

## Chapter Nine

Suzuko Hohki groaned. She awoke from an uneasy sleep, her nostrils twisting in unconscious disgust at the stench around her, of vomit and stale blood. Unwillingly, she forced her eyes to open, and looked around herself.

Her ears rang with the steady drone of propeller engines, as the great bulk of the Hughes Hercules flying-boat droned across the Pacific Ocean at night. The “Spruce Goose” as her friends called it to the great irritation of its owner, had been designed as a passenger carrier to carry whole companies of fully equipped troops across the oceans without danger from submarines. Satori had built the Toho Academy version in its mixed troop/cargo version – with forty very basic seats and the rest of it empty space that carried luggage and Mecha to and from Shahaguo Island.

Most of those seats were occupied, with twenty-one figures wearing burned and stained pressure suits, some of them collapsed and sick. One of them raised his head, and pointed towards her, saying something in a language she did not recognise, though its tone was clearly unfriendly.

Suzuko winced. Twelve hours ago, she had been literally on top of the world – high above the cares below her, preparing to lay down her life if necessary, in defence of her homeland, one life for possibly millions in Kobe or Niigata on the far horizon. She coughed, hoping they would get to medical treatment soon – none of the “rescued” crew were in good shape, and she was feeling none too bright herself.

Huddling in the drafty corner of the cargo bay, thankful for her warm pressure suit, she thought back as to how they had, all of them, fallen so very low...

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White sunshine shone in a black sky – at the top of the atmosphere, a steel dart headed towards Japan at thirty miles a minute, its razor-sharp wings and needle nose seared to the temperature of molten lead by the air friction above Mach Three. The engine plume brightened as its crew slammed open the throttles, in a desperate attempt to evade the chipboard interceptor that was slowly overhauling them. Borane fuel poured into the white-hot engines, twenty litres a second of triethyl borane “Zip Fuel” lighting up the skies behind with a lurid green flame, leaving a purple-tinged plume of smoke slashed like a razor-cut across the skies.

“We’re not stopping it!” Tloklohahn Davies shouted into the intercom, seeing the relentless dot closing on the rearward radar. “I don’t know if it’s shielded or what, but we’re not burning its electronics.”

“Air-mines ! Drop the lot in his lap!” Captain Evans barked. “We can’t evade – and we can’t signal.”

Just at that moment came a whoop of delight from the Bombardier’s station. “Cap’n! I’ve jammed the bomb! Hacked into its timing loop – it thinks it’s just been dropped.”

“So – it’s released our autopilot?” Captain Evans’ brow furrowed under his helmet. “Can we control the aircraft on manual ?”

“Uhh, yes sir – all except the bomb doors and release mechanisms. We’ll have to pull our laptops out for a second, hit the manual releases then restart the ship’s system.” Natahaho tapped at his laptop, having finally hacked into the control program of the Device that lay a bare meter under him in the bomb bay.

The aircraft shuddered, the “Spirit of 56” bucking as if it had run through turbulence.

“He’s firing! Looks like old-style cannon!” Jones the Upper Tail-gunner called out. He had seen the interceptor close to three hundred meters, and what looked like rods of white light flash past the tail, as cannon shells blazed past at a combined speed of about Mach six. “He missed – and it knocked him back two hundred meters!” The odd delta-winged aircraft had fallen back into the distance, the recoil and the eruption of gun-gas disturbing the finely balanced equilibrium that kept it in the air in the tight, hot angle of its flight envelope. “Here he comes again.”

Captain Evans grunted, making a decision. “Pull the laptops – everybody. We have to have full control – and we’ve got about a minute to reboot the system before he gets in range again. Do it now!”

In the cramped, radiantly hot interior of the Road Runner, twenty paws grasped the connections linking their third-hand laptops with the ship’s data bus, and prepared to disconnect them. This was normally done only at the end of a trip – when the aircraft was about to land, and the crew made their usual parachute landings taking the only valuable electronics with them. The manuals said that any of the systems could be disconnected while in powered supersonic flight – and the bomber would stay in the air without them.

Unfortunately, the manuals had never been written to consider every main and backup computer being yanked out simultaneously. As to staying in the air without a single laptop handling the controls – that was simply dead wrong.

Suzuko snarled soundlessly as she fought the controls of her Lippisch, the heat now intense as the air friction began to “soak” through the airframe, dangerously close to the point where the structural plywood glue would give way. She had missed – fifteen rounds from each cannon had streaked harmlessly past the tail of the bomber, wasted and gone forever. And the Road Runner was now twenty kilometers nearer her

Homeland, its weapon systems fully charged and a stand-off Psychiatric Blast warhead almost in range of Kobe. She was very rapidly running out of time – as were the two million sleeping people ahead of her.

Switching her engine settings to “Full Rich”, the last few hundred liters of T-Stoff peroxide surged into the compound cycle engine, her other paw twisting the fine control on the inlet spike ahead of her. “Mass flow increasing – pressure recovery just marginal ... just one more pass is all I’ve got time and fuel for...” she panted to herself, juggling the variables in her head as she began a shallow dive towards the silver dart that seemed to be floating almost motionless in space on the rim of the world. “Close to a hundred meters – and accelerate till I hit it with my cannons or my nose.” A glance showed that her cooling water was almost exhausted – she had been getting about a tenth of the thrust from her wings and not the engine, as steam sweated through the porous wings expanded in the supersonic expansion fan off the trailing edge. One minute after that coolant failed, the aircraft would start to burn up – but one minute was all she needed.

The windshield was patchy and milky with heat distortion, but she could see well enough. One final dive would do it, keeping just above the turbulent plume of the Road Runner’s engine wakes and the invisible spiral of the vortices shed off its wingtips. Running into either of those at this speed would be like hitting a brick wall in the air – if it didn’t tear her wings off, she reminded herself grimly, it would send her tumbling to break up in the heavier atmosphere below. She glanced down over the charring curve of the fuselage. At that speed, it was like skating above the rim of a lava pit. Her computer had showed her the colour-coded view before it died on her – deeper in the atmosphere was deeper into the heat barrier, the speed becoming lethal intensities of heat and pressure: just two kilometres below her, the pressure would blow her engine inlets apart in a second. Another fine twist of the inlet controls as she gained speed – the shock wave from the centre cone hitting the sharp lip of the intake as precisely as a tight-rope walker on a very fine line. The airframe and engine were past their designed safety limits, heading into unknown territory every second – a territory crowded with disasters lurking in all directions of speed and energy.

“Here we – go.” The tail turrets seemed to grow in her view as she overhauled the Road Runner again. Details resolved themselves – she could see the upper tail gunner with his hands raised clear of the particle cannon’s breeches, waving frantically. For an instant, her resolve faltered – but her paw stayed firm on the throttles, even as she felt the Bowden cable release for her own cannon. The bomber’s electronics-killing beams had no effect on her essential systems, but definitely she would have been finished in any other aircraft, she reminded herself. Gunners who had been hosing her with their beams every meter of the run in, were hardly going to wave any white flag she could accept.

