

Road Runner : Prequel

“Your trouble, Suki,” said an irritatingly cheerful Kazuko Leclerc, her blonde mop of head-fur tossing in the early September sunlight of Toho Academy .. “Is you’re so ... Responsible !”

Sun poured down, the island’s semi-tropical evening due to fall with semi-tropical suddenness in an hours time, as the two friends finished loading up a fuel-cell powered lorry parked outside the island’s fuel complex, safely remote from the main buildings on the far edge of Shima Beach.

Suzuko Hohki straightened up, the vixen panting in heat stress as she strapped the load securely onto the flatbed. “They should NEVER put you Anime types in charge of the tank farm, you know that ? “ She gestured around at the semi-buried complex of tanks (the sort with pipelines rather than cannon, unlike the usual runabouts at the Academy) and frowned. "Still, I suppose it’s an advantage to actually Like loud noises and bright lights, and somehow manage to walk out of a fireball with just a few nicks and scratches ...”

“Super !” Kazuko vaulted up into the cab, her teflon party-suit flapping on her like designer-casual shrinkwrap. “Come on, we’ve got time to deliver this load before dark – and tomorrow’s the first new blood arriving !”

“First day of term’s next week ...”, Suzuko agreed, wriggling to release some of the hot air from the neck ring of her Silicone rubber suit, checking her helmet was ready at hand in case of accidents. “Hopefully, there’ll be some new hands available for the chores round here . It’s induction week starting tomorrow – tonight, we’ve got to get your friend’s project off the ground - with the aircraft we’re expecting, the skies tomorrow might get a bit TOO crowded.”

As Kazuko started the lorry’s engine, a recycled unit salvaged from an old Dodge VegOMatic, Suzuko made sure the doors to the tank farm were firmly shut. Not that there was anyone liable to be wandering around till the new term’s arrivals tomorrow – but she had only managed to survive this long without the advantages of inborn Anime abilities, by being careful.

Looking back as she climbed into the lorry, she cast an eye over the lurid warning labels on the pipework and stainless steel containers, some of them with ferociously polysyllabic names, or cryptic titles such as “T-Stoff”, “C-Stoff” and “M-Stoff”. “You DO learn a lot here that’s not listed in the course prospectus” she murmured .. “Before I came here, I’d only used words like “Pyrophoric” and “Hypergolic” in crossword puzzles”

The Island was small, but still boasted two hills. The main peak was fairly central, rising perhaps two hundred metres from the bamboo and rattan forest that covered the heart of the island. But it was to the northern point above the coast cliffs that they drove, some five careful minutes, Suzuko acutely conscious of the load they were carrying and the roughness of the road.

Her ears flat down on her skull, she looked over the safety certificates on her lap. “It says we’ve got to fill in this form, to prove how fail-safe our fuel handling facilities are. Or we would, if this was on the Home Islands, anyway. You work down at the tank farm, Kaz – how fail-safe is it down there ?”

Kazuko’s eyes seemed to widen, almost threatening to meet in the middle. “Oh, Suki. You worry too much. Those forms aren’t any use, anyway... might as well chuck’em.”

“Oh ?”

“Oh yes. They don’t even HAVE a box to tick for “Fail-Catastrophic”.

On top of the cliff, a twenty metre concrete pad looked out over an exceedingly wide piece of ocean. Still panting, Suzuko stood and stretched, swishing her tail inside its chemical-proof covering as she looked out at the waves. “Everything ready ? Airspace is clear ... I’ve checked with Horst on the radars, and we’ve two hours before any flights are due in our grid. Better warn folk out of the area, though.”

“Can I ? Great!” Kazuko bounced out of the lorry, gleefully lugging the new 85 mm mortar she’d got for her birthday. Handguns were illegal for private citizens to possess in modern Japan, but in a spirit of fair-mindedness, the Government had decided to make mortars and howitzers compulsory. “Heads down !” She reached into her old school satchel, rummaged amongst the school satchel-charges, and hefted a “Happy Holiday” brand photoflash shell.

“Not again ! Out, Out of the way ! Fifty metres, Kaz, and angle it seawards !” Suzuko shooed her friend further towards the cliff edge, and reached for her helmet. Checking the air supply was flowing freely from the backpack cylinders, she took one last breath of cool, salt-scented breeze and screwed down the “goldfish-bowl” helmet on the neck-ring.

“Eyes down for action ..” came Kazuko’s cheerful voice over the earphones, followed by a deep, resonating thump as she dropped the shell down the barrel with a skill born of long hours of carefree practice. Suzuko looked up – three seconds later, the first shades of evening were temporarily banished by a new star erupting far above the clifftop, in a display all their side of the island could see.

“Ah. Now, then – This bit gets tricky.” Suzuko fiddled with her pressure regulator, till her rubbery suit swelled to just the right overpressure. “Come on, Kaz – we’ve got about thirty minutes for this.”

Night was falling fast, when the two friends stepped back – well back – from their labours, and carefully hosed each other and the ground around with copious jets of clean water. “Should about do it I hope.” Suzuko nodded. “Let’s hit the switch, then get out of here.”

Kazuko stuck out her tongue, behind her facemask. “The trouble with you, Suki, is you don’t LIKE wearing rubber suits And you don’t even sweat, for an excuse !”

“I steam-cook. Final check, please !”

They looked up. On the concrete pad was a metal turntable, with a long girder ramp now raised to fifty degrees and pointing seaward. At the ground end, was something unfashionably tubby for its type, its wide fuel and oxidant tanks now brim-full and all ready to fly.

“An Enzian - an actual first-generation Enzian, nice” Kazuko nodded appreciatively, “Good thing Hyao left us the jigs and enough material to throw another dozen together ! This project should pay our own fuel bills for the term !”

“Only if it works ...”, Suzuko nodded cautiously. She pulled the manual out, leafing through the launch list of safely checks and Extreme_danger checks. “Fuel tanks capped – now. Launch in two minutes, before tank pressure reaches critical Engine valve settings, check.. Engine douching, check.” The bell nozzle of the Walther rocket engine dripped with the spraying they had given it to disperse any lingering traces of fuel or oxidant from the 1945 technology valves, that had been turned out by semi-skilled sociology students from non-strategic scrap metal. “Booster ignition circuits, check, booster separation circuits ... check. And Kazuko ... please stop playing with that launch button !”

Kazuko snorted. “Honestly You take all the Fun out of things, Suki. It’s not as if you’d even connected it up, yet. How about the .. special system ? The flip field ?”

“Coming to that. “ She pulled out a pocket tester, and jacked its lead into the only part of the first-generation bird that would fail the Authenticity exams. Next to the Walther engine’s catalyst-fed steam turbine, was a large tesla coil the full diameter of the fuselage, nestled just below the peroxide tank. Suzuko hummed, tracing the Eversion Field Generator’s circuits. “It only has to work for a few seconds Looks like it should hold up”

Kazuko nodded cheerfully, readying her mortar for a final warning shot just in case any of the flying students came winging in for a flying visit. She looked down at the monitor next to her, a modern flexi-screen that was currently displaying the grainy view of evening clouds that the Siemens-designed Super-Iconoscope in the missile’s nose was seeing. “It’ll be interesting to see where this shot lands – we should be able to track it two jumps away, unless it hits something first. All ready, Suki ?”

The vixen unplugged the test device, nodding. “It should flip out to somewhere in interstellar space – the Eversion field’s based on the same principle as the original stardrive.” She glanced up, for an instant: somewhere still under the Southern horizon was the constellation of the Swan, and in that direction – six years out from Earth, Japan’s starship the Yamamoto II burrowed through the folds of space under the virtual thrust of its mighty Bachman-Turner Overdrive.

