

Dawn washed over the dormitory blocks of Toho Academy, a bright cheerful sunrise after a night of rain making the roofs of the dozen two-story buildings sparkle and gleam like new.

“Hurrah!” Dick Pontephrigh bounced out of the block onto the concrete hard standings, where his friend Gen’s sports tank squatted hopefully. “What a super day!”

“Isn’t it just?” His brother agreed, rubbing his fur dry with a big, extra-rough towel, freshly scented with extra-harsh carbolic soap. “Much too nice to lie around in bed – let’s get the girls and see about some more Adventuring.”

“Right-O.” Dick’s tail wagged vigorously, taking a break from the physical jerks he performed every morning. “Awfully lazy types, some of these locals – it’s good enough for them to be up till eleven at night, some of them – if they can do that, they can jolly well manage to be up at five like the rest of us.”

“Well spoken, Dick.” Julian tossed the towel over to Jenks, the butler standing motionless in the porch. “Breakfast at five-thirty, Jenks – bacon and eggs, grilled tomatoes, kippers and heaps of buttered toast – the usual.”

Jenks caught the towel and bowed slightly, his plain black Butler’s uniform blending into the shadows. Stepping aside as Julian rushed past him heading loudly for the stairs, his normally impassive face gave a slight but significant one-millimeter twitch, as a loud banging and a cheerful “Wakey-Wakey!” echoed through the building.

It was good, he told himself, to see the Young Master in such fine spirits.

Half an hour later, the downstairs kitchen rang with cheerful noise as the Pontephrighs tucked into their breakfast. “Simply scrummy, Jenks – you and Timmy have outdone yourself, as always!” Anne called over towards the sink.

Jenks expressively inclined his head a millimeter.

Dick smiled, looking round the table. “Well, Georgina – I’ll bet you’re sorry you missed out on the fun yesterday! Quite a trip it was – we were on the trail of sinister foreigners – they’d stolen a secret weapon from their own government, which probably makes them spies too.”

“Or deserters,” Anne’s tail thrashed, as she politely helped herself to more bacon. “Or even Bolsheviks! We haven’t met any of those yet.”

“Good point, Anne.” Dick nodded, his eyes gleaming. “They have to be somewhere – why not there? That’s an Adventure and a half for you, and I bet it’s not over yet.”

Georgina looked at her cousins, as she shoveled more kippers onto her plate. “I was in it long before you were, don’t forget. This time yesterday, I’d already helped save the Island and some city or other, while you were still fast asleep. Well, me and Granita and quite a few others.”

“Yes, credit where credit’s due.” Anne nodded earnestly. “She looks just the kind of chum for you, Granita – would you believe it though, Dick thought you were going sippy on her.”

“Steady on, Anne,” Dick reproved mildly.

Georgina bristled. “There’s nothing at all sippy about Granita! She taught me to wrestle, Friday night – well, she started to. And she’s been teaching me all sorts of things you wouldn’t be interested in – it’s jolly fun, I can tell you! She’s very respectable – when she was over in England following the sports, the Police themselves asked if she wanted to become a Special Constable. You can hardly do better than that, can you?” She glowed with pride – Granita had told her of her following the football riots: after the Millwall/Moscow Dynamo match of ’35, she had been filmed laying into the enemy supporters with such outstanding enthusiasm and vigor that both the Riot police and the Anti-Riot police had wanted to enlist her on the spot.

“Well said, George. She does look a solid chum for you to have. Thinking of chums, I wonder if Gen, Shiitake and Yukio are back yet from their Adventure? I know they headed out post-haste as soon as we told them where to go – and they took those funny suits of armour with them.” Julian started to make a large inroad into the huge pile of buttered toast in front of him. “Oh yes, and that other Native girl, Susan or whatever – they went to pick her up, too.”

“They’re good sorts,” Dick confirmed, his blunt muzzle slick with butter as he wolfed down his own supply of toast, to have Jenks resupply it effortlessly. “Yukio was telling me how he copes with Natives – when he has to go to Foreign climes. When they make that rubbishy foreign gabbling sound, just gibber some nonsense back at them, let them know you won’t be taken in. Everyone speaks English * anyway – just some of them won’t admit it. They do it to annoy you, if you let them”

“Yes, I can understand that – and Yukio should know, on his course they study all sorts of funny customs from all over the place. Why, some countries used to drive on the wrong side of the roads – but Japanese tourists of course couldn’t put up with that nonsense. A few thousand sports tanks speeding on the proper side of the road, soon puts things right.” Julian grinned, and made a grab for the teapot.

- Yukio, naturally, didn’t exactly say that, but the principle translated perfectly.

“Well then – let’s stroll over and see what’s happening. Should be something of interest, it looks that sort of a day.” Dick looked out of the open window, from where a bracing sea breeze was scouring through the room. “As soon as we’ve finished Breakfast – off we go.”

Georgina smiled, flexing her knuckles. “And of course Timmy comes too – hurrah for the Five!”

On the top of the hill that morning, the dormitory blocks were hidden from sight by the bamboo-clad curve of the slope. The rocky expanse on the summit had two peaks – a wide, flattish one currently marked with a partly rubbed-out chalk circle, and a smaller crag, the highest point on Shahaguo Island.

Mae was sitting on top of the summit, her eyes closed. She had been there most of the night, wrapped in an old Dutch Alpenkorps surplus parka, her exposed fur ruffled by the winds of dawn. A little way off, Trish lay in a borrowed sleeping bag, having volunteered to keep Mae company on her non-physical search.

Trish yawned, waking up and looking around. Wriggling out of the bag, she stretched and smoothed her clothes down – then stopped as she caught sight of the chalk circle. A strange shudder ran through her. This place looked awfully familiar – she had been so relieved to find out her sleepwalking adventure had not included sleep-snacking, that she had not thought much about what actually had occurred.

Suddenly, Mae opened her eyes. “That way!” She pointed out to the East. “I’ve got her – Suzuko. She’s alive, and she’s not moving much – on foot, if at all. Quick! The marker rods!”

