

Road Runner Chapter 14

“In a hole in space-time, there lived a Shoggoth,” Shobban sat on the floor of the Toho Academy crèche, a big book open on her lap and a dozen assorted offspring crowding round and crawling over her as she read aloud to them. *“Not a squashed, black hole full of gravity and lots of things falling on top of you from all directions – no, this was a Shoggoth-pit, and that means comfort.”*

“One lurid afternoon, the Shoggoth known as Tekeli-li was lurking on the threshold of his pit, busily deliquescing. His protoplasm would form big, tarry bubbles and inflate them till they burst with cheerful Pops. Pop, pop, pop! He was very proud of his talent, and indeed he was very good at it.”

“It was just then that the Wizard climbed up the eerily carven rim of Tekeli-Li’s pit, just when the Shoggoth was thinking about it being time for a little light devouring. His pit was very cosy and well-stocked, full of nice things to hunt down and devour, and Shoggoths love their meals – four times a day, and more when they can seize them. But then the wizard knocked on the carven rim with his staff.

“IÄ!” Intoned the wizard, halting at the threshold, and looking at the Shoggoth peacefully bubbling. *“Quite an Eldritch day for it.”*

“IÄ”, bubbled Tekeli-li happily, as he deliquesced under the ambiguous light of the sinister sun. He formed some more eyes, and raised them on a stalk to look at his visitor. “Eldritch indeed! Would you care for something to devour? Just the right time for a little something.”

“Indeed no,” smiled the Wizard. *“Not right now. But if your invitation can keep awhile, I’ll be returning this way when the sinister stars come out, with one or two good cultist friends. We’re on our way to a Quest.”*

“Dear me!” Piped Tekeli-li, alarmed. *“Quests! No thank you! Nasty things, Quests, inconvenient and dangerous. Harm can come to an Entity like that.”* Tekeli-li felt quite three-dimensional at the thought. *One of his spawn-relatives called Tekeli-li had gone off on a Quest and never returned, and neither had his neighbour Tekeli-li. All Shoggoths were called Tekeli-li, and they found that it made things much easier all round.*

The wizard nodded, silently marking the carven rim with his staff, drawing a sinister symbol there. “Till the sinister stars come out, then. IÄ!”

“IÄ!” the Shoggoth fluted doubtfully, and fled down the benighted passages to his dungeon. He hastily devoured what was in there, forming extra-large feeding appendages to do so. *Quests? Not for me, Tekeli-li told himself firmly.*

But on the carven rim of the pit, a certain symbol glowed, attracting attention all that lurid afternoon...”

Shobban put the book down as Trish and Hiroshi entered. The Irish setter puppy smiled, waving her friends to sit down. “Not there, Hiroshi! That seat’s taken.” She took out a short pipe, filled it with a fine talc-like powder and blew it over one of the cushions. A shape was briefly outlined there which would be exceedingly inconvenient to describe.

“Ooooooh.” Hiroshi pressed her hands together, her big eyes crossing. “Cool. How’s the babysitting going, Shobby?”

“It’s going well – this is a lovely bunch.” Shobban gently removed a bunny kit from her shoulder and placed him back in the sandbox. “Have you found out if we got to Pirate Island or not? I’m pretty sure we got there – as well as being here.”

“Umm, no.” Hiroshi blinked. “Trish got an idea – she said not to. You tell her, Trish, I’m allergic to things with equations in them.”

Trish fumbled in her satchel, and pulled out her old phrase book and another, newer hard-copy book she had found and printed at the Academy library, titled *“99 Questions About Paradoxes You Didn’t Want To Ask.”* She blinked, carefully turning to a book-marked page. “Shobban-chan, the machine sent us to Pirate Island by putting us into a quantum half-state, yes-no? There are being two parts of the singularity and which of them we are being at is ... Indeterminate.”

“That’s right,” Shobban agreed, cautiously. “We’re as much here as we are there. Hopefully when we get back from the far end, it’ll sort itself out. There aren’t really two sets of us.”

“Is being the problem.” Trish’s whiskers drooped. “I am reading about this. Is Paradox Number fifty-six in this book, has happened before. Is classic two-slit test of wave theory – shine electron beam through splitter and beams are behaving as if two beams until observed – then is one or the other.”

Shobban frowned, absently brushing away two kittens who were batting at her tail. “Yes – that’s how the whole theory works. But you mean – oh!” Her eyes suddenly went very wide. “I see what you’re getting at! If we saw ourselves there – the observation would happen, and ... I don’t know what’d happen then. We’d be in one place or the other – and there’s no way to tell which.”

“Is big problem.” Trish’s tail twitched. “One way, we stop being there and only ever were here – other way, we are only there and not here.”

Shobban grabbed her notebook and a specially overclocked pencil, and started to scribble. “I think you’re right. I hadn’t thought of that – and whichever way it happens, it will then have always been true. Oh dear.”

Hiroshi’s eyes had been glazing over as she looked from one canine to the other. Suddenly she cheered. “Party time! We can run up huge credit bills and drink as much sake as we like and the hangover’s on someone else’s time line!”

“I don’t think it quite works like that,” Shobban’s tongue hung out in concentration, as she pored over her notebooks. “Maybe this is why we’re not meant to mess with naked singularities till the third year of the course.” Suddenly, her tail thrashed. “I’ve found a loophole, I think! We can’t see if we got there – that’d be an Observation – but we can send ourselves some help, just assuming we’re there to pick it up. The Tesla Coil’s still energising the far end, we’ve enough power.” She hesitated, looking around at the assorted offspring looking expectantly at her. “I’m stuck here all morning – you’ll have to do it.”

“Yay!” Hiroshi bounced happily. “Come on, Trish – if I know us, we’re probably in trouble over there already. Like they used to say before the Millennium – *“The Lord Helps Those Who Help Themselves”* – so let’s go raid the armoury and send some resupply.”

“Is it all right to be doing this?” Trish asked worriedly.

“Of course.” The silver-topped menace nodded cheerfully. “It used to be a Divine commandment, even. We just go there and – help ourselves.”

Georgina Pontephrigh slammed into the wrestling mat, the impact knocking the wind out of her stocky frame. Only for a second, though – she bounced up and out of her assailant’s grasp before the big panda girl could dive and pin her. Remembering one of Granita’s moves, she leaped in the air as the hefty two-tone wrestler lunged at her, grabbed her by the forearms and heaved back.

“Hammerlock – double hammerlock – and flip!” With every erg of strength, she slammed the Bosun down on the mat she had just left, and pinned her mercilessly.

A split-toed Tabi sandal drummed on the floor in defeat. “Conceded!” As soon as Georgina released her, the Bosun pulled off her garish wrestling mask, and grinned ruefully. “Mmm! You’re Good! But I’d expect that if Granita herself taught you – she’s a fine coach, with good taste too.”

Georgina felt her ears flush at the praise, her tail wagging happily as she looked around at the wrestling ring. It was as good a place to spend a morning as any – one of the privately run gymnasiums not two hundred paces from where she had found Suzuko a few hours earlier.

Timmy ran up with two big towels in her mouth. “Good Timmy!” Georgina patted her head-fur, as the human dropped them in the ring and stood waiting expectantly. “You go and stand guard, Timmy. Timmy – Guard. While we go shower and – all that.” She wriggled, as the Bosun ran an approving gaze over her.

Just then, there was a polite cough from the viewing gallery. Georgina looked up, and her tail drooped a little as she saw Suzuko Hohki watching her with the strange rabbit standing beside her. She waved, mentally kissing some of her plans goodbye. “I thought you weren’t back till after lunch?” She called up, her eyebrows knitted.

