

Chapter Five

Dawn was breaking far over the Andes, early spring for the Southern Hemisphere. None of it ever penetrated to the giant military-religious complex of Chutapaxta dug deep beneath the Peruvian mountains some eighty kilometres from La Paz. The entrance was hidden around a sharp canyon bend, a deeply shadowed road and rail portal whose thousand-tonne doors were currently sealed tightly shut.

Senior Priest and Foreign Minister Ramon Xutachtabi was not waking up to the promise of a splendid new day, with much to look forward to. He had been awake for forty hours, watching over the counter-attack that was pushing the Mexicanos back towards Panama - and six hours ago, he had cleared the use of the three experimental weapons that had been "acquired" from an unknown source. He frowned, his vicuna muzzle twisting in displeasure. There should be no secrets in the Peruvian People's Republic "unknown" to him - but the R-Devices had been brought in by a small team under great secrecy - and after partly translating the manuals and transmitting increasingly horrified reports, the leader had killed the entire team and then himself.

"But where are the R-Devices now?" He fumed, looking around to his aide. "Mexico City is gone - as effectively as if we'd blown it to a crater, supposing the Japanese or the Girl Scouts released any weapons that big. We need the other two - twenty percent of their surviving High Command is in Guatemala City, if we can catch them before they evacuate. Any reports?"

The aide, a slim Chupacabra girl, frowned as she looked at the screen. "One's destroyed, Sir - it was taking off from the Missouri River, by best accounts some of the natives attacked it - rowed big logs out into the river in front of it. The R-Device triggered itself autonomously - seems there's some sort of fail-safe trigger on them. If they sense they're going to be destroyed in Enemy Territory, they don't let themselves be captured."

The vicuna slammed his hard, hoof-like hand against the desk, oblivious to the pain. "And the other one? There was one in Strike Fleet West, on random dispersal in the Pacific. Where's that one?"

The Chupacabra hesitated, her bat-like ears dipping in worry. "We're not sure - it was engaged by a flight of Mexicano running-dog missiles, right at the edge of our detector area. It's been out of contact for two hours now - the Priest is carrying a homing beacon that we should be able to detect if he gets the order to activate it."

Just then, another screen flashed to life, from that part of the Foreign Ministry that was still above ground near the beautifully refurbished temple complex at La Paz. The aide spoke briefly into the screen, and her tail went rigid in shock.

"Well?" Minister Ramon demanded.

His aide turned to him slowly, looking distinctly unwell. "That, sir, was from the Japanese Ambassador. There's good news and there's bad news - the good news is, they've found our missing bomber for us."

"Estimated landfall on the Japanese coast, ninety minutes." Tihucabo's voice rang through the general intercom, as the Spirit of '56 cruised at twenty-five kilometres above the open ocean, still with half its fuel left. "We should be within range of our VHF radio - the satellites aren't talking to us any more. Must be Mexicano jamming."

Captain Evans nodded, sitting relaxed for the minute in the pilot's chair, content to let the autopilot fly the aircraft. He looked out at the starry night, paling with the coming dawn behind them. At cruising speed, they were flying a little slower than the sunrise coming round the planet - but the course was nearer Northwest right now than pure West. "Davies! Cotaxha! Get me Air Traffic control, book us through."

"Trying, Sir." Davies the Night Radio frowned, tapping at his laptop. The Road Runner normally communicated with its base by satellite, but for some reason nothing but static was coming through. The VHF radio was strictly line-of-sight, which limited it considerably compared to the huge expanse of the Pacific Ocean. One frequency after another he tried, fingers moving faster than ever as they approached the line on the map display marking the outer Japanese Empire boundaries. "Cotaxha, check we're getting this out, look you - even if we can't hear them, they have to hear us."

"Gotcha." The Colombian Jaguar wriggled under the radio panel, checking the status lights. "All green, Sir - the signal's getting to the computer, and the computer says it's getting out." His whiskers twitched. "That is - it's all routing through that new computer in the bomb. It's flying the aircraft all right, so the radio should be no trouble to it."

Davies the Night Radio drummed on his laptop, one ear dipped in worry. "I hope you're right. I just hope and pray you're right there, boyo!"

Flying suits, Suzuko reflected briefly as she struggled to lace up the pressure liner, were never built for quick-change routines - and definitely not for running in. The only consolation was that her Dormitory was a bare

four hundred metres from the airfield dispersal points, where her Lippisch N-13 sat ready for her, fuelled and ready to go for this surprise drill.

"It ... HAS to be a drill," She panted, her tongue hanging out as she ran through the pre-dawn darkness. "There'd be sirens screaming all over the place if the Neighbours were coming!" On every fourth street light was an emergency siren, all staying mute as she hurried past. "I just hope I get bonus points for this one."

At the edge of the airstrip, she slackened her pace for an instant in surprise. Test alerts were normally handled entirely by the computers, the radars marking her performance and scores against the simulated mission that the control tower played from its capacious but bulky Hard Tape system. But there was a blaze of emergency lighting at the control tower, and a crowd of people she had never seen out at this hour, except in the direst assaults from Monster Island. She bowed, seeing a figure she had spoken to twice since her first week at Toho, but whose holograph portrait floated in front of the Administration building night and day.

"Miss Hohki - come with us, please," snapped Fusada-sama, the Arch-Dean of all Toho Academy. "We have a problem."

In the dispersal bays at the end of the runway, a dozen overalled figures were feverishly working, hitching up small towing tractors to two of the three aircraft that were lined up for immediate action.

"Hurry it up!" Granita snapped, her tail lashing dangerously as she led the ground team pulling the Kyushu J7W "Shinden" propeller fighters out of the start line. "Never mind putting these in the hangars - just pull them out of the way. They're no use for this one!" The 1945 class Japanese interceptors would have played havoc with bombers of their own time, but they lacked twenty kilometres altitude and two Mach numbers performance to defend against what was heading towards Japan.

Dressed in her specially tailored flight suit, Toemi nodded her tightly bound head of blonde hair, helping her muscular friend snap the towing hook into position. "My Leduc, Suki's Lippisch and Kobishi's Nord Griffin - they're the only ones we've got for this trip. In just a couple of months -" she grimaced, gesturing wordlessly towards the yawning floodlight-lit hangars, where the sleek shapes of a North American Rapier and a "Greased" ramjet-engined Lightning were almost in flying condition.

