

Christmas Present

Being the Nineteenth part of the diaries of Amelia Bourne-Phipps, in her final year at the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies, Spontoon Eastern Island. Amelia and her friends have just returned from a harrowing two weeks in the Aleutians...

Oharu Wei, Nikki Reese Dorrycott, Reverend Bingham Stu Schiffmann, Judge Harold Poynter E.O. Costello, Angelica Silfverlindh Freddy Andersson

14th December

Dear Diary: although we arrived back last night, it is only supper-time today that I get a chance to write. The trip was long, very bumpy and chilly – crammed into the dark hold with no view outside, three or four of us were airsick, which did not improve the atmosphere. This scarcely ever happens to a Songmark girl let alone a third-year, but one could hardly have a less comfortable flight. Even military transports have seats, be it the canvas strap type we had on the Handley-Page “Clive” we flew down to the Albanian South Indies. Certainly the Lockheed Lamprey is no luxury airliner, being more like a flying version of one of the cattle-trucks that were pressed into service for troops in the Great War (the aerodynamics at the front are not dissimilar, but then it is no Schneider Trophy racer). Although by all accounts the troops were pleased to get in them, if the train was taking them away from the Front on leave.

Most people managed to snatch some sleep, but although we have tried it in worse conditions (the bare windswept beach at the start of our acclimatising comes to mind) it was hardly restful. At least on the way out we were sitting on piles of clean, dry equipment and clothing; on the return everything was sodden wet and muddy. So were we, for that matter.

It was a very sorry bunch that staggered up the docks on Eastern Island in the dark, soaked to the skin and all shivering with cold. Our leather Sidcot suits had been saturated for days, and not having had a chance to change our clothing in a week we certainly were far from fragrant. The quarter mile or so to our gates has never seemed so far. This time of year few lights are on in the street, and after the last scheduled flights of the evening come in the airport buildings shut down apart from a skeleton crew to handle emergencies.

For once our Tutors were merciful; we would usually have to clean and list all our equipment and specially issued clothing before handing it back into the Songmark stores; yesterday it seems there was a Songmark first-year dorm in need of punishment duties, to whom we gladly handed everything before staggering in little more than our bare fur towards the showers. The third-year dorm rooms are unheated but after the Aleutians it feels like Summertime to us – and if we did not break our record speed getting into the hot showers, it was only because of our exhaustion!

Maria is always proud of her looks, and the sight of her fur matted down with mud and grease that had seeped in from the leather Sidcot suit’s waterproofing would have set her off into frenzies if she had the energy left. We were all much the same, and much soap and grooming was needed before we looked anything like our passport photos. Molly grumbled that Madame Maxine’s probably has a casualty ward for this sort of thing. Certainly they have deep baths for a good soak, something that we have dreamed of.

It was officially lights-out time before we had even finished a minimal cleaning, but for a change our Tutors were merciful. We must not expect any more of this; at least not without first paying for it with another similar two weeks of hard living. There was a hot midnight supper of thick soup and buttered toast waiting for us in the dining hall though only half of us came down, the rest had thrown themselves onto their beds like one sees films of desert travellers throwing themselves into oasis pools. White bread and real butter! None of it went to waste; we were even allowed to leave the dishes on the table for the other years to clean up. Another first, and quite possibly a last. The soup tasted excellent after living substantially on pemmican, especially those vegetable pemmican blocks with the mashed beans congealed in palm oil. Those made our Saint Winifred’s traditional diet (mostly suet) seem decidedly tasty.

Back to our third-year dorms, which never looked so good to us before! We were shepherded upstairs sometime around one by Miss Devinski, who quite gently carried an unconscious Li Han up to bed like a kitten. The poor girl had passed out with her snout in her soup bowl; fortunately it was empty by then after she stayed awake just long enough for seconds.

Anyway, I have at least seen some daylight today unlike some people who did not wake up till tea-time when it is getting dark now. A ten tenths cover of heavy cloud easily knocks off an hour of light, and the rain was hammering down all day. It was marvellous to sit indoors relaxing and look at the rain on the window outside, rather than feeling it leaking into one’s fur. The thing about Adventuring is it is such a relief when you stop and rest afterwards. Tomorrow we will be back to our usual hard routine till the end of term, with night guard duties and everything. Mrs. Oelabe is scheduled to give us the once-over first thing tomorrow, like a mechanic going over a fighter after a dogfight. There may not be any bullet holes to patch, but there are the equivalent of plenty of strained bracing wires and control cables.

Molly took advantage of the free time when other folk were still asleep to stagger out and bring in a supply of Nootnops Blue that she got past the second-years on gate without much trouble. Happily it was Rumiko and Florence Farmington, who would not “turn her over” just for the sake of it. She has an emergency cache of smuggler’s accessories stashed around Eastern Island such as oil cans with false bottoms and the like: anyone opening the top for a casual inspection will see and scent the machine oil in there. There is about a cupful at the top, the rest of the gallon can being available for “cargo space” as she puts it.

We have a few days before the end of term and our Tutors are going to be making us suffer. Not that they have said as much, but we can read the signs by now. According to Miss Devinski, the Aleutian trip counts as a holiday in that we did not keep up with our textbooks or our flying skills – that we shall have to make up later. If that is a holiday, I dread to think what the final two terms of hard work are going to be like!

As far as the holidays are concerned, a lot of us are staying on Spontoon and around the area. Even furs who have made a point of always going home, such as Madeleine X are staying this time. Adele Beasley is surprisingly returning to Krupmark, though not to that job in a casino. She confides in me a lot, having nobody too sympathetic in either her old or her new dorm. What Miss Devinski will say about it I hardly like to think; technically in the holidays we are on our own time but we are expected to keep up our fitness and arrive back healthy and on time. The last time Adele went there she returned having picked up something rather unwelcome; she says she has written back and been praised and rewarded for having pointed out the problem, which should not happen again.

But then, this IS Adele we are talking about. If there is a refugee on Krupmark carrying the authentic 1918 influenza, one can guarantee he will fall in the water and she will be called on to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. She is taking a radio transmitter with her, which is something she has asked approval for at each end. I don’t know if her getting involved with someone “up the hill” on Krupmark is such a good idea, but she is a Songmark third-year student and has survived her last two trips there. I would have thought someone with chronically bad luck should stay clear of that place like someone with poor balance should avoid tightrope walking or skyscraper building. At least, being able to keep in touch as long as she has the transmitter is a good idea, and may be a lifeline.

A return to poi for the evening meal, although plenty of fish and chilli stew disguised it. It is one thing we hate to admit in public – poi really is rather nourishing, and looking at the Natives brought up on it, it definitely builds physiques. We all retired early, but a return to Nootnops Blue was a more welcome experience than the poi. The second-years will be glad we are back, as by all accounts the weather has been miserable here and they have been learning what the view is like patrolling the fence at three in the morning.

15th December

Back to classes! As we found out in Spring, recovering from the militia exercises with minimal sleep takes more than one night’s rest to recover fully from such a major exertion. Alas we have used up that ration of luxury now and the chorus of groans at seven was far louder than the alarm clocks. (Beryl calls this the “Dorm Chorus.”) Another grey and overcast day, but after being up to our tail-roots in snow and slush, one hardly minded.

Out after breakfast (breadfruit mash, again) in our athletics kit for two hours brisk jog, something else we are told we have to make up. Well, anyone who can jog through muskeg swamp and/or tail-root-deep snow hardly needs extra exercise. True, running does use muscles other activities do not, and we had not sprinted anywhere in awhile. While we slogged along the loose beach sand, on the coast road Miss Wildford paced us on her bicycle, a new Eastern Island built racing model of Vostok magnesium alloy that was made on the dayshift here. Just what that factory makes during night shift is something we are not going to investigate. We would pass on the warning to Crusader Dorm in the first year, but it would probably be counter-productive. They are usually in quite enough trouble without us dropping them reverse psychology hints, and for some reason are convinced we are all villainesses rather than fledgling adventuresses.

Molly had caught up yesterday with her letters like the rest of us, and as we double-timed it along the beach while our Tutors were out of earshot she panted that Lars is back in town, having been busy in Vostok buying and selling. Considering what he brought over last time he did a major overseas trip, the arrival is unlikely to be logged in the pages of the Birdwatcher, and I expect Molly will probably like whatever he brought.

There is so much to plan for the weekend! For one thing I have dropped a note to Judge Poynter on Meeting Island, who is interested in looking at my case. It is liable to make legal history; people have committed every crime in the book trying to get a Title, but my trying to get rid of the Allworthy association will be a new one. The Judge is of course busy with cases all week, but has kindly assented to see me on Saturday.

Helen says she ought to come along as a chaperone. I pointed out that by all accounts the Judge is a genial and respectable old gentleman – to which she riposted THAT was what I had thought of Leon Allworthy, and look where that got me. I took her point. Still, I sincerely hope I have learned my lesson there.

Our Tutors are busy writing up our marks for our trip, and indeed we are compiling our own reports. They will go to the Songmark library for posterity, where presumably future generations of Adventuresses will be able to marvel at Madeleine X's record-breaking moaning and Molly's impressive feats of racketeering in the face of extreme hardship (If there was a medal for that, Molly deserves one.) I fear Madeleine X and Adele are not getting along at all well after this trip – Adele might have been better off staying in her old dorm with Beryl and Missy K, which was bad enough.

Between classes, we all took our trip to visit Mrs. Oelabe and be poked and prodded. After all I will be Tailfast in a few days and want to make sure I am at my best for Jirry. All is well, and I am definitely looking forward to it.

Another thing we have to take turns with is the one bath for nineteen of us. Since that Cranium Island shrew Alpha rebuilt the water heater it does not need a second girl furiously pumping the air compressor – which is a vast improvement. By the time you had a bath and laboured on the pump long enough to fill the tub for a friend, you needed another bath yourself. Still, there is nothing like a soak for tired and strained muscles, and there are a lot of those around here.

An interesting trip for Maria; Miss Wildford summoned her to her office, being on evening duty tonight, and awhile later we saw Maria heading out of the gate towards Song Sodas. She returned quite late, with a rather thoughtful expression. If she feels like telling us she will; she has quite a lot of secrets, what with her Uncle. Perhaps it is some unfinished business from the Festival of Nations? That is only two weeks ago, but after our trip it already feels like last term. From all accounts she held her own side up in the debate jolly well, and although she gained no points for justifiably dropping Liberty Morgenstern on her head, neither did she lose any. There was no damage done to the stage and Liberty's head is exceedingly hard, probably all the way through.

Just over a week till Jirry and me are Tailfast! Helen equally keen for the Solstice to roll around, but she has been continuously Tailfast to Marti all this time, and has got used to it. It will be more of a change for me to be able to brush that comb-patterning into my fur again. After a year and two Tailfasts they can marry by Spontoon custom – in fact on some of the remoter islands without resident Priestesses to preside, the custom is that after two Tailfasts they simply are regarded as wed.

All being well, this Judge Poynter can think of a way for me to drop the Allworthy connection, and whoever is due to inherit is more than welcome to it. I had a letter this morning with a British stamp on it, postmarked Barrow-in-Furryness, which was from "my" tenants. They begged to know if I was going to come home and put things to rights – and I hardly know what to tell them. If I try and ignore the whole thing I will be by default an absentee landlady, with rents piling up in whatever Allworthy bank accounts are now unfrozen, whether or not I ever spend a penny of them. Not my idea of a good deed. Plus, there is someone out there whose rightful inheritance I am sitting on – again, not a good thing to do.

Madeleine X overheard me talking it over and was complaining that I was severely letting the side down, for a Euro. Having the good fortune to inherit wealth and title, it was my duty to stop degrading myself with savages and live up to my responsibilities (she said.) True enough, the idea of Lady Allworthy marrying Jirry Hoele'toemi and moving into the spacious estates of a palm-thatched longhouse does sound a little odd. Which is why I will be keeping the longhouse and dropping the Lady part of it.

(Later) Just when all our plans were made and polished, something happened to put the tin hat on them. We should be used to this by now. Just before lights-out Maria decided to "spill the beans" on what she had been doing. She has met Saimmi before we managed to, and that Japanese Spontoonic priestess that painted Prudence's team portrait! It looks like we have a mission to Krupmark far sooner than expected – Maria and Molly are asked to join the team, while we are not. Well! I can't say I think much of that; Helen and I did not do too badly on Cranium Island and we have been practicing a lot since then. Even Saffina was asked to go; a fine thing to take a second-year on an Adventure and leave two third-years on the shelf. When Maria told us the departure date of 21st December, that rather gave us pause. True enough, we are booked to be on Sacred Island that day. Helen and I had a long debate just before Miss Devinski came round checking on us, and indeed there is much to think about.

From what Maria tells us, the fragment on Krupmark Island is far nastier than the mostly depleted one that changed Cranium Island into what it now is. This one is "Buried In Earth", somewhere near the abandoned church, a Spanish mission church built around 1750 and the only trace left of a settlement that went rapidly extinct. Given what it must be sitting on, one doubts the final days of that community were pleasant. Just to really cap it all, we are not the only folk who know where it is. We might have had more time to prepare, but a certain Adventuress has obtained the drained Cranium Island fragment from Professor Schiller and wants to complete the set. If she is acting as an agent for someone with serious money (her usual career) or working on her own, nobody seems to know.

If Kansas Smith gets hold of this artefact and knows what to do with it, this would be rather bad news for the world. I recall hearing that Cranium Island shrew Alpha Rote explaining that according to some of her neighbours' theories the original Spontoonies were testing a doomsday weapon – an idea that she deeply respected. As she said, having built such a thing the temptation to test it would be hard to resist for long, even if this is not the sort they have in the pulp comics with a big inviting red button. Mind you, Cranium Island is

what some folk have called “Insanity friendly” and not prejudiced towards clear and stable thinking. Considering what happened centuries ago at the Great Ritual, we can hardly risk anyone getting their paws on the other fragments, especially if they only have a rough idea what they do and are tempted to experiment. Being Tailfast will just have to wait for me, Helen and the Hoele’toemi brothers.

There are all sorts of stories one hears about Kansas Smith and not all of them can be true. Some I think she had spread herself; by all accounts she believes in advertising boosting trade, and treasure-hunters have no Union rules. But a lot of the stories are rather disturbing ones that I doubt she would really have wanted getting out. That young pig called Half Ration who travels with her – I have seen the thing that travels along with him, and definitely do not like it. One of the stories say that Half Ration was just a hired Native porter on one of the treasure-seeking trips, who fell through thin ice and was rescued apparently too late. We have done a lot of first-aid and life-saving, and know that people who look definitely drowned might still be revived with strenuous measures. In his case, although he was brought back to life the story says that something else came back with him. I can believe that one.

16th December

Last day of term! It has been hectic; re-familiarising ourselves with flying, air navigation and such as if we would have forgotten it in a fortnight. In the Aleutians one can imagine managing to launch aircraft without a runway; all you might need is a turntable with sturdy clamps. Most days one could just turn it into the wind, run up the engine before releasing the clamps and climb straight off, there being enough headwind for takeoff speed. Landing could be tricky. Most things in the Aleutians are, except perishing of exposure.