“That was the plan – but like the Girl Scouts say – no plan survives first contact with the enemy.” Suzuko looked down onto the ring, her snout wrinkled in worry. “Well – we found them – and the Girl Scouts were right.”*

Ten minutes later, the four of them were sitting at a table in the gym cafeteria, with Timmy curled up underneath it. Suzuko pulled out a databook that Lebeq had lent her, and brought up a map of New Port Royal.

“Rai’s bunch have been looking for me all night – and they nearly caught up with me.” Suzuko tapped the display. “If Lebeq here hadn’t got access to the cameras showing them waiting round the corner – they would have.”

The brown lapine bowed, smiling. “A mere trifle. Miss Hohki, your credit with my establishment is now very substantial.”

*Military-Industrial Editor’s note: by the mid 2030’s, most citizens had finally lost all patience with politicians. They are certainly forbidden to interfere in military matters – and the Japanese military disliked handling weapons of mass destruction, so looked for someone trustworthy to do the job. The Girl Scouts got it.

“Yes. Well. Instead of them ambushing me, we tracked them through the streets, always a couple of corners away. They’re sort of conspicuous in all that mecha, and they stopped to refuel. I didn’t know it, but New Port Royal is about as wired for video as any street in New Tokyo or Mega-Tokyo. They went – here.” Suzuko tapped the screen, indicating a large block of warehousing near the docks.

Georgina frowned. “I know that place! That’s where we went last night! Rai and Gen were there with some funny Natives, and a big torpedo thing they were trying to sell.” She paused. “When we met that Pyrate chief Mr. DeWaal, he seemed to think it was important.”

Suzuko winced, something long practice had accustomed her to since arriving more than two years earlier at Toho Academy. “Important? Once word gets out this thing’s here, half the organisations on the planet are going to want to grab it, and the other half will stop at nothing to make sure they don’t!”

Lebeq’s ears twitched. “Too late, I fear. The word has “gone out”, as you put it. I should know. Information sales are my business.”

Suzuko stared at him. “You did it, didn’t you? You told everybody who’d credit you half an old Ukrainian Currency Coupon,* right down to the address it was at! And now someone’s throwing bombs our way – the next one might not be a stage prop.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Lebeq looked up at the ceiling innocently, his long ears twining. “My dear Miss Hohki, of course I did. But that is not what New Tortuga has to fear. I have not survived here all these years by being easily – surprised.”

Suzuko, nostrils twitched, as she looked at the lapine hard. The brown-furred figure radiated a calm certainty, as if nothing could amaze him. “And?” She prompted. “If it’s not a Psychiatric Blast device that’ll wipe out every sentient in thirty kilometres, if it’s not some mercenary missile submarine’s ICBM heading our way – what’s a bigger threat than that?”

Chisel teeth gleamed as Lebeq smiled, leaning over the table to almost touch noses. “Is this a formal Question, or are you just being conversational? If the former, I fear it will cost three hundred and sixty gold Yen, cash, plus all your credit.”

Suzuko growled, sitting hard back down in her chair. “Forget it.” She looked at Georgina, who was watching the proceedings with interest. “If I was you, I’d try and get on your friend’s pirate ship, and far away from here as soon as possible. Whatever it is, there’s something definitely unhealthy around here.”

George hesitated, and reached down to pet Timmy under the table. Akeritsu had offered her a berth, certainly – it had been quite an honour, to leapfrog the long list of applicants for the Cabin Girl vacancy. “Suzuko – I know my cousins are a pain, but – we’ve always been together. Still -,” she looked over smilingly towards the Bosun, who was suddenly staring at Suzuko as if she had sprouted an extra set of ears, “whatever goes wrong – it won’t hurt them. Things always turn out the way they expect. It gets boring.”

The hefty panda suddenly stood up and grasped Suzuko’s paw, shaking it in an enthusiastic grip that had the slighter vixen yelping. “Suzuko ? Suzuko Hohki? I don’t believe it! All this time you’ve been here incognito, and never even dropped in to pay your fellow Captains a visit! Welcome to New Tortuga!”

“What? But I’m not Captain of ...” Suzuko began, then clapped her other paw to her mouth. “Oh. Yes. I suppose so.”

Georgina was looking on, wide-eyed and a little jealous. “Suzuko? A Pyrate Captain? But she said she’d never even been here before!”

“But her ships have.” The Bosun pulled out her own databook, and brought up schematics of two vessels. “Sea Vixen, built Vladivostok Naval Yards 1974, 3000 tonnes displacement, nominal crew of 45. First Cub, built by White’s of Chatham, England 2029, 1200 tonnes, nominal crew of 18. Currently both carry Letters of Marque for Peru vs. Mexico and New Taiwan vs. Albanian East Indies commercial traffic. Titular owner, Miss Suzuko Hohki, Japan.”

Suzuko groaned, and her ears drooped like limp paper-mache. “Oh no.” She buried her head in her paws.

Lebeq smiled, his paws spread wide as he faced the glowering Georgina. “I believe I understand. Although you might find it hard to credit, in some parts of the world, being legally responsible for the operation of Pirate vessels is still not considered a respectable occupation for a young lady.”

“My parents are Diplomats,” Suzuko shook her head, over and over. “It’s really not what they had in mind for me as a career. I’ve never even seen those ships since I waved them farewell from Toho more than a year ago. I thought I told Captain Broznov he was in charge of everything.”

* Not exchangeable on the world’s currency markets. Exchangeable only for cabbages in Kiev Central Market on alternate Wednesdays, subject to status and availability.

“Oh, he is, as Captain of the Sea Vixen.” The Bosun consulted her databook. “You have two vessels legally registered to your name – therefore one of them is a flagship. You rank as Flag Captain. Pleased to meet you, Ma’am.” She bowed.

“Some strive for fame, and some have fame thrust upon them.” Lebeq commented sagely.

Suzuko cast him a sharp glance. “Well. Yes. Right. It doesn’t look like I can get away from this. Are there any advantages in being a Pyrate Captain around here?”

Blue eyes gleamed, framed by black panda eye-sockets: unlike some of the newly Authentic Pyrates of New Tortuga, the Bosun’s black eye-patches were ones she had been born with. “Aye, Capt’n Hohki! But if you’ll follow me and meet my own Captain Akeritsu-Sama– she’ll best be able to tell you.”

The vixen sighed, looking around. “Lead on, Bosun,” she gave a despairing glance around, trying to spot a tiny shred of normality hiding somewhere. “I suppose I’ve got nothing else to do today.”

“My goodness!” Thought Tekeli-li as he heard someone else squat on the carven rim of his pit and howl shocking obeisance at the sinister stars, “Just how many Cultists has that dratted Wizard brought along?” He began to feel quite alarmed, for though his lair was well-stocked, there were eleven feasting indescribably in there already.” Shobban turned the page, the various offspring hanging on her every word as well as whichever bits of her they could reach.

“Ah! That makes twelve. Now we’re all gathered. It’s always best to start a Quest with a good festival, it brings good luck.” The Wizard gestured to the twelve Cultists. “As does starting with the right number – with you along, that’s thirteen, much more suitable.”

“Me?” Tekeli-li piped, his protoplasm drawing up into big spikes and blades at the shock. But the Cultists were not listening – they were bringing out musical instruments, thigh-bone flutes, dry death-rattling crotalas, and drums covered in oddly tattooed and tanned skins of sentients. One by one they began to play, in an eerie cacophony that echoed oddly around the walls of the Pit.

“It’s Off we go, our Quest comes first

Investigators, do your worst

Reclaiming soon, our Temples old

We’ll feed Adventurers to the mould!

We’re hopping out, beneath the stars

Paladins strong we’ll spy afar

We’ll trample every Elder Sign

Their foaming blood shall be our wine!