“Hai, Mae-san,” Trish bowed, grabbing the two surveying poles she had carried up for the occasion. Mae jammed one into a cleft in the rocks, and Trish ran twenty paces to the East, to get a good baseline.

“Left a bit .. left a bit .. right just a fraction – got it. Bang on the beam.” Mae sagged, sitting on Trish’s still-warm sleeping bag. “Takes it out of you, that does. Physically, I don’t move, but mentally – it’s like spreading yourself out over a chunk of the planet, then trying to scrape yourself up again.”

Trish nodded, busying herself with the compass. “Eighty-five degrees, two arc-seconds exactly.” She blinked, looking out over the empty waters. “What is being over there but Oxygen dihydride ?”

Mae’s whiskers twitched. “Not a lot – no major land mass till you get all the way across to our East Coast Colonies – and I don’t think they’ll want to take the Peruvians there. The JSDF would be after them – they protect our colonies, and outside the colonies there’s only roaming hordes of mutant bikers and drug-frenzied cannibal hillbillies. No.” She sat, thinking. “If it’d been South-East, I’d have guessed they were taking them home. But out that way ? I’ll have to check the map.” She pulled out her databook, and tapped away busily. “Well well. That makes sense.”

Trish’s tail swished with interest, looking over her shoulder – one dot on the map was like another to her, but from the way Mae was staring at this one, there must be something special about that one. “Where is Suzuko-san being?”

“There’s not much doubt – it’s the only place on that bearing. She’s on New Tortuga – a non-colony of the Greenland Anarchist Non-State, and the Pirate capital of the planet.” Mae tapped the map, thoughtfully. “Used to be called Wake Island. I’ve no idea how the Anarchist Non-State got it, and it doesn’t say here.” She paused, as a thought hit her. “Last term – I remember, Shiitake’s class were trying to arrange a field trip there, but they couldn’t get permission. Good Citizens aren’t meant to go there, you need special passports and things – not to get there, but to come back here afterwards. They sent in a robot instead, it lasted about half an hour before someone used it for target practice.”

Mae stood up, folding her databook as she set off resolutely down the hill. “We’ll have to get out there – I don’t think it’s as bad a place as the Cultural Hygiene course think it is, but – I know it’s rough. And Suki was hardly amongst friends, even before she got there.” She cast a glance at Trish, the vixen-ish girl bending over to collect the survey poles, and frowned. She had been wrong about Trish – and she knew she should apologize for trying to look into her mind uninvited the day before. But – she had also seen the scans that Mangana had taken, and had enough experience to interpret them in the right way. Trish was quite innocent of devouring anyone at Toho, but deceiving them was another matter.

“Is good!” Trish beamed as she tucked the poles under her arm, following Mae towards the inhabited side of the island. But then she stopped, looking again at the chalk circle. “Mae-chan – is this a – special place, on top of hill here ? Seems can feel something – strange about it.”

Mae raised an eyebrow, following the gaze. “Oh, you could say that. A lot of folk here are definitely into Monsters and visa versa – given the chance. I should think by now, this hilltop features in some foreign guidebooks – written in very foreign places indeed.” She grinned, looking at Trish’s flustered expression. “Why, are you into that sort of thing? We call it the Bridal Stones.”

The day-to-day running of Toho Academy was a strange mixture of improvisation and beaurocracy. As in the Looking-glass world that some students claimed to have visited (generally those on the Ethnic Pharmacology courses), the staff not only had to believe ten impossible things before breakfast most days, but fit them into a smoothly running timetable.

Horst Graben put the phone down, as he sat in the basement of the control tower where he had spent the past two days, having snatched a few hours sleep. “They won’t let us go.” His steely grey fur bristled. “I did

talk with the Dean's staff – they are saying, they have so many special passes a year for visiting New Tortuga – and Gen block-booked them all for the Cultural Hygiene field trip! That's what they say they're doing. They got it approved before they left the Island." His eyes narrowed dangerously. "And then, such a piece of good luck, they passed Suzuko and an "unknown aircraft crash" and took them off for medical attention."

Broohilda blinked. "Suki's all right?" She was standing by anxiously, looking at the screen showing New Port Royal, the main city of New Tortuga, and a live video feed of two home-built mecha shooting it out in the street while the citizens stood clear and cheered. Jenni sat on the desk next to her, the ewe's long, thin legs swinging carelessly as she cast a scowl towards Kazuko, who ignored it like an Academy administrator hearing a plea for a project extension. In the corner Mae stood with Trish, tapping away on her Remote_Impersonal computer, accessing what data she could on the area.

"She's alive, and being taken for treatment. That's all they say – and Gen had his hand on a Lie Detector, just to make it an official report." Horst snorted. "Which is why we cannot even go out on a rescue mission – If they were still on Etepa Atoll we'd be allowed to use Academy projects to bring them home – but now Gen's beaten us to it, the Staff say we can't take our aircraft or any Academy ships and collect them."

Broohilda put her hand to her mouth. "Oh my. I don't trust Gen. And Shiitake's worse. So's Matzu. You – fought with him in the first year, didn't you?" Broohilda's tail twitched. "I've never seen you lose your temper, even."

"I did." Horst's tusks gleamed sharply in the light of the screen.

Kazuko gave a wide grin, from the console in the corner of the room. "You should see Horst in action! He's about as hard to touch off as a ton block of commercial C-7 explosives – but if you manage to do it when you're standing next to it, serves you right! Matzu had been on at Horst for weeks about Horst's Lederhosen being a traditional Japanese costume Horst had no right to wear – and Matzu was in the first term of that Adaptive History course, so he knew all there was to know about it, or so he'd tell you. Horst was as cool as a cubic mile of Antarctic ice – till Matzu called him a liar." Her eyes went wide. "You should have seen it! Horst didn't even lose his temper – I bet his pulse hardly even raised an octave, he just took Matzu down like a demolition crew on a skyscraper. And Matzu's a polar bear, got all sorts of trendy Martial Arts too."

