

Monster Hash

Being the 14th part of the adventures of Amelia Bourne-Phipps at the Songmark Aeronautical Boarding School for Young Ladies, currently exploring with her friends on one of the islands that do not appear on the cruise ship routes. Cranium Island has a certain "Reputation" for strange events and mysterious inhabitants; mysterious still since so few folk come back to tell.

Sunday August 12th, 1936

(Written on waterproof field notebooks and transcribed later)

So far, so good. We had an uneventful flight out yesterday, in a newer model of the Lockheed Lamprey that actually has some windows in the main hold. The original designers probably reasoned that cargo does not need to look out – presumably the crew chiefs telegraphed them urgently that they need some light to sort the cargo when the flying boat has its big front-loading hatch shut.

A brief circling over the coast fixed our position on the sketch map and the aerial photographs we had managed to obtain. Most of the Southern part of the island is heavily forested, but on hilltops there are clearings and what looks like buildings or at least ruins here and there. The obvious cones of three volcanoes rise up at one end of the island, but they have trees growing right up their flanks and must have been quiet for centuries.

The pilot is a familiar snout to us, a local otter who revealed he has experience in Mexico and the Bolivian/Paraguay wars; at any rate he brought us in for a terrifyingly brief "combat" landing, diving straight down and slamming the flaps and air brakes on as it looked as if we were going to pile right into the beach. As it was, he judged it perfectly and the Lamprey just ground gently into the sand leaving us barely hock-deep water to splash through carrying our supplies and equipment. In three minutes he was turned round, and in five we were on our own.

Saimmi was dressed in a more "practical" outfit than I have seen her wear before; she is unarmed except for a machete, which is an essential tool and not a weapon for her. She has explained that there is nothing expressly forbidden about her fighting in self-defence, but doing so would disturb her spiritual focus and spoil her abilities for days. As she is our main detector and navigator in this trip, she is relying on the rest of us to handle the threats. Molly seems quite happy at the prospect.

We made best speed to the edge of the jungle, brushing out our tracks behind us as the Lamprey turned and took off; the tide is coming in and in ten minutes there was no sign of where its cargo door had dented the beach. It was almost disappointing in a way; Molly had the T-Gew with bayonet fixed and safety catch off, and the rest of us were ready to repel an ambush, but there was nothing happening. As far as we could tell it might as well have been the wilder parts of Main Island on Spontoon.

By nightfall we had made camp by a stream and settled down vigilantly. No fires were lit, as a plume of smoke can be seen for miles away rising through the canopy. Helen says her Uncle was in the Spanish-American wars in the Fillypines, and it took them a lot of time and casualties before they worked out how the Spanish artillery on the open ridges were tracking their progress through the jungle.

A first night on Cranium Island passed peacefully enough. I was on first watch with Saimmi, who sat at the edge of the clearing with her eyes closed letting her ears and other senses reach out. She has taught us a jolly interesting exercise with a candle flame, first looking through the fire at the surroundings, then blowing the real fire out and holding the image in the mind's eye. It makes the world look a very different place, but it is hard to describe exactly how; things look rather like those strange Kirlian photographs one sees in Unscientific American and other journals written for the mad scientist market.

After about an hour, Saimmi opened her eyes and asked for the map and a compass. She had a rough fix on something strange that might be the Fragment, she says – though warned that the island is full of very strange things, and rather than just looking for a needle in a haystack it is like looking for the needle when there is a hundredweight of assorted scrap scattered around it. She drew a line to the far side of the island away from the volcanic section to the worn-down smoother hills; it still covers a large swathe of territory but at least gives us a starting point without having to quarter the whole area.

A surprisingly restful night followed and by dawn we were moving along at the edge of the jungle, heading out along the beach. I think Molly was regretting carrying the T-Gew well before lunchtime; a forty-pound cannon that is seven feet long plus the bayonet is no easy load in

the jungle. Even Maria was gladly handing it back to her after a half-hour stint of that. Our regular loads of food and such would have been heavy enough in all conscience; Helen explains why they call their Infantry “grunts.” It is not just having poor communication skills that kept them out of other jobs, she says – hauling half one’s body weight and more around the rugged landscape, one cannot help but grunt a lot.

It got even worse in the afternoon, when we left the sandy part of the coast and slogged our way into a marshy estuary. The trees looked like I have seen films of Mangroves, but there was something very odd about them. For one thing, even Spontoon is too far North for mangroves to thrive and Cranium is two hundred miles further than that, plus it is out of the Nimitz warm current according to the shipping charts. At least we persuaded Molly to take off the saw-backed bayonet, as she is a major hazard swinging that around the place.

Saimmi was looking rather strained, and although she is as fit as most Spontoonies she has not had the hard training the rest of us had. But that was not the problem, as she explained: the plants here are all wrong, and the whole area is bathed in a sort of inner corruption. She admitted not being able to pin it down, until Helen suggested it was being carried down in the river from further inland – which is where we are going tomorrow. Not an encouraging prospect.

We were lucky to get out of the swamps before dark, having done about half an exhausting mile an hour and ending up covered in mud to our snouts. Luckily we know how to cope with that; on all our rifle muzzles we had what the Songmark equipment list still calls a “emergency water container, elastic” though back on Casino Island Molly had some curious looks trying to find one big enough to fit the muzzle brake of my rifle.

Anyway – we can risk a fire tonight, having found some sheltering rocks to hide the light and a good supply of really dry driftwood that should burn without too much smoke.

On the open side of the island we had a decent view ahead, and Helen took first watch on top of the rocks with a jolly fine spotting scope that came with the rifle set Molly received so mysteriously. She scrambled down at the end of her shift and told us there are signs of life about a mile away, with someone else having a fairly well hidden fire. Indeed, with the angle of the hill it is only our camp outcrop one could see the light from, and whoever is there probably thinks they are quite safe. She also saw scattered electric lights off in the distance on the hilltops, but it is too dark to get more than a rough bearing to check tomorrow.

Saimmi has Helen, Saffina and myself busily practicing our protective rituals, which she says are already important this far in – she drew a large circle on the ground and scattered some of the herbs that we know at carefully spaced intervals, explaining that we must sleep inside the circle and if any of us roll away in the night whoever is on watch must wake them immediately. Molly and Maria were much amused, thankfully in a good-humoured way. Still, I pointed out to Maria that school science and Religious Education lessons these days cover the theory and use of Electric Pentacles, so the idea is quite well thought-of. My own Uncle is a modern forward-thinking Padre and blesses his tanks in a ritual circle before exercises as prescribed by Archbishop Crowley, getting the Regiment a several percent performance boost on both accuracy of fire and cross-country performance.

It was extremely dark with no moon and low cloud, once the mists closed in. My watch was from midnight to three, along with Saffina. There were very odd sounds and cries off in the far distance that were quite impossible to make out. I rather disliked the sound of them without being able to say exactly why. Saffina’s ears were right down and she fingered the good-luck charm she carried (as well as checking the machete; she is a very practical girl.) She has told me some fascinating folk tales of her native land, which has its own share of very odd buildings that no archaeologists have been able to agree on, and unfortunate things happen to those who investigate too closely. The Hollywood films tend to show Natives as being easily spooked by strange things and run for the Witch Doctor; Saffina actually is one and says there is a lot that happens which one would be very unwise to capture on film.

Still, nothing came very close to us and we all survived despite a rather poor night’s sleep. I wonder what a modern alienist would think of six people all having the same dream the same night? Most odd.

Monday August 13th, 1936

(Written in haste.)

We are not the only Adventurers on the island! This morning we headed towards where we had seen the campfire; the ashes had been buried but we found the evidence all right. Helen looked out with the spotter scope and saw movement about a mile and a half away. There were five

figures, one of which she recognised from the fully illustrated report in the Daily Elele which our reporter chum Missy Aha says had been “subsidised” by the interviewee. Kansas Smith is always hungry for publicity by all accounts.

We held a hurried council of war, and decided to press on with our plan. We were going to bounce in and out as fast as possible, now having a rival we have even more reason to hurry. Treating this as a reconnaissance mission and returning later in the month is no longer an option, with a world-class treasure-hunter on the scene. The good thing is, we saw them before they saw us, so we have a chance at keeping out of their way.

From what Helen could see, there is Kansas Smith recognisable by her brown leather jacket and bush hat, and another lady adventuress of about the same species, very visibly a lady. The others were gentlemen, two canines and a small pig who seemed to be leading the way.

Molly’s eyes lit up, and as we walked told us what she knows of Kansas Smith from Film Frolics and such. Her Mother is a pure mink, once a film star and now a mature beauty who appears in sophisticated theatrical productions. There are two older half-sisters who are pure mink beauties born from unadvertised dalliances and are “doing the rounds in Hollywood” as Molly says, and Kansas herself who is half stoat and carries the family name. The mixture seems to have been unfortunate somewhere, as we have seen her photo and certainly she did not inherit star looks. She seems to take after her father who was not a star but a film director; Molly says marrying for money and influence is a bad move when something like the Wall Street Crash comes along and folk lose both. *

Further, Molly remembers the Daily Birdwatcher article mentioning Mrs. Smith being listed as one of the party arriving on Spontoon – it must be a strain going on Adventures bringing one’s equally famous and far prettier mother along for the ride.

Having seen which valley the Smith Party were exploring, we chose another one heading off at a Northerly angle along the boundary between the two oddly different sides of the island. We had been scrambling over recognisable volcanic hills, basalt sills and such, but once we had crossed to the far side of the valley everything changed. It somehow seemed quieter – not just as a drop in sound being produced by the wind through the rocks, but as if there were invisible heavy curtains hanging in the air deadening all noise.

We had seen from the photographs how the Northern part of the island was very different, but not until our boots trod on it did we really get the full impact. The jungles were all behind us and ahead was an uneasy tilted landscape of obscurely shaped and rounded hills whose occasional greasy rock exposures seemed to be more like glittering obsidian than any plain natural stone; I found myself wondering just how that could weather into soil that a plant could live in. The vegetation was certainly odd, in ways it was hard to describe. When I went down to the Gilbert and Sullivan isles near the Equator the plants were different from Spontoon, but one could understand that. They made perfect sense being where they were. However rare they may be, one does not expect any garden to wish to grow the plants that straggle over these hillsides, although the worst thing is there is nothing that one can really put words to and explain why not.

Saimmi looked as if she had a sick headache and motioned for us to keep together and closer to her, explaining that the tensions around us were getting very bad. It is far, far worse than she feared possible, she says – and confides there are other things here besides the Fragment. Perhaps bringing that here was like lighting a bonfire on a coal seam: in Australia and places there are smouldering seams that undermine the whole landscape and defy all attempts to extinguish them. These hills seem unaccountably old somehow, as if they were a landscape that had already seen too much in the deeps of time and vanished beneath the mercifully concealing waters, only to be resurrected unfathomed aeons later by the new surge of volcanoes that pushed it back into the sight of the sun. The pages of “Weird Tails” are full of this sort of thing, and according to them it happens all the time.

Even Molly and Maria were looking definitely alarmed, with Molly having moved out to the front and put her ear protectors handy on her head ready to nod on at a second’s notice. She had the bipod clipped into place and moved everything hard from her front pouches to her back ones; diving forward onto one’s water-bottle hurts and really the only way of using that cannon at short notice is to throw oneself down and fire it from the bipod. The T-Gew has a total muzzle energy of a quarter of a tonne and anyone caught without ear protection within ten feet of the muzzle brake risks permanent hearing damage.

And yet, there was really nothing to be seen. Saffina had her charms handy in her pocket; she comes from a tradition that knew when to fight and when to flee long before the first stones of ancient Zimbabwe were raised to the gibbous African moon, which archaeologists say far-flung colonists of Egypt planned although Professor Schiller says is ten times older than the

first pyramids. There was an odd haze in the air, more like bronze dust than anything I have seen before, that tinged the light and made it hard to see true colours.

For six hours we slogged across that landscape, Saimmi warning us not to try and use some of the skills she has taught us except the protections: she says there are things that we would not like to see here, and other things that we should not attract the attention of. By the time the sun was setting we were mercifully over the worst of it, and just before dark we found an old lava shelf that had flowed over from the saner side of the isle that Saimmi said would be relatively safe to sleep on. Even so, three people on guard and triple protective circles tonight!

* Editor's note: in the margin is scribbled in clear text – "Molly says they divorced with her citing Incompatibility. When he lost all his income she lost all her pattability."

Tuesday August 14th, 1936

This island is not as empty as it looks. We kept finding traces of tracks all day; it is hard to say exactly what of, though. The clearest patch was at a stream crossing; it was the sort of blurred track one might get if one filled a balloon envelope with footballs and rolled it across the landscape. There are some very disturbing scents at these places, which are mercifully unlike anything we have ever scented before. Saffina seemed definitely worried and said they fitted rather suggestively with some of her tribe's oldest legends, which are whispered only amongst the witch-doctors to avoid needless panic.

All morning we kept to the edge of the lava field, which gave us an impression as if it was a causeway through some awful morass worse in its way than the one that cost us so dearly on Albert Island. I recall Father's tales of the end of the Great War when his engineering companies had to put roads through what had been the scenes of bitterest fighting for four years, with the earth churned into a poisonous slurry of mud, decay and lingering mustard gas. He had to gather the rubble of whole smashed villages and simply pile it into a causeway, a clean stone and brick walkway that was the only safe passage through the sheer awfulness. And yet there is really nothing to see; if we took photographs they would only look like rolling worn-down hills with odd rock formations here and there on their summits.

Maria seems to have it worst; she has her crucifix in her paw and is muttering constantly in Italian, though it does not seem to be helping. I recall her telling me she had the cross specially blessed by Father Dominicus before heading out; he has freshly stamped papers with the Papal seal, and presumably carries extra effect. Her own remote ancestry has several Papal Bulls amongst it; I think she mentioned a Pope Sixtus the Fifth or possibly the other way around.

Saimmi says we are getting nearer now; in the oddly hazed distance we can see a volcanic crater that is on the right bearing and we cannot be far now from the opposite shore. Distances seem distorted somehow, it is taking much longer than it should and we ought to have crossed from one side of the island to the other by now. Still, we are going cautiously and keeping to cover; our Tutors have taught us how Not To Be Seen and we are doing our best to combine that with making reasonable speed. Even so, we are not making much better mileage over these ambiguous hills than we did through the jungle.

There is no sign of Kansas Smith and party, but if they carried on up that river valley it curves round and has its headwaters on the side of the volcano we are aiming for. Still – seeing paw-prints made by things that really are paws would be a welcome sight right now, even if they are of our rivals. The weather is stifling, a sort of breathlessness more like a stuffy, dusty room than the cheerful summer heat of Spontoon. Above the haze the sky is darkly solid purple like the arch of a great bell-jar trapping us, and we are all heartily sick of the place already. Those scientists must really be mad to volunteer to live here.

It is the strain on Saimmi that worries me; several times she has called on us to halt and get close to her for a few minutes while she intones rituals in a very old form of Spontoonie, possibly one of the original Polynesian languages. Molly was inclined to turn her snout up at it the first few occasions but her snout is definitely shut now and she seems to have decided to suspend disbelief "for the duration." Maria is looking at the rest of us rather differently; although we have often told her the basics of what we do on our Sundays she has thought of it only in terms of quaint folk rituals and customs like our Dance classes. Seeing Saimmi in action and getting tangible results is giving her cause to think again and it is anyone's guess which direction that will take.

(Later) We have made camp on the lower slopes of the volcano, rather earlier in the day than usual but everything above us is more exposed and we found a lava tube that gives as much

shelter as we can hope for. Of course we made very sure to examine the insides very carefully, nobody likes the idea of sleeping in an open tunnel in a place like this with an unknown passageway going into the darkness. The tube is blocked completely ten yards inside, with a choke of great boulders a howitzer shell would not shift. All in all, as good a campsite as one could expect in such a place.

Wednesday August 15th, 1935

Dear Diary. It has been one of those days that make me wish I was at a Finishing School. I was on the first watch with Saimmi, who is looking quite haggard as if she had had nothing to eat and no sleep since we arrived. Actually she has had our usual rations, but sleep is a bad idea here as the dreams are simply awful. An eleven forty I changed over with Molly and Maria who were watching till half past three, and my last sight of them before turning in was seeing their silhouettes against the gibbous moon at the entrance to our lava tube.

I was just about asleep when all of us were jolted awake by the loudest and most urgent alarm call there is – the ear-shattering crash of an anti-tank rifle fired again and again as fast as Molly could work the bolt! In the ten seconds it took to throw off my bedroll and scramble up to the entrance in the dark she had reloaded and fired four times, something I still can hardly believe anyone could do with a hand-loaded T-Gew. The last shot was different; I was the first one out of the tunnel as the landscape was bathed in a searing burst of white light and I knew Molly had fired one of those illicitly obtained magnesium jacketed rounds she must have “saved for Sunday” and thrown it into the breach in the darkness.

I must write down very carefully what I did and did not see, and try not to be influenced by what happened after. When Molly fired the magnesium round I was just about out in the open and on the hillside, but the rocks under my paws were uneven and I was looking down for paw-holds when that lightning-brief burst showed everything around us. Helen was right behind me but mercifully saw nothing.

If I did see anything it must have been out of the corner of my eye as my head was jerking up – even so I saw quite enough. Something was there, possibly that which had made the tracks in the stream beds – it was huge and towered above Molly like a great glutinous wave completely unaffected by three point-blank hits from the armour-killing rifle. But it did not like the light – for by the time my eyes were focused that direction a split second later, it had gone. It did not leap away, or fly, or disintegrate – but it was no longer there. Molly was there with the stock of the T-Gew braced against a boulder, her body locked absolutely rigid except for her paws that unerringly cycled the bolt and grabbed another ten-ounce round from her pouch. Of Maria there was no sign.