“Ready, check – go for it.” She dipped her head at the sound of Kazuko’s mortar thumping, closing her eyes to save her night vision as the flare gave a final warning for the rest of the islanders to stay clear. Fifty metres away, safely behind the lorry with Kazuko, she pressed the smaller of the two red switches on the launch control.

“Turbine start ... looks good Turbine up to two thousand revs, two thousand three hundred ... all ready. ” Kazuko looked at the launching ramp, now wreathed in screaming steam as the high-test peroxide spun the fuel pump and dynamo, charging the Eversion field’s superconducting tesla coil. “Ready to launch .”

Suzuko’s gloved finger stabbed down on the larger button. Tetra-ethyl borane “zip fuel” suddenly poured into the combustion chamber, mixing with the almost pure peroxide “T-Staff” and instantly detonating, in a thunderous roar of unleashed energies that lit up the night sky. Half a second later, the four Schmidding-built solid fuel boosters lit, and the tubby antique became a streak of fire and thunder, arcing like a reversed meteor into the night skies !

“Go ! Go ! Go ! Kazuko shouted, popping her helmet off as the column of fire climbed high above them, heading North. “Flip drive’s ready ... power stabilised ... let’s kick it into Elsewhere!”

“Counting down ..”, Suzuko scanned the controls. The Enzian was a rising star, four starlets briefly arcing away from it as the boosters separated, leaving the clean airframe accelerating under the power of its stretched Walther engine. From the readouts, the tubby rocket was rising up through the troposphere, trembling slightly as its thick plywood wings grew shock waves spreading out from tiny flaws in the surface, compressibility starting to build as it reached the speed of sound

“Mach point nine – the vector it’s on, there’s no way it can hit the island now. Get the cameras rolling, Kaz, I’m going to flip it .. Now.” And her finger pressed aside the caged cover, pushing in the blue button. There was a sudden flicker of lights on the telemetry board, and the light above them went out abruptly.

There was a brief silence, as both girls studied their instruments. Kazuko gave a startled yelp, and looked round, her blue eyes wider than ever.

“Suki ? I ... I got Something – just before the warhead went off – it was so fast, I’ll have to play what the supericonoscope saw in slow motion. Wherever – I don’t think it went into space.”

“Oh Ninja,” Suzuko growled, her ears down flat. “It hit somewhere on Earth ? That’s torn it – if we can’t get it well out of range, the Girl Scouts are never going to pay to strap their test loads on it – not since Australia’s Ramsey Street open-air testing range slapped those damned yield restrictions on everyone – and they blow a fuse if you even mention cobalt-jacketed Devices. So – where did it hit ? Can’t have done TOO much damage, there was less than half a tonne of explosive in it.”

Kazuko blinked, her fingers flying over the keyboard, linking her to StarNet, the orbiting radio telescopes that she had bought a minute’s worth of attention from – the Enzian’s E-blast payload had been designed to give out a radio pulse detectable twelve light-seconds away. “Err .. you’re not going to believe this ...” she turned round to Suzuko, presenting StarNet’s data. “It hit, somewhere – but it wasn’t Earth it landed on.”

Suzuko’s own eyes were wide, and her ears pressed flat. “I know. Look at this – I’ve slowed down the tape.” They stared down at the grainy readings of telemetry and targeting data, starting five seconds before the Eversion field had punted the rocket well clear of their airspace.

“Telemetry from the Eversion field ... it’s being pulled off-course, there’s some sort of ... warp conduit in the area. Look – field exception error, it’s taking the easiest route out of local space.” Suzuko’s tail swished irritably inside its chemical-proof cover. “Kaz ! Was someone messing with any of the island’s Temples tonight ?”

The anime girl shook her head, consulting her watch. “Uh-uh. The Stars are Quite wrong – we’ll have to wait till next week for any tentacle fun. Nobody I know would be pointing spells this way. But – take a look at THAT.”

Frame by frame, they watched the Eversion field build to critical point – then there followed a brilliant flash as effectively it rotated itself out of Einsteinian space-time. A millisecond later, there was daylight around, an unfamiliar landscape that looked Earth-like, the Enzian still homing along the line of least resistance.

“Uh-ohh – I think we’re about to cause an Interstellar Incident ... what’s that tower it’s tracking on ?” The image was blurred, the 200-line scan of the 1945 tech television camera updating twice a second as the craft seemed to jerk forward, four hundred metres between each refresh belying the plywood interceptor’s plunge through alien air under the full thrust of its Walther engine. “And someone’s bang in the crosshairs ..”

There were three more frames, showing a robed figure standing on top of a tall, wizardly-looking tower, evidently gesturing frantically – possibly a long-distance “Detect Viricator explosive-pumped E-bomb” spell had warned him in time. Just on the penultimate frame, the telemetry showed another major field Excursion, some force throwing the course bodily off. The final frame was unaccountably over a recognisable lake some kilometre away from the tower, in the millisecond before the proximity fuse fired.

There was a silence, as Kazuko and Suzuko looked at each other, and at the blank screen. “I think ..” Kazuko ventured, “That we can call that a Qualified Success. “ She tapped the bulky manual. “The specification DOES say, we have to flip the payload well away from Earth ..”

Suzuko snorted, her ears still pressed flat. “And we shoot up everywhere that happens to have a dimensional weakness pointing in our direction ? Next version, we’ll select where the field line’s pointing BEFORE we jump there.” She stood up, stretching, unsealing her helmet. “Well, the airframe held up nicely. We’ve twenty more left to work on, and only one needs to work. “ She sighed. “Time to pack up for the night.”

Kazuko nodded happily. “I’ve a new batch of Absinthe Saki all ready to sample – it’s handy, we can get it when we drop the lorry off.”

Suzuko’s nose twitched, and a hint of a smile wreathed her narrow muzzle. “Since when have you abandoned that still in your room ? “

The anime girl sniffed, turning up her minuscule nose in disdain, as she pulled out a sheaf of hazard warning notices from an inner pocket. “I haven’t. But since someone sampled the last Saki batch – the Tank Farm’s where they make me keep the stuff !”

Road Runner (Or, the project formerly known as “Cybermancer” till Fred Patten pointed out a whole series of “()mancer” books, that I’ve never heard of elsewhere). This is the third in the Toho books, following “Eldritch Hop” some 10 months later.

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CHAPTER ONE

Some students arrived at Toho Academy on the one chartered boat that left Honshu in Japan three days before the start of term. Some caught the freelance aircraft services operated by the senior students: with courses in Historical Engineering having covered the years 1935 and 1945 in previous years, the island was registered home to a Dornier X and a Spruce Goose, both of which came in handy for shuttle trips. As flying boats, they were happily immune to the problem of a distressingly short Academy runway. On the first day, some students arrived indeed by all these means – and some of them simply – Arrived.

Shiitake Tabi was standing on the wide grass strip bordering the runway, a checklist in his hand and a ferocious expression wreathing his pug snout. There were so many jobs to choose from, this early in the year – enough to suit all tastes.

“Gotcha !” With a flourish, he slapped a wheel clamp on the nose-wheel of the nearest parked aircraft, a rather flashy Leduc 020 that had been away from its allocated hangar eight minutes too long. He rose, grinning, with the satisfaction of a job well done.

Suddenly, his ears jerked up in surprise. Not eighty paces away, was a vehicle that he KNEW hadn’t been there a minute ago – a large, squareish, rather muddy four-wheel drive vehicle with smoked-glass windows hiding whoever was within. Shiitake frowned. “How did THAT get here ? The ship’s not due in till lunchtime – and none of the aircraft except the big two could carry that – and they’re not in yet.”