It seems very odd this term, having just got back to Songmark and leaving again so soon. All four of us are staying on the island – we have only two holidays left together as students, and even before Maria’s news we were determined to make the most of it. As to tracking down the fragments, Maria has been busy indeed; before Eva told us Professor Schiller had sold the Cranium Island piece she had an official invite arranged for us to visit New South Thule and (unofficially) look for it. That will have to wait till Easter now, if we get there at all. Anyway, we hear that Professor Schiller is back on Spontoon, hopefully not to try for the Krupmark artefact. It is her disturbing knowing we are not the only Euros with an interest in such artefacts; for centuries they were safe while they were dismissed as “Native Superstition.” What depopulated the Spontoon group was no superstition. Professor Schiller is investigating exactly how such things work, and despite being fairly neutral as to the Spontoonies, there are cases where ignorance is bliss. If he was still ignorant of a lot of things around here we would be happier.

Maria says there are extensive archives in Rome under the Vatican full of fascinating things learned or concealed in its early years. One needs to speak Latin, and indeed some of these archives are never likely to see the light of day. I doubt Beryl’s story of there being a first draft of the Bible (before they took all the jokes out at the Council of Niceae in the 5th Century) but if such a thing existed, that is where it would be. Not in the possession of a friend of a friend of our tricky mouse, who could be persuaded to part with it for a suitable sum. She never will give a straight answer, and claims to have been brought up attending a low-Church Non-Confirmist Chapel.

I had to write putting off Judge Poynter again; it is a shame but there is nothing else for it. The tenants of the Allworthy Estates will be waiting for my reply, but until I have sorted things out with the Judge there is nothing I can really tell them. Perhaps the rightful heir somewhere will get an unexpected piece of good news for Christmas – though since the Great War people have become cautious about “it’ll all be over by Christmas.” New Year may have to do.

End of term at Songmark is like a stirred ant-heap, with sixty girls suddenly signed off by the Tutors and hurrying in all directions. No group meal at Bow Thai this term, though many of us are heading over to Casino Island. The second and third-years who have flights home tonight have learned to send their baggage ahead of them, to have it passed through Customs while they are looking eagerly at the clock in their last air navigation class. Five o’clock and there is a rush for the gate (though this time of year there is only one scheduled service heading to Hawaii in the evening, and one heading down to the French Sandwich Islands.)

Although many folk departing tonight were heading over to Mahanish’s at the airport for a celebratory meal before their flights and the last Nootnops Blue they will get till they return here, in the circumstances all four of us and Saffina packed our overnight bags and by quarter past six were on a water-taxi heading over to South Island. Mrs. Hoele’toemi is a better cook by many a nautical mile than Songmark has.

Thinking of excellent chefs, we hear from the second-years that on Casino Island the Ave Argentum has a fully trained Spanish chef now, a refugee from Barcelona where a Worker’s Anarchist Militia has taken over the top hotel he worked in. They have red meat and red wine on their menu, and no Poi. Their prospectus promises good accommodation, and respectable conditions for the “respectable” senioritas and similar. True, nobody has taken any photographs for next year’s Songmark prospectus of Molly squatting by a jungle fire eating Maconochie out of a hacked-open tin with a saw-backed bayonet for cutlery; it might be a little off-putting. Songmark is a “Boarding school for Young Ladies”, not trainee trench raiders. On paper, anyway.

Saffina has been telling us that though the Ave Argentum are not saying anything directly against Songmark, they do not at all mind others doing so. That is, there is a lot of “comparisons” being made about the kind of students we take relative to them. Having Molly, Beryl, Red Dorm and the like onboard does not make for a popularity contest with some people. It would be very tempting to ask Beryl for ideas about taking the wind out of their sails, but she is likely enough to do it anyway, and I will sleep better for knowing nothing about it. What our Tutors do, if they decide to do anything, should be worth watching – like a volcano, from a safe distance. New South Thule sounds good.

Saffina has also obtained a copy of their course guide and prospectus, and they put very different emphasis on Adventuring styles. They seem to be emphasising running a team by being a leader of hired helps, not the Songmark style at all. More Kansas Smith, I would say. “Selection and use of Henchmen” is one of the skills not listed in the Songmark class list, though to be honest that is not quite what the Ave Argentum call it either.

It is excellent to be back on Haio Beach after so long. All the family was there – happily including Jirry and his father, in fact everyone except Saimmi who is a rare visitor these days. But she did arrive after Supper, and we immediately tackled her about Helen and me not being invited on the Krupmark trip. She looked a little sour that we had found out about it – and warned us it was not a trip anyone should look forward to, plus we are due to be Tailfast to her brothers and she refused to spoil that for us.

I did point out that there is little point in our training to be Warrior Priestesses if we get left behind like surplus baggage; Helen added that Marti can certainly wait another six months if he thinks her worth waiting for. Plus, if the worst comes to the worst and all the fragments are reunited, Spontoon might not be a calm and pleasant place to relax and enjoy our Tailfast rings if we get them. Besides, we are not going to let Molly and Maria run off into danger without us, especially as it is the sort of danger we are training to tackle and they are not.

Saimmi conceded the point, though she was obviously not happy about it. She is not going herself, being High Priestess and unable to leave the islands. I think that is part of what made her so worried; this is the first time I know of she has had to sit back and send others into danger. She is responsible for us since Huakava died, and must be contemplating the possibility of none of us coming back alive. Keeping at least Helen and me in reserve would make sense from one point of view. But sending us as the best team gives everyone else a better chance of making it back. It is like Miss Wildford told us about the dilemma of choosing equipment to go Adventuring; in the swashbuckling adventure films the hero heads out with the irreplaceable family sword and the utterly loyal horse he raised from a foal. That might give him the best chance of success – and yet choosing a plain military blade and an anonymous remount is less heartbreaking when circumstances force you to abandon the hardware or ride the horse to death. In accounts of real adventure rather than romances this sometimes happens.

Saimmi may be our good friend and future sister-in-law, but she has to put all that aside when Duty is involved. She warned us to look after her Priestess Oharu, and basically not to come back without her, ever. Well, it is not the first time we have been bodyguards, and indeed Songmark qualifies us for that job as does our Warrior Priestess training on another level. Saimmi is certainly giving her job her all. Letting us all go out together is definitely putting a lot of the eggs into one basket, even if it makes the basket sturdier. As Helen quoted from her countryfur Mr. Lincoln, to be a good general one must love and cherish the army, but be prepared to send it to its destruction to win the war. This is one conflict we have to win, cost what it may.

We are to head out for final training to Main Island, to study with the (ex) Japanese priestess Oharu Wei, whom we have met. She is the one who turned the site of the former Chapel of the Sacred Heart into a Spontoonie sacred site, guarded by the most vigorous bamboo grove on record. Definitely we have a lot to learn! Happily she had no objection to the neighbouring Pie-shop of the Sacred Steak and Kidney, which is alive and well and now has a handy source of bamboo shoots for any herbivore customers.

Having volunteered our services (well, insisted) the die was cast. However, we had at least one evening free while Saimmi went off to make her new arrangements. It is an awfully long time since I spent any time with Jirry – but we did our very best to make up for lost time, as did Helen and Marti. The Hoele'toemi family only have one Guest longhouse, and in better weather one or the other pair would head out with a hammock or Pandanus palm mat. But the hut is big enough for four, at a squeeze.

18th December:

It serves us right for volunteering – although less physical than Songmark, our training at the Great Stone Glen is just as hard a task, and no holiday. We waved farewell to Molly and Maria, and with Saffina took a water-taxi out to the Southernmost village of Main Island. The Great Stone Glen is near the main waterfall of the island, but set aside out of the tourist path. In fact the path to get there zig-zags off in an unlikely direction from the main trail, and turns sharply back on course when it is out of sight from below; even if you knew the place existed from an aerial photo, finding it on the ground would be hard. We have been here before but came in from off the mountain, not from below. At the time nobody was there.

The glen itself is a peaceful spot with a fine view out across the plantations, and on a really clear day from up there one can just make out Albert Island. It is about five hundred feet up, though the same block of island sweeps up to Mount Kiribatori, nearly two miles higher. There is a great stone in the middle of a pleasant open grassy patch (hence the name) and we noticed a small hut like a miniature longhouse tucked away in the shelter of a bamboo grove.

The three of us arrived to find the place apparently deserted, though there is apparently a waiting area. It seemed a good time and place to get started with our exercises, so we sat and went through the one Clear-Skies Yakan used over on the North Coast when she looked for the curse attached to Adele Beasley. It is quite like taking an infra-red photograph in that one sees things one would never ordinarily spot; the difference being one sees it all right away and no pricey special film is needed.

As usual, we all spent several minutes trying it then compared notes; no two people ever see exactly the same thing, and Saffina has had years of doing something fairly similar back in Africa. She has quite a broad perspective of such things; her Mother being brought up a Missionary's daughter and converting to become a Mambo in the Voudon religion, about the equivalent of a lady vicar.

The spot is definitely powerful; we could have guessed that much but it is something to actually trace its boundaries as we did at Songmark. The two sites are actually quite similar, in the way two modern monoplane fighters from different companies are similar in look despite having no single components in common. There is the actual Great Stone; we could have guessed that too from a tourist postcard (if there were any of here, which I doubt) but it is another to actually sense what is there.

We could certainly see a strong local presence, not quite the same as Songmark but of that same age. It was very different indeed from what is under Sacred Lake, the same way a line of harvesters with scythes working across a hayfield is different from a skirmish line advancing with bayonets. Both are moving forward in formation with steel-tipped tools, but for a very different purpose.

For awhile we talked it over, then relaxed and recommenced the rituals. So it was that we spotted the Priestess; Saffina first then Helen, then I felt the presence of a definite power before she walked around the bamboo grove and bowed to us.

I had not met Priestess Oharu since that time on South Island I told her about my friend Angelica's problem with bananas. Actually she was not a full Priestess then, Saimmi tells me, though she became one soon after. She rather vanished from my view since she handed over responsibility for Angelica to the local Honoured Mother in Angelica's village; Ada Cronstein keeps me informed about what Angelica was doing.

I was surprised that Helen knew her, but Helen explained they had both been helping Mrs. Hoele'toemi care for me and Molly when we were struck down with the Marsh Typhus we caught on Albert Island. Apparently Helen helped "behind the lines" away from us highly infectious patients, but Priestess Oharu and Mrs. H did everything necessary to care for us. Helen never mentioned this before.

I bowed as deeply as I could, thanking her – I remember very little about it but from what I heard Molly and me were barely alive, and any amount of care might have made the difference that pulled us through. Somehow I had remembered her, at least when I met Oharu for what I believed was the first time, she already seemed familiar. She has been to Songmark on at least two occasions I know about, and it is reassuring that both Saimmi and our Tutors approve of this trip. Maria told us quite a bit about her, and indeed she has suffered a lot of awful punishment as we can see from her neck, her voice and other places. Maria has seen her back, and says it is not a sight for the squeamish. They used to say at Saint Winifred's "*That which does not kill us makes us stronger*", but I for one can happily manage without that sort of strengthening.

Anyway, the first morning was spent in our demonstrating what we know already, what with Saimmi and Gha'ta having trained us. Oharu took notes at the rate of a court stenographer and asked us a lot of questions. I had handled the Cranium Island fragment, which is like the Krupmark and the Crater Lake pieces as far as a torch battery is like mains electricity and a lightning bolt respectively.

After our experiences in the Aleutians it was a comfortable and fairly trivial thing to camp out in a meadow off the side of the Glen. Helen and I had brought our bivouac shelters, and Saffina borrowed the one Adele Beasley made (she may well be having a rough time on Krupmark, but I doubt wind and rain are her main problems.)

Training was quite similar to the same with Saimmi and Gha'ta, except that this seems to be going both ways. That is, Oharu constantly checked how well things were working and made notes in a book. Saimmi has told us she is working on a definitive work that will put the Polynesian religion we are learning into a coherent whole, for the first time since the Great Ritual went so horribly wrong. Possibly they did not have a coherently written equivalent even then, just a body of Priests (far more than today) and Priestesses each having learned in the traditional way. The trouble with that is that it is impossible to exactly know what someone else is thinking or what they will do next; handling something as complex and crucial as the Great Ritual really needed as much planning as designing an aircraft engine. Perhaps that could explain a few things.

As with our Warrior Priestess training, a lot of what we learned was defensive rituals. We put them to the test; maybe what appeared really were illusions but they were convincing enough. Rather like a ship's

captain spotting a wake of bubbles heading in on a collision course; there just might be other things it could be rather than a torpedo, but one hardly likes to let it hit and find out.

Oharu had quite a lot to ask us, as well as teach. She seems to know a fair amount about Songmark, but there is a lot of day-to-day stuff that she is interested in. We complained slightly about the diet, but she seemed to think it quite luxurious, having fish nearly every day and meat about once a week. Of course, we three are all felines, but she asked what Molly and Maria eat. She seemed quite shocked when she heard they join us and eat all the meat and fish available; evidently in Japan herbivores by birth are usually herbivores for life. I suppose when the main diet is millet or rice, raising fawns to have expensive tastes would be frowned on. By reputation red meat breeds ferocity; although we have little enough of it at Songmark, anyone watching Molly having fun with her sword bayonet and a plaited straw dummy might guess she had not been dining on green salad. Actually they would usually be wrong, if our regular side dish of stewed taro leaves count as salad.

One thing we have here in common with Songmark is our timetable recognises we cannot digest endless lessons without a break; even at Songmark they tend to intersperse classroom work with workshop experiences, flying and sports. Having put some hours working with us on the rituals, Oharu excused herself for other essential duties and invited us to explore the area until she returned for Sunset Song. We are not expected to spend all our time learning rituals. For two hours a day we have time to exercise, stretch our legs and “find our centre.”

Helen and Saffina explored with me; the longhouse we first saw was that of Oharu’s three students, the ones who put the curse on Angelica. We have heard a lot about that, and indeed they are pointed out as Awful Warnings about what happens when people have more talent than training. Some of the blame might be on the Priestesses who refused to train them, Saffina thinks. Then again, talent is Talent, and sadly is not connected with wisdom or good intentions. Imagine if Red Dorm had those sorts of abilities! It would be no favour to the world to train them up to use their abilities, knowing what they would probably do with them.

The second hut was quite a way around the corner, Oharu’s own that she had offered to us while we are here. It is a rather distinctive structure being raised off the ground as if the area was expected to flood. We spent awhile looking around convincing ourselves that this was not going to happen; Helen has told us of the dangers of camping in “Arroyos” that very rapidly become flash flood channels. The Glen is certainly an ancient watercourse, but looking at the grass and such there has been no real flow through here for years. A small waterfall at the top vanishes into cracks and fissures, the sound of water echoing up from deep in the mountainside.