For a second I just stood there, my eyes half blinded by the flash – and found myself oddly thinking calmly that if Molly had missed I should be able to see the fading streak of tracer as a white line punching across the night. There was nothing like that. The stars seemed oddly bright and near all of a sudden, as if that oppressive lid over us had been lifted – or as if this mountain was one of those in some high remote plateau on the roof of the world with very little between us and the cold scrutiny of starlight and the endless night beyond.

By the time I had got my night vision back Helen, Saimmi and Saffina were fanning out and looking for Maria. Molly was staring almost sightlessly, locked rigid still like one of her ancestral relatives caught in a searchlight – Saimmi was examining her, and her face was grim. In a minute Saffina came up with something held in her paw – and I felt my stomach lurch within me as I recognised Maria’s crucifix, oddly buckled as if it had been turned to wax for an instant and carelessly squeezed. Its ivory inlay had not cracked or discoloured, which is impossible to explain as neither heat or any mechanical pressure could do that.

The landscape around us was quite bare and empty under the pale moon, with very little cover for hundreds of yards and no sign of any living thing. Anyone moving would have been spotted immediately.

We got Molly down into the cave where Saimmi and Saffina could take a look at her – as far as I could see there was not a scratch on her, at least physically. Saimmi shook her head and muttered she should never have let the two unprepared ones take watch alone – but she would do what she could. She asked me to stand watch outside; I managed to get the giant Mauser out of Molly’s rigid grasp and found in the breach another of those magnesium rounds that Lars had provided. Of course, anyone for miles around would have heard the shots and I am sure the last one would have been visible anywhere on this side of the island. We could hardly have said, “Here we are” any better with a pack full of maroons and signal flares.

For about ten minutes I scanned the landscape with the help of Molly's spotting scope; certainly I am proud of my feline ancestry and in the middle of the night it often comes in very handy. Then in the far distance I saw something beginning to move towards us. Even now I cannot exactly describe it, it was like a flurry of wind picking up dust and vegetation and whirling it high; indeed that is all I can truthfully say I saw. But it was far more coherent than any normal piece of weather except a tornado, and Helen has said they need thick clouds and storm winds to form. If anything I would have said they settled into formation, which is a rather odd thing for a piece of weather to do.

I was just about to call down to Saimmi when she appeared at the entrance to the lava tube, already looking straight at that piece of horizon. She asked if I had used any of the methods she had taught to look at the approaching phenomenon; when I shook my head she seemed grimly pleased and advised me not to, on any account. Pointing up the rough slope, she told me the lava tube would not save us now, but we had just a chance further up the volcano.

In a minute we were all out on the open hillside in the harsh starlight, ash and scoria rolling under our boots. Molly was moving like a sleepwalker; Saimmi whispered that with this and what happened to her on the tramp steamer, Molly had taken two severe blows to her sanity inside the year. I imagine being faced with something that is wholly immune to violence must be a shattering revelation to her, and I suspect that one of those fifteen-inch shells Lars smuggled would have not done any better.

For half an hour it was hard slogging up the ash slopes until eventually Saimmi called a breather. Below us the strange features were advancing across the landscape like the tide, but our Priestess called for us to sit on a small ledge around her, and we ran through the ritual she had shown us on top of Mount Tomboabo. Immediately, I felt totally drained – but Saimmi sprang to her feet and pointed up the hill. Maria was alive, she told us – and we were not the only ones on this mountain.

Immediately we were off again – and as we went over a ridge we saw that she was perfectly right. Above the piled rubble of the ash cone the volcano is solid rock – or rather it had been solid before someone had got very busy re-working it. I shuddered to think of the sort of mind that would pick the biggest dormant volcano in sight as their safe haven.

Saffina gave a quiet hiss of alarm and pointed ahead at what looked like a line of huge figures waiting for us ahead. We stopped and I took a look through the spotting scope – folk must have thought the madness was contagious here as I helplessly laughed out loud at the sight. Tikis! The whole upper part of the hill is ringed in Tiki statues, staring out over the barren lands below. We made top speed over the three hundred yards towards them, with Saimmi looking slightly less grim and Molly still staggering along rather disconcertingly puppet-like. I was definitely grateful that Saimmi had been able to aid her, though from what she has said such protections do not last long.

When we got there, we stopped and Saimmi went forwards on her own. The statues were carved in the solid rock, and around them the black rock was levelled into a shelf cut into the hillside. As we approached I noticed the shelf looked very clean, amazingly so, and about as flat and level as an ice-rink.

Looking at the Tikis my tail certainly bristled. They were Spontoonie work, I had no doubt about it – they looked rather like some of the oldest ones on Main Island and yet there were certain very disturbing differences. A year ago I might have spotted that they were different without being to explain exactly why. Certain styles and meaningful symbols had progressed beyond anything surviving on the Sptoon Isles themselves, although there were hints about it in the hidden carvings under the walkways of Casino Island that had been made in the final years before the Great Ritual that had gone so awfully wrong. If those normal statues had been cosy hearth-fires, these were blast furnaces of huge capacity; if the Main Island statues were decorative garden fences these were something like the fully developed Western Front with tangled concertinas of booby-trapped wire and a mile of defence in depth with aircraft and artillery on call. Definitely they were built with more than domestic protection in mind.

Saimmi pressed her paw to the nearest one, and shuddered as if she was holding onto a low-voltage cable, painful but not enough to throw one back. She gestured and pointed at a spot to her right – we hurried across the oddly smooth boundary, feeling a most peculiar sensation as we did so. Suddenly, it was as if we had stepped back onto a normal island, where no sinister starlight leered down on sights best left unseen.

It felt altogether cleaner here, and indeed we were breathing easier than we had since first arriving on the beach. Still, there was nothing for it but to press on half an hour later after a drink of water and a bar of tropical chocolate apiece; above us we could see lights shining as if

the top of the volcanic cone had become a great fortress or tower. Saimmi explained that the Tiki statues had been made to trap something inside their circle, but they were now keeping things out. They are of a certain very specific type that she says were never made on Spontoon, or at any rate were only produced in the final months and were destroyed in the cataclysm or what the first returning priestesses had to do to make the islands safe in the 1850's. Although very few of the High Priestesses that had been involved in the Great Ritual had survived, there were things which they had told their juniors who had been away from the islands at the time, that had been passed down to the modern priestesses.

As I stood there with Helen and Saffina I could not help but think just how fragile this whole tradition of knowledge is; Saimmi says she still has much to learn from Huakava, who is ancient indeed and not up to this sort of strain. In fact, unless there are a lot more people involved with the upper levels of the local religion that I suspect, we are more or less IT in terms of doing this job. If we fail to return it might be years before anyone else could be found, and neither Huakava nor Saimmi would be there to train them. There were more qualified Priestesses fifty years ago despite the Missionary presence; just because folk are free to practice their Traditions on Spontoon does not mean there will be suitably qualified and interested people born to take up that challenge.

With the spiritual strain lessened, our "ordinary" training kicked back in and we trusted Molly with the T-Gew again, Saffina having carried it up the hill for her (it is something of a strain even for Saffina, mostly lioness though she is.) Helen was her usual practical self, muttering about the bad planning of us four all having different ammunition types – she stopped, her ears drooping when she realised she had automatically listed Maria as being with us still.

As we climbed, I looked over at the horizon and spotted the first glimmering of light in the east, the stars just starting to fade. Being caught out here in the open by day might only expose us to a different set of dangers; the local inhabitants are not reputed to appreciate company dropping in uninvited.

One thing that struck me was the definite lack of any obvious road going into or out of the place. Our aerial photographs were not brilliant or quite up-to-date, but to build a complex as big as this one appears to be takes more than a footpath and construction roads would show up on the photos we have. Furthermore, the inhabitants must need supplies, as I have not spotted anything growing on this side of the island one would like to eat.

We circled round the flank of the volcano, rather marvelling that anyone would actually choose this as a safe place to set up in. Just then Helen spotted a cave mouth or entrance above us, and we made for that. Dawn was fast approaching and we were feeling very exposed out on the open hillside with the towering final summit cone pierced with electrically lighted windows. Any sort of searchlight from there would have picked us out like mice on an open kitchen floor.

Ten minutes later we were all drawing breath in the shelter of the entrance, a round passageway about eight feet across that looks as if it was melted rather than quarried out of the rocks. It went straight into the mountainside: we had Molly go in ten yards and listen carefully while the rest of us held out breath outside, but she said she heard nothing but the sound of the wind inside. Looking out of the cave mouth it was quite a view across the island in the growing light and indeed we must be five thousand feet above the beach, giving us ten minutes earlier sunrise than anyone on the distant beach still away in shadows.

Suddenly things changed rapidly. The cavern was flooded with light from concealed bulbs in the ceiling, and an amplified voice boomed out "Welcome to the Mansions of Doctor Blum!"

Getting spotted this early was not in the plan. But we knew we would have to meet up with the residents sooner or later, and with our rifles carried at the port we slowly moved into the corridor. As we went along the corridor became more finished with smooth metal-clad walls and more visible lighting, until we found a bend which led to a double set of sliding doors about ten feet apart, the nearest one of which was wide open.

As I reminded the party, walking in there trustingly all together would be a rather poor plan, the sort of thing our Tutors would have us peeling taro root and gutting fish in the kitchens all week for suggesting. Helen and I went in first while Molly covered us, her T-Gew ready for surprises (Saffina and Saimmi retreated back up the corridor, having no earplugs and knowing just how loud that tank-killer is even in the open air.)

Just then things went horribly wrong. There was a distant electrical buzzing and the lights dimmed slightly – and an invisible force grabbed us and dashed us against the wall! My pistol almost broke my fingers as it was wrenched out of my grasp and crashed against the side of the chamber. My belt buckle, pocketknife and a lot of small kit nearly tore out of my clothing,

pulling me fast against the metal wall. Someone had lined the corridor right back from the door with electromagnets as powerful as the one in Superior Engineering they use to pluck marine diesels out of engine-rooms with! A second later what looked like a metal mesh supporting the far wall came free and leaped across the corridor like a net as the designers of the trap took no chances with folk who might have come in armed with bone spears and flint knives. The designers had definitely put some brains into this one; Molly might be a predictably equipped Adventuress but Saimmi is not, and from her surprised yelp around the corner it got her too.

For a second or two I was just winded, and odd thoughts flashed through my brain about redesigning all our equipment in bronze and other non-ferrous metals for next time. I was mostly pinned by the mesh but managed to wriggle out of the shoulder straps of my knapsack and had started struggling with my belt buckle (a cargo strap belt of forged steel linked to the climbing loops sewn securely into my shorts, worse luck!) when the door in front of us opened and four rather neatly dressed figures strolled in, all wearing grey jackets of a peculiar linoleum-like material with high circular collars almost like that of a diver's suit. All were armed, not with any "Buck Rogers" lightning cannon as we almost expected but with plain and very serviceable-looking bronze automatics which they covered us with while two of them rolled the clinging steel mesh off us like a heavy carpet.

Three of the local gentlemen were bears but their leader was a Ratel girl of about our age, who seemed very happy to see us as she ordered us "not to try any funny stuff". Her accent was North American not unlike like Liberty Morgenstern or Ada Cronstein; East coast I should think though I am no expert.

Well, that was embarrassing. It was hard to say what else we might have done but go into the tunnel or run away, but this is not the sort of thing that ought to happen to a Songmark girl. In five minutes we were searched down to our pockets; folk even found the fishhooks hidden in my head fur (not hard to do as they were sticking to the wall) and the steel string draw-cords in our jackets (ditto.) We were marched down the corridor, one of the bear gentlemen being told off to stay and gather up our equipment and follow after as soon as the electromagnet was turned off. From the bronze sheen of our captor's handguns, it looked as if they had thought this one through in some detail.

Molly asked which of them was Doctor Blum – the Ratel just laughed and said the Doctor would see us when he was ready. One never sees the position of "henchman" advertised as such in the "Situations Vacant" columns of the papers, and despite our own situation I found myself wondering just how employers manage to recruit staff in these places. Perhaps they advertise in the back pages of magazines we do not read, such as "Amateur Vivisectionist weekly."

The corridor was about fifty yards long and then through another door we had another surprise – when we came out into the open again, in what looked almost like a jungle! The inside of the volcano had been quarried and terraced to provide farming land (volcanic ash soil is famously fertile) and there was a stepped crater easily two hundred yards across heading down to what looked like a well shaft ten yards across some distance below us. From the air it looks just as if the crater is filled with natural vegetation, as the steps are covered with climbing greenery and it is hard to tell a wild tree from a fruit tree from a thousand feet.

That certainly explains the food supply; although most of the plants were in raised stone beds and planters they were vibrantly green and the place was a tangle of climbing beans and vines. Some of the plants I could not identify at all; they were not exactly rooted in the soil but stood on the ends of the rows, almost like sentinels. It was rather odd; one could swear their branches were moving even though there was very little wind down in the crater.

We were hurried across to the far side of the crater where another tunnel bored into the steep wall, and thrust into a plain rock-hewn chamber about twelve feet square, with not only a complex lock (with no inside keyhole) but a heavy bar on the outside of the door.

Oh dear.

After a few minutes we pulled ourselves together, Molly seeming almost cheerful; I suppose it is some sort of an improvement to be in a situation she can understand, however tight a spot we are in. Even if we had kept our lock-picks there is no way to get to the lock from here, and unlike in the films there is no key conveniently left in the lock for us to improvise grapples against. This place may be run by mad scientists, but certainly not by stupid ones.

For an hour or so (we had been relieved of our watches) there was nothing to do but cool our bare heels (we had been relieved of our feature-packed and steel lined boots too) and try to rest awhile without pacing around burning up energy. Fortunately our captors had not removed everything from our pockets, and we had our aluminium waterbottles and our tropical chocolate

still in our pockets to console us. This seemed a good omen – though Helen commented wryly it saved them the expense of feeding us. She might have spared us the thought that only giving us their own food suggested they plan to keep us alive.

Saimmi spent the time in prayer and concentration, and at the end of it announced that we were very close indeed to the Fragment – it being no more than “the length of a village” away from us. But there is something very strange, she says – though she definitely has the “feel” of it, she is not picking up any fraction of the power that is saturating the island outside.

Helen asked about Maria and Saimmi went into a trance for a few minutes before announcing she is here alive, and quite close. She might have been able to say more if it was someone who had studied with her, she says – but it is part of the reason that Maria was taken in that she had no way to shield herself from what is here. I did not like to explain to Molly that Saffina’s homemade “Voudon” charms from Ubangi-Chari are a better self-defence around here than our T-Gew.

Saffina was holding up very well, certainly for a first-year she should get full marks should we get out of this (and it was not her plan that got us into it but mine.) As I write, things look rather bleak – but we have been in scrapes before and always got out. At least it is less spirit-crushingly oppressive inside the mountain than outside so Saimmi says it should be safe to dream if we can get the chance to sleep – we can thank the Tiki gods for small mercies!

Friday August 17th, 1936

Dear Diary – it has been a definitely shocking two days. I now know how islands get their reputation; if anyone asks I will tell them to never, ever go anywhere near Cranium Island, though refuse to elaborate on why.

We had been locked up for about six hours and even got some fitful sleep. After all, the last few nights had been draining enough and we were in no more or less danger locked inside a shielded room than out on the open island. Then the door opened and a different four armed locals looked around the room – three dark-furred canines, Dobermans I think, and a small and studious-looking rabbit male wearing what looked like industrial goggles pushed up over his forehead. He looked round and smiled, saying the Doctor would see all of us in turn. He pointed at Saffina and the rest of them kept us covered with their automatics – there was nothing to be done except grit our teeth and let them take her off, the door closing and the sound of the bar going into place outside.

Saimmi immediately went into a trance, and announced to our relief that Maria is still alive and well – and she should be able to keep a far better track on Saffina for obvious reasons. The fear we had was that whatever this Doctor Blum has going on is fatal to the folk being used for “experiments.” Helen and I agreed that there was little anyone could do while inside the room and the only thing was to make the most of one’s chances as soon as we are taken out.

We managed some more sleep and finished the last of the water before the door was opened again and this time it was the Ratel girl, who pointed at me. With a sinking sensation I waved farewell to Helen, Molly and Saimmi and followed her out, blinking in the late afternoon sun that shone through the crater making it a rather pleasant scene with the virulently fertile growths everywhere – not that I could really appreciate the view.

Our party was heading down towards the deep well-like shaft when there came the sound of a large gong from the distance. The Ratel looked annoyed, and announced we were going up to see the Doctor right away. This time we went back upwards to the highest levels, where carefully shielded windows look into the crater greenery, all of them with inward angled glass so they cast no reflection a passing aircraft could possibly see.

Towards the top of the crater the rock is solid pyroclastic lava, a foamy rock that one can tunnel through as easily as chalk – at least, from the corridor I could see a small window in the outer wall showing the crater rim is less than fifty yards thick here. The place was Spartan in the extreme as regards décor but well equipped with lights and electricity, indeed when we passed some of the rooms our fur stood quite on end with some huge static charge that must have been close by.

I was pushed into a large, dome-roofed chamber easily twenty yards across. At the back on a sort of dais surrounded by equipment (I was eerily reminded of V-Gerat and their Theremin array) was a large raven gentleman, dressed in a very elaborate version of the linoleum-like suits my “escort” was wearing. Doctor Blum, I presumed. But it was the three other folk in the room, obviously relaxed and at ease as guests rather than prisoners that made me gasp – two mustelid ladies and a short pig that I recognised as Kansas Smith and her party!

