

Chapter 7

Evening fell on the Western Pacific, the shadow of the planet sweeping across the globe. Far out on the penultimate member of the Volcano Islands, Toho Academy was braced against the hard shoulder of the island's main peak, holding out its airfield like a protective shield against whatever Monster Island and the rest of the world chose to throw at it.

After a night and day of furious activity, peace and calm were slowly returning to the airfield. On the Alert strip, the 1955 class jets had been replaced by the pair of Shindens that had been scheduled to stand guard the previous night, their crews grumbling quietly about having been stood up for duty two nights in a row. Evening fell, and on the airfield a sense of hush descended.

Of course, this could never last. From a small wooden shed by the runway, a plaintive whine was heard, rising to a volume that would score points at a mecha-boosted Karaoke fight.

"That's so UNFAIR!"

In the shed, Hiroshi Leclerc blinked her huge eyes as she stared down at the screen of her little terminal, its fashionably retro 20-line green screen linked to the Remote_Impersonal Computer somewhere in the Home Islands.

Shobban yawned, waking up. She had built a safe den out of the funny lead blocks that the shed was equipped with, and stacked all the remaining Devices in one corner to leave her room to stretch out. "What's up?"

Hiroshi stared at the screen. "It's from my old school - they went and won the Weird Science prize without me. I would have been up for that! Oooh! And that green-haired girl Rae - she got dragged off by something that was "totally indescribable in any way whatsoever". I'll bet she comes back with a metre-wide grin and a request for a maternity sailor-suit - she always got all the good stuff."

"Aww." Shobban sympathised, her long ears drooping. "But this is a good place too for that kind of thing - we almost got it right last night, there'd have been enough Monster for both of us!" Her tail wagged. "Come on - I've got a Forbidden Book out of the Academy library, it's got warning labels stuck all over it. Let's chant out all the spells and see what happens!"

Hiroshi sprang to her feet, eyes gleaming. "Yay! Lead on, Shobban! I'll read the rest of this stuff later. Father's got a new charity he's running, "Thinking-brain dogs for the Stupid", it looks fun to raise funds for."

Securely slamming the shed door behind them, the two first-years trotted across the airfield, heading up towards the bamboo groves that clad Shahaguo Island's main hill. Hiroshi checked in her satchel - yes, she told herself, she had everything they were likely to need. There was a set of coloured chalk for drawing circles and mystical signs, a fresh supply of really hot chilli powder as incense and a big folding Spirograph™ that had been bent slightly out of three dimensions to let it draw really interesting shapes.

They stopped to draw breath at the start of the climb, and Hiroshi took another look at her terminal. Her face fell. "Oh no! It's a disaster!" She pointed at an article indexed to the expanding news stories of the Mexico City attack. "The world's best singing group, Menumbro - they were playing there! They're gone too!"

"Menumbro? I've heard of them. Cute boy-band, my friend Sinned * has a poster at home." Shobban blinked. "They can't be gone - they were too young to die." She frowned, her head tilting to one side. Sinned's mother had shown her a poster from twenty years ago showing Menumbro as being fourteen and fifteen then; although the faces looked a little different (and the lead singer had changed species a bit) it was definitely the same band to judge from the costumes and merchandising.

"OK! They'll be all right, then. That's sorted." Hiroshi sprang to her feet, and trotted on. "Let's go!"

In ten minutes they reached the hilltop, where a great expanse of bare rock was exposed on the summit like the skull of a part-buried corpse staring eyelessly out to sea.

"Nice here, isn't it?" Shobban looked around appreciatively, her tail wagging. She pulled out a notebook, and began doodling equations. "That Professor Brandon who does Math, he liked my work. He's not too keen on the planar geometry, but the angles, the angles are all right."

Hiroshi drooped. "I don't think I'll ever catch up on that stuff," she complained. "Phenomenology is so hard - when they hand out the homework, if at least one student doesn't jump out of the window screaming at the sight, they know they're not doing it right." She looked up at the evening sky, smiling. "Look! The stars are coming out - Formahault, the Hyades, Algol the Demon-Star - it's like they're watching us." She gave a delicious shiver, undoing her neck-scarf and waving upwards to the sinister stars and leeringly gibbous moon. "Looks a promising night for it."

Shobban nodded, her long ears bobbing. Taking the chalks, she began to draw a big circle, big enough for the two of them and any guests who might appear later on. "This time, we'd better follow by the book," she suggested, "And make sure we rub the thing out when we're finished with. Not everyone can safely look at this sort of thing." She squinted at the warning notices pasted to the book cover, with the lurid green and purplish "Psychohazard" warning symbol at the top of the page. "It says ... this is a book that when you read it, IT reads YOU." Her eyes lit up. "I've never done that before. But I'm sure it'll be interesting"

- Pronounced Shionhaidh, of course.

The silver-haired girl giggled. "Like my cousin Mangana says – "real two-sided triangles in the classroom mean real patients in the medical centre." And the price of Sanity Points just went through the roof yesterday, so we can't fix anyone who can't handle looking at neat geometry or excitingly built Monsters." Her head cocked to one side. "Still – the only ones who got hurt this term like that weren't very nice, anyway. That creepy chap, Potzu – what did he call you? An Idiot Savant. What does it mean? Doesn't sound very polite."

Shobban's tongue flopped out as she concentrated on drawing a curve that looked convex, but bent in a direction not easy to explain. "I don't know anything about that – but I don't care. I'm jolly good at maths!"

In the medical centre, Mangana woke up to find Broohilda gently shaking her. She blinked, looking around. "Sorry – must have dozed off." She stared around for a second, before her eyes lit on the monitors. "Any change in the patients?"

Broohilda shook her head, her tail hung low. "Afraid not. I'll look after them. You have to rest."

The black-haired anime girl stretched, standing up. "You won't have to do it all yourself. Tava!" She called out, "Change shift! Do you two know each other?"

Broohilda stood stock-still as the ram came in from the small kitchen at the end of the corridor, a tray of tea balanced expertly on one hand. "Umm – we passed each other earlier. We're in the same block, on different floors." She felt her ears flush with blood, the black skin showing no signs of the blush she felt.

Tava smiled, putting the tea down. "My half-sister's mentioned you saved her when she fell in the harbour the other day. I'd like to thank you for that – I couldn't have got there in time."

"Oh. Well. I just happened to be there." Broohilda smiled, looking down at her hooves. She glanced across, her gaze taking in Tava's own hooves, very like her own if rather larger. "That's all. I'd have done it for anyone."