We had a debate over whether to use the hut; it is rather small for the three of us, though luxurious compared to the cramped cargo hold of the Lockheed Lamprey. Plus we are not likely to wake up in the night with a ski-tip or snowshoe tail having somehow migrated to poke us in the kidneys. I did worry about whether Oharu would be insulted about our refusing her hospitality – especially as we have all the necessary bivouacking kit with us. We have several days of basic provisions as well; we hardly like to impose ourselves on such a small community. Foraging for food is a full-time job, and we are busy learning here.

In the end we decided to bivouac at the end of the valley, not far from the students’ hut. We have not met them yet; they are evidently tending shrines and such elsewhere. Lighting a fire is not something we want to do in such a place – but we have a half dozen of Molly’s “Fireless Food” (Pats. Pending) to test out. They look rather like a small square can with a strip of tin foil taped over to make a weak spot one punches through (with a twig or knife, NOT one’s finger, there should be warnings about that) and spoons in the water to start the reaction. Quicklime may be less dangerous than burning fuel, but I have forebodings about one of these bursting inside a cramped tent some dark and windy night. At least with stove fuel one can see where the hazard is.

19th December:

A damp start! Our bivouac shelters are perfectly comfy once one is properly in them, but getting in and out in pouring rain is jolly difficult without getting the sleeping bag and such soaked. One learns to get out rather like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon, having the top oilskins out first and emerging into them, then quickly sealing up the bivouac bag as the leggings and boots go on. One of these days someone will invent a waterproof garment that really IS waterproof.

We have now met Oharu’s students who arrived late last night; the badger twins are old enough to come to Songmark in a couple of years (should they want to apply) and the fox is a year or so older. I confess my nose wrinkled rather when I first met them; if not for them, Angelica would probably be safe at home by now rather than stuck on Main Island. Mind you, that would mean she would be up to her ears again in bananas and associated merchandise, which she utterly hates – and Ada would be sorry. But I am sure these three have had the error of their ways pointed out to them by now. Maybe even twice.

The badger girls are interesting, Nuimba and Ote’he. They share our fur markings of trainee priestess, though they are Natives and do not wear the “arrived” mark we have. Though they are not identical twins their natural fur is extremely similar, or would be apart from the styling. Nuimba wears the similar style that Ada and her friends in the formation swimming team use, which does not denote sporting prowess. Well,

not for anything there is currently an Olympic event for, much to Ada's regret. She could win medals, I am sure.

Rather oddly, Helen whispered that when she woke up in need of a convenient bush in the night, from the sound of it all three of Oharu's students were decidedly – occupied, one way or another. By her fur markings, Nuimba would hardly be expected to have an interest. One hates to ask, but it is very curious. Angelica told me something about those three; they had trained each other in the local religion and have grown up together. Possibly Nuimba is less particular in the case of her fox friend. I have no taste for sour poi myself, but if it is that or go without entirely I can talk myself into it, pretending it is something more to my liking.

More hard work today, although we are very used to that idea. Oharu quizzed me about the Cranium Island fragment, as Saimmi and me are the only ones she can ask who have handled it. The trouble is, there are not really words to describe how it felt and how it reacted to what I could do against it.

As Oharu obviously needed to know, I consented to having her “look inside” me – according to Helen I was out for half an hour, while she explored what I truly remembered of it. She had some interesting questions after that – she asked about Professor Schiller and especially those three young wolves who travelled with him, Gunter, Uwe and Ulric as I recall. Evidently she spotted something there I had “Seen but not Observed” as Sherlock Hound used to say. I recall them being very quiet, intense types who worked as a team just as well as any Songmark third-year dorm, with hardly a sound or gesture needed as everyone knows their place in the action. They were jolly athletic too, the way they got over that volcano crater and back.

From what Oharu told us, the Cranium Island fragment had been by far the least of the three, as witness the fact it could be taken furthest in a sailing canoe with most of the crew having to “contain” it rather than sail or row the vessel. The Krupmark fragment is slightly bigger and will be a lot more active, and as for what is under Sacred Lake – dealing with that right now would be like trying to put out one of Mr. Wells' Radium bombs in “The World Set Free”* with a fire hose. They give out Victoria Crosses for equivalent bravery, but most of those are posthumous.

The unfortunate thing is that having one stone calls to another, and another beyond it. Oharu says the main fragment is so deep down that a Priestess who gets it secured to be hauled up would give her life to do so. In Native pearl-diving mode maybe, but I cannot see why a proper deep-sea diving outfit could not be used. There may be some sort of curse involved affecting machinery the same way as Angelica's aircraft – but I hardly see how, considering the artefact has been down there five hundred years. If it is not buried under yards of sediment it will be surprising. That might be a blessing if it ever becomes essential that the main fragment must not fall into the wrong paws. I did not like to ask what the spirits of the lake would feel about someone dynamiting in a few hundred tons of rock off the cliffs to make sure what is down there stays there.

Anyway, we had arranged to meet Molly and Maria down on the beach at luncheon, or rather at the native village there. They are handling one side of the Krupmark trip, being physical “security” while we are preparing against the kinds of things that bullets will not affect. It is forty minutes fast going down the trail, but the last bit through the plantations is easy going and we are keeping as fit as we can. The village is rather basic, having no shops or restaurants, being a long way off the tourist routes. Its only “facilities” are the bus stop and the Police Station (actually just the constable's house, but it has a telephone) which doubles as the Post Office. Anything else one gets from “The Truck”, a lorry that grinds through once a day, turning round here at the end of the road before heading back to Main Village.

While we have been training up on the mountainside, our friends have been having an equally busy time. Maria says they have all the equipment ready; we shall start from the South tip of Main Island along with Oharu and have just one night to get everything done. We should even have some diversions – Maria has contacted Adele who says she has approval from her local friend to cause some well-targeted mayhem. It seems the time is right to get away with it; Molly rather wistfully added that Krupmark Island is going through one of its periodic upheavals and no matter what happens there are too many suspects to easily pin the blame on. The one good thing about Krupmark is that there are no innocent bystanders; everyone is probably extremely guilty of several crimes. Helen muttered that a 1918 Cologne-scale bombing raid would improve the average honesty of Nimitz Sea area furs no end.

I have no idea what Adele is getting into, but it hardly sounds like a safe way to spend a holiday. Neither is ours, I must admit. At least our raid should be as Molly describes a bank robbery – “straight in, do the business, straight out.” We are being taken there and back by the pilot Nikki (I forget her other name) that tough Fillypine mare who is often to be found at the Double Lotus. Molly dipped her ears at hearing that; the last time she was taken anywhere by a Captain of that persuasion was by Captain Granite more than a year ago, not that she will ever forget it. I recall that Prudence and Ada earned a flight in Nikki's seaplane – they came back with their logbooks duly filled but claiming the experience was not worth the price of the flight.

Luncheon was at one of the houses we had stopped at on our way up Mount Kiribatori a month ago; although one could hardly describe it as a restaurant, like many farmhouses in England a weary traveller can be sure of a hearty meal in the family kitchen for a very reasonable price. Molly's fireless cookers are very good for warming a can of stew, but she will have to put in more work before she can deliver crisp roasted fish with that system! The lady of the house was very happy to cook for us for a cowry apiece, she being a spotted

jungle cat looking rather like an Albert Islander. A lot of the Polynesians have that fur pattern; an old insult from Plantation days was “Spotto” which probably referred to such fur rather than being a Spontoonie as such. Jungle cats tend to have spotted fur unlike Euros; I have seen Mixtecan felines of jaguar ancestry with almost square spots. Considering some Euros these days who come to work here as exotic dancers and such have fur-dye applied to look like that, the insult will probably die out in this generation.

By tradition the very earliest Spontoonies were lizard folk like the pretty statue of the great green water-lizard in Main Village, so in that case the fur pattern hardly seems relevant. This must be about as far North as a lizard cares to live all year round; I hardly saw any in Vostok and none at all in the Aleutians. Angelica has described one of her former employers in the Pearl trade as being a snake lady, a very rare species indeed. I have only seen them in books, never in the fur (so to speak. Should I say “full scale”?)

So: everything is arranged for the solstice. As we climbed back up towards the Great Stone Glen, I could not help my ears drooping at the view of Sacred Island in the distance, where I was going to be Tailfast. I know Helen is thinking much the same, as she muttered about even Prudence and Tahni being there, but not us. Still, we not only volunteered for this but annoyed Saimmi doing so, and can hardly complain about the consequences. Certainly I would never forgive myself if anything happened to Molly and Maria while I was off enjoying myself knowing they were going into danger.

* Editor’s note: in the 1930’s Mr’ Wells’ idea of an atomic disintegration bomb was more like a nuclear flare, or a chunk of a star melting the neighbourhood to a volcanic crater as it stayed burning for several days. See E.E. “Doc” Smith’s “Masters of the Vortex” for a slightly more modern description.

20th December

A last day of preparation! We got plenty of sleep at least, being just up for Sun-Greeting song. Happily a bivouac shelter can just be rapidly stepped out of in dry weather, and we joined in the ritual with Oharu and her students. A busy morning practicing rituals followed; Oharu says we have to get this absolutely perfect on Krupmark and will have no second chance.

Actually, although Priestess Oharu looks outwardly quite calm one can see she is under a lot of nervous strain. Apart from Rumiko I have not really met any Japanese, and the body language is somewhat different. I think this trip could be difficult for her; she is not physically toughened up by the look of her. Still, if it comes to it Saffina or Maria could just pick her up and carry her; for short distances we have surely hauled heavier stretchers and rucksacks.

I must say, it is enough to worry anyone. Oharu made me describe the Cranium Island stone as I first found it cast up on the cooled lava flow inside the volcano, with various blasted and splintered bones around it. I doubt those could have been the Priestesses who put it there; to be “buried in fire” the volcano must have been active centuries ago, and there would be nothing left. The remains must have been those of furs who were sent out to retrieve the fragment, either to take for themselves or because they were sent out as a typical Cranium Islands “Experiment.” Oharu says that the rituals Saimmi had taught me saved more than my life – according to her, losing to such a stone would capture one’s soul. I doubt there is anything in the Bible dealing with this, though I have not read Archbishop Crowley’s wholly new and revised version yet. The Reverend Bingham sticks to Version 1.0, but Spontoon is rather remote and some things take awhile to get out here.

We are about as ready as we are going to be, so in the afternoon we took advantage of an hour of sunshine to have a brief wash in the only bathing pool in the Glen. The water is cold but bearable if one keeps moving, and Helen and Saffina joined me. It was rather odd – as we splashed around in our bare fur I could spot something watching us, yet on the other paw there was certainly nobody there. In fact, one had the impression the valley itself was watching. Saffina raised her tail invitingly, and blew a kiss in the general direction of the presence.

I recall our one Japanese student Rumiko telling cautionary folk-tales about that sort of thing. According to Japanese legend it is unwise for girls to sleep out on verandas and such in the open air in rainstorms, lest they attract the attentions of the thunder-god (who fortunately manifests himself in a more personable form than a lightning bolt.) Maria’s comment at the time was it would be at least an interesting experience and a good use of a rainy evening. She seems to be thinking a lot about such things in the last few months.

It felt rather like getting our call-up papers as we struck camp, packed our bivouac gear into the knapsacks and headed down towards the beach. There we met Saimmi who was with two other Priestesses we have seen before but do not know by name. Saimmi had said she would leave us behind unless we passed the sternest tests she could give us – apparently those two were our replacements ready on the spot should we fail. In the course of duty, Saimmi certainly put us through the wringer! We were pale-nosed and shaking by the time she finished and rather grudgingly passed us as fit. Then it was awaiting the laden water-taxi from South Island, where Molly and Maria had spent the time selecting equipment and generally finish preparing for the physical side of the trip. Molly is carrying the Mauser rifle that appeared from a mystery benefactor; she

really wanted to take the T-Gew but there are narrow caves to negotiate and my anti-tank rifle is rather unwieldy in cramped spaces even without the two-foot sword bayonet.

The rest of us have suitably anonymous Vostok rifles, the “Fedorov Avtomat” Mark Fours that are lightweight but have a good rate of fire – the average Krupmark hired thug tends to be an enthusiastic but not too accurate shot especially at night, unless of course we have the misfortune to run into some of the guards from “up the hill” where Adele is staying. Then as Beryl says, all bets will be off. Another advantage is we are all carrying the same ammunition – on Cranium Island we had four different sorts ranging from my revolver to the T-Gew. Standardising on the Fedorovs is a happy compromise, and the short 6.5 mm rounds do not weigh half a pound apiece. In fact, the whole clip is about the weight of one T-Gew round! Molly dreams of getting one of those Vostok built armoured cycles the Motor Cossacks ride that can carry all the hardware and still jump walls and ditches like the horses the Cossacks had to leave behind on the Russian mainland. Some folk seem to be thinking hard about that; in this year’s “Jane’s All The World’s Armoured Vehicles” we read that the American army has started a specialist Tankette Destroyer Command.

Maria says she has heard Kansas Smith is already heading towards Krupmark, though we stand a fair chance of beating her to it. What Maria hears these days, and how, is an interesting question. I doubt she hears it from Mr. Sapohatan, who might be expected to tell me and Helen of our group, rather than Maria. In fact on some occasions she has given me information to pass on to Post Box Nine, rather as if she is paying her taxes to the local authorities.

As the afternoon faded we met up with Oharu on the beach where the flying boat was landed, also meeting Saimmi who was there to see us off with a few final notes. Our instructions are clear – if we get the stone, get it back to Spontoon at all costs. This basically means getting Oharu back, as nobody else stands much chance of handling the fragment. We have memorised the maps of Krupmark, and if necessary the rest of the party will scatter and make for pick-up points, hopefully pulling pursuit away. Although she did not say it as such, Saimmi left us in no doubt that the rest of are of secondary importance in terms of getting back.

A larger team might be handy for this, but we are going to have to move fast and secretly in what is basically enemy territory. All being well, we can bounce in and out before anyone even knows we are there. In effect it is like pulling a bank raid behind enemy lines – twice the hazards. This is one reason we are going on the longest night, to give the best cover. It is clear on Spontoon, which is rather a problem with slipping in undetected on an island as paranoid as Krupmark – but Saimmi says she can arrange something to help us.

Well – I am handing my diary to Saimmi, as it is a case of – “return with your shield or on it” and one thing is certain – we are going to be rather busy.

22nd December, 1936

Dear Diary: we all made it back alive. But Saimmi was quite right; it was a trip nobody would volunteer for had they known. On the afternoon of the 20th we piled into the flying boat, heading for somewhere just as hazardous as the Aleutians but this time the terrain was safe and the locals dangerous.

Although the weather was clear for the first part of the trip, when we got to what should have been Krupmark Island around sundown there was nothing to be seen but a fog bank. Rather unseasonal, and not at all what the forecast expected. Still, the mare flying the plane proved to be an excellent pilot, and we touched down just inside the barrier reef. A tricky landing even in good conditions! We have rehearsed this jumping out of a cart shed on Main Island; as soon as we felt the keel grate into the beach we dived out in all directions, throwing ourselves into the shallow water making hard targets. In ten seconds nobody fired at us, so we picked ourselves up and waved Priestess Oharu to come out of the shelter of the aircraft and join us. As soon as we were starting up the steep hillside above the beach the flying boat reversed prop pitch and backed out, the sound of its engines soon vanishing into the night and fog.