Suzuko squeezed the triggers and felt the recoil hammering her light aircraft, seeing white lines of fire stab past the turrets – and in that same instant a hundred meters ahead of her, twenty computers were pulled out of their data sockets.

Along the shielded data bus of the Road Runner, a power surge crashed through the damping mechanisms, and locked the engine controls. The big variable doors in the engine splayed wide like oars jamming in the current – and in the white-hot combustion chambers, the flame went out. More than twenty tons of thrust had been keeping the aircraft balanced at a steady speed, and as that winked out, drag seized the bomber with the force of a twenty ton retro-rocket blasting it into reverse!

All Suzuko saw was the green-white plume of the engine wake fade below her – the bomber seemed to leap towards her in a second, its trailing edge just vanishing a few meters under her nose as she shot past its suddenly decelerating bulk – and in a time span measured in milliseconds, she had troubles of her own. Hurling past the Road Runner, Suzuko’s air inlet ran through the shock wave trailing like an invisible wall from the bomber’s wing, as if it was a combine harvester suddenly eating a pile of scrap metal. The precisely tuned inlet choked up with conflicting pressure gradients and her own ramjet stalled, the deceleration slamming her forward into her straps, hands helplessly thrown off the controls!

Unheard by each other, thirty-five screams filled pressure suits as their occupants were hurled against bulkheads or thrown against safety belts with the impact of a twenty mile-an-hour car crash against a brick wall. Four of the bomber’s crew died then, as badly torn suits depressurized explosively in the near-vacuum of ninety-three thousand feet altitude, and another six struggled to find repair patches as their agonisingly popping ears told them of slow leaks that in a minute would see them either seal their suits or their fates.

“Wha.....?” Suzuko gasped, her vision a red haze of pain as she was pressed against the tight belts, her tongue feeling like a straining balloon and her eyes threatening to bulge out of her head. She laboured for breath against the straps that seemed to be wrapped like iron bars around her chest, holding her suit centimeters away from the scorchingly hot windshield. She shook her head, trying to clear it – dimly realising that had her straps been just a fraction looser, she would have slammed her helmet visor against the gun sight, with fatal damage to all concerned. “I’m – diving!” Deprived of thrust and losing speed by the second, the air pressure around the wings was dropping – only at Mach Three had it been enough to hold her aircraft flying at that altitude, and through the red haze Suzuko saw the Mach meter and the altimeter dials spinning down steeply. Her gaze flashed at the chart of permissible speed and altitude, mentally placing her as lost in the deep red zone, wings and engine stalled and falling out of the sky like a meteor.

Suzuko shook her head. Dimly she saw the horizon, steadily flat ahead and below her – not spinning or whirling, as she had feared. Her aircraft was dropping, but keeping slightly nose-up as speed bled off. A

flash of silver in the distance caught her attention – she stared, half dazed, just off to her port side at about one o'clock angle to see the Road Runner, now two kilometres ahead and pulling away in a shallow dive. Blinking, she took a few seconds to realise that its engine was out – and that it was heading down towards the waters of the Pacific.

Scanning her instruments, she glanced at her stopwatch. Her heart skipped a beat, as she saw the mechanical arm approach the adjustable red line she had set on the dial as the two nuclear-armed interceptors had finalised their flight plans. With a yelp, she braced the control stick between her knees, slammed her visor down tight, covered her tightly closed eyes with her folded arms, and began to pray. Somewhere ahead of her, the second wave of Toho Academy's defence should be seconds away from springing into action ...

“Counting one, counting two, counting three,” came the voice of Natahaho, the Engineer in the Road Runner's lower crew section slipping his laptop back into the data socket. “Ready for systems reboot – inlet doors open to re-start position, ten more seconds and we can re-light the engines, and –“

Even in the shielded lower compartment, he clapped his hands to his eyes as the compartment flooded with white light – light and heat as tangible as fire flooding the room, even the reflection blindingly white, like holding your head in a full searchlight beam. He gasped in shock and pain as a second pulse of light washed through the ship – even with his eyes tight shut, the bones in his paws showed through the flesh like ghostly red X-rays.

Mixelipicti came shooting out of his ball-turret through the hatch – he had been securely cradled in his tight seat against the shaking earlier, and fortunately had been facing aft with his visor right down. “That's a nuke! They've gone and –“

“Belt in!” Natahaho thrust him down into one of the engineers chairs, diving into the one next to it. “Belt tight! Depending on distance, we've a few seconds before the blast hits us...”

Just as the second belt clicked tight, the floor came up and hit them like a lift crashing into the buffers. Had the blast wave hit the aircraft at lower altitude, it would have been torn apart there and then, the wings and tail twisted off as the merged shock wave of the two Genie warheads above and seven kilometres ahead of them slammed into the aircraft. Two more of the crew died then, Rhys the Mid-upper Gunner flung down from the turret as he was blindly crawling down for help, and Motahcic the Night Bombardier thrown against a bulkhead hard enough to smash his face-plate.

“We're going down ...” Mixelipicti heard a voice, and realised that it was his own. The blast had hit slightly to one side, sending the Road Runner into a dive, the engines still out, and the engine controls still blocking the flow needed for a re-start. He blinked, purple-black after-images of the reflections still clouding his view, and, unclipping his harness, made a grab for the ladder leading to the crawl way to the cockpit. “Follow me – we'll see what we can do for'ard!”

Mixelipicti threw himself down the cramped tunnel, glad of his two years experience on Road Runners. The deceleration was milder now, as their speed bled away - they must be under Mach Two by now, he thought as he slid down the smooth tunnel, surrounded by space-cold fuel tanks still a quarter full of liquid methane. In three seconds he was through – into the cockpit.

“Oh, Mictanicutli take it,” he swore softly, invoking the least charitably inclined member of the pantheon. There were three crew in the cabin – one of them was down, his suit deflated like a burst balloon, and as for the other two...

Captain Evans turned sightless eyes towards him as he scrambled into the cockpit. “Who's that ? We need to get this aircraft down somewhere – or over land the crew can bail out over.”

“It's Mixelipicti, Sir – I'll do my best.” The engineer slid into the co-pilot's chair, and began to haul back on the stick.

The Captain felt the aircraft's attitude changing. “No! Don't pull us out – till we've got power. What's our altitude ? If we've altitude left, we can re-start the engines.”

