscious friends, Broohilda waved farewell until lunchtime, when she would be back to relieve Mangana and let her get some sleep.

"The way I feel right now -" Mangana had said "I don't think I could sleep, thinking about Suki. But when I'm tired enough - I'll just keel over. "

Broohilda sighed, retracing her steps towards her dormitory block. "I missed it all." She reproached herself. "I was fast asleep and dreaming, when Suzuko and the rest went up and faced that bomber." Her lop ears drooped. "I'm not a pilot, but I might have done something to help."

Entering the ground floor corridor, she stopped. Her nose twitched, and her eyes widened at a mysterious scent, that seemed to be hanging in the air. "Oh my." She forced her legs to carry her to her room, and after several fumbles, opened her door.

"Good morning!" Came a voice from behind her. Broohilda turned, to see Jenni standing there with a set of folded sheets under one arm. "I just got up, myself - I was up all last night. You've heard?"

Broohilda winced, her glossy purple-black skin glinting in the reflected daylight shining through her room. "I - I heard." She sat down, heavily. "You were the last one to see Suzuko?"

Jenni nodded. "Yes - I strapped her into her flight suit. She was brave - I was in the control tower and heard the whole thing. " She sighed, putting her hoof-like hand on Broohilda's shoulder. "But still - life must go on. She saved us all - it's up to us to make the most of the time she bought us." Under her yellow mop of head-fur, her eyes roved around the room, taking in the double futon, one side of it still pressed down, but the other obviously unused for some time. The room was beautifully clean, but there was a faint canine musk in the air that set her snout wrinkling. "You're all alone here?"

"Rashke's in Japan. He's - very much in Demand there. And his sports scholarship hardly pays tuition fees and food, out here." Broohilda passed over the details of Rashke's current "trip", complete with photos of the two aristocratic Direwolf bitches involved.

Jenni looked through the folder, an eyebrow raised, with a smile that did not show on her muzzle. "That's awful!" Her face was a perfect study in shocked surprise. " Letting you know all this - it's just adding insult to injury. Why do you put up with it? I know I wouldn't, not for a second."

"Oh no," Broohilda protested, taking the folder back. "It's all right - it's not like that at all. I check all the details, arrange the trips and such - there's a lot of requests for him I turn down. Direwolves are - very single-minded though, and - they don't give up easily."

"I can sympathise with that." Jenni smiled, looking into Broohilda's honest, troubled face. "But honestly - to think of him out there right now - in some "love Hotel" or whatever you call them, and getting paid for it. That'd make me feel ill. And he's a Direwolf - not even your kind, nothing remotely compatible."

Broohilda opened her mouth to speak, but felt herself flushing, her nose twitching. She looked at Jenni, the young ewe's features set in concern for her. "I do miss him, though."

"You shouldn't have to," Jenni nodded earnestly. "And you can't trust a carnivore - sure, he's having his fun with you now, home and away - but one day, there'll be an unmarried girl of his species - who'll be very determined to put him in her pack." Her fingers gently massaged Broohilda's tense shoulders. "Her scent will be in his nostrils, and once she gets him, she'll use every trick to keep him. You can't fight three million years of Biology, with just a good heart and wishful thinking. When it comes right down to it, everyone's happiest with their own kind."

"There aren't any others OF my kind here - and I hope there never will be!" Broohilda's voice was a plaintive cry against Fate. "I'm an Enterope, and the rest of them are really horrible things. Not from upbringing either, they're as bloodthirsty as minks, but worse. Mangana brought me here because I'm Different - and Rashke doesn't mind that."

"I'll bet he doesn't," Jenni's gaze caressed Broohilda's glossy skin. "You're such an Exotic. I've seen fashion models not so pretty, become world-famous just because they're one-of-a-kind mixes, one way or another." She grinned. "I intercepted some of the Purists' WorldNet scans this week - Iwao and Gen, they were preaching in public about nobody who's not fourth-generation Japanese born being allowed to vote, but you know what they were looking at? Pics of Genemeld folk from Thailand - some of them were very distinctive hybrids indeed, in all their - finer features. Though I'm sure Rashke's a lot more discreet than that."