The way up the trackless hillside was steep, but we could keep a fairly direct line using our radium dial compasses even in the dark and thickening fog. Priestess Oharu is evidently not trained for this but we expected as much; there was always a friendly paw available from one or other of us to pull her up or boost her over obstacles. It is a help with three of us being felines; we needed no telltale torches and one would have to be very close to see our eyes shining in what moonlight trickled through the fog.

As far as we could tell, nobody lives on this side of the island, and there are few paths. We had arrived about half way up the Western coast, aiming for the col between Mount Krupp and the charmingly titled Traitor’s Ridge; Fort Bob is on the far side with its church. Molly seemed to be quite happy with the trip; at one rest stop she grinned unnervingly and whispered “Military-religious Target ahead,” as if she was a bomb aimer on approach run.

Had it been daylight in friendly territory we could have forged over the col in an hour from the beach; advancing “by bounds” through the scrub is tiring work, and we were very glad of the high boots with steel shin pads as we found out about branches in the dark. According to books on colonial peacekeeping, police have spotted disguised rebels by looking at the scars on their shins; honest folk rarely need to roam around off the path in the middle of the night. At last we found the high point, crawled over the skyline (a force of habit, besides the moon just might have chosen that moment to break through and silhouette us to the whole of Fort

Bob) and took a five minute break. A handful of dried dates apiece were most welcome, and leave no telltale packaging behind.

On the top of the ridge the mist was thinner, and we checked our bearings. The “Hill” above Fort Bob is not the highest spot on the ridge (that would be far too exposed to storms) but a large knoll standing out above the main settlement. We could just about make it out through the mist, though even felines with binoculars could not see any details. Maria’s eyesight is very good in daylight but bovines are very poorly equipped for night hiking, and she brought up the rear. Her ears are as good as anyone except Molly, and she is a very reassuring friend to have watching one’s back.

At about ten we stopped to prepare the other defences, the ones that do not get smuggled in from Vostok. Helen, Saffina and I handed over our rifles to Maria to carry for the next bit. They would do us no good underground and spiritually hardly fit with what we must do there; however unconsciously having material weapons available would distract us from the rituals that are all that will help keep us alive. While Molly and Maria stood guard Oharu led us in the first protective chant, something that hopefully should slow down what is down there recognising us. This took half an hour, and then it was down to the church and what we found there.

Just as we arrived outside, we heard a series of loud explosions from down the hill in Fort Bob. A yellowish glow tinged the fog, and by the sounds of distant yells and fire-bells there would be no furs idly wandering up the hill that night. Good for Adele! At least, we assumed it was Adele and Madeleine X. But we had to put that completely out of our minds a minute later; they had done their part but we had to concentrate totally on our own.

The church was quite small, but in surprisingly good condition. Houses on Fort Bob are generally rather ramshackle prefabricated affairs but this has been repaired with proper building stone and imported slates. It is by far the oldest Euro building I have seen in the Nimitz Sea islands, by a century and more. The door was unlocked, which was disturbing in its own right. Molly was equipped to get in quietly if the locks had defeated us; these days she carries a large crowbar that has just the right curve to hook over her shoulder for carriage and is quite inconspicuous under a long coat. For some reason policemen tend to look down on folk who walk around equipped to open harmless crates and the like.

Inside the church there were no lights, and although it had traditional pews, from the murals on the walls it was obvious that the ceremonies enacted in here in recent years are quite unconnected with anything in the Common Prayer Book. We were careful not to look too hard at those scenes. There was a small staircase leading up to a bell tower, but no other obvious doors except the one we had entered through. As our Tutors have been impressing on us since the first year, another name for a building with one exit is “*A Trap*”. This is where it would have been good to have another party covering the building from outside; the trouble is, such would make our trip far more likely to be discovered in the first place despite the fog. As it is, once we are in the church or underground, any casual patrols outside should see nothing untoward and our scent would soon disperse.

The altar was the obvious place to look according to all the books, and indeed after a few minutes Maria worked out the combination of pulling and twisting that got the big stone slab moving. She looked rather ill as she looked down that steep passage; although our noses only detected damp rock the effect was like coming across unburied bodies. She reached for her crucifix – then hesitated, as if realising it would be like trying to jam a radio transmission with a searchlight, and stepped aside. Since Cranium Island she has had her viewpoints rather widened, and though I think she hardly really approves of our taking up the Spontoonie religion, she knows as a fact that it works.

Oharu led the way down the stairs, and after she demonstrated an amazing expertise in getting through defences we could scarcely see the full extent of, we emerged in what was perhaps once a natural cavern, dimly glowing with the sickly yellow light of luminous mosses. The cave looked rather like those medical photographs one sees of bloated cysts and tumours, but in negative – as if the living rock had strained to pull away from what was in the centre. There was another altar there, this one of ancient bones. I knew without being told what had happened to the priestesses who had bound the glowing Fragment to this place five hundred years ago. They had used all their power to seal the thing underground and discovered they no longer had enough to break free of it themselves.

It is a good thing Molly is not as trigger-happy as she used to be and was carrying a single shot rifle rather than her Thompson – she would have burned through half a drum magazine as figures came shambling towards us from the shadows. We were surprised by the starving wrecks of what I think had been three missionaries, bearing the book Saimmi had warned us to search for. Exactly what is in the book is a mystery to us, but it is unlikely to be cosy bedtime reading. Oharu judged the three harmless – and indeed they collapsed, giving us another problem to think about for the return trip. The book itself is exceedingly dangerous, even I could tell. Once we had it, things started to happen.

Saimmi had been quite right, our rifles would have been useless against what came at us. On the other paw, Molly had hers what many religions would call blessed, and while we started the great binding chant she burned through four clips of ammunition. What she hit was never entirely material – but regardless, she put them down remorselessly one after another.

The main chant seemed to last forever, but at last it was finished and Oharu seized the Fragment – still glowing, and rather larger than the one I found on Cranium Island. With the skills we have learned, it was like seeing a barrel of gunpowder with sparks landing all around – one false move and the whole thing would have gone up. Though her fur bristled and I could smell scorching cloth, she picked it up unharmed – and the horrible altar dissolved, turning into dust of half a millennia of decay. Whoever worshipped in the church building above us might sometimes have come down here but could never have removed the fragment; the sacrifices of the Priestesses had bound it to this place and no ordinary force could have moved it.

Saffina managed to sweep up a token amount of what was left on the altar slab, to return to Spontoon soil – but then the roof started to shake, and it became very obvious that this was no more a place for the living. Maria handed the bundle of rifles to Saffina and picked up the three missionaries; they were of small species and almost starving, though they must have been her own weight between them. Even as we got back to the staircase great chunks of rock were crashing down around the altar site. I had feared the narrow stairs would be blocked, but somehow they seemed to be wider rather than narrower than on the way down.

As soon as we got out I realised we really should have had a covering party aboveground. Kansas Smith had found us; or rather she had let us do the hard and dangerous bit then just waited for the prize to fall into her skinny lap. A dozen henchmen were there, low-grade hired guns by the look of them. I was more worried by the sight of the small pig Half Ration and the thing that goes with him. I could see it quite clearly in that light, like the living shadow of one of those impossible shapes Susan de Ruiz draws. In that place it seemed to be bigger, more definite as if it could be seen better in the light of the fragment.

I somehow found time to realise that having had an effective covering party would mean bringing in a big enough military force to shoot it out against all comers, not just Kansas Smith but the heavily armed Krupmark residents who might swarm up The Hill to see what all the action was. The ritual underground needed utter concentration, and definitely I got the impression that if we had missed one beat, the results of the surface battle would no longer be our worst worry.

Dear Diary: I now see why Saimmi values her Priestess so very highly; the rest of us are cannon-fodder in comparison. Oharu faced down Kansas Smith plus the book – and with her powers defeated both of them. I could tell she was drawing on the power of the Stone she carried as she pulled Kansas's bullets off course to slam into the stone or the ground. I had the feeling that this was a rather bad idea, but it was that or death for all of us and letting Kansas get the stone.

I think that Molly was the only one who could not feel the power building up; Maria certainly was eyeing all the exits. In the course of the battle of wills, it had gone hard with the hired guns who had discovered their weapons were no use whatsoever against what appeared when the book was opened by Half Ration. Only Kansas and Half Ration were left alive on their side of the room, and the pig escaped despite our best efforts. Oharu ordered us all out and Molly was the only one who stayed to see Kansas dealt with. I did not see what happened back in the church, but something certainly did. There was a release of power like a lightning stroke, and then a devastated looking Oharu came staggering out, a few minutes after a very angry-looking Molly. I did not see what happened to Kansas Smith, but I would not bet a farthing on her walking out of that building.

Maria and I were in the lead, scouting for the track back when we heard voices behind us in the mist. They sounded determined and efficient, a trained patrol rather than an impromptu posse. Evidently the events in the church had attracted attention of all the wrong kinds. I remembered the expensive murals on the walls, and shuddered at the thought of what rituals and celebrations must have been held there over the years. Even as the Cranium Island fragment had its adherents, this one must have been used for dark purposes by some of the highly ranked inhabitants up on the hill – and in pure Hollywood style we were running off with their Native Idol, in a most hideously primal form.

Oharu looked in a bad way with the Fragment clutched tight to her burned kimono, but we managed to get her away into night and fog before the locals turned up. Everything had already taken far too long; by our watches it was barely an hour before Nikki was due to pick us up that we left the church, and by repute that mare is not one to hang around patiently.

Getting down the hill with the pursuit beating the bushes was a nightmare. We had to stay quiet; sound travels a long way in the fog. But neither could we lose any more time; all of us were strained to the limit carrying the three unconscious furs and sometimes ended up dropping them in sheer exhaustion. Mercifully I doubt they felt it at the time.

In Songmark training we are taught various ways to carry injured furs, but most of them involve some kind of stretcher. It is extraordinarily difficult to carry an unconscious body down a pathless hillside in the dark, no matter if they are half one's own weight. We were already very tired, being drained in ways our gymnastic training never prepared us for. Maria and Saffina took one of the chipmunk nuns each all the way down to the beach; the missionary was shared between the rest of my dorm, the other two guarding the rear. The Fedorov automatic rifles may have only a small cartridge but fit plenty into their clip; had any party of furs with ordinary rifles jumped us, just two of us could have sprayed out a lot of lead. Definitely we were glad not to be lugging the bulk and fifty pound load of my T-Gew through the bushes.

Although the beach was cold, deserted and almost hidden in the darkness, it was as fine a sight to us as anything on a South Island postcard. For a few seconds we stood at the edge looking at our watches and compasses, then Molly's ears perked up and she declared our ride home was arriving. She was quite right; inside a minute Nikki's aircraft ghosted into view out of the fog. Tired as we were, we made sure to board it properly – Oharu first with the stone, then we passed onboard the unconscious furs, the last three of us standing guard ten yards off just expecting a patrol of locals to jump out of the bushes with guns blazing.

I think what saved us was our unlikely exit point heading West down the trackless hillside; anyone just trying to get away from the church as fast as possible would have fled along one of the regular trails we had crossed, heading along the main ridge towards Mount Krupp and the forests we lay up in on our first trip. I think most of the pursuit went that way. The coral reef on the Western side of the island is impassable by anything bigger than a native canoe according to the chart, and as for aircraft – most folk would think that anyone crazy enough to want to take off in twenty yard visibility along a narrow lagoon would not be a good enough pilot to manage it.

Two shattering aircraft flights in a week, the Aleutians and now this! Fortunately Nikki's aircraft had seats, and the journey was much shorter. We very soon cleared the fog bank; looking back we could see it draped over the island like a blanket, with a few plumes of smoke rising through to show where something in Fort Bob was still smouldering. I do hope Adele and Madeleine are all right. If they were caught it is unlikely they would be kept alive long enough for us to mount a rescue mission, but we would have to go in anyway to make sure. One quite realises why our Tutors dislike us meddling with Krupmark business.

We had time to talk with Oharu, who was clutching the fragment as if it would go off with the slightest vibration. It was covered tightly against the light, but when we closed the blinds in the back of the aircraft she declared it would be safe to work on providing we were quick. At her instructions we used the materials that had been arranged; a lead box with a lid that we melted hermetically shut with a blow-lamp. Using a blow-lamp onboard an aircraft in flight is something we would probably get thrown out of Songmark for doing in other circumstances, but there is more danger in the box than in any quantity of fuel vapour.

It was only when Nikki called back to strap ourselves in and commenced a tight spiralling descent that I realised where we were going to touch down. Sacred Lake! We had all been told never to attempt this; it takes an exceptionally powerful aircraft to get out again, clearing even the lowest point where the river comes out in a narrow gorge. I know Angelica just managed it in her Silver Angel; I also have seen the dents branches made in her floats. Another metre lower into the canopy and they would have been mourning her in Gothenburg.

We landed safely, much to my amazement though in truth I was too exhausted to think straight. Maria dropped the sealed box in about ten fathoms of water onto one of the ledges that one can see deep down – the walls are vertical but from altitude with the right light one can just make out several ledges where the main fragment might be. I hardly noticed that Oharu had left us till we were taking off again and I saw her scrambling ashore, wearing nothing but her fur. That kimono was burned as full of holes as an ironing board at Saint Winifred's first year Domestic Economy class, but there was no smell of scorched fur from inside.

To be honest, I fell asleep about the second we cleared the trees. Saffina and Helen had slept all the way since five minutes out of Krupmark, in a nervous reaction. I can believe my Father's stories from the Great War of experienced troops sleeping through a nearby artillery barrage, only waking up when it got too close for comfort. Maria told me later that we went to Casino Island to hand the unconscious missionaries over for medical care; possibly they ended up in that hospital on Meeting Island that tourists are never taken to. I never saw them again. One wonders what the offspring looked like.

I vaguely remember being on a water taxi to South Island and being half carried down to Haio Beach, where I woke up at Sunset in the Hoele'toemi guest longhouse with Helen and Saimmi still asleep next to me.

Such was our Solstice day, the day we were going to get Tailfast! Well, at least it was memorable – and all in the course of duty.

23rd December, 1936

A rest day! We woke up with Mrs. Hoele'toemi announcing breakfast and an unusual visitor to the village, Mrs. Oelabe our Matron who had come to check us over on the physical side. I recall Miss Devinski briefing us before we went, and indeed if we have come to any harm Songmark need to know. This may not be an official Songmark trip, but I expect the school benefited substantially in whatever moral credit it builds up with the Althing.

We were given a clean bill of health, at least physically; Saimmi will be coming over to debrief us on how the rest of it went. Still, Mrs. Oelabe did say we were to rest for a few days before doing anything too demanding. I was not planning on running up Mount Kiribatori anyway!