The opossum looked at the sparse instrument panel. “Half the dials are dead – altimeter says forty thousand and dropping – we've lost half our height already.” He grabbed the laptop that had been ready to plug in, and jacked into the ship's main data bus. “Running diagnostics – damage reports coming in from all over. We're hit hard, Sir.” He blinked, as the second laptop in the pilot's seat came to life. “Radar emitters are working still, but the receivers are fried. We're jamming still. Sir ! The controls aren't responding properly. I think we bent the airframe a bit. We'd never hold up to high speed flight again. Engine controls are locked hard.”

Captain Evans' blind eyes stared towards him, the pupils wide and milky. “We have to set down. Any land within range? And what about the Device – can we jettison it ? We'll be too heavy to land with that on board.” The Road Runners frequently dropped their crew by parachute before landing – the skid undercarriage was only stressed for the expected weight of an aircraft whose fuel and weapons had been completely expended. Getting the crew out over friendly territory sometimes cost a few twisted ankles and such, but overall it was safer than staying with the aircraft. Over the Pacific Ocean, it was an option none of them had.

Mixelipicti started to call what crew he could, while holding the Road Runner in a shallow dive. “Engineering and Navigation are mostly OK – Natahaho says he just had time to force a loop in the timing routine. The Device thinks it’s already been dropped – so it handed control back to our systems.”

“It thinks it’s dropped ? So why hasn’t it fired yet ?” The Captain closed his eyes.

“Natahaho says it’s got a five second delay after dropping, to get clear of us before it switches its internal guidance on – like counting to three when you parachute out before pulling the ripcord. He’s fixed it for now so it re-sets before it ever gets there – and it’s holding so far.” Mixelipicti blinked. “Navigation say there’s only coral reefs and a few rocks ahead – we’re going down in the Ocean. Unless one of them’s big enough to set down on.” There was a pause as he heard the panicked discussion back in the Navigation bay, where the bulk of the ship had shielded the crew from flash-blindness. “There’s only one within range – and it’s marginal that we even get there. Altering course now.”

“We’ll go for it. See if any of the night-shift pilots or co-pilots are left, and get them up here.” Captain Evans grimaced, holding on to the unseen chair that he was tightly strapped into. “Then get ready to dump the Device and our fuel tanks if we still can – we’ll be coming in fast, hard and heavy!”

Suzuko held the silvery speck of the Road Runner in sight, far ahead and below her, as she scanned the instruments. The news was bad, but not as bad as she had feared – her mechanical altimeter, Mach meter and fuel gages were still working, but her radio and radio compass were dead. She blinked, looking around at the great flat expanse of the Pacific Ocean. “No land in sight – and I’m not that sure where I am, anyway.” She ran her gloved paws over the flight controls – the inlet cone was at its further forward again, ready to re-start the engine, and in the meantime cutting down the drag as it closed off most of the airflow through the rapidly cooling engine. It suddenly felt very quiet, with the thundering engine cut off and the thin air still hardly supporting the airframe as her speed bled away.

She shivered, holding herself steady as she fought the nervous reaction. If the Road Runner had carried on its course for another fifty seconds, it would have been neatly “bracketed” by the two nuclear detonations – it had been a good plan, but one she wished she had been observing from further off. In a pocket of her flight suit she wore a dosimeter that recorded her radiation exposure – and she was not looking forward to reading what it said.

“Fuel, two hundred litres, T-Stoff, about fifty – after I light the engine, about two minutes on low thrust.” She felt her ears trying to flatten inside her helmet, as she calculated her chances. “Radio’s out – either the beam guns or the Genies fried it crispy. Nobody knows where I am – and there’s no reason for them to think I’m even alive.” At twenty kilometres from the twin hypercentres she had missed the worst of the flash and heat pulse, but her aircraft was charred all over – in denser atmosphere its medium-density fibreboard parts would probably have burst into flame. The last sight she had seen of the Genies’ effects had been two billowing dirty brown clouds still rising high towards the top of the atmosphere – with luck, nothing from that would descend to earth for years, after most of the radiation had decayed. Still, she reflected wryly, high-altitude balloon flights might be unhealthy in the area for a few months to come ...

“Now where are they going ?” She spotted the Road Runner altering course. “They’ll never make Japan gliding, not in that thing.” She gulped, trying to suppress the rejoinder that came jeeringly to mind – *and neither will I*. With more momentum, the bomber had pulled ahead of her in the dive, and with its thinner wings it was keeping ahead of her.

“Well – I hope they know where they’re going – because I don’t. Except down.” She held a gentle turn, watching the altimeter dropping, as she followed the silvery dart down towards the water. Suddenly she blinked – there was a billowing flame from the Road Runner’s tail, easily a hundred metres long. “They’ve blown up ? Or – re-starting the engine?” She looked down at her own engine controls, and winced. There would scarcely be enough fuel left to catch up with the Road Runner from her present position, let alone if it began accelerating away from her. She held her paw on the engine controls, staring down at the distant speck. Despite the flaring fireball behind its tail, the image in the gunsight was hardly pulling away at all.

For three minutes she watched, as the fireball grew and then just as abruptly shut off. Then she gasped, peering past the distant needle nose of the bomber to the far horizon. At first she could see only a circular patch of differently textured ocean – as if something was calming the waves just in one spot. And then she saw it, a thin curve of land, still distant and thirty thousand feet below her. Looking down at her map, she blinked as she checked off the possible atolls by their size and shape. She finally found it, and tapped the map with a worried expression. “Etepa Atoll. Abandoned twenty years ago, with the sea-level rise. Uninhabitable. Underwater at high tide.” But as she looked around at the vast expanse of cold blue-grey Ocean all around, the thin strip of sand seemed an increasingly inviting place.

“Capt’n! We’ve blown the fuel and oxidant tanks, but – we’re still tonnes too heavy!” Tktlohahn Davies shook his Commander gently, pressing his helmet to direct contact. “We’re trying to unship the Device, but the powered controls aren’t working.” Behind him in Engineering, a team of half a dozen of the Night shift were labouring at the crank handles, turning the long worm gears that were raising the folded-down wing tips

for extra lift as their speed decayed. “We’ll have to hand-crank the undercarriage too – and that’ll be three minutes.”

Captain Evans shook his head, long familiarity letting him visualise the situation even without sight. “Damn. That’s bad. The landing area’s what, three hundred metres you say ? We’ll have to hit it just right – and our drag will be changing by the second, all the time the skids are extending. What do the computers say?”

“We could do it if we didn’t have the Device on board. It recommends the crew jump – but we’re over open ocean, and nobody to pick us up. As it is, we’ll be too low to parachute by the time we’re near land. And we’ve thrown out all the disposables, including the air-mines.”

There was a moment’s silence. “How many of us are left ?”

Tktlohahn Davies hesitated. “Twenty-three, Sir – Xohacapo and Copaxili are out cold, head injuries we think. We’ve three broken arms, one badly broken leg, and eight flash-blinded. Any number of cracked ribs and dislocations. Eleven dead.”