"We'll have to fuel them up till they leak, and that won't be enough," came a worried voice, as a slight black feline wriggled past them towards his aircraft. "My Griffin - it drinks fuel like you won't believe - well, nobody but you, Toemi." Kobishi nodded, as the demigoddess slid the cockpit cover forward and started to warm up the systems on her Leduc 022.

"There's a tanker on the way - the JSDF scrambled one from Okinawa, half an hour ago," Toemi shouted above the noise as the auxiliary engine started up, providing electrical power and starting thrust to her thin-winged bullet of an aircraft. "Good thing we dropped a couple of Authenticity points on an in-flight fuelling probe each!" She pulled on her helmet, relaxing on the steeply reclining seat of the French interceptor, the current leader of her 1955 class Historical Engineering course. "We'll be launching in about twenty minutes - good thing Granita had her Society already up and ready to commandeer!"

Granita gave her a quartz-sharp grin, and a thumbs-up gesture as the towing tractor started to haul Toemi's fighter out of the hangar. Under her flight overalls, Granita and most of the hastily impressed ground crew wore the regalia of their Secret Society that had been meeting on the Island's northern hilltop when the alert had sounded. Not their own regalia, of course - it was a standard practice of Secret Societies to camouflage their activities in instantly recognisable costumes belonging to their rivals.*

"Ha ! We've got permissions to load the biggest we've got on this mission." She spun to her crew, checking the personnel files, and spotted a tired-looking red setter pup, in a green overall that was much too big for her. According to the manual, some jobs had to be assigned to time-served Girl Scouts, who were certified to the highest possible standards of stability and common sense.

"You ! " Granita pointed. "You were in the Girl Scouts, right ?"

A long-snouted head nodded vigorously, cascading furry ears shaking in the pre-dawn wind. "Sure!"

Granita snorted, reading code-phrases from the sealed envelope that the Arch-Dean of the Academy had handed her. "Firebreak. Flying Spear. White cataphract." She looked closely at the new student. Who was standing with a puzzled expression, her head to one side and her long tongue flopping out of her muzzle. "You don't understand your own code-words ?"

- Of course, any intelligence analyst worth their pay could quite soon spot their real identity by tracking the one Society they never dress as. However, so many intelligence analysts belong to Secret Societies, that this in fact never happens.

"Nope." The red-haired puppy shook her head, eyes wide and vacant, but with a frightening keenness in her expression. "Not a word, sorry. I was supposed to do the Practical side this year at School, but I'm here instead. They just put me in charge of the Shed yesterday - I know how the door works - you've got to kick it in just the right place!"

Granita sighed, pointing to a wooden shed by the side of the runway, its armoured chipboard protected by a specially hand-written, customised "Do Not Enter" sign. "Open up the shed, arm the nukes, and bring them here on the double. Got that ?"

Shobban nodded vigorously, yipping in excitement. "Sure! Right away !" Her tail wagged like the wing of a Mitsubishi Strike Ornithopter, and, seizing a low-loader trolley, she dashed off. "Come on, Hiroshi ! Cool stuff!"

From the earth-banked dispersal pen holding her aircraft, Suzuko winced as the two tired but happy-looking first-year students headed off towards the Special Munitions Security Shed. She wriggled, tightening up the lacing on her flight suit. This was not one of the bulky, semi-inflatable designs, but a "mummy-suit" that wrapped layers and layers of tightly tensioned elastic fabric around her, the fabric providing pressurisation that her home-built wooden cockpit could not. Glancing around, she pulled a broad pink ribbon out of the thigh pocket - a ribbon of unearthly intense hue that was definitely not authorised Academy wear. She bowed once, her eyes closed, then tied it around her brow before sliding the long-snouted helmet down to lock with the neck-ring.

She studied her helmet display, and felt her fur attempting to stand on end. "This is a nightmare," she whispered to herself. "Kazuko's cooking is giving me indigestion again, and I'll soon wake up." But she shook her head, grim-faced. A Peruvian bomber had dropped a strategic yield Psychological Warfare device over Mexico City, with the same eventual effects as a neutron bomb. The WorldNet had been full of sinister rumours from Europe in response, mostly crazed ramblings that all pointed to certain areas on the map that were still listed as unsafe to occupy - and especially unsafe to dream in. There had been others presumably who might have said more, but they had been of necessity collected by robotic aid and sealed beneath the giant shielded domes of specially earthed Loony Bins, themselves constructed far from intact and vulnerable minds.

"And there's one on the way here. We don't know why - the Peruvians are saying there must have been some sort of leak and it's driven the crew mad, but we can't risk that." It was a first-year ovine girl, dressed in the green coveralls of the ground crew.

Suzuko blushed, realising she had been speaking aloud. "The whole JSDF is scrambling behind us - but nobody's been building point-defence interceptors for years - they're way out of fashion. So - in ten minutes I'm launching. Could you do my tail suit, please ?"

Jenni nodded grimly, squeezing Suzuko's tail-fur tight into the gusseted fabric sac, then zipping it tight and strapping it like a bulky sleeping-bag in a compression sac. Squeezing a fox's tail into a pressure suit was a task that took at least two people, and a lot of determination. "Give them hell from us !"

Suzuko winced, only partly from the squeezing of her fine fox-brush. "If I have to. It looks like they're carrying a lot of it intended for us." She vaulted lightly up into her cockpit, clipping in the seat harness, pulling the pins out of the ejector seat and flicking the master electrical switches. Grabbing the edge of the canopy, she pulled it down and locked it, the positive-locking bolts engaging on both side with a reliable non-electronic "Thump!"

"Horst here, from the control tower" came a familiar steady voice over the radio. "Suzuko - the Road Runner is climbing still. Nearest pass to the Academy will be eighty kilometres Northeast, estimated twenty-eight kilometres altitude." There was a pause. "Our computer's not sure just how they'll react when they see you coming. They may drop the Device on us, rather than have it shot down." Another pause. "Which is why the rest of the island is not on Alert - no point in waking them."

Alone in her cockpit, Suzuko nodded, solemnly, a cold fear washing down her spine. There were enough people at the airstrip to launch the only three aircraft that would be of any use - having the rest of the island down here would not help matters. "Better not to know, if that hits us." Suzuko whispered to herself. She looked through her sharp-angled cockpit, its "V" section reflecting stars and instrument lights in the darkness, as the tractor pulled her out onto the airstrip pointing towards the faint wash of light in the East. The tractor unhitched, leaving the delta-winged interceptor poised at the end of the runway, night dew glistening on the Medium-Density Fibreboard of its wings.

