

Road Runner Chapter 15

“If they taught us one really important thing, back at my old school,” Hiroshi announced dramatically, the Anime girl’s face set in an unaccustomed expression of seriousness, “It was to always remember the Scientific Method. Whenever you investigate something – change one variable at a time, so you know just what’s going on. Test, alter, test again.”

Shobban nodded happily, the red setter’s dangling ears dancing as she set down some crates of supplies in Hiroshi’s room. “That’s right! You weren’t there last time, Trish – we almost summoned up enough Monster for everyone. It was very nearly right, too. We can’t be too far off. So we’re changing one variable, and seeing what happens.”

Hiroshi cheered, drawing a big pentacle on the dorm room floor, and holding up a bottle of chilli-flavoured Sake. “We’ll duplicate the whole experiment tonight – but THIS time, we’ll try it drunk!”

The previous day Shahaguo Island had seen two arrivals – Satori had managed to fly his Hughes Hercules back solo, with the assistance of a co-pilot seat piled high with re-programmed PrayStations handling the navigation and engine controls. Right now, he was regretting it – as a tall wolf in the black cloak and white ceramic collar of a Vicar Militant had taken one look at him through an unlabelled Detector, and dragged him off to ask him some very pointed questions about his trip to Pirate Island. Many of the points were those revealed by the threatening gape of an authentic Iron Maiden borrowed from the Society of Destructive Anachronism – and Satori was being most cooperative. Currently he was being held upside down with his head in a bucket of something unpleasant by the Verger, a stolid and solid ox who traveled in the Vicar’s retinue, and was supremely qualified for tasks involving strength and mindless obedience.

Up in the heavily reinforced Administration building, Fusada-sama was also having a bad day. Being the Arch-Dean of Toho Academy was rarely relaxing, and often the sort of job where you were obliged to handle half a dozen Unspeakable Events before breakfast. He sighed, signing off from a very uncomfortable video transmission all the way from the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo. Having a Vicar Militant turning his island and students upside down was bad enough, but this – this was worse.

“Professor Rabid!” He keyed the transmitter, summoning the elderly pit-bull from his authentic squat in a deserted corner of a condemned machine-shed. “You’re Suzuko Hohki’s Tutor, aren’t you? We just got word from her parents. High-level Diplomats, they are – they can raise more stink than a skunk regiment if they feel like it. She’s been spotted on New Tortuga, and they want her out of there. Right now.”

There was a weary growl from the other end of the link, as Rabid-sama acknowledged. “Yeah. All right. Bunch of suits and Nowheres, shouldn’t think they’d appreciate that place.” He paused. “But her mates are already over there, to do that. I’ve got their schedule, and a list of the gear they signed out of Historical Engineering. They’ve got a squad of F***-Off big main battle tanks with them, and enough ammo to blow New Port Royal off the map.”

“Someone’s already tried to do that.” Fusada-sama explained, using up his limited ration of patience for the day. “That’s why her parents want her somewhere safer.”

“Yeah? Like here, for example? First Monster footprint on the Tokyo trail?” In his squalid room, Rabid-sama struggled to his feet, panting. He looked around it with pride – although he was entitled to a well-furnished staff house up on the hill, an illegally occupied ex-storeroom was far more fitting to someone of his impeccable style credentials. He scratched himself behind the ears, pulling out a grubby sheaf of notes from under the mattress that was the room’s only furniture. “Here we go, tosh – her mates radioed in, said they’d made contact. She’s OK so far – and I can’t be arsed to send another team out to get her.”

“Then you’ll go yourself, and like it!” The Dean bellowed, crumpling a sheaf of reports into free-form origami. “That Vicar’s heading that way – hitch a ride with him. Either way, I want her back in class first lesson Monday. Got it?”

Rabid-sama snarled generically, and put the communicator down. He thrust his paws into the frayed pockets of his tartan trousers, and looked around glumly. This, he told himself, was becoming a pain in the arse. He had started his career in modern Archaeology, and for twenty years Ronny Rabid been amongst the most famous names in his profession. But two decades of dodging traps, fighting off sinister Natives and running home with the treasure from tombs and temples had proved enough for him, and he had taken up Phenomenology instead. The hours were shorter, and the Academy’s official statistics showed there was a 76.2 percent less chance of being hit with curare-tipped blowgun darts on the field trips.

“Vikkas. Yeah. Right. Used to know a smashing good violent Vikka, tall geezer he was. Whatever happened to him?” He stared out of the window, his feet scuffing the carpet. There were no old vicars, in their profession. Since the return of various Deities after the Mayan Great Year, the world had become a far

stranger place, as existing religions suddenly gained real temporal power. And where there was power there was conflict, in new and inexplicable ways – it had been Vicars who had foiled the conspiracy that would have taken Rome off the map, spotting that in the lineup of visitors to shake the papal hand there was a fully qualified Antipope.

He winced. Nobody could be right all the time, not even Vicars. That very same day, a kidnapping had removed the head of the Church Of Scotland, who for centuries had held the title of Moderator – and that had proved to be no casually given name. Without a Moderator, the theological core had turned supercritical in seconds, the resulting spiritual blast effects reaching as far as the Norwegian coastline, and only stopped from devastating England by the newly erected menhirs spaced out along the defences of the Hadrian Line. Those two-hundred metre high monoliths had been vaporised absorbing the energy, but at least the Northern Marches had been spared theological domination by pushy young deities let in by the rift in Theo-space.

“Vikkas. Yeah. Right.” With a sigh and a jingling of gratuitous straps and buckles, Rabid-Sama opened up the locker carrying his old Archaeology equipment, and prepared for battle one more time.

“It’s a much more peaceful place than I expected.” Mae Tsuko murmured into her communicator, as she cautiously strolled down the main street of New Port Royal, on her way to her rendezvous with whoever had managed to get her friends their landing permissions. “Oh! I’m passing the place we got our tank fuel from, “Pam’s Propellant Parlour”, they’re having a special autumn sale of pyrophoric fuels. Not a building that’d survive long if everyone went around shooting the place up for fun.” Her mecha-clad tail swished, the cylindrical joints flexing like a black armoured centipede. “Signing off – I’ll let you know when I’m at the meeting.”

Mae made an inconspicuous figure, quietly walking down the street in her slender hardsuit. She looked around the corner cautiously, the pack of detection equipment in her left glove poking around the angle before she stuck her head round. Though she had little fear that Gen and Shiitake were standing around the next bend with their weapons primed, she was taking no chances – here on New Tortuga, they could blow her to scraps and shrapnel and never fear any legal consequences. Even without using her psychic talent, she had survived enough encounters with them at Toho in the past two years to know they would be very pleased to get the chance.

For an instant she closed her eyes, using the senses that worked regardless of her armour. She could spot Suzuko, somewhere near here – but on this island, for some reason the psychic background noise was deafeningly loud, as if huge bursts of power were echoing off every mind in the place. Tracking that down would be a problem – it was like hunting for a pipeline spewing smoke: the nearer one approached it, the harder it was to see.

She paused, as a naked polecat ran past, screaming as he waved a Katana over his head. “Now there’s a nice view you couldn’t put on a legal postcard,” she murmured, her whiskers twitching. “Still, this place is well-known for being famous, as they say.” Her eyebrow raised, inside her helmet – there were certainly some strange survivals on this island that she had only seen in history books. It was authentic for Pyrates to have pierced ears, she supposed – but peering in the display screens showing the interior of one club, she had spotted once-fashionable Mobile Dancers, suspended from swinging gantries by lugs attached from straight-through skull piercings. These were real, not simulations, she could tell from the psychic aura of the place. Mobile Dancers had the brain piercings connected directly to their pleasure centres, which stimulated them as they danced.

Mae grinned. “At least, until someone sneaks up behind and short-circuits them with a cattle-prod,” she reminded herself. “Mind-blowing or what?” Though she had never seen anyone with piercings outside a history vid, she knew they had become more and more extreme in the final years before the Mayan Great Year turned, until by the end only life-threatening versions were acceptable for true fashion credibility. Idly, she wondered if any of the lecturers back at Toho still sported liver bolts or spleen shackles.

She strolled on, passing small shops and street vendors. Cheery costermongers had set up stalls by the roadside offering food, drinks and munitions of both classical and modern style. She recognised empty crates of a French sporting goods manufacturer, who had happily discovered that their surplus “boule” balls were in the right caliber to fit the newly retro fashion cannons that Pirate Island was ordering from foundries all over the planet.

“Special Limited edition! Limited edition classics! Genuine Ming Dynasty!” called one sharp-faced razorback hog, seated behind a row of souvenirs “Get your genuine 17th century computer saddlebags and Bulky Disk caddies here! Limited issue, collector’s item!”