My guess seemed to be correct, when the full Mink (Mrs. Smith, or Lola Vavavoom as Hollywood once knew her) looked at me and laughed, commenting that the “Dear Doctor” had certainly pulled in some healthy specimens for his fun. She looked very healthy herself; in her mid forties I should guess but still with a face and figure that would draw all eyes (and twitch most tails) on the beach.

There followed a lively conversation where Kansas Smith and Doctor Blum haggled over a price – to my horror I realised that I was one of the pieces of merchandise! It seemed her party had lost the two canine gentlemen to the hazards of the island, and Kansas wanted some assistance with carrying equipment (“and to go in front in case there’s any more like the thing that got Louie” as she rather dismissively said.) They settled on a price for two of us – and the Doctor chose me and Saimmi, or at least described her as the Medic; she was unarmed and carrying the first-aid kit, which made it a fair guess on his part.

Well! I confess my fur was rather bristling as folk talked about us as if we were items of kit on a shelf to be issued for the trip – Kansas looked over at me and laughed, her tail swishing as she very “generously” offered two of us the chance to get away, at least as far as their ship, after which we were free to go where on the island we liked.

Once out of this fortress, I knew we were in with a chance – so with my ears right down I accepted her terms. We got in before, and once free of our captors Saimmi and I could try to rescue the rest of the party.

Mrs. Smith looked down at me through her rather long-lashed eyes and smilingly remarked that I was not to worry about my friends – they would be well looked after, and she has enjoyed trying some of the experiments herself, up to a point. Kansas sighed and rolled her eyes – she may be a world-famous treasure-seeker but hardly seems to have a contented family life. Perhaps the two are related.

I was “escorted” out again, and did my best to talk to the junior Henchgirl, who seemed quite unconcerned about what happens to us. She laughed when I offered her money to let me escape (Songmark might possibly ransom us, and at any rate it is worth a try) as she says she is not in this for money – she is one of five interns currently working with the Doctor for free, just for the chance to learn from such a great man.

!

Much to my dismay I was not put back in with Helen and the rest, but locked in a small room which at least had an open grating facing the inner gardens. There was food (fresh fruit and vegetables) and water, a sleeping mat and other facilities, so things could have been worse. In the films one sees prisoners signalling each other by tapping on the radiator pipes – alas, like most things here the radiator is electric, and the power to the room is shut off. Evidently mad scientists are fully aware of the potentials of giving prisoners electricity to play with, or I would have practiced one of Beryl’s practical jokes and wired the door handle to the mains.

There was little else to do but eat the food and try to rest, and not worry about things I could not help at the moment. I fear I did not do so well on that. I did get some sleep, but was awakened by a sudden shadow falling across me. I looked and saw a mass of greenery pressed outside the window and heard a peculiar scratching noise outside. It was very odd – I assumed that one of the vines had come loose in the wind and fallen in front of the door, but when I next looked out a minute later I could see nothing of the sort anywhere near, nor could I scent any recognisable fur, only the vegetation. Very odd.

The next day dawned after a disturbed night, and several times in the darkness there seemed to be a greater darkness pressing against my cell door. I heard recognisable pawsteps passing a few times but that was at different times, almost as if it was something different entirely. The sun was not even over the crater wall when my door was unlocked and swung open, and the Ratel girl with three guards was outside. To my delight Saimmi was with them, held at pistol point it is true but carrying all her equipment except the machete, including the big first-aid kit. It looks as if we really were to be taking a walk outside the fortress; happily our boots were returned to us.

Our captor grinned and gestured towards the base of the terraced crater, where a vertical shaft yawned big enough to fly an autogiro down. We went down level after level of terraces until finding the lowest one had a spiral staircase cut in the natural rock, which led easily a hundred feet down before emerging into a great arched chamber.

Oh my. When the volcano last erupted, it must have formed the main crater before the lava drained away somewhere else, leaving a flat-bottomed chamber far below when the remaining lava solidified. Saimmi gasped at what was lying out in the very centre of the lava plain, something no Spontoonie had seen for five centuries and lived to tell.

We had heard everything the Priestesses had gathered about the Fragments and knew the ones taken off Main Island were small; indeed this one was small enough to fit in a knapsack. This is the one that was “buried in fire” – but when the fire cooled to earth, the earth rejected it and cast it up like a champagne cork launched underwater.

The Ratel grinned and pointed towards it, telling me to go and get it; she added conversationally that she had bets running with Izzy and Bernie the other interns about what would happen when I touched it. There seemed no hurry, so I took a deep breath and ran through the protective prayers Saimmi had taught me; though I heard nothing I could see her lips were moving and feel she was helping too. It was only about forty yards out along the flat surface of the cooled lava but I took a minute to make the walk, guessing nobody was too keen to come after me. There were small fragments of ancient bones lying around in the rubble, some of them blasted as if by lightning and I used the “seeing through fire” trick as I stood over it, feeling rather like one of Father’s sappers finding an unexploded bomb of unknown design, concentrating all my senses on seeing exactly what was there.

The Fragment was empty. That is, it was a solid piece of material but it was like a flat battery, just as heavy but drained of its power. I suddenly had an idea what had happened to the rest of the island; possibly for generations scientists and “wonder-workers” had been coming to this place and using its powers, accidentally or otherwise transforming the ancient landscape into what it is now. Everything that should have faded away in remote ages and now been harmless was now re-vitalised; shadows walk in broad daylight and take on sudden strength in the dark.

Professor Schiller had dropped hints about the hideous dangers of disturbing this sort of thing; apparently his “Ahnenerbe” has suffered major casualties in bringing that odd collection of antiques back for their Chancellor’s private collection and in discovering just how they work. But I had no choice: I bent down and picked the thing up, noticing to my surprise it was quite loose and not welded down by what had been lava before it cooled; the earth seemed almost glad to be rid of the burden. In fact, the earth had “rejected” it so thoroughly that it looked as if it had not touched it at all, having floated on the rock like a soap bubble on water.

The Fragment weighed about ten pounds and was ... unpleasant to carry. It was not unlike trying to hold onto a sparking magneto, but different in a way very hard to describe. I got it into my knapsack and rejoined the rest of the group, the interns looking quite open-mouthed in shocked surprise. Apparently things used to Happen to folk who touched it.

As I rejoined the group Kansas Smith and the Chinese boy arrived, both dressed for travel. She addressed him as Half Ration (a most peculiar name) and asked him if it was clear outside. A very strange thing happened to him – for a minute I was sure he was going into an epileptic fit as his eyes rolled back, he started to jerk and fell to the ground twitching and drooling, while Kansas looked on quite unconcerned as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Then he started to speak, in a deep ringing voice quite unlike he had used before – indeed I would have thought it impossible for him to make that sort of sound. I did not recognise the language but Kansas evidently did, for she nodded calmly and told the locals that if that was true we had better get going. She mentioned having a private collector lined up who had big plans for the artefact, and referred to having a pilot waiting at the coast.

Ten minutes later we found out why there is no obvious sign of traffic on the aerial photographs. There is a long tunnel to the outside of the volcano, which comes out in a road dug into the side of a canyon! The canyon floor is rough and choked with boulders anyway, and folk could dispose of any amount of excavation rubble without attracting attention. The “gateway” was a solid metal door big enough to drive a small lorry through, and as we were pushed through it my ears and tail sank. Leaving Molly, Maria, Helen and Saffina behind is not something that I can forgive myself for, but with Kansas and Half Ration carrying pistols in paw making us lead the way five paces in front, I really could not see any alternative at the time. They seem to have done this kind of thing before, having weighed us down with the packs so we cannot run and keeping a good distance from us so we cannot turn and grab them. Having seen what this island is like, our chances of running into even more local trouble seemed rather high.

It was a dismal hour stumbling down the mountainside weighed under our packs and being shepherded by the half-stoat and the impassive pig. The coast was in sight about two miles away through the haze when we turned the corner of the canyon; although she had said she would let us go when we reached it I had my doubts. Kansas Smith is known for being unscrupulous, and neither she nor Doctor Blum would probably want witnesses. We know just where the Doctor’s lair is now, which he has taken great pains to conceal from anyone liable to spill the secret.

Just then, everything changed. We had left the shelf cut in the canyon side and were passing under a steep cliff scored with gulleys when a few pebbles hit the road around us – then a second later about a tonne of loose rock and ash roared down between us and Kansas, hiding us in a dust cloud! The slope below the road was almost vertical, but I grabbed Saimmi and we plunged down it into the canyon, bouncing painfully off the walls but mercifully slowed by the debris cone at the bottom some fifty feet below. I looked up and saw not two but three figures on the slopes above the road for an instant – the rock-fall had been no accident and someone up there likes us!

Three pistol shots rang out from above us but we tore back up the canyon, still carrying our loads and were soon in cover pressing close to the bottom of the cliff. There was no sound of Kansas following us down, and indeed she would have to be willing to risk broken bones to try it. We dumped the packs full of Kansas's spare clothing, keeping only the food and water; not surprisingly she had not put any weapons in the packs she gave us. The Fragment was rather a burden but we could not abandon it; as we made best speed back uphill Saimmi gasped that someone who knew how could restore it to power. Having that sort of thing doing what it did to this island amongst the crowded East Coast of America would be a world disaster.

It took two hours to get back up to the entrance. I looked up when I could but there was no pursuit visible; of course Kansas and party could move along the road a lot faster and more quietly than we could over the rocks, especially if they knew we were heading uphill rather than down to the coast. All the time the thought of my friends captured still by Doctor Blum was spurring me on, and I was exceedingly glad of the Songmark levels of fitness training. Saimmi is fit but she was panting for breath by the time I stopped at the base of the cliff and looked up to the almost invisible ledge where the road ran. There was no handy gulley here, but the rock looked firm enough and I was soon climbing it, thankful again for my lessons! A rope would have been good to have, to help Saimmi join me – but Priestesses are not trained for this, and she volunteered to stay with the Artefact.

Two minutes hard climb brought me up to the road and I cautiously poked my head above the edge, almost expecting to see Kansas coolly sitting there with her pistol waiting to use my snout for target practice. There was someone there all right, but about the last person I had expected to see – Professor Schiller, standing there with G-U-U all clad in full tropical adventuring kit, solar topees and all!

I knew Molly had opened her snout too wide and told him about our trip, and he seemed quite unsurprised to see us – tipping his solar topee politely, and giving me a paw up. It seems he had been watching this volcano site for days, and spotted Saimmi and me being led away – indeed he was very interested in what I had to say about what was inside the crater. Gunter produced a rope and tied a neat sling seat on the end: with the three stalwart wolves hauling Saimmi was soon pulled up to join us.

It was a very strange meeting. All three of G-U-U twitched their whiskers as soon as Saimmi came up with the haversack, and Uwe whispered something in German to the Prof. His ears went right up – and he congratulated us on having got what we had come for. How they knew what and where it was, I have no idea – except he has referred to G-U-U as being as much a prototype as any Schneider Trophy entrant. Very odd indeed.

My own ears rose in shock when he put a proposition to us – if he rescues our friends, the price would be the Artefact, as he called it. I retreated round the corner and asked Saimmi what to do. Her own ears and tail were right down – she admitted the Fragment was currently almost harmless, but its empty form could tell the right (or wrong) people much about what it had been and how it was made. But she agreed that our chances of getting Molly, Maria, Saffina and Helen out on our own were not at all hopeful, and reluctantly accepted the deal so long as the Prof agreed to take it well away from the Nimitz Sea and never bring it back.

She added that a Knight of the Great Worm seems to have many powers that Euros generally do not possess these days. He is far nearer a Spontoonie priest than any Euro priest is in ability if not outlook, and the three youngsters are a tool for him, “forged as steel is forged.”

Well, whatever gets our friends out sounded good to me. It was definitely getting to be a strange struggle, now a four-sided affair with ourselves and the Prof against Kansas Smith and Doctor Blum! And there is strange talent on both sides; that young pig “Half Ration” must have some sort of real ability or I cannot see Kansas keeping him handy for his looks or strength, and we have Saffina plus whatever G-U-U can do.

We shook hands on the deal, and I took the post of “wicket-keeper” near the gate with Saimmi to raise the alarm in case Kansas came tearing up the road ready to call out the guards on us. Happily Kansas did not have a radio set with her – Treasure Hunters travel light on the

outward trip hoping to return laden with loot, and she seems to subscribe to the “travel light travel far” principle.

When I turned round again the Prof and G-U-U were simply gone. It almost reminded me of the way the Wild Priest had appeared and disappeared without trace. Saimmi took the haversack containing the Fragment and started intoning a long and complex ritual over it, while I watched for any signs of movement in the empty landscape.

I can only say the wait was long, as we had not had our watches returned. In fact the sun was getting low when there was a sudden fury of noise from the doorway – and it burst open, with the Prof and our friends suddenly pouring out with clouds of smoke billowing after them! Molly had her T-Gew back but that was all she carried – and the ten-ounce rounds are not something one keeps clips of in one’s back pocket. Saffina likewise had the cased Mauser rifle kit slung across her back and all had their boots on but little other equipment. Helen gave a yelp of joy at seeing us and we slid on down to the road to join them at a brisk trot heading towards the coast. Helen was urging Molly to throw the T-Gew away as it is useless without ammunition and an awful load to run with, but Molly was sticking to her guns.

As we ran, Helen panted that the Prof had been incredible – he had broken Maria out of the laboratory, found some of our equipment and then liberated them all – plus facing down Doctor Blum himself. Doctor Blum had one of his assistants with him, a star-nosed mole (and we all know what their talent is) and was about to fatally electrify the whole corridor when he seemed to get the idea the Prof was a fellow researcher. From what Helen said he was given one chance to tell the truth on an innovative (mad, she said) theory, and he came up with a very strange one involving everything being based on fire and ice, with something about the moon being ice and previous ones crashing to earth on a fairly regular basis. Somehow the star-nosed mole was fooled into thinking he really believed in that – and Doctor Blum seemed suddenly less annoyed to lose his captives to another completely mad scientist.

Molly and Maria seem to be in fair shape physically, though G-U-U have wounds rather like claw marks. I asked what animal had made those, and Ulric mysteriously replied that it was not an animal at all. Still we managed to get down the valley to the spot where Kansas had been ambushed without any particular problems or indeed any trace of her. The Prof said she had been seen heading for the coast the last time he saw her.

The sun was setting by the time we reached the coast, and the Prof headed towards a rock outcrop on the beach where he revealed a cached radio. With a few curt words he called in his transport, and then we settled down to wait.

About twenty minutes later Molly’s ears went up and she announced a large aircraft was approaching. She was absolutely right – my tail fluffed out in delight as I spotted the unmistakable shape of a Horten design, the tailless aircraft looking almost boomerang-shaped as it swooped in towards the beach. Definitely there is an aircraft we would give out tails to fly.

Saimmi took off the knapsack she had been carrying and with a slight smile took out the Fragment, explaining it had lost a lot of its power over the years. She was about to hand it over when it was snatched from her grasp by a snaking whip that appeared as if from nowhere – and we found out what had happened to Kansas Smith!

Kansas was there, the setting sun behind her as she stood in her trademark bush hat and leather jacket, swinging her rhino-hide whip. She grinned and waved forwards six hefty canines who must have been part of her treasure-hunting team. Holding up the Fragment, she gloated that it was worth “half a million simoleons” to her, and we were not getting away with it.

Just as she held it up, the tables were turned. Molly had retrieved some of her equipment, and with a pistol-like crack her Vostok steel knout snapped out, grabbing the Fragment back and tossing it to Saimmi who elegantly fielded it and relayed it to the Prof with a grateful nod. The black Horten had landed on the firm beach, its four pusher engines blowing up a dust storm as it began to taxi towards us.

Molly and Kansas faced each other about six yards apart, both swinging their weapons. Kansas raised hers in a swirling move and struck, only Molly’s lightning reflexes getting her out of the way in time. She swung the knout, not quite cracking it but slicing a piece out of Kansas’ leather sleeve. Definitely that is something that would seriously annoy the Treasure Hunter, as we know full well the outfit is brand new and barely paid for!

For about half a minute they circled warily, then both went into a frenzied blur of action. Kansas got in two painful blows, but Molly got in three and her knout is over two pounds of steel cable, with a solid steel tip. It tangled with her opponent’s whip and Molly jumped back, using all her weight to jerk Kansas’ weapon out of her paw. As Kansas dived to retrieve it Molly

planted a steel-lined boot in a full-strength Jude-Jitsu strike, and Kansas was instantly flat in more than one way.

With their leader unconscious and Molly looking on gleefully as she swung the knout experimentally, the rest of her team rather lost heart. They looked very much as if they were muscle hired for the occasion, and having one's paymaster taken out of the battle is generally discouraging for such folk. Looking down the barrel of an anti-tank rifle may have helped persuade them, as they probably assumed when Molly cycled the bolt that it was loaded.

The Prof tipped his hat again and shouted above the engine noise that there was regrettably no room for all of us onboard – as he had a long voyage Southwards to make and he wished us well of our homeward trip. G-U-U waved and followed him up the ladder into the cavernous belly of the Horten – which turned round and in five minutes was a dot vanishing Southwards into the darkening sky. Heading to the naval base and year-round winter sporting wonderland of New South Thule, or I miss my guess.

We put a few miles between us and Kansas Smith before it became too dark to see, played our usual paper-scissors-rock to choose first on watch and slept out in the sand dunes, having a mercifully undisturbed night. What a day!