Horst raised an eyebrow, a hint of a smile playing on his features, more at Kazuko's enthusiasm than at the memory. "After all – "My Word Is True", as the priests say back home. But – as to Suzuko. What can we do for her? No commercial flights anywhere go to New Tortuga, even if we could get permission to go."

"And that's only half the problem," Kazuko pointed at the live film stream. "That's a rough place. Mae has a Mecha suit, but of the rest of us, she's the only one now Rashke's in Japan – and his suit won't fit anyone else. We'll need some heavy support when we get there. And how are we going to carry that?"

"Especially since we're not allowed to use our aircraft or any Academy transport," Broohilda's ears drooped. "We can hardly drive there, it's twelve hundred kilometers of open ocean."

Kazuko frowned, staring intently at the map. Suddenly, she gave a grin the like of which only Cheshire felines usually managed. She jumped up on the desk, and struck a heroic "recruiting-poster" pose, while Broohilda and Jenni looked up in amazement.

"To the Engineering Workshops! I have a Plan!" With that, she bounced off the desk and hared out of the room, with Broohilda cautiously following her.

Mae's tail twitched, her gaze following the pair. "I recognize that look. She's off to do something totally deranged – which will probably work quite well, by her track record. I'll go over and encourage her, not that she needs it." She paused. "Horst. You were in here with the Arch-Dean, when the bomber came over. Didn't he tell the JSDF we'd shot it down?"

Horst looked at her, an eyebrow raised. "He did. And a lot depends on staying in their good graces. I am wondering just what Gen told him, and what he told Gen, when their crew loaded the Device on board. I can see why he would not want it coming to this island – especially if it's still live."

Mae purred, a pink sliver of tongue protruding as she stared at the screen, her eyes narrowing. "This is getting interesting! Gen goes out, picks up the Device – takes Suki and most of the crew off to Hospital, but what's he going to do with it?"

"The Arch-Dean was very keen to lay his paws on it," Horst confirmed. "And now he has – still better, he's got people he trusts investigating it, on the one spot on the planet where if it goes off, nobody will be complaining too loud."

Mae cocked her head to one side. "Oh, I don't know. It's not as bad as the folk in "Rising Sun" write about in their anti-adverts – sure, it's got a lot of terrorists and escaped criminals, but they're a minority of the population. And they tend to – thin each other's numbers out, by all accounts. Granita went there last year, she had a great time."

Horst smiled slowly as Mangana waved from the doorway and strode in. "So. Very interesting. The Arch-Dean told the JSDF we had done our duty and shot down the Road Runner and its bomb. I wonder – has he told them now that it is not destroyed after all? A few satchel charges should have done the job had Gen's team wanted to remove that danger from the planet – but they did not."

Mangana stopped dead in her tracks. "If there's one person on the island you don't want to get irritated with you, Horst, that's the one. Anyway, how do we know what he's told the JSDF? Imagine if he's

kept them up to date and got their blessing – then we come along and assume we’ve some sort of hold on him. Not good for us.” She shook her black mop of head-hair. “Not good at all.”

“There is that.” Horst agreed. “How do we find out? It is sure to be a secret.”

Mae’s whiskers twitched. “You just leave that to me,” she purred. “I’ve got the key to Suki’s room and the password to her little Cray. Once I get into there – we’ll see just what we can get our claws into.”

Ten minutes later, Mae sat in Suzuko’s room, and slipped her friend’s interface goggles and data gloves on – fortunately, they were the same size and not too incompatible a shape. She closed her eyes, taking a few seconds to adjust – and opened them again to see the neon city glow of the Worldnet surrounding her.

Where she “stood”, was in a doorway looking out at rivers and streams of light, the great floods of data moving from place to place, every drop a packet of binary information. She spread her arms, making wings of them as she soared out into the great echoing memory spaces, rising far above the humdrum data sprawl of the nearby Japanese Empire’s traffic.

Mae flew on. The Worldnet was a giant series of caverns – a huge central chamber that could in analogy take the Holding Pattern of jets above Tokyo airport – but linking it were side caverns and chambers, each expanding into its own area. That narrow portal there, she knew was the territory of the Greater Liechtenstein Reich – a narrow passage showing slow communications links on salvaged and recycled machines, leading to a Spartan cavern whose odd “sculptures” were hybrid organic machines of a kind the rest of the world shunned in horror.

Mae waved, and flew further. Every cavern had its own style, its own lighting, even the sounds and scents were distinctive indicators to her virtual senses. She paused – in the entrance to a bland, warehouse-like commercial structure there was a narrow crack, not exactly hidden, but not obvious to a casual Worldnet search. Mae stopped, and smiled. “This is the place.”

Somewhere in the world of matter, electrons switched courses in satellites and pumped light down cables, triggering responses a row of old machines half forgotten in the basement of a post office in Uzbekistan. Someone paid hard currency by devious means once a month to power and maintain them with no questions asked. Sometimes, such places were home to some very strange transactions indeed.

In the dim alleyway of the Worldnet, Mae knocked and entered a plain steel door, or its close analog. The room inside resembled a nightclub – a smoke-filled one, with many booths in dark corners, some of them curtained off. Through a flyspecked window there was a view out onto a park, with patchy snow on the ground. Various somberly dressed figures strolled slowly in twos and threes, or sat on the benches and fed the ducks while they engaged in quiet conversation.

Mae smiled. She looked down, changing her image in that place to include a hock-length dark grey trench coat, and black low-brimmed hat with ear holes. Slowly making her way to the bar, she nodded and put a foreign-looking banknote on the bar, next to the bartender.

The bartender was a “shadow”, simply a mirage-like disturbance in the room, but nodded non-committally, polishing a glass as he stood across the bar from her.

“They say,” Mae drawled, having once sat through a 48-hour festival of Stark and Gritty Film Noir, “that the Japanese Self-Defense Force would like to get their paws on one of those Psychiatric Blast Devices. The ones that pushed up the prices of Sanity Points in Mexico.”

The barkeep nodded, neutrally. “People say a lot of things,” he agreed.