So off we go, our squamous horde

Our Mythos Cycles climb on board

We’ll seek the long-forgotten Tomb

And pedal out in quest of Doom!”

But though the Shoggoth-pit rang merrily with the sinister sounds, Tekeli-li shuddered and sloshed nervously. He did not at all like the sound of this – all this talk of bold Adventurers, Investigators and Paladins was something that the amorphous pulpy entities in his neighbourhood preferred to remain as pulp entity Fiction, and not have to actually deal with. He seethed and bubbled nervously, and was just about to surge out towards one of the portals to the forbidden dimensions of Outside, when the evil eye of the Wizard spotted him.

“Here now! The Host can’t leave his guests, not at his very own going-away Party!” The Wizard smiled, fixing Tekeli-li with a fierce gaze and a “Dominate Shoggoth” spell several levels higher than Tekeli-li could struggle against. “Before the mocking moonlight fades in the ambiguous abyssal voids, we’re all starting out – these twelve good Cultists and you, on the quest for the Eternal Fountain Of Filth.”

The cubs, pups and kits all “Oooh”’d and “Ahhh”’d as Shobban finished the chapter, just as Trish and Hiroshi returned. Shobban waved, closing the book and putting it down. “How’d it go?”

Hiroshi gave her one of her biggest and best Grins, filling up most of her face without moving her jawline while Trish looked on in amazement, trying to work out the biology involved.

“It was OK! We just dumped a pile of stuff into the Singularity, labeled it to ourselves “With best wishes from a well-wisher” – then pulled the chain and Foosh – it all went off.” Hiroshi carefully checked a bean-bag for invisible occupants – some of the inhabitants of the crèche took after their other Parent’s looks – and sat down. She yawned. “Now what?”

“Well, I was thinking about that.” Shobban tapped one long canine tooth with her pencil. “You know, your idea about being able to party all we wanted without worrying about it – leaving it to Causality to get the headache?”

Hiroshi sniffed. “Don’t say it. It’s a totally irresponsible idea, Respectable students shouldn’t plan that sort of thing. I know just what you’re going to say.”

“Wrong!” Shobban’s tail thrashed, while two kittens tried to grab it. “You were right the first time, Hiroshi! Party time! Just as soon as Mipsi takes over at tea-time, we can get the Sake out. And invite all our friends over, too.”

Trish looked at the equations Shobban had drawn, and her very realistic teeth shone as she smiled. “Is being a Traditional thing to be doing at Toho, Yes-no?”

“Oh Yes, definitely Yes, squared and cubed Yes.” Shobban tapped at some squiggles at the top of page ten, next to the crossed-out proof of the Theory of Some Things (The Theory Of Everything had been solved to some physicists’ satisfaction years before, but the general public remained skeptical. The important proof, reducing it to an equation compact enough to fit on a T-shirt, eluded Science still.) “It’s what you call Applied Mathematics – one equation told the world how to tune up a Bachman-Turner Overdrive enough to flip a starship through the folds of Space – and this one’s telling us it’s all right to raid Kazuko’s drinks cabinet.”

“Cool.” Hiroshi squinted at the page, then covered one eye to see if it improved things. “That’s what I CALL scientific progress!”

“Progress,” Kazuko Leclerc declared as she sat on the turret of her Maus II, looking at the three kilometres of water that separated them from New Tortuga, “Is just what we’re not making.”

Mariko gave a sympathetic hum, as she wriggled out of the driver’s hatch, and started to slap repair patches onto the big air struts that held their flotation screens rigid. “At least it’s a nice day for it,” she offered, smoothing down a patch and relaxing. “A fine day and a coral sand beach – for all we know, Suzuko’s got Mae’s message and could be arriving any time.”

Mariko stretched, taking off her black leather tanker’s helmet and slid out over the side onto the smooth sand, her daughter following like a long grey streak of fur fabric. She smiled, unzipping her outer suit to reveal a black and glossy bathing costume underneath. “Four days we’ve been in those tin cans! Four days without a bath or change of clothes – I’m going for a swim. And you could use one too, Kaz.”

Kazuko’s miniscule button nose twitched slightly, as she scented her own soaked coverall. “If you say so – but really, I couldn’t tell. You snouty folk are all so fussy.”

The mouse winced. “Let’s put it like this – if the family firm made a perfume like yours, we could sell it.” She paused, her whiskers twitching. “Sell it to the JSDF as an area denial weapon – one spray and nobody would want to go anywhere near the area!”

Kazuko caught her reflection in the ersatz plastic of the hatch periscope. Her usually bouncy mop of blonde head-hair was plastered down with sweat, salt spray and smears of oil. She averted her eyes. “Wait for me – I’ll grab the soap and join you!”

Mae was already on the beach, a large towel spread and a waterproof data visor covering her eyes. She waved, spotting her friends arriving. “First time I’ve really tested these. They do data links, plain light, magnification and infrared. I’m looking through a public camera over there right now – it looks like they’re having an eighteenth-century fashion show.”

“No sign of Suzuko?” Kazuko asked hopefully.

The grey-furred feline shook her head. “It’s a crowded place, New Port Royal. I’ve more chance of finding her through the local Nets. It’s not as easy as through Suki’s Cray 90-90, but I’m trying.”

Concentrating, she tuned out the plain view of the sunlit beach and the watchful Salvation Naval sloop anchored offshore, and stared through her virtual view, looking out over the island. It was like flying over a city at night – the broad structure could be seen, but details could only be recognised in the brightly-lit squares and street corners – in real life, the areas that public cameras were watching.

Mae gritted her teeth. Most of the island was “black light” – her sensors registered there was camera coverage there, but nothing she could access. But there were brightly lit shops clearly visible – her far-flung consciousness flitted past a well-respected Thieves’ Bazaar, stocked with excellently priced items of hardware under glaring advertisements headlined “It’s a Steal!”. Her tail twitched, but she moved her viewpoint on – there might be time for shopping later.

A few minutes brought her to a part of the virtual city where there were no street lamps. She hesitated, looking back at the bright zones “behind” her. True, the local Net came through short range, line of

sight transmissions that only a dedicated snooping satellite stood much chance of spotting from a distance – but this looked like a place where she might be able to find some answers.

Tuning her presence in that place from a drifting wraith to a solid, interactive figure, Mae “walked” down a starlit street, heading towards a chink of light. She paused, and looked down at herself – clothing her image in her traditional hock-length brown trench coat, which bulged in places suggestive of concealed hardware.

There was a door, and a narrow slot. Eyes scanned her approaching image, or the functional counterpoint of eyes. “Name and business?” Came a voice that belonged in a data file of something large and intimidating, and probably dressed in a traditional bouncer’s costume.

“Mae Tsuko, of Japan.” Mae hesitated. “Information to buy and sell. And – services available. I’m a Psyker.” She winced, though it did not show up on her generated form in that place. In Japan the idea of someone being able to access one’s private thoughts was about the ultimate horror, far worse than casually announcing “I’m an axe-murderer”. That could be made socially acceptable by adding “but I only do it for public entertainment on a game-show” – but for a Psyker there was no such escape clause.

The door opened, revealing a dim, crowded bar, with far fewer generic figures than she had expected. The “Mean Streets” look of an old Oriental movie was a standard figure, with templates easy to use for even the least experienced data walker. In this place, though – she realised that if she lived in this shadow world of the Greenland Anarchist Non-State, she would fairly soon be wanting to generate a new wardrobe.

