

Oharu©David Reese D'Orrycott, respectfully borrowed along with other characters of his for the Spontoan scenario. Used by permission.

Spring 1936, Luakinakina Park, Casino Island.

It was the only snow that Spontoan Island would ever see. Oharu stood alone in the park, a figure as still as any of the strangely carved statues that stood sentinel on the higher parts of the ridge. It was the "Cherry snow" that fell on her, white and pink flakes that settled on her calm figure from the trees around her.

The small figure had been standing there for half an hour in the first of the dawn's light, having quietly slipped out of her room leaving a note explaining to Mrs. McGee that she would be back in time to prepare breakfast. Her breath came slowly and evenly, as if she was sleeping like almost everyone else on the island at that early hour – calm outwardly, while within she fought a bitter struggle with herself.

This would be what they want to know, she addressed her inner voices, feeling the warmth of the rising sun on her back. But the rising sun cast a long, dark shadow before her, darkening the path in front of her. *With this knowledge, it might be – sufficient.* In her first months here she had sometimes dreamed of finding something of such value that her Duty would be to return to Cipangu and report it straight away – if there could only be such a pearl of sufficient price to buy her old life back. Not as a Miko, she knew – that path was closed to her forever. But to walk down a street in Cipangu again, to hear familiar voices, to be ignored or noticed only as any other citizen – that was what she had dreamed of.

Of course, there could never be such a pearl. That had been what she had been telling herself, until yesterday. The cherry snow fell on Oharu, as she cast her mind back to that day.

"Place is quiet, reckon you deserve a day off," Mrs. McGee had announced after breakfast, having just waved farewell to a party of tourists who were heading back to the air terminal and Hawaii. "Come Tuesday, we're full to the end of the week, every room in the place – sure you don't mind the storeroom till Friday?" The McGee compound had grown to incorporate an older, very solidly built room that had been built as a counting-house for one of the plantations when the island had been called Accounting Island. Oharu liked solid walls and locks on doors while she slept.

"Is not a problem," the mouse bowed slightly. "Temple floor was harder, and always in Spring much colder." She smiled. Her landlady rarely let out the small single room she normally slept in, and only to suitable guests. The week before, a lupine girl with fur like brushed grey silk had stayed there – and her scent had lingered most enticingly.

Gathering her inkbox, paper and brushes, Oharu made her way to the water taxis at Pirate's Cove. Although most of the locals preferred their "native" mode which covered strategically little of their fur, one fierce-looking hound was dressed in an odd European costume that looked as if it came from a very different era. As she waited for the taxi, she managed to hear and make sense of some of the obviously rehearsed speech he was making to the enthralled line of tourists.

A Pirate chief, indeed. A thief and killer of innocents. And this, they celebrate? The ex-Miko shook her head, as the costumed figure waved his deadly-looking sword and the crowd cheered. By the dates the actor had mentioned, the story must have been from what had been the start of the Shogunate in her homeland, before Europeans and their pernicious influence had been banned.

We locked ourselves away from the world, then. On that day we had swords, and they had swords, but ours were better. So it remained for two centuries. We could lock ourselves in, but never lock the world out – because when the world came back, they had steam-ships and we still had only swords. She felt her tail swishing, and tried to retain her composure as was proper. *If we could have kept the world out for another hundred years – but no. Then they would have still come, but in aircraft not steamships.*

As if to make the point, the air shivered with the roar of powerful diesels as a sleek Dornier banked overhead, setting itself on course for the main seaplane landing run. Squinting up against the sun, she read the registration that proclaimed it as coming from the 999th Gau – New South Thule, the German Antarctic colony. She gave an inward smile that even the alert water-taxi woman missed.

What I was, I can never be again. But all my life I learned to memorise perfectly – prayers, rituals, and holy texts. I still have that. As no doubt they knew when they chose me. In the final months

before leaving Cipangu she had absorbed new knowledge suitable for a spy like a sponge absorbs water – *comprehensively, although none ever ask the sponge if it is thirsty*, she reminded herself. That “Neu Suden Thule” was more than its posters proclaimed, a year-round winter sporting wonderland, was information no priestess was likely to know.

Still – anyone could look up and wonder at this sight. *Four Jumo diesel engines, 16 cylinder units, twin-stage superchargers, probably methanol boosted for takeoff*. Anyone could speculate about what else that design could be used for, with very minor conversion. Aircraft had been made before now with easily stockpiled and concealed conversion kits, to change – what was that phrase she had heard the Euro public preacher use on Casino Island the Sunday before?

“They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into a pruning-hook,” she said softly, in English. *But metal is metal*, she told herself silently – *and they can always beat it back again*.

South Island was a place she had only come to on her own a few times before, and only to the near shore in sight of the Casino. And she would stay on the public, tourist beach areas today, rather than risk the jungles and unknown villages inland. Where tourists went, she decided, she could go. In her mind’s eye she had a map of the islands, almost exactly as she imagined seeing them at night from very high above. Casino Island sparkled with light and safety, or as much safety as there was here. The northern coast of South Island, and a few sides of Eastern Island – dimmer, but still a place she dared risk treading.

