

Okay, people, here's my first swing at a first chapter of what I've been outlining and plotting over the past few months.

Schedule permitting, I hope to have a chapter a week.

If you'd rather, I could set these up in a separate file rather than run them here.

*And by *all* means, feel free to be brutal.*

Michael

Sandra Swift & The Lost Airship

by Michael Wolff

Chapter One: Visitors From The Bureau

"Ms. Swift?"

"Scuse me," Sandy said to Phyllis, touching the intercom. "Yes?"

"We've got a Tommycar on approach that identifies as being from the FBI's Albany Office," the voice from the intercom said. "The occupants have asked to speak with whoever's in charge, and I've gone ahead and cleared them to land. They'll be on the pad in about two minutes."

Sandy frowned at Phyllis who returned a mild shrug.

"OK, thanks Gunnar. Go ahead and clear them for here."

Switching off the intercom Sandy leaned back in her chair. "Now what?"

"If it was bad news from Africa," Phyllis pointed out, "then we'd hear from your Dad. Or mine."

Sandy nodded, thoughtfully pulling on a long strand of blonde hair before turning to get up from behind the desk, moving to stand at the picture window overlooking the Administrative complex of Swift Enterprises. A slender woman of twenty years and almost five feet ten inches, her blue eyes now frowning out towards the parking lot/landing bay.

Phyllis Newton joined her at the window; her size and age practically matching Sandy's, but her eyes wide and as dark as the chestnut curls which cascaded halfway down her back.

She glanced over at the large wall display which kept track of the current status of all Swift Enterprises holdings and activities. Nothing was blinking red, no icons were announcing potential sources of trouble. "Maybe it's a bake sale."

"We'll know in a moment," Sandy said, nodding at the window.

Phyllis' eyes followed to see a black "Marathon" style atomicar swooping down to hover over an empty landing pad. Wheels were extending and the vehicle was slowly settling down. As the girls continued to watch, the atomicar's engines gradually powered down and the landing bay crew approached to help the dark-suited occupants out of the car, directing them towards the Main Building.

"You want me to get back to work?" Phyllis asked. "I can get these roughs over to Promotion."

Sandy shook her head, returning to the desk. "Go ahead and stay. I'd be telling you about this anyway. And I get a feeling we might both want to hear what's coming."

Phyllis nodded gratefully, moving to relax upon the broad couch near the desk. Moments later the door opened and Lisa Kuttner announced: "Special Agents Henry Dale and Julian Brattleboro from the Albany FBI office."

From behind the desk Sandy slowly rose. "Gentlemen. Sandra Swift. Aeronautical Development and Production. My partner, Phyllis Newton: Marketing. We're sort of . . . minding the store around here. My brother's currently in Africa, working on the Core Cannon project, and my father's up in our space station monitoring the situation."

Dale bent forward to lightly touch the hand Sandy offered. "We've been following the progress your brother's been making," he said. "He's supposedly made it to the mantle by now, hasn't he?"

"At last report," Sandy said, settling back down in her chair and indicating for the agents to be seated. She tried not to look at Phyllis, tried to keep her worries of Tom and Bud and the others firmly under wrap. "And now. What can Swift Enterprises do for the Bureau?"

"Actually, it's more of what the Bureau can do for you," Dale replied, exchanging a glance with Brattleboro. The latter agent moved his briefcase up to the desk, opening it.

"Three days ago," Brattleboro was explaining, "a Federal depot in Kentucky was broken into. The case is still under investigation but, while we were taking an inventory of what was stolen, we came across this."

Sandy leaned closer, and Phyllis left the couch to stand by the desk as Brattleboro produced an object the size of a cigar box.

The object was wrapped in what seemed to be a silvery cloth, but Sandy's eyes widened as she touched it. "This is metal."

Dale nodded. "We took the liberty of running a few tests but couldn't exactly determine what sort of metal it was."

Sandy was delicately unfolding the covering. "And you think our company has something to do with this?"

"You'll see in a moment."

Mystified, Sandy's fingers worked faster, and the metal "cloth" was soon pulled aside to reveal a thick book bound in leather. The cover carried no markings, and Sandy opened the book.

She and Phyllis saw it at the same time, but it was Sandy who gasped the loudest at the sight of the name scribbled near the top of the page . . .

Barton Swift.

"Your grandfather," Phyllis said.