Mae steered herself towards the bar, and looked around. There were masked figures, hooded figures and several with the blank faces of unfinished marionettes. Clothes were stylish – she recognised one character with the gorgeous epaulettes, gold-braided uniform and towering dyed quiff of Emperor Norton the Second’s secret police. She smiled, her senses tingling. For an instant, she toyed with the idea of pulling a sealed packet out of her pocket, waving it in the air and shouting “DRUGS!” or “TOP SECRET!” just to see who moved first. But no – that was more Kazuko’s style, and Mae tried to be a little more subtle than a cluster bomb in a china shop.

“I have a shopping list,” she announced conversationally. “I’m collecting cards.” With that, she pulled out a battered representation of a trading-card game from the twentieth century, that if real would certainly fetch its weight in gold on the open market. She put a card down on the table – its back proclaimed it a low value one, a list of Worldnet addresses and valid codes, very handy for certain deniable transactions. That they were the student accounts of Shiitake Tabi and some of his friends, bothered Mae no more than it would whoever would trade to see the data on its hidden face. “Any takers?”

There was a vague stirring of interest. Mae put another card next to it. “A pirated satellite, that departed its orbit three days ago. Not claimed by anyone registered on this island or the Greenland Anarchist Non-State. Here are the control codes it’s now using, and who stole it. Its new owner should attract little attention – if he wants to use it a little while he claims the reward and turns the original thief in. Any takers?”

Some individuals strolled by, and took a close look at the back of the card. One of them shone what looked like a small torch at the card, checked its hologram and nodded, satisfied.

Mae ran her pink tongue over her sharp teeth. She had one more to bid – this was a quite different coloured card, more in the nature of an IOU that could do her real harm if she refused to redeem the promise on it. “Services of a registered Psyker, for one assignment, on New Tortuga within ten hours from now. No assassinations – and I won’t cause permanent injury except in self-defense. Any takers?”

Now she really had the room’s attention. She had heard there were Psykers here – but in the usual course of things, they would either be very highly paid “consultants” or personnel dedicated to some existing cause. A Pirate ship might have their own, but would use their powers sparingly, and rarely if ever lend their services out. In an open market of abilities such as hers, the shop windows normally gave a price, with a chalked notice of “*none offered for sale.*”

A figure with the velvet fabric of a shop dummy looked at the card, and verified it. Although New Tortuga had no laws, let alone law enforcement, this deal was as binding as any two farmers shaking hands in the full view of a market. “And what are you – collecting?” The accent was neutral, a synthetic tone that revealed no extraneous data whatsoever – a perfect poker-player’s voice, Mae found herself thinking.

Mae slapped down something resembling Suzuko’s student ID card. “I want to meet her – unharmed, in a friendly fashion. I believe she’s being hunted – I want to know by whom. And to meet them, in an unfriendly fashion, with the option on harm.”

“Done. Any provisos to the trade?” The baize-featured mannequin injected a lightly questioning tone into its otherwise deadpan inflexion.

Mae drew her breath, her tail twitching. “I need clearance to physically access New Tortuga. I don’t currently have landing permission.”

“Agreed.” A doll-like bow, somewhat mocking. “It will be necessary. Stand by for immediate landing clearance and details of the mission.” It passed over another card, not one of the trading cards which it deftly scooped up, but a representation of an old-fashioned business card.

Mae sighed, bowing in return, and left the building. It would have been perfectly possible to just shut her image down, effectively vanishing from the room – but that was bad manners. Doors were meant to be used, she told herself.

In the alley, another two figures had left ahead of her. One vanished to whatever physical location they were connecting from, fading out in the crackly haze of a teleporter effect. The other one shouted a certain word and pointed at the ground – which glowed, cracked and sprouted clawed appendages which seized the figure and dragged him off through the smoking tunnel, which collapsed after him without trace.

Mae grinned, vanishing as her data visor reverted to a plain view of genuine beach and ersatz armoured vehicles. It took all sorts to make a world.

“Mae says we’ll be clear to roll in half an hour!” Broohilda’s purple spike of a tail quivered with urgency as she trotted over to where Jenni and Tava were washing each other with salt-water soap in the surf. “Finally – we might get to find Suzuko!”

Jenni smiled, leaping into a hug. “That’s just wonderful! And then another leisurely drive back – but not wasting the first two days this time. Suzuko’s going to want to ride on her Tiger Three, I’m sure.”

Broohilda closed her eyes as she nodded, willing herself to relax. Jenni’s wet wool caressed her like a soothing flannel scented with soap and clean musks, leaving her bare skin glistening like an onyx statue in some far rain forest. “It’s an Empress Tiger, really.”

“Whatever.” Jenni nuzzled her. She waved Tava forward, and invited his close hug, the three of them together. “This is so fine – it’ll be better of course when there’s a dozen or more of us, but – not so cosy.” She looked up at Tava, her eyes sparkling. “Mother was nineteenth, the herd had been going nine years when she joined. I’m glad we got in at the first stop.”

Tava winced. “I’ll have to ... go and check the engine oil’s topped up. She was running awful hot last night.” Kissing Broohilda, he retreated to the rounded shadow of the Stalin Three.

“Mmm. Wasn’t just the engine. So, Broohilda, what do you think? Do you reckon you could possibly beat this?” Jenni’s eyes narrowed slightly, watching the ram’s broad back.

Broohilda’s narrow nostrils flared slightly, catching the scents on the wind. “He’s awfully nice. But I don’t think he’s ... ready for this.”

The ovine girl looked at her, one eyebrow raised. “If it’ll make you feel better – I’ll tell you a real secret. You know, in Japan everyone’s Registered, down to the DNA, it’s coded on their citizenship cards?”

“Yes – Mangana was telling me.” Broohilda’s eyes followed Tava as he bent over, muscles rippling beneath the wool as he hauled a toolbox out of the accessory chest welded onto the hull side.

“It’s not just them. When they started their eugenics project, the Government of the time thought it wasn’t good enough to start from a flat baseline, of what’s on your medical card and passport. Oh no. They matched everybody up – and publicly printed out who was related to whom. Really. Genetically. There were a lot of surprises, and a lot of shake-ups.” Jenni’s wooly tail waved slowly, as her eyes feasted on Broohilda’s slender form. “A nasty shock, eh, to get kicked out of a noble family and find out you belong in the postman’s instead! Nowhere else on the planet ever dared try the experiment.”

“And?” Broohilda queried, turning to fix Jenni with a puzzled expression.

“And so. It’s a good thing we didn’t try it back home.” Sharp herbivorous teeth gleamed in the bright sunlight. “Mother was nineteenth, like I said, and she wasn’t the last to join. Even for a ram, that’s a lot of tails to get round in a week – and Father wasn’t that young at the time.” She hesitated. “Or possibly he was. But that’s not what my Birth Certificate says.”

“Oh My.” Broohilda blinked. “He’s not your half-brother after all? So why not tell him and ... oh. I see.” She looked at Jenni, the ewe sleek and relaxed. “You can’t tell him. And – I can’t, either. Oh dear.”

Jenni hugged her, grinning. “I neither confirm or deny anything – and I’m not taking any genetic tests, you can bet your tail! Don’t you think it makes things more ... Interesting ?”

Broohilda’s eyes went wide, as she swallowed nervously. “Not really, no. I think it’s unfair.”

“Aww. Look at it this way. We’re a flock now – and you’ll help me choose who else joins. It’s traditional – of course Tava decides too, but it’s “one picks, the other chooses” – there’ll be quite a few ewes with an interest, dropping by now. It’s our responsibility to choose ones we’ll be happy with, and who’ll make our ram happy. We two shouldn’t have any secrets between us.” Jenni held her gaze. “It’s our responsibility to make the flock work – we have to trust each other.”