Mangana grinned, giving Broohilda a playful squeeze. "Oh, come on now. You've never taken credit for anything yet, it's time you tried it for a change. I tell you, Tava, if there was a Modesty contest on the island, Broohilda would win it by a mile – she's the only one who wouldn't vote for herself." She paused. "As opposed to Gen or Shiitake, who'd probably start a political party geared to getting themselves the Modesty prize."

The goat-girl wriggled uncomfortably. "It was the right thing to do. How could I do anything else?"

Tava cast her an interested glance, as he passed Mangana a mug of the potent tea. His nostrils flared, a strange sensation washing over him that seemed somewhat familiar – a muscle in his throat twitched as he recalled it from the dream the night before. Shaking his head to clear it, he managed to find his voice at last. "Well, I'm certainly grateful, anyway. If there's anything I can do for you – just let me know."

Broohilda smiled shyly. "Thank you." For a few seconds they stood looking at each other, the air in the narrow room suddenly feeling heavy, relaxing as if some strange opiate was on the breeze.

Mangana drained her tea in three long pulls and stood up, yawning. "I'm off – I'll meet up with Horst, then we'll head home. I'll be no use to my patients if I can't stay awake. Call me if there's any change." She took a step towards the door, and stopped. "Oh. Tomorrow, we're arranging a memorial service for Suzuko. Nothing fancy – I think she'd have wanted it quiet, just her friends. Tava, you're invited of course." Her eyes were bleak and wide. "Try not to take it too hard, Broohilda – she went out fighting, and saved us all. I'm sure she wanted us to keep on enjoying ourselves..." her voice broke off. "But – right now, I think it'll be a long time till I can." With a cheerless wave, she swept up her coat and trench mortar from the stand by the door, and tiredly went out.

There was a silence. "Well..." Tava and Broohilda said, at the same instant. Tava smiled, nodding for the goat-girl to continue.

"Um – has anything changed with Mae or Trish?" Broohilda's tail twitched. "In a few hours, we'll have to put them on drips, they'll be dehydrating and such. I've done that before."

Tava moved closer to her, silently handing over the details on the readings they had taken of Trish. "With Mae, certainly. With Trish – I think we might have problems." He waited, watching Broohilda's ears go right up as she scanned over the data. "Princess Cthuline's had a look at her, but she's sure Trish isn't one of her relatives, despite appearances. We'll be asking Toemi, as soon as she's free."

The goat-girl nodded. "Toemi's a friend of mine." Inwardly, she felt a pang – the two of them were from outwardly similar backgrounds, being hybrids with divine attributes on one side of the family. Toemi's father, unlike hers, was a long-established and highly respected Entity whose name was shrieked and chanted around Roodmas and Candlemas sacrificial fires in all the best social circles.

"Well, we'll get the equipment set up for Mae, and just hope she comes out of it." Tava looked through Mae's data file. "It says she had the same sort of thing happen last year – and she came out of that one." He shook his head, having some trouble concentrating. "Umm – do you mind if I sit down? I hope it's nothing infectious, but – I feel strange."

"Oh." Broohilda moved towards him, eyes full of concern. "May I?" she touched his brawny black wrist, expertly feeling his pulse. "Oh my. It's racing, and your temperature feels awfully high. You'd better go back to your dorm and lie down. I'll handle the patients."

Tava shook his head resolutely. “No thanks! I’m scheduled to be here till seven, and I’ll be here till seven. These folk might need me – we don’t know what they’re going to need.” He smiled, looking around. “I don’t feel sleepy, at all. Sort of half drunk, if anything – yes, I’ll lie down and see if it passes. Looks like you’ll have another patient, more or less.”

Broohilda smiled, feeling her tail twitch with a will of its own. “I’m immune to disease and most poisons. Which is good for working here, especially if the patient’s – “ she broke off, feeling her skin flushing again.

“Got an unknown illness?” Tava asked, curiously.

“That’s it.” Broohilda forced out. But as she looked over the big ram with a medically practised eye, she remembered what Jenni had been describing when she had let her scent the braided wool of her home flock.

The word she had been about to blurt out, was – “Compatible.”

On the hilltop some six hundred metres to the East and a hundred metres above the medical centre, Shobban was busy laying out a circle with the dimensionally skewed Spirograph™, carefully following the instructions in the book. The red setter girl panted happily, her tail wagging in the evening breeze as she worked.

Hiroshi sneaked a peek over her friend’s shoulder, giving a quiet “Ooooooh!” as she saw how Shobban made sense of two diagrams on different pages, angling the chalk lines apart in a way that took a lot of talent and would take far more description. “It’s a good thing we’ve got these books in the libraries over here – lets us call in all sorts of neat Things.”

Shobban’s tail stopped wagging for a minute. “We ought to be careful – you know, I’ve heard people say some of these books can be dangerous. We’ll be OK, sure, but back in Europe ... well, some bits won’t be safe for centuries, after what happened there.”

“I’ve heard.” Suddenly, Hiroshi brightened up. “I can do a Karaoke about that one, I’ve learned some of the songs, Just a second, I’ll get Mister Twirly ready, and do some.” She rummaged in her satchel, and pulled out a Bulky Disk player. “Pin your ears back – here’s one.” The plaintive whine of a Theremin echoed across the hilltop, as she started to sing.

“We drove in our tanks through the cold autumn waters
To loot the Low Countries for treasures untold
But the city we found in the far Belgian wasteland
When we looked, proved to have far more Stuffing than Gold
(Of cities so rounded, old horror tales told)

Ai Kawaii! We should have known better
But no one had listened to stories that say
Ai Kawaii! Should you see bright pastel
Your only escape is a fast run away

The pavements we found there were like deep pink carpets
When viewed in the sickening rainbow-hued light
Embroidered with shapes from the toy books of History
All doing such things that we shivered in fright
(Mortals were their fun, which could never be right)

Ai Kawaii! We should have reversed then
And aimed our rear turrets at whatever moved
Ai Kawaii! We stayed in the City
In search of the gold that we sought to remove

The first clue we found that the place wasn’t empty
Was when some giant stuffie-toy cuddled two men
And when our brave Vicar was snuzzled by Wuzzles
We knew our survival chance weren’t one in ten
(The lucky ones set off their self-destructs then.)