Sandy nodded wordlessly, her fingers turning the pages. The book seemed to be filled with figures, rough map sketches, coordinates and, on one page, a bold line declaring Flight Fifty- Two.

"Sandy!"

"I know," Sandy replied. She was suddenly finding breathing not as easy as it once was and she forced her eyes up from the book to look at the FBI agents. "And this has been locked away in a depot in Kentucky all these years?"

Brattleboro nodded. "And believe me, Ms. Swift, we're just as mystified as you are. Just like with the metal covering, we've taken the liberty of studying the contents of the book before bringing it to you. If the contents are correct . . ."

"Then it's the last notes from my grandfather," Sandy slowly said. "And the account of the last flight of the Silver Cloud."

Chapter Two: Visitor From Texas

Swift Enterprises was a name associated throughout the world for innovation; often mentioned in the same breath as General Electric, IBM, Microsoft, Grumman, BASF and Intel. From its complex on the shores of Lake Carlopa in upstate New York flowed a seemingly endless array of ideas and developments. Both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans were hosts to launch sites from which a fleet of vehicles regularly pushed the Swift name into space, pioneering the effort to colonize the new frontier.

As her eyes were drawn back to the book, Sandy was beginning to feel the entire weight of the company for the first time in her life. Her shoulders shook and she imagined them suddenly breaking from the pressure.

A touch, but it was only Phyllis' hand gently on her shoulder. Sandy nodded gratefully and sank back into her chair, exhaling slowly.

"It was something of a shock to us as well, Ms. Swift," Brattleboro told her.

"I'll bet it wasn't nearly the same sort of shock I got,"

Sandy said, rubbing a hand across her forehead. Her eyes focused on the FBI agents. "Maybe you'd better start all the way from the beginning."

The agents looked at each other, then Dale spoke. "Well . . . as I mentioned, three days ago there was an attempted break-in at a Federal depot in Kentucky. This particular depot was being used to store a variety of documents.

"There was nothing about this in the news," Phyllis said.

"And we're trying to keep it that way while our investigation is still going on," Dale replied. "The break-in was carried out by a small and well-armed team. We managed to keep them from getting away with any of the depot's contents, but they also managed to escape capture."

"Professionals."

"Obviously."

"How do you know this team was after this book?" Sandy asked.

To her surprise Dale's face reddened a bit. "Well . . . that's something of a story. Naturally, once the depot was secured, we examined the particular vault which the team had targeted. As it turned out, most of the documents the vault carried had actually been declassified years ago. Easily available through either a government bookstore or the Freedom Of Information Act. Some of the contents were hardly even worth the cost of shredding them. The exception was, of course . . .," Dale nodded at the book on the desk.

Sandy lightly ran a fingertip along the edge of the book. "And you have no notion how this book ended up in the depot?"

"The Bureau and the GAO are currently tracking down records to find out about that."

Sandy's finger moved onto the metal cloth which the book had been wrapped in. "And you say the Bureau couldn't determine what this was?"

Dale shook his head.

"Do you mind if we run our own tests?"

"Please feel free."

Sandy nodded and touched the intercom. "Metallurgy."

"Yes?"

"Doctor Bower? It's Sandy. I'm going to be sending a specimen down to the lab shortly and I'd like a positive identification as soon as possible. I suspect you'll have luck if you check the sample against our production files."

"We'll be waiting for it, Sandy."

"Thanks." Switching off the intercom, Sandy took the metal cloth and went to the outer office, passing the item to Miss Kuttner with a few murmured instructions.

She then went to where a coffee service waited on a nearby table. "Please help yourself, gentlemen," she said, fixing herself a cup.

The agents and Phyllis joined her at the table. "You're checking the sample against your own files?" Brattleboro asked.

"Just a theory I have," Sandy replied. Sipping from her cup she nodded over to where several framed photographs of Swift Enterprises vehicles hung on the wall. "That's the Silver Cloud over there. Far left, on the top row."

The agents went to give the framed photograph a closer look.

"The last airship Swift Enterprises ever produced," Sandy said, also looking at the photo. "One thousand feet long, could carry ninety people at a top speed of around two hundred miles per hour. By comparison, the Hindenberg had

a cruising speed of seventy-eight miles per hour. A Goodyear-type blimp has a cruising speed of thirty. Silver Cloud had an average range of ten thousand miles."

"I remember seeing it in flight once," Dale said. "Didn't your father run into trouble developing it?"