The Captain nodded, slowly. “When we get down to ten thousand feet – if there’s absolutely nothing else to jettison – burials at sea. Make arrangements. And keep working on the Device!”

“Sir!” Tktlohahn Davies saluted, heading back towards the aft section while Mixelipicti kept the Road Runner on a long, shallow dive just above the speed of sound. The wings had a sharp-edged biconvex section of barely two percent thickness, completely tuned for supersonic flight without a single thought of compromise. Once they dropped below Mach One, they would literally start dropping out of the sky. At their best glide angle, they were still dropping at nearly eight thousand feet a minute – Etepa atoll was absolutely the only piece of land within range.

Wriggling through the now echoing tube through the empty fuel tanks, he slid into the main Engineering compartment, where Natahaho and Jones the Day Radar were hunched over their laptops. On the screen was a bewildering jumble of source code, some of it obviously written in several distinctly different languages.

“You’ve kept it passive?” Tktlohahn Davies jerked his tail at the floor, where the great bulk of the Device under the floor stretched the entire length of the Bomb Bay. “We can drop it when the bay doors are open?”

Natahaho winced. “We’ve held it for eight minutes, which is eight minutes longer than the program’s expecting. And we can’t just crash the control program – there’s three instances of it running, and if any one of them fails, the Device thinks it’s about to be hacked into. It’s running on internal batteries right now – if it ever “wakes up” and discovers we’ve fooled it, it’ll detonate the millisecond later.”

Tktlohahn Davies swallowed nervously. “We’ve got to drop it in the ocean, quick. I’ll get the Night Shift to crank open the bay doors manually.” He tapped in the parameters on the aerodynamics simulator, and his eyes bulged slightly. “Oh, by Saint Dafyd of Xenopacthiha ! What that’ll do to our drag ! The bay’s meant to flick open in half a second, it’ll take minutes by hand. And when we drop it, it’s six percent of our momentum gone ...” He swallowed. “But that’s not the worst of it. Even if we dropped it right now, we’re still within range if it goes off – and so is that atoll.”

With a despairing look at the screen, he scrambled aft towards the next Engineering compartment, in search of able-bodied spare crew to crank down the great powered doors and landing gear. In nine more minutes the flight would be over – one way or another.

Suzuko scanned the empty horizons, hoping beyond hope for the wake of a distant ship – anything on the visible ocean was still within range, with her remaining fuel and altitude. But there was no other land except the yellow rind the bomber was heading towards – and very soon, she was going to have to make a decision about that. She looked down at her fuel gages and ammunition supply – she had forty rounds left, and enough fuel for one firing pass.

“They surely won’t be a threat to the Homeland all the way out here,” she told herself, nervously chewing a loose tuft of throat-fur inside her pressure helmet. “But – anybody would say I should – blast them out of the skies, and let the sharks finish them off.” She hesitated. Kazuko would have stormed in already, just to see the bang when explosive incendiary rounds blew apart fume-filled fuel tanks – and any of Gen’s friends would have as eagerly eliminated the foreign crew on general principles. “But I’m not them.”

She hunched her shoulders, her tail twitching in nervous tension as she thought – and watched the cockpit instruments that still worked, recording time and altitude slipping away. Suppose the Road Runner landed ahead of her, leaving no clear room for her to land ? Suppose they both landed, and the crew decided that slowly roasted vixen would be an entertaining snack ? Suzuko blinked, still trembling in reaction. She had not expected to survive the interception, and now life was seeming extremely sweet to her.

“What I can do – is take a look. I might as well, after all.” She switched the turbo-pump on, the peroxide blasting into hot steam and leaving a thin trail behind her in the icy upper air. Already, she was in air almost thick enough for an acclimatised climber to breathe, and her pressure suit felt tight around her as outside pressure reasserted its hold. Carefully eyeing the fuel gages, she fed fuel into the ring of Walter rocket

motors behind her, and felt her battered aircraft respond like a tired racehorse sensing the final mile. Her last fuel would never get her to any airfield, and as with all the 1945 class T-Stoff fuelled aircraft, landing with any of the violently corrosive peroxide sloshing loose in the tanks was a very bad idea.

Slowly she began to overhaul the bomber again, its high tail no longer glowing white-hot with engine flame or air friction. No bursts of microwave energy came her direction – not that she had anything vulnerable to such an attack still working. Putting the joystick forward, she dived below and held position three hundred metres below and a little behind, as she looked up at the great silver dagger still pointing towards Japan. Checking the altitude, she unsealed her helmet and swung the visor up out of the way for a better view.

“What are they doing ?” She blinked, puzzled as she worked her jaws to clear her painfully popping ears while the pressure equalised. The bomber’s wing tips had been folded down to form vertical fins that trapped the shock wave to provide “compression lift” in high speed flight – slowly, they folded up to lie flat and even as part of a smooth delta wing. A few seconds later, a long crack appeared in the underside of the aircraft – a slowly opening slot, long enough to swallow her whole fighter with ease.

And then Suzuko saw it, and with a sick thrill knew exactly what she was looking at. As the bomb doors slowly swiveled upwards and into the shining belly of the Road Runner, something slowly came into view. She eased the throttle forwards, pulling up the nose to close in for a better look – and her fur tried to fluff out in panic under the pressure suit as she focused on what hung in the bomb bay.

It was big, she had expected that. Easily the length of her own fighter, the pale green shape was slick and smoothly finned like some deadly shark, but somehow had proportions that made her shiver in a way no mundane piece of aerodynamic design should do. And as the bay doors opened further, she gasped in shock.

“Ninja!” Suzuko swore, her eyes bugging as if she was still at the edge of space with an open helmet. “Folding wings – and it’s got engines of its own. It’s a stand-off bomb, they don’t have to be over Japan to drop it!” She slammed her visor shut, and checked her cannon were still cocked and ready. “They’re going to launch it from here!”

With a swift motion she hit the wing spoilers, pulling the stick back as the charred plywood nose spike of her Lippisch interceptor reared up like a reined horse. The image of the Road Runner’s splitting belly span in front of her – as she pulled the triggers of both her cannon !

Her fighter was now light, down to its last fuel reserves, and the high-velocity heavy cannon shook it like a speedboat hammering through choppy waves. She saw ragged lines of fire burst out from behind the bomber – and then the bolts clicked forward on empty chambers. Pushing her fighter’s nose down, she darted ahead and hauled back the stick to climb above the bomber, seeing pieces starting to break off it, but no fires – and then she twisted on the stick to barrel-roll right over the top, looking upside down at its upper surface.