Ai Kawaii! We ran for the borders
But found hordes of natives with shoe-button eyes
Ai Kawaii ! They worshipped the Stuffed Ones
To find some were Spare Hares came as no surprise

“I got out alone, but nobody believed me
 They just didn’t want to accept what I’d seen
 They sent me away from the halls of Celaeno
 They told me no Cuteness survived the EC
 (But I’m coming back bringing vengeance with me)

Ai Kawaii! I know you’re still out there
 You’re throwing Reality all out of joint
 Ai Kawaii! I’m coming to Belgium
 As soon as I get back *one* Sanity Point!” *

Hiroshi beamed, putting down the microphone. “How about that? I know I should sing it in armour, but it didn’t come out too badly. It’s a good thing all that stuff wasn’t real, or the world would be in a real mess.”

Shobban looked her doubtfully, but nodded. “Well – you’re probably right. But – I hope you’re not out of breath, we’re ready to start here.” She opened the big Unspeakable book, and turned to the first page. “Oh good! All the bits where it says things like “He Who Is Not To Be Named”, someone’s pencilled the names and stuff in the margins.”

Hiroshi clapped her hands in glee. “Neat! I hope it goes better than last night – I can’t believe it, I’ve been here two weeks and the only tentacle I’ve seen is on Toemi. She’s a lucky girl. I bet she gets a lot of the right kind of dates.”

The red setter whined, mournfully. “She’s in my block. Actually, she was complaining just last week – her Father’s so ... high-ranking, that most of the things we’d want to meet, are really a bit lower-class for her.” She sighed, but then perked up. “Oh well. All the more for us, then.” A red tail wagged furiously.

“Page one, let’s take it from the top,” Hiroshi loaded a Bulky Disc of the current Alpenrock smash hit into Mr. Twirly. She hoped the sound quality would be good enough: most of the current Very Large Array Alpenhorn smash hits could smash concrete at ten metres downstream of the expansion nozzle, at a live concert. She blinked, holding the page up to the light. “Hmm – do you pronounce that word “Gya’toghgh’y’lhaiii” or “Giatho-ggil-hay?” Do you think it’ll make a difference?”

Shobban shrugged. “Try both. It can’t hurt.”

“Tava – look at this!” Broohilda sprang to her feet, her sensitive ears picking up the changing rhythm of the diagnostic couches. “I think something’s happening.”

The ram shook himself, swinging out of the chair and strode over to the readouts. “It is, too. On both of them.” He pointed a hoof-like finger at the recordings from the past minute. “They start with a spike, a surge in vital signs .. Trish first, by a heartbeat or two. Then they drop a bit – look, there’s another one. Both together. That’s strange. The heartbeats – I don’t quite know what Trish has for a heartbeat, but that line there pulses just when Mae’s does.”

Broohilda scratched her head. Suddenly she went rigid, as a memory surfaced. “Oh my. She has done this before, you know. It was last year, she was injured then as well, there was this Russian ermine Iania who she sort of – got psychically stuck to.” Her naked spike if a tail trembled. “That was an awful thing. Maybe Trish is a Psyker?”

“We’ve some data on Psykers, but nothing on anyone like Trish.” Tava looked through the medical records. “Who would know about last year ? Kazuko and the rest?”

“Yes. Kaz, and Mangana – she’ll be fast asleep. And Suz – yes, Suzuko ... she did. They were all there. The other folk aren’t here, there was a team of Russians and another team of mixed folk from the GLR, they have a lot of psykers. But they all went home afterwards.”

Tava pointed to the two beds. “They moved! Trish first, then Mae – sort of shuddered. Like – there’s something they’re both tuned into, Trish more so.”

Broohilda trotted over to the Rigid_Immobil phone in the corner, and began dialling. “I’ll see who we can get to help. It looks like something’s happening.”

“Nothing’s happening,” Hiroshi drooped, tiredly on her friend’s shoulder. “It’s worse than last night – at least we got to say hello to something neat then.”

- Paraphrased from “Ai Cthulhu” filked by Brian Biddle and Leslie Fish. A fine track, but not what the folk at Toho would call Theologically Correct in its original form.

“One more to go,” Shobban opened the book at the last page. “Look – the light’s gone all funny around the book. I’m sure that’s a good sign.” She paused. “This one’s something about summoning someone or something that sleeps on the “web between the worlds” I think it says. Let’s have a go.”

“OK!” Hiroshi reached down and turned Mr. Twirly up to full power, not quite to the peak overpressure of a dedicated Ghetto Blaster, but certainly powerful to blast a decent area of slum dwellings. “I think I’ve been saying “ftaan” when I should have been saying “Ft’hagn” – I’ll try it this way.” Standing in the centre of the circle, she gave Shobban a hopeful grin, twirled her Karaoke microphone, and began to chant:

“Nomeii Zathros, Nomeii Absolomus, arpox Alpha, arpox Omega,
 Nim zarthod uhraiiium, nim farnios Xectoranit os
 Arboinus, zalach-derbius, IOT SOTHOT f’t’hagn insonomia belimarsus vo,
 Nominei zabulkos, sabaoth, tomomarthos, bar-hominor, nepenoninax
 IOT-SOTHOT! IOT-SOTHOT! IOT-SOTHOT!
 Nim belzinor, ab urmium, ab beletor, ab merentonius
 Vene ! Na’f t’hagn! Vene! Na’f t’hagn! Na’f t’hagn! Na’f t’hagn!” *

Panting, she put down the microphone and looked around hopefully. For a second, nothing happened – and then, came a response. Not from the abyssal voids beyond the stars, though – from Shobban’s pocket.

Shobban pulled out her walkie-talkie, a puzzled expression on her face as she tucked it under a long ear and listened intently.

“You know, Hiroshi,” she glanced at her friend quizzically, “It might not be quite what we expected – but I think we got something right tonight.”

Mae was floating in a vast, dimensionless void of coruscating colours, falling endlessly through clouds of looping and coiling substance that was first more and then next solid than the air around it, if indeed it was air she was floating in. Time meant nothing here – or rather, she could look down on Time like an orbiting spacecraft looks down on latitude and longitude, swinging high above them both.

There were two things that were in her mind – she realised that she was not thinking, in the sense of one thought after the other, but more of a simultaneous branching of every possible thought she could ever have, with one of them lighting up after another like a universe of stars only coming into vision at the instant of becoming supernovae. The second thought was more of a sensation – the voiceless feeling of a pilot sitting in an ejector seat as the aircraft crashes below, after some spectacularly foolish stunt went disastrously wrong. “I wish,” went the thought in broadest terms, “That I hadn’t done that.”