A spare wheel-clamp in paw, Shiitake stalked towards the silent vehicle, his puzzlement replaced by a thrill of excitement, as he checked the vehicle description with the list he carried. Unregistered ! Fair game, and his first ground vehicle “hit” of the term. No markings on the left-hand side .. but just to make sure, he circled round to the front, looking down again at his list for an instant to check one more time.

“Eh ?” He looked up – he had gone a quarter turn around the vehicle, but Mysteriously, it still showed its left-hand side to him. Definitely, he would have spotted the movement if it had turned. Frowning, he walked round the vehicle, defying it to move.

The vehicle didn’t move, in the accepted sense of the word. But in ten seconds, Shiitake’s fur was standing on end in panic as he ran round all sides of the enigmatic (and rather dusty) vehicle to be confronted with that very same left-hand side. Suddenly, the door opened, and for an instant he caught a glimpse of the interior.

From the far side of the airstrip, various folk heard his panicked scream of terror, and saw him slowly keel over like a toppling tree. Various folk cheered, and turned back to their project works, paying little attention to the long-haired vixen who wandered in towards town, looking a little lost, a small pack on her back and a heavy-looking suitcase in her paw.

Trish, for it was she, looked around at the unfamiliar landscape. She sighed, waving in an indeterminate direction as her Mother started up the StRange Rover and headed away, back home till the New Year Holidays.

“I suppose it did its job,” She commented to herself, as the All-Dimensional Vehicle receded from her. “But I wish I could have got enough three-Dimensional paint to cover all of it”

“And after lunch, we ‘ll be taking you to the Admin building, to sign all the Disclaimer forms and official registrations – then to relax, we’re heading you round the Societies Recruitment fair !” Mae the Psychic Kitten addressed the dozen assorted new arrivals, her “Tour Guide” badge sparkling in the morning sunshine. Critically, she looked them over. Half were felines, standard Japanese stock, who’d probably come to the Academy to escape some mundane trouble back on the Homeland. She sighed, wishing she was allowed to use her mental powers on registered students.

Suddenly, her grey tail swished mischievously. In twenty minutes time, they’d BE Registered students, but right now Her eyes half-closed, as she concentrated.

“Now, I know you’re feeling a little far from home here,” she grinned, ushering her class away from the harbour, “But I’m sure you’ll fit in. If any of you “ her gaze swept face after face, innocently. “If any of you, say Were found with large quantities of highly enriched Uranium in your sports locker – well, we’re not prejudiced about that kind of thing here.”

“There was a perfectly innocent explanation !” Burst out an exceptionally slender and bug-eyed Anime human girl, with platinum-blond head-hair. “Honest, there was !”

Mae nodded, shooing her towards the building. “Quite, Hiroshi. The trouble was, they never gave you time to think of a good one”

Just then, a rolling thunder of high-performance engines made the group look up. The Academy was getting to be a noisy place, Mae reflected, since the 1955 class of Historical Engineering started to test-fly their craft alongside her own year’s ’45 models, now souped up considerably after passing their authenticity testing. “That’s a McDonnell Douglas Voodoo variant, in the lead,” she shouted above the pulsing, brain-hammering waves of sound as the craft swooped low in for a landing, the spiralling circular shockwaves from its supersonic-flow propeller making the windows rattle all across the island. “Round here, that’s we call that normal. Behind it, there’s a transport plane coming in .. looks like a ’25 season class, a Handley-Page something or other Look, it’s making a turn right over us now.”

“There’s ghouls and Undead parachuting out of it!” Yelled one of the felines, an ice-blue eyes Siamese. “What do you call THAT ?”

Mae’s whiskers twitched. “Around here? Around here, we call it Para-Normal.”

The Administration building of Toho Academy was one of the oldest surviving structures on that side of the island – Toho’s founder having rented the island cheaply due to its proximity to Monster Island, but paying for it with the frequent rebuilding of trampled buildings by Tokyo-bound wildlife in years gone by. It was a rather utilitarian place, straight corridors and ninety-degree angles everywhere, in a starkly Euclidean framework that had very little of the extraordinary about it. Few of the students really registered it was there, and most of the staff tried to be elsewhere.

Trish was feeling distinctly dizzy, as she tried to find her way round it. Everywhere, were angles that refused to alter when you moved – planes abounded that looked like obtuse angles, but deceptively, actually were. Her head ached, as she realised she was hopelessly lost here.

Just then, she heard a cheerful voice. “And here’s Registration. Get your papers ready, kits and pups, and start signing your lives and sanity away. One thing – watch out for blank confession forms, the Security here’s all Paraguayan Secret Police they slung out for giving the Force a bad name...”

Trish closed her eyes, cutting out the disturbing visual cues, and groped her way towards the voice. Registration was exactly what she was looking for....

“Oooooop!” There was a sound as of two fluffed things colliding, as Trish and Mae bounced off each other and landed on the floor.

Mae glared at the vixen – a slightly rounder shape than her friend Suzuko , and with reddish head-fur that reached almost to her tail-root. She wore a very clean, very tidy “Sailor-Suit” that looked as if it had come straight out of the box that morning, Fumbling in a pocket, the vixen pulled out a small, chunky book and flicked through it worriedly. At last her eyes brightened, addressing her.

“HeL-Lo Lit-Tel Plush-ee Kitt-Ee. Prit-Ty Ki-Tty, Yes ??”

Mae’s already frayed patience snapped. “Don’t you call me a Plushie!” The air temperature in the room chilled twenty degrees, thermal contraction sending papers whirling in from the offices amidst howls of bureaucratic anguish, and her fur bristled in a high-voltage halo as she hurled a Psychokinetic Punch calculated to blow the newcomer out of her bobble-socks.

Something strange happened. About half a metre away from the vixen, a swirling corona formed, as if the energies were swirling round and round, entirely bypassing the target. There was a crash, as halfway between them a bowl of flowers fell from somewhere and shattered, while papers settled around in a steady fall-out. A few seconds later came an echoing splash from the harbour.

Trish blinked. She wasn’t TOO sure of her phrasebook’s accuracy – but surely any product of “The Famous Hungarian Phrasebook Co” ought to be good ?

The Recruitment fair was in full swing by the time Suzuko stopped by, to look over the wide range of stalls set up in one of the minor hangars. A couple of half-finished 1955 class aircraft had been towed out onto the runway to make room: she waved at the distant figure of Toemi clinging by her back tentacles and tail to an engine bay, while tinkering with an exposed complex of pipework.

“Ah.” Suzuko turned, to see Mangana and Horst behind her, looking over the fair. “Takes you back, doesn’t it ? Remember our first week ?”

Mangana nodded, her black bob of hair swinging. “I did the usual thing – joined half a dozen secret societies.” She frowned. “I’m still not sure which ones they were, even after all this time. And I remember, there seemed to be an awful lot of overlap in the personnel...”

“Is a normal enough thing to be doing,” Horst offered, the big boar’s arm around Mangana’s shoulders. “A small place like this, maybe not enough people to have agents of both Bavarian AND Wurtemburger Illuminati without crossover. To join both groups, is very Illuminati anyway, they say.”

Mangana snuggled closer to her mate, smiling. “A lot of folk are wearing two hats or more today. I’m relieving Mariko at half past two, she’s going over to registering one of those Mystery Religions.” She stepped aside as a costumed devotee of the Wilfredian Society of Gugnunks hurried past them.