“It’s still going!” At a glance, she saw shell holes like a deadly constellation as daylight shone through the thin skin – neat, round holes, not the ragged craters a metre wide she expected. Suzuko blinked, and her eyes widened. “The skin’s as thin as a sake can – and these are authentic cannon shells. Ninja!” At close range, the paper-thin steel fuselage skin had slowed the shells hardly at all – the 1945-vintage fuses had only triggered when they had passed right through and out the far side. “Looks like I hit something, though – there’s still pieces falling off.” Her ears pressed down inside her helmet with strain, she throttled back and watched the rind of land slowly approaching her, even as her fuel gages approached “empty” with a grim urgency of their own.

“Damage Reports!” Captain Evans snapped over the net. Though blinded, he knew by feel and crew reports what had hit them. The Road Runner’s wind noise had steadily altered as the bay doors were winched open – and then there had come the staccato shuddering of large-calibre shells tearing through the aft fuselage.

“Major hits, Cap’n !” Natahaho called back down the intercom a minute later. “We’ve lost the waveguide aft of the wings – no more turret guns. Electrical power’s out – and our aerodynamics are shot to hell and back. We’re going to have to come in steeper and faster still, if we’re to hit the atoll.”

“Hell and Dalmatian,” Captain Evans thumped the unseen rest of his chair. “Can we drop the Device yet ?”

Back in the bombardier’s position aft of the fuel tank, it was a shambles. Only one of the shells had detonated, hitting an internal strut solid enough to set it off – the rest had punched straight through the thin steel skin, cutting cabling and pipes, but hitting nothing immediately fatal to the big aircraft. Natahaho picked himself up, his ears still ringing despite his helmet – he had unsealed the visor the minute the pressure outside was bearable, and was regretting it.

He crawled over to the bomb bay, and popped the inspection hatch. “Sir!” He shouted into his microphone, as he plugged into the data bus. “We lost the wiring loom – and the explosive bolt release was part of it. We can’t drop it from the console!” He stood looking down through the open hatch at the Device, and his tail twitched. The great pale green curve of the bomb filled his sight, left and right – and just in view was the ripped-open mass of control wiring, naked wire ends a bright sparking mass of tangled metal. A neat

round hole two fingers wide spilled light in from below, showing where the shell had punched in through the bomb bay door before detonating in the electrical vital organs of the Spirit of 56.

Natahaho swallowed. The access hatch was small, but even in his pressure suit he could wriggle through it, without the parachute pack. Swiftly, he unclipped the parachute and looked around the aft compartment. “Koahic – I think I can drop this by hand,” He touched helmets with the propulsion engineer, whose fuel and thrust gages were now dark and still. “I can trace the leads from the jettison switch and – “ he gestured towards the sparking bundles of severed wires. “One touch against that, should get enough juice to fire the detonators.”

Koahic winced, the jaguar’s whiskers scratching inside his face plate. “You’ll be standing on top of it when it drops.”

“I know! Pass me the parachute when I get through – and a dinghy pack. If there’s enough altitude, I’ll be all right if I can jump clear on the way down – but I’ll have to go right now.” With that, Natahaho started to squeeze through the round hatch, glad that his pressure suit was deflated and flexible. “What’s our altitude?”

Koahic spoke briefly on the intercom. “Twelve thousand and dropping fast! Get moving!”

Natahaho nodded grimly, unscrewing his bulky helmet and feeding his long tail through in its tightly bound pressure sheath, followed by his legs. A brief struggle with his parachute harness and a metre drop into the bomb bay – and he was sitting astride the Device. The wind roar was deafening, the open doors below him blasting air with the force of fire hoses through the opening between the smoothly tapered Device and the rectangular frame of the open door. For a second he could only hold on desperately – then he blinked, looking up at the wiring above him.

“That’s it!” High above him, the Spirit of 56’s wing spar fattened to a sturdy forging that held the main bomb shackle. There was one thick steel bar holding the Device at the front, with locking bolts leading to stabilising points behind him – when the main bolt sheared, all three would let go at once. And running from that main bolt was a thick red wire.

Grabbing hold of the bracing spars above his head, Natahaho struggled forward, straddling the great curve of the Device in the tearing air stream as if he was bareback riding a hippo through mountain torrents. The air was thick and breathable, and well below the speed of sound outside now – he knew they could be only a few minutes from hitting the planet, one way or another. Gasping with the strain of holding on, he traced the red wire down, finding the flailing end – and began to stretch it back towards the other bundle of live cables.

He blinked, the wind blast making his eyes stream with tears, and suddenly noticed that the big junction box that should be just above him was missing, with a ragged hole in the outer fuselage above. He stared at it, as the realisation hit him – about a metre of cable was not just cut, but missing.

With a yelp, Natahaho struggled to turn around, hanging on like a leaf in a gale as he shuffled back towards the entrance hatch, with no time left to carefully unpick the torn bundles of arcing wires and find a surviving length that would reach. Looking down at the gap just past his booted foot, he could see the waves clearly below, rushing past as they did from a Road Runner using its slow, floatplane based first stage.

“Pull me through!” He shouted at the top of his voice, raising his hands towards the hatch. “Pull me through and strap in – we’re going to hit!”

From a little over a kilometer above and behind the bomber, Suzuko watched the final seconds of its flight. The great silver bird swayed slightly, its nose coming up high, angled at thirty degrees as flaps and air brakes sprang out to squeeze the last dynes of lift from the sharp delta wing that was far happier at a thousand kilometres an hour faster. Even as she winced, she congratulated its pilot, who was making a spot-on “dead-stick” landing on a sand strip narrower than the bomber’s overall length. The nose came up steeply, to forty-five degrees and past it, white vortices suddenly springing into view behind the canard foreplane and wingtips as swirling contrails in the damp ocean air. Steeper it rose, till the nose was three storeys off the ground, as the pilot desperately struggled to squeeze lift out of the last shreds of a momentum that had taken it across the planet.

From her viewpoint keeping pace with it, for a second the Road Runner seemed to hover, spray blasting from the waves below as it entered ground-effect and slid towards the narrow end of the sand-spit. From her angle she did not see the four-metre long main skids hitting the sand – but saw the great golden spray hurled to each side like a snow-plough as they bit into the beach.

For a few seconds all looked well – as the nose steadily dropped, the skids ploughing wide furrows in the damp sand at a hundred and forty kilometres an hour, and a great grey braking parachute streamed out behind, biting into the heavy ocean air. Then the nose skid touched the beach – every second the weight on the skids was growing as the dropping air speed and angle drained the lift from the wings. Three furrows now ploughed across the beach – getting deeper and deeper, as the full weight of the overloaded bomber ground along on undercarriage never stressed to land with its payload on board.

Suzuko had twice tried to blast the Road Runner out of the skies. But she shuddered anyway in a pilot’s fellow feeling as she saw the top skin of the bomber start to wrinkle like folded cardboard just aft of the

mid-upper turret – and the pure silver dagger buckled and broke, a slim fuselage crumpling on the beach in a huge fountain of flying sand and debris.