Mae stopped and concentrated, checking that her abilities were in tune. She drove a hard, penetrating truth probe at the vendor, and nodded. In his own mind he was perfectly honest – the mass-produced items

from Ming Dynasty (Korea) were indeed a limited edition. Their numbers were strictly controlled by the numbers he could pass on to gullible customers or the quantity of suitable stuff in the Universe to make them out of, whichever ran out first.

Suddenly, she paused, her heart sinking as she arrived at the rendezvous. It was like arriving at the first class of a new term – she was heading into the unknown, knowing only that someone else had things lined up for her. Getting her friends onto New Tortuga had cost her unknown customer quite a sum; right now she was about to see the size of the bill.

There was an inconspicuous metal door in an angle of the wall, with a camera plate watching her. There was an armoured key-pad as well, which slid open protectively as she was recognised – and she keyed in the number she had been given.

The door slid open. Summoning up her courage, Mae stepped forward into the darkness.

“Tea’s up!” Kazuko banged on the turret of the Empress Tiger with a large crowbar. “I’ve been shopping – I’m tired of ration packs, so I did a little exploration trip. There’s a great eating house just down the street there, and an arms boutique to die for. It’s a neat place, all round.”

Mangana cranked up the hatch, the great ersatz metal plate weighing as much as her slender frame even in its padded black tankers’ suit. “We’re supposed to sit tight here – what if Rai and Gen’s bunch had seen you?”

Kazuko tapped the gun mantlet, the “Saukopf” casting ringing with the pure note of flawless metal. “Like they won’t spot us anyway – parked at the end of the main street like this. Anyway – here’s the tea and a hot meal I got from a Pyrate takeaway. You should see the place! They do all sorts of special menus, vegetarian, total carnivore and everything. It’s ok, I picked all this from the “*non-cannibal*” section.” She heaved a big insulated pot of steaming stew up onto the engine deck. “Some sort of local mixed-up dish, sort of like the “Grand Slam” curry they make in the Canteen when they buy those cheap cans with no labels. Smells OK though.”

Mangana frowned, and passed a mess tin full of the steaming stew over to Horst. The boar raised a shaggy eyebrow and his sensitive muzzle twitched. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the aroma.

Suddenly, Horst nodded. “It is very fine stew – mixed meats, pickles and egg cooked in wine. Tasty as well – you won’t have to add any of your usual flavourings to it.” He looked pointedly at Kazuko. “And you had better not.”

“Hey! I happen to like Jalapeno and Habanero chilies with extra chilli sauce!” Kazuko protested. “It’s good for you! Clears the tubes out!”

Horst smiled, handing Mangana the tin back along with a combat Spork from his webbing set. He nodded contentedly as Mangana and her cousin bickered pleasantly, Kazuko always insisting that on a field mission as a matter of style, one should eat only out of hacked-open tins using a saw-backed bowie knife. Kazuko’s favorite dish of “Chilli con Chilli” certainly cleared the tubes out – he patted the breech of the 120 mm smoothbore cannon that armed the Empress Tiger. They had fired fifty rounds through it while proof testing, and the fouling had almost jammed the gun tube – but a litre of Kazuko’s special recipe, had cleared it out in no time. “You might like to be more relaxed yourself, Mangana,” he suggested mildly, “we might be here for quite some time.”

Kazuko cheered. “That’s telling her! You listen to him, ‘Gana – he’s qualified to talk about states of mind. If he was any more Illuminated, you’d have to sleep with sunglasses on.”

Kazuko jumped down off the tank before her cousin could reply and trotted back to her own vehicle, passing up the insulated containers through the open driver’s hatch to Mariko in the hull. She cast a glance down the street. “All quiet so far,” she gestured. “And I got us a local dish. See what you think of it.”

The mouse took a deep sniff. “Arr. Salmagundi, proper Pyrate fare, it be.” She blinked, her crest of bobbing head-fur nodding as she scratched her head. “What IS wrong with me today? I ... I recognise the ingredients, but – how do I recognise that dish, it’s straight out of the history books? At least, I don’t think I’ve had it before. Then – so many places I’ve been.” She reached down and scratched Dracaena’s fuzzy ears, her lithe daughter curling round her leg like a vine. A large ear twitched speculatively. “This place isn’t so bad, really. If it wasn’t for the trouble with visas, this place might get more than virtual tourists.”

Kazuko bounced nimbly up the rope ladder to the turret, and slid into the commander’s cupola. “Yes – it’s a bit strange. Mae was saying there was this huge psychic pressure on the island. I expect the place is full of rogue psykers battling it out, or something on those lines. Some Psyker thing – by all accounts, I’m immune to all that stuff.” She relaxed, unconcerned as she slid down inside the turret, pulling the hatch shut and settled down to enjoy her lunch.

Launched from the far end of the street, the old Austrian Marine Corps G-6 rocket took something like a second and a half to cover the distance, its optical homer focussed on the huge expanse of side armour of the Maus II. Its warhead was a round saucer of dense, malleable metal alloy backed by two kilos of highly brisant Cubane nitrogen explosive, and guaranteed by Amanda's Arms Boutique to punch through any leisure or sporting tank on the streets of Japan. Two milliseconds from impact, the fuse triggered the charge – and the metal plate fused like the splash of a water droplet into a sharp slug stabbing into the armour at three thousand metres a second!

“Banzai!” From his hiding-place around the corner, Matzu cheered exultantly as he saw the vehicle vanish in a flash of white flame. But he growled, his bear muzzle twisting in a snarl as the smoke cleared. The tank was still there – two square metres of its corrugated mine-proofing skin was blown off, a silvery splash showing where the self-forging fragment had struck home.

“What does it take to kill that thing?” He yelled, seeing the turret starting to turn towards him, plumes of diesel smoke billowing out of the exhaust. Clipped on the turret sides were two long, flattish boxes that he had not seen when Kazuko had last driven it around Shahaguo Island. He grabbed another rocket and clipped it onto the launcher, his mecha providing a stabilised sight as he ducked into cover. For a few seconds he hesitated. There was just enough of the other two tanks visible behind the Maus to give him a chance at them as softer targets – but he was in no mood to give up. He had left Rai and Gen to hunt for the Hohki girl, and luckily found himself a far more rewarding target. “Whatever it takes – here's some more.” He concentrated, lining up his second shot on the seam between the hull and the turret, and prepared to fire.

“We're hit!” Kazuko felt her seat straps bite into her as the two hundred tonne bulk of the Maus II was kicked a track-width sideways, skidding across the plaza in a shower of sparks. The crash was followed by a howling buzz in her ears, as she suddenly realised she was deafened. A wave of heat washed up from the main compartment below her as the huge impact energy raised a ruddy glow inside where it had hit – she looked down, seeing Mariko already spraying a fire extinguisher on smoldering seats and equipment. Fans whirred and laboured, steam rising from the wet decks as the armour side reached red heat on the outside and began to soak through.

“OK – whoever did that, gets this.” She looked round at the rack of glowing valves of the Zuse ballistic computer, checking that it had survived the impact. Kazuko nodded, spotting all the valves were lit. There were three switches; old lever-throw contact switches that she flicked in a second, one after the other.

“Test. OK.” The telltale lights glowed green, ready for action. “Armed.” The turret twitched and moved, its “Vampire” infrared detectors seeking out traces of threatening fire. “Commit. War shot. Confirm.” The tank lurched, as the mighty analogue computer brought it to life, all systems on fully automatic as the Maus came alive under the brain she had crafted from thermionic valves and carefully programmed in the “PlanKalkul” programming language that of all people alive on the planet, only Horst could help her with.

“Right, now where ... aha!” Kazuko peered into the flickering screen of the authentic 1945 vintage super-ikonoscope, its bulging round display tube showing a suddenly empty street as the citizens dived for cover with ease born of long practice. There was a plume of hot air that had been there for some time, rising from behind a rubbish skip – something very like a large battlesuit trying to hide with its engine running. All other heat traces were rapidly moving, as bystanders got out of the way. A less than authentic receiver duct-taped to the inside of the commander's cupola flashed its warning lights, noting that heavy jamming was blocking any communications and modern guidance links.

For an instant, Kazuko looked down into the baking interior of her tank, Mariko furiously tackling a small diesel fire that had broken out. Had she made her class project out of plain steel and iron they would all be dead now, blown to pieces or incinerated. But she had used STABO, the totally synthetic ersatz material only weakly interacting with normal baryonic matter made of real protons and neutrons – and though wounded, this was still a mouse with all its fight intact. Mecha had been first evolved for just this job, letting infantry carry armour and heavy tank-busting weapons but still be able to climb over walls and dive into trenches – and her own vehicle had been programmed with exactly that threat in mind.