“Oh ?” Sukuko’s tail swished. “Which one ?” Religion was always an interesting topic at Toho, where students such as Toemi and Princess Cthuline provided first-hand experience of Applied Theology every time their relatives visited. She winced, recalling the Summer Term’s Parent’s Visiting Day, when the medical centre had wholly run out of available transfusions of Sanity Points. They were an item in internationally short supply, with only Switzerland producing a really saleable surplus for export.

Mangana shrugged. “It’s a Mystery Religion. It’s a bit like a generic Black Box – as soon as you understand what’s in it, it stops working. Makes a change, though ... usually, by the time you’ve read all the books and learned all the spells, you’re in no condition to DO anything with them.”

Horst looked out over the crowds, his fur shining in the bright sunshine like new steel wool. “But still, is not Always best of ideas, to mix together. Back home, I remember they joined Westphalia and Ostphalia regions, for economy reasons.”

Mangana’s round eyes widened. “What did they get ?”

Her mate’s expression was purest deadpan. “TotalPhalia.”

Suzuko wandered down towards the fair. She waved at Granita, who has signing up a fair queue of new recruits for the S.D.A. (*1) with promises of free medieval costumes, weapons and a license to use them.

Granita waved something long and spiky back, the half-gargoyle girl already intrinsically armoured. “Hey, Suki ! Want to join this year ? Get a free lesson !” She hefted the polearm. “Looks great on your resume, that you’re adept with Ranseur, Glaive-Guisarme, Lochaber Axe, Mancatcher and Bohemian Ear-Spoon. Lots of jobs in Tokyo using those. We’re even training a rural specialist force for Colonial use, equipped with these.” She pointed over to a bundle of vaguely trident-like three-pronged spears. “It’s a Partisan operation.”

Suzuko shook her head. “I’ll stick with my old Katana, thanks.” She patted the uranium-cored blade that swung in its scabbard on the side opposite her satchel. “Do you have a lot of foreign students joining up ? Most of that’s European ironmongery.”

Granita’s rhino-like nose horn gleamed in the high, bright sun. “Fair number. That lot there – over by the fence. Signed them all up together.”

Suzuko’s gaze fell on a party of four canines and an odd-looking primate, sitting on the grass at the edge of the runway with a picnic spread on a big old-fashioned tablecloth. The four were laughing and chatting happily, attended by the ape-girl, who wore an odd black dress, almost a uniform, with shortish skirt and a white apron. A white lace tiara-like cap topped the costume. “Two couples?” She hazarded a guess.

Granita shook her head, her club-tipped tail swinging like a weighted cosh as she grinned, showing Suzuko the register. “Siblings. First time I’ve seen anyone get a genuine Toho Scholarship, not many folk qualify these days. They certainly do! And they were found in our Empire proper, so they qualified even though they’re English stock.”

“A Toho Scholarship? Didn’t think they did them any more.” Suzuko’s ears raised in interest. The Academy had been founded to cater for the large numbers of Beautiful Daughters of Lost Scientists that the founder had kept running into when exploring and filming on the Pacific islands, back in the 1950’s and 1960’s. If there had been any plain daughters, or sons of Lost Scientists found, the records had never been entirely plain on. Certainly, though the first intake had been all-female, the Academy was about a third male by the start of the 21st century. A thought struck her. “You mean someone just Found them, like they used to?”

(*1) Society for Destructive Anachronism. A merry group, dedicated to the return of the Dark Ages. Fund-raising projects include spreading authentic plagues and pestilences, destruction of all Technology, and the extermination of all Heretics. They refuse to elaborate on their own religious beliefs, which probably helps in finding them a good supply of Heretics.

“Heh. That they did. One of those Lost Expeditions of the 1930’s, three aristocratic families and their servants went out to settle in Borneo, climbed up to a “Lost World” sort of mountain plateau just before a landslide wiped out the only way back down. The families married each other traditionally, but some of the servants ... went Native a bit. Shocking scandal, I’m sure.” Granita tapped the registry. “These four are the Pontephrights, though I think you pronounce it “Pumfrey”. In order of age, they’re Dick, Julian, Anne, and the butch-looking one’s Georgina. Oh yes, and that’s Timmy the Human.”

“Doesn’t look very Human to me ...” Suzuko’s tail swished, as the maid bent over to serve sandwiches, revealing various brightly-coloured skin areas more reminiscent of a mandrill or chimpanzee. “I think some of her ancestors must have gone Very native.”

Suzuko headed down the row of stalls. She blinked, her fine russet-and-cream tail swinging as she scanned the rows of new arrivals, queuing up to sign or milling around excitedly as they discussed which of the competing schools of obscure and spurious Martial Arts to sign up for. From what she heard, the “Crane” style of Kung Fu was being severely challenged by Granita’s “Industrial Excavator” school this year.

“My final year here,” She told herself silently. “Three more terms, that’s it.” In reflex, she glanced over to the Heavy Engineering Workshops on the far side of the airfield, where her major project was already taking shape. She winced slightly: her project was running rather late after various events had distracted her from her studies – and though the Academy was somewhat more relaxed than the suicidal pressures of a Home Islands University, still she needed to catch up in a hurry. With a wistful glance at the happy crowd, she hurried across towards the great girder-roofed assembly sheds.

Half-way across the runway, she stopped in surprise. This was not generally a good place to do it at Toho, where air traffic control was of the freestyle kind, and various homebuilt aircraft were likely to need to touch down in a hurry before fuel tanks ran wholly dry or experimental plywood wings came wholly unglued. But in the distance, she saw the unmistakable shape and colouring of another fox – and for the last year, in a statistical fluke, she had been the only vulpine at the Academy. Her pace quickened, then slowed at the realisation that this was another vixen, not a tod-fox. Still, the company would make a nice change, she thought as she came within hailing range. Oddly, she reflected, unlike most vulpines she had ever heard of, the newcomer was plantigrade legged.

“Hello ?” She called, a little hesitantly. The vixen turned, eyes of slitted blue widening slightly with recognition, and waved.

Trish and Suzuko looked at each other for a few seconds. Though both wore the regulation Summer-issue sailor-suit with its pale blue skirt and crisp white shirt, Suzuko’s was topped with the neck-scarf in the pattern of a third-year student – plus, the katana at her hip proclaimed her as a Citizen. (Only Japanese Citizens were allowed to wear weapons in class, unless enrolled in the Enver Hoxha School of Political Science. One of the great role-models of modern political thinking, the beloved Albanian leader had scorned relying on security forces, and brilliantly concluded boring political debates by executing the offending Minister in person, on the spot. His writings, and distinctive from-the-hip shooting stance, were widely admired amongst modern leaders.)

Suzuko looked at the newcomer, with the thorough appraisal of someone cut off too long from another of their species. Trish was a few centimetres shorter than her, with a slightly fuller figure, and unusually long head-fur currently held in check by a black velvet band. Her sailor-suit was impeccably Regulation perfect, right down to her sensible split-toed black shoes and extremely silly white bobble-socks with dangling pom-poms that bobbed as she walked.

“I’m Suzuko Hohki,” that worthy introduced herself, bowing a few degrees. “Welcome to Toho ! You’re the first of our kind I’ve seen here for ages !”

Trish’s expression was one of shocked amazement. “There were others ? But Mother told me ...” her mouth opened as if to speak, and something very odd happened.

Suzuko’s sensations suddenly seemed to swap over. Trish spoke in a lemon flavour, with sharp smoked ham hints, the aromas wrapped round the insides of a dainty Klein Bottle. The sound had the sensation of thrusting your paw into warm yellow mud, with definite associations of bicycles.

She staggered back, clutching her head. “I’m going to wring Kazuko’s neck! But after I find out what she put in that Absinthe Saki,” she gasped. “That flashback was Strange ... Like nothing on Earth.”