Broohilda closed her eyes, bowing her head. Jenni's own eyes gleamed - reaching over, she dropped the clean sheets she had been carrying into the open laundry basket, and with lightning speed pulled out the identical set that was in there.

Jenni patted her on the shoulder, reassuringly. "Well, I do hope I'm wrong about him. But it's a shame, seeing you all alone like this. I should know. Until I left South Island, I'd never been a day apart from my flock. In

fact - when I left, they gave me this." She fished in her satchel, and pulled out a plaited belt of somewhat greasy wool, its threads of varying shades. "I keep it in a glass jar, when I'm not carrying it. " She pressed it to her nostrils, and inhaled delicately. "It's a plait of the wool of my whole flock, every one of them. Would you like to scent it ?"

Broohilda blinked. "Oh. I - I didn't know. May I ?"

Jenni smiled, passing the precious braid over to her. She watched as the goat-girl hesitantly put the braid to her narrow muzzle, and saw her nostrils and eyes go wide. "What do you think ?"

A naked blue-black tail trembled, as Broohilda passed the braid back reverently. "Oh my. I - I didn't expect that. Not just the scents of a lot of people, like you'd get in a class here, but - how they feel, it stays in their scent. They all - fit together, like pieces in a puzzle - everything just where it should be. Is that - how it is ?"

"Oh yes." Jenni carefully put the relic back in its container, and sealed the airtight lid. "That's exactly how it is. But give that scent to a feline or a canine, and they'd just tell you it's "a bunch of dumb sheep", or some such. If you can spot how it'd feel - then you're near enough to fit in. Somewhere, there's a place for you waiting."

Carefully gathering up the sheets, Jenni stood and waved, leaving Broohilda staring blankly, her mind a whirl. Closing the door quietly, the ewe tripped lightly up the stairs on her narrow hooves, to the corridor she and Tava lived on.

Standing in front of the Ram's room, Jenni fished out a duplicate key. She smiled, breathing out in deep relaxation.

"Oh yes." She looked around the empty corridor, one eyebrow raised. Tava, she knew, was helping down at the Medical Centre till mid-afternoon. "There's a place for you, waiting - and a place for me. You're going to help me get there." Chuckling, she hefted the bundle of laundry soaked with Broohilda's pheromones, and silently slipped into Tava's room. Fair exchange, she told herself, was definitely no robbery.

The control tower at Toho was a squat, three-storey structure that looked rather a patchwork of materials and designs, its ground and first floor having been replaced several times after various trampling episodes courtesy of the Neighbours from the island opposite. The heavily reinforced basement was the only relic of its original fabric, where the computers and radar electronics were kept out of harm's way under two metres of layered concrete and coral sand. On the ground floor was the administrative office where Mariko had worked for a year filing flight plans - and above that, was the glazed control tower itself, with a view of every metre of runway and taxiing space that the island possessed.

Gen Yakitora was watching as the final aircraft set off to search, the G.A.L Fleet Shadower currently crewed by the Pontephrights. He smiled, turning to Yukio.

Yukio nodded, catching his friends' gaze as the plank-winged aircraft stalled, dipped and recovered before lurching out of sight around the side of the hill slope. "Any bets we don't see them again ? They've no idea how to fly that - and you need more than blind optimism when you're up against the laws of Gravity."

"As discovered by Isaac Newton, lifetime resident of Yokohama." Gen agreed, watching the horizon where the aircraft had vanished, straining his ears for the expected sound of a crash. "Still - there's a lot to be said for them - they're good no-nonsense sorts. None of that seeing things in shades of grey - morally speaking, of course. After all, they ARE canines, they can't help monochrome vision."