“Oww – at least it’s in one piece.” She felt her fur starting to rise as the aircraft ground to a halt, still largely in one piece apart from a trail of scattered metal panels. She looked down, while her fuel gage began blinking red. “No fire, either – and it’s left enough room for me to land behind. Like it or not – here I go.”

Natahaho lay strapped in the bombardier’s couch, staring up at the sky. There was something very wrong with this, some part of his throbbing head was insistently telling him. For a full minute he looked up at the clouds, feeling his breathing slow and laboured through bruised ribs where the tight straps were cutting into his chest.

“Daylight.” He blinked. Realisation dawned that he should not be seeing daylight through the fuselage of the aircraft he had lived in for the past eight months. Just then, a battered shape loomed over him, as Jones the Capacitor hit the release buckle of the harness and caught him as he tumbled off the couch.

That was another thing that wasn’t right, Natahaho told himself as he looked around and caught a glimpse of the horizon through a ragged tear in the thin steel. The Road Runner was tilted forwards and to one side, after one rear skid had collapsed and the fuselage had buckled with the impact. Fine sand showered over him as he moved, his head feeling as if hammers were beating there from inside and out.

“We’re down, look you,” Jones the Capacitor waved at the wreck. “But we’d best be getting away – as far as we can. There’ll be fumes in the main tank, and charge in the capacitors. One spark ...” Without another word, he popped the lower hatch that had once led to comfortable bunk beds, in a living module now floating abandoned somewhere halfway across the Pacific Ocean.

Natahaho winced as his bruised limbs flexed, the opossum sliding down the ladder to the sand below. He collapsed, panting, and looked around at the narrow strip of sand, narrower than some runways he had seen. Forward, he saw the nose was tilted up, the sharp spike still pointing defiantly ahead as hatches opened and the command crew emerged – some making their own way down, some lowered on ropes by their parachute harnesses. “We landed ? In more or less one piece ?”

Jones the Capacitor grimaced. “Not in one piece. Copaxili’s dead, he never came round since the engines stalled. Maracacho Ap Rhys got it too – one of the compressed air tanks burst, it’s a real mess in the fore turrets. Good thing you were strapped in.”

Natahaho clutched his throbbing head, trying to feel grateful. Just then, the canine next to him looked out through the torn fuselage, and swore sulphurously in Quechca.

“Oh-oh.” He heard Jones the Capacitor breathe, and felt the Welsh Corgi tap nervously at his shoulder. “We have company.”

Natahaho turned slowly. He blinked in the dawn light – looking back towards the Eastern end of the atoll they had flown over, was to look straight into the rising sun, the great crimson ball slowly rising above the sea-haze. His gaze followed the furrow carved deep in the sand where they had landed – and barely a hundred metres away, saw a strange shape outlined in the sun.

“Yes, we’ve got company.” He confirmed, his ears sagging. Pointing straight towards them, was the aircraft that had shot them down, sitting on landing skids very like their own, but still intact – its cannon ports round and black like piggy eyes looking straight at them. “He followed us down – we can’t dodge, and at that range last time - he didn’t miss.”

Suzuko sat in the cockpit, shivering violently. In a way, it was like stepping on shore after weeks afloat, the sudden stability and silence unnerving her. She had done what she had to, one step at a time – brought the Road Runner down, and landed her own aircraft safely. The carefully planned scheme had run its course, but had left her in a situation nobody had considered as a possible ending.

“Safe.” Her ears drooped. “On a strip of sand occupied by thirty terrorists, probably armed to the teeth, still carrying their Bomb – and probably all wanting my hide for a hearthrug. Some safety.” It was rather too late, she told herself, to go waving olive branches – but then a slow smile crept to her muzzle. She looked down at her cannon, the bolts still forward on empty chambers – and realised her sights were still fixed on the main bulk of the Road Runner, which had skewed round diagonally on landing to present her a target she could not miss.

Quickly, she took stock. She had the standard survival pack, with five litres of water and rations for a fairly comfortable three days, that could stretch to a hungry week. Her cockpit and windscreen were bulletproof, unless folk worked their way around to the sides – and on the narrow, bare atoll, she would see them trying. “No ammunition left – but they don’t know that.” A quick check of her systems showed a dead radio, but the navigation lights were still working from the little onboard battery.

She smiled. “They’ve been fighting the Mexicans for years,” her eyes widened, as she looked out to see figures emerging from the bent fuselage of the Road Runner. “I expect a Mexican Standoff, is something they’re used to by now.”



“He’s signaling!” Tktlohahn Davies spotted the winking white lights on the wing edge of the fighter that squatted purposefully on the sand a hundred paces behind them. “It’s Morse code – anyone have a paper notebook ? I’d have to write it down and translate.”

“No need – I learned it in the Police Scouts,” Natahaho shaded his eyes to peer across to the strangely shaped black aircraft, its scorched-looking skin showing no visible markings. “It’s in English – let’s see.” His tail stiffened in concentration.

“... REST IMMEDIATELY’, I think that’s “Under Arrest”, then it’s ‘WILL FIRE IF APPROACHED’, then, ‘FORCES ON WAY’, I think he means there’s reinforcements coming. That’s it for now. What shall we reply?” He reached down and grasped a torn-off strip of polished steel fuselage skin. “This’ll make a good signal mirror, the reflection’s perfect from here.”

“Sir?” Tktlohahn Davies turned to see Captain Evans being led forward, Mixelipicti leading him carefully. “We’re stuck, we’re right in his sights. He missed the fuel tanks last time, but he won’t now. And his friends are on the way.”

The Captain’s tail drooped, and he sighed. “We’re down, and most of us are still alive. That’s the best we can hope for. We can expect the JSDF to be arriving any time – assuming they don’t just blast this atoll to glass as soon as their next battlestation orbits past us.” His nose twitched, scenting the sour scent of sick and scared people around him, carried on the fresh ocean breeze. “They might do that – “We surrender, Sir?” Natahaho blinked. “We’ve still got our small arms – we can move the wounded out of danger range, then take him left and right, along the beach so he couldn’t hit us. We could do it!”

Captain Mictikutili Evans turned his sightless eyes towards the voice. “And then what ? We’ve ten badly wounded, and no shelter except for what’s left of Spirit of ’56. The Device is still unstable, it could wake up and detonate any time – and we wouldn’t have a heartbeat’s warning. And as for rushing the aircraft - that’s a single-seat fighter, and Davies here says it lands on skids like ours – it’s not taking off from here on its own power. The JSDF must know what we’re carrying – I don’t think holding one of their pilots to ransom is going to achieve much, apart from irritating them more than they are already.”