(Regular diary entries recommence)

Saturday August 18th, 1936

Back to Spontoon! We made an early start and must have trekked sixteen uneventful miles along the beach to our pickup point before noon, having just enough time to dig the signal trench in the sand before seeing the welcome sight of the Lockheed Lamprey zooming in over the coast. The pilot spotted us, did another low pass to be sure it actually was who he expected to find, and pulled another one of those spectacular short landings planting the nose hatch right on the beach. This time we were all aboard in ten seconds, Helen shouting "Go go go!" and helping the crewman seal the front doors in record time.

By three o'clock we were looking down on the familiar shapes of the Spontoon Islands, with four boats in the waters and the highly visible black and white cones of the Schneider Trophy course below us. I suppressed a shudder thinking how close those four boats must come sometimes to Cranium Island. We barely got away with it ourselves, and the idea of a couple of hundred average tourists cast ashore on that isle really does not bear thinking about.

Everyone seemed very quiet and withdrawn, especially Molly. Saimmi whispered above the engine note that Molly has had as much as she can take for the time being, and whatever new adventures crop up she should steer clear of. I assured her that our only plans now were to relax and watch the Schneider Trophy; no more perilous trips for us before term starts.

I am quite worried about Saimmi myself; she put an awful lot into this trip and though she is young and strong it has been a hideous strain. If spiritual trials were muscle strains, it is as if she had gone through everything we had carrying another hundred pounds of weight in her pack, as she was protecting and concealing us from things I did not even clearly see were out there. She confides that Professor Schiller might be rather disappointed with the Fragment he took away; she had enough time to go through the ritual she had planned to from the beginning, and what is left should be mostly harmless now. Well, she did tell him it was out of power.

It seems the various local religions keep an eye on each other's interests, as she mused that it would be a good thing to warn the Vanierge about the Prof's collecting mania; it seems they have the actual Horn of Heimdall, whatever that may be, that the early colonists brought from Europe and should not return there. Just as the Reverend Bingham would not see eye to eye with Father Dominicus on rituals despite having the same basic religion (as someone like Jasbir would see it) there are Nordic priests and Nordacists, which are a quite different thing.

(Later) It is so good just to lie out on Haio Beach, relaxing with a pineapple drink and without worrying about who is on guard and what is sneaking up behind them. We returned with our tails on, having successfully rid the Nimitz Sea of one of the three fragments. Actually it made no real difference as it had already been drained dry of its malign influence (which Saimmi says will fade over the years though the folk who like Cranium Island as it is will hardly notice) but at least it is accounted for and gives us valuable clues on tackling the other two. Definitely a successful trip, all things considered. If Professor Schiller makes a catastrophic mistake tinkering with it in New South Thule, he can hardly render the Antarctic Plateau any less habitable than it is already.

Mrs Hoele'toemi was very pleased to see us all back safe and sound; this is the first time Saimmi and I have been out in peril together, and there was a definite chance of none of us coming back. I think Saimmi is excused heavy work for a while – still, there are the four of my dorm plus Saffina quite fit enough for household jobs, and even routine things such as weeding the taro patch are a very welcome relief after the last week. With summer “holidays” like this one, even the prospect of the third year at Songmark does not seem too bad!

Sunday August 19th, 1936

Yesterday finished rather early for us – an hour after sundown all five of us were fast asleep, definitely making up lost time. Actually sleeping in a bed is a great luxury once one has gone without for so long – and though it is a great shame Marti and Jirry are not back, I fear we would have disappointed them; for the first evening at any rate. This morning I felt quite fine, though.

Before heading out to our various devotions we got together and compared notes on the trip – Maria says she is going to confessional and has to get her thoughts in order, and our Tutors will no doubt want some sort of account. They are far more forgiving of us confessing what plans went horribly wrong than finding out we tried to hide them; as Miss Devinski always says, nobody ever learned from their mistakes unless they faced up to them first.

Oh my. From what Maria says, Professor Blum had some very ... innovative ideas about the local wildlife of Cranium Island. Whether he bred them, found them wandering or a mix of the two Maria could not say, but he certainly had some plants that Kew Gardens would want in their collection (until they found out about their preferred food and habits.) I recall the mysterious greenery that pressed against the window of my cell in the night, and the fact that Gunter said it was no animal whose claws (thorns?) had cut him.

I also recall Mrs. Smith mentioning some of the experiments were quite fun up to a point, and realise she was talking about being a willing test subject rather than an experimenter. Of course, in some circumstances Maria would not feel she needed to confess; though she did not go into detail one had the impression Doctor Blum's experiments might have involved giving plant husbandry a whole new meaning, which at the time she had no complaints about. Maria rather hopes and prays for crop failure now, being unwilling to take more positive steps with her religion being what it is. She is rather embarrassed about acting so out of character; if she was feline I might suspect her having been exposed to catnip but that has no effect on bovines. Possibly there is something new that does.

The rest of the story was easy enough to piece together, with Saffina having been called in by Doctor Blum to be asked about our party and why we had come to the island. She says Mrs. Smith seemed to be very well settled in the place, and had an admiring following of young interns wherever she went. I suppose Hollywood stars are rare in that part of the world, though Professor Blum mentioned once being associated with Entertainment having a resort in the Catskills Mountains until his increasingly bold hobbies required relocating somewhere less public. Folk from the coastal cities would drive out into the Catskills in big groups for dance parties and shows, and over the course of the years some probably never returned.

Anyway, G-U-U somehow got into the crater over the top past all sorts of traps and alarms, and threatened to blow up the power receiver unless we were released. From Saffina's account the complex did not have a normal fuel-driven generator as one would expect but an absolutely huge Tesla coil that was receiving electricity beamed from elsewhere. We have studied the late Mr. Tesla's inventions in our engineering classes, and there was much that he was working with when he died concerning wireless power transmission. In which case someone else on the island must have a generator and be feeding the various science fortresses; one wonders in what form they receive payment?

We were glad that we were only counting the cost in terms of equipment; my Webley-Fosbury pistol is gone for good but unlike T-Gews there were plenty of those made; most of what we lost we can replace easily enough. As Miss Blande has often told us, Adventuresses have a dilemma in terms of needing to take the best possible equipment into the field as a matter of survival, but knowing they may have to leave it behind in all sorts of circumstances. Much as Helen quotes her Abraham Lincoln as saying about being a general; good generals must cherish their armies but be prepared to send them to their deaths in necessary battles. In both cases, one should not gamble what one cannot afford to lose. A new revolver of that model would be pricey but I am definitely not going back to Krupmark to buy another at the Thieves' Bazaar, whatever happens. If I never see the place again it will be ten minutes too soon.

While Molly headed back to the beach and Maria went off to the Chapel of the Sacred Heart to give her confessor a surprise, Saimmi took the rest of us out to a jungle shrine and taught us a healing ritual that we were all decidedly in need of. It is a shame that Molly has not taken any interest in the local religion even after seeing it working; Saimmi says she is the one who could most benefit. It is amazing how time seems to pass when conducting our rituals; it seemed about ten minutes but looking up at the sun Saimmi announced it was lunchtime already.

Maria came back with some news that had us all sitting with ears rigid – things have moved on in no uncertain way with Father Dominicus and his plans. He has agreed to dismantle the South Island chapel and take up the offer of the larger site on Casino Island, which surprised us. He has two conditions though – the South Island site stays consecrated Church property with nothing allowed to be built there except a garden with a Calvary – and he gets his temporary Flying School.

He's actually done it. Everyone said the Althing would throw that out at first sniff, but Maria says the Chief of Police was asked to do a thorough investigation as to the risks, and when he amazingly enough gave it a clean bill of health the Interior Minister rubber-stamped it and publicly announced it to the newspapers. The flying school will be based on Casino Island but they will rent workshops and hangars on Eastern Island alongside us. I still can't believe it.

Maria's ears went right down as she told us what else some of the congregation were saying. She says folk were discussing the new flying school being entirely for girls of good character – by which I think Molly and Beryl would not even get a reply to their application, and if a student did get caught doing some of the things we have got up to they would be slung straight out with penances rather than refunds. I had not really thought about us being "scapegraces and fugitives from Justice" which is how some of Maria's fellow congregation described us. Some folk do not seem to like young ladies becoming world-class with firearms and in unarmed combat, and we have been seen climbing buildings as well as rock faces; in Beryl's case that is rather worrying I must admit. Our Tutors will be simply fuming when they hear – and they have very sharp ears about anything connected with Songmark.

(Later) I think Maria could have chosen a more sympathetic religion, had she chosen it the way we have the Spontoonie traditions rather than being born into it! She has to go back tomorrow to find out her penances having had her confession heard; not surprisingly even Father Dominicus has had to go and look some things up in the reference books once he was convinced she was telling the truth. It is rather ironic that we had been concerned she had nobody to date, being always concerned about her reputation back home with her Uncle. At least in terms of spoiling reputations Doctor Blum does not know our names – and however advanced he may be for a plant life form, Maria's Cranium Island "date" is unlikely to be talking.

Monday August 20th, 1936

A restful day, catching up on things with our friends. We bumped into Prudence and co (all her dorm are here over the summer) on Hotel Beach and after all this time accepted their invitation for a swim with their formation team. I must say, they are as well rehearsed as any team Bushby Barkley puts in his films, and it is jolly good exercise. Molly announced that she intends to sit on the beach sunbathing every day until September, being due some relaxation.

Actually, Prudence had some interesting things to tell me. She had mentioned before that her friends at the Double Lotus had pinned a name down of the tramp steamer Captain who had her way with Molly last year, and they have a plan that will go into action when Captain Granite next heads this way. Tramp steamers never know exactly where they will be going next; it depends on what cargo is available when they arrive at each port. She asked me not to tell Molly, who would probably get ... overenthusiastic and might wreck things.

A rather more surprising visitor to the islands is my old school chum Angelica Silberlindh from Sweden who they met stranded on Main Island last week! I know Angelica was set to travel with her family company when she left St. Winifred's (they have almost got a monopoly on importing bananas into Sweden; her firm lives, works and probably dreams bananas) but had no idea she was heading this way. There is some very odd problem with her aircraft that left Prudence definitely scratching her head-fur over – and both Prudence and Ada are about top in our class when it comes to engines, so it must be strange indeed. I will certainly go and see if I can help; by all accounts she has a wonderful aircraft and our Tutors are always pleased to see us filling in our log books with new types flown. We have not done much flying this holiday; even Molly was advised by Mr. Sapohatan she had best not write up our flight in the

commandeered Sikorski chasing the slavers to Casino Island, as nothing is being written down about that episode anywhere public.

I can certainly imagine why Ada was keen on offering my friend a friendly paw, or indeed other very friendly parts. But she will be too busy for awhile as that respectable librarian rabbit from the American mid-west is arriving tomorrow and Ada wanted some advice on appropriate oiled fur patterns for her. I think it is rather off-colour, Ada pretending to be a Native Spontoonie and carrying on a deceptive correspondence with her all year – someone is bound to find out eventually. On the other paw, I have been a Siamese girl from Macao myself on occasion so can hardly complain too loudly.

Prudence also brought me up to speed as to the Schneider Trophy races; the teams are quite evenly matched in aircraft but the French have been having personnel problems. Their senior pilot Monsieur Crapaud of Chateaux Crapaud has been in jail overnight twice for gross driving and flying offences despite his claiming international competitors have Diplomatic Immunity and just yesterday his long-suffering friends Monsieur Taupe and Monsieur Compagnol * bailed him out of the Casino Island police station again.

That mysterious Tillamook aircraft with the steam boost has only flown twice since I saw it, and has spent most of its time being repaired under strict guard. Prudence says there is something quite revolutionary about the radiators of the Lorinson, making it a “Mystery Ship” as they call them, that only appears on race days and the owners are not keen on letting anyone too near. Certainly, there is more happening in these islands than just sunbathing and picnics on the beaches.

The weather here is quite scorching, and we are very glad of Native dress. Actually once one gets used to it, having the politer type of tourist photograph one is quite good fun. I can see how the Spontoonies like inventing rituals and traditions – rather like Beryl working out how to sell worthless merchandise, half the fun is in persuading folk it is real and imagining them telling their friends back home. I am not too worried that anyone will recognise any photograph of me in costume, even if the newspaper printed it back home. Helen’s costume is still more revealing, which is a form of protection in its own right as no newspaper back home could think about printing it!

For the less polite tourists – style always comes round again, and I have seen folk proudly wearing new hats embroidered in Native script with “Wandering paws”, “Avoid like the tail-rot” or “Total bigot” as well as less polite things. It is a double joy to sell them the very warning signs that let one’s friends know what to expect and to take evasive action!

*(Editor’s note: a water rat is not actually any species of rat, but an aquatic vole!)

Tuesday August 21st, 1936

Saimmi reappeared today; she had been off since Sunday conferring with her superiors and discussing what to do about the remaining Fragments. The one under Sacred Lake will keep, she says, and indeed just physically finding it and bringing it to the surface would be a major engineering job let alone coping with it afterwards. I suppose the nearest word would be “deconsecrating” it but that rather assumes it was holy to begin with, rather than the opposite. Although it could not be done even with the intact priesthood four centuries ago, the energies have lessened over the years and it just might be possible to tackle the job, given all the luck in the world.

What they are worried about is the Krupmark fragment; by elimination we now know it is the one buried in the earth but nobody knows where. If we are lucky it might be in the scrub woods high on Mount Krupp where nobody notices us digging for it – if we are unlucky it is a hundred feet under the foundations of Fort Bob, which I would think more likely considering on Cranium suitably inclined folk were drawn to its presence. Saimmi says she will take months to recover from what she went through on Cranium Island and none of her fellow Priestesses can really be spared. Still, she has gained a lot of useful experience about dealing with such and says Huakava has another new pupil who might be able to help when the time comes.

Someone else we saw was Mrs. Voboel (nee Pelton) who was on South Island sunbathing with her cub and husband. Oh my. Helen spotted last Autumn that after finishing her career at Songmark she wasted no time on her new one; it looks as if she has decided cubs are a good thing and will be presenting hers with a brother or sister next Spring.

Although she has left Songmark our dear (ex) Tutor was keen to find out how we were getting along; after all she put a year of her time into my class before she left, and is happy to

hear about us. As I expected, she said we should try and get in more flying time; having our “B” commercial licenses we are qualified to charge for our services if we can find anyone willing to trust us with their aircraft. That would be a fine idea; if I could get some flight experience and the pay that goes with it, I could get my dear Sand Flea in the air again!

Although it may be the holidays, there was no time like the present and having waved farewell to the rapidly expanding Voboelle family I gathered up my documents and took a water taxi over to Eastern Island. Helen whispered that it was a caution to all of us; when she was Miss Pelton she doubtless took all possible Precautions but now she seems to have thrown that right out she is having a kitten a year, one after another. I think it is a nice idea, personally. One wonders if we will be here to see any more of the original Songmark founders change their careers that way?

The pilot’s Union Hall is right next to the Pan-Pacific Airlines building and close to most of the rest, which is handy if pilots turn up sick, dead drunk or similar and a scheduled flight needs a last-minute replacement. Registering was fairly painless, but when I showed my qualifications folk shook their snouts and held out little hope for me getting any regular work. I put myself down for “unlimited” duties which basically means anything legal at any time on zero notice – so if someone wants to pay minimal wages to get an express cargo of coconuts here from Orpington at one in the morning through a typhoon, I might be considered. Well, nothing ventured nothing gained, and being an Adventuress means living with a lot of uncertainty.

Having my logbook and everything with me, I decided to make a day of it and try and find my old school chum Angelica before she flies off. Prudence had seen her on the North Coast but had been rather vague about where; from her description I found myself an hour later heading over the watershed from Main Village and passing the reservoirs where I recall Sippy Forsythe bathing. Though I do my best to see the good in everyone, I can hardly help thinking so many other folk beside me would be a lot better off if she had drowned in there.

One thing Prudence had been very exact about (beside Angelica’s good looks) was her aircraft; at half a mile I was sure I had the right valley when I spotted the big silver floatplane moored in the bay. It is rather a poor place to dock for anything more than an afternoon picnic: there is no proper jetty or slipway and the bay is right open to the North which would be bad news if a typhoon curved round the way they often do in Autumn. It is still holiday season but last year a typhoon narrowly missed these islands just two weeks later in the year, and by Prudence’s account Angelica has been stranded here longer than that already.

Ten minutes later I was admiring the silver monoplane, a very nice all-metal construction with the name “Silferangel” stencilled on the fuselage. There seemed no sign of its pilot, so I enquired in the village. Quite a story they told me – and having looked at my fur markings that Saimmi combed in, I think they told far more than they would to most folks. I have heard of some of the minor priests on Main Island having their own ideas about protecting the wildlife and scenery, but had not thought anyone would launch a full-scale curse strong enough to affect someone who disbelieves in such! Having three “wonder-workers” ganging up on one Euro seems hardly fair.

The villagers tell me Angelica is keeping herself fed and such by pearl-diving and is out most of the day when she is not desperately tinkering with her aircraft; from what Prudence has said it is suffering from what any doctor would call a mystery bug and is almost out of fuel. There is a limit to how long she can stay like this though; if the more officious officials hear about it she could be instantly deported – by all accounts she would love to leave, but her aircraft is her only asset and it is going nowhere with her flying it. Some folk in her situation have had crashed aircraft or leaking boats seized by the authorities and sold to cover deportation fees and such – something that would absolutely break my chum’s heart, I am sure! If the aircraft really is unfixable – well, it looks like top-grade aluminium throughout, and Superior Engineering pay a decent rate per pound of scrap. That would be even worse.