"Fuel tanks full, battery charged..." She ran down the checklist, as familiar to her as her Morning Prayer ritual. There was one extra section today that she had not needed for a long time. On each side of the narrow cockpit ran a long slot, filled at one end with a black simulated plastic knob. Grasping the right-hand one with both hands, she pulled it back with all her strength till there came a loud click - and repeated it for the identical device on the left.

"Mark 108 Rheinmetall-Borsig 30 mm cannon, cocked, sixty rounds explosive/incendiary in each." Her eyes crossed. "I don't know what it'll be like firing these at full speed and altitude - but it's all I've got. By the look of them, those Road Runners aren't armoured more than a sake can." For an instant she forced herself to relax, breathing deeply, as she took in the display the old hacked SAGE system was displaying on her helmet. The ocean

was calm and innocent looking, but somewhere a lethal arrow was flying towards them all, laden with death and hideously contagious madness enough to overwhelm a whole city.

"Horst here." She heard the familiar voice again, and clung to it like a rock in a flooding river. "Eight minutes to launch. The timing's tight on this one - but we can do this. I'll be here all the way." Suzuko nodded, her paws gripping the control stick tightly, as she looked down the length of the runway into the darkness. Suddenly, a pair of ninety-year old cannons seemed even more inadequate than usual - as she saw what Shobban and Hiroshi were wheeling toward the other aircraft.

Granita cast a suspicious eye at the two first-year students wheeling the heavy trolley across the runway. Carefully stacked on wooden pallets were four missiles, produced to suit the 1955 course. Little over two metres long, the top pair carried stubby fins, rather bulbous heads, and were painted a neutral white, save for the a red ring near the tip and the yellow and black radiation symbol on two of them. The other two were otherwise identical, but were marked "Training" in black stencilled letters.

"Two Douglas MB-1 air-to-air "Genies", check. Two smoke marker "Ting-a-ling" training rounds to balance, check." She swished her heavy tail. "You managed to arm them pretty quick!"

Shobban nodded happily. "Did it yesterday! Got rid of the safeties, too."

"That's right!" Hiroshi chipped in. "These are meant to be used, and they want to be used, I'm sure. It's cruel, putting safety devices on them. Like chaining up a pet. Anyway, it's saved lots of time. Isn't Shobban awesome?" She clasped her hands together, her eyes seeming to become bigger than ever as reflected highlights swam like pools of mercury in them.

Granita winced, reminding herself to have severe words with whoever assigned the part-time jobs at the Academy. She flexed her knuckles, distracted for a second at the pleasant prospect. "Better start the pre-flight sequence. The books said it'll take five minutes authenticating the codes."

Shobban reached down and pulled out what looked like a meat skewer from the missile, hearing a quiet click. "All done!" She smiled. "I fixed that bit too. Just - don't bang it around too much. " She pulled the second missile's pin, her tail wagging.

"Those ARE meat skewers, aren't they?" Granita's eyes narrowed. "Let's guess - you applied to work in the kitchens and they threw you out as an accident waiting to happen." Her muscles tensed, then relaxed as she nodded. It was standard policy to hand out the most potent hardware to the most emotionally fragile crews, to bolster their confidence.

"Yes ! And me too!" Hiroshi clasped her hands tightly under her chin. "We wanted to try out new recipes, there's a way of preparing Fugu fish that I'm sure nobody's ever tried. And they threw us out. It's so Unfair!" She pushed the trolley over towards the flight line, where Toemi was setting up the guidance system that would pre-set the missiles' course. Once they left the aircraft, they would be wholly relying on the onboard electro-mechanical timer, with not a single external sensor to guide or confuse them. Only especially crude technologies could survive the transistor-killing punch of a Road Runner's beam weapon, and the Genies were marvellous pieces of authentic Crude Engineering.

Five minutes of furious activity followed, as hydraulic jacks were pumped furiously to raise the missiles to the aircraft hard-points and marry them up to the aircraft - one Genie and one Ting-a-ling apiece on the two 1955 class interceptors. At last, the lights in the cockpit displays turned green, and Toemi waved a back tentacle as she vaulted into the cockpit. A minute later, Kobishi waved to the ground crew, climbed the ladder above the gaping air intake of his Griffin, and slid the cockpit shut. There was a brief moment of stillness, as two French point-defence fighters sat on the runway, chocks pulled away and ready to roll behind Suzuko's own ersatz chipboard interceptor.

"All we can do now is wait," Suzuko whispered to herself, watching the stopwatch and the display from ground control. She felt sick to the pit of her stomach, as she looked down the pale runway under the starlight. She nodded over towards her friends' aircraft, taking in the plan being relayed by the datalink from the control tower. Hard realities of time, distance, fuel and speed had narrowed down their options - there was only one plan which the tactical computers could come up with that stood much of a chance of catching the Road Runner before it was within striking distance of the homeland. She sketched a salute to Toemi off to her starboard side on the wide concrete hangar apron, spotting the matched pair of sleek shapes clinging like remoras to the front fuselage. One was a harmless smoke rocket, but should draw some of the defenders' fire away from the other one - hopefully, the mechanical timer on the Genie should survive long enough to fire its fifteen hundred tonnes of hellfire in the path of the attacker.

The seconds ticked past, the hands of the authentic stopwatch on the dashboard jerking slightly as they moved. Every second, the Road Runner came a few hundred metres nearer, climbing a little as it burned off fuel, becoming lighter and more responsive all the time. Suzuko had been hastily briefed, and shown film clips of the big steel shapes spotted over Mexican targets well above Mach Three, in the minute before the fuel ran out. By a perverse twist of logic, their peak performance for their kinetic bombs was reached just as the last of their fuel entered the engines, and whatever happened to the aircraft after that was a secondary consideration

Deep in the basement of the control tower, in an unmarked room next to the broom cupboard, the fifty-year old IBM XT running the SAGE defence programs checked its own clock and dialled out using its state-of-the-art 300 baud modem. The modern ONION computer picked up the call, a ten-kilo multi-layered sphere of cloned fish neurones, and consulted with the distant JSDF machines. A green light winked on in three cockpits.

"Time to go." Said Suzuko Hohki, and pressed the Start button.

"I say," Georgina Pontephrigh panted, her tail drooping in the dim light as the ground crew scrambled out of the way behind the earth berms. "Does this kind of thing happen often around here? It must be jolly tiring."