“They say, that it’s a shame there aren’t any left – the breed’s extinct. “ Mae traced her paw pad along the rim of a damp wine glass, the wailing sound ringing eerily. “Anybody who knew where there was one left, could write their own price on it.”

“People believe in supply and demand.” The barkeeper agreed – a simple responder program animating him. Around the room, several less artificial figures put down their drinks and cocked an ear apiece. Dark corners of the room suddenly gained a little in detail.

Mae pushed up the brim of her hat, an eye gleaming in the shadows beneath. “Something like that could cause trouble in the wrong hands. If the JSDF knew they could buy it – it’d be worth their while to make the investment – however large.”

“Business is good for business.” The barkeep assented.

Mae tossed him a matchbook with an anonymous contact number on it, pulled her hat-brim down over her face, and nonchalantly strode out, feeling many pairs of eyes on her back. As she left the bar, she grinned, even as she hit the auto-return function and felt herself drawn back home to the gateway Cray sitting on Suzuko’s desk.

Closing her eyes, she removed the display goggles, waited the prescribed ten seconds and opened her eyes to the narrow but solid room. Putting a bottle of sake on the exhaust stack of the little Cray to heat, her virtual grin surfaced on her biological face.

“Well, that should have stirred things up a little,” she told herself, rummaging for cups. A sound made her turn round, and she saw Broohilda standing hesitantly by the door. “Oh, hi – I just did a little poking in sensitive spots of the Worldnet – using Gen’s account, of course. Now to sit back well clear – and see what hits the fan.”

Broohilda blinked. “Isn’t that awfully dishonest?”

Mae's whiskers twitched. "Broohilda. Do you remember last term? He sneaked that data disc of Unpatriotic Songs into Suki's bag. And "someone" tipped Customs off when she tried to get back into Japan – it's a good thing she found it and frisbeed it into the Pacific, they turned her over completely trying to find it."

"Well, yes," Broohilda admitted. "Even so."

"And just this week – I didn't tell you, but on Monday, he put something nasty into your lunch box – I spotted him, and 'ported it right back into his pocket."

"Oh my. Surely not poison? Anyway – I'm immune to most of them." Broohilda stared at her friend in horror.

"Nope – he wouldn't waste the effort, he knows that. It was a Misfortune Cookie – he put his hand in his pocket going out of the door, and opened it before he knew what it was. You saw what happened then?" Mae purred, eyes narrowing.

Broohilda thought back. Her own eyes widened, as the memory resurfaced. "I saw it – somehow there happened to be a bar of wet soap left on the floor outside the room – he slipped on it, went ears-over tail all the way down the stairs. Temari was coming up with a gallon of treacle for the kitchen – he tumbled into her and she dropped it all over him. I don't think he's got it all out of his fur yet."

Mae nodded, relaxing. "That would have happened to you, or something like it. I wouldn't be too concerned over his welfare." She paused, looking up at her friend's troubled face. "What's wrong, Broohilda? Tell me about it." She poured two large tumblers of blood-warm sake, and handed one over.

Broohilda's tail drooped. "Rashke's – well, you know he's off in Japan. I wouldn't think to look at any other males – at least, that's what I'd have told myself last week. But ..."

Mae smiled. "Oho! Tava, unless I miss my guess?" She nodded, seeing the expression on her friend's face. "He's a nice one – looks and character – and I shouldn't think you'd have any – compatibility problems with him." An ear twitched, remembering her own experiences with Rashke. "Quite the opposite. Anyway – has Rashke asked you to – wait around all on your own for him to get back? I can't imagine him asking that."

"Oh, no. But I – I should." Broohilda raised an ear, her emotions churning as she thought back. Jenni had taken her to town the night before, and without making any – improper moves – she had made it a fun evening of companionable talk and dancing, with neither of them getting back till the small hours. She had to admit it, she told herself reluctantly – there was nothing she could do for Suzuko at the moment, and her friends had always encouraged her to have fun.

Mae shrugged. "It's up to you, of course," her tail twitched. "I'm not into herbivores much, but if I was – mmm! There's a sheep you'd need a lot of mint sauce to cover! As far as I know, there's not a gram of mischief in him. What I'd call an Eligible Bachelor, in fact – I'm not surprised Jenni's hanging around him. Must be frustrating, the best male on the island for her is the only one she can't have." She smiled. "Not surprising Jenni's bad tempered."

"She is? She – hasn't shown it with me." Broohilda stood up, looking a little happier. "Oh, well – I'll check with Rashke when he calls tonight. If he says no, it's no." She blinked, looking out of the door. "Umm – I promised to help Kazuko, down at the Heavy Engineering workshops. I think I'll be – busy."

Mae playfully swiped her with her grey tail. "Put it like this – I hope you caught up on sleep earlier – what with work and Tava, I don't expect you'll be getting much in future!"

"Nothing like an early dip!" Dick Pontephrigh panted, happily splashing out of the cold waters of the lagoon, towelling his fur dry. "Gets you properly set up for the day. That and a good breakfast – then hello Adventure!"

Anne and Julian nodded vigorously. Georgina smiled, but her look was thoughtful. She threw a stick for Timmy, who neatly fielded it and brought it back to drop at her feet on the sand.

"Buck up, Georgina!" Julian called out. "Here's that super little shop again – I bet there's all kinds of clues we can find."

"Yes, thrilling, isn't it?" Anne's tongue lolled out of her muzzle. "We always manage to find some sort of Adventure, even if it's not obvious at first. We'll ask that nice little old lady if she has any up-to-date books on strange goings-on in the neighborhood." She paused. "As long as they're not too spooky."

"Same old Anne," laughed Dick, his tail wagging.

Georgina snorted disdainfully. "Honestly, Anne – you are SO wet at times! And whoever heard of people publishing that kind of thing?" She shook her head, looking at Anne. The three siblings had the Pontephrigh tendency in its most virulent strain – even on the Plateau, a virtually sealed world not ten minutes walk end to end, they had always managed to find something to investigate.