By all accounts the pearl-fishers can stay out all day at this time of year, depending on how good the harvest is. I asked around in the village and folk shook their heads somewhat, telling me that though Angelica is bringing in plenty of pearls she cannot actually sell them herself – she needs licenses and permits which the Althing do not hand out too happily to Euros. Exactly how she is selling them, I will have to ask her. I suppose pearls are a perfect cargo for the quieter side of the “import-export trade” as one can carry a fortune in one’s pockets and there is no telling where they came from. Beryl has told us of some school chums at Saint T’s who fell foul of the law disposing of their Father’s Great War souvenirs; the bank managed to prove by chemical traces the gold bars were official Imperial German bullion illegally imported. Happily pearls have no such fingerprint!

No sign of Angelica by teatime so back to South Island. Someone who has turned up is Lars – or so Helen says, he vanished with Molly at lunchtime and she happily told Mrs H not to lay her a place at table till she returns, hopefully in a few days.

It was interesting how Helen described Lars as hailing Molly from outside in the street; it looked as if he was carefully avoiding stepping over the boundary into the Hoel's family compound. I can imagine he is not welcome here with his reputation, but Euros barge into villages wherever they feel like without fear or thought. He did much the same at Song Sodas according to Jasbir, which is odd. I must ask him about it.

Our year has certainly dispersed, even those of us who have not gone home for the Summer! Jasbir and Li Han have gone to Gull Island, hopefully to establish themselves with local papers to get them into the Coconut Shell dance shows despite our Tutors' veto. Beryl has been seen on Casino Island where she is presumably spending time and shells in the small private casinos (the main Casino has blacklisted her again.) I have no idea where Adele Beasley went to; she seems to have vanished completely. The only second-year folk still around here are my dorm and Prudence's; with any luck we will not get called up again to welcome the new arrivals this month. It would serve that Brigit Mulvaney right to have to welcome some staunch Ulster girls with a smile, though someone might have to twist her arm to get the smile out. There would be no shortage of volunteers.

Of course, things will be harder for Red Dorm or whoever else gets grabbed for the job this year, in that most of the aviatrixes arriving will not be for us at all. Father Dominicus has already gathered a dozen of his faithful flock (or flight, or squadron) from the folk who were still in the area having been rejected by Songmark, and by all accounts he has twice as many on the way here. Next term should be one of those Interesting Times that Li Han keeps saying are best avoided.

Wednesday August 22nd, 1936

A fascinating day! Out to Main Island first thing where I managed to find Angelica, and we spent the morning catching up on things. It seems so long ago that I said farewell to St. Winifred's, and though she was not in my class I used to see a lot of her being in many of the same sporting teams. Remembering that sudden-death playoff against Saint T's hockey First Team (penal squad) brings a tear to my eyes and a twinge to my shins even now. Of course, with Father deciding rather suddenly in the holidays to send me to Songmark rather than back for my final year I had never said farewell to any of my class – which Angelica says caused a lot of rumours about why I had suddenly been sent to the far side of the planet.

I was rather hard-pressed to think what to tell Angelica about her aircraft – having talked with Saimmi, I knew the real explanation is not something Angelica would ever believe. But I had to do my best for an old school pal; she had made nearly forty shells over two weeks of jolly hard work pearl diving, and I managed to make up the fee of fifty that Superior Engineering charge for a day's full workshop time. Nothing less will really do to track down a problem as subtle as this one seems to be; if it was anything straightforward Prudence and her friends would have at least worked out the problem even if they lacked tools and parts to fix it on the spot.

Then – it was a real treat to get up in the Silver Angel's cockpit for an hour, reading the manuals (or rather looking at the pictures in Swedish, with Angelica translating) before taxiing around the bay while the real pilot looked on rather frustrated. All seemed well as far as I could tell, so I opened up the throttle and the aircraft almost leaped off the water! The fuel was below ten percent on the gage so there was no scope for anything fancy; even so I clocked twenty minutes of flight in the log book before we touched down near the Superior Engineering slipway on Eastern Island. It is the first aircraft I have flown with triple tail fins, and I hope my Tutors will appreciate the addition to my log book.

Angelica was very glad to put my flight suit on for the day, and it fits as she is not far off my size but probably quite a few pounds lighter. The Songmark course is very physical, and I have gained a lot of muscle since we were both wearing our St. Winifred's uniforms. All she has had to wear since getting here was a borrowed lava lava cloth costume that she rather dislikes, though I think it looks rather good on her and Prudence and co certainly agree. They would.

Superior Engineering is a hive of action this time of year, with the full Summer flood of commercial and private traffic plus all the support aircraft for the Schneider Trophy teams. Although of course the national teams trust only their own mechanics to touch their precious racers, the British team alone has six flying boats in support and Superior get the business of

supporting those (so to speak.) Still, I know most of the senior mechanics there and they are always keen on exploring a new aircraft type. I hardly expect to get the McCraddens themselves to work on it for that price, but they have trained up some very good Spontoonie engineers and Songmark is a valued customer, so I am sure they will do their best for me.

Angelica had to vanish and see someone about selling pearls, so I checked in with the Pilot's Hall to see if anyone had enquired about hiring my services. A few folk had looked at my qualifications, but on having spotted I was not yet a Songmark graduate they had rapidly lost interest even seeing the pittance I was willing to fly for. What does a girl have to do to get money and experience around here?

Thursday August 23rd, 1936

Quite a day of ups and downs. I met with Angelica again at Superior Engineering just after breakfast, both of us hopeful they have tracked down some subtle glitch in her engine. Certainly we cannot complain they have skimmed the job: we have seen the engineer's report and they took the engine completely to pieces before reassembling, testing all the way. The good thing is, the Silver Angel is in 100% good mechanical health, as if it had come straight from the factory. The bad news is ... it took every shell Angelica had to pay for the service, and even after their works pilot took her aircraft for a testing flight, it still will not work for her! The McCraddens are certainly Wise Ones in engineering terms, but we will need someone more on Saimmi's lines to fix what ails that aircraft. I can see there is something there, but not exactly what it is.

Poor Angelica. I was commiserating with her when I saw one of the port wardens prowling towards us; Eastern Island has limited dock space and mooring fees are expensive. She has hardly any fuel left, and without mooring fees she cannot even afford to leave her aircraft where it is. There was only one thing to do; before the warden grabbed us we piled into the cockpit and I got us away, climbing over Main Island and gliding back down to her cove with the fuel gage now reading "empty". What she can try next, I really do not know. I am not sure the curse would not follow her even if she traded the Silver Angel in for another aircraft, something she would never consider in the first place.

Angelica had to get back to her pearl diving, so I went back through the village and had a word with Mama Popoluma, the head of the household she is staying with. She is a very nice and jolly Spontoonie of Phillipine descent, and when I walked in she was stirring up a big dish of nutritious stewed plantain for the evening meal. Although green plantain does not smell or taste like banana, I am sure it must remind Angelica of home (assuming she knows green plantains ARE bananas, which I did not know myself till coming to Spontoon where they grow.) Mama Popoluma is perfectly happy for her guest to keep paying the rent in fresh oysters, though her idea of feeding Angelica up until she has a properly pleasing figure to attract an islander husband might not be quite appreciated as she expects.

Still, there is very little more I can do for Angelica; unless a Swedish aircraft carrier turns up and takes her and the "Silver Angel" home on deck I hardly see how they are going to leave together without spending a lot of money, unless someone does something about that curse. I doubt that will wear off any time soon with the three natives still around to renew it as required, and it is more a matter for Saimmi than Superior Engineering now.

On my return to Haio Beach my heart leaped at the sight of Mrs H waiting for me waving a phoned-in message relayed through the village – someone wants to see me about a flying contract! I hugged her in gratitude and ran straight to Herr Rassberg's shop where the nearest public telephone was happily free for use. A lady answered, and I got the details for my interview, first thing tomorrow on Casino Island with my papers and documents. She double-checked that I was who I said I was; of course for piloting one cannot be too careful, and there are plenty of tales of temporary pilots vanishing with the aircraft and cargo. I might not have a passport, but I decided to take along my pedigree which has my paw-print on it, and is accepted as proof in some places.

My head was quite spinning as I put the phone down; after all the trouble I took getting my license on the Gilbert and Sullivan Islands six months ago, it is the first practical reward. In fact I believe I am the first in my year to get an offer like this, and I will try to make my Tutors proud of me.

Helen and Saffina were quite elated at my good news – of course I only have an interview so far, but that is more than the rest of us have managed. I had one Nootnops Blue to celebrate and no more; turning up for an interview tomorrow half dazed or hung over would not be a brilliant career move.

In twenty-four hours I have added a new aircraft to my logbook, helped an old chum as best as I can and hopefully taken the first steps into my new career. Things are decidedly looking up!

Friday August 24th, 1936

The essential thing about a career as an Adventuress is to learn to make the most of one's opportunities, however unpromising it seems – "where there's muck there's brass", as Prudence frequently says.

I was up bright and early, regretfully combed out my fur markings and dressed in my neatest Euro costume by eight: by half past I was on a water taxi heading across to Casino with my logbook, papers and identification. I only had the copy of my passport that the Songmark staff made when I first arrived, and was rather worried about the lack of a valid one. Unfortunately my (jolly useful and fully documented) identity of Kim-Ahn is an entertainer not a pilot, and all my flying papers are in my own name.

Not surprisingly, it turned out to be a private customer rather than a commercial air company I was due to see; the Madston Hotel has function rooms on the ground floor they hire out for business meetings and parties, and I found myself fourth in the queue waiting outside the door. Oddly enough the other three were female too; some companies do express that preference and not only for the same reasons as Miss Morgaine Molson the film director. Two of the lady pilots I recognised from the Pilot's Union halls; both of them canines from Tillamook with far more experience than me by all accounts. My ears rather sank as I saw them in the line ahead of me, and recalculated my chances steeply downwards.

I had barely said hello when the door opened and another familiar snout appeared, a brown bear girl from Rain Island who flies with the Air Reserve. She stormed out, having evidently heard something that did not sit well with her breakfast digestion. The other three followed her in turn, and none of them were in there for more than ten minutes – one of them was out in two. I was decidedly puzzled about what sort of trip was being planned, but put my most confident face on when the voice within called me to enter. I was the last one to be seen, which encouraged me greatly.

The room was a sparsely furnished business suite with plain tables, hard leather chairs and a telephone, the sort anyone can rent for ten shells a day. Behind the desk was a thin and very striking wolf lady dressed in a very businesslike yellow blouse and elegant skirt with red highlights that quite perfectly set off her fur; a Rachorska creation unless I miss my guess. She smiled pleasantly, her ears going up in interest as she saw me and glanced down to some papers on her desk. As she greeted me, I was agreeably surprised to spot she is English too, and of a very good style as if she had been to one of the better public schools.

It was just like one sees in the pulp magazines: she introduced herself only as Miss Susan, and told me she had a job that needed doing that needed discretion and would take a week or more. Seeing my reaction she laughed lightly and reassured me it was entirely legal, adding that smugglers do not interview people in this style. It was a ferry flight of two passengers and some personal baggage, and it has to be dawn tomorrow – the aircraft being a nearly new Sikorski of a standard pattern with no great flying peculiarities that she is sure I can handle.

My logbook does not mention flying that make, but I have flown twin-floats before and was rather taken by the idea. Payment of twenty shells for each leg of the flight, five shells a day retainer before the return trip and other bonuses available for extra duties if required – it is no fortune but it would buy a lot of eighty-five octane petrol for my Sand Flea. I did point out that I am hardly an experienced pilot but Miss Susan just smiled and reassured me I have all the qualifications she is looking for, and indeed she had heard my name before. I suppose the reputation of Songmark goes a long way in these islands, and I have been photographed in the Daily Elele with my dorm at the dance contests. One does not do well in those without stamina and good balance, which are important things for a pilot to have.

It was then that I found out what had sent the other applicants running for the door – the destination is Krupmark Island! She dipped her ears when she saw my reaction, and revealed the urgency of the flight; there are no doctors she can trust on Krupmark, but her dear brother is stranded there and she needs to get one to him. The doctor is arriving on a scheduled air service tonight, and she fears the delay that taking a ship would entail, plus the risk of pirates on the way there and back. As I well remember, there is no way to get to that island commercially.

Well! I can hardly turn down the prospect of a mercy mission, no matter where it is heading. There are some perfectly respectable folk on Krupmark, such as the missionary Mrs.

Critchley we met last summer – I imagined someone like her lying sick and me standing over here in safety, turning up my snout at the idea of a rescue mission just because of the dangerous neighbourhood. Not the sort of thing that would make my family proud of me.

There is also the little matter of the Krupmark Island Fragment: I have held the Cranium Island equivalent with my bare paws, and have a fair idea what to look for and how to sense it even if it is buried deep under the Thief's Bazaar. Saimmi did say nobody must go in there unprepared, and as Father always quotes, "Time spent in reconnaissance is never wasted." If I could just get an idea which end of the island it is buried, it would be a big help and cut a lot of the risks for whoever is tasked with tracking it down eventually.

With all that in mind, I could hardly turn the offer down. Although I had promised myself never to set paw on that island again, in the circumstances I could bring back a lot of useful experience that someone else will be very glad of. We shook paws on the deal, and Miss Susan promised the money for the outward trip would be in my bank as soon as our flight cleared Spontoon waters tomorrow. I wondered at the time how she knew my bank details, but remembered all Songmark girls are required to open a local account and she knows exactly where I am studying.

My first big break! I almost danced out of the room, and though it was barely lunchtime treated myself to a large Nootnops Blue at Shanghai Sadie's on the south shore by Pirate's Cove. For all I know it could be the last one I have till I return; pilots on retainer are generally expected to be available to fly at a minute's notice, and being out there I will need all my wits about me. This time round at least I know what I am getting into; I have had another year of Songmark training and certainly will not be getting into the same scrapes.

(Later) I returned to find Helen and Saimmi had vanished off to Main Island, where there is a dance festival near the waterfall that has a lot of significance quite lost on anyone who does not read hula. They left a message for me to join them for the evening dances if I got back from my interview on time. It was a pity, but I can hardly spend the night in Native costume on Main Island and get back to Casino in flying kit before dawn. I left a note with the good news and put together my flying kit along with maps, charts and the necessary supplies for a week away. Maria and Saffina were in, and they congratulated me on my good luck. This time next year Saffina should have her own license; if I can build on this success I will very happily pass on the contract to her. Of course Helen will worry, but there is no helping it; this is a trip for one pilot and only the passengers Miss Susan is paying for.

Saturday August 25th, 1936

Well, though I did promise myself never to return here, Krupmark Island has not done badly for me so far. I had arranged a water taxi for dawn, and by six was at the old China Dock looking over a very clean Sikorski painted in the livery of "International Deliveries", a company registered in Macao but probably quite unknown to the authorities even there. Miss Susan was there along with a rather wizened badger who I took to be the Doctor; at least he had a traditional black bag and some well-wrapped crates labelled "Medical Supplies" that I helped secure in the back seat. Miss Susan wore a very neat flying suit of black leather trimmed canvas with high Russian type boots; certainly she looked the very image of an efficient captain of industry.

The distance is less than I flew in my license qualifying flight, and with the well-known landmarks of the Kanim Islands to give me an initial heading, in clear weather I am sure I could have found my way without a map. Still, I have an actual employer depending on me now and was keen to get us there by the fastest possible route; the Sikorski is quite fast but with strong headwinds it took a hundred and thirty minutes to cover the two hundred and ten miles before the rise of Mount Krupp appeared on the horizon. Looking from above I was surprised to see not one but two airstrips; the one near Fort Bob I had visited with Helen and another one on the far side of the island. Being in a floatplane I headed for the main jetties; as I landed Miss Susan handed me a Morse pattern to flash with the landing lights. There is no air traffic control here, but it seems the locals have a basic "friend or foe" system as we pulled up to the jetty unmolested despite spotting machine-guns manned on rooftops overlooking the harbour. A destroyer could flatten this place, but a standard police launch would get short shrift.

As I write, I am set up in a basic room up on the first floor of what seems to be a small hotel. Fort Bob is much as I remember it, with a sort of vibrant energy mixed with brooding menace. We met two large and heavily armed bears at the waterfront, evidently bodyguards known to Miss Susan, and as she snapped orders concerning docking the Sikorski I joined her

and the Doctor on the short walk to the hotel. It is nothing like those ramshackle wooden buildings we found down on The Beach, and indeed seems rather a quiet place. Unlike last time I was here I do not have to poke my snout into things, which was risky even with Helen as backup, and if really necessary can just stay in the room earning money on retainer till I get the aircraft keys again and fly the Doctor back next week! Money for old rope, as Beryl says.

(Later) I did expect there would be the occasional problem in a place like this. Miss Susan knocked on the door half an hour ago, now wearing a severe but very fetching red dress. Her ears were right down and she seemed very different, growling that local thieves have made off with half the luggage including all my own. She looked me over speculatively and promised she would add to my bonus in compensation when I got back, and could probably find something to fit me in the meantime. As I was wearing a flight suit that was proving rather warm, that was certainly a relief. On Spontoon a quick hour's foraging in the woods could provide me with the materials for a Native costume, but nobody seems to wear them here and as a paid employee I must do my best to look respectable.

Sunday August 26th, 1936

Dear Diary – the four other candidates who stormed out of the interview as soon as they heard the destination had the right idea after all. I should have known there were no respectable missions involving Krupmark Island!