Suddenly, there was a tugging, as if the featureless spaces she was floating through had suddenly discovered gravity, and decided to try it out to liven a dull afternoon. She looked down, now there was a down direction to look in, and realised that things were – coming together, condensing like a shadow shortens and pulls towards its parent body as the lighting angles change. The pulling was coming in waves now – and with a thrill, she realised that they had brought their own supply of “Now” with them, letting her think in Time again.

There was a familiar rushing sensation, a melding like slipping into a well-worn pair of comfortable shoes, but extended to every aspect of her being – and Mae felt her heart beating, and for an instant was conscious of every part and function of her feline body, from her foot-claws to the tips of her ears.

Mae woke up. Her eyes snapped open, and she found herself looking up at the ceiling of the Medical centre, with its recognisable spike-holes where patients had been nailed there in earlier experiments. She gasped, looking around, jerking upright as she realised she was wired into a diagnostic bed. Next to her, Trish was rubbing her eyes and hurriedly checking herself over – behind her, Broohilda and Tava were standing looking on open-mouthed.

Trish looked at her, the vixen’s strange blue eyes wide in shock, as they both remembered the mental collision they had made – and both of them suddenly understood why.

“Suzuko – oh no.” Trish put a hand to her mouth. “Please tell me I didn’t do it. I was sleepwalking, I didn’t know what I was doing. And I hadn’t really – eaten- in weeks.” Her voice trailed away in shocked horror.

*Standard disclaimer. The management accepts no responsibility for any consequences of reading this aloud, with or without a properly constructed Defensive circle. The results might not be anything like a natural-born Anime character with guaranteed (Luck (+4)) rolls can expect, even if you could duplicate the precise circumstances. Which would be difficult. I mean, you’d need the right brand of coloured chalk, the right brand of chilli powder, and a well-used Summoning site that features in guidebooks written Outside. So I’m not telling you that the last two repetitions of the last line have been deliberately missed out. *

• Whoops!

Broohilda's tail went right down. "Trish ? I'm afraid we've got some bad news for you. Suzuko, she –she won't be coming back." She looked at the horrified vixen, her own face a little puzzled. "What do you think you did ? Suzuko, she – took off at dawn, when you were asleep. It's a long story, but I'm afraid – she never landed again."

Mae's eyes widened, looking from one to the other. "Suzuko had some sort of flying accident ? But she got down safely, I know."

Broohilda shook her head, sadly. "I'm afraid not. We're holding a ceremony for her tomorrow."

The psychic kitten's fur bristled. "Broohilda – I don't know just where I've been for – " she glanced at the clock – "the past six hours, but I set myself to find Suki before that happened. And I have, too! She's a long way off, but – don't you think I'd know it if she died ?"

Broohilda opened her mouth, when the Rigid_Immobile Phone in the corner rang. Tava vaulted over the couch to get it – and they saw the expression on his face change as he listened intently.

"Well?" Mae prompted.

Tava looked at them, tongue-tied for a second. "Over at the control tower – folk have got pictures in. Suki, and the bomber both – they've crash-landed, on a little island about two hundred kilometres Northeast of here. Horst's trying to contact them on radio, but getting nothing."

Trish gasped, relaxing, relief washing over her features. "Then I didn't?" But the room was already empty, as the doors swung in the draft as its inhabitants sprinted out towards the airfield.

Hiroshi and Shobban trotted into the medical centre a few minutes later, and looked around the empty rooms. "Hello?" Hiroshi called, hopefully peering around the corner. There was a silence, only broken by the garbled screams filtering out of the isolation tanks.

"Nobody here. But they asked us to come. That's mean of them." Shobban's ears drooped. Suddenly, she picked up a loose printout from the floor, and another one next to it. "Monsters!" She sang out happily. "These are timed this evening – we did manage to call some up! Must have been that last track, the 'awakening of that which sleeps Outside' that did it."

Hiroshi looked over her shoulder. "I can't see anything like we got last night," she complained. "It looks too – flat."

Shobban smiled, panting as she held the two pictures at different distances from her eyes. "You have to get them in perspective – these are just pictures of one dimension each – didn't they teach you in your old school about seeing the angles of the Yhgg and the Vhurr ? We did ours before learning about Pythagoras."

Hiroshi sniffed, tears brimming in her huge eyes. "We'll never get a Monster at this rate. I bet my old class have done it already – all of them, in fractal detail!" Her eyes crossed at the thought.

"Mmm." Shobban's tail wagged, looking at the pictures. "Tentacles coming out of dimensions where most folk haven't even got dimensions. That'd be SO neat. And I'm not even a big-eyed sort. They don't have folk as pretty as you native in Europe or most places. Just a few cropping up where folk got lucky."

Hiroshi sat down, beaming again. "I'm just lucky. It's a big help most of the time – though they wouldn't let anyone who looks like me loose with a Time Machine, we'd stand out a bit." She cocked her pumpkin-shaped head to one side. "Mind you, you're right – there's always been a few, like that film star Miss Boop a century ago." She giggled, wriggling in her seat. "Of course, SHE was from the coast South of Canada, probably one of those neat old sea ports that had such a fun time getting to meet Princess Cthuline's folk slumming it on the land."

"Anyway – there's nobody here." Shobban looked around, and checked her watch. "Come on – we've time to get back to my dorm, there's that new show, "Junior Police Interrogators." We'll see if they can get the crooks to confess in the time limit – this season, they get bonus points if it's the right crime!"

"OK!" Hiroshi bounced out of her chair and followed her friend out, her tears totally forgotten. "It's a good night after all!"

"Well, we've seen where they went down." Horst Graben pointed at the screen. "The maps show it as Etepa Atoll, which is a coral reef and a few sand dunes – nothing else. Better than ditching into the ocean, but – not much."

Mangana tried to focus on the image – everything was blurred, and her head swam dizzily with lack of sleep. "We're sure that's Suki's aircraft there behind it ? I'd like to think so, but ..." she pointed at the much larger shape at the tip of the sand spit. "It looks like the Road Runner broke up on impact. All I see is a triangular shape – could be debris broken off ? It's very close."

Horst nodded, heavily. "It could be. But there is nowhere else for Suzuko to have landed. And Mae says she is certainly alive ?" He turned to the feline, one eyebrow raised.

"She is." Mae asserted. "Right! So we know they're stuck there – Suki can't have a cupful of fuel left, to have gone that far out – and anyway, there's no room for her to take off there even if it was one big runway, not soft coral sand. Her Lippisch lands on skids, after all. So, how do we get to her?"