“What about – that secret?” Broohilda blurted out, her eyes darting towards the ram, now buttoning up an oil-proof coverall as he heaved open the engine grill. “You could just tell him you’re not his sister, it’d make him a lot happier about – all this.”

Jenni raised an eyebrow. “He’s lived with it so far. And it’s a bit late to worry about all that now. Anyway – I’m not an orphan, you know. I don’t think Mother would thank me for spreading the news. You – I can trust. I wouldn’t do this for anyone else, Broohilda. I’d like to ... entrust you with everything I have. Next year, I should think it’ll have to be now.” She smiled, stroking the furless girl’s trim stomach.

Broohilda closed her eyes, feeling the warm Autumn sunlight on her dark skin. She could hear the gentle thunder of the surf on the ocean side of the reef, and the artificial thunder as first one Maybach engine then another bellowed into life in the belly of Kazuko’s Maus II.

She remembered something Jenni had said the week before, when the ewe had been telling her nostalgically about her family, her mother and twenty others farming the high alpine pastures of South Island, sometimes cut off for weeks in Winter from the outside world. She had hesitantly asked Jenni if all of them had been ewes – if other species ever married into the flock.

“Not in ours – but it’s not unknown,” Jenni had shrugged. “Getting in an exotic has sometimes seemed like a good idea at the time – but all too often it doesn’t work out. They can see the attraction on an intellectual level – but if they’re not a proper herd species, they don’t feel it right down where it counts.”

Broohilda’s dark skin flushed invisibly, though she felt the heat of it. She nodded, looking at the expectant ewe as she realised now just what she had meant. It was an uncomfortable feeling, like discovering a new kind of hunger that nothing else in her experience would satisfy. “You can rely on me.” She looked into Jenni’s bar pupilled eyes, the mirror of her own.

“Thank you!” Jenni smiled, patting a purple-black shoulder. “Come on now, let’s help our Ram get this show on the road. We’ve got a lot to do, back at Toho. And like the old song said –“ she nodded at the island across the strait, “we won’t be back, till it’s over, over there.”

“This is jolly!” Anne Pontephrigh enthused, her ears flapping in the wind as she leaned over the side of the fast launch, her tongue hanging out. Beside her, Dick and Julian were braced solidly in the prow, as the crew of Pyrates steered toward BlackTail’s Reef. “Going out to dig real buried treasure!”

“Oh, definitely.” Captain “Redclaw” DeWaal now sported a large black three-cornered hat, and on his shoulder was a vicious steel flying robot, wired up to his brain-user interface by his ship’s techs. He grinned, holding the hat on with one paw. He seemed to be immune to the strange stylistic compulsions that were sweeping the island, possibly due to the anti-intrusion routines in his brain implants – but in the spirit of solidarity he had joined his crew in their fashion makeover. “We do this sort of thing all the time. Have any of you considered a career in Piracy?”

Anne giggled, shaking her head, spray flying as the launched bounced over the sunlit waves at twenty knots. Dick frowned, his bluff, honest features wrinkling slightly in concern. “I say! We can’t be getting involved with that sort of thing – decidedly seedy, not the kind of thing a Pontephrigh does.” He hesitated, his head cocked to one side. “Well, there was the eleventh earl, Nathaniel Pontephrigh, knocked about the Spanish Main and pirated a few ships – mainly Spanish. But that was simply ages ago.”

“But aren’t traditions wonderful?” Redclaw addressed Anne, whose long skirts were flying in the wind. “What could be better? I’ve looked him up since you mentioned him. Old Sir Nathaniel was a true patriot, he was raiding all sorts of places before they even went to war with your country officially. Saved such a lot of time and trouble later. And he retired a rich man.”

“Yes.” Dick’s muzzle twitched in puzzlement. “I can see what you mean, Captain Redclaw. He did build the East Wing of Bellington Hall, after all. Anyone who did that, can’t have been a bad sort at all.”

“Of course not! He was a Pontephrigh, wasn’t he?” Julian agreed. “Just because nobody’s used a tradition in awhile, doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with it.”

Redclaw grinned, his sharp teeth gleaming in the sun. The reef they were heading on was a barren sandbank above the waterline, and he knew for a fact that it had been surveyed over and over again with ground sensors capable of spotting an aluminium mili-yen piece under two metres of wet sand. A full fathom deep, he corrected himself as he gazed at the approaching bank.

“What sort of treasure do you think we’ll find?” He asked innocently, looking at Anne. This was a final test of his theory – he had seen the secret passages that the Infamous Five had used, which simply had no right to exist in the accurately surveyed modern buildings. If he was right – then he had found a treasure the likes of which Pyrates of old could never have imagined in their wildest dreams.

“Ohh ... the usual sort,” Anne replied dreamily. “A big black brass-bound chest, full of doubloons and jewels. With maybe another old map with lots of skulls and crossed palm trees on it.”

“Quite a treasure!” Redclaw injected a bouncing enthusiasm in his voice, signaling his Neo-parrot to squawk cheerfully. “It might be the chest Mad Mick Mannion buried somewhere in these waters – with bags of platinum thousand-Euro coins the size of your fist. What a find that’d be!”

“Oh yes!” Anne sparkled. In fact – something certainly sparkled, as if the launch had run through a shimmering veil of spray hanging in the sunlight. A few seconds later, the boat slowed, retracted its hydrofoils and caught the crest of a wave that brought it perfectly smoothly onto the beach. “Dick and Julian are super at finding that sort of thing.”

“I’m sure they are. Yes, I’m quite sure they are.” Redclaw’s BUI had registered a huge surge, something like a data intrusion alert, but less focused. He accessed a standard database of currencies and collectable coins for the second time in an hour, and nodded thoughtfully as he compared the two results.

“Hurrah!” Dick and Julian leaped over the side into the shallow water, their buckets and spades at the ready. Jenks followed, carrying a large picnic basket, which he laid carefully on the sand beyond reach of the waves before returning to assist Anne over the side of the launch.

Redclaw’s tail twitched as he looked on, carefully noting everything with both his sharp eyes and the multi-spectral scanners of his neo-parrot hovering above the beach. There! He spotted something very odd, and noted the findings for later reappraisal.

“Lend a hand if they ask for it,” he waved to three of his crew, now tastefully attired in frogged coats and sea-boots. “But let them choose the spot – I want to see how this works.” He smiled, as Dick earnestly paced up and down the empty sand bar and suddenly pointed at a spot. “We’re probably in for a surprise.”

He followed his crew leisurely over to where the two canine brothers were digging frantically, their stocky forms already half-way out of sight as they threw up fountains of gleaming coral sand left and right. Suddenly, his nose twitched – at an unexpected scent of diesel on the wind, blowing from the far side of the island. Strolling over while his flying parrot-like scout watched the digging, he noticed three wide sets of tracks pressed deep into the damp sand, and a few stray fuel splashes. Out at sea, what looked like three tubby barges could just be seen wallowing in the stiff currents, heading for the main harbour entrance of New Port Royal.

“Of course, there could be a rational explanation – Anne contacted some friends of hers to go out and bury something here this morning. But I wonder ...” he fell silent, his long black-tipped russet tail swinging from side to side as he watched with growing interest.

Suddenly there was a clang of metal on metal, and a loud cheer rose from all three Pontephrights.

“We found it! Mad Mannion’s treasure!” Anne waved over. “Come and look!”

In a few more minutes, an ancient blackened timber chest was wrestled up from what certainly looked like several centuries of burial – a quick cleaning of the sides of the pit showed the delicate stratification of bedded sand, recording storm surges and typhoons of decades and generations gone by. Redclaw casually took a swing at one age-darkened side of the chest with his brand new cutlass, exposing a paw’s breadth of clearly marked tree rings, and signaled his neo-parrot to drop down and take a careful look.