After our trip, a quiet morning helping around the Hoele'toemi household was a welcome return to normality. Even Molly seemed unusually quiet. I suppose after our trip to Cranium Island where she has horrified to find something immune to artillery, being able to reaffirm her faith in such things must mean a lot to her. Like the Germans in 1916, "Tank Terror" only lasted as long as there was no way to fight back; "Spirit

terror” for Molly might now be just realising one needs the right defences. It must be hard for her, not actually believing in things she now knows are extremely real.

(Later)

Just spending the day in the longhouse with the kittens crawling over us was a wonderful thing. Saimmi turned up after luncheon, and congratulated us on our success. Pity about the book, but the fragment was what we had been sent to retrieve and we managed that. We were awarded the equivalent to the keys to the city – all of us have full permission to visit anywhere we liked at any time, Sacred Island aside. My dorm have been unofficially doing so for awhile, but for Saffina it is a major reward; she is the first Songmark second-year to earn that privilege. Saimmi took an hour examining us for signs of the sort of damage that our dear Matron could not have spotted – she seemed rather concerned with Molly and Maria, but passed us all as fit. Saffina handed over the bag of ancient bone dust she had recovered; Saimmi took it reverently and assured us she would see to it the remains of the Priestesses were returned to Sacred Island.

We asked her about our further training; she smiled and proclaimed we had a holiday till New Year. Running up against such a Fragment, even though we did not touch it ourselves, is a severe strain. Doing what she and Oharu did is a once in a lifetime effort, she tells us. This is rather a worrying thing to hear, considering the two greatest Priestesses in the area have used their ration up dealing with the two lesser fragments. That still leaves the main piece deep under Crater Lake to deal with, by someone. Considering Kansas Smith’s group still has the Cranium Island fragment, we can assume they will be back for the rest. We will not have years to prepare to deal with this, I expect. Only the fact that they (presumably) do not know how to handle a live Fragment keeps the sky above Crater Lake free of deep-sea divers parachuting in.

After we had thanked Saimmi and said farewell, there was at last time to relax. First I wrote off to Judge Poynter, hoping to meet him and discuss the Allworthy problem. I still wear that gold wire hidden in my fur next to my tail-root as a lasting souvenir of that trip, as Miss Devinski ordered. I am awfully glad that is the only little souvenir I took back with me, at least that lasted. Had things been otherwise, by now I would be visibly changed by the encounter and probably no longer a Songmark student. Our Tutors nearly threw me out as it was.

Jirry and Marti came in from the boats in the afternoon, both very glad to see we were unharmed. I hope Adele and Madeleine are as well off – not that they are likely to have any sort of romantic encounters on Krupmark at the best of times. Saffina grinned and departed for the village woman’s longhouse, leaving Helen and me with the Hoele’toemi brothers. We may not be Tailfast but neither of them seem to mind, having heard the basics of what we achieved. Being native Spontoonies they have a strong sense of duty where the doings of their ancestors are concerned – even though technically speaking they are not the direct descendents of the Spontoonies who got the Great Ritual so disastrously wrong. Very few got away.

There was a rapid meeting with the rest of us; Molly and Maria were returning to Casino Island for the day to catch up on things, while Saffina is happy to stay on Haio Beach. From what Saimmi says, when word filters (discreetly) around of our success on Krupmark, the Spontoonies are liable to be very grateful. If I interpreted correctly her hint, we might be in line for Citizenship regardless of being married into the Hoele’toemi clan. Molly could certainly use some stability. Lars is a native Spontoonie just as much as Jirry and could make her a Citizen the same way, though she has never talked about getting married.

Having said farewell, the rain started to come down again and we all retired to the guest longhouse. I used to think of it of Helen and I chaperoning each other. Certainly, things turn out far more respectably (at least from the Polynesian point of view) than when Molly and I end up in such situations with Lars. It really is rather odd. One way I reassure myself that being Mrs. Amelia Hoele’toemi should have only pleasant surprises, and the other – well, it is at least expected for a Spontoonie girl to have visited several cabins on the Ark before making her final choice. Polynesian males on average seem to like the idea that they are chosen as husbands in light of experience rather than luck and blind faith.

24th December, 1936

A bright day! The local post is very efficient, even considering there are no two settlements on Spontoon as such more than an hour apart by water-taxi and bicycle. Judge Poynter is free to see me this afternoon, and I used the village telephone to confirm with his housekeeper that I could at last meet him. Mrs. Hoele’toemi recalls he has been on Spontoon longer than her, and she was born here! He must be the last of the original Government officials still working, having served loyally and with very little reward all these years. Certainly, I know his street on Meeting Island, and there are no mansions there.

Helen insisted I stop by at Herr Rassberg’s shop first for some rather specific purchases. Honestly, she does take a pessimistic view of things sometimes. But some things are not worth arguing over, and I complied (rather shocking the good shopkeeper) before heading out alone on a water-taxi. I took care to wear a respectable “Euro” outfit rather than my grass skirt or the Adventuring kit that is still drying out from the wash; though the skirt is rather longer than the tennis wear I wore on Krupmark, the overall design is much the same. Good impressions are important; Judge Poynter is offering to look at my case for free and indeed I

can hardly afford a regular lawyer – not without tapping the Allworthy funds, which of course I cannot do without making a claim on them – the very thing I am trying to avoid!

Meeting Island is very quiet this time of year, with most of the diplomatic and trade staff connected with tourist season taking their annual long leave or working part-time. Maria has told me about the Festival of Nations three weeks ago, which caused a temporary flurry of activity as the Spontoonies came to munch popcorn and watch the exponents of the various governments expound their points of view. All that has died down now, and many of the official buildings looked half deserted.

Judge Poynter lives in one of the stone houses from around the turn of the century; apart from warehouses and churches there were few really solid buildings on the islands before then until the first hotels were built. Like Mildendo and Krupmark today, the Plantation era architects mostly built in corrugated iron and timber. His housekeeper, a staid looking chipmunk, let me in and escorted me in to wait in the Judge's study.

Although the street outside is Spontoonie, the study was definitely Victorian English, everything rather worn and bleached around the windows by tropical sunshine but clean, of obviously high quality and scrupulously kept in good repair. Actually that was also my first impression of Judge Poynter, who arrived about a minute later as I was surveying the veritable gasogene that had probably provided fifty years of aerated soda water. The shelves were piled up high with books and legal documents dating back decades, starting with hand-written annals of the "Courts of Oyer and Terminer" which even I know has had another name since the turn of the century. Possibly with Spontoon never having been a proper Colony, its administration had to beg for whatever obsolete cast-off supplies it could get.

Judge Poynter is a canine of the gundog type, with long and neatly brushed ears and head-fur, and a very well groomed tail. He was dressed in one of the few suits of tweed I have seen on Spontoon; unlike the furniture they were not Plantation era but only a few years old to judge by the style. Possibly the Empire Stores catalogue gets out to these islands, though I have not seen a copy. He was very pleased to see me at last, and invited me to sit down and discuss the matter with him.

I must say, he turned out to be a very nice old gentleman. Well, I have met older ones who still hunted and fished all day long, and look set to see their century if they keep up the healthy exercise. All the books say you should trust your lawyer with everything if you want him to win your case; I told him the whole story of my second Krupmark trip from the day Lady Susan recruited me as a pilot. Well, perhaps not absolutely everything. But I did show him the gold wire ring around my tail and tell him about Lady Susan's gift of a sack, a brick and a large bucket for my kittens that I would be opening on Christmas Day had I followed the instructions. I could see that one shocked him, though he had been the one to read out the charges and serve the warrant on Lord Leon and Lady Susan and hand them over to the authorities in New Penzance. According to the books, nobility are traditionally hung with a silk rope rather than a hempen one.

It seems there really is nothing our Tutors do not know. Judge Poynter looked at me sympathetically and informed me he had heard from Miss Devinski who had passed him certain other evidence. I did not tell them I was coming here! But he has a copy of that pledge Leon wrote that I signed the last page of – though when I saw it, it was the only page and my signature ended up appended to something I would certainly not have agreed to. He says it is a very sad case, but as the law stands, unless I can actually prove there was only one page when I signed it, being deceived will not help matters. On paper it really does look like a reasonable contract, exactly the sort of thing that a former Gentleman might think of if he was repenting of some of his crimes in his later years – but the galling thing is, we shall never really know. If Lord Leon had not committed such horrors before first arriving on Krupmark I might be able to blame the Fragment rather than him for some of them.

I spent most of the afternoon there, refreshed by the first proper tea and biscuits in ages, and managed to pick up something of the good judge's career. He really has been on Spontoon since the Plantation days, having served under all administrations and been involved with the treaties at the end of the Gunboat Wars. It has brought him little profit, and indeed he mentioned that the house comes with the job as if he was a gamekeeper on some country estate back home. One hopes it also comes with the pension. Evidently he never married; the only photographs on the walls are faded formal portraits from fifty years ago, looking as if they were taken back in England. The Spontoon climate is not kind to celluloid and photographic emulsion. Judging by his age and the others in the pictures, he might well be the only one of them left.

I took my leave at four, with the Judge promising to look hard in his collection for precedents. That is the difference between a properly matured legal system and some of the others; just as we do not need a Constitution in British law we do not have a rigidly established legal code. Nothing is legal or illegal in principle; there has to be a specific law making it so, and the interpretations of that are what makes a legal career such a test of skill and memory. Everything depends on precedence and what some other wise judges decided was appropriate perhaps a century ago – which explains why judges never retire as long as they are healthy enough to go on serving.

Jasbir has told me of various anti-Imperial rebels in her homeland who specialise in murdering good and selfless officials, as they present a real moral threat to breakaway movements. Rebels want the Colonial powers to be cruel and haughty, not devoted to the public good of wherever they are appointed to serve.

Colonial officers really do serve, as well as rule. She has also hinted what happened to the captured assassins at her Father's court; it would not do at the Old Bailey to hand out death sentences involving tiger ants, but it is an internal matter of a loyal Native State and I doubt our government in Delhi or London was too concerned that they were following age-old traditions.

Back to South Island, realising it is now Christmas Eve! Two years ago it was me and Helen here exploring the island and its "waterworks project", a year ago Maria and I were being chased across Vostok by Bolshevik forces. This holiday has definitely sneaked up on us, what with the Aleutians trip and heading straight off afterwards to prepare for Krupmark. A little relaxation would be nice. But whenever I tell myself I have time to relax, it invariably starts another adventure. We have not heard from Mr. Sapohatan for awhile, which is worrying in a way. Like volcanic eruptions and earthquakes – the longer between events, the bigger they are when they arrive.

25th December, 1936

Merry Christmas! Although we are definitely progressing in the Spontoonie religion, there are no commandments there against going to other social events. I can hardly forget I met Jirry in the first place at the Reverend Bingham's church on Casino Island. That is where we went this morning, tipping the water taxi drivers generously and sitting through the service.

It is a rather long time since I went to a standard Church, and indeed the last Church we were in had murals showing rather different services taking place. Reverend Bingham has a rather more orthodox approach, which is certainly a good thing. I felt my ears blushing as I considered the next time I might be here – if I become Mrs. Amelia Hoele'toemi I will have to do so at a "Euro" church to make it legally stick at home. There are plenty of stories of folk heading out into the wilds, being willingly married in Native ceremonies then being snatched back by shocked relatives who totally ignore the fact and want to "save" them. This would quite certainly have happened to Saffina's mother in Ubangi-Shari had she not been living so very far from the local Colonial government. Embarrassing mixed cubs tend not to be brought back to Europe.

Back to help Mrs. H with the Christmas dinner; the Spontoonies of course have their celebrations on the solstice and the calendar New Year, but she put on an excellent meal for her guests. Shark wrapped in taro leaves, then cased in clay and roasted in the fire-pit! An excellent family-sized dish to carve, and indeed we felt no lack of meat (the idea of turkey for Christmas is a recent import, roast beef or goose was the done thing in my Grandparents' youth). It is much nicer than that Icelandic "Hakarl" I had in Vikingstown once, but as that involves leaving shark to ferment for months in Arctic sand it is scarcely surprising. Prudence and Tahni declare it the finest dish in the world, but Tahni is a Hyena and dogs will eat almost anything.

It is always a problem working out what to give Molly; could I buy a case of grenades it would be much appreciated but look rather out of place under the Christmas tree-fern. I compromised and bought her a sharpening and honing kit, which she can use on other things than her saw-backed bayonet. I gave Maria and Helen silk flying scarves (always useful) and discovered they had clubbed together to get me a really good chronometer, handy for navigating all over the world. Many thanks all round!

My ears dipped a little as I imagined having followed Lady Allworthy's advice and waited till today to open her "present" in front of the family – especially if I really had been carrying another Allworthy gift since Krupmark. We are better off well away from that place, and if I never see it again except through a bomb-sight I will be very happy. Molly has other ideas, but she generally does.

Some good news at least came out of there – Maria says Adele has been on the radio and she and Madeleine X are alive, well and "enjoying the hospitality I had before." That is a rather odd phrase, considering she refused to go into details about just what she did there in Summer. Still, as long as they get back in time for the new term, I doubt our Tutors will complain much. If a girl can survive on Krupmark she can thrive respectably anywhere else.

Mrs. H made the public announcement that Saimmi had hinted about – all five of us are now officially free to go wherever we wish on Spontoon (save Sacred Island), even Crater Lake. Not that I particularly want to go there, knowing what is under those waters. It would be like camping on the fields of the Somme, it is all grassed over now but not the place for an undisturbed night's sleep knowing what is under one's groundsheet.

Molly has a really rather odd present to show off; in fact it is as implausible for her as one can get. She has been given a Vostok-built agricultural sprayer by Lars, and yet seems very happy with it. It comprises a big metal knapsack tank and compressed gas cylinder with manual pump, which through high-pressure hoses feeds a two inch diameter cylinder rather like a mechanic's "grease-gun." She was demonstrating with water; certainly it makes a good water pistol but is rather over-engineered for the job. There are valves at entry and exit of the cylinder; pulling the bolt back fills the chamber from the reservoir, and a blast of air behind the piston ejects the contents to twenty yards in a fine spray or fifty as a solid jet. She was gleefully picking off overripe breadfruit from high in the trees with it for an hour in the afternoon. Still, it is harmless enough and keeps her out of mischief, so I can hardly complain. Oddly enough, some bits of it seem ... unfinished, but that may be for optional accessories to be bolted on. There seems no actual use for the battery and capacitor arrangement, and she does not as yet have a manual explaining it.

An excellent afternoon relaxing around the fire-pit with Jirry and the rest of the family, digesting the ample luncheon and generally enjoying all the quiet domestic things that an Adventuress rarely gets the chance for. Still, it makes it all the more welcome for us when it does happen. Some people have nothing else yet seem content with their lot; yesterday a letter came from my old school chum Mabel who is in Switzerland with her husband says she is expecting a kitten next year! That really does seem strange; I have not seen her since Saint Winifred's and that is how I remember her, swinging a lacrosse net in the First Team.