Yukio gripped the rail, following Gen's gaze. "Supposing they do find anything ? I suppose we can trust them to report it to us ? I doubt there'd be any urgency - we're not expecting survivors." He paused. "Nah - that piece of the planet's ninety-nine and a bit percent water. The chances of any debris landing on land are tiny."

Gen raised an eyebrow. "Unless they didn't crash, but - landed." He smiled. "I didn't sent those hounds out entirely on a wild goose chase. I've got my own feed into the Stealth Radar, and I've been running analyses of the last few minutes. Something interesting happened up there - I think that Korean vixen just might have shot the Road Runner down - at any rate, the last position we got wasn't quite what I expected. The Stealth Radar can't tell parallax too well, you know. Some angles, it has trouble working out altitudes, and the regular radars were all out by then."

Yukio's ear cocked, puzzled. ""They'd lost altitude, you mean ? The Genies were set to thirty thousand metre detonations - and they've got about a three kilometre kill zone."

"Better than that!" Gen's eyes shone. "The prompt radiation's going to be something fierce at twice that range - folk might live long enough to land, but - unless they can get specialist medical treatment pretty soon," he shook his head, sighing in mock sorrow, "it'd be just too bad. There might be an intact bomber floating out there, with a perfectly working Psychiatric blast device onboard, and ..." he checked his watch, "by the time our search parties get there - nobody in any shape to object to our claiming it. Spoils of War, you know - perfectly legitimate."

"Oho!" Yukio's eyes lit up, his tail wagging gleefully. "We can have our rice-cake and eat it too! The Academy gets the credit for shooting the bomber down, WE get to hand its payload over to the Arch-Dean ! " A slow smile creased his muzzle. "I wondered why you'd sabotaged the engine on Satori's Hughes Hercules. You've got spare parts for it, haven't you ?"

"I have. And if we all chip in, we can have it fixed in a couple of hours. Which means Satori flies with our group, not Mae's and that bunch. Which means we turn up with one of the only two aircraft at the Academy that can carry the Device if we find it - and we can take it anywhere we like. It's been written off as destroyed - so nobody'll be looking for it. And if we keep quiet - nobody'll be looking for us, either."

"As long as nobody beats us to it," Yukio's ears dip. "That German boar, Horst - he just isn't giving up. He's sitting there like some old Zen master, I don't think he's slept a minute - bending every sensor he can get to point at that chunk of ocean. If he finds out we knew where to look and didn't tell him -" He blinked. "Remember what happened to Matzu in the first year? He wasn't walking again till eight months after."

Gen nodded, closing his eyes, pressing his fingertips together contemplatively. "I think," he mused, "That now we've settled accounts with Miss Hohki - it's time for a general clean-up of unwanted rubbish around this Academy."

Back in the medical centre, Mangana frowned as she looked down at her two newest patients. Mae and Trish were hooked up to a battery of automated diagnostic tools, which confirmed they were unconscious, but little else. At least, Mae's system was showing a standard feline response in deep sleep or coma, but as for Trish...

Her tired eyes lit up as the door opened. "Tava! Just the person I need. Can we swap these diagnostics round? The set on Trish are broken - we're getting nothing but gibberish from them."

The ram nodded, flexing his black, muscled forearms as he sized up the situation. "Certainly! Or - it might be quicker to just pick up Trish's bed and move it. She can be moved?"

Mangana was silent for an instant. "Well, there's nothing to indicate spinal damage or the like - she was brought in by tankette, and didn't seem the worse for it. Let's do it."

Between them, they unplugged the sensor harness from the unconscious vixen, and carefully picked her up. Trish was still in her sailor suit, her neck scarf loosened, and seemed only deeply asleep. While Tava took the weight, Mangana plugged the connections into the next diagnostic bed along the row.

"Ninja!" Mangana swore. "That one's broken too! Just the same gibberish as before." She frowned. "They're usually reliable." Cocking her pumpkin-shaped head to one side, she thought for a minute. "Tava - secure Trish where she is, and you get into the bed she just came out of. Looks like I'll have to re-calibrate it."