The first thing that happened was recognising the cheerful Cougar maid who brought up breakfast to my room. I have been served by her before, though it was a year ago and I was wearing very different clothing at the time. Although she seemed not to remember me, I remember her serving Helen and me a breakfast of reconstituted dried egg and tinned bacon early in the morning in a courtyard behind The Beach – and if the staff here are the same, the industry that pays them very probably is.

Just as I was about to sit down to eat there was a knock on the door and without waiting for a reply Miss Susan walked briskly in, followed by a strange-looking long eared shrew girl carrying a neatly folded selection of clothes draped over her arm as one sees the staff doing in photographs of fashion boutiques. Miss Susan introduced her as Judy, explained she was in charge of dressmaking and such here and said I was expected downstairs in half an hour. With that she was off, leaving me with my whiskers bristling in shock and rather less appetite for breakfast than I had two minutes before.

Whatever else happens, at Songmark they tell you to eat any meal put in front of you, as one never really knows when the next one will be. I shovelled the tinned food down rather dry-mouthed, while Judy bustled around looking me over critically like a mechanic on a just-landed aircraft checking for obvious faults to be fixed. She really is rather strange looking for a shrew, and when I spotted her Australian accent I did ask about it. She grinned toothily and proudly announced she is a silver Bilby, the only one on the island. I should think she would be unique on most islands, as I have never met one before. I had thought she was a rabbit and shrew cross, looking at her snout and ears. She has a (lack of) figure rather like Kansas Smith, but of course does not seem to feel the lack, her ancestry being what it is.

It was with some relief that I saw the costumes were all quite respectable, and mindful of the heat outside I chose a white tennis outfit complete with white sun-hat. The effect was rather striking, and though it was obviously designed for someone rather shorter than me it fitted very well, and scented as perfectly clean. With Judy happily assisting me I had my fur combed and was escorted down to the ground floor right on schedule, though still having the same sort of mixed feelings as an early Christian being promised top billing at a Circus.

The ground floor room was curtained heavily against the streaming sunshine outside, and was laid out as a far more sumptuous office than the Casio Island one where I met Miss Susan. The desk was mahogany with a leather top the size of a tent groundsheet, and all the furniture was leather and quite opulent: totally European and very different in style from the usual local cane and bamboo models one sees around Spontoon.

Miss Susan really seemed very different than I had seen her on Casino Island, curtly giving folk orders and keeping the place a scurrying hive of activity. She softened slightly when the Doctor came out from the back room, and asked about the patient – the old badger harrumphed and handed her a paper, which she looked at and nodded thoughtfully. Just then she was called away, and I took a peek in the back room at the patient I came here to assist.

Filling most of the couch was a very fat wolf gentleman, looking quite distinguished and impeccably dressed in a slightly old-fashioned morning suit with a wing-tip collar. He must have

heard or scented me outside the door, as he called out politely for me to enter; he has a most marvellously cultured voice and I wondered what he could be doing in a place like this.

Well! We had ten minutes of very interesting conversation, from which I gathered he is Mr. Leon Allworthy who owns the building – though not, he says, the business currently being run here. He thanked me profusely for getting the doctor to him, confirming as I thought that there is no scheduled service to this island. He smiled sadly and waved at his bulk, explaining that he is almost a prisoner here – and though he looks overfed it is his kidneys that have made him balloon out with water retention.

It seems a very sad story, of how he came out from England and bought this place years ago and tried to make it into a respectable hotel – but when he fell ill with Dropsy his own sister Miss Susan turned the business into something rather worse. She is in charge now, and though she does look after his needs it is only so he can sign documents and such. Although there are no lawyers and official bankers on Krupmark, he is still the property owner on paper and Miss Susan needs her brother's signatures for various transactions off-island. Possibly the influence of the Fragment corrupts people who stay here too long as well as attracting them here in the first place.

Just then I heard the door open, and Miss Susan entered leading five rather scantily girls whom she paraded in front of her brother. There were two bears, one of them a polar bear, and the other three were stunningly built canines, mongrels by their looks but very pretty. Miss Susan had them twirl and pose, then asked rather archly if he approved of the new talent – he nodded wordlessly, and with a snap of her fingers she summoned them away.

Oh my. That is what I call rather cruel. As they left Mr. Allworthy whispered that his sister showed off all the canine girls knowing that looking at them is all he can do. Just then Judy reappeared, and she escorted me back upstairs to my room directly above.

Of course, on Krupmark one can hardly take anything for granted, and when I asked Judy about what I heard she nodded with a glint in her eye, and said everything was just as I had heard it. Miss Susan is awfully strict and runs the place like a real martinet, Judy says.

By her account, Mr. Allworthy hardly ever leaves his chair any more, which is no sort of healthy lifestyle and I can well believe he needs a doctor. It must be awful to have that Dropsy problem when everyone simply thinks he is fat. I asked about Miss Susan showing off the “new arrivals” and Judy giggled at that – it is a case of “*water, water, everywhere and not a drop to drink*” as all the girls are totally forbidden from getting friendly with him. She looked at me speculatively and commented that Miss Susan only ever brought in non-canine cleaning staff and the like who have any contact with her brother; the pilot before me was a reptile girl and the one before that a small squirrel.

I definitely felt my ears blushing, recalling how the four canines in the employment interview were discouraged from taking the post, and how Miss Susan had looked me up and down then mentioned I had all the qualifications I needed. I remember what Miss Devinski told us in our first week or so in the ... social health talks, about what to expect in that way from gentlemen of some species. Madame Maxine had been equally candid, and pointed out that it is an experience after which a girl would never be quite the same again, unless she was of a matching species.

Judy waved farewell, commenting that I looked very good in the tennis outfit, and said that she had to be about her duties. She sighed rather wistfully, commenting that she stores and cleans and refurbishes wonderful clothes every day, but being a marsupial none of them will properly fit her so she too can only look on in envy. It must be like hotels hiring teetotal bar staff.

I was left alone for an hour or two to think about my position. Last time I was here, Helen and I had freedom of movement but no safety: right now it looks as if I have a measure of safety (if Miss Susan wants me to fly her doctor out again) but being “on call” as a pilot I doubt I will be free to go wandering around the island, even if it was safe to do so. Those three “enforcers” we ran into last time might recognise me, apart from the usual hazards of the island.

Sometime before luncheon, Miss Susan entered without knocking and announced that if I wished I could have afternoons off, as long as a bodyguard goes with me and I agree to follow his advice – in other words, no running off. I agreed hastily, not being too keen on being cooped up in here for a week, and indeed I hardly had a chance to look for the Krupmark Fragment on the way in. She added that my payment would be entirely on return to Spontoon except for what had already gone into my bank; rather a blow as I had planned on making the most of Krupmark's rather specialist markets.

No sooner said than done – she snapped her fingers and a very strikingly patterned canine gentleman seemed to appear out of the shadows: a Cape Hunting Dog unless I miss my

guess. She introduced him as Kwame, commenting that he had no other name, and obeys only her orders. Seeing my expression, hers hardened and she snapped that I would only get this opportunity once.

Well, five minutes later I was on the main street of Fort Bob, walking behind Kwame and trying to look nonchalant. Though the costume is perfectly respectable the skirt is a little short for the circumstances, and I would have felt happier wearing a flight suit with a holstered pistol as we did last time. Fort Bob seems quite full for daytime, and I really did not want anyone to recognise me. This skirt really fits with Kim-Anh rather than me as Amelia, and I hoped Wo Shin was not here visiting her family when I passed the garish sign of the Lucky Dragon Casino (all signs are garish here; there is nothing one needs to be discreet about buying and selling.)

I certainly was glad of a bodyguard; half a dozen times folk commented rather indelicately after me, but were suddenly quiet when Kwame glared at them. There was one exception, a big and dangerous-looking Cape Buffalo gentleman who addressed him in a language I did not recognise: Kwame gestured at me and replied in the same tongue, seeming highly amused. Next time I will wear my flying-suit, whether or not I steam-cook in it!

I did my best to “scent out” some trace of the Fragment, but it was hardly wonderful conditions in which to concentrate on what Saimmi had taught me. I did get a general “taste” of it but no more; I have no idea how that relates to its real strength and can hardly go quartering about the town playing “hot-hot-cold” all day.

Of course, this stroll was not wholly for my benefit; Kwame had business at the telegraph office and ordering in supplies. The economy here is quite topsy-turvy with whatever is illegal or restricted in most places being sold at wholesale rates, but a hideous mark-up on every normal product. A whole dollar or Spontoonie shell for a small can of corned beef! Thinking about it, this island seems to have very little food production (I doubt whoever took the trouble to plant crops around here would get to eat any of them) and nobody would be expected to go into business here for any sane or sensible profit margin. From what Wo Shin has let slip, folk pay taxes to the Bosses rather than any Government, and although the buildings are not insured hiring bodyguards is just as expensive.

We did a rapid look through the Thieves’ Bazaar but there was nothing I wanted and could afford. The firearms seemed to be mostly Russian this time round, Mosin-Nagant rifles and pistols such as we found on that slaver; certainly nothing I wanted to take back with me to Songmark. All too soon I was back at the building – one wing of it is certainly laid out as a hotel, where the owner and staff stay, so Kwame tells me, and the rest of it is the “business end.” That is plus whatever Miss Susan has at The Beach.

My tail drooped considerably as a horrid thought struck me – what if it was Miss Susan’s establishment that Lars and I raided last time I was here? Lars has not mentioned having any particular trouble so his part in that rescue is presumably still secret – but the cook working here served me breakfast that day, and someone might put two and two together. I imagined the ... uses folk might put me to, if they discovered I had helped The Beach lose one of its expensive assets. Perhaps it is as well I am dressed very differently than last time, though I could certainly use some fur dye.

(Later) At least, I am not exactly a prisoner in this room. I am invited downstairs to dine tonight, and will make the most of it. I had thought of asking Judy if along with costumes she handled temporary fur dye – possibly I could do well disguised as a tabby but NOT as Kim-Anh, now I think about it. Changing into that fur here would effectively “blow my cover” amongst these folk and whomever they feel like informing; right now only four people outside Madame Maxine’s know about my Siamese face, and by all accounts Madame M is an absolute grave of secrets. I remember the exact markings of that supercilious tabby girl at the British Embassy on Spontoon; if her bosses called her to the carpet after a secret agent thought he spotted her in a Krupmark bordello I fear I might be quite unsympathetic.

Looking around my room, I spotted my flight suit was missing – when Judy came in she cheerfully announced she had sent it to be cleaned, and it would be back in a few days. My tail drooped at that – the suit was loaded with small items of kit, lock picks and fish-hooks and all the things one does not want Customs officials asking questions about. With that away for cleaning and my luggage stolen I realised I was standing with nothing but my fur and my wits, in a borrowed costume that I doubt belongs to the local tennis club. Oddly enough I found the idea something of a thrill; an Adventuress can hardly dislike danger, and the better the challenge the better the triumph. At least I can hardly lose anything else; the only way is up, as Beryl says.

Judy brought in another selection of clothing – luckily I am of a fairly standard figure, having nothing special like a skunk tail to be tailored for. There was a very nice dinner frock, of

the sort folk wear for dances and such back in England; again it was a little short but one cannot expect Judy to have known my luggage would be stolen and have a tailored costume made up for me. She wears a plain white top herself, a knee-length skirt and has the bottom buttons of her shirt open to teasingly show off her pouch; she spotted my gaze and dipped her ears sadly, commenting there are few marsupial gentlemen around to appreciate the view and nobody else cares tuppence.

It was a very fine evening, actually – downstairs was cool with plenty of fans and Mr. Allworthy has such a fund of stories I quite forgot the circumstances as one might while enjoying playing cards in a trench in the Great War. He has almost nothing to eat as I saw from the plate Miss Susan had servants bring in; though the air was rich with the scent of roast chicken he explained that was his sister's meal, her apartments being just next door. He cannot even ring staff himself in emergencies; he showed me one button that he explained rang next door and nowhere else.

My own dinner was rather good, roast chicken and canned vegetables. There was only water to drink, and Mr. Allworthy regretfully admitted that wine was another thing he has not been allowed to enjoy in years, for his health. Oddly enough, I have read the books about this sort of condition in my medical course on Spontoan, and though the diet for kidney patients should be low in salt there is nothing against a glass or so of wine.

I must say, I got on rather well with him – he is the first really cultured and well-spoken Gentleman from Home I have met, apart from Major Hawkins who has such an unfortunate opinion of me. He does not dwell on his woes, merely mentioning that he left a respectable financial position to track down his sister who had disappeared in suspicious circumstances – as it turned out she had arranged it all herself, and he has never left the island since. Of course, as owner of this place on paper he is thrown into business rivalries with the criminal bosses who run the island, and he says folk will say all sorts of things about him.

I took the chance to ask about other folk I know of on Krupmark such as Lars and Mrs. Critchley, without saying how I know them. Of course he knows them both; Lars was originally something of a business rival (I assume that was before Miss Susan set up this place) and nowadays is more into supplying the most surprising things. I asked about the missionary Mrs Critchley, which seemed to surprise him for a second; Leon indicated she had made several converts, even including a pair who came here to be missionaries of another denomination.

There was a photograph on the sideboard of two young wolves in the costume of just before the War – I recognised him and a very affectionate younger Miss Susan, before they came out here and were stricken with sickness and the influence of the Fragment respectively. It is all very sad, and I wished I could do something about it. Possibly removing the Fragment might help matters.

All too soon Miss Susan walked in from her rooms next door (there is no lock between them) and “suggested” I retire upstairs. As I closed the door behind myself, I clearly heard her laugh and comment that she sold entertainment for others, but had to make it for herself. My ears definitely blushed at that, it is definite cruelty on her part like dangling a bone out of reach of a hungry dog. Well! We shall see about that.

Monday August 27th, 1936

Another scorching hot day, with no flying duties. I spent the morning exercising in my room, before being allowed out into Fort Bob with Kwame acting as guide and bodyguard. He seems highly amused by it all. Choosing a costume was tricky; Judy said most handy ones were being used or washed. Surprisingly enough there was a Spontoan Islands lady constabulary uniform that would have fitted me; I have no idea how that got there (I checked and was relieved not to find any repaired bullet-holes.) Still, I expect folk might object if I walked down the streets of Fort Bob wearing that. We settled on a practical and comfortable Pan-American Airways stewardess's uniform but I insisted on taking off the hat and rank badges; I have not earned those and one has principles to maintain.

This time I had prepared myself with the appropriate rituals before setting out: though closing one's eyes is not a good idea for an instant on those streets I managed it long enough to focus half a dozen times. The impression I got was it was further up the hill, towards a collection of what passes for stately homes; Kwame tells me that is where the real “high-flyers” on this island live.

Just my luck. In Fort Bob anyone with money could buy or borrow a building and start tunnelling; I expect the place is riddled with items and people secretly buried there already. But

the folk who live on the hill probably take extreme precautions with their security, and since Father's sappers tunnelled into and blew up Messines Ridge in the Great War, the idea of mysterious tunnels heading their way makes even law-abiding folk uneasy.

The Thieves' Bazaar turned up trumps today: another Webley-Fosbury revolver that I could just afford! That cleaned me out completely; I could only buy the cylinder of rounds it came loaded with, but it is better than nothing. The bad news was, Kwame spotted me buying it (this costume has no suitably deep pockets to hide suchlike) and when we got back to the Allworthy house Miss Susan promptly confiscated it until I go outside again or leave Krupmark. She did not seem too upset by the idea; I suppose on this island folk are asked to check in their weapons at the door the same way other places collect hats and coats.

Judy dropped round again; it seems afternoon is the quiet time here, and she is always eager to help out. I had spotted Miss Susan "frisking" her this morning to check she is not carrying anything forbidden in or out, paying particular attention to her pouch. Weapons are not the only thing one is not allowed to keep in this place, and Miss Susan is rather unreasonable to her staff as well as her relatives. With that in mind, I asked Judy if she would be willing to help with my idea. Her eyes went wide, but she came up with a mischievous grin and said there is a first time for anything. She was quite flattering to me, claiming I must be the only Good Girl on the island, which puts my scarcity premium beyond price. An odd way of putting it, but Lars said much the same and I suppose they are thinking in Krupmark Island terms.

Having the job she has, she spotted a lot of ... practical problems I would not have thought of. Miss Susan's room is right next door to her brother's, and though she is elsewhere supervising in the evening she does drop in to freshen up and such, and would hear any unusual activity. My ears blushed bright red, remembering various folk commenting that I have on occasion yowled the place down. She has an answer for that, and while I cannot quite like the idea I can see the practicality. Another problem she solved was getting down without alerting anyone in the corridor; by good luck this room is right above Mr. Allworthy's window and after vanishing for a few minutes she reappeared with plenty of climbing rope. This must be like Beryl says robbing a bank is like; half the fun is in the planning and anticipation (she says.) I have no idea what she normally uses some of this equipment for; presumably it is for emergency fire escapes out of windows and such (there are no fire exits or other legally enforced safety featured in a place like this.)

(Later) I managed to pass the word to Mr. Allworthy (Leon, as he asks him to call him) at suppertime before being escorted back upstairs where all the preparations are hidden in the laundry bag; not under the bed, the first place anyone looks. I cheerfully expect a disappointment, but the thought's the thing and no good deed ever goes unrewarded.

Tuesday August 28th, 1936

Oh my. The good thing is that nobody was remotely disappointed, and I was wrong. The bad thing was – Madame Maxine was very, very right.

Wednesday August 29th, 1936

Out again to Fort Bob, having recovered far more rapidly than I thought. Leon is healthier than one might think, in some respects, and whatever he might not have done these past many years, he has forgotten nothing.