I doubt Mabel would really want to exchange places, in fact I have left rather a lot out of my letters back to her. The idea of living in a longhouse wearing nothing but grass skirts and a smile would hardly fit her idea of respectability; she always thought games like Australian Rules Hockey were "unladylike", not a word I have used much of late. While she was learning social graces at her finishing school I was swimming into secret air bases on Spontoon, fleeing from Bolsheviks and Mensheviks on Vostok and dyeing my fur as an exotic Eurasian dancer in the heat of the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands. Settling down with a respectable scion of a Swiss banking family might be rather dull after awhile. It is like the Tourist season, where hundreds of furs are perfectly happy to lie in the sun on the beach all day – after a suitable rest any Songmark girl is liable to be looking for something to do by luncheon on the first day, and bored witless by the second.

Back to the guest longhouse all evening, something I have missed all this term. Jirry says he will be going on more official trips in the near future, so we will have to make the most of these days. When term starts it is going to be hectic. Seven terms finished at Songmark already, and only two to go! Miss Devinski was getting insistent about our future plans – at least everyone in our year has been able to think of something already. I am not sure what a "modified Ponzi Scheme*" is, but Beryl says she has devised one that is actually legal in Mixteca.

Overall, the best Christmas yet on Spontoon! Remembering the great gloomy redwood forests of Vostok last year with only hunger pangs and the taste of fear in our stomachs for days, sitting down to a good meal with the Hoele'toemi family around me and Jirry by my side feels even better than it would anyway. "A bowl of breadfruit, a jug of palm wine and Thou" – it might not be quite true to the original, but I have no complaints.

- Editor's Note: recipe for original mix Ponzi Scheme, 1920's style.

You will need:

1 quantity seed money (non-counterfeit)

1 collection fairly gullible, greedy and well-connected dupes as an initial target group. Recommend insecure up-and-coming socialites, beginning movie stars/starlets etc.

1 unverifiable plan that could possibly make large quantities of untraceable, untaxable profits. Smuggling family heirlooms/bullion/jewellery assets out from the Soviet Union sounds about right. Who's going to want to disprove it, after all?

Take seed money, spend some on own clothes and short-lease office, secretaries etc. Persuade target group to invest trifling sums in your "enterprise". Almost immediately reward them with (say) triple returns in a week. Watch the word spread, and reward the first investors lavishly from seed money. Now expand scheme with taking the money of second generation of investors. Use a portion of that to keep the initial target group happily singing your praises and gathering still more investors; quietly stash the rest overseas.

To serve:

Take one carpet-bag full of all remaining cash and depart country under assumed name by fastest transport, just before office lease/public credibility expires. Ruminates on famous sayings of P.T. Barnum, to taste.

26th December, 1936

Dear Diary; every time I congratulate myself on getting some peace and quiet, I suddenly discover that I no longer have. At least we have had two very nice days, more than we might have done. We had a whole free day together, and took great care to make the most of it.

Just as I expected would happen someday soon, Helen and I were happily comparing our respective nipped ears and neck-fur at breakfast, when a certain ferret dropped by for a chat. My heart and ears sank at the sight, and at his suggestion there was an exercise we might be interested in. Not only have I lost my chance to be Tailfast this Winter to Spontoon "Official Business" but most of my chances to make it up to Jirry, or I miss my guess. Mr. Sapohatan asked where Molly was, and seemed fairly relieved to hear she was down in the village still.

Although it is nearly a year and a half ago, the authorities have no more forgotten Molly's experience with Captain Granite than she has herself. More so, in that they know of several cases where victims have vanished without trace, never to surface again. Molly got off lightly in comparison, though she is never likely to say that. The ship, the Three Moons is back in the Nimitz Sea, and a fur who has been known to act on their behalf as a scout has been seen on Spontoon. It seems likely that they are hoping to pick up the sort of cargo that will not be declared on the Customs manifest.

Mr. Sapohatan asked us not to tell Molly, although he will do so when the time is right; he wants us all in on the capture. In fact, he says the plan is a “sting”, setting up an opportunity for Captain Granite in the nearer Kanim Islands that is too good to miss. Of course we volunteered – we have done this before, and that finished up most successfully – except for the crook who fell off the hotel roof, and the ones we and Lars captured. We never did find out what happened to them, and for our peace of mind have agreed it is better not to ask. Considering high ranking Diplomats are “found drowned” or “fell off cliffs” around here, what happens to folk the Althing is not obliged to officially account for could be more ... exotic. Unlike Jasbir’s story of Traditional justice in her homeland there are no hungry tiger ants around the Nimitz Sea, but there are crabs.

Anyway, the good thing is that although we are to be on short notice to move out, the actual trap should not take long, one way or another. I did ask if Lars would be helping us this time – at which a grey ferret muzzle wrinkled, and it seems he is certainly not. Mr. Sapohatan did hint that although Lars has been very useful in wiping out other criminals, there are several possible motives for that.

He did point out that a tramp steamer that got away into International Waters would be outside Spontoon legal jurisdiction, and there would be nothing the police or the Rain Island Syndicate could officially do about it. But he mentioned almost casually that old tramp steamers had a habit of mysteriously going down with all hands far out at sea, being poorly maintained for the most part – that or sunk after being boarded by Pirates and looted for whatever cargo they were carrying.

I know one dorm of the first-ever graduates of Songmark turned air-pirate and are still at large, but that was one career plan I had not put before Miss Devinski! Molly has sometimes thought about it, but I hope she is joking. I asked Mr. Sapohatan if he wanted our help with such a backup plan – and indeed he does.

Well! It is one thing for Molly and me to have defended a smuggling ship against ruthless pirates as we did on the Parsifal, but doing the opposite is one step too far. I pointed out that one would never know till boarding if any “live cargo” was on board, and such would probably have been concealed against all but a very thorough search for secret compartments in the bilges, coal bunkers and such. A Pirate ship as has no innocents on board, and nobody would complain if it got in the way of a torpedo in thousand fathom waters. But unless we knew for certain that the Three Moons was guilty on this particular trip, I would have to turn that commission down. I added that Molly would do the job very happily. Anyway, we have not trained in torpedo dropping, and by all accounts it takes more than a few days to learn.

I must say, Mr. Sapohatan is unfailingly polite even when one turns him down. He noted my objections, and assured us that he would think of a suitable role for us. We are very happy to help on this mission, but it would be nice to have some degree of law on our side. No doubt he has plenty of other folk he can ask.

When he left, Helen and Saffina met out in the three-yard jungle at a shrine far from prying ears and talked it over. Saffina is very keen to help; her homeland has always been subject to slave raids, and in fact still is. She tells me that having the “Euro” legal markets closed down a century ago changed very little; slavers were raiding before Euros ever wanted plantation labour, and the only difference today is their victims stay on the same continent in probably worse conditions. She has no problems with being a pseudo-Pirate on this mission, she says. In the old days our equivalent would be privateers carrying official “Letters of Marque” – officially sponsored, and something like a Special Constable but with cannon rather than a truncheon.

27th December, 1936

A clear, bright day. Not having heard from Post Box Nine by the early post, I stepped onto a water taxi for Meeting Island. Passing Casino Island I could see furs in Tower Hill Park starting to assemble the New Year bonfire; hopefully we will be able to attend that one or at least the South Island local party. Duty calls when it chooses to, but missing out on both the Solstice and New Year rituals would be a bit much. I have heard from Saimmi that Prudence and Tahni were there; she blessed their rings herself.

Meeting Island was quite deathly quiet; few people actually live here and the offices traditionally close between Christmas and New Year. With no customers, the shops and luncheon bars take the holiday off. It is rather strange on Spontoon; as most of the business takes place in other folk’s traditional Summer holidays, the Spontoonies have to take any long holidays in the middle of Winter! One can see there might be a market for those trips to New South Thule if they are cheap enough; they are suitably exotic foreign holidays for furs who already live on an exotic foreign holiday destination. Spontoonies have all the beach they want any day but never get the chance to sledge and ski, and right now it is Midsummer and light all the time in German Antarctica.

Knocking on the door I was answered by the Judge himself, who apologetically explained his housekeeper had gone home for the holidays, and he was “getting by.” Well! While he sorted through papers I found the kitchen in the back and by dint of half an hour’s labours managed to put together a palatable dish of broiled gammon from the pantry and local fresh greens, followed with a sago pudding from recipes learned at Saint Winifred’s, totally different from Mrs. H’s version made from the sago palms of the village. I have heard Euros saying that just as some foreigners even get the names of their own towns wrong (according to Maria,

Florence in Italy is “really” Fiorenza, despite my showing her the correct spelling in my clearly printed atlas) local growers never get their native foods quite right. Anyone fresh from Europe ordering tapioca or sago in a Spontoon native restaurant will not recognise the dish.

The luncheon went down very well, and indeed Judge Poynter was full of praises. It is rather ironic, that a Lady Allworthy would not be expected to do her own cooking, and the public image of a tough Adventuress would mostly eat out of cans, though perhaps not with a saw-backed bayonet like Molly. Personally I like cooking, and sharing a joint of gammon such as I have never seen at Songmark is more than enough payment.

As to my legal state, he had to admit that it was a problem. The best bet was to argue that as the Songmark Tutors are our legal guardians, I could not be married or engaged without their permission. Unfortunately this does not work as far as Krupmark Island is not technically under (enforced) Spontoon legal jurisdiction, so it is hardly conclusive. A lot of the problem stems from the fact that I cannot dispose of the title without admitting it is mine to give away! It is looking as if there is little I can do from this end – if I could find a proper claimant for the title they could contest it and win it off me in the Courts, but they could not do that while I was in Spontoon and unable to defend myself (not that I would actually want to defend, but the law sees these things differently.)

The judge’s ears drooped, and he confessed that he feels he has rather let me down. He opened a locked drawer and displayed a bottle of what they used to call “crusted port”, something he rather sadly told me he had been saving since the year before, and offered me a glass. He had looked forwards to clearing me, in that the Allworthy case had left him with a decidedly bad taste and he wanted all the pieces tidied away before he finally retired after fifty years service. He has written off to various Law Lords in London, but it is the Michaelmas Court Recess and right now they are mostly sitting around roaring fires judging the country-house weekend murders for style and imagination.

Dear Diary: if I made myself stop feeling sorry for people, I am sure my conscience would give me just as hard a tweak as when I let my sympathies run free. I pointed out that he had done everything he could with the legal materials and the situation, all on my behalf – if there was no local solution, at least now I know and can make alternative plans. Our Tutors would not expect us to get a barn door flying, though it could make the basis of a jolly decent raft. After a second glass of port (the first I have had since leaving England) I was feeling rather sympathetic, and shortly afterwards it registered that I was being chased round and round the table. The exit door was there and available once per circuit, and there were a dozen options available from my self-defence classes – but I did not feel like using any of them. After about the fifth circuit I thought it might not be healthy for the good Judge to do this all afternoon, so decided to apparently run out of fuel first.

While he completed the last half lap, I rapidly ran through my options – one of them was to stand and imperiously order him not to “get fresh” as Molly puts it, and add a few choice words about the actions of a Gentleman. That should certainly have brought the afternoon to a crashing halt. Looking at the faded room and photographs on the wall, somehow I did not have the heart to do it. I remembered everything Helen said about the last time this happened – but I have every assurance from Mrs. H who I trust with my life, that Harold Poynter is no Leon Allworthy. He is far from fat, which is one nice feature. I told myself there should be no surprises with him being canine, having visited this room on the Ark already, and anyway I had brought Precautions specially tailored for such demands.

Actually, the only time my conscience did twinge was when I was walking back to the water taxi half an hour later. I could tell this to Jirry or our Tutors without any qualms; I know non-sentient canines like having their tummies rubbed, but I expected something different. That was absolutely all he wanted. I even had specific ... precautions ready with me that Helen insisted I buy at Herr Rassberg’s, that as it happened were quite unnecessary. If only all lawyers asked such reasonable fees! It seemed a harmless but odd request, although I have only known one canine and I hope Leon Allworthy was not typical. My only conscience twinge was when I had looked back at the very comfy-looking sofa also going unused, and realised I was willing to offer rather more. Now, that is a problem.

28th December, 1936

An interesting morning again today – Mr. Sapohatan returned to call us all into a meeting, Saffina included. He reprised the overall plan for us all, though he did not mention to Molly exactly who they were hoping to trap. We have not told her ourselves; we know how she tends to rush into things when she gets excited. Everyone volunteered, of course. The surprise came when he said he could only take Molly and any other second year, not us or Saffina along to the actual trap site. Our Tutors have put their collective foot down; setting us out together to Krupmark must have given them some grey hairs and we are not to be risked together again so soon, when there are plenty of volunteers from the S.I.T.H.S and similar who can do that bit.

Still, we are wanted on the backup which could be just as important and probably more difficult; instead of setting an ambush we may have a naval chase and boarding a desperate vessel on the open seas. I suddenly had visions of swooping down in the Songmark Junkers 86 with one of those LeDuck engined aerial

torpedoes under each wing, sending one skimming the waves across their bows at five hundred knots with the promise of the next one ploughing through their boiler room on the waterline.

Unfortunately we do not get to use such things, not even a “get out of Jail Free” pass or any sort of Carte Blanche as the Agents of the Committee of Public Safety had in the French Revolution. I suppose that would rather give the game away if we had one and folk discovered we are from Songmark. We are supposed to use our skills, training and luck, though hopefully not relying on luck too much. It is like rock climbing without a protecting rope; mistakes are a lot more dangerous, so one concentrates on not making any. As they say even when roped, “The leader must not fall.”

A tramp steamer has no schedule as such but moves from A to B according to what cargoes are available and wanted elsewhere, which makes predicting the Three Moons’ course as tricky as predicting a pinball game two moves ahead. But their scout on Spontoon has been led to discover a Native Ritual involving a dozen or so island maidens (in the Polynesian sense, if not perhaps strictly as Euros would class them) and a priestess staying on a deserted island overnight. This would be too good to miss; in fact it might seem too good to be true for anyone who knew about our previous “sting” in the Kanim Islands – but it seems the Authorities believe they made a clean sweep of everyone involved in that, and no warning leaked out. As soon as the ship heads this way we will be put on immediate alert, and are asked not to go too far from contact in the meantime. No New Year camping trips on the summit of Mount Kiribatori, then.

When Mr. Sapohatan had gone, we all sat down for a long talk. Saffina was wondering why the Nimitz Sea has this kind of problem – Jirry agreed with me that the short answer is, it is vulnerable because of its isolation. With ships and now seaplanes available, any raider can pounce on a sparsely settled island and vanish off into the wide expanses of the Pacific. As we know, in an hour from Casino Island one can fly an awful long way, and aircraft are just getting faster and longer ranged all the time. A Schneider Trophy racer could fly four hundred and fifty miles in that time – though happily being single seaters they are not the sort of aircraft we have to chase, and indeed they never carry enough fuel for an hour at full throttle. In fact it is a fine balance between completing the course and cutting down weight; a ground crew who see the engine run dry as their aircraft taxis back after the race congratulate themselves on having judged it perfectly.