The opossum’s whiskers drooped. “Yes, Sir. “ He picked up the mirror, thought briefly as he translated his native Quechca into English, and began to signal.

NO SHOOT. WE SURRENDER.

.....

The monotonous engine note of the Hughes Hercules droned on, seemingly lost in the endless night. Suzuko shivered, remembering that high point of her day, some twelve hours ago by her old mechanical watch. She had been happy to be bluffing on one level – if she had had ammunition to fire, actually doing so would have removed her last bargaining chip – but she would have been a lot happier to know the JSDF, or indeed anyone, was coming to help.

The day had worn on, the early sunshine vanishing in first a thick haze, then in thick glowering clouds that swept low over the island. Suzuko shivered, in an uneasy mix of nerves and exhaustion as she stared through the rain-smearred canopy at the glittering steel shape ahead of her. The crew had either vanished to the far side of the crashed bomber, or retreated back inside out of the rain.

Rain had smeared the canopy, condensation threatening to wholly spoil her view. At about mid-day her on-board power supply had failed, the batteries finally running flat. From that point on, she was sitting in an inert shell – as the final electrical systems went flat, including her infra-red goggles.

“That’s just great,” Suzuko had growled to herself, cautiously opening the canopy to peer out into the rain. It occurred to her that several of the crew looked like kinkajous, capybaras and some other species with no aversion to water – it would be no trouble for them to slip into the surf unseen on the far side of the bomber, swim out a hundred metres and circle back to land behind her, the rain on the canopy muffling any sound. She stuck her nose out of the open canopy, sniffing for any suspicious scents above the odor of scorched plywood that her brave interceptor was wafting into the rainy air.

Just then, her ears had pricked up at an unexpected sound – not of stealthy footsteps on damp sand, but that of small, buzzing piston engines. Opening the canopy all the way for a minute she stood up, unfastening her helmet liner to hear better. Yes – definitely, she told herself, engines!

From out of the low clouds, came what was obviously an Academy aircraft – but one she blinked up at, puzzled, taking half a minute to recall where she had seen it before. It was a clumsy-looking, high-winged monoplane with four very small engines in the wings, painted in the Academy registration codes for the Historical Engineering course of the year before hers.

“Nobody from my year – surely, that one went home, months ago ? I’ve not seen that in the air since Spring last year.” She waved as the straight winged Fleet Shadower dipped rather clumsily over the island, rocked its wings and headed back the way it had come.

Her ears had perked up at the sight, even when the little aircraft had vanished back into the clouds. She had been bluffing before, but now that someone from Toho Academy had spotted her and the Road

Runner – things were starting to look up. Even the 1925 class aircraft carried radios, and upgrading such things was the first thing proud owners did after passing the Authenticity exams.

“Mae and Mangana will get a flying boat out here in a couple of hours,” she told herself, reaching for the one canteen of water she carried, and taking a generous pull. “By tonight I’ll be home safe and sound – assuming those folk ahead don’t try anything desperate, my troubles should be over.”

Suzuko had relaxed, humming an Alpenrock tune to the accompanying percussion of the rain, as she reached for a canine-safe chocolate bar from the Survival Kit. There would be no need to make it last.

She had been exactly right about the flying boat from Toho Academy arriving in two hours, as the Infamous Five radioed in her position to the people who were eagerly awaiting their report. But as for her troubles being over – though Suzuko was highly gifted in various ways, fortune-telling was sadly not one of her better talents.

Gen Yakitori grinned fiercely from inside his Mitsubishi M-155 Mecha, currently wedged in the access door between the crew and cargo sections of the Hughes Hercules. He hefted a dull green, grapefruit-sized piece of ordnance as he looked down at the captured terrorist crew – the “Screamer grenade” was basically a rocket-driven whistle with skull-piercingly high sonic and ultrasonic notes tuned to deliver maximum pain with minimum damage. He had used half a dozen at the capture on the sand-spit that afternoon, and had no qualms about lobbing a few more into the crowd if they got too near.

The sharp-muzzled canine stood braced, his suit’s systems primed and ready to go. He was proud of his mech: a proper Japanese design, plain unfussy iron black ceramic fibre in main construction, with a smooth-running, compact turbine currently idling. In a heartbeat he could trigger it into swift and deadly response – his right arm was currently rigged with a chainsword that could slice a hole in a brick wall big enough to step a bulky suit through in little over a minute. Taking apart the thin steel of the Road Runner had been no trouble at all.

“Just an hour to go. Want to change shifts ?” Shiitake Tabi strode towards him, the pug secure in his own Mecha – with helmets sealed, the two suits “talked” through point-to-point infra-red links that ignored the loud droning of the aircraft around them. Shiitake’s suit was a more stylish affair, ablative armour panels tied to the outside in a well-researched piece of protective design that resembled the lacquered plates of a classical Samurai armour. The effect was hardly coincidental.

“No – I’ll hang on till then. This suit’s plumbed-in, I don’t need a tree break.” The canine showed sharp teeth in a smile, patting the armoured codpiece of his Mecha. “Besides – they might try something, when they spot we’re landing. Can’t do much escaping at twenty thousand feet, but they might think it’s worth risking it when we’re touched down. I’d hate to miss the fun.” He tossed the Asatabo Industries Mark 21 Screamer grenade from one armoured paw to another. “Have we cleared to land ? Our papers should be good for a week.”

Shiitake gave a snuffling laugh, his squashed-in snout wrinkling more than ever. “That’s to get back to the Empire – all you have to do is satisfy the folk on New Tortuga that you’re not going to invade or Reform them – they don’t use paperwork, they’re ....” His face contorted as he spat out the word, “Anarchists! Fundamentalist ones, too !”

One of Gen’s ears dipped, inside his helmet. “I never really studied New Tortuga in detail,” he confessed. “Well, you don’t study things like that, except not to step in them. How does the place work ? I’d have thought, it’d be ripe for a Hostile Takeover by the first Evil Mega-Corporation that got there.”

Shiitake braced himself against the wall, setting his suit’s actuators to “Auto-Stabilize” as he relaxed inside it, letting the suit cancel out the swaying of the aircraft. “That’s what I thought, at first. But it’s a ... convenient place to have around, for a lot of powerful organisations. Everything that takes place is deniable – they literally have no legal system. No Government, no organised military or police, no lawyers.”

Gen shivered. “So that’s what they mean when they claim they’ve got a zero Crime Rate! I assumed they were just boasting.”

“Well, in a sense they’re telling the truth. There’s no such thing as crime – the locals do kill each other, but it’s not Murder, but Homicide. They treat it as a special-interest sport.” Shiitake raised an eyebrow. “You name it, you can probably do it on New Tortuga. Only trouble is, there’s nothing to stop someone else doing it to you first.”