"Well, here we are – time to find out." Julian pushed open the ancient small-paneled oaken door. For a second, he felt a little uneasy as he crossed the threshold – the guide to Toho Academy he had avidly read, had mentioned there were no surviving surface buildings older than sixty years, whereas this building looked as if it had endured centuries of wear. But he shook his head determinedly – this was a super little shop of precisely the kind his Ancestral Tales said they should be patronizing, and nothing else mattered.

They closed the door, the little brass bell tinkling above it. Looking around, at first they saw nobody – but then the nice old tabby-cat appeared, polishing her bifocals on her shawl.

“Good morning, my dears,” She smiled, her wise old eyes twinkling behind thick-lensed glasses. “And what be you wanting today? We’ve a new range of proper traditional sweets for the young gentlemen and young ladies.”

“That’ll be super, for starters! Keeps the strength up!” Dick’s tail wagged as he pointed to the big glass jars in the window. He cocked his head on one side – and selected a big bag of Mint Imperials, disdainfully passing by the Lemon [People’s Socialist Republican] mix in the jar on the shelf below.

“Oh, and do you have a – guidebook, an up-to-date one, of – strange and sinister Goings-on?” Anne asked hopefully, looking around the crowded, dusty little place. “Something with lots of strange clues and riddles, and lots of old maps in it?”

The shopkeeper twitched her whiskers. “Well, my dear – let’s see what we’ve got in the back room.” She vanished, in a way Dick found hard to describe – but no Pontephrigh was expected to know anything about being a Shopkeeper, so he was sure it was quite all right and none of his business.

Georgina looked around, impressed despite herself. She was sure the shop had been subtly altered from last time, though it was hard to say exactly how. There was an array of exercise equipment that had not been there before – smiling, she tried hefting some of the bean-bags, lentil sacks and other pulse exercising items. The ceiling seemed rather different too – although it was oddly hard to remember, surely there had not been room for a display of those big firework rockets like the other students put on their aircraft?

“Here’s all we have in stock, me dears,” The Shopkeeper appeared, handing over a small brown volume covered in oddly smooth thin leather. “I hope it will suit.”

Anne took the book, her eyes wide with interest, and flicked through a few pages. “Gosh! This is more like it! There’s an index of sinister plots and odd goings-on, that’s jolly useful! And it’s bang up-to-date!”

Georgina sniffed. “For which century, Anne? Just look at it – all the new books I’ve seen on the shelves here are all shiny, celluloid-like stuff on the cover. That looks ancient.”

“Oh no. Listen to this,” Anne coughed, looking around for her brothers’ approval. “Notes on Red Bartlemy, the notorious Pyrate – who is to be found on New Tortuga, that den of iniquity, when not on the High Seas attempting to win the coveted Teach Trophy.” She skimmed the page. “There’s lots of it. And – it says he last won the Teach Trophy in 2035, that’s last year!”

“That’s impossible,” Georgina said flatly. “That book looks like the sort of thing the family left behind at Bellington Hall!” She shifted uncomfortably. The departure of the Pontephrigh family from their ancestral home had been a matter of some controversy. All the eligible family members had fought through the Great War with such enthusiasm that several had to be knocked unconscious and bundled off home at the Armistice as the only way of stopping them – and yet there had been a suggestion of retreating, as they removed to the safety of unknown Borneo, that fateful Summer more than a century ago. The calling card of a famous amateur detective – Miss Maple or something similar – had arrived one Monday morning – and by the Thursday the Pontephrighs were on the ocean liner heading East, hearing radio reports of the decimation of Barseshire left behind them. Several less well-prepared mansion houses had suffered structural failure with the weight of bodies in the Library, Drawing-room and other traditional locations, but happily Bellington Hall survived, though the landscape around had been unpeopled for several generations after.

“We’ll take it!” Dick counted out two of the big gold local coins, one Yen being so near a guinea as made no odds. “I’ll just bet it saves us no end of trouble – finding out about the local Mysteries.” He flicked through the book to the index. “There’s a big index on dens of Iniquity, with map coordinates and telephone numbers. That’ll save us no end of time.”

“But that just isn’t...” Georgina began to protest, and stopped. Dick, Anne and Julian were excitedly clustered around the book, Julian having already found a bloodstained sketch map hidden in a secret pocket of the lining. She blinked, and suddenly felt very alone, as she stuffed her paws hard into the pockets of her khaki shorts. If there was one thing she knew as a solid fact, it was that her cousins would, within twenty minutes maximum, be embroiled in some bizarre and improbable Adventure for which there could be no rational explanation whatsoever. The shop was bad enough on those lines – she pushed aside as one of the Native students entered with a smug expression and asked for “A shoehorn – the kind with teeth”, and seemed staggered when the shopkeeper came back with a wide selection.

With a sigh, she bought a pack of freshly baked farm scones for herself and a bar of compressed Pemican for Timmy, and followed her cousins out into the Adventure-infested open air.

Far above the Pacific, the JSDF satellites orbited in their usual patterns, a stately weave of small unmanned reconnaissance “birds” and bigger manned battlestations. For most of that morning, the stately dance continued unchanged – then, very subtly, things began to happen. Two older surveillance satellites began braking, dropping down towards the top of the atmosphere, and shortening their expected lives by weeks for every kilometer they lost. At the same time, their orbital “footprints” changed – from monitoring the approaches to the Homelands, they swung their orbits over to pass directly over the central Pacific, with only a few small islands to watch. Very slowly, two battlestations began to alter their orbits to follow them.

One of the islands that found itself unknowingly under closer investigation, was the four-kilometer rock that held Toho Academy above the waves. Mid-day sunshine beamed down brightly, the early Autumn day at its hottest as Horst and Mangana followed the sounds of busy machinery to the Heavy Engineering workshops, just South of the runway.

“Hello!” Mangana called in, looking around the corner. The main expanse was a great metal-beamed open area like an aircraft hangar, with smaller workshops and offices arranged around the outside. Most of the noise was coming from an overhead gantry crane, where a complete tank turret, minus its gun, was being lowered onto a Historical Engineering project she recognized as Suzuko’s.