Mangana frowned. "Hold it! We're not just talking about picking Suzuko up. There's a crashed bomber there, full of folk who were heading in to wipe one of our cities off the map. Those Road Runners are heavily armed, and they've got big crews – the plane crashed, there'll be casualties. There might be twenty or thirty military personnel on there, and they probably won't be pleased to see us."

"Plus their bomb load," Horst held a finger up. "Assume it's still live. We have to think about this hard – yes, we can get out to Etepa Atoll, but then what? This might take more resources than we can throw together in a night."

There was a silence. Broohilda shivered. "I'm just glad Suzuko's alive. But – she shot them down, and I don't think they'll appreciate that. They might be – holding her hostage, at the very least."

"Ack." Kazuko waved her arms, frustrated. "We have to get out there and see what's happening! At least drop a radio and stuff – we can't leave them there without water, they'll need food and medical supplies too. We can get that going right away – whatever else we have to do."

Horst looked around, from one face to the others. "Two hundred and thirty kilometres away. Not so far – any of our aircraft can get there and back. But it is a risk – will they assume we're coming to bomb them flat, finish the job? Many aircraft carry defence missiles the crew can dismount and fire. We might be carrying water and radio packs – they might be expecting us to be dropping nerve gas and cluster bombs."

"I'll risk it!" Kazuko sprang to her feet. "My Natter wasn't ready and fuelled last night, but it is now! And the nose cone can carry two cubic metres of stuff, we can rig parachutes for the radio while I'm working out my trajectory."

"Do you not mean "course"?" Trish asked, puzzled, as she sat in the corner of the room. "Trajectory is for missiles and such, yes?"

"Yes!" Kazuko's grin was ferocious. "Come down to watch me launch, you'll see what I mean! They'll have a job drawing a bead on me with a missile – I'll be dropping in on them ballistic, drop the parcels and then light up the Walter engine and head home the low way. I can be there in ten minutes off the pad."

Horst closed his tired eyes for a few seconds. "Yes." He looked around, calculating times and distances and resources. "It seems a good plan – and one we can do now, while we see what is happening out there." His eyes glanced over to the clock. "Seven o'clock, and dark already. We have a lot to do tonight."

Mariko nodded, her glasses gleaming in the light of the screens. "Thinking of which – I'm afraid I'll have to get back to the crèche. That Anne Pontephrigh, she's still not back from the search." She paused. "Even that Fleet Shadower must be running low on fuel by now. I hope they get back all right – it'd be a bit much if we had to go and rescue them too!"

Far out in the darkness, a wood and canvas aircraft chugged through the night a thousand feet above the Pacific ocean, unconnected to the outside world by the usual links of satellite or laser-link technologies. The crew were perfectly happy with that idea, and were in excellent spirits.

"I say, Anne," Dick called over above the noise of the slipstream, looking out towards the open window. "Be a good scout and all that – sing out when you see any land down there. Jolly exciting stuff, this night-flying!"

Anne nodded vigorously, her head stuck out of the side window, ears and tongue streaming in the wind. Above them was a moonless overcast, with no stars handy for navigation – below, in the dim light she could make out pale phosphorescent ocean foam, where long swells broke on some half-submerged reef. They had been flying for six hours now at a steady eighty miles an hour, carefully following the course laid out until they had reached their search area, then turned for home. At least – Julian had been quite sure that their aerodrome was in this general direction – not being a tomboyish aviatrix like most of the Native girls, Anne cared little about these technical details.

"You know," Julian reflected, reading the manual in his lap by the copilot's navigation light, "It says here, this air compass thing goes out of kilter after awhile, if it's not adjusted. "Swinging the compass" they call it. I wonder how long ago it was done last? This crate's been sitting in the back of the hangar for simply ages."

"Hmm. You might have something there, Julian." Dick's expression was thoughtful as he looked out into the grey night, above the cheerful radium glow of the instrument panel. "Still, it did us all right on the outward leg – got us there bang on target. He's a brick, that Gen Yakitora – got us this aeroplane, and points us towards our first Adventure at the Coll. "

"I should say!" Julian's bluff, honest features shone with earnest excitement. "It certainly beats hanging around those funny tea-shops they have on the Island on a weekend. You know, just between you and me, that lemonade stuff they were selling, smelled a bit – suspect."

"Yes, and such funny-sounding names, too." Dick laughed. "Who'd give a brand of pop a name like "Kreakstones' Ten Percent Skull Piledriver"? Only five glasses, and you could see folk getting all light-headed. I'm sure it can't be good for you."

“Hmm. Thinking of liquids – we seem to be getting a bit low on petrol.” Dick scanned the instrument panel, his ears dipping a little. “It’d be awfully inconvenient if we had to land on the ocean. We’d be late home – we might have to wait ages for a cheery tramp steamer to give us a tow to the right island.”

“Yes, and I don’t think Anne would like it on a tramp steamer – awfully untidy, by all accounts!” Julian tapped his sister on her shoulder. “Come on, Anne – buck up, spot us that island.”

Anne Pontephrigh strained to peer into the gathering gloom. It had been three hours since they had seen any recognisable landmark, and the weather forecast had come by looking at a piece of seaweed – she had heard there were modern ways of exactly predicting wind speed and direction, but they sounded awfully artificial. But she was a Pontephrigh, with centuries of tradition of muddling through in impossible situations – and so she pulled herself together and steeled herself for the job.

“Here we are!” Three minutes later, Anne pulled her head in, politely pulling her tongue in as well. “We’re on the exact course, ahead and left a bit – there’s the runway lights.”

“Hurrah ! Good old Anne. Knew you could do it if you tried hard enough! Back for tea, piles of gammon with new potatoes, mint and proper boiled cabbage – Jenks had to show the chefs here how to cook it properly, the lazy things had never heard of a two-hour boil. Won’t Georgina be simply green when she finds out what she’s missed out on ! “ Dick set the precise course for “Ahead and left a bit”, and scanned through the manuals to find the bit about landing. There was something about a retractable undercarriage – he supposed he should follow the makers’ instructions, though it seemed a bit new-fangled to be important.

“Yes, good old Anne. Quite the little eagle-eye, aren’t we? That’s two good pieces of spotting today. Good show all round.” Julian’s tail would have wagged, had he not been sitting on a parachute and dinghy. “And you saw that bomber on the beach back there – looks like they came an awful cropper on landing, must have had some excitable foreigner trying to fly it.”

“Didn’t they just?” Anne closed her eyes, remembering. “Not like that fox girl from the coll, Susan or whatever she’s called. She was parked down there neat as neat.”