“Target, mech, two o'clock,” she shouted unheard as her ears rang screamingly. “Take him, Zuse!”

Matzu hunched behind the covering metal wall of the rubbish skip, waiting as the target display stabilised. He had bought half a dozen of the cheap Far Eastern rockets in the shop down the street as soon as he had spotted his prey, allowing two per vehicle. He grinned. Fate was with him. He was on Pirate Island, home of the deniable enterprise, and whatever he did here, was not accountable to the world outside. Shooting up the locals would have brought the whole island after him – but Mae and her low-life friends were fair game – and he had always wanted to go big-game hunting.

“Yeah.” Matzu’s head hummed. He had taken the final bottle of the unique narco-pop, and the world was a more righteous place. It was like ... he remembered a lecture on New Tortuga they had attended in Cultural Hygiene the term before. The place had been given a fair investigation, its lack of laws and morals evaluated from historical, economic and philosophical perspectives, and its inhabitants categorised as the product of their socio-economic circumstances. “Basically,” had been the politico-social summary, “they are what they are and do what they do because they’re filthy, and that’s all there is to it.”

The “Armed” icon shone green in his helmet, and he smiled a beatific smile. Suddenly rising up to let the rocket see and recognise its target, he fired.

The logic systems of the Zuse computer saw the burst of heat from the launch, and reacted with the simple, automatic precision of an insect’s nervous system. The turret was already pointing roughly that way – a quarter of a second’s traverse brought the Krupp naval gun on line to the target, and the firing circuit closed. The heavy tank reared with recoil – as a hundred and ten kilos of steel canister shot, like the biggest shotgun ever fired, scythed along the length of the street. Eight sharp-edged chunks of pre-chopped steel shredded the fuse and steering fins, the off-centre impact sending the still-accelerating rocket twisting into the ground to detonate with a thunderous gout of flame half-way down the street.

Kazuko felt the air pressure squeeze her lungs as the gun recoiled, and the status lights flicker on the Zuse display indicating the breech was empty. She reached down to heave another cartridge into the loading cradle, when there was a tremor she could feel through her body, coming from outside the turret. Both banks of a dozen R4M rockets had launched, the unguided, unjammable rockets rippling off their launch rails returning fire against the spot the attack had launched from. There was another shuddering vibration from outside, and then it became very still.

Kazuko rubbed her ears, but there was only a tearing howl as of static. She shook her head ruefully, as she scanned the street – through the low-resolution picture of the super-ikonoscope she could see a burning, scoured-out patch of street, the ground scored and cratered. Her eyes widened – even the full broadside of R4M should not have had that sized punch – unless they had hit another pile of munitions that someone had stacked up at their target. And that had been the correct target; glancing up, she saw the jamming had been silenced.

Mariko patted her dangling foot from the driver’s section, giving a “thumbs-up” sign as she gestured with the fire extinguisher, but wrinkled her nose and mimed covering her head with a respirator. She pointed to Dracaena, who seemed quite unaffected, her draconian heritage fortunately leaving her attuned to heat and blast. Kazuko nodded, switching on the extractor fan, and reached for a pencil.

WHAT SAY WE SEE WHO THAT WAS? She scribbled in her schoolgirlish Kanji script. THEY KNOW WE’RE HERE, MIGHT AS WELL MOVE.

Mariko shook her head. MAE EXPECTS US TO BE HERE, she wrote, her hearing mercifully saved by the snug black leather tanker’s helmet with its aural protection plugs.

I SAID THIS WAS BAD TANK COUNTRY. MECHS CAN GET TOO CLOSE IN THE STREETS. SHOULD HEAD FOR THE BEACH. MORE OPEN.

Mariko cocked her head, thinking fast. At length she nodded, and spoke into her radio. In a minute she scribbled a reply, passing it up to Kazuko, who was trying to clean the worst of the spilled Salmagundi off her padded Nomex tank-top and scan the area at the same time. HORST AND BROOHI LDA AGREE. WE’RE MOVING OUT.

Mariko slid back into the ersatz plastic seat, and adjusted her driving periscope. The view was rather like looking through a letter-box, but with practice she had more or less got used to its limitations. Checking the rev counter on the four Maybach V-12 diesels, she slowly let in the electromagnetic clutch, feeding amperage to the electric motors at the back. The Maus shuddered, and slowly ground forward on its tracks. In her rear periscope she could see the Empress Tiger and the Stalin III swinging round, all hatches securely “buttoned-up” and on the alert for any more attacks.

Suddenly Kazuko’s boot tapped her on the helmet, and she passed down a piece of paper. GO SLOW – I WANT TO CHECK THIS. A few seconds later the top hatch opened, and a waft of cooler air swept through the vehicle. Mariko shook her head, wincing slightly – Kazuko’s head was a big target. But half a minute later the hatch closed, and she saw Kazuko’s face looking strained in the reflections on the instrument panel.

Another note came down, its writing a little shaky. THAT WAS MATZU. SAW THE INLAID ARMOUR BITS, SOME WHITE FUR. NOT MUCH LEFT OF HIM. Kazuko winced, scrambling back to keep watch. She had reloaded the main gun, but without two minutes hard work on the outside of the turret, they were out of rockets. The Zuse was looking out, but had little to reply with: Rai and Shiitake could be waiting right around the corner, and there was little she could do about it. Modern hover-tanks often went into battle or on game-

shows with a dozen armoured troops hanging on the outside, their suits' sensors adding to those on the main vehicle, alert for danger. She swallowed – they were running, and running almost blind.

“Who was shooting at us?” Jenni called up from the driving seat of the JS 3, the intercom having failed again. “Are the locals after us?”

Broohilda shook her head, eyes wide as she got off the radio with Mariko. “It was Matzu. He tried to kill us...” She gulped, forcing her breathing to slow down. Matzu had never liked her or her friends, and usually referred to her as a “loathsome abomination fitted only for extinction” – but even on New Tortuga, she had never thought he would go this far.

“Right.” Jenni’s eyes narrowed, as she squinted through the driver’s periscope. “Tava? You’re on main guns. You know what Gen and the rest of them look like. What are you going to do about it?”

Tava had been asking himself that very question. Despite its owner upgrading the armour for the trip, the JS 3 was far less robust than the Maus. He remembered what Kazuko had said about the strange ersatz material she had made it from – an exotic dark matter that was cheaper than the regular sort, and actually comprised a lot of the “missing mass” in the Galaxy that astronomers had calculated should be out there. He felt the Chelyabinsk-forged manganese steel hard against his broad back in the cramped turret, and realised that its design was ninety years out of date – the warranty had expired, as would he and his new herd if a modern armour-buster hit them.

“Matzu was with their mob – he shot on sight, no warning. So – unless Gen and Shiitake are standing in their bare fur waving white flags – we shoot first.” Tava fought down the initial rage, and forced himself to think, hard and fast. “We don’t get a second chance at this.”

Jenni looked up at him for an instant, her eyes shining. Tava’s broad bulk was wedged tight in the gunner’s seat, his exposed wool darkened with grime and oil, but the heady musk of him overpowering the mechanical scents of cordite, diesel and lubricating oil. “You said it!” She exulted, “Broohilda – eyes peeled. No second chances here, nobody gets benefit of the doubt. Go for it!”

Broohilda swallowed nervously, her keen eyes peering out of the commanders’ periscope. She felt sick to her stomach – she had vowed never to harm any living creature, a lifelong defiance of her murderous Chaos ancestry – and she would be calling Tava on to her classmates. There was no getting around that. She flicked her eyes down to the auto-loader, with fifteen bright and shiny shells racked and ready to go. Unlike the rest of her classmates, she had studiously avoided all military hardware – she remembered Temari saying she had modified the 122 millimeter tank gun to fire on fully automatic as “*open-bolt blow-back action*”, but had no idea just what it meant. But then she looked further down to Tava and Jenni – they trusted her to do it – trusted her with their lives.

“I will,” she whispered, tail trembling. “But please, please – let me not have to.”

Far across town, the Pirate ship “Spirit of Desolation” sat at anchor, many of its crew now re-embarking as the vessel made ready to depart. Its Captain knew two things that she had been quick to pass on to her colleagues – that on their home island was an armed Psychiatric Blast Device, and that the rest of the world knew about it and was liable to come calling. In an hour she hoped to be under way, and in two hours outside its range – which by a less than startling coincidence was just the outer patrol distance she had chosen to defend her Island. With all the vessels in dock, the island’s defences were short-sighted: with her and half a dozen others standing a hundred kilometres offshore they would be better placed to spot any new threats coming in.