“Except the hardware.” Gen nodded, shifting the weight of fuel and ammunition as his Mecha creaked on its activators. He cocked his head on one side. “Doesn’t sound very sustainable to me.” He triggered the gunsight on his helmet display, projecting the aiming spot on the wall. “Imagine it, out there. ‘Bang you’re dead.’ ‘You killed my pal. Bang you’re dead.’ ‘YOU killed MY pal.’....” His targeting spot flicked from one side to the other of the fuselage. “I still don’t see why someone doesn’t set themselves up as King, or Archimandrate or whatever.”

The pug gave a short, barking laugh. “That’s the one thing you can’t do. They’re Anarchists, and they intend to keep it that way – I said they didn’t have an Organised police or military, but they get the job

done with a Disorganised one. ‘Mob rules OK’, and that sort of thing. They get things done by stirring up the crowds, who comprise some very desperate types – escaped criminals, sanity-deficient scientists and the like. Their sociology’s something like bacteria in a septic tank, and about as appealing. Try setting up Organised crime or Government though, and see how far you get – but I warn you, no insurance you can buy will cover you for what happens to you on that Island.”

“Fascinating.” Gen’s eyes gleamed. He waved his tail towards the passenger section, where a score of Peruvian Empire males and one Japanese vixen were secured. “You mean – when we’ve finished with them – we can ... ?” He briefly flashed the weapons sight on his faceplate’s snout-up display. “Or maybe something else might turn up, more profitable ?” His head buzzed with a throng of vaguely realised schemes, visions of golden Yen pieces like a swarm of honey-bees swarming through his thoughts. Enviously, he looked at Shiitake’s glamorous, princely armour – the Pug’s grandfather had been an early success story of what was now the Worldnet. He had clicked on an online advert promising “Make Big \$\$\$\$\$ Fast!!!” and within hours, amassed a fortune putting him in the top one percent of the richest individuals in Asia. Naturally, that had emptied the pot for everyone coming after, and similar schemes since then had never made much money for anyone. Although, he reminded himself, since old-fashioned Economics had been outlawed, there HAD been fascinating events around the Japanese Empire. His comrade Yukio came from a small island that had become Yen millionaires inside a week, just by sending each other chain-letters.

Shiitake’s armoured head nodded, looking past his friend. “Don’t forget, we do have to bring back field notes, this IS officially a Cultural Hygiene trip. It’d make rather good copy if some of them ... let’s see, now. I’ve read that there’s restaurants in New Port Royal, the one town on the place, that do – let’s say, Specialist meats not usually available.”

“I’ve heard of those,” Gen’s tail thrashed. “I want to eat Whale ! And Panda!”

Shiitake looked at him, amused. “I’m sure you can. But that’s not what I was thinking about. When I say they might end up in a restaurant, I didn’t mean paid by the hour. I meant, sold by the kilo.”

Gen was silent for a minute. “That sounds good copy for a field trip report.” He looked into the passenger compartment, speculatively. “Do you suppose we could take photos ? But – It’s a good thing there aren’t any Food Quality laws there.”

Seeing his friend raise an eyebrow questioningly, Gen nodded to the scintillation counter strapped to the wall. “Irradiated meat ! All the crew in the front section were throwing up not six hours after the nukes hit – with the sort of dose they must have taken, I don’t think they’ll be bothering us for long.” He considered the issue. The back section of the bomber had been effectively shielded by the fuel tanks – liquid methane was pretty good as neutron shielding, and the tanks were half full by the crew’s accounts. “The rest of them should be all right – at least, as long as we have to handle them.”

“There is that,” Shiitake mused. “Whatever, I think it should be – excellent material for our class project. Oh, and we’ve checked with the Peruvian Government. This crew have been officially repudiated as Terrorists – they killed their Priest and went in to bomb Japan on their own initiative – until they ran up against Toho Academy, and were blasted out of the skies. Officially, there were no survivors.”

“Officially.” Gen smirked. He looked towards the back of the aircraft, recognising the one Academy flight suit. “What they did was criminal. Nearly as criminal as one of our own trusted Students not shooting them down when she got the chance.” He raised an eyebrow. “Shame we can’t find a Homelands law about that. My cousins are all in the Police – they know what to do with criminals.”

Deep-set pug eyes gleamed. “I’ll bet ! They’re slippery folk to deal with. Why, my Uncle’s in the Anti-Riot Police, himself. Even when you’ve arrested them, they’re full of dirty tricks. Things like stealing a rope and stool, hanging themselves in the cell and THEN hiding the stool afterwards. We’d better watch this bunch like hawks.” He gestured towards the defeated crew in the passenger area.

“I take it that Peru won’t want their crew back, in any shape or form ?” Gen cocked an ear. “Even if they found out we’d got them after all ?”

Shiitake shook his head. “Not as such. But, you know, the worldwide trade in organs is anonymous, and Peruvians are as likely to need a new liver as the next fur. And not only for the terrorist crew – I’m sure there’s a variety of interesting things that can happen to a disgraced Citizen out there. Suzuko doesn’t have papers to go to New Tortuga, let alone come back again. That could make interesting copy, too – oh, those wicked people on New Tortuga.” He shook his head again, with a mocking sigh.

“Quite. We’ll get the secrets of this Device out of them, one way or another – and our Arch-Dean said, this is the only place on the planet where we still might meet some of the folk who built it in the first place. The technology came from Europe somewhere, he said.” Gen shrugged dismissively. “Shoddy Far Eastern goods, no wonder we don’t work with that sort of technology. And then ... when we’ve got all the information we need out of them – I’m sure it’ll be interesting, whatever we can arrange after that.”

The pug smiled. “Oh, I’m very sure of that. But it won’t be our fault, we’re all clean and legal, taking a crashed aircraft crew to the nearest Hospitals on our route. Did you notice any markings on that aircraft that said it was Peruvian ?”

Gen instinctively tried to scratch his head, before realising his helmet was sealed. “Well, there weren’t any after we’d finished with it – that’s a fact. I had to cut away that section with the chainsword to get at the

“trapped passengers” and the cargo.” His fur rose at the thought of the “cargo”, now securely strapped to the lower cargo hold below them. From the brief initial grilling of the Peruvians, they had claimed the weapon was almost sentient, and would react to any tampering with its programming or structural integrity by triggering itself autonomously. Having that sort of thing a few metres beneath his paws, was not a relaxing experience.

“Of course you did. We did what any good Law-Abiding Citizens would do, and that’s just how it’ll read in the report. As for what’ll happen to them on New Tortuga ...” he looked at his friend, ears raised.

“Like you said,” Gen nodded, flexing his power-armour menacingly. “New Tortuga’s a useful place to have around. Whatever happens there, is totally...” he waited for his friend to finish, and smiled when Shiitake said the word.

“Deniable.”