"Ha." Granita eyes her, a hint of a smile on her rugged features despite her own tiredness. Four in the morning brought the kind of fatigue that huge muscles could not wholly compensate for. "We get our share. There was last year, that business with the Dimensional entity that wanted to go home - ask Suzuko to tell you about that one. Then back this June, there was that alien Evangelist - nasty business that, Princess Cthuline had to call in a few favours. Then there was the Australian Rules badminton tournament, just last month. Not a lot of survivors from the losing team, they play it rough."

"I see." Georgina looked thoughtful. "But this foreign bomber, I didn't know you could drive folk batty like that. I thought it just ran in families, like our Uncle Crisp. And I never heard it was contagious."

"That's right!" A Homelands feline nodded vigorously, his Traditional black student uniform showing from under his coverall. "You can get it from eye contact, and if it's from a Foreigner, I hear you can catch it off a toilet seat too." There was a strangled squeal and thud, as an annoyed World Wrestling Champion lost her temper.

Granita dusted her hands, looking down at the pretzel-interlocked feline struggling on the ground. She hugged Georgina fiercely. "One thing he's right about - things change. What everyone's sure are natural laws one decade just stop working, and new ones come into fashion." She waved at Monster Island, just visible as a shadow against the stars. "Back in the 1940's and early 1950's, whenever you had nuclear tests or leaks, you'd get giant ants, giant non-sentient rats, vengeful tomatoes, the lot. It's recorded in all the films of the time." She paused. "Some strange things happened back then - take a tip from me, George, order the vegetarian Lasagne at our canteen, and don't mess with the Carnivorous one until I've taught you some advanced combat skills. It's something the first Toho classes found on Monster Island, they just carved off a slice to grow in the kitchen vats and it's regenerated as fast as we can eat it. But since then - it just doesn't happen. The Historical Re-enactment societies have set off exact replica 1950's bombs all over the place, and we don't get the same results."

A sudden thought struck her, and she turned menacingly to Shobban, pointing towards the Genies strapped to the sides of the Leduc and the Griffin. "You took the safety devices out of those, you said - do you mean you took them right out of the cases?" Her tail swished dangerously, as Shobban nodded cheerfully. "You've changed the weight, and the centre of gravity - they won't fly straight!"

"That's OK!" Hiroshi's eyes sparkled hugely in the growing light. "We're not, like, irresponsible, you know. We put some extra metal back in the case, next to the warhead, to balance it all up again."

A rugged eyebrow raised. "What did you use? "

Hiroshi jumped up and down excitedly. "This is a super island, isn't it? You can just go to that little corner shop and get what you want - the nice little old lady just went into the back and came back with the Uranium I wanted, all weighed out perfectly, cast and machined to shape! The Genie didn't look really punchy enough for us, but now it'll make a really neat bang!"

They all covered their ears, wincing as the three interceptors started their engines. Suzuko's was first, with a rising whine as the peroxide driven turbo-pump sprang into life with gouts of steam billowing around the aerospike jet exhaust. Eight rapid thumps followed in quick succession, as the eight small Walter cruise chambers lit up inside the engine duct, rising in seconds to a throbbing wail as she held the fuel mix to "rich" and peroxide blasted into the combustion chambers. Suzuko checked the air inlet spike was fully forward, and released the brakes.

"There they go!" Granita shouted, unheard in the mind-numbing noise as the brakes came off and Suzuko's Lippisch began to roll down the runway, its ducted rocket screaming like a thousand banshees as she suddenly opened the throttle and started to sprint. Five seconds carried it to the end of the runway - the nose pulled up, and the chipboard fighter zoomed up in almost a vertical climb, its takeoff trolley parachuting clear to splash into the lagoon a few seconds later.

Granita shivered despite herself, watching the rising speck of fire climbing through the dawn mists, fading as it pulled away from the planet, heading towards an encounter at the edge of Space that would have only one victor. She pulled Georgina close to her, instinctively. "Goddess speed, Suzuko. Goddess speed."

"Captain!" Tihucabo's voice sounded worried over the intercom as the Road Runner reached the line on the map marking the Japanese Empire's outer limit. "I don't know what's wrong with our radio. We're receiving

commercial broadcasts just fine - we can hear a lot of encoded military bands from ahead. But the satellites aren't talking to us, or giving us data feeds."

Captain Evans nodded, scanning his instruments in the cockpit. "The Mexicanos aren't jamming us, then? So why can't we call out?"

"The systems say we ARE, Capt'n - but ... " Tihucabo nudged the Dayshift radio operator. "Mixelepicti! The transmitter's right under your tail. Stick your multi-meter on the output leads." He wriggled round, tracing the data pathways. "We're routing our communications, radars and navigation systems through the Device - it's got the only maps, and a better computer." He blinked. "A Much better computer." He hit the "Resend" switch tuned into the International emergency channel, requesting overflight of Japanese airspace. "Mixelepicti - what's the output power we're getting?"

The opossum blinked. "Output power? Nothing - not a single needle twitch, and the transmitter isn't even warm." He pressed buttons on the self-test. "But the hardware says it's fine - and the Device swears it's sending the signal out."

There was a yelp from Jones the Night Radio, who had been monitoring the VHF radios, and had been getting an increasingly clear signal as they approached Japan. "News from Home, Sir! We've hit Mexico City - wiped the place out. But - the Mexicanos have gone nuclear." There was a chorus of cheers and snarls at the news, and after a minute Jones patched through to the Ship's general net again. "We sent in a Road Runner, with a strategic yield Psychiatric Blast bomb, folk don't reckon there'll be many long-term survivors. The rest of the world ... Uh, Sir, you don't want to hear what they're calling us. They're out for our blood. Even the Anti-Nowhere League just renounced its treaties half an hour ago."

In the forward cockpit, Tktlohahn Davies looked up at the Captain, eyes widening behind his face plate, the pressure suits now almost at their stiffest as they reached twenty-five kilometres above the ocean. "Our transmitter's not been working, Sir - they haven't heard us."

The Captain nodded, slowly. "We're heading into Japan, and nobody there knows why. Davies, I think I know what the "Device" is that we're carrying - it's one of those we used on Mexico City. We can't even contact North Korea and ask permission to land - and nowhere else would have wanted to see us, even before this."

There was a silence. Suddenly Morgan the Day Radar gave a shout, from his position in the aft crew bay. "We're being illuminated by a Japanese radar, Capt'n - a ground-based one, from Iwo Jima by the direction. They know we're here."