“If you’d do the honours?” Redclaw presented Dick Pontephright with a large-bore flintlock pistol. “The recommended method is to shoot the lock off. It’s not something we’re used to, though.” He winced at the thought: standing at point-blank range while a sturdy lock and the bullet transformed into high-speed shrapnel had been officially determined generations before to be hazardous to the health. But for some strange reason, he rather doubted Dick would get as much as a scratch.

“Gosh! Thanks awfully. Hands over ears, Anne!” Dick grabbed the unfamiliar pistol, pointed it and pulled the trigger – there was a deafening boom, and when the grey powder smoke disappeared, the lock was lying on the sand in two neat halves, as if lasered apart.

“Good shot.” Redclaw commented wryly. But the Pontephrights were rushing forward to open the lid, revealing a sparkling trove of enough precious metals to cause severe inflation if dumped into some of the world’s smaller economies. Anne cheered, holding up a silvery disc the size of an antique Compact Disc, and tossed it towards the fox. “You were right – it’s just what we hoped for – Mad Mannion’s treasure, thousand-Euro coins and all!”

Redclaw caught the coin, and almost dropped it – nearly quarter of a kilogram of what looked like pure platinum, stamped with the legend “One Thousand Euros” on one side. He passed it to Jurgen, the Bosun’s deep-set bear eyes widening. “These have to be rare – what, are they proof coins? I never heard of them before.”

“Neither had anyone else,” Redclaw accepted the platinum disc back, his keen appraisal reckoning its worth at three hundred gold yen or more. “I’ve got a hard copy printout from the definitive coin collector’s guide I downloaded before mentioning the treasure we expected – and another hard copy I made just now. You might be interested in the difference. I expect there’s now a Mad Mick Mannion in the history books as well – and now he’s always been there.”

“But that’s impossible!” The bear’s small ears went right back in shock.

“I can get used to it, though.” Redclaw raised an eyebrow. “I’ve just had my BUI compare the tree rings on that chest with European oak in the archaeological database. Felled in the sixteenth century, at latest. Isn’t that interesting?” He nodded towards Anne Pontephrigh, who was trying on a sparkling tiara – by a staggering coincidence, of all the possible species and head sizes it might have been made for, it fitted her perfectly. “Miss Pontephrigh and her brothers have been telling the truth, about having no idea why things have been changing around here – they are exactly as they expect them to be.” A slow smile spread over his sharp features.

Jurgen blinked, the bear’s sturdy Swiss solidity shaken to the core. “What are we going to – do with them?” He whispered, his tail trembling in unfamiliar shock. Boarding a fiercely defended ship with cannon shells and chainswords chewing at his armour held no terrors for Jurgen – but looking at the Pontephrighs, he felt like an origami figure standing next to a cheerful naked flame.

Redclaw rubbed his paws together. “We, Bosun, are going to see if we can do a little steering of those talents. I’m betting my tail, they don’t even consciously control this ability – we just have to persuade them to see things our way – and that’s the way things will be.” A look of unholy glee spread across his features, and his neo-parrot opened its carbide-edged beak in a cheerful squawk. “I think it’s going to get decidedly interesting around here.”

Half an hour later, the scene was very jovial as a big red and white checked picnic cloth was spread out on the sands, and Jenks opened the wicker hamper.

“There’s cold ham, cold beef, pressed tongue, hard-boiled eggs, and enough sardine sandwiches for everyone and seconds all round,” Anne boasted shyly, proffering plates around. “Lots of mustard, watercress, orange segments and a gorgeous big sticky plum-cake. All made fresh this morning.”

“Super spread, Anne – and well done, Jenks,” Dick opened up a gallon bottle of pop – plain lemonade, not the heavily advertised brands that he had seen on Pirate Island and had thought looked rather suspect. “So – we’ll hand this treasure over to the Authorities then – who knows, there might be a reward!”

Redclaw smiled, gritting his teeth. A flash of inspiration struck him, and his BUI sprang to life undetected by those around him. “I can contact the local Police immediately. I’m sure you can put in a good word for us.” He caught Jurgen’s incredulous gaze, and winked. “We have treasure trove laws here – you get to keep ten percent – the rest goes to Charity.”

“That’s jolly decent!” Julian nodded, his mouth full. “I must say, it’s far more fun than I expected, this treasure-hunting lark. Do you do this often?”

“Not quite like this – not as often as we’d like,” Redclaw sighed, looking at the impossible treasure chest. “We could really use some new crew – someone with real pluck and nerve. But they don’t make them like your ancestor Sir Nathaniel these days – more’s the pity.”

“I should think they do!” Dick’s voice held pride and outrage. “If anything, we’ve been improving over the years – since we settled the Plateau, there’s been more adventure than you could shake a stick at, even if you tried all day.”

Vulpine teeth flashed in a swift grin. His BUI accessed huge collections of medical data from across the planet, and he smiled. He had access to the history of the Pontephrigh family, all the written records accessible back beyond Sir Nathaniel’s time – and an unusually large number of them had the reputation of being “lucky”. Given that the talent was inheritable and passed through the family line – five generations of intermarriage within a very restricted gene pool could well have intensified the ability beyond all previous limits. You didn’t breed racehorses, he told himself, by going for the widest genetic base.

“Well, now,” he mused, injecting a precisely measured dose of puzzlement into his voice. “Sir Nathaniel did very well as a true Pirate, didn’t he? We’ve revived a splendid old tradition here called “Letters of Marque” – it’s a sort of license to raid and discourage the wrong sort of people. You could sail under Letters of Marque and still go home perfectly respectable.”

Dick scratched an ear, contemplatively. “It’s a rum notion”, he confessed, “But – I think I can see how it might work. Still, never think on an empty stomach! Sardine sandwich, Captain?”

Anne handed out the sandwiches and poured the tea from a big brown pot, a dreamy smile on her face. It was a pleasant meal, indeed – but after half an hour even Jenks’ generous catering had gone the way of all good meals. She supposed silly Georgina would love all that swinging around on ropes and firing cannon everywhere – but for herself, she imagined herself standing silhouetted against the sunset, on the poop deck of some noble vessel. Her skirts would be streaming in the wind as she watched endless vistas of exotic jungle islands unfold, each and every one absolutely packed jam-full of Adventure.

Dick shook her shoulder cheerfully a few minutes later. “Wake up, sleepyhead! The Police are here!” He pointed over to where a big black launch was heading their way, with the words “Ocean Police” stenciled on the prow in clear, new-looking lettering. “Hurrah! That was quick!”

As the launch approached, Anne spotted half a dozen tall, military-looking figures, mostly ermines, standing braced and ready for action. She cheered as they leaped ashore – their uniforms were rather plain and black, but they had proper helmets, big glossy boots and very practical steel-tipped truncheons, which she told herself were the only really important features.

The senior-looking figure touched his helmet respectfully, singling out Dick. “That’s a good day’s work, young man,” he nodded towards the opened chest. “Folk have been looking for that treasure for years. We’ll take care of it now.” While four of the constables staggered off with the chest to secure it in their launch, he accepted politely a glass of pop from Dick’s remaining bottle.

“Will you be – arresting anyone?” Anne asked timidly, looking up at the policeman – so strong and noble looking, she told herself, and so impeccably turned-out that every piece of his uniform looked absolutely brand new.

The tall ermine smiled. “Not today, young Miss. We might have had to – if these fellows had tried to make off with the chest. But we’re glad to see you kept them on the straight and narrow. Very well done, all of you!” With a flourishing salute of his truncheon, he re-joined his comrades and the launch sped away back to New Port Royal.

“Well!” Dick breathed, watching him go. “It looks like you’re right, Captain Redclaw – you can be a respectable Pyrate if you try.”