Something that I did not say to Jirry, was that the Spontoon Independencies would be far less raided if they were still part of an Empire. Although the local forces and Rain Island do what they can with their resources, the Pacific is a big place and their international reach limited. One hears of British and French gunboats heading up rivers in China and shelling flat some local warlord’s forts if they capture Europeans; I cannot really see Rain Island doing that on Kuo Han, despite everyone knowing that is the main focus for the slave trade in the Pacific. In Jasbir’s dorm, Li Han has told us something of her country, which is corrupt rather than dedicated to the trade – like we hear about Cuba, a lot happens that is technically illegal, but ignored if good for business.

It is hardly likely that Spontoon would subscribe to the “send a Gunboat” policy even if they had the navy to do it, considering their own history of the Gunboat Wars. London, Paris and Washington are far more concerned with protecting one of their missing citizens than the morals of demolishing someone else’s town and civilians in punishment for taking them.

Still, as before we could console ourselves that we should have a day or two free before we are called out anywhere; it will take that long to set things up and check whether the Three Moons takes the bait. Maria declares we should give Mrs. H a break for once, and offered to take us all for a meal. The motion was carried wholeheartedly, as we might not be together too often like this.

Although in tourist season South Island is fragrant with food stalls and the hotels in Resort Bay do a roaring (or should that be “drooling”?) trade, at this time of year only the places stay open that suit the demand. All those are on Resort Bay, so we strolled up Northwards to that beach and took a look at what was open. The restaurant at the Topotabo Hotel was serving but they have Euro standards and we were in Native costume, so that was out. We ended up somewhere I have been past scores of times but never actually dined at, the Pie-House of the Sacred Steak and Kidney. Maria used to know it well; when her church was next door she dined there most Sundays after Mass and morning service.

I must say, having two “Euro” meals in two days was rather a treat. Our local cooking tends to be rice or manioc, with fried taro leaves and fresh fish or dried shrimp. Today was more like the meals back in England, a big well filled meat pie apiece, with mashed potato and bright green processed peas. It is hard to believe Maria and Saffina look on it as exotic foreign cuisine. True enough, it only really suits the climate here in the middle of Winter, but that hardly stops most tourists. Father told me that in the Great War, the French restaurateurs were scandalised that faced with their sophisticated world-class menus all our troops wanted to eat was ham and eggs, egg and chips and kippers (which the French do not make as such, and troops with dictionaries trying to explain about smoked herrings got more blank looks than fish dinners in the early months of the War.)

Still, an excellent meal. Pastry is something the local cuisine is wholly lacking in, probably just as well for the Spontoon general health and trim figures. Wheat flour and lard all have to be imported, as does most of the meat except chicken. As an occasional treat it is excellent, and would be useful to cure any homesickness – say, that of a Songmark graduate who cannot get home again while the authorities are convinced she is a spy.

The sad fact is – while the Government believes Sippy Forsythe about me, I cannot go back to England – and without getting back to England I cannot sort out the question of the Allworthy title. Even if I could get a believable fake passport it would hardly help matters. Getting back as Kim-Anh Soosay would only work out until I had to openly become Amelia Bourne-Phipps to battle with the lawyers there – at which point the fat would be in the fire, and the fan would urgently need cleaning. Having sneaked into the country on high quality false papers is a poor start to proving one is not really a secret agent.

One sees the occasional newspaper from home, and indeed there is a lot going on. The New Party is proving as resolute in Government as it was in opposition; the country seems perfectly content apart from predictable malcontents. Some riots in the East End of London around Cable Street were rapidly quelled, and a lot of the troublemakers are being handed one-way steerage tickets back to Russia, Ireland or out to New South Zion respectively.

On the way back we took half an hour to examine the bamboo grove that is currently two storeys high and still growing even in midwinter. Just visible through the wrist-thick stalks we could see tumbled and uprooted blocks of stone; Jerry tells me the Church had started their project of building a Calvary when the bamboo started to grow. Actually the first stage had been a formal “Garden of Peace” which nobody was too likely to object to, but the religious carvings were already on order. I used the “seeing through fire” ritual to see just what was there now, and there were a few surprises.

The nearest thing I can think of is field drains; could one see the water under a landscape it would be in natural flows and sheets moving downhill, coming together in valleys and only welling up visibly at spring lines. Field drains would be regular lines obviously patched into the pattern, placed to gather and focus what was there. The bamboo grove had the equivalent to new piping, making it a focus where there was none before. When we see the Priestess Oharu I must ask her how she did that – it is well beyond anything we have learned, and the effects are very startling. If I was the herbivore type I might recommend these bamboo shoots highly; certainly they would contain a lot of energy, if not in the way that puts inches on one’s waistline.

30th December, 1936

A quiet two days, but just what the doctor ordered – and Mrs. Oelabe, for that matter. The weather is fine, so although we could not risk going off South Island in case the summons came, there was plenty there to enjoy. We braved the weather to swim off Haio Beach, and indeed it is no colder than late Spring bathing in England. In other words, fine for hard exercise but none too tempting for extended paddling.

Molly and Maria seem to be happy enough with exploring the island; there are various Euros to talk to at Resort Bay, some of them “Remittance men” who have been sent to be out of the way for various reasons and have stories they are keen to tell, and Maria is keen to take down. She fills her time with her journalism; her Uncle started his career that way after all. It seems to be good training for speeches, debates and all sorts of persuasion; I have read the reports on how she fared at the start of the month at the big Festival of Nations. Considering how few folk around here are actual admirers of Il Puce, she did rather well by all accounts.

All being well, we should get to Casino Island tomorrow for the big bonfire – some of the village folk are already busy weaving the palm leaf effigies they will be casting on the fire. By tradition, the more care and time one takes with the effigies the more bad luck and worries burn along with them. That is one thing we cannot make long in advance, not knowing if we will make it to the bonfire ceremony; being stuck with an effigy unburned after midnight is considered the worst possible luck.

Helen commented that if Adele was here she only needs to make a round ball of palm leaf strips and draw the lands of the world on it like a globe – wherever she goes is bad luck. When she comes back from Krupmark I will have to get right to work on her problem, or we will both be in even more trouble with our Tutors than we already are. Whatever she did there in Summer, she never said but never complained about either. It might be that she enjoyed herself with experiences it is bad luck to discover one enjoys. On scale, I will do my duty in the coming raid, but if I found myself laughing wildly while cutting down a raiding party in a hail of bullets, I will know there is something seriously wrong. Or at least I hope I would still know it.

Molly is still having fun with her sprayer; she has actually found a good use for it. The locals ferment a sort of plant feeding spray from seaweed which is sprayed over the leaves; it is generally like a thick jelly but the sprayer handles it very well. She is at least keeping fit, hauling the solidly built knapsack with two gallons of fertiliser around the village’s banana plantation, the trees being rather too tall to be properly reached by the stirrup pumps that was all there was available before. It is good to see her keeping out of mischief; she has not fired a shot in a week, which is a long time for her to go without. Still, she is predictably looking forward to the big bonfire.

31st December, 1936

Farewell to our last full year in Songmark! Waking up in the guest longhouse in such good company was a very nice way to end a year that we saw begin on Vostok. As Warrior Priestess (trainee) we are not obliged to sing the full Morning Greeting and Sunset Song, and indeed it would hardly be compatible with being a

Songmark student in term time. After breakfast we did practice our devotions though, hopefully summoning up strength for the New Year. We will be recommencing our Priestess studies tomorrow, and then it will be a few short days before term starts again.

Arriving in the village at lunchtime, we saw various village girls hard at work on whatever effigies they are planning to give to the flames. I was busy shopping for Mrs. H but when I returned it was to see Helen and Molly having a furious row – something almost unheard-of, they generally get along extremely well. Molly stalked off without another word as I arrived, her tail hiked in irritation.

It took some persuading to get Helen to “spill the beans” as she puts it. She had found Molly apparently peacefully engaged in handicrafts, learning from the village girls how to make an effigy of what trouble she most wants to be rid of. All well and good – until Helen spotted just who the image was of. By the ears and tail it could have been Beryl, though Molly has no serious rivalry that I know of with her sometime business partner. It was the broad palm leaf strips looped over the shoulders and tied at the waist in a fairly accurate kimono that clinched it; Molly was most ungratefully making a burnable model of Priestess Oharu.

I can quite see why Helen violently objected; I would myself. Although I was some distance away scouting on point as we left the church on Krupmark, I did hear something of Oharu admitting having a severe crush on Molly. Well, that is hardly anything strange around here, as Prudence would certainly confirm (and claim that the fraction of her dorm to the rest of us, one in five have such interests. That is probably wishful thinking on her part; before coming out here I had scarcely heard of the idea, which puts it well under one percent. Songmark candidates are not typical in so many ways.) If the figure had been of the vixen Captain Granite we would only have applauded, but I am told Oharu saved Molly’s life at great risk to her own in the typhus and certainly saved everyone at Krupmark. As I have done to various folks when Duty took me to the Double Lotus bar, simply pointing out she had no interests that way would be quite enough. Belle and Carmen were very keen on expanding my horizons in the first year, having heard tales of remote country girls’ Public schools that bore very little relation to the facts. I had to disappoint them both ways, but still count them as friends.

Anyway, Molly was persuaded to dismantle the figure before she formally named it, so no harm done there. Hopefully the prospect of imminent action should take Molly’s mind off things.

As the afternoon went on without any summons postmarked Post Box Nine, we could relax and start to assemble our own effigies. It is a Tradition; although one would think it a sign of a happy life to turn up at the bonfire empty-pawed, the Spontoonies would regard that as rather tempting fate – just as Molly says gamblers never comment on their good luck while the cards are still in play. I plaited together a thin book that I coloured with red ochre to resemble a passport, and named it as such. Helen had made a similar but thicker sheaf of leaves as a textbook; as she did two years ago, she will cast a maths book into the fires. Maria has thinner, loose leaves that could be telegram forms.

A fine evening looked likely! The skies cleared as we embarked for the main celebration on Casino Island, which was briefly brought to some of its tourist-season life for the occasion. That is, food and drinks stalls were unpacked that have been in storage since September, and were doing a roaring trade. We all attended, all the Hoele’toemi family and many cousins; Namoaeta was in from Orpington Island telling us they do not have celebrations on such a scale there. In fact, apart from concerts there is rarely such a crowd in Tower Hill Park at any time of year.

All was going well – until I spotted Violobe, one of the trainee Guides we know well, heading straight towards us in the crowd. Everyone’s ears went right down. We were in the middle of a party crowd, streaming up the hill towards the celebrations when our expected summons came. Molly cursed, rapidly bought a glass of hot spiced palm wine from a vendor and threw it straight down her throat before handing me her effigy.

I handed mine and hers to Jirry to be burned by proxy, and we all had to say farewell. Molly had already gone, heading towards the seaplane jetty where she would head out at top speed to the little island of Moto’s Revenge. We know it on the map but have never set paw there; it is just a patch of waterless coral sand with scrub vegetation, like a hundred others in the Kanim Islands. Our own route was to the docks, where we boarded a patrol vessel and headed off into the night. There goes our celebrations for 1936!

Friday January 1st, 1937

A new year, and I hope it develops better than it began! We spent our midnight wide awake all right, but not around a celebratory bonfire with food, drink and cheerful company. Our new year began shivering on the steel deck of a nondescript trawler, that was surprisingly well-armed and had engines sounding a lot more powerful and well-tuned than one would expect. The crew were dressed in fishing kit, but moved and acted like full-time military. Of course, the local militia and Rain Island could provide off-duty troops in a good cause – such as running down and boarding a tramp freighter escaping from a badly sprung trap. This would technically be an act of piracy, but considering the Spontoons are the only local government liable to be prosecuting we felt fairly safe on those lines. None of us were carrying our passports, and I doubt the Three Moons would feel like begging protection from any passing foreign warship it did find in international waters.

As it happened, our trip was an unnecessary precaution and very glad of it we were; just because first aid kits and insurance policies stay unused any particular day is no reason to do without them. A rather unmilitary whoop of glee came from the radio room in the small hours; there had been a white flare spotted from Moto's Revenge, signalling all was well. A yellow flare would have meant something like the ship escaping with a skeleton crew after the shore party was dealt with, while a red flare would have meant deep trouble.

As we were "stood down" and prepared to return to Spontoon, the crew brought out a flagon of naval rum and we all toasted success and a new day dawning. Then we found ourselves an unused netting locker, and threw ourselves down to sleep. It is rare to find clean, dry nets aboard a working boat, but I can report they make a very decent bed for a tired girl.

We woke up with an unfamiliar view of Eastern Island, seen from the docks at Moon Island. The boat was almost deserted, but we could see one "fisherman" on the bridge and half a dozen more carrying crates out to the jetty. There was another long crate looking quite like it ready on the deck, and as there was nobody watching I decided to have a look. The four rifles inside were a familiar sight, or that was what I thought at first, having a Great War issue T-Gew of my own. But knowing the model so well, some differences almost screamed out to me. The barrels were four inches longer, and the bolts shorter as if to handle a much longer cartridge of the same calibre – and I recalled that one round Molly had been given by Lars. These certainly seemed much newer than 1918 as well; though metal packed in grease will not rust, over the years the grease congeals to become waxy or rubbery. These smelled brand new, and ready for use.

I carefully re-sealed the case and retired to the net locker where Helen, Maria and Saffina were still asleep, and had another cat-nap while I heard the crew return to carry the crate back to whatever magazine they have onshore. Nobody greatly cares about small nations buying up surplus ordnance especially from defeated nations, the unspoken thought being it must be inferior or they would not have lost. But it looks like someone is carrying on development rather well disguised as the older model. The boxes certainly had "Allied Control Commission" stencilled on them, the board that saw to disarming Germany and Austro-Hungary in 1919, but they scented of new pine; nobody had thought to make the crates out of old wood.

Eventually there was a knock on the door and a proper Mess Steward in white jacket entered, evidently from the Officer's Mess ashore. He had an insulated half-gallon jug of steaming hot naval-issue cocoa and four mugs, which was a very welcome start for us. While we drank he informed us that we had a water-taxi summoned, that would drop us free of charge wherever we wished to go. Apparently the Rain Island forces are issued beer daily with their rations, but at that time in the morning even Maria preferred the cocoa.

So; no Tailfasting, not much New Year bonfire party, and not much of a holiday for us. On the plus side, we have put in a good deal of overtime for Spontoon and hopefully made both Saimmi and Mr. Sapohatan fairly happy with us. By diffusion, it would be nice to think our Tutors would be slightly happier too. We have had some holiday time at least – and unless something else crops up we should have a few more days to relax. We have certainly seen a few surprising things in the past month – those "indentured servant" kelp plantations on the Aleutian Isles with their high living ex-Confederate owners and native Aleut sea-otter workers, the horrors under Krupmark, and the strange territory of the Great Stone Glen. It is just as well we missed out the sanity-shattering nightmare landscapes of Cranium Island, but that is somewhere we never want to return to. I have said the same about Krupmark, mind you. Twice. Hopefully my third trip to Krupmark was my last.