In a minute, she had an extra "Patient" - as the big ram relaxed, flat on the bed between Mae and Trish. Mangana's foot tapped irritably, as she looked at the readouts. The diagnostics now looked perfectly normal, showing Tava's vital signs. "Pulse, very low resting rate - that's all right," she nodded, looking at the athletic frame. "Very good general muscle tone. Heartbeat, species-normal. Hormonal levels - oh, that's fine." She smiled to herself. The diagnostic software had taken a pheromone swab, and indexed it with species and gender to give a detailed readout. By all appearances, Tava was one step away from coming unexpectedly into Rut, possibly triggered by the seasonal Autumn daylight changes, or some such external cause.

She blinked, turning off the screen. "There's nothing wrong with this setup," she announced, puzzled. "It's reading you, down to the DNA levels. Which would mean ..." they both looked over at the still form of the vixen in the third bed.

Tava finished the sentence for her. "Which would mean, if the diagnostics are working, there's something very strange about Trish."

Mangana's brown eyes flashed, as she tried to shake the sleep from her head. "We need to think. Let's get some tea ready - strong stuff, Pu Ehr if we've got any left. Can you get that? I'll bring out some more equipment."

While Tava busied himself in the kitchen, Mangana set up a portable field X-ray machine, an ultrasound scanner and a precise Mass Spectrometer, that could have told her where Tava came from to within a day's travel, just from the isotopic mix of his local geology. "You are what you eat," she murmured, and smiled. "One way or another. I'd rather be a pig than a cabbage." One finger traced the two sets of extra attractions that Horst's porcine DNA were encouraging her adaptable body to form, as she fine-tuned herself to her mate. "Good thing I didn't fall for Florian, plant DNA might have been a little tricky to adapt to ..."

"Ready!" Tava came in with a tray bearing a teapot and two cups. He put it down, and froze as he looked at the pot. "Are you sure we should be using this? There's a sticker on it, says "Genuine Ming Dynasty." It must be worth a fortune!"

Mangana laughed. "Oh no. It's Korean. They re-named one of their pottery towns Ming Dynasty, same as they renamed a steel mill Sheffield. You can't always trust what you see around here - unless you know just what you're looking for."

"Thinking of which," Tava poured the strong green tea, nodding towards Trish, "now we can see just who we really have here."

Mangana smiled, flexing her fingers as she switched on the ultrasound scanner. "This should be interesting."

An hour later, two extremely puzzled paramedics sat down to look at the data. They had checked the instruments on each other, and received perfectly good results. But on Trish, things were Different."

"If I hadn't tested it, I'd have said that X-ray was of a bronze statue," Mangana said flatly, looking at the screen. Every detail of the diagnostics bed was picked out clearly, the web of sensor wired coming in off the side of the picture - and stopping at a sharply cut black silhouette, like a hole in the screen. "Something like that - you're talking solid metal, not the weight we picked up between her. Her mass is species-normal - in fact, it's exactly the figure in the textbooks for an average vixen."

"To two decimal places." Tava checked the database. "I'm just seeing if there's anything on her earlier records - oh." His black ears went right up in surprise. "Look at this - the figure she gave on her personal details form, two weeks ago."

Mangana's eyes widened. "Exactly the same, to a fraction of a gram. That's not possible! I've seen her eating, and she's breathing, metabolising food - her weight has to be up and down a few hundred grams a day."

"I'm sure it is, somewhere," Tava raised a grey eyebrow. "But I don't think it's here. Those X-rays aren't even reflecting, like a few of them would do off solid metal. They're going - in, somewhere."

"Somewhere." Mangana agreed. "This sonar pic - it's like... pointing it through a hole in the icecap. There's things down there, but they're out of range. The few shapes we do get, don't resolve... though we've got a top-range 3-D processing array on the job."

They were both silent, thinking. Suddenly, there was a quiet beep from a small box in the corner.

"That's the spectrometer! Maybe it's ready to tell us where she's from, if not what she is." Mangana sprang to her feet, and peered at the little screen. "That fur sample - oh my."