So much had been arranged in two minutes with her officers – and now Captain Akeritsu had other things to do, until her vessel was ready to raise anchor. The black-furred unicorn sat in her cabin, looking at her guests. Georgina Pontephrigh – she smiled at the curly-haired canine, remembering her previous encounter, and Timmy the loveable mongrel sitting obediently by her side. Suzuko Hohki – the reluctant Pyrate Captain, kept away from her rightful place on New Tortuga by her absurd prejudices. Lebeq the Cybermancer – the lapine Information Broker, who had revealed so many fascinating things for a price, and was now revealing something for free.

“Tell me,” Captain Akeritsu said sweetly, smiling at the lapine with the same expression she threw traitors to the sharks with, “about this Device you built, all those years ago.”

“Ah.” Lebeq relaxed, closing his eyes and stretching, as if reminiscing on some pleasant cubhood memory. “To do that – to truly tell you how it came to be – I must throw in a little free History lesson, one that I doubt you will have heard. Victors write the histories, and these days they change them by the day. You will not find this version of events on the Worldnet, Captains.”

He paused. “Where to begin? I was only a cub when they took me on at the EC headquarters, I was the talk of my school, with the things I had done in para-science. A Psyker, no, not in the usual way. But I could take a machine and understand it, feel every flow of its energies, until I could feel malfunctions as physical pain in my own body – I could say what was wrong with it, and why.” His ears twitched. “There was nobody like me. I know, for we searched for years trying to find anyone else with such a talent. Various Ministries borrowed me for their projects, and I was soon over my ears in the deepest, most secret circles of power, that very few even suspected existed. For you see, to know how a machine worked, I had to know what it was for – not in a purely mechanical sense, but the spirit, the reason for it to be.”

Lebeq raised an eyebrow, looking from one spellbound face to the next. “And here is something you may or may not believe, after the story the world now tells about us. We meant to do good. We honestly did. You could have put a lie detector on any of the workers, the planners, and asked them if they were working for the long-term benefit of their neighbours.”

Captain Akeritsu’s ear flicked. “I saw Eco-Warriors behead someone in the street for smoking last month,” she offered. “I asked them why. They pointed out that he had been transformed from a drain on planetary resources TO a resource – as they were going to repay his debt to the ecosystem by selling his body to a restaurant down the street. When they put it like that, it makes a kind of sense. But only their kind.”

“Quite.” Lebeq leaned forward, nodding in sympathy. “You have to take the long view. A hundred years ago, a hundred and fifty even more so, Europe was fractured, riven by divisions. Small nations spent what little surplus they had on huge armies, fenced themselves in and each other out. If you asked anyone where he was from, he’d probably tell you his province, and scorn those strangers in the next province over with their strange costumes and silly dialects. Folk from other countries were hardly counted as people – in the days when every small town had its own accent, its own traditions.”

“And the EC took its chance to take all those harmful divisions away from people. First one single currency, then one economy, one legal system, then we were well on the way to one language.” Lebeq frowned. “It was all for the best. In a century, the plan was for a Citizen to be able to be dropped blindfolded in any town in the EC and be literally unable to tell where he was. Every single thing would have been standardised. Just think of the efficiency! Think of the savings! We worked so hard to make the plan perfect, and it almost was. But there was one part of it which was defective – the one thing that we’d taken over as a legacy from the previous governments.” He paused again.

Suzuko’s ears went flat. “Let me guess,” she suggested. “The people?”

“Exactly! I’m glad you understand.” Lebeq smiled. “We controlled the process of government, but the raw material was sub-standard. Oh, we could imprison those who broke the laws, but – how could you tell which outwardly good Citizen has treason in his heart? There had to be a way of ... refining away improper thoughts before they could be acted upon. Suppose every house in a country washed their floors and windows every day with petrol. Of course, some of them would catch fire. But what would be better, putting the money into fire brigades, or finding a way to take the petrol away in the first place? We had one problem after another, all pointing to the same thing. A State is, when you come right down to it, a collection of the thoughts and minds of its Citizens. Control those from the inside, and all the rest follows. But you must be sure – History is full of traitors and double-agents who hid their real thoughts and intentions for decades before revealing their true natures. We had to make sure that could never happen again.”

Akeritsu raised an eyebrow. “And you are about to tell us that a tenth of the European population perishing in “Political Correctness Enforcement Community Centres” was a good thing?”

Lebeq gave a disappointed cluck. “When the Europeans arrived in Central and South America, they knew their religion was the only valid one,” he said, leaning forward intently. “They knew it as an implicit fact. You could have used any lie-detector you liked, it would have shown they were telling the truth in their hearts. Of course, they had their duty to convert the Natives from their wicked heathen ways. If ninety-nine died in the process and one survived, that was good – for one was saved, where otherwise the hundred were damned for certain. So everyone behaved with merit, and the only ones to blame were the heathens for their wrong beliefs in the first place.” He sighed, and shook his head. “Ten years ago, of course I would not have put it like that. But the basic premise was the same. We would make them the citizens they should know they ought to be. As to how we went about that – well. Enough of the background. On to the people.”

The lapine’s eyes brightened, as he leaned back in his chair. “Renee Vanderstraat! Now that was a scientist and a doctor for you! A brilliant Psychosurgeon, a true artistic radical in his field, his every operation drew cries of jealousy and outrage from his rivals. Oh, he was keen! The things he could do to a living brain, you could hardly believe. And the most humane I’ve ever met – I remember we caught the composer of a Nationalist song that was being sung all around the prisons. One little operation and she was free to go – Doctor Vanderstraat excised the parts of the cortex that dealt with making and understanding music. Cured of

such anti-social tendencies for life! We didn't want to punish, we wanted to cure, until the Citizens understood and thanked us."

Lebeq smiled, looking at the varied expressions of his spellbound audience. "But of course, there's only so many doctors of that quality – we trained thousands, but many of them were only capable of the most basic cures, removing aggressive potentials or excess intelligence. What we needed was something that could act at a distance. The same way an atomic clock keeps other clocks in tune around the world by radio, we needed something that could do the same for our people – then we could throw open the doors of the Political Correctness Enforcement Community Centres and let the patients walk free, as good Citizens. That was the project I worked on, with Doctor Vanderstraat, Doctor Porcini and Dipl. Eng. Valsmann. It was going to be the miracle of its age. It was not our fault, that it was not."

Suzuko felt her tail bottling up. She forced herself to speak, though she wanted to howl and surrender to her raw instinct to sink sharp teeth into rabbit flesh. "You built it as a weapon instead, didn't you?" She had heard Kazuko's accounts of the start of the EC war – Kazuko was half French, and in any situation she could not claim the Japanese were the first to do something, she credited her Father's nation. In this case it was liable to be true, that France had been the flashpoint when the EC Standardisation committee had reduced the inefficiently large numbers of cheeses permitted to white, blue and processed.

Lebeq waved a paw dismissively. "That only came at the end. I have no idea who may have made our three unused prototypes into the air-dropped weapon you describe – our experimental rigs took up three laboratory benches with special shielding required everywhere. The project took years – nobody had ever produced a proper linkage between psychic and other energies. Engineer Valsmann made the breakthrough – a switching gate like a transistor, that could amplify psychic energies thousandfold. The Psyristor, he called it." The lapine gave a nostalgic sigh. "We were making real progress. You needed only a Psyristor and a living brain of suitable type – Doctor Vanderstraat could of course provide us with plenty of specimens. Various chemicals and electrical stimulation could alter the mood as required – then we could broadcast the signal, greatly amplified. Oh, it was crude enough at first – we could broadcast pleasure and fear to complement live telecasts by our leaders to emphasize their words as required – but the potential was there for far, far more."

"Like howling, screaming madness?" Suzuko held herself back. "Like turning peaceful citizens into raging mobs of criminally insane berzerkers for the rest of their lives?"

"Oh, please, Miss Hohki," Lebeq looked at her dismissively. "Consider the facts. Imagine yourself in charge of defending your country, and discovering four tank divisions have rolled over your border. Of course you could lob anti-matter their way at forty-four megatons per kilo yield – devastate your own territory, leave tens of thousands of your own civilians burned and blinded for life. At such expense, when that energy could have powered your economy for years! One hardly has to be a fanatical Eco-warrior to object to that solution. But what we were working on – the weakest link is the minds of the crews. We could have filled them with peaceful thoughts – or sunk them in depression so dire that half the crews would hit the self-destruct switches. Very little death and no devastation – that was what we were working for." One ear dipped. "We only discovered the other potentials by accident. One of the organic components became – defective, just as we energised it, with rather – unfortunate results for the surrounding population. Of course, it is an easier matter to destroy than to remodel anything, especially something as complex and individual as a mind."