I suppose it would have been much the same had I followed my tail rather than my head with that nice Lionel Leamington on the Sullivan Isles – except that he had everything to learn and here I am finding out that I do too. As Mrs H does say, a native "Wahini" is expected to know rather a lot more than a Euro bride, and I hope Jirry will not mind too much when I tell him the circumstances. He is sure to notice.

I persuaded Kwame to head towards the top of the hill; there are no tourists here and anyone walking around with a camera and notebook would probably be given cause to regret it. Some of the houses are quite old, certainly what on Spontoon they call the "Plantation days" and there is even what looks like an old church on the ridge itself. I rather doubt it has any services these days, or at least any that its builders would approve of.

There was a spot of "dead ground" invisible from elsewhere that I pleaded tiredness in to rest a minute, and managed to concentrate hard. Definitely the Fragment is here, somewhere within a hundred paces or I miss my guess! Of course this would have to be the best guarded spot on the island. I really cannot see us sneaking in to dig for it with a team disguised as

archaeologists or drain repair folk, and hardly see right now what we can do about it (Molly's suggestion would no doubt start with a plastering of thousand-pound bombs with delay fuses, "such a saving in time digging the rest of the hole" as I feel sure she would say.)

Judy was waiting for me on return, having a new consignment of dresses in from Spontoon, which she very helpfully gave me first pick of. I did ask what she was doing here in such a place – her tail drooped and she admitted she once had a slight brush with the law, being falsely accused of certain things that she would rather not go into. Considering what she now does for a living, anything that would embarrass her was certain to be distressing. She did say she was from a poor family and her usual dress on the farm had been dungarees and blouses made from calico offcuts rather than fine silks; she actually likes her current job and (she says) likes to see folk make the best of themselves. I liked dressing up dolls myself, when I was a kitten.

Actually, she is proving a mine of information. She was of great practical help yesterday, and when she saw I am still determined to thwart Miss Susan's cruel ways, she had several suggestions. Vanishing off to her stock room for a minute she brought back a few button-sized glass phials in a handkerchief – highly refined, almost scent-free catnip oil, she told me.

I could feel my ears blushing at the idea. Had anyone asked last week I would have said it was something I would never be in need of. Judy commented it was in great demand around here, but she could spare three doses and write them off to breakages (the oil is volatile, the ampoules fragile and the weather rather warm, so a few are always liable to pop.) Wednesday is the quiet night of the week on average she says so Miss Susan heads down towards the Beach to generally manage things and pay the staff, who are far too busy on Friday nights when most places traditionally hand out the wages.

There is rather a difference between costumes that look fashionable in the usual sense and those that are practical for climbing up and down ropes in. I think I have managed to compromise though – and just hope Miss Susan does not come back early! There would be particular ... problems involved with having to rapidly get clear of Leon in emergencies, that not even Songmark had mentioned in detail yet. To be honest, our matron Mrs. Oelabe had told us something of what to expect, but the practice involved quite a stretch of the imagination, and et cetera.

Thursday August 30th, 1936

Well, I have done it again – missed the Schneider Trophy "Speed week" by being stuck on Krupmark Island, as I promised myself I would never do again! Mind you, I promised myself several times I would avoid Krupmark entirely – and thinking about it, once I got here things have turned out not unlike last time, in many ways.

Without meaning to, Judy gave me an awful fright today. I was asking her about the folk who live on the Hill, who are quite a mix from around the world and cooperate rather better than one might expect. She happily replied that folk find their natural place here – very few folk end up on the island unless they are the right sort to prosper and once here they stay (casualties aside, this being the sort of place it is.) This was when she was helping me clean up and such in the morning, something she seems very keen on doing.

From everything I have heard about the Cranium and Krupmark Island fragments, they attract people to them who are already attuned that way, and once arrived only exaggerate what they already have. This is the second time in two years I have ended up here in what looked like perfectly reasonable circumstances at the time and handled the island on its own terms – I suppose one could say I am prospering here. Oh my. I do not like to think of that too much, but at Songmark they make one face up to uncomfortable facts. Miss Susan was a well-brought up girl of good pedigree before she got here, and now look at her. (I am not sure why Leon does not fit the picture; possibly his illness made him useless for the mischievous spirit of the island to use.) Though I have not heard of her in Krupmark, that Air-Pirate Queen Letitia Fosbury-Smythe was another girl of good family and an early Songmark graduate as well.

I have another three nights here, then I will be back on Spontoon with my logbook and my bank account filled up, a nice reminder of a rather stressful trip. It is a good thing that most folk do not get up early here, as I was downstairs most of the night and only managed about three hours' sleep even so. Miss Susan had a few gruff comments about me lazing around all day, and hoping I was fit for the return trip. If only she knew! Thinking of fitness, Leon says he is feeling much better; quite a good deed all round though I say it myself, and one in the eye for Miss Susan.

I have done my best to pump him for information without being too blatant about it. He does seem to know everything that goes on here – not surprisingly, as he admits that his sister has made use of his wits if nothing else, and he has little to do all day but think. He only lost his temper once when I mentioned Wo Shin and her family – he seems to have quite a down on them for some reason. He has outlined the “major players” who live up on the Hill, and warned that I should have nothing to do with them. If that is dangerous relative to the normal dangers of Krupmark, I will certainly take his advice. Here are worse places than Krupmark and folk who fall foul of Krupmark’s rulers find that out.

Although I have been out this afternoon I studiously avoided the Hill, having guessed anyway that it is not a healthy place to hang around. I concentrated on ruling out the rest of the island – there was a chance that it was far more powerful than I thought and was some way past The Hill on the far side. But I have gone around on all sides now while keeping a respectful distance; definitely the Fragment is there. Even if the residents were already in their present careers before being drawn to the island, I would guess they have become all the worse for its influence. Certainly the surviving priestesses after the Great Ritual had the right idea, putting it as far away from Spontoon as they could! It is just a shame they did not bury it on Metzger’s Pyramid, that steep rock on the edge of the charts. That is too small to be inhabited except by seabirds, and those are already evil-tempered enough that I doubt it would make a difference.

Friday August 31st, 1936

Only two nights to go! Last night there was a major gun-battle in Fort Bob; hearing the occasional shot is common but the ammunition sellers must be happy this morning as someone must have gone through a case or two. It is nearly full moon, which may account for it in some species. I was very conscious of the building being wooden and not proof against high-velocity rounds; indeed a few stray holes were being angrily pointed out by Miss Susan when I went out in the morning. It seems the folk on the Hill are tolerant of minor squabbles, but anything big enough to disrupt Business gets both sides jumped on from a great height with both paws and the claws out. The rulers keep the peace, though their idea of “peace” is rather different from most places.

Judy has returned my flying suit, nicely washed and pressed but completely empty of all the hidden equipment. I am not looking forward to telling Miss Devinski just how I lost another button compass, and indeed on this trip I have lost more than that. She has no more of the refined catnip to spare, which is a pity – there is pints of the regular sort available but Miss Susan would spot that at the first sniff, and then the fat would be in the fire (an unfortunate phrase given Leon’s shape.) It has helped, but much to my surprise I found myself managing without it perfectly well now. It is amazing what one can get used to.

Apart from Judy, Kwame and the cooks I do not really get to talk with the other folk in the household, which is rather odd. Judy explains that she is on the permanent staff but the “business end” is worked by folk strictly on contracts. I asked about the rumour that anyone could get “bushwhacked and Shanghaied” as Helen would have put it – and Judy admitted that had happened on occasion. But she is perfectly safe, she said – and invited me to examine her tail. This is not something I generally do of course (scrubbing folks’ backs and such in the shower is of course perfectly proper) but with some trepidation ran a paw down and found something hidden in the fur at the second vertebra from the tail-root. It was quite invisible from the surface, but teasing the silver fur aside I found a ring of fine gold wire with a gold bead on the inward-facing side, absolutely snug to her skin. She explained that she could fall asleep in the main street of Fort Bob, and though no doubt she would wake up robbed of every stitch and covey, she herself would be safe. The sort of folk who kidnap people to Kuo Han and such places know what to look for, and studiously avoid anyone with such protection.

Well! I did wonder how she managed to survive to make a long-term living here – now I know. Of course I could never wear such a thing, even if nobody else knew it was there or what it was. I will be out of here soon enough, and am never coming back – and that is definite this time!

Saturday September 1st, 1936

Another scorching hot day, which started off rather differently than most. Last night Miss Susan had some business at The Beach which had her staying away all night. Judy was very keen on helping me out and says it will not be the same when I have gone. Although I hope to be Tailfast again this coming Solstice, it is something to have done good deeds along the way. One gets the

impression good deeds are rare around here, somehow. Just as living downwind from a smelting works is bad for the lungs, living on top of the Fragment is bad for one's principles.

Judy had a surprise for me, having mentioned to Leon she had shown me her protection, and he had expressed a wish to see me wearing the same. Miss Susan would throw an absolute fit if she knew. I can hardly count it as accepting gifts – in some respects it is only like the emergency equipment I lost in my flight suit, and is some exchange for that loss (someone quite expert must have emptied that out, even the best-concealed items were gone.) Judy's nose was quite twitching with glee at the prospect and she also really seems very keen seeing it on me.

The process was quite fascinating, and not unlike putting a hose clip on a radiator pipe. Judy had to comb my tail-fur back at just the right place and trim a tiny strip to bare the skin, less than a tenth of an inch, then she vanished to her stores and came in with a rather alarming-looking crimping tool she put the whisker-fine wire into its jaws and carefully measured it. With one squeeze the deed was done and the seal shut permanently – brushing my fur back, I checked and was relieved to find it is quite invisible. I can just feel it if I think about it: Judy says she has worn hers for two years without any problems. That is some protection at least, and though I might not have my other equipment now, on this island one needs all the help one can get.

Leon seemed very gratified to see I had accepted his kind offer – he sadly commented that as his sister controls all the money, there is very little else he can give me in thanks for my kindness. I can definitely report that I managed to prove him wrong about that! It is just as well Judy managed to find a pair of suitably reinforced gloves to fit me, or I fear Miss Susan would be getting awfully suspicious about finding scratches on her brother – something that would definitely point to a feline having defied her orders. It was such a treat to talk with a properly cultured gentleman, and indeed he was eager to hear what news I had of England. In his condition travel is very difficult – with a sad wave he commented that returning to our Empire would be the last thing he would ever do, as it would surely be the end of him. Happily, I am quite agile and energetic enough for two.

I really feel very different on Krupmark, and hope it is something I can quickly shake off when I leave. I feel very different in the clothes Judy selects for me, relative to our standard bush-jackets and steel-toecapped boots. If my Tutors could see me they would probably expel me on the spot – but when in Rome, etc, and they have never complained about us taking to Native dress on Spontoon.

Luckily I managed to get away just as Miss Susan was entering the building, and escaped up the stairs rather than up the rope (rather conspicuous in daylight, I am surprised the bodyguards never seemed to notice. Possibly they are not used to dealing with someone of my training.) I have seen Miss Susan looking at me very closely, though if she examines my neck-fur for wear and tear there is unsurprisingly nothing to be seen, in the circumstances.

From my window up on the first-floor I have quite a good view of the aircraft using both the main runway and the approaches to the harbour; with Krupmark's barrier reef there is a rather limited range of directions a seaplane can land in. Although in the long run crime does not pay (as I keep trying to convince Molly) certainly there are some very fine aircraft about. I am not sure where Miss Susan got that Sikorski from; she does not pilot herself and Leon says they do not own their own aircraft either. I would expect any reputable hire company to charge more for insurance flying to Krupmark than the aircraft is worth, as if anyone would offer insurance! The chances of it being stolen, damaged or seized by the police on its return to civilisation would be far too high.

Just one more night, then back to Spontoon having completed my first commercial contract, something I am very happy to put in my log-book despite the circumstances. I suppose anyone who puts their name down for "unlimited" flying duties cannot be too surprised at what they get. There is generally a reason why more experienced pilots turn some of those contracts down, but experience is experience and certainly it has not been a dull trip!

Sunday September 2nd, 1936

Back to Spontoon! I must say, everything went rather smoothly although I had feared all sorts of things. Perhaps the people here are not as bad as is generally made out.

Miss Susan was away all night supervising at The Beach again, so I had a very nice last evening. It is very sad thinking of poor Leon stuck here without company, and none of the locals wanting to get on Miss Susan's bad side. By the photograph on the sideboard he was once a very handsome young wolf, and he sadly explained that a promising stage career was cut short when his family did not approve. He and Miss Susan are the last of the line, which is sad too (and it

seems his sister takes a great interest in that lilac house down on the Beach, which she owns and takes a personal delight in staffing. One hardly expects her to carry on the Allworthy line.)

Leon proved to be the perfect gentleman, in more ways than one. Though of course I have been careful, he points out that accidents do happen in the best of families. He has seen my pedigree; it must be the copy I lent to Miss Susan to verify my identity instead of my missing passport. I was surprised that he had drawn up a document for my protection – at least, acknowledging everything and taking responsibility for any unexpected surprises. He even had two copies made which he had signed already; like most insurance policies I signed it too, and had one to take with me which I plan on tearing up next month. At least I certainly hope so; a mixed kitten would be a very bad idea especially right now, but one without even a name would be even worse.

Of course, I thanked him for his consideration in what some folk might think of as a rather self-fulfillingly prophetic manner; I am always careful but nothing is ever exactly one hundred percent safe. He is the most courtly gentleman I have met in the Pacific, and from such a good family back Home by his account – he sighed afterwards and wistfully remarked that if he was half his years he would be offering me a ring that does not go around my tail-toot but my finger.

It seemed all too soon that I was back upstairs, and after a few hours sleep was struggling into my flight suit and saying farewell to Judy. She winked and slipped me a silken package that she says is a traditional Chinese “Cheongsam” dress and weighs about four ounces total; I partly unrolled it and it passed inspection masquerading as a flying scarf. She is arranging to have it “stolen” by persons unknown before Miss Susan checks the wardrobes again. I met the Doctor again, and half an hour later I was down on the jetty with him and Kwame, who will be flying the aircraft back to Krupmark.

An excellent flight, tailwinds all the way and without Miss Susan’s strict presence I felt very cheerful – the Sikorski has a top speed of two hundred and twenty, and I pushed the throttle to the stops on the main ocean leg before the Kanim Islands appeared on the horizon. Considering it is autumn I felt really full of the joys of spring, having gained commercial experience and (hopefully) a large cash injection in my bank account.

It was a great relief to be back over Spontoon by teatime, seeing folk starting to dismantle the big black and white marker buoys off Eastern Island that the Schneider Trophy teams race around. Missed it again! Hopefully at least Helen and the rest managed to see the big finale. At half past four I was touching down in the main seaplane way, nervous as anything about not scratching the paint of my first commercial flight as I managed to taxi up to the Eastern Island air terminal docks as if manoeuvring on eggshells.

Getting through Customs proved a little difficult, with the doctor having his bag searched down to the seams (Kwame stayed outside the Customs area, and waved me off with a grin and a wink.) The one good thing about having my luggage stolen was there is so much less for a suspicious Customs officer to paw over, and even my flight suit could have been X-rayed without raising any ear-tips, for a change. Then, anyone coming in from Krupmark is bound to be suspect. I hardly see the real point of searching us here apart from making the Customs police look thorough, as if we had wanted to smuggle anything we would have landed or dropped it to a confederate on a fishing boat well out of range of prying eyes; fishing boats are never bothered by officials. All I have left is my flight suit, my log book and my pedigree – plus that document with Leon’s signature and mine, carefully hidden. A real pulp Adventuress might keep that as a souvenir, but not me. After next week, that is.

An hour later I was on South Island, having updated my records at the Pilot and Mechanics Union Hall. That is, I am now listed as “Some commercial experience” rather than “No commercial experience” which is a small step up the ladder but at least in the right direction. What I may or may not have in the bank will have to wait till they open tomorrow; I have only Miss Susan’s word that she paid me at all, and if not I can hardly try to sue her on Krupmark! As Wo Shin has mentioned, there are some advantages to living in such a place.

As I found out while catching up with Mrs. H, I have missed more than the Schneider Trophy races. Jirry was here for four days, but is now off again. Rather bad timing – and my ears blushed somewhat when I remembered what I had been doing those days he was alone here and probably wondering about me.

Helen, Molly, Maria and Saffina were back for the evening meal and indeed we spent the evening catching up on everything. They saw the races, every thrilling heat of them, from the vantage point next to Radio LONO looking right over the pylons. Italy won! That will make Maria good-natured for months, and indeed the Caproni put in a new world record. The British

team came second overall using another customised service fighter rather than a specially designed racer, which is a very good showing. France and Germany were equal third on points, and France might have won had Monsieur Crapaud not spectacularly crashed on the final race. By all accounts he claims his life has always been saved by avoiding seatbelts, as he has 30 years experience of being flung free of wrecks. From what we have heard our Tutors say about hard landings, most people would have been dead or crippled before the first year, so nobody is liable to get experience to match his.

The main “Mystery Ship”, the Tillamook entry, had a severe mechanical accident and was retired after causing some ears to rise having seen its early performance. Helen says it had some very odd technology, as on several occasions the mechanics were observed before the race starting the engine then heating up the radiators with blow-torches. There is a lot of speculation about that aircraft, which will probably wait till it appears next year. The Germans are muttering things about its evaporative cooling systems, which would leave one’s engine high and dry on a long-distance route but might last the course for the Schneider Trophy laps.

Maria says next year her team will be bringing along a Caproni-Campini design that will quite turn aeronautics around. They are trying to compromise between a regular engine and Monsieur LeDuck’s “thermo-propulsive duct” and if they can get that working as promised they can expect to retain the title with some margins to spare.