“All we need is the right example to follow,” Redclaw admitted piously. Inwardly, he grinned as he watched the launch vanish. It was amazing how fast modern fabricators could turn out uniforms and equipment, given the template files – and the “charity” the treasure would end up in was one of those run by Merton, his Pyrate Chartered Accountant. “We know how to be good Pyrates – with you along, we can be even better ones, and respectable. And with Letters of Marque you can decide in advance whom you think should be taken down a peg or two. You still support your own country, and protect their interests until you go back there a hero.” He winced slightly – the way the seas had risen by 2036, the only way he would manage to visit most of his ancestral Netherlands was by submarine.

Anne clasped her paws together. “Oh, do say yes, Dick!” She implored her brother. “It’d be SO romantic!”

Dick Pontephrigh nodded slowly. “I’ll think about it,” he assured her. “I’ll definitely think about it.”

Heads turned in the streets of New Port Royal as an unfamiliar sound rattled the windows and echoed around the dockside buildings. There was a shallow ramp heading from the graving dock up to the concrete walkways of the dockside – and up that ramp clawed three large steel giants, massing three hundred tonnes between them. The first and second of them bore what looked like modified black crosses on the turret, the top section erased to form a stylised “T”.

“Hurray!” Kazuko cheered, waving from the commander’s hatch of the Maus II. “We finally got here! This is more like it!” They had deflated the air struts and let the flotation screens droop like depressed hovercraft around the upper decks – all hatches were open and cheerful Toho Academy flags waved from the radio aerials as gestures of friendly intent. Jenni had been against it, pointing out that Pirate Island was notorious for random acts of violence, and that hatches closed would be far safer. Mariko, on the other hand, had been there the year before, and claimed the natives were generally more curious than aggressive – unless provoked.

Mae nodded, her whiskers drooping with worry. She had received details of where to meet their anonymous ally for the information trade – and had been given some tantalising details of what she was being asked to do. None of it sounded encouraging or healthy.

“OK, nobody’s shooting on sight,” Kazuko called up as they turned onto Bullion Street, the treads crackling and sparking on the concrete road. “I’ve got the map – we can close hatches a bit, just in case. Remember Gen’s lot are here somewhere, and we’re sort of recognisable in these buggies.”

“You think so?” Mae asked mildly, shrugging her seat belt straps into a more comfortable position as she peered through the periscope of the spotter cannon. “We know they were here – that was awhile ago. We don’t know what’s happening.”

“Well, whatever’s happening, sitting in the turret of two hundred tonnes of Maus, is the best place to find out.” Kazuko philosophised, patting the safety lever on the main breech. “And with a shell ready to go in each barrel, just in case. Armour-piercing in the ’88, canister in the 225. Should do something!”

The radio crackled, an unencrypted crystal set that worked on frequencies not even the most expensive modern interception system had the right aerials to even look for. “*Mangana here. We’ve got about enough fuel left to clean Horst’s overalls – Kaz, if we don’t get some TONKA 250 pretty quick you’ll have to push us. Over.*”

“Enough to clean Horst’s overalls? That should get us back to Toho, easily.” Kazuko grinned and dodged as Mae threw a rolled-up oil rag at her. “OK! OK! While you go find Suzuko we’ll go shopping. Looks quite a place. If we can’t leave the vehicles safe, maybe some shops do delivery.”

Mae looked up at her quizzically. “You think they have actual normal businesses in a place like this?”

“And why not?” Kazuko cocked her head to one side. “You get the same patterns appearing everywhere, in all sorts of times and spaces. Arcaneologists have found evidence of game shows under the lava flows from the Deccan Traps that flooded India seventy million years ago. Sometimes it’s absurdly specific – Horst tells me where he’s from there was a hit song in the 1960’s called “Hey Jude”, although on his timeline the Beatles didn’t sing it and the sentiments were VERY different.”

Below them in the driving compartment, Mariko shifted the engine throttles as the Maus took a corner, its electrical drive smoothly shifting between transmission speeds. “All stop, narrow streets ahead,” she called up, her stereo rangefinder having spotted the plaza at the end of Packet street having exits too small to squeeze the Maus through without taking some of the neighbourhood with it.

Kazuko heaved the turret hatch open and looked around. She frowned. There were buildings all around, and there was hardly enough room to do more than turn their little armoured squad around. “Bit cramped here,” she complained, “not good tank country.”

Mae shrugged, sliding up through the flak gunner’s position. “Can’t be helped – unless you want to go back and park on the beach. This is where I get off.”

“Do you want any help?” Kazuko looked at her, her voice suddenly serious. “We’ve got to watch the vehicles – but I’m not happy about you heading off on your own. Got your suit ready?”

Mae smiled. She was already dressed in the under-suit providing cooling and a measure of fireproofing for her mech, a slim hardsuit little bulkier than a medieval suit of armour plus a backpack. “All greased, fuelled and ready to go. Twenty litres of plain old methanol, nothing too toxic or unstable. Not like that borane hell’s piss Rai and Shiitake use.” She shivered. “I got a sniff of that last term when our refinery sprung a leak, put me in hospital all the weekend.”

“Right!” Kazuko semi-inflated the flotation screens around the rear deck, forming a shielded changing room as she helped Mae into the armour. Five minutes of systems checks and sealing checks later, all the green lights in Mae’s helmet proclaimed the suit was on power and ready to walk.

Kazuko stood up in the turret, resting on the overclocked two-centimetre flak gun that was on its first outing this trip. “OK? Keep in touch with your suit radio – any trouble, let us know.” She gave a ferocious grin. “With these buggies we’re riding, we can do a lot of urban renewal if we have to.”

Mae rolled her eyes, as she slid down the sloping front armour and balanced, her suit’s servos hissing and clicking quietly. “Don’t do that – Suzuko’s been here a week without shooting the place up, and she’s alive and well, wherever she is. Let’s follow her lead.” She checked her suit’s balance, and nodded. Unlike the heavyweights that Rai and his friends favoured, this had no screaming gas turbine pouring out heat and exhaust fumes (and razor-sharp turbine blades if the engine took a hit, she reminded herself.) Hers was a solid-state design, a with “muscles” of a memory metal that contracted as soon as electric current flowed through it. An air-breathing fuel cell provided enough power for three hours walking around, or half an hour of kicking down doors and leaping small bungalows in a single bound.

She braced herself, took a look back at her friends’ three tanks now defensively back-to-back in the middle of Small Packet Plaza, waved once and vanished into the alleyways of New Port Royal.

On every street of the town, a whole range of sensors watched the comings and goings of the crowds. These were rarely the obvious, bulky cameras of the late twentieth century, though – advanced optics, signal processing and data transmission made it possible to put a solid-state camera in a literal “bug” the size and shape of a grasshopper. There were real and manufactured grasshoppers in plenty watching Mae stride down the street – and not only eyes reported on the street life. Ears, noses and more technical instruments fed data into a loose collective of private and semi-private networks, where a well-connected individual could focus in to the smallest back alley or the remotest rooftop.

A truly well connected watcher could have seen several things happening in the next ten minutes. In Small Packet Square, some new visitors happily greeted fuel tanker trucks and stood cautiously clear while their crews busied themselves with earthing wires and fuelling hoses. Off towards the main docks on Fraud Lane, nine figures in black boarding armour headed towards the warehouse district at a brisk trot, their close-combat chainswords unsheathed and the drive motors ready to rip.

And most suprising of all – three characters in blue and white sailor-suits strolled happily down the main street, leading a self-propelled trolley loaded with green metal boxes stenciled with dire warning notices.