Captain Evans closed his eyes, then determinedly stood up to look through the twin-layer canopy, past the needle nose of the cruising bomber and out over the ocean. "All hear this, crew - this is what we're going to do." He winced, taking a deep breath. "We can't go back, and we won't be welcome anywhere but North Korea - so we're going to go straight there, full speed. We'll be "soaking" at Mach Three, all the way over Japan, so rig the ship for heat. Maximum altitude should keep us clear of their beams, and as for missiles- " He shrugged. "Gunnery, get ready. That's all for now."

Tktlohahn Davies wriggled back through the access tunnel to the main crew cabin, feeling his pressure suit grow sticky with the Priest's blood. Dimly he heard the sloshing of the liquid methane, the space-cold fluids suddenly pouring into the engines as the Road Runner accelerated, its steel skin already too hot to touch at cruising speed. Soon they would be "Riding the snowball through Hell", the external turrets retracted as they sprinted past Mach Three and poked their nose well into the Heat Barrier, only the icy fuel keeping the aircraft from cooking its crew and systems.

Shaking his head, he swung down into the crew compartment. "Tihucabo! Nothing's gone right since we linked into that Thing in the bomb bay. We're close enough to land to get a fix from our own radars for our World Map - so you can unplug us, and we'll run the Spirit of '56 the way we should."

The opossum nodded, the conical front of his helmet hiding a sharp snout twitching nervously. "I'll try."

Tktlohahn Davies looked at him hard, through the two layers of their Pyrex faceplates. "What do you mean, "Try" ? We plugged it in, you and Natahaho, just unplug it!"

"Well, I don't think it'll be quite that easy," Tihucabo swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. "When we installed its interface, it - contacted every computer in the ship, and - Integrated them. It's put software locks in place - secure ones." His eyes went wider, as he tapped at his keyboard. "I think we've got a Machine Intelligence here. It's not the kind you can chat to, but it's very smart as far as it goes."

Tktlohahn Davies shuddered, looking at the screen. "We've been trying to break Radio Silence, calling up Korea. It's decided that's a threat to its Mission, and stopped us calling out. You can't turn it off?"

"Not without unplugging everything else. And - when we told it to plot a course, it's only got one option on the menu - we told it to hit a prominent landmark, just south of Kobe. If we can't persuade it otherwise - that's just what it intends to do."

Three minutes after takeoff, Suzuko was heading Southeast at ten thousand metres, climbing steadily with her fuel cocks turned to full "lean", the Lippisch now an almost pure ramjet as she felt the steady acceleration

pressing her back into her seat. The plywood and fibreboard airframe was quivering with screaming power as it climbed, every minute gulping six hundred litres of fuel oil into the great variable-cycle engine. Air rammed into the inlet at thirty times the ambient pressure - at the height she was aiming at, only a precisely tuned inlet could keep the flame of the engine running, and not blow out like a candle in the wind or snuff out like a candle in space. The plywood wings trembled, the aircraft held in a fine balancing act of lift and gravity, thrust and drag - the chart on Suzuko's knee pocket showed a narrow and diminishing area where speed and temperature and pressure allowed her to stay in the air. One slip - one wrong throttle move and the delta would fall out of the sky like a man crashing through a rotten floor.

"Never put this to the test before - not all the way. Awful time to find out if it doesn't work," Suzuko whispered to herself. She checked the engine settings - a row of pressure and temperature readouts, and the manual inlet control. The air intake in the nose depended on a sliding cone, that had been poked right out at takeoff, but as she held her Mach Two climb, it was slipped most of the way back as air pressure and speed changed. Suzuko's muzzle twitched, smiling despite herself as she remembered Kazuko's comments on seeing the inlet design, with a sharp spike sliding in and out of its sheath - she had not taken up the suggestion to paint it pink.

For a few seconds, she managed to forget the danger she was climbing to meet - it was a perfect early Autumn dawn, the few light clouds already below her blushing rose-red and gold as the sun rose. Beneath her, the Pacific was still dark, and behind her the morning stars were shining, twinkling far less now she saw them without the thick turbulent air of sea level.

Suzuko nodded. She was on course and on time - the home-built Stealth Radar along the Toho runway had acquired the angular steel Road Runner just as she took off, and confirmed its course was unchanged. Her own aircraft was a tiny speck in comparison, its smooth chipboard and medium-density fibreboard surface hopefully immune to anything but a direct "paint" by a powerful radar.

Just then, exactly the thing she most dreaded happened. In her headphones rang a hideous shriek as of tortured metal - that same "Drill Scream" radar she had heard the week before, but now sweeping right over her piece of ocean. She yelped, barely holding the fighter on course as the main beam swept by, leaving a single tracer lobe tracking her.

"Horst - they've seen me." She keyed the radio, no longer caring about radio silence. "My 'puter says it's a Drill Scream precision bombing radar - tracking straight ahead."

"I see it." Sitting in the Control Tower, with the Arch-Dean and many of the major figures of the Academy watching, Horst's voice remained level. On his Stealth Radar, he actually could see the scattered beam like a bright torch shining through thin smoke. "The beam's mapping the coastline already. They're setting up a bombing run, Suki."

Suzuko clicked her transmitter button twice in silent acknowledgement. Her own craft had no radar at all, only a cheap infra-red detector on her helmet that she had received as a New Year's gift years ago. That was wholly battery driven - the Road Runner's pulse cannon could dump electrical energy into her aircraft, enough to short out most modern systems - but fortunately, she had kept the 1945 instruments and control systems. Electrical valves and steel cables were unsophisticated performers, but they were rugged.

She glanced up, straining into the dawn skies. It was still far too soon, she knew - the Road Runner was ninety kilometres away still, even its bulk just a speck of metallic dust lost in the huge Pacific skies. And her own speck of dust was heading up to meet it in a few minutes - very possibly, the last few minutes she had left.

"Not too soon, not too soon..." She found herself looking at the stopwatch. A head-on meeting would give her a closing speed of about two kilometres a second, and a vanishingly small chance of being able to hit the bomber, with her cannon or - with a ramming attack. She had seen the pictures of the outskirts of Mexico City, and nodded grimly. Her eyes widened, and she felt herself breathing faster. "One way or another - we won't let that happen to Japan."

Just then, she saw something. For an instant, it looked like a jet contrail - but high up in the region of the Autumn stars, far too high for water vapour to make a contrail. Her fur rose. "Horst! I see something, looks like a line of smoke, two o'clock high, very high. Do you see it?"

"I see it, Suzuko. The whole sky's lit up behind it." There was a pause, while Horst accessed JSDF files and digests of the Panama conflict. "They're injecting something into the engines, a borane compound I think - ionises the whole wake, lets them run it as a MHD generator. Suzuko - they are powering up their weapons systems! " Another long pause. "And they are accelerating - we're changing the intercept plot. Present course, but be ready to count down."