But away from those lights the island chain became very dark indeed. She had heard the tourist guides boasting of how they could thread a path through trackless jungles and bottomless swamps to the hidden treasures of the islands. How much of that was true, she had her doubts, but never doubted there was enough bottomless swamp to hide one incautious spy forever if she tried for certain “hidden treasures”. Moon Island was another place her imagination painted black as night – and as for Sacred Island – *should I be allowed to end myself, a fall from the top of one of the tall hotels. Not Sacred Island. That would be as certain, but probably not as mercifully swift an ending*.

It was the sound of laughter that brought her out of her sombre mood as she slowly made her way along the beach, her practiced eye looking for just the right angles of landscape for an inspiring picture. There was a natural rib of rock that cut off the main tourist beach, and with the sound of many voices on the far side she dared to look over. It was a small bay of blue water and brilliant yellow sand on the far side, but it was not the scenery that caused her to gasp in astonished delight – or more exactly, not the landscape.

There were twenty swimmers in the water, in a matching bathing costume such as she had seen in film posters – the name “Bushby Barklay” had been on a film poster she had looked long at, outside one of the Casino Island cinemas the month before. Four more swimmers were getting ready to join them, changing out of their day clothes behind an improvised matting windbreak – and one of the uniforms being hung up she recognised as that of Songmark.

Its owner, a slender canine with long snout and flowing ears almost reaching to her shoulder, waved at her. “Eh, they’s allus room for one more.” She called over in oddly accented English that Oharu could scarcely follow. “Grand day for a swim!”

For a second the mouse felt as if icy water was running down her back. Her ears dipped. But she looked over to the other swimmers happily splashing and exercising in the deep water offshore, as she realised with shocked delight every one was female. She clambered over the rough rib of stone hiding the small bay from the tourist strand, and bowed respectfully.

“I do not swim,” she said, though one part of her wished she could – to be able to do that and enjoy it as the others so evidently were. “If is permitted, may I – watch?”

The slender canine smiled, her long jaw open in a canine grin, exposing an amazing length of tongue. “Ah’ve seen thee sketchin’ outside our place.” Her head tossed, indicating back eastwards to past Casino Island. “Don’t mind anyone watching. We’re in films any road.” She gestured to the satchel of papers and brushes at Oharu’s side. “Help thissself.”

“May I?” The mouse felt her throat suddenly dry, as the last two of the team emerged in their costumes. One of them was... she had seen them in books, but never believed the books were truthful. A long, impossibly narrow muzzle almost the length of her arm twitched and a tongue flicked, tasting the air. *An anteater. She looks almost like one of the demons in the sacred texts. Yet – one I might regret having to banish*.

“Aye. An’ reet welcome.” The canine winked at her, and joined her friends in the water. Oharu suddenly realised where she had seen her before. She had wondered if it was usual to let such a complete stranger paint such a gathering, until remembering where they had met. The Double Lotus.

“Then these are” The mouse felt her knees grow weak, and sat down rapidly as she pulled her drawing pad open and grabbed the charcoal. With a heartfelt prayer of thanks to any gods who would still listen to her, Oharu began to draw.

If only I had brought more paper. That was the one hint of sadness as the artist filled the flip side of her last piece. Even the coarse card cover of the block held a sketch – rough, unfinished but vibrant with energy as she had captured two figures leaping out of the water like dolphins, boosted aloft by a firm heave from a “lotus blossom” formation of the rest of the team. Other pages showed divers, poised or aloft in mid-air, or tried to capture the splash of water as they plunged into their element.

“Amazing!” She turned round to see a rabbit girl looking over her shoulder. The girl’s ears were long, and blonde head-fur fell in a wet cascade to her shoulders, strands of it escaping the towel she was vigorously drying it with. “Can I look?”

Oharu bowed, smiling. “Was my pleasure. Hope you like.” As the lapine devoured the sketches with her gaze, Oharu felt her own eyes drawn irresistibly over her. Pale golden fur, lighter on the front, with corn-yellow head-fur to crown it – and a pair of sparkling blue eyes that danced like the sun on the water of the clear bay.

“I’m Tobonule, I live here. You really have caught us.” The rabbit handed back the sketchbook with a respectful dip of her long ears. “We’ve been trying to get publicity photographs – we’re a formation swimming team, studios hire us sometimes – but they never came out the way we wanted. You’d see a splash and a costume but – it might have been any team. These ... well, I’m impressed. Do you do commissions?”

“Landscapes, mostly. Sell tourists. Not sell tourists these.” Oharu had found herself sketching two feline girls taking a rest, happily grooming each other’s fur. *To capture that in detail*, she thought wistfully, *to show how every drop of water shone like a diamond on their oiled fur as they relaxed that day in the sun, together ...*

A rabbit smile may be buck-toothed, but there is a lot of it. “Would you sell them to us?” She shook her head as Oharu instantly offered her the sketch. “I mean – a finished one. I’d love to have one.”