“Well, we’ve done our bit. Home, a good cold bath, supper and a big mug of Ovaltine for me.” Julian yawned, stretching in the cramped confines of the cockpit. “It’s been three hours and a bit since we radioed back – it sounded like we really stirred things up a bit back there.”

Mariko yawned, looking around the crèche as she changed over from her friend Mipsi, who had been covering for the missing Anne Pontephrigh. She waved farewell to the lapine girl, just as Trish came in.

Trish looked round, a little puzzled, and reached for her phrase book. “What is she, her species. Is rare around here, yes?”

“Who, Mipsi? She’s a Bunny. We’ve got standard hares and rabbits in plenty around here – they manage to keep me quite busy,” her wave took in three slumbering piles of kits tucked snugly in white woolly blankets. “But Mipsi’s the only full Bunny. It’s sort of hard to explain – I’ve read it’s something on parallel with the – exaggerated - characteristics you get if you dose up on hormones.”

Trish nodded, having been impressed by the outstandingly fluffy tail, cute twitchy nose and lop ears. “Have heard of “Bunny-girl” before, somewhere in here.”

Mariko laughed. “Mipsi’s mother was one. I think she’s one of a few hundred people on record who managed to cross the species barrier without using Genemeld, just by The Triumph Of The Will. Have to ask Horst about that sort of thing.” Her tail twitched. “I’m glad to see you in here – but weren’t you heading out to help Kazuko?”

Trish frowned, her head cocked to one side. “Kazuko said only some kinds of people could work on her aircraft unharmed. She is loading “T-Stoff and Zip fuel” only folk with big eyes could have it blow up without getting hurt. But she will be phoning me here, when she is done. I have some ideas for “Go-Faster” stripes like we have at home, should help things.”

“Well – you’re welcome to stay. It’s bedtime soon for some of the older kits and pups here, and I can always use an extra set of paws.” Mariko’s eyebrow raised at the sight of Trish’s expression. “That’s just a saying.”

“Is good!” Trish nodded eagerly. “I get to see everything in this trip, larval stages too! Is all very different back home.”

Mariko smiled, her own whiskers twitching. She had been shown various photographs and other scans taken that afternoon – she was used to looking at sonar scans, as every term brought a stream of students soon to be in need of the crèche and needing to know what sort of offspring they were expecting. She was quite familiar with interpreting scans that a standard medical 3-D scanning system would never be able to resolve – Kazuko was far from the only one of her friends with a wide range of interests. “Oh, I’m sure you’ll have a lot to write home about.”

Half an hour later, Trish was wondering how Mariko ever managed to keep up with the six litters around that evening, let alone the dozen or more she blithely mentioned being in charge of in class time. Currently, Trish

had eight hare toddlers climbing over her, while Mariko read out aloud from an old-fashioned book to a mixed circle of mostly kittens.

"..... And there, by the gate leading onto the moor, I found his body," that worthy explained in a low voice. "All around it were deep pawprints."

"Ah !" Holmes leaned forward, an intent gleam in his eyes. "Were they were the pawprints of a man or a woman?"

"Mr. Holmes," our visitor said very slowly and clearly. "Beside that crushed, hugged body – there were the rounded paw-prints of an enormous stuffed-toy!"

Mariko broke off, a chorus of "ooohs!" and "Aaahhs!" escaping from her rapt audience. Suddenly, the Rigid_Immobile phone rang.

"It's for you!" Mariko struggled through the phone with a clinging mass of toddlers delightedly crawling over her, playing junior Tank-Riders. "Kazuko's ready and fuelled."

"Is good!" Trish nodded, carefully picking off the hares and dropping them in a metre-high walled crib. She waved, heading out. "I hope that I can come and help again – the larval forms are so interesting!" Under her suit, she blushed – one of the cribs held an offspring that she recognised from one side of the family – she had not needed the special powder that Mariko had sprinkled over it to make it show up for a second in normal light.

"It seems," Trish told herself, as she headed out through the dark towards the airstrip, "I might not be the first one to get here, after all!"

Following the instructions Kazuko had given her, Trish trotted away from the main airstrip proper, to a complex of heaped earth banks and deep pits, where a number of mostly vertical shapes poked sharply into the night sky.

"Hidy! Over here!" She recognised Kazuko's cheery hail, from above her head. Trish looked up – there was a twenty-metre tubular framework, now swivelling towards the Northeast on some unseen pivot – and at its base was a stubby-winged aircraft, sitting on its tail with a cluster of long cylinders around the tail unit.

Kazuko's grin beamed down, as she slid down one pole of the launching-rail. "You're just in time to help me load up," she panted, nodding towards the main assembly sheds where Mariko's Bren Gun Carrier was towing a large trailer in their direction. "Mangana and Toemi, they ran up some parachute packs, for a radio and a pile of water bottles. As soon as they're on board – I'll be off."

Trish looked up at the mostly cylindrical bulk of the little plywood interceptor. "I think I can improve things – give a few percentage more speed, yes? Just needs some improving to the go-faster stripes."

"That'd be great." Kazuko dashed over towards her tool kit, and tossed Trish a spray paint can. "I tried painting the whole airframe red – red ones always go faster – but I couldn't get a pigment that'd survive more than one atmospheric re-entry. The stripes work nearly as well, and don't take as long to fix. Excuse me – I've got to get than crane ready." She sprinted off, waving as the little tracked carrier came grinding round the corner, its Merlin engine upgrade easily pulling the half-tonne trailer – as indeed it could pull most of the Historical Engineering main battle tanks.

Trish looked at the can in her hand, and smiled. She had always enjoyed art at school – and since arriving at Toho, had not had the chance to practice. "I'll do the best I can – but I'll have to ... get comfortable for it." She looked around, a little guiltily, remembering her Mother's exhortation to always wear her Suit in public. Well – she thought to herself, unzipping it a little – it's pitch dark here, and it's not as if I'm stepping right out of it, after all...

Back in the control tower, Horst stared at the screen in front of him. He had called up the current flight roster, to check the runway would be clear that night, with no aircraft expected in for landing. He mentally ticked off the Fleet Shadower that was taxiing in towards the hangar, having done a landing more suitable to kangaroo than canine pilots – that was one less thing to worry about.

He brushed a wiry furred grey hand over his tired eyes, tapping the screen. "This isn't making sense." He looked at Broohilda, who was standing by with a tray of (Coffee +6), a genetically enhanced version that had almost driven Benzedrine and other synthetics off the market. "Satori's Hughes Hercules took off three hours ago – this morning it was down as awaiting spare parts, suddenly it's fixed, fuelled and flying, but there's no flight plan listed. At least, I don't count "Busy, gone for the weekend" as a flight plan. "

Broohilda blinked. "This afternoon – I saw a whole crown heading towards the docks, four of them were in Mecha," her eyes widened. "That was three hours ago. I've been here since."