"Ready!" Suzuko felt an icy touch run down her spine, that was no part of her suit's cooling system. "Altitude Eighteen point six k, Mach One Point Eight - I can just about turn, but only just. I'll have to chase them in a very straight line!"

Suddenly, the noise in her left earpiece rose to a tearing shriek as the "Drill Scream" radar locked hard on her fibreboard interceptor. Snarling, Suzuko switched the warning receiver off - she knew where the Road Runner was, and they knew where she was rising to meet them. The time for warnings was over.

"Twelve seconds to the turn we planned, Suki -" Horst's voice sounded faint, as the Drill Scream's main beam began to degrade the electronics. "Twelve seconds from - Mark!"

Suzuko clicked the transmit button twice, and set the Swiss clockwork stopwatch, even as she switched off the radio. "Just you and me now," she patted the instrument panel. "Just you and me - the old-fashioned, hard way."

"Captain!" Natahaho shouted through the intercom from his prone position couch in the front turret of the Road Runner, "Fighters coming up! One interceptor straight at us, two more circling at maximum range ahead - and a bigger one just showing on the horizon. Nobody's got transponders."

"Damn. So soon - we're still four hundred kilometres from the Inner Empire line." Captain Evans frowned at the screen display. "Davies ! What are we up against ?"

Tktlohahn Davies hurriedly paged through "Jane's All The Worlds Aerospacecraft", a Bulky Disc version that had been classified one year and given away with breakfast cereals the next, what with the huge expansion of aircraft types. Peru alone made it a point to have sixty top-secret projects in the works at any one time, and in Europe every nation had a score or more of fiercely competing companies in the business. But Japan - Japan was the main example of the old late 20th Century model of keeping a minimum of totally state-of-the-art models in service for years on end.

"Mitsubishi MI-252 Interceptor, that's their main one," Davies called out. "It's got forty kilos of fish-brain computer on board, and an Intrusion Beam that can wipe out anything with a standard datalink flying." There were smiles on the crew clustered around him - the Road Runner was happily immune to most electronic warfare, having a bare minimum of electronics onboard. Most of the technology was "acquired" from surprising sources: the basic airframe had been a supersonic transport design that had never proved economic, and the "still" was from a European aerospace project that had foundered with the rise to dominance of the Brussels Empire.

Davies winced at that thought, and tried not to think about the new piece of technology in their bomb bay - the mysterious and very single-minded Device that currently controlled most of the plane.

"Not seen," Natahaho shouted back. "That's not what's coming up. Nearest one's mostly Stealthy, looks more like wood than metal - the three way ahead are old polished metal like us. Anything to match?"

Davies shook his head. "Not on the nearest bandit. The JSDF gave up flying anything that fast years ago - when they got those orbiting battlestations. Don't know what this is, Sir."

Captain Evans nodded, brusquely. His gaze flicked over the instruments, tracing their projected course over Japan to the Eastern coast of North Korea. The Road Runner's engines were running smoothly, the "Panther Piss" additive streaming into the white-hot combustion chambers, turning the engines into huge electrical generators as the ionised wake blasted past induction coils in the tailpipes. "Weapons systems, Check !" He snapped. "Are we hot yet ?"

"Weapons hot, Capt'n," Jones The Capacitor sang out, relief in his voice. " Marx generators filling to sixty percent, reckon ten minutes to full charge. We can fire any time now." Throughout the ship, gunners stood to their posts, checking the methane-cooled waveguides that fed their turrets from the big capacitor bank running the length of the fuselage. Two Vircator cannons in the nose turret, one forward and one rear-facing ball turret on the top and underside, two side gunners on port and starboard, and the two quadruple mounted tail turrets - with a sky threatening to fill with state-of-the-art Japanese missiles, it seemed little enough.

Captain Evans stared fiercely ahead for a second, and gave a sharp nod, his tail flicking inside its fully inflated pressure suit. "Gunners - blind those radars. Hose them down!"

In the concrete-lined basement of Toho Academy's airstrip control tower, the Stealth Radar gave a piercing squeal and fainted, half the display lights turning red.

"Thought they'd do that." Horst Graben commented quietly. "It is goodbye to radars - Suki and the rest are on their own."

Fusada-sama winced, his fine feline tail waving in frustration. "How long to the intercept ? The JSDF are promising us the moon if we get this right, and they'll be dealing with us second after Peru if we don't." He frowned. Though nothing had been said yet in public, the Academy was in severe danger of losing its subsidised funding, now that the denizens of Monster Island had stopped coming over - and indeed, they had stopped eating any Citizens except for the usual Peace Studies students who would insist on trying to raise their social consciousness for them. For sixty years, a generous allocation of fuel and resources had kept the Academy on the map as an Interesting place to study - even before the Millennium, when a vanishingly small percentage of private citizens owned main battle tanks and the like.

Horst glanced at the "big board", displaying the converging tracks of the aircraft. "Sir - Suzuko will get there first, in eight minutes. She will be crossing their path two thousand metres below and twenty ahead - then make the turn onto their course, and chase their tail visually. If she does not bring them down - " he pointed to the

three dots now far Northwest of Shahaguo Island, fast approaching each other. "Toemi and Kobishi had to meet the tanker from Okinawa, and not wait for it to arrive here. They haven't the speed to catch the Road Runner - so they'll be waiting ahead of it, running collision-course intercepts - here." His grey-furred paw touched a point on the Road Runner's projected path, some hundred and fifty kilometres outside the Japanese Empire's inner boundary. "If they don't stop it - that's up to the JSDF. The plan calls for them to swing a domestic power beam and swat it from orbit - none of the battlestations will be in position in time." Indeed, one of the big, low-orbiting battlestations was over the southern tip of Japan as he watched - and watched its inexorable orbital swing taking it out uselessly towards Siberia.

"And the next one won't be along for half an hour." Fusada-sama's voice was dust and ashes. "The Peruvians have either excellent planning, or excellent luck."