"Oh yes. Dad was originally supposed to build the Silver Cloud on commission from the Jardine Brothers. The deal went sour and Dad was forced to finish the project on his own."

"But your father eventually recouped his losses."

"Eventually," Sandy replied, grimacing slightly. "Let's just say the Silver Cloud was sort of a sore spot with the company for a while. My Mom once told me that, at one time, it was privately suggested that Dad rename the airship the White Elephant."

"Ouch."

"No kidding. But things eventually managed to get squared away."

"After your father refitted Silver Cloud to be a research vessel," Brattleboro said.

Sandy nodded. "In a way, Silver Cloud was sort of a precursor to my brother's Flying Lab. Dad leased it out to universities and corporations and such."

"And then it crashed. Fifteen years ago."

"With my grandfather on board," Sandy murmured.

She then noticed the agents sharing a look she could only register as "uncomfortable". "What?"

Dale turned back to her. "As we mentioned, Ms. Swift, we took the liberty of studying the contents of the book."

"And?"

"The Silver Cloud supposedly went down in Colombia, correct?"

"`Supposedly'?"

Dale put his coffee cup down on the table. "Perhaps you should look near the end of your grandfather's book."

With Phyllis in her wake, Sandy went back to the desk. "The last reports from the crew said Silver Cloud was going down in Colombia," she said, pulling the book close and flipping the pages. "I remember Dad talking about it. According to the readings they sent they were going down near the . . . yes, the Caqueta River."

"Did they actually mention the river by name?"

Sandy shook her head. "It was pretty panicky by that time. Dad says radio contact was sporadic. But he was still getting compass readings and information from their navigational equipment. It indicated the area of the upper Caqueta . . . ah! Here." Her finger traced down a line of figures. "Grandfather's last notes on the Silver Cloud's position."

"Read me the figures," Phyllis said, moving around the desk.

Her finger touched a glowing square, causing a computer keyboard to appear beneath the dark surface of the desktop.

"Here we go. Zero degrees, fifty-two minutes, fifty seconds north by . . . seventy-nine degrees, twenty-eight minutes, forty-seven seconds west." Sandy's voice slowed as she frowned at the pages.

Phyllis' fingers tapped on the keyboard. The Swift Enterprises situational wall display faded, replaced by a standard map of the world. It rapidly zoomed in until a blinking circle appeared on . . .

"Northern Ecuador," Sandy said, her frown deepening as she straightened up to stare at the map. "Practically on the coast."

"That's . . . crazy," Phyllis said.

"That's what baffled us," Dale said, coming closer. "We checked all the accounts of the search for the Silver Cloud. Everything focused on Columbia."

"Dad says they covered every square inch of the reported area, and then some." Sandy moved closer to the map, crossing her arms. "This is so weird."

"How could your grandfather get different position readings from the Silver Cloud's instruments?" Phyllis asked her.

"A good question," Sandy slowly said, her eyes still on the map. "Either Grandfather was wrong . . . or something was wrong with the Silver Cloud . . ."

"And your father's search parties were looking in the wrong place," Dale finished.

Phyllis made a silent O with her mouth.

"Something," murmured Sandy. Her expression then cleared. "Yes!"

"What?" asked Phyllis.

"The reason Silver Cloud was in South America in the first place. Remember?"

"I hate to sound stupid, San, but I don't."

Sandy went back to the desk and began leafing through the book. "Tom talked to me about it back when he was getting the Flying Lab ready for its first flight," she explained. "Silver Cloud was on an expedition to chart magnetic anomalies in South America. Something was going on. Something . . . ah! I knew it'd be written down here somewhere. An item Grandfather underlined on 'Lithospheric Magnetization Contrasts'."

"Which means?"

"If I remember correctly, Tom said Silver Cloud was looking into unusual magnetic phenomena which was being reported in South America. So Silver Cloud was . . . yes!" Sandy tapped the book hard with a palm. "I remember now. Tom said Silver Cloud was carrying detection instruments like magnetometers and stuff."

She moved back to the map image. "If Silver Cloud actually found what it was looking for, then maybe it bit off more than it could chew."

"The flight instruments could've been affected," Brattleboro said. "The crew could've been sending out incorrect information. That could also explain the sporadic radio transmissions."

"But if Grandfather was taking his own personal readings . . . maybe using special instruments." Sandy's eyes widened. "Oh God!"