"I take it this is information you haven't offered for sale before," commented Akeritsu dryly. "The Mexicans might be interested in knowing just who started it."

"Ah. I know the market too well to offer what I know will never sell." Chisel teeth gleamed. "Nobody wants to know all this – quite the reverse. These events are being erased from History as fast as possible – and even you are having difficulty believing me. We worked for the overall good, and when that was threatened – we defended it. With whatever means were available." He frowned, his whiskers drooping. "As to the end of it all, desperate people will take desperate measures. Our leaders had made arrangements with various interested parties of a stuffed nature – but I was nothing to do with that." He paused. "The Roman Empire let in barbarians to fight for them before the end, but that only made the end more certain. We made the same mistake."

"You invented the Electric Grin," Akeritsu said flatly, "which is about to wipe this island free of sentient life. And you worked for the government who thought that letting in the Cute things from Outside was a good idea. And you just sit there and tell us it was all for the best?"

Lebeq shrugged. "If you work for a company that goes bankrupt and folds, you move on. In my case, whatever I may have done, was a legal project authorised by my Government – that Government no longer exists, and I can hardly be blamed for following orders. The world might disapprove, but at least none of it was for my personal gain – unlike, say, Piracy."

Akeritsu glared at him, but said nothing.

Suzuko looked from one to the other. The Pirate queen was a species that utterly baffled her, an actual Unicorn – that sharp ebony horn was definitely real and not a synthetic addition. Besides, Akeritsu's frame was more finely-boned, her head more slender in the muzzle than any equine Suzuko had seen before – and her bare hooves were cloven. A tufted tail swished, with a cat-like wave of irritation.

The only Unicorns Suzuko had ever seen were on Mangana's magically rich homeworld, and those were non-sentient four leggers. No, she told herself – there had been one Unicorn more or less spotted at Toho, though opinion was divided as to whether it was a ghost, a holographic practical joke or a mass hallucination. A rounded, blonde-haired quadrupedal Unicorn shape had been spotted that term, flickering like a badly tuned projection – it generally lasted about ten seconds, gave a disgusted look at something over its shoulder, and faded out without leaving any solid trace.

Suddenly, Akeritsu's ear twitched, as her communicator urgently alerted her. She rose, sketching a bow to Suzuko. "Something's come up," she said, her tail twitching. "I'll have to continue this later. George, Timmy – you may come to the bridge with me if you like. Captain Hohki, if you would keep our Belgian Hare company awhile? Thank you." With that she swept out of the room, Georgina and Timmy eagerly following.

There was a silence. Lebeq looked over, and an eyebrow raised at Suzuko's horrified expression.

"My dear Miss Hohki," he said, relaxing again. "You of all people should know things are rarely what they seem. Who would guess that you are this planet's one and only Priestess of a certain deity? Not one that you boast about, with good reason – given our charming Pirate Hostess's obvious opinion on certain matters of a pastel nature. And another thing – it might interest you to know that Timmy is actually physically impossible. Under all known laws of genetics, that is."

Suzuko blinked. She remembered Lebeq doing something she had noted as odd, when they had been about to leave his house – he had picked up a hair from the carpet, looked at it and carefully sealed it in an envelope that he had left on a side table. "You had a DNA sample run on her?"

"Bravo! Top marks, Miss Hohki. And it was quite revealing. To look at her, one would think loyal Timmy is what you would call a Far Eastern type human, with some mandrill ape in her background. The two species are not, of course, naturally interfertile. There is of course Genemeld, which your countrymen have such a low opinion of – but that leaves a very clear "signature" on the genome, which Timmy certainly lacks. Various adventurous researchers have produced actual cell-level mixes, chimeras ... but Timmy is not one of those, either."

"Her ancestors left Europe a century ago, and they're not the type to push forward any frontier of science," Suzuko pointed out. "Whatever high-tech you mention – they haven't got it. Not a ¥'s worth."

"Quite. I must say, Miss Hohki, it has been long since I had such – clear-thinking company." Lebeq rubbed his paws together. "What is she, then? If you were of a disapproving frame of mind and had both humans and mandrill folk around – if you considered a scandalous liaison producing children with the worst features of both – that fits the bill rather neatly." He paused. "And it seems that being able to make things fit one's expectations are possible for the Pontephright family, even without high technology."

Just then, Suzuko's mind filled with a sharp, lucid image as if a stage set had been dropped in front of her. She had been thinking of her friends all day, notably Mae – but suddenly she was absolutely sure that it was more than wishful thinking.

She turned and looked at Lebeq. "Is it publicly available knowledge," she asked carefully, "that there is an arms dealer on this island who is an anteater? Light brown fur, artificial left paw? Who owns extensive workshops?"

"There is one, Pacahuta by name, as a scan of our public directories could tell you." Lebeq answered, just as carefully. "Have you met him?"

"No. But I'm absolutely certain that a friend of mine is with him right now. She's a Psyker – he's asking her to use her powers to look inside that Device you built to try and defuse it – there's three technicians looking on with cutting tools, they look scared and annoyed at the same time. They're in some unfurnished concrete chamber with pipework on the walls – temporary lighting strung up, the whole setup looks lashed together. Mae's scared witless, she's just realised what it is."

"As well she might." For the first time, Lebeq's voice cracked in fear. "Even our prototypes were failsafe shielded against that kind of probe – it'll activate as soon as she tries to get into its mind."

Suzuko swallowed. She knew her own broadcast abilities were officially nil, and that Mae was the one with all the powers – but Mae was mentally looking for her, and if she made herself conspicuous enough...

MAE. DON'T GO IN. IT'S A TRAP. Suzuko drove home the thought with an image from last month's game show, the studio audience screaming for the celebrity guest to cut the red wire and not the brown one – followed by the slow-motion filmed blossom of the fireball as the audience leaped to their feet cheering in wild abandon.

Somewhere she felt Mae wince, and knew her warning had hit home – but elsewhere, she spotted as in her peripheral vision a frightened-looking anteater gesturing her to hurry. Evidently Mae was going to need more than a psychic hunch to persuade her employer not to drive her consciousness into the Device.

WE'RE COMING. SOMEONE WHO KNOWS THESE THINGS IS WITH ME. WHERE ARE YOU? Suzuko sent as clear and hard a thought as she knew how, receiving an image of tunnels entering a concrete chamber. There were old pumps and rusting pipes to be seen on the way in – evidently some kind of water reservoir.

“An old reservoir,” Suzuko gasped, springing to her feet, “Where is there one on the island? That’s where they are with the Device. We’d better get there fast – if you know how to defuse that thing.”

“East end of the island, it’s in all the books,” Lebeq answered promptly. “I can get us in there – if you’re sure. Are you very certain of this, Miss Hohki?”

Suzuko paused for an instant to smile, her lips drawn back in an unnerving vulpine grin. “I’m sure. Let’s say the Pontephrights aren’t the only folk at Toho with unusual powers.”

Gen Yakitora had been having a poor time of it on New Tortuga. It had all started off so well – they had arrived with prisoners and a unique piece of military hardware to sell, on the one place on the planet where they could do so with no questions asked. By this time, they should be back at Toho Academy with the money and their notebooks full of hideous local observations that would gain them record-breaking grades in their Cultural Hygiene exams – and with the annoying vixen Suzuko finally taken care of.

The sharp-featured canine averted his eyes from the splashed remains of his classmate. “Hohki did this,” he hissed, his muzzle wrinkling. “Her and her friends. There can’t be fifty Maus II’s in the world, and it was teamed with that stupid crossbreed Tiger Hohki drives. They did it, all right.” He quelled the brief voice inside reminding him that they had already written off Matzu for his cultural contamination and narcopop-fuelled instability – this was no time for loose and muddy thinking.

“And she’s rescued the prisoners and disposed of Shiitake and Podzu,” Rai Gosu added, casting a nervous glance towards the dock and the now empty freighter whose owner was demanding cleaning and repair bills. “There was nothing left of them. Gone without a trace. Podzu, he was only a first-year, she hardly knew him. And now there’s not even enough of him to send a parcel back to his family tomb.”

“Right.” Gen looked around, standing tall in his jack-legged mecha. “We have us some tanks to hunt. Osamu, you’ve got the cash – let’s get tooled up for the job.” Osamu had been born to wealth unimaginable, his grandmother having invented and then mass-produced the world’s first semi-automatic door. *

“Brand new or second-user?” Osamu pulled out his cash card, looking down the street. “There’s ‘Amanda’s arms boutique’ or ‘Ivor Thief’s Den’ - which do you think?”

Gen sniffed. “Thieving is immoral,” he declared. “It can only be condoned if done in a good cause, such as taking from the corrupt and giving to the needy.”

“So, Amanda’s it is then?”