"Our luck's just about run out," Tktlohahn Davies winced, looking at the laptop display. "Sir - we're burning their radars, but they just keep coming. It doesn't help, that we're heading on a dead straight course." He shivered inside his pressure suit. Everything suddenly felt eggshell-vulnerable, from the thin, stressed material of his suit that was keeping his blood from boiling like red cappuccino at ninety thousand feet, to the great shuddering bulk of the Road Runner. Outside, the air friction seared the thin steel of the Road Runner like a blowtorch, only the thin layer of cooling methane in the double skin keeping the skin panels from buckling like frying bacon in the heat. The airframe trembled, even high above the low-altitude turbulence its very engines always prone to running into vibrational "screech" or "howl" that could tear them apart in seconds. There were consequences, he reflected, of building a high-performance aircraft on the cheap. For a "one-shot" airframe they could get away with a lot as long as their luck held out, but the flight envelope was full of glaring red zones on the chart, where the Road Runner would burn up, break up or simply fall out of the sky.

"Where's that fighter got to? It's vanished off the screen?" He stared at the radar board. "It was right behind us."

"Gone into our engine wake's dead zone." Jones the Day Radar's voice was quiet in his headphones. "We can't scan through ionised gas, and we can't shut off the Panther Piss till the batteries are full - at least, we'd better not."

"That's not all. We're only three hundred and fifty K to the coast! And - we can't shut the Device down!" Natahaho's eyes stayed glued to his own screen, as he desperately tried to trace the software the huge terror weapon had implanted to guide their ship to the target near Kobe. "This interface is a lash-up - it's got no safety devices - you dial in the target and boom, it gets you there and it hits it!"

"It will, too - unless we do something about it. Wiping the Mexicanos off the planet's one thing, but - Japan's a friendly country! We've even had Japanese-born Presidents, back before the Millennium." Tktlohahn Davies looked over his friend's shoulder. "Can't you just drop it in the ocean? I know we're supposed to bring it home, but - losing the Device is nothing next to what'll happen if we hit Japan with it. They'd flatten us."

Natahaho nodded, eyes still straining on the old screen. "They'd bomb every structure in Peru into a parking lot. Even the bits that are parking lots already." He gave an alarmed chirp. "No! It's taken over the bomb bay doors and the bomb shackles - the new ones don't have manual overrides, either!"

Tktlohahn Davies nodded grimly, patching his helmet jack into the nearest plug and tapping Captain Evans' personal frequency. "Sir - you were right. We're running out of time. As long as the computers are running the ship, the Device is running them."

There came a bitter-sounding snort, as the Captain switched frequencies to broadcast. "Wonderful. All listen, crew. We can stay in the air without the laptops, but we can't find Korea, or fight without them." Captain Evans paused. "If we've not switched off this hijacker by the time we're a hundred kilometres from the shore - we'll pull all the laptops. We can do an emergency bomb release with the explosive bolts, once the bay doors are listening to us."

"It'll hit the ocean about - " Natahaho tapped at his screen " forty-five kilometres from shore. Even if it goes off, it shouldn't cause the mainland too many problems. As for Cruise boats and a few fishermen - well, it just won't be their lucky day either."

Just then, Jones the Day Radar gave a warning cry. "Fighter, fighter, six o'clock high - he's climbing, looks like he'll try and catch us in the dive. Radar return doesn't match anything in the JSDF database - what is that thing?"

Suzuko rode at the tip of a long, lonely spear of fire in the dawn. Twenty-five kilometres above the ocean, the horizon took on a distinct curve, a few scattered islands breaking the smooth ocean hundreds of kilometres away.

"That way, Okinawa," she glanced at her map, looking West into the fading night. "That way, Japan, off to the North. Shahaguo, Monster Island and the rest of the Volcano Islands, all behind me." Her fear had faded now,

as she concentrated on jockeying the inlet and throttle, fine-tuning the engine as she climbed and accelerated. "Static air temperature outside, minus fifty-six centigrade. She cast an eye at the engine and skin thermometers, nodding to herself. "A hundred and ten degrees on the nose at Mach Two-point-one, and things are about to get worse." Her fine muzzle wrinkled, as the stopwatch clicked down to zero. "Making the turn - now."

The Lippisch-designed delta turned sluggishly in the thin air, Suzuko gently easing it round in a mushy arc twenty kilometres across. Gently, she settled in on her course, a complex four-dimensional track of speed and time and distance. Somewhere ahead of her was a point in the empty sky where she had to be at such a time and such a vector to bring her in behind the Road Runner.

"There go the instruments," She watched as the old crystal display of her radio compass started to flicker and dance crazily, its electronics already suffering from the bomber's beam cannon. Suddenly, her snout twisted in a wicked grin. "Seat-of-the-pants time again - let's see them try and jam that!" Smoothly pulling the stick back, she opened the eight engine throttles to the limit, and set the fuel mix to "Rich". "Here- we - GO!"

The plywood fighter's trail suddenly became a brilliant plume as peroxide surged into the engines, no longer relying on the thin upper air to breathe. Gulping fuel at ten litres a second, the Lippisch surged towards the top of the atmosphere, the sky already dark and starlit above and all around as Suzuko went triple-sonic and began to overhaul the Road Runner. Pressed back in her seat, she felt the heat from the windscreen striking her like an oven door, air friction increasing almost exponentially as the needle on the Mach meter passed the third big number. Jockeying the throttles and inlet, for the second time ever she penetrated into the "thermal thicket", that far and unfriendly part of the flight envelope where medium-density fibreboard aircraft rarely ventured.

"Got you," She breathed a minute later. Sparkling in the space-bright sunlight, far ahead of her a silver speck appeared, seeming to hang motionless at the tip of a yellow-tinged plume. Shrugging her infra-red headset over her eyes, Suzuko saw it as a brilliant ball of fire, two sun-bright sparks showing where the white-hot engine nozzles sat under the tail, tuned for the highest possible performance without a single Yen's worth of effort spent on Stealth. "Coming up - over the top." She held her fighter in a climbing turn, wincing as the skin temperature hit three hundred degrees, the chipboard charring despite the water cooling "sweating" through its skin. Putting her nose down, she dived after the Road Runner, closing like a piranha on a silvery carp in some infinite clear ocean.

"Getting hot." Even in her pressure suit with its supply of cooling air, she felt the radiant heat on the quartz canopy through her helmet visor, like peering through thin glass into a furnace. "Three hundred and ten degrees - and climbing." The wing edges were blackening like scorched paper, heat building up faster than the hasty sweat of evaporating cooling water could carry away. Eyes widened as she glanced again at the gages, seeing her fuel and oxidant tanks little more than a minute from running empty at this speed - and the coolant tanks that were keeping the wooden-skinned Lippisch from bursting into flames, would run dry about a minute after that.