Horst's tusks gleamed in the dim light. "The only ones with mecha, apart from Mae, are Gen's lot – they're pals with Satori, who runs the Hercules." He paused, considering. The eight-engined flying boat was a very expensive proposition to fly, and took a trained crew of eight. Even with the generous fuel and support allowances, Satori would have had difficulty funding it had it not been for the official contract he had with the Academy's

administration, to carry the majority of the Homelands students to and from Hokkaido at the start and finish of each term, with baggage and two and three-tonne mecha included.

“They went out Northeast, straight after they took off – the Stealth Radar’s not too good at low-flying aircraft,” he mused. Suddenly, a grim expression locked on his face. “There’s only one thing happened urgently in that direction, and that’s where we’re going. Suzuko! I’ll get onto the harbourmaster, see if he can get a crew list. You don’t put mecha on for a pleasure trip, that’s a fact. If Gen knew about Suzuko, two hours and more before we did ...” his voice dropped, becoming very cold and precise. Suddenly, he picked up the phone, contacting the team down at the Natter’s launching pit. “Mangana ? You’d better tell Kaz to take care, for a change – when she gets there, there might be more than one team of unfriendly company to look out for.”

Trish clung to the side of the cockpit, some twelve metres above the shallow pool of the concrete-floored launching pit, admiring her handiwork. There was a sound behind her – hurriedly she pulled herself wholly back into the suit, and zipped it shut, adjusting her outer clothes just as the crane rumbled in carrying a large cylinder.

“Finished!” She slid down the smooth pole to the concrete base as she had seen Kazuko do, splashing slightly as she gratefully found the liquid was water and not spilled peroxide. “You have the Radio for Suki and the water, yes?”

“All packed!” Kazuko sang out cheerfully, swarming up the access ladder. Her aircraft looked fairly conventional in flight, but sitting vertical on the launch pad, the pilot’s seat she wriggled into was flat on its back, the nose pointing to the stars. “Popping the payload hatch now – swing it in, Mangana. That’s right.” The rounded tip of the nosecone swung aside to let Mangana fill the space with the improvised load, where fifty R4M rockets usually sat. “Is the airbag primed to pop this lot out? I don’t want to try and fly back with a hole in the nose.”

“Ready.” Mangana called up. “Horst just called. Look out for Satori, they headed out in your direction – they could have been out on Etepa Atoll two hours by now, if they knew where they were going.”

“Will do. All right! Stand clear folks, I’m ready to hit the button.” With that, Kazuko secured the canopy, carefully locking it in place as she inflated her “G” suit. Vertical launching in a conventional pilot’s seat with ones legs in the air was poor ergonomics, and she usually went into “red-out” for a minute until the boosters burned out, trusting the onboard gyroscope to hold the plane on course. Grinning, she looked around the elegantly simple wooden instrument panel – a stopwatch, an altimeter, a Mach meter and a few temperature sensors, with very little else. She had proved wrong all the detractors who had claimed she had no chance of making orbital interceptions flying by the seat of her pants – her onboard computing power was zero, but she had very capable pants.

Mangana gestured to Trish to jump onto the empty trailer, and they bounced away from the launch gantry along the rough track heading to the main airfield. There was little room in the main tankette, with the massive aero-engine that Kazuko had put in there for a bet – and to win the prize for highest-powered tankette in that month’s edition of “Practical Home Tank Builder”.*

“Cover your ears, Trish,” She pulled in behind one of the high earth berms, switching off the throaty rumble of the Merlin engine. “This gets loud. And bright too – you might need these, you’ll ruin your night vision for half an hour otherwise.” She reached down into the glove compartment of the tankette, and pulled out two pairs of dark glasses. “Polarised, too – only the best.”

Trish bowed politely, frowning a little as she tried to fit the lenses on her muzzle – they were designed for a flat Anime human head, with no significant nose and eight centimetre eyes. “Thank you, Mangana-san!” She finally pressed them against her face, one paw holding them steady as she scrambled up onto the bank for a better view. “But – do we not need launch teams, control rooms and such for rocket launchings? I have seen old films.”

Mangana laughed, putting on her own shades. “Fifty years ago, you would. These days, folk just strap on a home-built rocket and toss a match out of the window – well, strictly speaking, Kaz has a big red button, labelled “GO” in cheerful lettering. It’s cheaper this way – and so much less to go wrong.”

Just then, there was a tearing rumble from over the earth bank – a hard, piercing whistle of the Walter engine joined by a massed bellow as the ten booster rockets kicked in, lighting up the skies of Shahaguo Island as the Natter leaped off the pad. Rising on an eleven-pronged spire of light, at twelve gravities acceleration the little wooden interceptor became a spaceward travelling meteor, its vertical ascent just starting to “turn-over” on course as it vanished into the low clouds, lighting them up for a few seconds like the full moon.

“There she goes.” Trish blinked, taking off the polarised lenses. “And then we will hear from Suki, yes?”

Mangana stared at her for a second, still wearing her shades. Trish had been outlined against the rising star of the rocket launch, with the light behind her. The vixen should have made a sharp silhouette, except where fur

- A perfectly standard hard-copy magazine, out weekly in nations whose citizens have the resources and attitudes for the hobby. Kazuko’s Maus 2 featured largely in its sister publication, “Totally Impractical Home Tank Builder.”

softened her outline – but she had not. For a few seconds, the effect had been – in a way, as if Trish had been wearing a thin shirt that had been soaked and made translucent by the light. What the figure under that costume had actually been, confirmed what the ultra-sound scans had revealed – not only was Trish built differently, but the main bulk of her was not even on the island, in the usual way.

Mangana raised an eyebrow, unconsciously copying Horst. “I hope we’ll find out how she is, yes.” She said slowly. “We’ll find out what happened – and I expect we’ll be in for some surprises. Round here, things usually aren’t what they appear on the surface.”

As you well know, she directed the thought at Trish, hoping the vixen-shaped girl had no telepathy, whatever else she had. *As you well know*.