Kazuko waved from the crane cab as the turret bumped into place, the great carbon-fibre cables slackening and reeling in as Temari unhooked them from the turret. Taking off her earphones, Kazuko shut down the crane’s motor and slid down the ladder, her wide face beaming.

“Wait till you see what we’ve got on the way!” She gestured over towards the workshops on the far side of the building, where all the automated Template Control tools were actively processing raw materials into finished products under computer control. “It’ll take a few hours to get all the tanks ready – but then we can go after Suki.”

Mangana gave a quiet cough. “Kaz – I know they’re good for fording rivers and such underwater – but this is the Pacific Ocean you’re talking about. I really can’t see a ten kilometer long snorkel device working too well, and I don’t suggest you try.”

Temari laughed, her naked tail swishing. “Oh no. That’s not the idea. I’m going with them, and I intend to get to New Tortuga in this Incarnation, not the next one.” The rat’s chisel teeth glinted in the hard workshop light, as she scrambled up onto the turret with toolkit in paw. “My Joe Stalin 3 is about ready to roll, as soon as the fabricators finish making the – accessories.”

“Which are being?” Horst asked mildly.

Kazuko unrolled a set of plans in front of her cousin and her bristly mate. “Ta-daaah! What do you think? Neat, eh?”

Mangana looked at the plans – looked away, and did a quick “double-take” at what she saw. Shaking her head, she turned to Horst, who was studying the plans with a wry gaze.

“We’ll have to make room in the Medical section somehow – even if we have to outfit the broom cupboard as a Sensory Deprivation chamber,” Mangana said, with a mock sigh. “Because this time, my dear cousin has flipped entirely!”

Lunchtime saw Broohilda in the medical center again, helping with Mangana and Tava as they finally managed a transfusion of Sanity Points for their patients. The scheduled supply flight had been delayed, which had saved them – every Point in the Swiss stocks had been bought up, either by the Mexicans or by hoarders afraid of the effects of the Mexico City strike spreading – but having been stuck in transit, the package ordered the week before had escaped the general cornering of the market.

“They’ll be all right, won’t they?” Broohilda asked anxiously, watching as a still wild-eyed Potzu and Osamu stagger out of the center, blinking in the unaccustomed sunlight.

Mangana nodded. “With proper aftercare service, yes. Their friends have been told to look after them – to tell them six times a day to pull themselves together, and slap some sense into them if they start to relapse.” She looked out over the empty room, and smiled. “They’re lucky we’ve got this level of medical care available on the island.”

Broohilda smiled, relieved. “Umm – so, there’s nobody left here to look after. Kazuko asked if you could spare me to go after Suzuko – I’d really like to go. They might need someone on the trip who does first-aid.”

Mangana winced. “It’s an awful risk – if it was anybody else with that plan, I wouldn’t rate it as a chance in a thousand! But I have to admit – Kazuko can pull that sort of stunt off, however stupid it may be.”

“And I’d like to go,” volunteered Tava. “It’s a long trip, they’ll need more than one driver. And I can navigate – you have to, where I come from.”

Mangana sat down, wriggling uncomfortably. “I can’t go myself – someone has to man the Med. center – there’s only me, Horst and Doctor Faustus, when he gets back. Good luck – you’ll need it!”

Broohilda looked up at Tava, her eyes crossing slightly, her nose twitching at the close proximity. Early that morning, she had been downstairs breakfasting with Jenni when Tava had dashed past with a laundry bag and an expression of purest embarrassment. Broohilda had blushed herself, when Jenni had quietly leaned over and whispered an explanation – telling her of the effects their scents were having on the healthy young ram, even at such a distance.

Tava smiled. “It’s a risky trip, but – if it’s to help Suzuko, your friend – of course I’ll go. I’ll tell Jenni, we might be gone for a week or more. I don’t think she’s got any reason to want to come on this one.”

Just at that moment, there was a beeping from one of the rooms off to the side, and the noise of the fabricators lessened. Temari’s whiskers twitched. “Sounds like it’s finished mine first. Want to lend a hand getting things fitted?”

Mangana looked at Horst, and rolled her huge eyes. “Come on. This idea must have been hatched by someone in Uncle’s charity, “Heavy weapons for the Criminally Insane” – but while we’re here, we’d better help out.”

Horst gave a single nod, and rolled up the sleeves of his black Student uniform, so reminiscent of the Volks Priest costume of his home timeline. “I cannot think of any other way to get to Suzuko – and this is a way nobody will be expecting, that is certain!”

“Yay ! Lunchtime!” Hiroshi Leclerc’s shrill voice rang out as she dashed into the dining hall ahead of Trish and Shobban. “My favorite time of day!”

Trish cocked her head to one side, as the silver-haired girl grabbed items like a looter in a power-cut. “Were you not saying that about evening meal yesterday?” She flicked through her guide book, trying to work out the merits of Chicken Supreme as opposed to Bean curd So-so.

Hiroshi stopped, a pickled “Daikon” radish in one hand, and gave a grin that Trish fortunately escaped the full force of. “That’s my favorite too. And breakfast – I like breakfast-time an awful lot.”

Shobban drooled slightly, her vacant-looking eyes focussed on a carved roast displayed behind the counter. Sighing, she pulled out a handful of aluminium milli-yen pieces, and mournfully selected a bowl of ramen noodles with Soya substitute sauce.

“Why so sad ?” Hiroshi looked at her friend. “We’re in the big Academy now – folk are meant to live on ramen noodles – it’s traditional! That, or trying to fry an egg over a light-bulb.” She frowned for a millisecond – some of her Traditional pursuits had not gone quite as well as expected, especially since the light bulbs were cold LED models these days. She reached into her satchel, and pulled out a red tube with warning labels brightly displayed on it. “Mmmm – anyone want to try this ?It’s all organic, full of nutrients and stuff.”

Trish quietly flicked through her guidebook for a recognition chart, as Hiroshi happily squeezed a generous layer of red paste onto one of her traditional Japanese “Burgers”, and devoured it with the enthusiasm of an anarchist piranha in a tank of pedigree goldfish. Tomato sauce, she decided, and gratefully accepted a layer of it on her own slice of the roast.