Ahead of her, the Road Runner seemed to float up towards her, bulges in the tall tail resolving into tail turrets that were looking straight back at her, focussing ever-stronger bursts of electrical energy at her flimsy craft. Sparks were flying from the instrument panel, all the electronics long ago shut down or burned out as every exposed wire and piece of metal was forced into acting as a power aerial picking up hundreds of volts per metre.

"As for flimsy," she told herself, "There's only one of us flying a pressurised thermos-flask full of methane - and it's not me! One hole in that pressure tank - and it's all over." Aircraft often made it home with gaping holes, shot-off engines and flapping control surfaces - but not from Mach Three, where the air hit every square centimetre like a fire-hose of molten lead. Suzuko nodded, and set the deflector sight of her ancient cannon to Active. Her eyes went very wide for an instant, then narrowed. She nodded, once. Getting within cannon range of the Road Runner was going to be dangerous enough - and blowing it out of the sky a few hundred metres ahead of her, tonnes of exploding fuel and tumbling metal with not a heartbeat's time to dodge any of it ...

A hard look set on her face. In a few seconds she would be within her Mark 108 Rheimetall-Borsig's range of the bomber, whose crew of twenty or thirty were already doing their best already to burn her out of the sky before they could unleash their Device on her homeland. She winced, as the windscreen's armoured glass in front of her began to turn milky, only the gold reflective layer keeping the microwave energies from frying her like an egg in her seat.

One muscle in her throat twitched unseen beneath her pressure suit and pressured fur. Everything suddenly seemed very calm and clear now, as she reached down and clicked off the safeties of her two cannon, a hundred and twenty rounds ready to fire. Suzuko opened her radio channel, and keyed the Transmit switch, though she knew her chance of being heard was almost nil.

"Suzuko Hohki calling. The bomber's just coming into range. Banzai. Out."

A hundred and ten kilometres ahead of her, Toemi and Kobishi waved to the JSDF tanker their thirsty aircraft had been suckling at, and broke connection. Ten kilometres above the Pacific, the two French-designed interceptors cruised towards their ambush spot, running on their auxiliary ATAR turbojet engines.

"We've lost touch with Suki," Toemi's voice carried a worried tone over the airwaves, "Bastards are trying to burn out her electrics with their jammer beams. At least it shows she's still all right and heading in - or they'd have stopped trying." She looked at her own display, the input leads double-wrapped in hastily applied metal foil earthed to the airframe. "Ready, Kobishi? We've only got one shot at this - when we start the climb, there's only fuel for one pass, and we can't hang around." Kobishi was holding up rather well, she noted thankfully. He had come to Toho after a disastrous year in the JSDF, where various events he refused to discuss had caused him to resign his Fifth Lieutenant's commission in Nagoya's "Fighting" Fifteenth Division to become a sanitary orderly in the "Running-Away" Six Hundred and Twelfth.

"You w - wouldn't Want to," Kobishi stammered, craning his head to see the rounded bulk of the Genie riding under his wing. "When these go off - anything flying within two kilometres gets it there and then. And the prompt radiation - there's hardly any air in the way, it's five times the lethal range as on the ground. Check your flash shields, you'll need them."

"Good point". Toemi pulled down the white blinds around the conical cockpit, and pulled down her instant-shield goggles. "I've not let one of these off since I was over Australia, on the Ramsey Street Range." Her tentacles wriggled uncomfortably at the thought. "Set fuses!" She glanced down to a black Bakelite box to one side of the seat, and twisted three of the first-generation plastic dials. "Hell - the Leduc's metric, but these are still in feet, for the sake of a few Authenticity points. Are you game for it?"

Kobishi nodded, juggling figures in his head. Like all the Home Islands students, he was the third-generation product of a ruthless social eugenics program, and accurately set the dials in seconds. "Set! Fifty degree launch angle at sixty-thousand feet - gives us time to turn away and put some more air between us and the blast - though I'd prefer lead plate to cirrus cloud any day. The rest's all onboard inertial - no sensors, no homing signal to jam. Let's see them stop these with a jammer!"

Just at that instant, one band on Toemi's receiver went quiet - dead quiet. "They just stopped jamming Suzuko." Blue eyes widened, then narrowed. "They got her."

Kobishi nodded, wordlessly. Three seconds later, an amber light appeared on his navigation panel, as they reached the edge of the ambush area, the SAGE program in the Academy basement calculating their position and the point in the sorrowing skies where a snap climb at full power would best put their Genies in the path of the Road Runner before it reached strike range of their Homeland. "Amber light, Toemi. Ready to rock."

"Check." Toemi's voice was flat, emotionless. Her left hand poised above the engine controls, ready to light up the 1955 vintage ramjet engine and kick it up towards the top of the stratosphere. "Green light. Ready to roll."

Flying a hundred metres apart, both pilots saw the others' engine flare, yellow shock diamonds forming in the wake as they accelerated through the speed of sound and began to pull up, a rising curve pointing towards the patch of sky ahead of where the Road Runner would be in another two minutes. Toemi reached down to the Bakelite box and twisted the key a full rotation - nodding grimly as the "ARMED" light began to flash red. For a minute they climbed steeply, keeping loose formation as they surged through the highest cirrus clouds and towards their encounter.

"Systems locked on. Launching one, launching two." Kobishi's voice came over the radio, flat and cold as the Genie and its harmless twin streaked off the launch rail, his aircraft pulling round immediately to get out of the way. Toemi nodded, her thick tail twitching as she transmitted the final update to her own missiles and savagely hit the flashing launch switch.

"From me - and from Suzuko. Eat it!"

From the control tower of Toho Academy's airstrip, two purple smoke rockets shot across the sky. Georgina Pontephrigh blinked, following their trailing course. "I say, Granita," she asked, puzzled "isn't it an odd sort of time for a firework show? It's nearly light."

Granita gave an alarmed grunt, her eyes widening. "Eyes down, everybody! Cover your eyes and shut them - NOW!"

Mystified, Georgina covered her eyes, shaking her head at some of the strange foreign customs they seemed to have at the Coll. "If you say so," she began, "But I don't ..."

At that moment there was a red glow, and she realised she was seeing through her hand almost like an X-ray. A fraction of a second later came another one, fading in a few seconds.

"Eighty kilometres off, and thirty high," Granita said quietly, next to her. "You can look now - but there's nothing to see through the clouds. It's over."

Georgina nodded, blinking. For an instant she thought she was tears in the eyes of Granita, like water squeezed from crystalline rock in the instant before it fractures. But a light rain began to fall on the Toho runway and the little knot of folk who gradually dispersed, slowly and quietly walking back to their rooms, so it was hard to tell.