"The flight crew might not have been using the same instruments your grandfather had," Phyllis said. "They were way off course and didn't know it. They were trying to send their location back to your father . . ."

"But had the wrong numbers." Sandy suddenly turned as the intercom buzzed. She leaned over the desk, and only Phyllis noted that she took the trouble of using the privacy earpiece. "Yes?"

Sandy listened for a few moments, then nodded. "All right, Doctor. Thanks." She slowly put the earpiece down, switching off the intercom.

"That was our Metallurgy lab," she explained to the others. "They identified the metal cloth. It's composed of Oralum."

"Oralum?" asked Brattleboro.

"An alloy which was originally developed by the Jardines. The skin of the Silver Cloud was constructed out of it." Sandy suddenly looked old and rubbed at her face, sighing. "The alloy was never used anywhere else since because of difficulties in its manufacture. There was a chance that the book could've been a cleverly designed fake. But the Oralum couldn't be faked. Whoever used it to wrap the book in wanted to make sure we'd know the book was genuine."

"Ms. Swift," Brattleboro began, but was silenced by a shake of the head from Phyllis.

Sandy eventually rose from her thoughts to look at the agent. "Yes?"

"Not wanting to pry, but what exactly are your plans now?"

"Get myself some more coffee," she replied, going back to fix another cup. "May we keep the book and the Oralum sample?" she said, staring down at the coffee as she stirred.

"We're hoping Swift Enterprises could cooperate in some way with our investigation into the break-in at the depot."

"Believe me, I want to." Sandy sipped at her coffee, her eyes on the photograph of the Silver Cloud.

"That's why I was curious as to your plans."

Sandy nodded. "There's a lot going on right now," she said, slowly turning back to the agents. "Obviously the prime concern of Swift Enterprises at the moment is the Core Cannon project."

"We understand . . ."

"But I promise I'll personally look into all available information I can get my hands on," Sandy continued. "I'll inform the Bureau if I or anyone else in Swift Enterprises uncovers anything."

The agents seemed satisfied with this and, after leaving Sandy information on how to contact them, made polite farewells and left.

Phyllis closed the door behind them and turned to see Sandy gazing at the blinking circle on the map.

"Sandy."

"Mm-mmmm?"

"Don't."

Sandy looked over at Phyllis curiously. "Don't what?"

"Whatever it is you're planning."

"What makes you think I'm planning something?"

"Because Tom has a look he gets on his face. It means that, five or so days later, he'll be trying to escape from a burning aircraft, or he'll be beaten up by thugs, or shot at, or almost drowned by one of his inventions . . ."

"Phyl---"

"And you're wearing that same look right now."

"Only because Tom and Bud and Dad are busy with the Core Cannon. You and I could do a little research on our own."

"Uh-huh. How much 'research' is 'a little'?"

"You make it sound so sinister."

"I have a good memory."

"Be realistic. After all this, what else could possibly fall into our laps?"

It was then the door opened and a face poked in to look at them. "There you are," a breathy voice said.

The newcomer stepped into the office to be revealed as an elfin-looking girl. Smaller than both Sandy and Phyllis, with short feathery blue-black hair framing wide dark eyes in a round face also possessed of equally round cheeks.

As Sandy and Phyllis watched, the girl tugged two large suitcases into the office, then released them to rapidly fan at her ace. "Whew! I first went by the house," she was saying to no one in particular, "and no one answered the door. Then I found the Swift Construction Company, and your father," this time the girl nodded at Phyllis, "said to try here. And here I am." The girl came over, sticking her hand out and producing a wide smile. "Hi."

Sandy brushed absently at the offered hand, trying to sort things out.

The girl grabbed at Sandy's fingers, pumping them up and down vigorously. She then copied the gesture with Phyllis. "You guys are Sandy Swift and Phyllis Newton. I swear, the both of you look just like your pictures."

Sandy finally found her voice. "Yeah. And you are . . ."

The girl's eyes grew wider, which was a feat Sandy would've privately considered impossible. "Well chop my legs off and call me Shorty, listen to me just yatter on," the girl remarked. "I'm Belinda-Glory Winkler, and I'm here from Texas looking for my Uncle Charles."

Chapter Three: Southern Strategy

Sandy stared at the girl. "Belinda-Glory . . ."

"Or you can call me `Bingo'," the girl replied. "Most everyone does."