“On Earth ?” Trish clapped an embarrassed paw to her muzzle. “Then you mean you ... oops ! Am apologies, please.” The strange sensation vanished, as if a switch had been flicked off. “I am being Trish , am wanting say apologies too with grey-fur kitty, say hello-kitty at Registration.”

“Sounds like Mae.” Suzuko nodded, then her ears raised. “You’re Trish ? I saw your name on our accommodation list. You’re in our block, this term. If you like, I’ll show you around.”

Trish nodded, relieved. This vixen was purely one of the Locals – she bowed, and followed her out across the island. Staying here, was going to be one of those Interesting Times she had read about.

“I think she’s in here.” Suzuko opened the door to the Mecha Bar. The concrete and steel-lined room was quite bare, except for the fuel/drinks dispenser on one wall, presided over by Vladislav, a huge bovine figure dressed in a stylish ablative tuxedo and Mecha bow-tie. Mae was at the far end, with Rashke. Both the cat and the direwolf were in unarmoured uniform, and were intently pacing across the room, stepping out some elaborate dance.

“And a one, two, turn, spin....” They heard Mae’s voice echo chantingly. “Three, four, you turn, kick, I spin, react, throw you through the wall. Turn, spin, I pick up the rose, power-fist, step, step, turn again. One, two, turn, pose, rocket-pod, rocket-pod, rocket-pod” She broke off, noticing Trish and Suzuko standing in the doorway. “Oh, Hidy, Suki ! We’re rehearsing.. next week’s the first Mecha Pash-dance of term. Should be good !”

Suzuko nodded cautiously. “This is Trish ... she’s staying at our block. Thought we’d best get introduced – she’s met Kaz, Horst and Mangana already. I didn’t know we had a spare room this term – what happened to Eddy Chang?”

Mae’s eyes narrowed slightly, looking at the new vixen. Her long, fine grey tail twitched. “Oh – you weren’t here, end of June ... blazing hot day, we were mostly waiting to go home. Eddy needed clearance to take off, the tower wouldn’t book him through Home Islands airspace. Kept him waiting on the pad, while him and his Mixmaster just kept getting hotter and hotter.” She shrugged. “He had a fit of “Runway Rage”, and ripped off both pods of “Mighty Mouse” 2.75 calibre towards the tower. Missed, of course – but he was kept behind a week filling in craters, and decided to transfer to Celaeno Gate college this year.”

“I think Trish is booked in. It’s a single room, she wanted that. Isn’t that right ?”

Trish’s tail waved. “Am wanting Private place, to “ She broke off, looking through her phrasebook. Her finger traced down a line of text, and her eyes widened. “Let us survey the People’s Glorious Republic Tractor Factory ! Let us smash the running-dogs of International capital, and collectivise their oppressed Halibut !”

“Eh ? Suzuko blinked. “Let’s see that phrasebook a minute ..” She took the book, and leafed through it. On one side were standard Japanese phrases, suitable for travellers abroad, mentioning hotels and trains and such. The other side ... it was something like a “hidden picture” printing, a multi-coloured spatter of dots that seemed to almost writhe on the page, as if a shape would suddenly jump into visibility from out of the confusion. Turning to the “Budget Accommodation” section, she tapped a suitable phrase in Japanese about wanting a secure and private room. “I think that’s what you might mean.”

Trish’s tail went rigid in shock. For a full minute she was speechless, her eyes seeming to bulge. “Is not physically Possible !” One ear dipped, and a contemplative expression crossed her face as she thought about the phrase Suzuko had pointed to. “At least, not think possible in local gravity field..”

Mae’s tail swished, her whiskers bristling while Suzuko made introductions. “Oh, we’ve met. You might say we bumped into each other, back in registration.”

Trish nodded happily. She recalled the identification chart in the back of the book, and mentally adjusted it till it was a match for Mae’s shape. “Kitty-Cat!” The ears were wrong and the tail too long for the nearest fit, ‘Bunny-Rabbit’. Worriedly, she flicked through the index trying to find a calibration chart to define just how Kitty this Kitty-Cat was, at least within ten percent.

Rashke looked at his watch, and his ears drooped. “I’ll have to get back,” he apologised, “we’ve some new arrivals of our own to show around the place, in our block. Six of them, four in the same family, a maid and ... “ he pulled out a databook, scratching his head as he looked over the schedule. “”Jenks the Killer Butler”, it says here. Sounds lively, at any rate.”

“Oh – I’ve met them. English, historically, anyway.” Mae cross-checked her own book. “Granita’s taken them under her wing – which is odd, as unlike most gargoyles, she hasn’t got wings. Seems she was there all last New Year holidays, for the football riots.” She hunched down in an imitation of Granita’s muscular bulk, and deepened her voice to a growl. “You should ha’ been there – it was Champion ! You’d get some of that!” Her fist smacked into her palm loudly.

“I suppose that’s what they mean by playing Injury Time,” Suzuko agreed. “Everyone ready ? Come on, Trish, it’s getting dark. I’ll show you back to our block. I hope you like it: there’s a lot to see.”

“Are you sure we should be doing this ?” The voice came from a masked biped figure, carrying one end of a long ladder through the darkness. In front of them, one of the accommodation blocks loomed up through the bamboo groves, lights on but curtains drawn over all the windows.

His companion shushed him. Similarly masked, this one's species was indicated by feline ears and tail poking out of the disguise. "Should be good. Have you seen that new vixen?" His tail swished in excitement. "I think we're in for a treat – when we see the rest of her." He glanced up at the bathroom window on the first floor, three metres above them. "Of course, we wouldn't be doing this back home – but they aren't respectable Citizens, in there. Not one of them! Sure, we can do this if we want to."

"If you say so, Osamu." The first figure handed over a camera, as they quietly put the ladder up against the wall of the building. Furless, pale-skinned hands revealed him to be a human, and his attitude proclaimed him as a human of the Anime race.

Osamu smiled, night-wide eyes surveying the quiet grove as he settled down to wait. Looking at his nervous companion, the feline's whiskers twitched in concealed contempt. Potzu was a useful companion, but rather dispirited. Having all the girls of your race prefer Monsters and Daemons, and knowing you would never be more than second-best, was liable to do that to a fellow. "Look – they're all downstairs. All last term, there was a queue for the showers around eight ... got some good snaps."

Potzu nodded, hoping he wouldn't come down with another nosebleed at the sight. "So – all we have to do is wait."

"Food's ready!" Mangana called out, putting her head round the corner into the corridor. "Come and get it!"

The accommodation block was a long, rectangular building, some five equally sized rooms on each side of a straight corridor that ran from the front door to the stairs at the far end. On the ground floor, there was a bathroom and a kitchen, where the students generally lived on instant noodles and eventual fish paste. Tonight, though, was Friday night.

Suzuko knocked on Trish's door. "All ready, Trish? Mangana's doing the Friday meal – and she can definitely cook."

There was a silence. Suzuko frowned, and pressed her ear to the door. Her ears rose, and her tail hiked in surprise. There was a sound inside – rather like a roar of surf approaching, from a great distance – far greater than the two by four metre room inside, if not greater than the distance to the beach itself. Then there was the sound of a zip fastener – a very big zip fastener. Suzuko thought of a trailer tent she had stayed in on one of Mangana's Arcaneology field trips, with metres of doorways and reconfigurable fabrics zipped together. She blinked, eyes wide.

"Coming!" The door opened, and Trish stood there in her sailor-suit, the room neat and tidy behind her. Suzuko stared for a second, then shrugged and waved her down the corridor. From one of the other rooms a radio was playing the annual Air Guitar championships from Helsinki, the virtual chords ringing out as a deafening silence throughout the building.