“Of course not. Ivor must be corrupt as anything, to trade here. We’re needy. We have a good cause. Let’s take his whole stock.”

As Gen and his remaining group crowded into the shop to haggle over bulk discount on RK-23 “Warclub” gravity-homing missiles, on the far end of the street Captain “Redclaw” DeWaal was treating the remaining Pontephrights to a nice ice cream apiece.

“Hurrah!” Dick greeted the vulpine cheerily as Redclaw sat down, his expression a fixed grin which he was having trouble maintaining. “Strawberry for Anne, vanilla for me and Ju. Our favourites!”

“I didn’t know Pirates ate ice-cream,” Anne said shyly, “I thought they were all into barrels of rum.”

Redclaw deftly changed his own order to rum and raisin, and with a whisper to the street vendor, had a double measure of white rum injected into the ice cream. “Well, there’s Pirates and Pyrates,” he offered, “We’re not all the same. Why, some are real villains – they don’t eat ice-cream, it’s true.” He took a long lick of his own with evident enjoyment. Although he was normally an extremely moderate drinker and found it interfered with his Brain-User Interface, being exposed to the Pontephrights looked like changing that – and not because of Anne’s expectations, either.

*Automatic doors open every time you approach, saving you flattening your snout on them. Semi-automatic doors do the same – sometimes. The saving in power consumption made the ecologists happy.

"I can see that, now," Anne suddenly cheered up. "Dick tells me there's even a ship of Lady Pirates here! I've no idea what they'd look like, honestly I haven't." She smoothed down the low-cut bodice of her cheerful scarlet silk dress – she had seen things quite like it in old pictures, though this one came with handy quick-release features for some reason. She supposed the picture she had taken it from was of poorer people than might have occupied her ancestral Bellington Hall at the time – the pretty lady standing on the corner might not even have had a chambermaid to help her get in and out of the costume.

"Right." Redclaw nodded, as another piece of the puzzle clicked into place. "So, will you all be signing the Pirate Articles, then? It's a jolly, hearty outdoors life, and I'm sure we could find lots of treasure with you along to help. And if we find any wrong-doers, we can obtain Letters Of Marque against them all legal and signed-for." He smiled inwardly. His own vessel, the Axebled, carried legal Letters Of Marque empowering it to act at will against the enemies of Kazakhstan – of which there were many.

Dick frowned, one ear twisted back in concentration. "Well – we are supposed to be back at the Coll., you know, noses to the grindstone and all that. It's a ripping offer though – even George would be sure to come around in time. In fact I'm sure she would, she said she was going to go off and be that lady Captain's Cabin-girl." He tapped the table. "I say! That's a bit "infra dig", no sort of job for a Pontephrigh! Could you offer her something better?"

"I'm certain she'd have a different position on my ship than the one she'd have under Captain Akeritsu," Redclaw said, entirely straight-faced. "Though I doubt she'd appreciate it."

"Silly George!" Anne smiled wistfully. "We told her all the treasure money went to charity, but she didn't seem too impressed." She sighed, her hands clasped to her breast. "I hope we see those handsome Policemen again – so smart and neatly turned-out. I'd let them take my treasure any time."

"That could be arranged." Redclaw was ordering his brain-user interface to keep his voice neutral, hardly trusting himself to do it. "I'm sure they'll turn up again when we need them."

"Thinking of which – where is the Police Station around here?" Julian chimed in. "This isn't such a big place, we've been here for days and not so much as seen a policeman on a street corner yet. It's nothing like Gen was telling us about Japan – they're wonderfully efficient there. His cousin's a Policeman, they only work on commission. Stops them being lazy – a day they don't get a confession, is a day they don't get paid."

"Yes, I wondered about that," Dick scratched his head. "No wonder there's so many crooks around here. Shiitake told me that if somehow a really clever crook in Japan hides most of the evidence and the judge can't quite find him guilty, they have lots of things they still can do. I mean, even the most vicious mass-murderer was just a suspect at one stage, and there's no smoke without fire."

Redclaw turned his black Pirate hat sideways to resemble a traditional Judge's cap. "I sentence you to be taken from this place," he boomed, in a deep stern voice, "unto another place, but on the way to accidentally fall down the stairs until you are dead, dead, dead. And may Cthulhu enjoy your soul."

"That's it Exactly!" Anne clapped her hands together with glee. "That's just what he said, but you did it awfully better! And Gen says the Police Stations are some of the tallest buildings around, with really big stairs."

"They might go down twenty stories underground, which is why we can't see them," suggested Julian. "I've heard of Police investigating underworld figures." He cocked his head to one side. "That explains about the old Bellington Castle too – I never understood how Oliver Cromwell had it "raised to the ground" after the Civil War. Of course – that must have been underground too."

"So." Redclaw relaxed, his tongue finding the liquid core of white rum in the ice cream and expertly tilting it to swallow without spilling a drop. "Would you like to come along on our next trip? We're looking for the lost gold of King Zog of Albania." He triggered his BUI to calculate exactly how much the world market would be depressed by the sudden appearance of two tonnes pure unmarked gold, and what financial leverage he could gain in certain quarters with the threat of releasing it. It would be good to have one's cake and eat it for a change – after hanging onto the gold until its blackmail potential lapsed, he could then release it anyway.

Dick's bluff, honest face was wreathed in unaccustomed concentration. He scratched his head, frowning as he looked out over the harbour to where the Axebled sat at anchor, a cheery crew of reactor technicians singing an old refueling-shanty as they worked. True, keeping a tenth of the treasure as a reward could keep them in lemonade and cucumber sandwiches for a long time – and they might need to buy rather more than that. The lawyers looking into the finances of Bellington Hall had not quite finished their deliberations – the last thing he had heard, was they had not quite found the present market value of Great-Great Grandfather Humphrey's extensive investment in shares of Imperial Burmese timber and Northern Rhodesian railway companies.

"We'll really have to ask George, though she is getting to be a bit of a wet blanket," he sighed. "After all, we are all Pontephrighs, the Infamous Five can't be splitting up. Maybe George can go off and be a cabin-girl in the hols, if she's really set her heart on it. Do Pirate ships have Summer hols?"

“Oh yes,” nodded Redclaw, mentally amending his schedule. “All the best ones do.”

Dick smiled. “Well then, Captain,” he beamed, slapping his new three-cornered hat on, the one with the extra-Jolly Roger grinning merrily on it. “If we can get George to come along – you can sign us aboard!”

Evening fell on Toho Academy, and in Hiroshi’s dorm the merry sound of the latest oompah-rock band was rattling the concrete walls as its inhabitants relaxed to the bone-shaking rhythms pounding out of Mister Twirly’s speakers.

“Super party!” Hiroshi mouthed unheard in the hammering noise, eyes wide as she loaded in another Bulky Disc of her favourite group, Prompt Blast Casualties. She swept her gaze around the room – Trish and Shobban were there, Toemi and Princess Cthuline were there, even Temari had dropped in earlier in the evening. Shobban was earnestly sketching Eldritch symbols in her notebook, while Cthuline was explaining what their true significance had been before the arrival of New Math in what surface-dwellers called the Lower Triassic.

Hiroshi giggled, sitting down heavily on a rolled-up futon. Sake was wonderful stuff, she told herself, and much nicer than the Junior Beer ® that was all she was used to. Her eyes glanced across the corridor to the bathroom, where everything was in place to try and copy the Summoning she had tried before. A slight frown passed over her broad features – though she liked the idea, she could see no way to overclock the great flayed skin bound Grimoire they had borrowed from the Academy library – and besides, she was trying to get all the other conditions exactly the same as last time.

“We’ve got it all ready,” she shouted, waving at Trish as the vulpine-effect girl cautiously picked her way across the room, “got the same pentacle and Interesting Words drawn out in the same brand of canteen chilli – it’ll be the same time of night too when we start. And if it works – we’re ready for that.” She fished in her satchel and brought out some small squares of plastic, each with an elasticated loop.

Trish blinked. “What are those being?”

Hiroshi’s eyes glazed slightly. “It gets real confusing, you know, when some senior girls at school said they managed to get dragged off to a nameless place and spent all weekend doing unspeakable things with an unnamable entity – and then the next week they did exactly that, but with a different lot of unnamable things in the nameless place next door. If we get enough Monsters for one each – I’ve got name-tags, so we can keep track.” She looked at the blank nametags critically. “These are elastic, they should fit over any unspeakable protrusions without falling off. I’ll have to think of some names – Trevor, Rodney and Nigel sound nice.”