The mouse nodded, already thinking of how she might start work. People were very different on these islands, she had observed – a life spent mostly outside and exercising hard for work and pleasure had very noticeable ... results. Tobonule was slender and far from muscle-heavy, but her figure gleamed with health and energy. “I would love to. Take much time, cost three, four shells. Is acceptable?”

“I don’t think you’ll disappoint me.” Tobonule winked. “Whenever it’s ready – I’m sure you’ll know where to find us.”

It had been a day of pleasant surprises all round. Clutching her precious sketchbook tight as she stepped onto the water taxi, Oharu had waited half an hour for one – hordes of tourists waving bundles of shells had pushed ahead of her, eager to get back to their Casino Island hotels for cocktail hour. *The shame of the traveller is easily brushed aside*, she told herself.

When a water taxi did come, it was not a familiar face; she had heard there were a hundred taxis on these waters, but whether that was a real figure or an arbitrary number to boast at, she was unsure. At any rate, she had thought she knew most of them by sight by now. This was a very young otter, possibly starting his first tourist season. He seemed worried, and cast his gaze back towards Casino Island.

Water Taxi folk were a taciturn folk who kept their eyes and ears open and their mouths firmly shut most of the time – but there were exceptions. “Most of the folk are helping with the fire on Moon Island,” the otter explained, “Father’s a part-time fireman with the Naval Syndicate; I had to take his taxi shift for him.” They headed back towards Casino Island, the boatman steering expertly despite his age.

Of course, they are brought up to this life, Oharu told herself as they rounded the point and headed towards the Eastern side of the island. Her gaze strayed further east; to the shore she would

definitely not be sketching, not even through the public seafront binoculars that took a five cowry coin for a minute's view of distant shores or nearer bathers. True enough, there were wisps of smoke rising from the far side of the island – not a major fire, surely. She had seen from her Eastern Island visits the big coal and fuel stockpiles there, which were no secret – and this smoke seemed to be the other end of the crescent-shaped isle.

“That’s Father’s ship! Mind if we take a look? So I can see if he’s all right.” The young otter turned appealing eyes her way.

Oharu hesitated, and nodded. “Agreed.” She had promised to be back before dark, but that was more than half an hour away on this clear day. Her head was still full of her art, as she imagined how she would draw the interplay of sea, sunlight and lithe forms at play. Besides, the fire-boat was only a few hundred paces away.

Had she relaxed and looked down through her sketchbook for the next two minutes, things would have been different. But Fate had her glance up as the otter’s friendly hail was answered from the deck above – and at that instant – a hastily secured tarpaulin blew away from what was suspended on the fire and salvage vessel’s crane.

Almost the last thing she had done before leaving Cipangu had been an afternoon with a bespectacled young scientist, whose exact job was never explained to her. He had a notebook and a host of ideas – most of which he admitted would probably never be built by anybody, and sounded like nothing more than the “Flash Gordon” devices she heard tell of on the radio the younger McGee children listened to so avidly. These were things she should look for. Improbable things, thousand-to-one gambles that would pay off on a similar scale if they could somehow be made to work. She heard tell of electrical rays that could stop engines or set fire to aircraft, of aircraft that could become submarines and visa versa – dozens of exotic ideas that only the writers of fantastic worlds were talking about. In public, that is...

What she saw in that one glance made her wish she had kept her eyes on her feet. It looked like a torpedo in general size and shape – but although it was burned and broken, she could see where wings and a tail had been. Still intact underneath it at the rear was what looked like a Lamblin pattern radiator, an open-ended tube shaped something like an empty cartridge case almost her body length. She had seen pictures of the model engine that the Frenchman LeDuck had exhibited at the Paris air show just the month before her briefing.

Aerial torpedo. The word sprang directly to her mind from her training, an unwelcome part of her past life emerging unbidden. *They have it. If it works and how well – I cannot know. But they have it.* She did look down at her feet then, and opened her sketchbook to study until they returned to the dock, the otter chatting carelessly with no sign that he had witnessed anything unusual. No doubt the salvage boat often carried crashed aircraft, fuel tanks and floats, any of which could have been mistaken for its real load at a hundred yards further off. The crew had doubtless rushed to put the tarpaulin back more securely, and just possibly might not have noticed her gaze at that one unexpected instant.

Paying the fee, Oharu hoped the trip had not cost her life; that would have been such a bitter irony, the way her loyalties were shifting. In the first months she had been here, she would have rushed to capture every detail on paper, with dimensions and angles as exact as she could. But that had been before.

The cherry snow continued to fall, almost vertically down on the still figure in the calm morning air. At last she moved, stirring as the whiteness fell off her in drifts, falling to the ground around. She purposefully headed out of the park, back to the McGee compound where there was breakfast to be made and guests to prepare for. Here, they waited for her. In Cipangu, faceless folk in unknown Departments waited for her message as well. But someone was going to be disappointed.

As the sun rose, the rising sun’s shadow became shorter before her as it vanished in the clear warmth of a Spontoon Island day.