"And you're Chow's niece?" Phyllis asked.

Bingo nodded vigorously. "My daddy's his younger brother. Works over at the water treatment station in Plainview."

Sandy finally managed to mentally catch up with events. "Ah . . . Belinda--"

"Bingo."

"Bingo," echoed Sandy. "Actually, it's a little . . . inconvenient for visiting right now. You're uncle is in Africa with my brother's scientific team."

"You mean he's over in Djibouti?"

Something more like two hundred or so miles beneath Djibouti, Sandy quietly amended, but decided not to broadcast that particular bit of information until she had more of an idea as to the sort of mental constitution Bingo possessed.

"And I'm not really visiting," Bingo continued, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a folded sheet of paper. "Your Mama sent this to me. Invited me."

Sandy numbly took the offered sheet and unfolded it, immediately recognizing her mother's handwriting and signature. "Mom hired you?"

"Yeah. She said she wanted me to be a surprise."

Score one for Mom. "The problem is, right now, my Mom's in New York City for a week or so of shopping."

Bingo's eyes once again grew. "Oh gosh! Miz Swift said to just come by once I got things settled at home. I thought someone'd be here---"

"And someone is. But Mom's out, my brother and your uncle are in Africa, and my father's up on the space station." Sandy continued to look at the letter, idly chewing on a fingernail.

"Breaking in for a moment," Phyllis said. "But your Mom hired Bingo?"

Sandy nodded.

"As what?"

"As cook," Sandy said, looking up at her.

Phyllis' eyes attempted to match Bingo's.

Unsuccessfully. "Cook? Is Chow retiring?"

Sandy passed the letter back to Bingo. "Maybe you'd better explain," she asked.

"Oh sure," Bingo replied. "Well . . . when I graduated from Plainview High School I had always wanted to be a cook just like my uncle. But things didn't quite work out so I started training to be a Emergency Medical Technician. Then Uncle Chow found out about me wanting to be a cook and so he said he wanted to help out with some of the money he made from his books. Mom and Dad argued with him for a while, yelling back and forth, and he finally convinced them to say `yes' and so I got the money I needed to go to school---"

"Whoa whoa whoa," Phyllis broke in. "They got schools for chuck wagon cooks?"

"Well . . . no," said Bingo from behind a small blush. "Truth be told I first went to the Texas Culinary Academy. I then took honors courses for boulangerie and patisserie at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris."

Silence in the room.

"Can you make biscuits?" Phyllis finally asked.

"Like a goddess."

Light was continuing to break through Sandy's confusion.

Chow Winkler had been making a name for himself with his recent memoirs concerning his years of adventures with the Swifts. But he had never really admitted to explaining what he was doing with the money he had made from the book sales. "And Mom's been trolling for a new cook to help out at the house," she concluded out loud.

Bingo nodded brightly. "I met Miz Swift back when her and your Daddy were doing some work at the Citadel. They were looking up some of Uncle Chow's folks and we got to talking."

Which explained the mysterious smile Sandy had seen her mother wearing over the past few months whenever the subject of Texas came up. "Well we're . . . glad to have you here, Bingo."

"Thank-ee."

"It's just like I said, everything's in sort of an uproar right about now, what with Mom and my folks elsewhere." And the events of earlier this morning, she silently added.

"Oh I won't be no bother at all," Bingo said and settled down primly atop one of her suitcases, smiling.

"Ah-hhh, right." Sandy glanced around, not really sure what she was looking for. "Bingo, you can slide your suitcases over by the couch and be more comfortable there."

The girl nodded and obediently began pushing her luggage towards the couch, humming softly to herself.

Phyllis edged closer to Sandy. "I could call Dad and he could bother with her for a while."

"Ummm, that'd be mean," Sandy murmured. "It's not like we're rushing off anywhere or anything."

"Oh?"

Sandy looked at her friend. "And what does that mean?"

"What about your grandfather? South America? Silver Cloud?"

Sandy didn't answer.

"Your plan for going down to Ecuador to investigate."

"Well yeah, but---"

"That's why Bingo's thrown you for a loop. You think you could manage me, but she's a loose end."

"It's not that bad," Sandy began before something occurred to her. "Bingo."

The girl had been leafing through an issue of Aviation Week and she looked up. "Yes?"

"I just realized something. You said you came out here by yourself from Mr. Newton."

"Sure did. Pretty country you got up here."