"What fur sample?" Tava asked, his woolly tail twitching. "That's not fur, fur's biological material, keratin. This stuff's more like Polyester."

"It does feel a bit like it," Mangana stared down at the screen. "Isotopes coming in now. It'll - What the?" She blinked, looking at the precisely tuned readouts which could tell where on Earth any biological material came from. "You know how folk spot meteorites that were blasted off the Moon or Mars? The composition tells you. It's just a different subset of the mix the Solar System started from, such and such a combination supernovae spiked into the original mix."

Tava suppressed a shiver. "So where's she from in the Solar System?"

"She's not."

They looked at each other, and if Mangana's eyes were wider than the Ram's, it was only because genetics had given her a head start.

Tava cocked his head to one side. "Interesting readings on the surface sonar, though. There's a line from here to here - about throat to navel. Yes, she does have a navel, it looks like - and, umm, looks like other biological bits too, everything you might expect on the surface. They seem to - lead off into the distance, somehow. Like - they're access hatches going somewhere, but the somewhere isn't here." He put his hands to the side of Trish's slender waist, then looked at the distance between them contemplatively. "The sonar goes off out of range - we're not talking thirty centimetres, or metres either."

Mangana loosened the First-Year's neck scarf, a finger tracing the fur gently. She froze. "Tava - you're right. It's not a scar, under the fur. It's something, but not entirely, totally unlike a zip fastener." She gently traced the line down to Trish's midriff. "I remember last week, Mae said she spotted something on her Stealth radar, that was too big and too far away to make any sense - that was when Suzuko and Trish were walking in front of the aircraft. When they came round to look at it - the image vanished."

"Just when Trish went out of sight from her radar." Tava said quietly. "So - are we going to pull the zip?"

Mangana turned pale. "Oh no. She's a friend of ours. For all we know, she needs it shut to survive over here - yes, she's injured, but do you really think we could treat her, even if we knew how?" She shook her head. "There's rules about that kind of thing. We should get Princess Cthuline over to take a look - she's the most experienced one of us, by a few centuries."

Tava nodded, heading towards the Rigid_Immobilise_Phone. It was a reliable model, having been upgraded that term with extra ground anchors, a six-tonne gyroscope and several tonnes of concrete. "She's the only one who's got family connections with this sort of thing - everyone can call to Cthulhu, but she can make the call reverse charges."

An observer hovering far over Toho Academy that day would have seen a lot more activity than the usual Saturday afternoon inspired. A gorgeous fish-frog hurried across from one of the dormitories, a trail of admirers following her till they were met and dispersed with prize-winning brutality by a muscular half-gargoyle girl and a stocky canine, who seemed to be learning more than one kind of lesson that day. On the airfield, one thirsty jet after another screeched to a halt in the sand of the Overshoot area at the end of the runway, their second-generation turbines running on the last drops of fuel in the tanks. On the flat area next to it, two of the members of staff were

setting up surveying posts covering the full length of the beach, six hundred extra metres being mapped out by them and a squad of students with relieved expressions.

That same observer might have spotted the hidden line of the Stealth Radar, the big buried aerial next to the existing runway exposed here and there as coral sand blew away in jet wash from taxiing aircraft. But where the data cables led from there was a mystery - they vanished deep into the ground, heading vaguely towards the control tower. And what was happening in there, an outside observer could not have even guessed.

"Still at it?" Mariko and Temari poked their heads around the heavy steel door of the basement room. "Refreshment time! Coffee and cakes!" Mariko sang out happily, lugging a hamper with large flasks of refreshment. "You look like you could do with a pick-me-up, and this brew could pick you up off the North Pole of Jupiter!"

Horst smiled, gratefully clearing space on the desk. "Thank you. I will be working till dark tonight - then starting first light tomorrow." His grey fur was damp but clean: for the last six hours he had taken ice-cold showers on the hour, keeping himself alert.