Broohilda stood at the window of the medical centre, shading her eyes as she watched the Natter launch, gazing skywards until she saw the spent boosters parachuting down into the lagoon – they would sink to the bottom except for a marker buoy on the parachute, easily recovered the next day. “Well – that’s it, till we hear from Kaz when she gets there.” She had left Toemi with Horst in the control tower, monitoring the flight. The wooden aircraft would be hard to detect on any radar the Road Runner had surviving – and ninety percent of its flight would be ballistic, which should make things difficult for heat detectors searching for engine plumes.

There was a quiet cough behind her, and she turned to see Jenni standing by the door. The young ewe smiled, waving.

“I thought I might find you here.” Jenni’s nostrils widened, taking in the scents. “Mmm – Tava’s been here. Is he still around?”

Broohilda shook her head. “No – he stayed till eight – though he was only scheduled till seven. He’s very dedicated.”

Jenni’s eyes gleamed. “Yes. He’s a very hard worker – I can scent that, from where I’m standing. You two make a marvellous team.”

“Oh. He’s good with the patients, too. We’re getting on very well.” Broohilda’s naked tail twitched, as her own nostrils breathed in deeply – Tava’s scent set her tingling, in a way she tried to tell herself was wrong. “Have you finished for the day? I was just about to turn in.”

“So soon? It’s Saturday night, Broohilda – surely not. You’re not going to sit down in that empty room and read or watch the data nets all on your own? I’ve been up since yesterday, but I’ve a few hours left before I fall over. I hear the Mecha Bar is the place to be, down in town.”

Broohilda blinked. “Well. Mangana and Mae go there a lot – I’ve sometimes gone with them. But they’re busy tonight. And there’s nothing I can really help with – I asked.”

“Well, then!” Jenni hugged her playfully. “You owe it to yourself to have a little fun, once in awhile. When’s the last time you went in there without them around?” She saw Broohilda hesitate, and look embarrassed. “You can show me round, then. I’m sure there’s a lot of local customs I need to pick up – and we can talk, somewhere comfortable.”

“All right.” Broohilda smiled shyly. “But I’ll take my communicator – in case anybody wants me.”

Jenni’s woolly tail hiked, as she followed Broohilda to the door. “Oh – I’m sure they do. Yes, I’m very certain that they do.”

Two hundred and twenty-five kilometres Northeast of Toho Academy as the ballistic missile flies, a ballistic shape dropped out of the clouds, decelerating to just under the speed of sound as Kazuko applied her air brakes. There it was! Just a pale rind of land, the only major beach of the atoll: the only place big enough to put down an aircraft for three hundred kilometres, between Toho and the Home Islands.

“Here we go – lining up for the delivery...” Kazuko was hanging in her straps, the nose pointed down almost vertically, while she lined up the centre point of the island in her sights. Her thumb flicked the cage off the firing button, a broad grin filling her helmet as she spotted the slightly bent shape of the Road Runner. Then she frowned. There was something different about it, from the photo that the satellite had taken early that afternoon.

“She lines up – she shoots – she scores!” Her thumb squeezed the button – and the Natter shivered as the airbag in the nosecone hurled the packages forward, four hundred kilos of supplies showering down towards the midpoint of the island. In a few seconds, the tip of the airbag swelled with fast-setting foam, restoring the streamlining for the flight home. “No sign they’ve seen me... but just in case...” She imagined half a dozen highly irritated aircrew manning portable missiles, searching the skies for the source of the objects now whistling towards them. “Let’s give them something to look at!” With that, she jabbed the switch triggering the plug-in Countermeasures pack she had fitted that morning, and six brilliant magnesium flares burst high over the island, the million candle-power flares lighting the sand up like full sunshine.

Heaving back on the stick, Kazuko pulled out of the dive a bare two hundred metres above the waves, while the flares slowly descended towards the water, casting sharp-edged shadows from the sharp, twisted edges of the

Road Runner and Suzuko's Lippisch, parked a bare fifty paces behind it. There was no sign of movement – not even of any figures lying flat-out on the sand taking what cover they could find.

Kazuko hesitated, about to light the main engine that would flick her back up to altitude and on course for Toho. But then she changed her mind – no bursts of small-arms fire, no hastily aimed missiles came streaking out towards her – and with the performance boost she had gained from Trish's Go-Faster stripes, she just had enough fuel to take one look around before the flares went out.

She hit the turbopump starter, the hydrogen peroxide from her almost full tanks screaming into steam as T-Stoff and catalyst mixed to power fuel pumps and turbines, before she lit up the smaller cruise chamber, just enough to keep flying speed. Heaving the stick around, she panted with the muscular effort as she brought the Natter in for a low run along the length of the beach, just as the flares reached the waves around her.

For ten seconds she looked down, her huge nocturnal eyes scanning every detail of what flashed past below. And then Kazuko Leclerc hit the main engine start, pulling the nose up and heading back towards Toho Academy, even as she switched on the radio to the boar she knew would be listening.

"Hello, Horst? The aircraft are there – the Road Runner looks like it broke its back on landing, but that didn't look too bad a crash – and Suki's runabout doesn't look at all damaged. But..." she tensed her muscles, trying to find just the right words for what she had seen and deduced in those ten or twelve seconds. "The tide's been going out for hours – there's tracks, a big deep prow mark in the sand, like a ship or a flying boat was pulled up there. And the middle bit of the Road Runner's gone – it looks like a tin can somebody hacked apart with scissors, I could see the sand through it. There's no sign of anybody, dead or alive."

She nodded, collecting her thoughts as the Natter punched back up through the clouds into starlit skies, accelerating up to cruise altitude for the half-hour trip back to Toho. "If that wasn't Gen, somebody else had a flying-boat there tonight. They landed, took off the crew and Suki, then cut the bomber up to get whatever it was carrying out in one piece. Gen and Shiitake, their Mech suits have close-combat chainswords, could do it easy."

She heard Horst exhale, a sharp grunt of air. For a second there was only the crackle of static, but then heard his voice, slow and calm.

"I think you're right, Kaz. They've taken her, one way or another. But – the tides. That gives us timings, if you can describe the marks." He waited while Kazuko passed on the information and then came the rattle of his Remote_Impersonal computer. "The time! They must have been gone before dark – plenty of time to get back here in triumph, and they're still nowhere in our airspace. No distress signal either, so they haven't broken down."

Kazuko looked around herself through the armoured glass panels, the sea of clouds already far below her hiding the endless expanse of the Pacific. "If they were going back to Toho – they'd be there." She looked back at the great billowing walls of vapour, her eyes wide. "So they somehow managed to get Suzuko, the crew of the bomber, and a Device that could wipe out any city on Earth onboard. Where would you go with a thing like THAT?"