"Thank you but how did you get onto the premises unannounced?"

"Oh that." Bingo reached into her pocket. "Your Mom sent this to me with the letter," she continued, holding out an object which Sandy and Phyllis recognized as one of the electronic amulets which Swift Enterprises used as a security device.

"Okay," Sandy admitted, "one mystery solved."

"Which still brings us back to the original problem," Phyllis murmured.

Sandy walked over to where the wall display was still showing the last location of the Silver Cloud.

"It shouldn't take more than a few days or so," she said half to herself. "A week at most."

"Sandy!"

"You want an answer to this or not?" Sandy said, turning back to Phyllis.

"You know I do. But just running off . . ." Phyllis ran a hand nervously through her hair. "At least let me call my Dad."

Sandy shook her head. "Your Dad's busy enough as it is, minding things while the Core Cannon project is underway. You and I are pretty much spinning our wheels right now. I mean, I won't get the Bolo-III test schedule from Hulse Aerospace until the end of the month. And you told me you were pretty much finished with the promotional art for the Skeeter home kit."

Phyllis still didn't look wholly convinced. "How about calling your father, then?"

Sandy once again felt a weight on her shoulders. "Phyl . . .darn it."

Phyllis slowly nodded in satisfaction.

"Dad's monitoring what the guys are up to," Sandy said. "He's busy with telemetry and coordinating support. The last report we got said the project is at a critical phase." She stared directly into her friend's eyes. "With all that going on you want me to call him up and tell him that, when his father went down in the Silver Cloud, he wasted all his time searching in the wrong place?"

Phyllis winced.

"You want that?"

"Not . . . really," Phyllis reluctantly concluded.

"Right then." Sandy rubbed her hands together, nodding brightly. "Like I said, just a quick investigation. You and me and . . ."

A pause, then both of them slowly looked over to where Bingo patiently sat. The newcomer politely waved at them.

"I have a passport," she said.

"Oh. You heard all of that."

Bingo nodded.

"Then . . . and I know this is a little sudden and all . . ."

Next to her, Phyllis coughed.

". . . but how would you feel about accompanying us to Ecuador for a few days?"

"Works for me," Bingo replied.

"And she's already packed and everything," Phyllis noted.

Then a thought occurred to her. "Hey! Do we have passports?"

"I know where mine is and can get it in an hour."

"Mine's at home," Phyllis said, mentally calculating.

"Right. Run home and get it and pack . . . and I'd better do the same." Sandy thought for a moment. "I'm going to check up on some things we'll need to take with us. Do me a favor?"

"Like what?"

"Call Dispatch and have them prep a seacopter for us."

Phyllis had already been heading for the desk. Now she stopped as if she'd tripped on something and stared owlishly back at Sandy. "A what?"

"A seacopter."

"A seacopter," echoed Phyllis.

"Please."

Phyllis straightened up and sighed. "Sandy, you might be interested to know that there's a brand new innovation making the rounds these days. It's called `airlines'."

"Phyl, the crash site of Silver Cloud lies fairly close to the Pacific coast. We might need the seacopter's submersible capabilities."

"San---"

"I'm fully qualified to pilot a seacopter."

"San---"

"You want to solve this?"

"Don't bring that up---"

"You want to explore every possible angle so that we can deliver a full report to Dad and the others?"

"Yeah, but---"

"You want to sit through a five-hour layover in Atlanta?"

"What was the button for Dispatch?" Phyllis asked, bending over the intercom.

Well through fear, fire, flood, the cussedness of man and internet service failure, the latest installment!

Chapter Four: Spectral Warning

Swift Enterprises kept the majority of its active diving seacopter fleet at its maritime facility on Fearing Island out in the Atlantic. But as the remarkable vehicle proved to be such a commercial asset, several were also maintained at Enterprises itself for demonstrations to prospective customers. And, occasionally, they were employed for other tasks.

It was already entering late afternoon as Phyllis carried a pair of suitcases across the tarmac to the seacopter hangar, but she suspected there'd be no rest or waiting. Especially since a ground crew were busily at work around the eighty-foot craft which had been moved out to shine in the sun.

Bingo and her luggage were already waiting near the boarding ramp, the girl holding a large floppy hat tight on her head as she stared up at the underside of the seacopter hull.

"Ready to go?" Phyllis asked.

"I'spect," Bingo answered, still studying the craft. "So this is one of those flying submarine things Sandy's brother invented?"