But New Tortuga was that sort of place – and however well connected a watcher might have been, they would have very rapidly lost interest.

Captain “Redclaw” DeWaal stood at the side of the warehouse normally used by Pacahuta, and smiled grimly behind his armoured visor. He envisaged a passageway opening in the wall – and reminded himself that Anne had been blithely confident that he could find it. For such a customer as himself, he doubted an appointment would be really necessary, and he was well prepared to argue the point.

“That brick, then that one, then that one down – there.” He willed the wall to open. “We can’t disappoint the little lady.” A few seconds later, there was a rumbling and a two-metre wide section of brickwork swung in to reveal stairs leading upwards.

Guarez hesitantly examined the wall, looking for the locking mechanism with a keen professional pride. But his Captain tapped him warningly on the shoulder.

“This isn’t like anything you’ll have seen before,” Redclaw advised, his short-range encrypted infrared communicator linking suit to suit. “Try not to think about it too much. Above all, don’t tell yourself this is impossible.” His tightly bound tail twitched inside its kevlar inner suit. Although every change that had taken place in the past week seemed to be holding up, being inside a secret passage that suddenly ceased to exist was not a way he envisaged ending his career.

“Aye Aye, Capt’n.” Guarez respectfully touched his helmet with the flat of his chainsword – mercifully, acquiring a taste for the styles of the seventeenth century did not interfere with being able to use the technologies of the twenty-first. He brought up the rear, ever aware of the threat of very understandable foes.

Half a minute’s cautious progress brought them to the end of the passage. Redclaw smiled, spotting a chink of light, and feeding an optical fibre camera through the tiny gap. He connected in the data feed to his BUI, and for ten seconds looked around the big open warehouse as clearly as if he had been standing in the middle of its floor.

Had you dared to ask his crew their frank opinion of their Captain, they would have all called him a cool, calculating professional – a Dutchman bringing the thoroughness of his race to a dangerous profession. It surprised them all when Redclaw suddenly brought his chainsword to screaming life – and slashed through the thin wall of the partition, leaping through into the warehouse beyond.

Redclaw stood in the middle of the extremely bare room, from which even the customary stock and tools were missing. He snarled, slashing the air with fury.

“Missed them!” He cut the power to the rending blade, opened his helmet and looked at his Bosun and Security Officer wryly as they cautiously picked their way through the rough-hewn hole in the wall.

“Yes, we missed them – Pacahuta, his staff and those Japanese who brought this thing to our island,” his voice was suddenly cold and smooth again. “Very well – but we can find them again.” A smile returned, as he looked around. “Guarez, you try the standard methods. While I,” he raised a speculative eyebrow, “I have a little lady Luck to sweet-talk, who just might help us on this.”

Some two hundred metres from Small Packet Plaza, Suzuko Hohki was staring up at the armoured bulk of the *Spirit Of Desolation*, from whose upper radio masts a plain black Pirate flag was flying, as the guidebooks had described until the last week. Beside her was Lebeq, who assured her he was well known with Captain Akeritsu, as well as George and Timmy, who most certainly were.

Suzuko scratched her head, then realised what was puzzling her. “They’ve not gone all theatrical, have they? Nobody’s walking around with cutlasses or iron hooks going “Arr Jim Lad.””

“No.” Lebeq agreed. “Rather odd – the one crew that George has ... befriended, are left at their full potential. Isn’t that interesting?”

Suzuko studied the lapine closely. “You know something, don’t you?” She blinked, and gave an irritated growl. “Before you say it – yes, I know. Information is your business. And I’ve bet you’ll sell it to the highest bidder, the medium bidder and all the rest, before you’ll tell me for free.”

“Nothing’s free.” Lebeq’s ears twitched, and he smiled as a severely dressed Pyrate in a modern fireproof suit waved them aboard. “And you’ve been most valuable to me. Just because I don’t give my wares away, doesn’t mean I won’t trade them. I’d be interested in your ideas.” He waved George and Timmy up the gangplank and followed ten metres behind, just out of earshot.

Suzuko nodded, concentrating. “You don’t think ... it’s George? It can’t be her cousins; they’re as big a set of tail-wagging idiots as you’ll find outside our Parliament. Respectable, honest and everything, sure. As solid as a cannonball, but mostly between the ears.”

“Ah. But we’re not talking about a clever plot here.” Lebeq held up one paw. “We have something very different. Tell me –“ he hesitated. “You’re from Japan. Have you seen your friends suddenly get irritated and pull out large mallets from nowhere? You have? Well, can you tell me how much intelligence is needed to do that?”

“None. They just do it. It’s innate.” Suzuko caught her breath. “I see what you mean. They’re from the past, more or less – and this place has slid back that direction.”

“Very good!” Lebeq smiled at her, stepping onto the deck. “But – keep that thought running quietly, please. Captain Akeritsu is a Customer, and you see...”

“You don’t want me to give the goods away for nothing.” Suzuko sighed, as she nodded.

On the deck, there was a reception committee – the panda Bosun, three large wolverines in plain military green suits, and a figure that had Suzuko almost stepping back over the rail in surprise. There were no Unicorns on Earth, she told herself – and none elsewhere that she had ever heard of were bipeds.

“Captain Hohki. Welcome aboard.” The black unicorn smiled, offering a hoof-like hand. “We’ve heard so much about you.”

Suzuko shook the hand, tentatively. “Thank you! I – try and keep a low profile, when I can.”

“A sensible move.” Akeritsu cast a glance at Lebeq. “Quite a party! And our dear Cybermancer as well. May I invite you in for some refreshment? No Grog or Salmagundi – though I can send out for some if you wish.”

“No thank you, that’s fine,” Suzuko hastily assured her. She had sampled the newly fashionable dishes which had saturated New Tortuga in the past week – and while there was nothing much wrong with Salmagundi, there was almost nothing else being sold to eat in the town. Having it for supper, breakfast and lunch was quite enough.

Suzuko followed the unicorn into a well-appointed wardroom, certainly decorated with plunder but quite lacking in ironbound treasure chests. Neatly dressed servants silently appeared, bearing in trays and wheeling in an ice chest of rare wines and cans of lager. George had apparently been expected – at least, Suzuko doubted there was usually much demand on board for ginger beer.

“So, Captain – what can I do for you?” Akeritsu sat on a wide sofa, Timmy and George happily flanking her. “The Brotherhood Of The Coast have been wondering if you’d show up in the fur – some of the freebooters are run as commercial concerns by shareholders at home, but we know you took a personal interest in your vessels.”

Suzuko hesitated. “It’s a long story.”

Half an hour later, Suzuko brought her condensed version of the events of the past two weeks to a close. She panted, relieved. “I didn’t expect to BE here – and I’d rather be somewhere else, to be honest. But – I can’t go and leave things undone – the Peruvians are still locked up, and there’s the matter of the Device they brought with them. Some of that’s my responsibility.”

“Spoken like a true Captain!” Akeritsu’s eyes sparkled, looking over the vixen. “I can answer some of that for you – the Peruvians are free, Captain DeWaal released them. About the Device, though – I’ve heard nothing.” She hesitated, her equine ears right back. “It sounds like something out of the past – some of my crew fought in Europe, and there was a very nasty weapon used by the EC forces right at the end – nobody ever found out just what the weapon was. Only what it did. I think we know more now.”

Lebeq stirred, a little uncomfortably. “I have a confession to make.” He cast his eyes around the room, and shrugged his shoulders. “You’re perfectly correct, Captain Akeritsu – Miss Hohki. Somehow the Peruvians obtained the last three prototypes of what the outside world called the Electric Grin. “

He looked from one face to another. “I recognise it, you see. I should do. I was one of the team that built it.”

End Chapter 14