"Every week, one of us in the block takes turn to do a proper meal," Suzuko explained, as they entered the kitchen. "We all have our styles, I do fish dishes and such." She looked around; everyone except Princess Cthuline was there, sitting at the antique plywood table. Mangana nodded, and Kazuko waved happily.

"Wait till next week!" Kazuko enthused. "I do a mean curry!"

Horst winced, his flat-fronted snout twitching. "Mean? Ach, Kaz, the word is "Spiteful"..." His eyes glanced to a pinned-up chart on the noticeboard, with the varying potencies of Kazuko's favourite dish. "Mild or Madras, is good. Vindaloo, fine if you are having a cold. Tindaloo, and the top one Phall" He shook his head. "The last time Kaz cooked that, chemical warfare alarms in the next two buildings triggered."

Kazuko stuck her tongue out, and pulled one lower eyelid down in derision. Her cousin tapped her on the head with a large cast-iron pan.

"Plates out, folk. Here it is. Genuine, and Ethnic. Enjoy!" With a flourish, Mangana opened the top of the rice-cooker, which did nicely for any wet dish needing a long slow boil. She gingerly tipped out their meal onto the big serving-tray, flourishing her spoon over the recognisably organic, basketball-sized meal. "Haggis, everyone?"

Suzuko saw Trish's eyes widen, and nodded. "Minced lungs and liver, with pearl barley and turnip. All packed into a sheep's stomach and boiled for six hours, the gullet left intact. Nice, eh?" She reached down to the smaller scabbard next to her Katana, and pulled out her combat Spork.

Trish's tail twitched. She looked at the steaming, rounded dish, clearly marked with veins on the outside, the arm-length of ribbed oesophagus dripping into a courtesy dish. She nodded, feeling her mouth water. "Does look Excellent!" She poked the long, flaccid length of gullet. "Can I?"

Mangana nodded cheerfully. As the cook, she had the right to carve it and hand out the best bits. "Of course – you're still our Guest, so to speak. But there's a lot of demand – this is a Very popular recipe."

The party fell upon the haggis like vigilantes on a street-mime, Mangana happily brandishing the big military-issue cleaver as she hacked it apart, great steaming chunks sending even the Anime humans' tiny noses twitching with the delightful savour.

“Looks good – IS good.” Trish nodded, tucking into her share. “Is exactly ...” She fished in her pocket for her phrasebook. “Let us establish a glorious Proletarian, wibble, Cement-Factory, Sardine, Anchovy, key to Dialectic growth. And after lunch, many amusing surgical procedures.”

Horst scratched his head. “Am thinking she is better off without that phrasebook,” he commented, one wire-rough eyebrow raised. “Still – it’s hard for some folk to adjust here . I felt lost myself, cut off from the Mystic Strength Of The Volk.”

Mangana nodded. “We’ve got some interesting new arrivals, all right. Here’s a few more I enlisted, for the [] Society.” She pulled out a group photo, with all the faces obscured.

“How do you spell [] ?” Suzuko wondered aloud. “Must make it difficult to print Society stationary.”

The dark-haired human grinned, pulling out a business card, passing it to Suzuko. “No problem ! It’s on this.”

Suzuko looked at the card, turning it over. “It looks blank. Is there invisible ink, or some sort of magnetic coding on the card ?”

“Hardly. Someone might crack that. Even I don’t know what the name is – and I doubt anyone else does. But when someone takes a guess and pretends to be a member – you know they’re not.”

Trish looked at the picture, spotting various species and costumes. One muscular ram was wearing a New Zealand flag on his hat, and a shirt depicting players of some ball game belayed to pitons holding them on an almost sheer surface. “What is this “Duneidin Street Crown Green Bowling” club ?”

Huge green eyes sparkled mischievously. “Oh, he’s from the Southern Hemisphere. You can tell, he was going on about how the water goes down the sink the wrong way, and seemed surprised everything here wasn’t upside-down too. Nice chap, came here with his Sister.”

Mangana raised an eyebrow. “Seemed very affectionate, if that was her brother. Still, they’re of a herd kind of species. Tend to go around in dozens, generally – I imagine they’d be drawn pretty close to each other if they’re the only ones around.”

Trish nodded, passing the photo back. She sighed, closing one eye to cut down the baffling perspectives in the square-cornered room whose odd Euclidean geometry was giving her vertigo. Upside-down, she could cope with – but relative to home, most things around here looked inside-out.

Suzuko relaxed, savouring the meal as the party ate solidly. In the background, her desktop Cray 20-20 was downloading a news channel, scanning the world’s events in idle processing time. She listened with half an ear – in Europe, the recently rebuilt Hadrian’s Wall was now claimed to be the first truly uncrossable barrier – in North Korea, the clone-child of the hereditary Party Chairman was being sworn in as Crown Prince-Comrade. Over in South America, the Peruvian People’s Republic was taking losses as the New Mayan Empire moved into the northern Andes.

She noticed Trish straining to hear, and smiled. “Nothing to worry about – this is a low-priority channel. If any Japanese Citizens were involved out there, they’d certainly tell us about it.”

The meal over, Kazuko vanished for a minute and returned with two large bottles. “Kampaii!” She gave a cup-raised gesture. “Last of last term’s brew – just wait till you see what I’ve got started this term ! It’s a classic vintage, should be ready in a week or so. It’s very – Ethnic, in Nepal anyway. You won’t believe the taste !”

The others exchanged glances. Mae winced, and went through the motions of pulling on an imaginary respirator. “The last Ethnic dish you served, was that Durian Surprise. The one you prepared on the far side of the island in sealed containers, till it was ready to unleash on an undefended world.” *

“So ? Surprised, weren’t you ? Anyway, try this – no, Suki, it’s not Absinthe Saki this time. I was at my Grandparents’ house in Normandy this July, they’ve got this stuff they make called “Marc”, it goes down a treat . Brewed up my own version down at the Tank farm ... don’t worry, I washed most of the hydrazine out of the pipework first, this time.” Kazuko uncorked one of the bottles with a loud pop, and everyone involuntarily jumped back from the table, eyeing the exits.

- The Durian is a tropical fruit about the size and shape of a spiked Rugby ball, though (according to some people) about a tenth as edible. Its main claim to fame is its scent and taste when ripening, which even its worst detractors have to admit is unique in the vegetable world. A ripening Durian is a fascinating piece of evolution in action: the reaction of most people when it has reached the ripe Stilton phase, is to give it immediate burial, preferably with extensive prayers to prevent it rising to trouble the living (stakes, as available at any good Garden Centre, are popular but optional funeral accessories). At Toho, the various species with carrion-eating ancestors have declared it an Honorary Meat dish.

Suzuko sniffed tentatively, ready to empty her lungs and sprint for the fresh air, a habit evolved through long exposure to her friends' cuisine. But there was nothing immediately corrosive about the scent: a fairly coarse, but neutral spirit aroma. "What's it made out of?"

Kazuko cocked her head aside. "Grapes, same as the finest brandies and champagnes," she asserted. Her pumpkin-shaped head cocked to one side, as she paused meditatively. "Well ... mostly grapes, anyway."

Trish watched, intrigued as Kazuko filled all their large tumblers with the colourless, but oily-looking liquid – and as they sampled it, all except Kazuko and Mangana collapsed, gasping and spluttering. She nodded, savouring and analysing the flavour and exact chemistry as she checked her own metabolism could use it. It probably explained Anime humans' obvious supply of boundless energy, she reflected – if they were evolved to drink and like ethyl alcohol pure as rocket fuel.