"Uh huh. You're looking at a generation-II `stretch' model, by the way."

"Oh. And that's good?"

"Sure. Let's get settled and I'll give you the tour while we wait for Sandy to finish juggling her eggs."

"Where is she, by the by?"

"Working out the final details of the flight plan. We may be bugging out of here, but Sandy's at least too careful a pilot to take too many chances. C'mon," Phyllis finished, indicating that Bingo follow her up the ramp.

They carried their luggage up into the seacopter. "This space also serves as the cargo hold," Phyllis explained.

"Tom's original seacopter design was half as big as this and, when he worked on making an expanded version, he made several changes. The main rotor for the seacopter is forward of this section."

Passing through a bulkhead door they stepped into a gently curving corridor. "We're in the starboard section," Phyllis continued, closing the bulkhead door behind them. "The door on the opposite wall leads to the airlock. Left and right of us are equipment lockers."

Bingo was taking it all in, nodding slowly.

"Back this way," Phyllis said, heading aft. Bingo followed and they were soon in a spacious curving lounge. Large windows overlooked the activity on the field below.

Touching Bingo's shoulder, Phyllis indicated doors which occupied the inner wall of the lounge. "We're set up with six cabins here, so you can take your pick. Bathroom here," she said, sliding open one of the middle doors in the wall, "and next to this is the galley."

At the mention of a galley Bingo's expression brightened and she opened the door, peering into the tidy, compact space and nodding to herself. "And the consumables are in that rear locker?"

"Uh huh. They're loaded into a module which is pushed up directly into the space."

"I should be able to make do here."

Phyllis smiled. "We're not expecting you to slave for us, Bingo."

"Yeah, well," Bingo slid the galley door shut. "I sure as heck can't drive this thing, so I gotta do something to earn my keep around here. `Sides, cooking keeps my mind even."

"Oh? You're worried?"

"Not necessarily about me." Bingo glanced about. "But Sandy and this sudden trip . . ."

Phyllis sighed. "Yeah. C'mon, I'll show you the rest of the ship." She waved a hand to indicate the lounge. "This used to be the alternate control room in the earlier seacopter models. But potential customers got sort of weirded out by the idea of having to switch back and forth from one room to the other, so Tom found a way to simplify everything. The whole seacopter's operated from the forward end now."

"This lounge is nice," Bingo commented.

"Yeah, it made longer missions easier to handle." Phyllis walked down the port corridor, nodding at the sealed panels. "Workbenches and more equipment lockers."

"We carrying a lot of stuff with us?"

"I asked for a few pieces to be loaded. Lord only knows what else Sandy might decide to carry along. Power plant for the ship's here to our right, forward of the cargo hold. Forward toilet . . . or I guess I should call it the `head'. And here's the control room."

Bingo let out a low whistle at the sight. The control room was half the size of the lounge, or perhaps it was only the greater complexity of the space which made it seem so. Two pilot's chairs sat before dual control stations which were, in turn, located beneath curving ports.

Phyllis pointed to the starboard chair. "You'll notice the panels over to the side of where the co-pilot would sit. Those handle sensing gear, coordinating any research which the seacopter might do. All data can be sent to screens at the pilot's station, as well as to repeater screens in the lounge. Further work or experiments can be monitored from special modules which we can plug into these connections in the rear bulkhead, or from the workbenches back in the corridor."

"Well pierce my ears and call me Drafty," Bingo said. "This is one put together little tub."

Phyllis wondered what Tom's reaction would be to having a seacopter referred to as a "tub" and shook the thought away.

"Hey, there's Sandy."

Phyllis looked to where Bingo was pointing. Outside the seacopter Sandy could be seen talking to one of the ground crew. As they watched she looked up at them and waved briefly before returning to work.

And Phyllis was now noticing that Bingo's eyes were on her. "Let's go on back and relax."

"Sure."

They returned to the lounge. "And you're right, by the way, Bingo," Sandy told the Texan. "There're things to worry about this."

"I read all of Uncle Charles' books about Sandy's family," Bingo said, settling down upon the long couch which followed the curve of the lounge wall, "but I got to admit I'm not exactly up on Tom's grandfather."

Phyllis perched on an arm of the couch, arranging her thoughts. "It's . . . sort of complicated."

"You mean a lot more than just the fact that the Silver Cloud went down somewhere else than where everyone thought it did."