"Any - news?" Temari asked hopefully, though her ears were down. "That's the first wave of aircraft back - did anyone spot anything?"

Horst shook his head slowly. "There is nothing. No trace, no sign - even the fall-out went straight up, it should not reach the surface till it is safe, some years from now." Toemi and Kobishi had been interviewed by the JSDF, who in turn had put an order in for dozens of "Genies" from the Island's labs - but these versions would be modern anti-matter filled models, with no fall-out anywhere. Shobban and Hiroshi had received a good-natured ticking-off for packing the first set with extra fissionables - but significantly, were still in charge of the Special Munitions Shed. They were still there, as occasional wails of "It's so Unfair!" from the shed attested.

"All the aircraft are back and refuelling - all except that old prop thing the Pontephrights have taken on," Mariko's whiskers twitched, as she walked over to the big map on the wall. "They've got another four hours of endurance - best search aircraft this side of a proper flying-boat."

"Hum." Horst nodded. He sighed. On the screen was a complex image he had pieced together. It was a 3-D map of the seas and skies outside the Japanese Empire's inner zone, where Suzuko and the RoadRunner had last been spotted. There was a clear track heading into the screen from one direction, which turned into a tentative line at the point where two-way radars had been jammed. That tentative line came to a very definite ending - bracketed by two glowing spheres, on scale as a two kilometre red zone and a vaguely edged yellow surrounding.

Mariko looked at the screen intently, the light glittering on the big, round spectacles she wore. "So - that's a cone there, spreading out in all directions from the last point we absolutely knew they were at. Sort of trumpet shaped - spreads out to cover the maximum area they could have turned or dived into." She shook her head. "You don't do a lot of turning at Mach Three, and diving -" She winced. "They were all flying at their temperature limit, for that altitude. Dive into thicker air at that speed, and you'll blow the inlets apart."

"Suzuko was always proud of her inlets," Temari said mournfully, the rat's naked tail drooping. "I was working with her just last week. On that last trip - she was having to watch them every second. They're so critical - one wrong control move, and the shockwave goes the wrong way. The engine chokes on its own bow wave, the pressure gradient reverses, and instead of eating airflow, it starts puking it. Then without engine thrust, down you go - the stalling speed up there is about the same as maximum redline speed."

Horst pressed a four-fingered paw to his temples, closing his tired eyes for a second. "Yes - that would happen." He tapped at the fashionable "retro" keyboard, and the shape of the search area widened. "The strange thing is - the Peruvians are saying, the Device the bomber carried - it would have fired itself rather than let itself crash. And we would have known about that." He nodded in the direction of the Medical centre, where Osamu and Potzu were receiving the finest treatment available, secured in total sensory deprivation tanks and fed nothing but jam. "Unless - unless, of course, the Genies hit it directly. There would have been no time." He swayed, as the fatigue of thirty-five hours of constant vigilance struggled with his iron will.

"You'd better lie down," Mariko looked at him, alarmed. "We'll watch the board for a few hours - we'll handle the search. The weather's still awful over there anyway, nothing to see for a few hours."

Without a protest, Horst rose and let himself be helped away to the cot upstairs in the reception room, where flight controllers normally snored away sleepy afternoons.

For a minute, there was a silence in the deserted basement room. Suddenly a search program gave an alarmed squawk, then another. Far off to the East, a few gaps in the cloud were appearing, narrow lanes opening up between towering masses of opaque cumulus that spoke of a failed typhoon, just as MARSAT 886 swept across in the low-orbital overtaking lane.

There was an island just off the edge of the search area that Horst's computers had drawn. It was tiny, a bare two kilometres of treeless coral sand atoll without a palm tree or blade of grass, that high Spring tides washed right over. But it was not featureless, today. At the very edge of the water was a sharply pointed steel shape, broken and crumpled at the end of a widening skid-mark the full length of the island. And, next to its tail - just three pixels on the display showed where a very small, triangular aircraft was sitting guard by it - right on the tide line.