Trish scratched her head, but wandered over towards Shobban. To her horror, she discovered that Shobban was giving a vector-based description of the Entity they had summoned the week before – Shobban had not got it quite right, but Trish recognised the portrait well enough. She turned away, flicking through her Phrase Book, which was seeing little use these days as her Japanese improved. Her claw tapped on an entry in the section “1001 essential platitudes for everyday life” – *‘Eavesdroppers rarely hear good of themselves.’*

“... So I checked the books, and I’m fairly sure what we got was one of these,” Shobban drew a dread symbol in her sketchbook, which started to smolder slightly. “One of “*Those which the Elder Races ban from their wide realms by reason of their nature*” – I’d have thought they must be pretty radical for your folk to kick them out, with the things you coexist with!” The red setter puppy’s tail wagged. “Should be interesting!” She took a sip through a straw from the long drink of Junior Whiskey ® over ice – unlike most long-snouted folk, Shobban had learned to drink through tubes from an early age. Whereas Cthuline had grown up in a high-pressure environment, all Shobban’s family and neighbours had grown up in an NBC environment, and she still felt hideously exposed at walking around in the open air without a sealed suit and respirator.

Trish felt a tug at her sailor-suit collar. Hiroshi was there, looking stricken. “We’re out of drink!” She wailed, tears springing to her eyes. “We can’t have our friends and royalty sitting around at a dry party – Cthuline’s an amphibian, you know they hate dry things!” She paused. “She didn’t even like the dry sherry.”

“Is nothing here in the kitchen?” Trish’s ears drooped, as she hit the switch inside the suit. “Was seeing those fire extinguishers were full of something labeled EC StandardBrau Lager.”

Hiroshi pulled a face. “Bleagh! Can’t drink that! Maybe there’s some windscreen de-icer around for someone’s aircraft project, or – I know! Let’s go borrow some from my Sister, I bet she’s got enough alcohol to launch a squadron of V-2’s into orbit! Come on, you can help carry.” With that she cheerfully grabbed Trish and pulled her uncomplaining out into the clear night beneath quite outstandingly sinister stars.

It was fifty metres across between the dormitory blocks, and Hiroshi kept up a cheerful humming as they trotted along the crushed gravel paths. She turned and grinned unnervingly in the gibbous moonlight. “I bet the dorm’s glad to see me – it must be used to being full of students and now there’s nobody in there. Isn’t

it lonely? Just you and Princess Cthuline left, everyone else gone off to Pirate Island?” She paused. “Even us! We’re there too, in a relative way.”

“I hope we are being all right,” Trish admitted. “But we will never be knowing – we will never meet our selves and find out.”

“It’s sorta quiet without them,” Hiroshi walked on in silence for a few paces. “And Mae – Mae’s cute! And all psychic all over the place, I’ll bet she’s putting it to good use.” Her eyes widened. “I know a Karaoke about that one, I heard Kazuko sing it once.” She pulled her ever-ready microphone out of her satchel, and regaled the leering shadows and echoing abyssal voids of the sky with her shrill rendition:

“It’s not always true what our brochures they say
Like “Study at Toho, you’ll wish you could stay!”
Now Mae’s standing there on the beach all alone
For the holiday’s here and she cannot go home!

Poor Mae’s seen her friends leaving, filled with elation
They’re touching down now in the Rising Sun nation
She feels as much use as two left-handed mittens
For nobody there favors Psionic Kittens

Even if she went back she’d be home all alone
In a big draughty castle of cedar and stone
Where the weather blows in off the cold Ohtosk Sea
So she might as well stay at the Academy

For her Pa’s a big cheese in Designer Disease
Raking billions in fees from the wars overseas
And the family travel wherever he goes
They’re not coming back till the Midwinter snows

Mae suddenly stops, and her face fills with glee
She’s remembered the rules of the Academy
Just last week her Project’s requirements were met
Now she legally owns her own four-engined jet!

She’s already forgotten she wants to go back
As her Junkers she fits with a “Mighty Mouse” pack
And the next time she’s picked on in Toho airspace
It’s going to be her coming home in first place!”

She finished with a triumphant twirl of the microphone, as they reached the block. For a microsecond she looked a little pensive. “I hope folk don’t mind – it’d be mean of them though, to grudge us using their stuff. Princess Cthuline’s royalty, and Toemi is sort of on her Father’s side – Kazuko can’t have us letting down the reputation of the Academy in front of them!”

Trish fished out her card key, and slipped it into the door. The block was silent, with only the dim glow of emergency lights around the fire exits. “I am hoping Suzuko can fix her Cray, if it is not meant to make smoke like that when you tried to make it go faster.”

As she hit the lights, Trish noticed a slightly guilty look on Hiroshi’s moon-like face. But a quick check on her species expressions guide failed to find any reference to her subspecies having any such expression in their range.

“Well...” Hiroshi said slowly, as they reached the far end of the corridor and took the stairs two at a time, “it’s not as if there’s anything wrong with stuff exploding or bursting into flames.” She beamed at some pleasant memory. “In fact – it’s a perfectly natural condition for most things – that’s what I’ve always found, anyway.”

They halted in front of Kazuko’s room. Hiroshi sniffed. “She’s never even let me look inside the place! Well, this’ll save time when she comes back.” She fished out a Junior Burglar™ passkey and eagerly went to work on the lock, dodging the occasional electric arc and spray of peroxide that smoldered on the floor tiles where a less cautious investigator might be expected to be standing. After a few minutes she gave a whoop. “Ta-daah! We’re in!” She pulled the door wide open, dodged the deadfall trap and trotted into the room.

Trish blinked, looking into the room as Hiroshi happily ransacked it. “Kazuko she is into – underwater exploration? All those waterproof suits.”

Hiroshi held up a particularly rubbery suit, admiringly. “Looks neat! I know she made one for Suzuko, even though they don’t really go with fur.” Her eyes crossed. “This’d fit me! My Sis grew five centimeters overnight last year – she’d stunted her growth years ago, rushing things with hormones, and last year she sorta got reset to be the same as if she hadn’t. Rather confusing really. I’m sure this wouldn’t fit her any more.” Her blue eyes took on an acquisitive glint as she imagined herself dressed head to foot in the nice rubbery texture of a Nightgaunt or a slinky ghoul.

Meanwhile, Trish had followed her nose and spotted a cupboard with “Highly Inflammable” warning notices. She hesitated – Hiroshi had mentioned it was a fashionable pastime to collect dangerous items, and several of her friends had large collections of classic landmines and the like collected from fields around the world. She had seen references to munitions plants, and supposed mine fields were where they grew. “In here?” She ventured, her fine snout detecting a concentration of explosive hydrocarbon vapours. “Is scented like Kazuko was drinking last week?”

Hiroshi grinned, putting her official Girl Scout crowbar to good use. “At school, the Careers Advisor was pointing me towards jobs in Evil Mega-Corporations,” she commented casually. “It’s respectable there being in Data and Resource acquisition like this – and they let you keep a percentage, too! Ooh, nice.” She raised a bottle of lager-free alcohol up to the light. “Come on – let’s get back to the party!”

Mae Tsuko stared down at the great sleek shape of the R-device in horror. Around her, a great echoing concrete chamber dripped with moisture – a natural shelter, which was no reassurance considering she was on the same side of the wall as the Device. By the door, two heavily muscled Hyena guards kept out the curious – they had been there for an hour, and one was now opening a lunchbox. The familiar scent of the local scavenger cuisine reached her fine feline nose, which wrinkled in reaction – she had passed pie-shops on the way advertising a full range of maturity, from fresh through regular and up to Extra Rancid.

“That thing’s alive,” she said bluntly, looking around at her temporary employer, whose long tongue was flicking nervously in and out of his tubular muzzle. “It’s asleep, but – it’s alive. I can feel thoughts radiating from it.” She gently tapped a point half-way towards the frontal steering fin. “And this piece here – it’s like ... like looking at a dam gate, when you know there’s enough pressure behind it to flood half the province if it goes.” Mae shivered. Going into the “mind” of this thing was going to be as survivable as sticking your head inside a blast furnace – but she could already feel it stirring, like a restless sleeper. Consciousness could start and spread in the synthetic mind like a spark in a barrel of gunpowder – and millions of times as deadly. Turning her back on it was not an option.

She closed her eyes and rested her paws on the smooth, gelatinous case of the Device, probing into other areas than the deadly pseudo-mind and its power amplifier. Half the case was taken over with explosives, stacked in layers with high-quality piezo-electric crystal generators. When the precisely tuned detonator fired, half a tonne of Cubane-40 would turn efficiently into thousands of amps of current – a common enough power source for electromagnetic pulse weapons, but with this – it would be different. Very different. For a fraction of a second a psychic signal of immense power would radiate to attune itself with the minds of all sentient creatures, asleep or awake – and that mind was mad.