It was a change to have a relaxing evening, back in safety at last with some commercial experience under my belt. I could really use some more like this – and though our Tutors might not like where I went, I managed it solo this time and got out intact. Well, strictly speaking.

Although I lost that Webley-Fosbury revolver, there is some hope Miss Susan might get it sent on later, and at least I was spared the trouble of explaining it to Customs. When I acquired my first one there, thanks to Lars we did not actually go through Customs, but then I should think he rarely does. My ears have occasionally drooped at the thought of getting caught officially with that box of “Hunting ammunition” which I now know is totally illegal anywhere laws apply.

I showed off my other souvenir after supper, the Cheongsam that Judy acquired for me. Silk recovers very well from being folded and used as a flying scarf, and I hate to think what this one would cost me full price at Rachorska’s boutique. It certainly fits better with Kim-Anh than me as Amelia, being tailored on Chinese rather than Euro models of “respectable”. I recall Li Han surprising us by saying they consider the throat and upper shoulders the parts to be covered for modesty reasons; as long as a dress is tightly buttoned up to the neck, it can be slit practically up to the tail-root. This is a very respectable design, from that point of view.

Helen was looking at it rather suspiciously as I modelled such a design, but I could reassure her it was given to me in fair compensation for my other clothes being stolen. In fact Judy kindly kitted me out with all the necessary garments, which are rather prettier than the ones I lost. I doubt I will forget my first commercial trip in a hurry – though I hope I do not find I have any unexpected souvenirs of this trip!

Monday September 4th, 1936

We have only 2 weeks of holiday remaining, until we sew that third bar on our Songmark badges and head in for our final year. Molly says she is definitely not looking forwards to that – but by her account she has had a blissful week helping Lars at work and play. He has arranged some very strange deliveries, some of which are on open display on Casino Island, she says.

I went over on the water-taxi just after breakfast, my bank pass-book in paw and a hopeful expression on my muzzle. Molly and Lars met up on the Rainbow Bridge, a definitely cinematic meeting as he swept her off her hooves while tourists applauded (they have been parted for all of sixteen hours, after all.)

Although most of the rebuilding goes on outside tourist season there are always folk working around Casino Island. Molly proudly showed me a new piece of street furniture: a sort of waist-high metal bollard or short fence-post, evidently cast iron and newly installed to stop wheeled traffic climbing up the pavement. It is hardly anything to write home about, one would think; it looks quite like the original London ones that were small Russian cannons captured in the Crimean War. The mystery deepened when she whispered she and Lars had helped bring in a ship full of them, and these were just the flawed ones that were not reserved for use elsewhere. A glimmer of light began to dawn when Lars suggested I measure them exactly, and see what it reminds me of. There was one ready to be installed on the opposite pavement, so I could see how much was buried underground.

For some reason, a foundry in Rain Island has made up a batch of heavy metal castings in just the same calibre and nose-tail length as the old Austro-Hungarian Naval shells Lars brought in awhile ago. These are certainly not shells; they are blunt tipped and have no rifling bands, obturation rings or anything that would let them be fired from a normal gun. But in some respects they are interchangeable, and with careful filling Molly says the weight and centre of gravity could be made to match. I have no idea what folk want them for, but by using the rejects right in public it becomes “obvious” what they are and nobody hunting for evidence of suspicious shipments would give them a second glance. Lars says surplus shells are often traded around, as all treaties count the gun barrels rather than the ammunition, and obviously a fifteen-inch naval gun would be rather tricky to hide around here. Those things weigh a hundred tonnes per barrel, and the mountings have to reliably withstand perhaps six hundred tonnes recoil energy at the trunnions. Not quite the sort of industry Spontoan can support.

While waiting for the bank to open we sat and looked out over the central waters in the brilliant sunshine, a secure place to talk as there is water on almost all sides and with the stiff breeze voices are quickly carried away. Lars has heard of my Krupmark Island trip from his own sources on the island; he seemed very surprised indeed when I told him who my customer was.

Something is awfully wrong here. I described Mr. Allworthy in some detail, as well as Miss Susan and the house – there are not two such in the world let alone on that island. I could tell Lars was trying to spare me something unpleasant but I dragged it out of him – the “Fat Leon” he has known for years as a rival is not a kindly invalid ruled by his wicked sister at all, but one of the greatest criminal monsters on the island and with a death penalty waiting for him the minute he returns to civilisation! The one thing Lars did not deny was his claims to have been a fine actor when young – something Lars diffidently suggested he was keeping up with given the right incentives.

I think my jaw must have dropped like one of those matinee cartoon animals, as he rather hesitantly explained that Miss Susan is not only Leon’s sister but an exceedingly ... affectionate one, who is known to have a malicious sense of humour only matched by her brother. So physically affectionate, in fact, that it is one of the charges they would both have to face if they returned anywhere ruled by law; one wonders how indiscreet they would have had to be to get noticed that way. Leon did say leaving Krupmark would be the death of him, but he did not mention hangmen being involved.

Of course, Lars was once their business rival by his own accounts and one can hardly turn ideas like this around by just one story. Unfortunately there is nobody “trustworthy” to ask on Krupmark by definition, if Leon is not what he seemed to be. There is Wo Shin of course but I do not relish asking her this sort of question, as she would be sure to put two and two together about as fast as Susan de Ruiz does in maths. I had done my best to triple-check everything when I was over there, but if Leon, Miss Susan and Judy had all been in the joke together – oh my. I imagined that document I signed yesterday suddenly becoming rather less benevolent. There are all sorts of cautionary tales one hears about discovering what one thought was a single page, is part of a larger document now bearing one’s signature to the whole thing.

The conversation rather palled after that and I was glad to hear the clocks chiming nine announcing the banks were opening. Molly whispered that I had been set up for a fall, and as I queued for the cashier my tail was definitely trembling in anticipation. Our Tutors have constantly drummed it into us that ignorance is not bliss, and what you don’t know will certainly hurt you. I became very conscious that I was wearing the clothing Leon chose for me next to my fur – at least, Judy selected them after my own was stolen; if it really was stolen by someone apart from her.

The Spontoan banks are rather odd in that they double as lost-property and safety deposit storage for goods as well as money; it is not unusual to see someone “depositing” valuables such as fine cloth or bags of pearls as well as the usual currency. When I asked what was in my account, as well as consulting the ledger the cashier came up with a large but quite light parcel, labelled “*do not open till Xmas*” that had just been handed in five minutes ago; I forgot the banks are open at eight-thirty rather than nine in Tourist season to help departing hotel guests pay their bills on time.

My ears went right up and I breathed a sigh of relief as I checked my balance: it is richer by twenty shells for each leg of the trip and five shells a day “retainer” – exactly as promised, but not a cowry of cash bonus despite being robbed of my luggage and such. After all I did very little between flights but eat and sleep as far as Miss Susan knows; she seems to be hard but fair, and that quite fitted with my first ideas. We took the parcel and went out to a small tree-shaded

square where I stared hard at the hard, round, flat-ended parcel wondering what on earth it could be. I could feel something light but soft inside when I shook it; Molly suggested it might be some sort of contraband far more valuable once smuggled into Spontoon, as my bonus for my losses on Krupmark.

Although in most circumstances I could have our Tutors put a Christmas present in safe storage to stop Beryl pilfering it till called for, in this case I could not bear the suspense, and unwrapped it. There was a note inside, evidently penned by Miss Susan herself – thanking me for my services, and detailing how much of a “bonus” I would have made had I only put things on a proper commercial footing rather than giving it gratis. As my tail and whiskers drooped and my ears went down like collapsing sails, I looked at the postscript; I could almost hear her voice sweetly announcing that her brother’s document was very thoughtful, but she encloses some more practical gifts for me to use next year.

It’s a complete lie about felines that will always get any other fur into an instant fight if they bring up the subject. I’m sure it’s never actually happened, but folk of ill-will do whisper such awful things involving kittens, sacks and buckets.

Lars was looking away almost embarrassed, which is a first for him. Molly looked at the coarse sack and rather dainty white enamel bucket rather baffled for half a minute before putting two and two together and suddenly reacting almost as if someone had punched her in the stomach: for a minute I thought she was going to lose her breakfast. I was hardly feeling much better myself.

It seems Lars was completely right about Leon and Susan Allworthy – and I remember Miss Susan saying to her brother that she had to make her own entertainment on Krupmark, though at the time I had no idea I was it.

Oh dear.

Tuesday September 5th, 1936

Dear Diary – I have decided to try and look at the bright side. Whatever else happens, I have expanded my logbook and acquired my first commercial experience. In flight that is – I am not sure how I would cope if Miss Susan actually had paid me the “bonus” she had itemised rather thoroughly for each night; better than I remembered myself. The money would have been in my account, and giving it all away to charity would not have changed things. At least the money I have earned is honest money. (Molly says there is no such thing as dishonest money as long as you can spend it, but she would.) As Father has often said, armies learn more from defeats than from most victories, though one tries to avoid getting too much of that sort of education.

Memo to myself: when one is thrown at judo, we are trained to roll with the fall, pick oneself up and carry on. The good news is of course that now I have a fairly healthy bank balance, and with Molly’s commercial success with the “Fish Log” she no longer needs every last cowny to stand between her and being deported to the waiting G-men. Last night I booked an appointment with Madame Maxine, having hinted rather at the problem – this morning I found myself passing the very large tiger lady at the door to enter that very secluded walled garden where Madame M herself advises on such a range of things.

Oh dear is right – though she charged me only five shells to survey the problem, so to speak, she had very little advice to offer that I wanted to hear. I am not planning to marry any canines, however qualified I now may be, and unlike my Pilot’s license this one is not going to expire. I bowed to her professional wisdom and reminded myself things would have been much the same with that very nice Lionel Leamington, and a proper Adventuress must take things in her stride. Madame M is very sympathetic, but did ask that if I did not believe her when she warned me in advance about this, why am I asking her advice now? It was rather hard to answer that one, so I quietly paid my bill and left somewhat chastened. I did not like to ask about the gold ring around my tail; Judy might have been telling the truth about that, or at least I like to think so.

Well! Having taken several deep breaths I decided to take my mind off things and see what else is happening on Casino Island. Molly was off at the Temple of Continual Reward, where she is keeping up with her favourite sporting scene. I did not know “dirty pool” had its own dedicated following, let alone organised leagues.

The hotels are packed still and will be for another two weeks, while the big tour boats are still visiting. There is a shop in the back street behind the Madston where they sell all sorts of outdoor gear and very expensive bush-jackets, which tourists buy to be photographed in on a few guided walks around South Island then take home to gather dust in wardrobes forever after. In

my case it is more likely to be tested to destruction than left dusty, but what does not get used is wasted and I can hardly complain.

I almost had another very unwelcome shock – in fact I did, as I came round the corner and in front of me was the familiar figure of Kansas Smith! Of course adventurers gather at the Madston Hotel, their main meeting-place (when pickings are not good enough to afford the Marleybone, that is.) Fortunately she and the young boar were facing the other way and did not see me. There were three others obviously in their party but though they saw me we had not met before; at least now I know them which is some advantage.

I saw something rather more, that I am still not sure about. On Cranium Island there were all sorts of strange things happening, and Saimmi was warning Helen and me not to look too closely rather than the opposite. Broad daylight on Casino Island is another matter – in that instant of shocked recognition everything Saimmi taught me kicked in like an engine supercharger and I saw something that I doubt the rest of the crowd did: on Main Island it would have been a very different matter which may explain why they are not there.

There is something that follows Half Ration around; on Cranium Island I saw glimpses of it like a dark fire, a shapeless flickering in the shadows though it was hard to say who or what it was following. Even in daylight I could see it was there today; if anything it is like the shadow of a frisking beast that follows at his heels and never strays far from him. This does not look healthy. I remember when Kansas asked Half Ration an apparently impossible question, it was obviously something very different that replied, speaking through his body and giving information the young boar could hardly have known. Having that sort of arcane assistance to draw on could be very useful to a treasure-seeker; by reputation she has found many things that were simply unknown even to legends, and she famously scorns the usual treasure maps and such that most treasure-hunters rely on.

If I saw that thing and understood something of its nature, it probably saw me just as well, which is not good if Kansas asks it about us. I fear we have definitely made an enemy there, and she does not have a reputation for forgiving and forgetting. Dyed fur would not help as a disguise against a thing like that shadow, if it is anything like the stories Saimmi has been telling us and Saffina has confirmed from her own homeland. I had better tell Saimmi about this development but not Molly; it was bad enough on Cranium Island, but I think she has convinced herself that finding things that are immune to violence “can’t happen here.” It is a comfort to her, and she has few enough of those. I made a mental note to avoid the Madston for awhile, and diverted by cutting up the hill through the alleyways.

Casino Island is certainly bustling, but it is not that big – in five minutes I was passing another disturbing feature, Father Dominicus’ new Flying Establishment. He has bought up one of the older hotels, one built just after the Gunboat Wars when this was still Accounting Island and the planners had not quite decided which side the main development was going to face. The South side of the island won, leaving the (ex) hotel rather stranded in a growing settlement of villas rather than tourist attractions. If he fills the upstairs rooms with bunk beds I should think he can get in easily twice as many students as inhabit the rather sprawling Songmark campus, and in his case the churches will be as important as the airfield, and very handy on the same island.

In the meantime, thanks to this project the local economy is booming as he has hired exclusively local workmen on the job of converting the building. Maria has told me about him. He sounds quite the right priest for the job (worse luck), having as much fire as it takes to get a job done, but enough icy patience to sit and wait for the perfect time for action. Professor Schiller did say in his own (very different) beliefs that everything is made of fire and ice.

Hanging around in the street watching would draw attention to me, and we may be called on to look at this place officially later on. So I carried on to the Western end of town, where there are dockside shops and restaurants mostly serving the docks rather than the tourists. Even there I saw a familiar snout; that short dark velvet-furred Monsieur Taupe *, from the French trophy team that by all accounts is delayed leaving while they try and salvage fragments of their aircraft from the main channel. He was looking with horror at the Mixtecan Restaurant, which had a billboard of dishes served in the traditional style with “Mole Sauce.” Happily I could recall enough of my St. Winifred’s French lessons to explain to him that the main ingredients are actually chillies and not his relatives. Helen has told me about Mixtecan cuisine which seems mostly to consist of chillies, maize flour and beans, quite often in that order.

Back to South Island, where Mrs. H was waiting with for me with another telephone message. The pilot’s guild hall must be getting desperate this time of year, as someone else wants to interview me about a flying commission. I have two weeks to spend, and will certainly see what

they want. Any reasonable mission considered, I will say – though I doubt anyone will complain if I class Cranium and Krupmark Islands as totally unreasonable!

* (Editor's note: Taupe=Mole in French.)

Wednesday September 6th, 1936

Well, I could spend the next two weeks with Molly on South Island, recovering from our experiences while relaxing on the beach and “investing” my Krupmark earnings in enough Nootnops Blue that I forget for awhile how I earned it all. But the Adventure bug seems to have bitten me – I might have gained experience on the last commercial flight, but not of the respectable sort I wanted. So this morning I was back again on Casino Island, my papers and logbook in my valise and my most respectable Euro costume freshly pressed for the interview.

This meeting was in one of the small rooms at the Pilot's Hall itself, with a very dour-looking hound dressed in black. He was quite stand-offish, and introduced himself as Mr. Johnson; evidently an American gentleman of some religious persuasion. From what I could gather this was a passenger flight on rather limited means – not just two hundred miles to Krupmark in an hour and a half, but days of flying, all the way to the Southern Hemisphere!

I had to tell him that was far more than I had ever attempted before, and that he would be better getting a commercial airline pilot. He smiled a very thin-lipped smile and explained that none were picking up the offer for the money he had available. His next request was rather odd; he asked if I habitually drank alcohol or smoked tobacco.

Well, it has been weeks since I had a nice glass of wine, and I avoid tobacco as far upwind as possible, so I could reassure him on that score. He also asked if I attended a house of worship on a regular basis – and again I gave him the answer he seemed to approve of. (It might have been just as well he did not ask about Nootnops Blue, or ask just which sort of worship I give these days!) Having confirmed that I would work for the specified rate, about 1/10 of an airline pilot's pay let alone a commissioned freelancer, he laid out the offer.

This is different. Mr. Johnson explains his brethren have been granted a 99-year lease on some islands in the Albanian South Indies, and want to found a new colony free of religious persecution. All well enough, one might think. He has the first wave of settlers already travelling on “economical” shipping via Tillamook, but they are assembling on Spontoon as there is a lack of commercial shipping heading to the Albanian South Indies, there being very little there to trade. Coral and coconuts are not that rare around here, and they are too far from any export markets to make trading them worthwhile. Flooding the home (Albanian) market would take about one ship per year, so at least this is not part of a “get rich quick” scheme.

I had to point that out to him as well but he says he is used to it – his brethren are used to living on freedom and hard work in Utah, he says, having been attracted there originally by the promise of inexpensive land and all the salt they can eat. He showed me the passenger list, and I felt my ears going right up as I read the names.

If Mr. Johnson thinks hardship is good for the soul, he is heading the right direction. I just hope Mrs. and Mrs. and Mrs. and Mrs. Johnson know what they are letting themselves in for!

I think I will take this job on. Whatever else folk may say about Mr. Johnson's religion, everyone agrees they are perfectly respectable. After everything that happened on Krupmark, that will make a nice change. After all, our Tutors will certainly ask us what we did in the holidays, and it would be nice to have something I can actually tell them.

(Amelia's adventures continue in “Nut House”, a cheerful tale of plantation pioneers. Or something.)