Outside the upstairs window, Osamu gave a quiet hiss of pleasure as the bathroom light went on. His camera was braced against the window with a suction-cup, looking under one gap in the blinds while he peered in through another.

"I was right" He whispered down to Potzu, who was holding the bottom of the ladder. "It's the new vix. Mmm. I can see the shower stall from here – ohh, yes. She's taking her sailor-suit off. I'll take a few pics, then you can have a look."

Potzu nodded, blushing in the darkness. He looked up at Osamu's slowly waving tail, imagining the scene. "What's she like?"

"Now, that's a Nice vixen Sort of rounded, lovely fur reddish, redder than most I've seen ... maybe she's from somewhere exotic, like the Kuril Islands, or maybe Sakhalin. Oh yesvery nice ... she's not got a stitch on." The feline's voice shook. "She's heading towards the shower now... she's sort of reaching for something" His voice carried excitement and puzzlement. "I can't see what .."

Looking up, Potzu saw the feline's mouth fall open, his tail and whiskers bristling in shock. Just faintly, he heard a sound as of a very large zipper being undone. But he could have been wrong, for at that instant Osamu gave a terrified, throat-tearing scream, hurling himself back off the ladder into the air. Only unthinking feline reflexes and the springy bamboo shoots stopped him breaking bones as he hit the ground and ran, still hideously screaming, off into the night.

Trish looked out of the window, a minute later, to see Kazuko and Mangana pulling out large rubber mallets and start righteously pounding a pasty-faced human, who had been struggling away on his own with a ladder.

Trish's ears rose, and she blinked in surprise. She had seen exactly where the mallets had appeared from, and nodded appreciatively. There had been a few references in the literature about this ability, usually connected with females carrying the Anime gene set.

"Seems like," she told herself as she stepped back towards the shower, "These folk are not quite as ... Limited as the travel guide told me."

Dawn rose, and an entire generation of now impoverished and hung-over new Students swore off playing cards or mah-jongg with their seniors while being plied with various batches of home-brew: especially home-brews that for some reason its creators had put aside without drinking for a whole year. In the Heavy Engineering Department by the airfield, all was still in the big assembly hangars. Only the remains of a rushed breakfast scattered beside one of the towering Main Battle Tanks showed that some folk had arrived bright and early to work on a Saturday morning.

"Need a paw?" Mae called in through the hatch, scenting her friend in the mix of hot metal and ersatz rubber that was her Project's engine bay. The feline grinned, looking at a coil of greyish plastic insulating wire laid out on the engine deck. "I see you can't get real ersatz rubber any more – have to have ersatz, ersatz stuff."

There was a muffled thud, a yelp, and Suzuko stuck her head out of the turret hatch. "I could use a lot of paws – ones that know what they're doing." The vixen rubbed her head ruefully. "I've six weeks to get this moving – how's your project?"

"Almost done ! Just waiting for parts, they'll be on the next flight in." Mae clambered up with feline grace, her claws clinging to the rough "Zimmerit" textured paste of the back plate. She looked down at the vehicle's engine bay, and shook her head sorrowfully. "You're building in trouble, Suki. 1945 class turbines are bad enough on aircraft, I should know."

Suzuko's gaze was bleak. She urgently needed the marks, and could gain far more by assembling a system that had never been actually built at the time. "If this works, it'll solve most of my problems. Just my good luck someone found these plans ten years ago – they'd been in a locked filing cabinet for eighty years

down a salt-mine that'd caved in. I was building a regular King Tiger – these plans are for the turbine version, someone pencilled in the name “Koenigin Tiger”, that’s “Empress.” I really could use some help. Do you know where Trish went to?”

Mae’s fine grey tail waved. “Kazuko sent her off to get something – I’m not sure what. But by the look on Kaz’s face, I’d guess it’s another prank ... oh, here she is.”

Trish came into the hangar, a little out of breath. She looked around, and waved to the two furs standing on the Koenigin Tiger’s engine decking, as she pulled out a crumpled list. “It was not easy, but I found it all.” She gestured at the Long Stand, the bottle of Dehydrated Water and the bucket of elbow-grease she carried. “There’s no room in here – I tethered the Skyhook outside.”

“That was hard work.” Evening fell with surprising suddenness, as the last rivet was pounded home in the engine-bay. Mae, Suzuko and Trish had put in a hard stint of welding, cutting, soldering and brazing as they assembled and tested the experimental power systems on the Tigress, as Suzuko was now calling her project. Suzuko stood up, stretching. “Time to call it a day ! Have to get Eddy to lock up ...” She stopped. “Oh. Eddy Chang isn’t here, is he ? That means ...”

Mae wiped her paws clean on a copy of the “Rising Sun” newspaper. “Yup. Hard to believe – you’re Senior in the Class. You’re a week older than Shin, so you get to do the paperwork. Congrats on the promotion !”

Mae grinned over at Trish, while an anguished vulpine howl echoed from the roof girders. “Ahh, the responsibilities of Command. Come on, at least I’ll give her a paw with the Readiness Lists, they’re due in tonight. Give you another look at what we do here.”

In the back office, there was a fascinating collection of ancient chipboard furniture and classic computing hardware. There was also a big white board, divided up into “Air” and “Ground”, with names and various symbols chalked up.

Mae rubbed out two names. “That’s Eddy and Hyao gone. Eddy took his Martin Mixmaster with him, he’ll be beating up the beaches on the Celebes Islands, now he’s gone to Celaeno Gate. Hyao graduated – that’s his runabout you passed, a French effort from the 1935 class. Fastest Char 3 bis in the world, since he stuck those old Perkins diesel power-packs into it. Pretty nifty for a 75 tonner.”

Trish frowned. “What are you needing these for ? Had heard the Locals had stopped attacking your capital city.” She looked across in the direction of Monster Island, conspicuous today for lack of Tokyo-bound residents intent on encouraging the building industry with some traditional Urban Renewal.

Mae tapped the board. “Shh ! Not so loud ! We’re still being funded by the JSDF * to keep monitoring the Island, and keep ready for when they call us – not that we’ve been called out all last term.” She pointed at one of the ancient terminals. “Every week, we have to send in a Readiness Report – saying just what we’ve got available, to fly at instant readiness, half an hours notice, a day’s notice and so on. Right now, Ana Ng is parked on the end of the airstrip polishing the plywood of her Volksjager, and ...” she consulted the list “looks like there’s a pair of Shindens at the front of the hangar, just need fuel tanks topping up and they’re ready to roll. You’ll like it here ! You get bonus points for standing by, once you’ve built your runabout ... to be honest, I think that’s the only way poor Suki there’s kept up with her marks, what with all her ... distractions. And when you’ve finished the course, it’s yours to do what you want with.” She frowned. “Not that I recommend what Chuck and Osamu are planning, opening up a Death Race 2000 school inland of our East Coast Colonies – but it’s fun driving a main battle tank through Tokyo.”

Trish blinked, having seen depictions of the traffic there. “Is it not hard to park there ?”

The feline grinned. “You can park where you want. The fun thing is, watching as folk try and tow it away. And they come in handy when there’s film crews on the Island – we rent them out for Drag Races, see which has the greatest Drag ... that and tank-surfing. It’s like car-surfing, that Anime folk like so – you know, three to four percent of urban passengers back home car-surf regularly to work ?”

“Do they not fall off often into the traffic ?”

“Often ? Oh no ... only once each.”

- The Japanese Self-Defence Force: a purely defensive organisation, who these days steer well clear of Toho Academy after various unfortunate encounters of the trampling kind with the Neighbours. Besides, they are FAR too busy these days conducting a vigorous “Forward Defence” of all the Japanese Empire’s frontiers and potential frontiers, wherever they may be.