Flinching, she cast her thoughts wider. *Suzuko – where are you?* She thought hard, forming her friend’s mental image. She was close, and getting closer – and her friend had indicated she had help coming, qualified help.

Just outside. Tell them to let us in. The signal almost made her bounce back in surprise, with its clarity and power. Mae blinked. “Suki’s not a Psyker – is she?” She asked herself. And as she relayed her instructions to the ant eater and his guards, she realised how the signal had been so strong.

The Device had a psychic amplifier, right next to her head. If it was starting to re-radiate thought signals, she thought desperately, it must be beginning to draw current from somewhere.

“Open the doors, let them in!” Her voice carried a low hiss of urgency, “This thing is waking up!”

“Ooh. What a party!” Hiroshi staggered back against the door, having waved the last of the guests goodnight as midnight approached. She gave a bleary grin, and slowly slid down the door, her head swimming. “Any more of that stuff we got from Kazuko’s room? What is it, anyway?”

Trish gave the nearly empty bottle a solemn inspection. “It’s green.” She declared, holding it up to the light.

“Oh. Well. Mother always told me to finish up my greens. Let’s finish this off.” She shook her head, and grabbed Shobban as she was about to fall out of the window, vigorously waving goodnight to the only three Western Europeans she had met all evening. Unfortunately, conversations had been rather restrained

due to the lack of phrases suitable for parties in the available “Anglo-Saxon for travelers” phrasebook. Cnuthwald, Ælfric and Egbald hailed from Middle England, and naturally spoke only Middle English.

Hiroshi and Shobban fell to the ground in a giggling, untidy heap that one of the guests must have left. For a minute, Hiroshi looked up at the ceiling lights, admiring the swirling colours – and wondering if they always changed their behaviour and started to crawl down the walls this far after her usual bedtime. That Absinthe Sake was very fine stuff, she told herself.

“Let’s ... just check this is all right,” she hiccuped, lurching over to the cordoned-off area which had become a dumping ground for empty bottles as well as the more dangerous bits of their experiment. She pulled the knitted cosy off the naked singularity, and lay on the floor looking at it awhile in dreamy contemplation.

“Look,” she offered, a few minutes later, as Shobban reappeared with a big pitcher of iced water. “It’s such a neat singularity – you can see where the laws of time and space break down and everything goes infinite. There’s the border between Order and Chaos - it’s got pretty fractal edges.” She poked it with a stick.

“Don’t do that, Hiroshi,” Shobban automatically replied. “It’s still holding the two possible futures apart. If it stops, causality might break down and we’d lose marks if our Tutors have to come and fix it again. It has to be kept in balance.””

A silver-topped menace scratched her head as she struggled to her feet, looking around. “Balanced. I heard about that once. Like ... if you use an eco-friendly shampoo, you should use an eco-catastrophic conditioner? Still – no time for that. Nearly midnight – let’s get spell-casting!” She followed Shobban out to the bathroom, where she had used the dimensionally skewed Spirograph™ to copy out the same shape they had almost succeeded with on the hilltop the week before.

Shobban blinked, looking around as she took up position and handed her friend the ancient tome they had borrowed from the library. “Where’s Trish? She said she wanted to be here to watch.”

There was a low moan from one of the cubicles. Hiroshi pulled a face in sympathy. “That sounds Trish-shaped,” she offered. “I thought that last cocktail you made her looked a bit extreme – half a bottle each of brown Russian Kvass, yellow Dutch Advocaat and blue Bombay gin with three ice-cubes.” She paused. “Next time she should just stick to two ice-cubes.”

“She can hear us in there,” Shobban agreed, dousing her head in a basin full of cold water. “She can come out when she’s ready. Thinking of ready –“

“Yes, yes, yes,” Hiroshi’s mop of silvery head-fur nodded. She twirled her Karaoke microphone, took a deep breath and looked around, before taking a final swig and draining the bottle of her Sister’s batch of Durian Gin. “Who knows? If this really works we might call up somebody who’s never been here before at all – we can be their first Priestesses!” She clapped her hands together in glee. “It’ll be just like my friend Minagi’s aunt did last year – if it looks OK, we’ll make shocking obeisance, and it’ll tell us what sort of sacrifices it likes, and we’ll give it loads of them and it’ll give us all sorts of Powers and Attributes and stuff. And we get to design all our own costumes and holy symbols. That’d be so neat!”

She turned round to see Shobban pointing to the Grimoire, her paw tapping and tail swishing impatiently. “All right – let’s take it from the top!” Opening up the book with a flourish, she began to chant.

Trish felt the rhythms beginning to pound in her head – which was the very last thing it needed, being painfully pounding already. She panted, struggling to close the small section of her inner suit she had needed to open – being sick in a space-suit was something she had heard of discussed in horror by the locals, and her own situation was far more extreme. The suit’s zip fastening had been sticking in the past few days – she had hoped it was a temporary glitch, as finding local materials that would work on the inside of the suit was liable to be difficult, to say the least.

“Never again. Never again.” She shook her head, and regretted it, the ears falling down in random directions as she reached for the control switches. “I will be sticking to plain Sake from this time onwards.”

She struggled to her paws, hearing Hiroshi’s voice raised in an evocation that she realised her friend had very nearly got right, despite all the odds. Fastening her zip and sandal straps would have to wait – she put her paw on the door handle and began to open it – when in a bananosecond* everything went horribly wrong.

Trish felt her foot-paw catch in her open sandal, which in turn was wedged against the door post. As the door swung open, she tripped and fell headlong into the room, realising too late that the seal on her inner suit was unlocked. With the force of impact, Trish’s inner suit zip sprang open, and Trish poured out into the frighteningly Euclidean space of the bathroom, more than half filling it as she unfolded from the home-like space of her three-dimensional suit.

* The time interval between stepping on a banana peel and hitting the floor.

Hiroshi gave a triumphant squeal, her eyes widening to their utmost as the bathroom filled with more Monster than she had ever hoped to summon. She blinked, feeling the visceral reaction that all her kin did when faced with the Unknown – the driving urge to dive into the unexplored territories and preferably come home with better souvenirs than just postcards.

Suddenly she stopped. Behind her, Shobban gave a whimper, pointing to the door of the cubicle.

There was what looked like an emptied fur coat there, clad in a disordered sailor-suit of first-year pattern – very much as if something had eaten Trish from the insides out.

“Ulp.” Hiroshi froze. “That’s not supposed to happen.” Despite all expectations of other species, Anime girls very rarely came to harm in their adventures – the past year her home town had hosted a visit by a mixed couple who were the living example of cooperation; Mr. and Mrs. The Thing That Eats Eyes. Her own huge blue eyes stared at the vixen-skin, while somewhere in her pumpkin-shaped head a certain association began to form.

Shobban spoke first, looking up at the seething pattern of blobs and pseudopods that appeared and disappeared as they briefly intersected Einsteinian space. “My tail’s not gone sideways,” she said matter-of-factly. “It should do – it’s certainly a Monster.” She gave a yip of disappointment. “It’s a girl!”

Hiroshi clicked her fingers. “That’s it! It’s like seeing a painting and a sculpture of the same model – but lots more so.” She hesitated. It was more like being blind and having to recognise the sculpture from a painting, with very little dimensional information in common – but the more she looked at the figure, the more she noticed a certain indefinable Trishness about it. “You’re her, aren’t you? You’re not really a plain vixen, but an Entity from three motorway exits past the farthest stars! That’s cool.”

Shobban flicked through the index of the Grimoire Hiroshi had dropped. She shook her head. “No wonder Princess Cthuline didn’t recognise my Monster-spotting,” she complained. “The translation isn’t *“Those which the Elder Races ban from their wide realms by reason of their nature”*, but the one on this page here, *“Those which the Elder Races don’t let join their country clubs because they’re too middle-class.”*”

A large but indefinite volume of Trish-type Entity seemed to blush, pseudopods phasing in and out of the local reality.

Hiroshi gave an extra-big grin, helping some of the indescribable shape flow towards the empty three-dimensional suit, undoing the shirt buttons to let her friend fit in the room again. Her lips pursed as she caught a glimpse inside the suit, which was quite a few sizes larger inside than outside, and extended in directions not easy to explain. “Well, that’s all right, then. You had us worried for a minute. Now, back to work!” With that she took back the great book from Shobban, and twirled her microphone again. “Take it from the top!”

From the outside, a late wanderer would have heard a human and a canine voice joined in a merry evocation that had been old long before the volcano that formed Shahaguo Island had broken the ancient waves. There was the sound of a large zip closing and some fumbling adjustments – and then a third voice, broadly canine, joined in the chorus.

But then – late wanderers around Toho Academy tended to see and hear many strange things, and this was by no means the strangest of them.

End Chapter 15