As promised, the water-taxi brought us back to South Island and a most welcome meeting; someone must have telephoned from Moon Island about us as the Hoele'toemi clan had gathered to welcome us back. Having Adventuresses in the family may not be so good if one wants the garden hoed or the dishes done dependably, but we seem to be appreciated for our other talents. Mrs. H was very pleased to welcome us back, claiming we had made the Nimitz Sea a cleaner place.

Molly turned up after lunch, looking rather grim. She confirmed that everything was well, they had made a clean sweep, and Granite and her crew would not trouble anyone again. She even volunteered that she had not only been awarded the ship, but had it hired off her for a sum that should pay for her next two terms at Songmark. For all that, she looked rather disturbed. I had hoped that a vigorous firefight would have her happy and contented till half way into term, but not so.

We will let her explain in her own good time; for now we can finally relax and finish off the party we missed last night. That is, Mrs. H and the whole village seem to be exceedingly happy with us – and we hardly feel like turning down their hospitality.

Of the various things we missed last night, it seems the "Goddard Club" put on a spectacular display. Not in terms of showy pyrotechnics but their rocket flew to surprising heights in the dark, the motor running for more than half a minute. Everyone cheered, and any tourists around at this time of year might have been disappointed by the lack of coloured stars etc that a normal display rocket drops. Having that specialist fuel depot on Eastern Island that caters for exotic Schneider Trophy demands is a major asset for such projects.

I assume Jasbir's sister Meera stayed over the holidays to work with the Goddard Club; what with our adventures taking us away from Casino Island I have seen nobody from Songmark but my own dorm and

Saffina. I expect Beryl is making trouble as per usual, at one or another of the small Casinos. The main one will still not let her play, after the unaccountable and highly improbable streaks of good luck she enjoyed in her first Summer holiday here. Casinos know all about probabilities, and though they could not prove anything they do not believe in luck like that.

We might not be earning any money as yet as Adventuresses, but it is nice to be earning goodwill among the Spontoonies. Violobe seems semi-official these days, in that she quietly asked us if there was anything we could use as some compensation for missing our Tailfastings and New Year celebrations. I was about to decline, when Helen's ears went right up and she asked for enough 85-octane aviation spirit to run my Sand Flea till term starts. This was happily granted – and we were told the aircraft would be ready whenever we needed it. A definitely bright idea on Helen's part, and one that will benefit us all through our logbooks.

Well! Though it was tempting to rush back to the water-taxis and put the gift to good use right away, we happily relaxed and enjoyed a New Year's Day beach party. Four hours of sleep in a net locker was very welcome at the time, but far from a full night's rest and we had felt rather worn after all the excitement. Taking part in a vigorous hula soon chased the cobwebs away, and with Jirry and Marti we passed a most enjoyable afternoon. And evening, for that matter.

Saturday January 2nd, 1937

A bright, clear day with a steady Westward wind had us all getting up early; though there was none of the traditional sausage and ham available in the Hoele'toemi larder, there were eggs and smoked fish for us to have a good "flight breakfast." We are starting to associate those with momentous days; the last formal ones we had were just before the Aleutians, and before that it was the aerobatics contest with the Ave Argentum (who have been very quiet lately.)

Off to Eastern Island in high spirits, after eight hours of sound sleep and much relaxation. Helen was so relaxed she looked like a tiger-fabric pillowcase at breakfast time, very contentedly draped over Marti's shoulder. Still, she firmed up enough to be memorably seasick on the way, despite having made the much rougher air trip back from the Aleutians with no trouble that way. Rather a waste of a good flight breakfast, alas. If we ever get to please any local Deities enough to ask them for one wish as in the stories, I will ask for a more stable stomach for her! Unfortunately it is just not something she gets used to; in our first Easter holiday living on the fishing boats she was no better on the last day than on the first. She lost twelve pounds in weight.

Molly and Maria are rather thrown together while Helen and I enjoy the company in the Hoele'toemi guesthouse. Maria is rather gritting her teeth at all these adventures we keep being given that she could not possibly use as a story – the Krupmark trip she says is something she could hardly write up even if Saimmi let her. Certainly her Uncle has no interest in such things, she says, being a thoroughgoing materialist who has been championing the People over the Church for years and despises superstition. As with Molly, discovering it was true all along would probably not be good for his equilibrium.

Saffina was happy to spend her final few days of peace resting up and exploring South Island and Main Island using her new freedom. It is just as well we had her with us rather than Eva; from what we gather Eva would have been deeply interested in anything related to the Fragment her own Uncle once had in his paws to investigate. Eva is quite open about the sort of things her Uncle is looking for; having artefacts that someone made for their own purposes centuries ago is well enough, but he really wants the secret of producing such things from scratch for what is wanted now. Their Chancellor has hardly begun to use the potential of that Spear he was waving around at the Olympics, she tells us. She adds that she can tell us because nobody else would believe such things; apparently her country acquired the authentic "Girdle of Freya", whatever that may be, from some museum in Finland for merely its weight in gold, and the curator thought he had a good deal of it.

Maria's articles are being syndicated across to Tillamook and Rain Island, which is a surprising thing considering their politics. Maria's party line is to despise anarchists more than Bolsheviks, and many Italian volunteers are putting it into practice opposite Barcelona right now. She is certainly turning out tight, sharply written pieces that go down well with the Pacific islanders; learning her trade with a portable typewriter in uncomfortable conditions makes for a concise style. She has put a few political articles together, but kept them well-reasoned and possibly persuaded a few furs to see things her Uncle's way. After all, she says Italy seeks only to revive the wealth and glory of the Roman Empire for its mostly poor citizens, which is nice. The only territory they claim in Europe is a rightfully Italian province and city the French conquered from them in the last century, which is Nice.

True to her word, Violobe had passed on our request for fuel and by whatever route the word had reached the airport staff. We arrived to find my Sand Flea wheeled out onto the runway, and a fuel bowser drawn up that could have fed its needs all the way back to Barsetshire. A splendid sight! Though Helen protested it was my aircraft, it had been her idea to ask for this payment and the rest of us insisted she get first flight. Our Sidcot suits had been cleaned and repaired courtesy of the first-year dorm that must have done something awfully wrong to get saddled with such a job. The evidence of muskeg swamp on the outside and two week's daily grime on the inside was very thoroughly removed, and we know what sort of a job that is.

With four of us servicing and fuelling it was hardly ten minutes before I was swinging the prop and Helen shouting "Contact!" while airport staff looked on in amusement. It is an unusual aircraft but they have seen stranger around here with the Schneider Trophy aircraft as regular visitors. That Bee Gee parked in "C" hangar is surely the most improbable thing to ever manage to leave the ground; Maria once commented that it is a perfect pole racer. With that tiny tail fin and massive engine torque it flies in circles on its own accord.

It is a fact that my Sand Flea is hardly a Schneider Trophy winner in terms of engine power, and on a hot day it takes quite a lot of runway to get airborne, especially with Maria or Missy K at the controls. Happily, today the wind was favourable and the air cool, and with Helen it fairly leaped off the ground as if very glad to be back in the air after so long. I took the next flight; with all the fuel we wanted we could stay up for an hour, covering the whole island chain and only turning for home when we ran low on petrol.

There was a very strange event while Molly was up around lunchtime. One of the few commercially scheduled land planes of the day was heading in so we had cleared out of the way to let the Customs folk do their business; Maria had gone off for a coffee. That left Helen and me at a loose end awhile so we practiced our exercises, some of the ones Saimmi taught us. It is generally a very good way of passing time; ones viewpoint goes somewhere that is decidedly not in the usual time zone.

I think Helen first spotted it; she came out of her trance and growled urgently that something was approaching. It was like and yet unlike the presence in the Great Stone Glen; certainly not the kind of thing one associates with aircraft schedules. Although it was like tracking a scent in a gusting wind we started to track, calling out "Hot-hotter-colder" as we ranged across the airfield.

In about ten minutes we had traced the signal to the far end of the runway where the private aircraft are parked, out of the way of the sleek DC-2 that had just arrived from Hawaii and was being refuelled for the French Sandwich Isles stage. Then we spotted a fur we had seen before.

Although I only met her for a few minutes back in August, in the circumstances we are not likely to forget Kansas Smith's mother, long divorced and presumably back under her Vaudeville stage name of Lola Vavavoom. What her original name was, Molly did not read in "Film Follies." She is a stunningly built mink of mature years, and still a great beauty. Evidently Kansas Smith is soon to have another little half-brother or half-sister, to judge from her condition. She was just boarding a privately registered Sikorski amphibian aircraft on the runway when we spotted her – which immediately rolled out onto the runway and took off heading Northwards. Either what we sensed was already in the aircraft when she boarded, or it is her. Definitely the trace we were reading faded out with the departing plane.

We found Maria at the coffee lounge, and immediately told her what we had detected. She was definitely affected by the tale, but then we have heard something of what happened to her on Cranium Island – which a quick check with the airport staff showed us to have been the Sikorski's filed destination. It is rather odd – Maria asked us just what Miss Vavavoom had looked like, as in did she look worried, happy or whichever. I had to say she looked quite blooming, and perfectly contented. "Swell" in various ways, in fact.

Maria admitted she had thought a lot about what had happened to her – and although I had not picked up their conversation, the thing Oharu banished under Krupmark had somehow known about that. Being reminded of it has definitely affected Maria, the only one of us without a regular partner. Of course, her problem is that she shares many of the romantic restrictions of royalty, being who she is. Without saying she is fussy, I can certainly understand her problem with finding an equal partner as few males are equal to her right now and she is rising higher all the time. Heading off as Jasbir did in dyed fur for an incognito romantic adventure would not help much; mongooses (mongeese?) like Jasbir can modify their looks to resemble other similar species but with those horns and that tail Maria is rather distinctive. Apart from various Indian water-buffalo and Chinese oxen, bovines are not a common type in the Pacific.

We had another ten minutes to talk it over, and then we heard the distinctive sound of the Sand Flea announcing Molly's return after a trip that had taken her right around Mount Kiribatori and back over Crater Lake. There are generally few Priestesses on Eastern Island, and evidently none who were near enough to notice the ominous arrival and departure and get here in time to spot just what it was. We are not too sure ourselves, though hopefully Saimmi might have an idea.

Still, we kept the dust off our flight logbooks today and our Tutors are always happy about that. Having a sponsored fuel supplier is a great treat, one that we will try to make the most of. It is almost a shame the Sand Flea is not my friend Angelica's Silver Angel, so we could all squeeze in and explore Albert and Orpington Island again, let alone further afield! There is much to see within two hours flying time from Spontoon. Another pity that our windfall happened at the very end of the holidays, not the start.

Back to South Island for our last full evening there; although most of our clothing is stored at Songmark we have two changes of "Euro" costume in our tin trunks at Mrs H's longhouse. Definitely the airtight trunks are a blessing; most of the year they keep out the ferocious local moths and right now they are preserving our respectable outfits from damp and mildew. Grass skirts and freshly picked flowers have no such limitations. A Songmark girl does all her own laundry, but considering everything – it is just as well the Native outfits are disposable.

Sunday January 3rd, 1937

Our final day! I confess Helen and I were up rather late, at least we arrived for breakfast around nine with keen appetites rubbing our respective neck-fur. Mrs. H joked that her sons would take awhile to recover from our trip, and at least they have a healthy enough diet to help that along. Very fresh fish every day was what the Pacific area Olympic athletes trained on, after all.

We met up with Saffina in the village, then as arranged we trotted down to the long curved sand spit the map calls South Fluke, where Gha'ta and Saimmi were awaiting us. After the ritual greeting we wasted no time in telling Saimmi what we had seen on Eastern Island. As we thought, although half a dozen priestesses had noticed something amiss, nobody else had seen exactly what it was.

Saimmi seemed unsurprised in a way, and of course she had been on Cranium Island herself in August. She guessed that the new addition to the family would be something that would greatly surprise midwives anywhere else in the world. That is nothing new on Spontoon; her sister Moeli is of course expecting a kitten of unusual attributes, her husband being one of the Natives of No Island. I know that Moeli plans to stay on South Island when her time is near; these things are never exact on timing, especially with exotic mixtures involved. We have heard of one girl who gave birth to a "Kitten of No Island" in the main Casino Island hospital unexpectedly two weeks ahead of time; it was pure luck that only Spontoonie doctors and nurses attended, not visiting Euros.

A very busy morning of training ensued; Saimmi is learning the Warrior Priestess tradition at the same time as the rest of us, with Gha'ta explaining and demonstrating. This was a very different tradition from what we had seen the Priestess Oharu demonstrate on Cranium Island, but it had much the same effect. At least, it would with a skilled and powerful enough practitioner; next to Oharu we are torch batteries compared to lightning bolts. (Comparisons are dangerous things. I recall Beryl telling some first-years last term on a trip to the Casino Island power station that you would not actually get a shock from three-phase high voltage electric supply cables if you touched all conductors at exactly the same time. According to her, the positive, negative and zero phases all add up to zero, so it is perfectly safe. She declined to demonstrate.)

Back for a splendid farewell meal, which Saimmi attended as the guest of honour. It is rather strange, having the High Priestess in the family, technically no longer a relative. She belongs to every family on Spontoon now – and indeed, if she had not been passing the old homestead in the course of her duties she could have been anywhere on the islands. She at least has no shortage of energy, despite having arranged that fog over Krupmark Island. I am still not at all sure how she did that. Still, she has been brought up on these traditions, and we are decidedly raw amateurs at it. Things could be worse – if we decisively bungle some of those rituals Gha'ta is teaching us, we would be cooked amateurs.

The meal was excellent as ever, with some of the last local bananas of the season. They cut them green in October and ripen slowly indoors, but this is about the end. I wonder how my friend Angelica is doing? We have not seen her in ages; had we not been grabbed twice this holiday for Official Business™ an expedition to meet her would certainly have been arranged.

Back for a final farewell to the longhouse and Jirry, final till next weekend at least. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder – well, both Helen and I are making up for it. In advance.

(Later) The rain is streaming down on the windows, and we are back in our Songmark dorm. It always seems to rain on the first night of term, not that term strictly speaking begins till the gates close tonight. Adele Beasley and Madeleine X were the last to arrive, with half an hour to spare – we have not had time to ask how they enjoyed their Krupmark trip. Contrary to popular belief one can enjoy Krupmark, at least Molly has done. But as Molly says, it depends on the company – her earlier visits were with Lars, unlike the last one which she did not enjoy at all. It seems she has discovered the cased Mauser rifle she was so proud of was anonymously given to her by the Priestess Oharu, which has rather spoiled it for her.

A busy holiday, and for a change our Tutors might not assume we have all been relaxing for weeks with our foot-paws up in front of a fire eating Christmas pudding and chocolates. They always think the worst of their returning students; in September we are told there is no more lazing around eating ice-cream on beaches for us – as if we had the chance to do much of that. Just having a full night's sleep will be luxury enough for us to go on with.

(Later still) Miss Devinski just put her snout round the door and announced we have the honour of protecting Songmark for the first night patrol of term. Help! I should have known – they always do begin as they mean to go on!

(And they did. Her final Spring term continues in "Uncowed in Macau.")