Shobban watched with interest Trish’s reaction. “I’ve seen folk dance like that in old films, rolling around on the floor. Looks good stuff, that tomato ketchup. Can I have some?”

Hiroshi blinked, looking at the tube. “Tomato ? No, this is a North African stuff we have at home – Harissa, it’s called. Mostly made out of pimentos – and the rest’s red bonnet peppers.”

Shobban nodded – but for a moment, looked down in amazement. “Where did Trish go?” There had been a strange shimmering flash, and a centaur vixen was sprawling on the floor where Trish had been an instant before. The centaur seemed to be gasping for breath, its back legs scrabbling on the tiled floor as it looked around at its rump with a mixture of shock and surprise.

“Ooooo!” Hiroshi squealed in excitement, clapping her hands together. “Hello there, my name is Hiroshi, this is my bestest friend Shobban, I think you’re neat, and do you have a Brother, or maybe two?” Her eyes crossed. “Centaur’s are officially classed as Monsters – and I mean that in a GOOD way.”

The centaur, who facially resembled Trish quite uncannily, looked around with her mouth open. “Errm – I think he might be just outside.” She pointed at the window, trying to cover her exposed rump with her tail.

Shobban and Hiroshi dropped their food and ran to the window. “Where ? I can’t see any ?” Hiroshi complained, while behind her was a shimmering as if a mirage had suddenly re-shaped in the room. She turned round to see Trish sitting on the floor, hastily smoothing down her skirt.

“Where’d the centaur go ?” Shobban asked curiously, calculating the time and distance involved in a person reaching any of the exits in the available time, from a standing start. She strained her ears, but there was no echo of the supersonic shock wave she would have predicted from a departure of that speed.

Trish blinked. “Centaur ? What centaur ?” She looked up innocently. “It was probably an optical illusion.”

Hiroshi looked thoughtful, her facial muscles aching from the unaccustomed expression. “I suppose. That or a mass hallucination.” She brightened up, her eyes lighting as her grin re-established itself. “Yay! Para-normal activities for free, even at lunchtime – isn’t it great here at Toho ?”

Her red setter friend wagged her tail in agreement. “I’ll say. And I bet it even showed up on the cameras. You don’t get mass hallucinations with that sort of quality, back home.” She smiled, picking up her tray and heading for the tables. “Coming, Trish ?”

Trish, meantime, had found a sink and was swilling volumes of cold water over her tongue and muzzle. “Be with you in a second.” She winced, her gaze sweeping over the two girls, happily chattering without another second’s concern at what they had seen.

Checking her suit’s controls, Trish made a mental note of the unmarked button next to the steering wheel, that she had hit accidentally when the white-hot Harissa had sent her into flailing shock. Tonight, she thought grimly, I’m going to “fix” that switch – with a very large hammer!

“Pack the bags, Jenks – we’re going on a trip. Looks a ruffianly sort of place, so be on your toes!” Dick Pontephrigh laughed carelessly, breezing in to the dorm room with a towel casually flung over his shoulder. “The usual kit for us, I suppose – and pack our flannel pyjamas, it might be chilly out there.”

“Flannel pyjamas,” Anne said dreamily, propping her snout on her chin as she gazed out of the window. “Roaring fires, robins in the garden, snow on the grass, church bells...”

“Steady on, Anne,” Julian reproved her mildly. “It’s only eight hundred miles North, and it is still September. But it won’t be quite as steamy, I’ll be bound.”

Georgina sniffed, casting a withering glance at the book Dick was reading intently from. “I don’t believe a word of it, myself. How can you have a Pirate Island? Aren’t there any navies left afloat? First thing they’d do, I’d have thought, was to flatten the place and run up the jolly old flag on the ashes.”

“It does seem a bit rum, now you mention it,” Julian confessed, scratching his head. “But it’s written down here, so it must be true. Whoever heard of a newspaper or an author fibbing?”

“It’s got pictures, even, so there!” Anne pointed in the book to a highly coloured illustration of a leering wolf in black chromed half-armour, one leg and arm clearly artificial. A backpack seemed to be snorting diesel exhaust fumes, with a big black flag on a retractable pole snapping in the wind behind him. “See! He’s got a big cutlass, though it seems to be motorized – he’s even got a red-and-white kerchief tied round his head – what more do you want in a Pyrate?”

“Pirate,” Dick suggested.

“Those as well. They’ve got Pirates, Pyrates, buccaneers, freebooters, privateers and folk carrying “Letters of Marque” whatever those are. Sounds awfully foreign.” Anne flicked through the book. “Hmm. It doesn’t say if they even speak English. Probably not – they look a villainous lot.”

Julian nodded, seriously. “Shiitake’s been giving me some handy tips. What you have to do, is talk in a silly accent, and wave your arms around a lot. That way, they’ll think you’re a Native.”

Anne pulled a face. “Pooh! As if we’d want them to think a thing like THAT! Still, it looks a jolly interesting place. Very up-to-date though: the residents don’t keep their ill-gotten gains in big wooden chests any more, but in “Gilt-edged stocks”. Must be harder for the other pirates to steal.”

Dick considered the picture. “Well. The story is that there were a set of stocks on the village green near Bellington Hall that’d been in daily use since the early Middle Ages – and nobody ever managed to steal those. I expect gilt-edged ones are heavier, or something.”

“And anyway – we’ve got Jenks coming along – and Timmy to look after us. She can be awfully fierce, can’t you Timmy?” Anne ruffled Timmy’s head-fur. “Oh, Jenks – be sure to bring heaps of oranges and tomatoes, it says here that the ships there are manned by “many a scurvy crew”. We’ll probably get invited to feasts at Pirate Kings’ riotous halls, as long as they don’t stay up late.”

“Hmm.” Georgina frowned. “I think I’d better investigate this myself.” She got up, stretched, and headed towards the door.