Suzuko stuck her snout round the door a minute later, just as everything shut down. “All set ? After all that, I can use a little relaxation. In thoroughly traditional style, of course.”

Trish nodded, looking around at the ancient collection of electronics. On one of the displays, was the full roster of Historical Engineering Students, mostly Citizens. In most nations, she recalled reading, there was a distinctly limited supply of folk willing and able to fly fast jets – but in Japan, thanks to a strict Eugenics program, three-quarters of the current generation of students qualified. She watched as Mae typed in the report, and began to shut the machine off. She read aloud the sequence of warnings that flashed across the screen. “It is now Incredibly Dangerous to switch off your computer. We mean it. Don’t even Think about it. Your life wouldn’t be worth a moulted whisker.” Evidently this old equipment had to use verbal threats: by the look of it, it predated by several years Earth’s neural link technologies that had made possible such socially responsible toys as the “I Die You Die” Tamagotchi.

“Of course.” Trish nodded dutifully, following her new friends out of the hangar into the fading light, while Suzuko locked up. From the direction of the sunset came a vigorous beat, where various reptilian students practised drumming as a spiritual discipline, fanatically summoning a trance-like state as they sat on the beach facing the red sun as it descended into the Pacific. Komodo Drummers, the book had called them ...

Mae grinned, nudging her back towards the small town to the South of the island. “No, not there,” she waved her tail dismissively, following Trish’s gaze. “Classes start Monday, so tomorrow night we’ll have to be in bed bright and early – tonight, it’s the last night we can hit the Mecha Bar !”

Down in the Mecha bar, the walls rang to the strident tones of brutally stripped-down Italian Speedcore, its blaring tones reverberating off the concrete and steel of the heavily reinforced building. The three entered, greeted with various cheers and howls of derision from friends and foes.

“Neat ! Oh, I love this place,” Mae shouted above the din, brushing past armoured figures to get to the bar. “I love the Ambience, the brooding, hulking menace of a room full of battlesuits, the sheer – brutality of it all.” Her ears twitched, as the strident scream of the latest hit by Prompt Blast Fatalities made the room shiver. “I miss it, when I’m away.”

“It Is rather fun, “ Suzuko agreed cautiously. “And just like home, too.” She sighed wistfully as she thought back a month. “I wonder if Uncle Shuzen got that contract ?”

Trish blinked.

Mae laughed, elbowing her cheerfully. “Suki’s Uncle works in Internal Marketing, for the Government. The JSDF keep turning down all his giant robot designs – they say single-seater battlesuits are OK, but anything three storeys high is just a tactical liability. If you ask me, they should have watched more Mecha shows when they were young.”

“Ah. I see.” Trish looked around at the bar, where various suited and unsuited folk were carousing and refuelling. She leafed through her dictionary, comparing the various bottles on display. “I am thinking – do folk here not give drinks names of exotic foreign places, like Malibu, Curacao and Tropicana ?”

Suzuko waved her across to a table, and returned with a loaded tray. She gestured out towards the door, where palm trees swayed against the rising moon, Pacific Ocean foam dimly visible on the silver-lit beach. “We do that, Trish. Take your pick of the cocktails, I bought us a Cleethorps, a Magnitogorsk and an East Grinstead.”

Trish nodded. She looked at a blue thing, a green thing and a yellow thing, and selected the one that seemed to be evaporating fastest. As she sipped it, her long head-fur seemed to bristle out as if it had been liquid static at half a million volts. “Is Good!”

Mae sighed with content, sliding into one of the chairs, her fine grey tail curling round. “This IS the life. Prompt Blast Fatalities playing loud on the digital radio, something drinkable and inflammable in front of me, and a whole room full of drunken squaddies ready to start getting value out of their armour. It just doesn’t get better than this !” She waved at Granita and Rashke, as the two armoured figures lumbered onto the dance floor and began to dance The Crusher – a pretty dance, but one illegal in the Home Islands due to its huge casualty rate and near-certainty of collateral damage on the neighbourhood. “Just you watch – you’ll soon pick it up, Trish – then maybe later they’ll dance the Alligator Stomp and the Len Ganley Stance for us. Welcome to Toho!”

Two thousand miles East, the same hammering notes of satellite-relayed Speedcore were picked up by another receiver, its listeners suddenly in a very different mood. The local time was two in the morning, the moon high overhead, and those receiving the broadcast had been grimly awaiting it for some days.

“We’re getting an Alert pattern.” Ensign Tktlohahn Davies jerked to full watchfulness, the red lights on the laptop computer suddenly flashing as he triggered his throat microphone. “It’s confirmed – wake the Captain and the Priest, please .”

“So, it begins.” A brilliantly patterned kinkajou, Tktlohahn stretched, shivering. He reached for his pressure helmet liner and studied the embroidered crest of the Peruvian People’s Republic for a second, as if measuring his devotion. Fastening it around his ears, he smoothed down the inner pressure suit, taking one last look around in the calm before the storm.

In the lee of a waterless coral atoll only big enough to serve as a landmark at low tide, a strange shape floated. At first glance, it looked like two aircraft that had tried to land on the same piece of runway at the same time – the upper and lower sections were radically mismatched in appearance. Sitting on fibreglass floats the size of petrol tankers, was an elegantly wide, glider-like craft, its long slender wings’ symmetry only marred by three huge engine-pods and a bulbous crew carriage slung beneath it. But perched on top of that was another aircraft, something very different. A sharp, polished steel dart of sleekly menacing aspect, its highly swept delta wings glittered razor-edged in the moonlight, the whole surface mirror-like except for the flat glass windows covering its internal turrets.

“Is it confirmed ?” A husky voice demanded from the darkness, as an almost skeletally thin llama squeezed through into the radio compartment. The priest stared at the screen, nodding as he answered his own question. “Yes. The data patterns in the broadcast check with our own daily code”. Since each sequence of random-looking bits only translated to trigger another random-looking sequence that lived for a day on the ship’s network of old laptops, it was as near to unbreakable as they could manage on the resources. No computer was going to crack that message into a plain text, for there was no plain language text in the original message.

From behind him, Captain Mictikutili Evans squeezed a glance over his Priest’s shoulder. Pulling out his swipe-card, he fed it into the laptop that ran the ship’s comms suite. “Confirmed. It’s the signal to disperse, using Plan 15 ... looks like this is the real thing. Muster the crew – and no transmissions from now on. “ The Margay’s long tail twitched regretfully, thinking of the fine catch of sea fish scheduled to be microwave-roast on the radars for breakfast. It looked like they’d be wearing pressure suits and eating through their feeder tubes for the near future or the rest of their lives – whichever came first.

The priest tapped the display, summoning up a large-scale map of the Eastern Pacific. “Nearest friendly territory’s the Galapagos Islands, eight hundred kilometres East. Do we have a tanker scheduled ?”

The Captain studied the scrolling information now being winnowed out of the digital transmission, and blinked a few times. “We have. But it’s straight West, nearly as far as Hawaii ... looks like the Strike Force is being spread right across the Pacific. I think we might be in for it this time.”

Behind their officers’ backs, Ensign Tktlohahn Davies cast a worried glance back at the arriving crew, half of them fellow descendants of the short-lived colony of Welsh Guyana. He tapped in a course on the laptop, and a line extended on the map towards the central Pacific. “Sir – we’ll be there in nine hours, at best speed. We’ll only have twelve hundred kilos fuel left when we get there, with the headwinds forecast.” Looking out at the status displays, he ran through the checklists, briefly wishing he was back home in Aberbanana. “That’s empty ocean out there, Sir – if we missed the tanker ... There’s nothing between us there and Japan.”