“Don’t be late!” Dick called after her. “We’re leaving right after tea-time. And if you’re not on the aeroplane by then, we’ll have to go without you!”

Georgina bit back a sarcastic remark – and strode down the hall, down the stairs and out of the building. She knew just who ask, for the real facts about Pyrate Island.

“New Tortuga?” Granita put down the hundred-kilo bar bell she had been exercising her tail with. “Quite a place – you’ll have fun there!”

Georgina smiled, looking around the gym. It was quite full, with a dozen folk of various species working hard on the exercise equipment. In her nose was a pleasant scent of mixed musks and the glow of hard work, as the students worked out their frustrations on various punch bags or obscure martial arts targets. “You’ve been there?”

Granita grinned, exposing sharp teeth. “I’ll say! I can show you trophies I’ve won there – one of the few places they do Unlimited-class wrestling.” She smiled, a wistful look on her rugged face. “You should have seen the fight last year – me and this huge Mexican bull, the Rising Hodge. Eight hard rounds, the audience were screaming – he’d gone for an eye gouge, trying for points – but I don’t play for points. Clean neck break, and the trophy was mine.” She shook her head. “They don’t do that class of fights most places, you should try and watch a few.” An eyebrow raised, looking Georgina up and down. “I’ll write you a letter of introduction to the fight schools if you like – I expect you’ll be very popular there. Come back and show me the tricks they’ve taught you, eh?”

Georgina nodded happily. “That sounds more like it! Anne, Dick and Julian are going out there to find Treasure and Adventure. I can’t really see it, myself.”

Granita’s tail swished. “And I can’t recommend it. On New Tortuga, folk with treasure tend to have got it in pretty rough ways – and they intend to keep it. Not like your brothers’ pal Yukio – he just inherited the family fortune, his Father invented 2,5, Gamma Fraudulin, the first of the “Miracle-cure” Placebos. Try not to show the locals the error of their ways, eh? They won’t appreciate it, and I want you back in one piece.” Her

nostrils widened, scenting Georgina's healthy aroma. "Mmm – it's a rough place you're going to, all right. Want a refresher course, George?" She nodded towards the wrestling ring.

Georgina's tail wagged. "I've got two hours – enough for a good bout, then a shower and, well, everything."

Granita laughed, shaking her head in amusement. "Oh yes. I should think, George, you're going to be very popular over there – very popular indeed!"

Down at the airstrip as evening fell, the wood and canvas Fleet Shadower had been re-fuelled, its engines looked over and a big picnic hamper loaded into the weapons bay under the cabin floor.

"Thank you, Smythe," Dick Pontephrigh tipped the mechanic a five centi-yen piece, as near as sixpence as he could manage. "A jolly good job! The engines sound clear as a bell."

Anne scratched her head. "How do you know he's called Smythe?" Doesn't sound the sort of names people have round here, it's all Ching-ding-hing-fling sort of gabble."

Dick smiled forbearingly. "You wouldn't have heard the stories passed down from Great-great-uncle Algernon, those are boy's stuff. He was in the Royal Flying Corps all the way through the Great War, became an ace while still flying balloons. Mechanics are all called Smythe – they soon get used to it, and it saves a lot of bother."

"Yes, you have to treat the technical domestics properly," Julian agreed. "Or they end up turning all Bolshevik on you. Can't have that."

"Quite." Dick walked round the aircraft, reaching up to stroke the smoothly varnished twin-blade propeller. "What a smashing crate this is! Much nicer than those noisy tinny things the other folk fly. You can put it on the ground in the space of, what, five croquet-courses?" He looked around, tapping his watch. "Where is that silly Georgina? It'd be the absolute end, if we had to wait up for her. Serves her right if we did leave her behind."

"Here she is!" Anne waved out of the window. "And she's brought all her gear, at least."

Georgina arrived, looking happy but flushed. Without a word, she scrambled into the cockpit and smoothed down her khaki shorts.

"Right." Dick jumped into the pilot's seat, and secured the door. "Oh yes, engines. Prime one, magneto check, contact!" He pressed the self-starter, and the port inboard engine coughed into life. "Starboard inner, contact, port outer, starboard outer. Running smoothly. All right, next stop Pirate Island!"

Anne and Julian cheered. Anne looked at the ocean chart on her brother's lap, and whooped. "Second star on the right, and straight on till morning!"

Georgina glared at her, but said nothing. Wistfully, she turned round to look back at the buildings of Shahaguo Island's "Town", the lights just coming on in the Town Square and four streets that made up the settlement outside the Academy.

"Throttles forward, flaps down, undercarriage – umm, better leave that down for a bit," Dick looked at the checklist, and consulted the manual on his lap. "Off we go!"

The Fleet Shadower bumped along the hard standings, turning smoothly onto the runway proper, seeming to leap into the air at fifty knots, its four small propellers efficiently blasting air over the straight, high-lift wing. Dick put the plane into a gentle turn, first gaining height over the summit of the island's northern peak, then setting course North-East, roughly the direction they had gone the day before. "Red sky at night, airman's delight!" He sang out happily, looking out at the darkening horizon.

Georgina looked down as they passed the island's reef, the waves breaking pale on the submerged coral. "I say – someone else is heading out for a moonlight trip!" She pointed down to a gap in the reef, where three wakes showed up in the fading light as they passed a pair of blinking navigation buoys marking the exit.

"So they are, Georgina – so they are." Julian stuck his head out of the window, and waved. Three 1945 class main battle tanks were taking to the high seas, kept afloat by braced canvas screens that transformed them into makeshift boats. Surges of foam at the rear showed where hastily improvised Duplex Drive propellers thrust them out at a steady five knots into the pathless expanse of the Ocean.

"Look, they're waving back," Anne said excitedly. A figure she was sure she recognized was standing on the turret of the biggest floating tank, wearing a life-jacket and a set of black overalls. "Funny time of day to go for a boat trip, I should have thought."

Dick nodded, setting in course for New Tortuga, leaving the three wallowing tanks far behind, following the exact same direction. "Quite. But then – folk in this part of the world, they come up with the strangest of ideas!"