It wasn't a question and Phyllis nodded. "Understand I barely remember Sandy's grandfather," she said. "All I really know is from what Tom and Sandy told me. And sometimes some stuff from Mrs. Swift."

Bingo patiently waited.

"Barton Swift was . . . well, not quite what you and I would expect. I mean, he was successful. Don't get me wrong. But it has to do with scale. Look at it this way. Here you've got Barton Swift at one end, inventing new butter churns and farm engines and balance scales and such. Then here you've got his grandson, on the other end; traveling to the Moon and down into the Earth and building sophisticated robots and flying cars and space stations."

Bingo rubbed at her forehead thoughtfully. "I really don't see where the problem is. I mean, Tom and his grandfather were just inventing for their particular times."

"Yeah," admitted Phyllis. "But I was trying to point out the sort of scale we're talking about here. Tom's father was sort of straddling both worlds; Barton's horse-and-buggy world and Tom's world of nuclear fusion and hypersonic aircraft."

"You see, in the beginning Mr. Swift and his father got along real good and were very close. Sort of co-inventors living under one roof. But Mr. Swift's ideas and projects soon got bigger and more sophisticated. Submarine design . . . giant searchlights . . . aircraft. And then all the traveling all over the world."

"Sort of leaving Barton Swift in the dust."

"Yeah, but not consciously. I don't think either of them meant it to happen, but Barton Swift soon got to where he was all but outright objecting to Mr. Swift's ideas. I never asked Mr. Swift directly about this, but Tom used to tell me it sort of hurt his father."

"Wasn't Tom's grandfather getting sick?"

Phyllis nodded, "And that might've contributed to the situation. But Mr. Swift tried everything in his power to heal the breach. Heck, the first time he used the Silver Cloud it was to rescue both his father and Mrs. Swift from a fire."

"So does that explain why Barton Swift was on the Silver Cloud when it went down? I mean, being as old and getting on as he was."

"Yeah." Phyllis sighed. "It was an olive branch."

"Aha!"

"Mr. Swift had loaned out the Silver Cloud to this research group who were going to do magnetic research down in South America. Mr. Swift was invited to go of course but, at that time, he was busy with the preliminary survey work looking for a place to set up his proposed atomic energy station."

"Where he met Uncle Charles."

"That's right. Anyway, it almost looked as if the Silver Cloud was going to go to South America without a Swift on board. But then Barton Swift came up and volunteered to go along and supervise the expedition, as well as monitor several of the instruments. He managed to impress both Mr. Swift and the expedition organizers with the amount of study he'd made concerning magnetic phenomena in the South America region. Nothing was said, but Mr. Swift realized his father was doing all of this as a way of reaching out to him."

"And then the Silver Cloud went down."

"Yeah." Phyllis looked out the window.

Bingo watched her quietly for a few moments. "It wasn't Mr. Swift's fault that everyone was looking in the wrong place," she softly pointed out.

"I know. And you know and Sandy knows. But this is still going to hit Mr. Swift hard."

"More'n likely. So now you're going to tell me what the worry is."

"The worry is that Sandy's now got the responsibility for finding out the truth about all of this. She's got to walk a tightrope and try and get to the bottom of the mystery, and she's going to be stepping on eggshells whatever happens."

"And what if it turns out to be a simple solution?"

"Huh. Bingo, let me clue you in to a lesson in living with the Swifts. No hunt for a simple solution was ever started with a break-in attempt at a Federal depot."

"Um. Point."

Meanwhile, down on the ground, Sandy was involved in last-moment details. She had just finished signing equipment release forms when the ground crewman who was patiently waiting gave an indicating nod. Sandy turned and her heart jumped up into her throat as she saw the approaching figure of Ned Newton, Phyllis' father.

The manager of the Swift Construction Company, and co-CEO for many of the Swift concerns, gave Sandy a slow lopsided grin. "Going somewhere?"

Sandy was suddenly possessed of the feeling of being eight years old, and with her hand firmly in the cookie jar. "I was . . .hoping we'd be out of here by now."

"Before you got caught, you mean." Ned Newton looked up at the looming bulk of the seacopter. "And you thought Phyllis could just rush home, throw some clothes into some suitcases, ask her Mom where her passport was and then bolt out the front door without any of us becoming curious?"

"Uncle Ned---"

But Newton was raising a palm to silence her. "Fortunately your Aunt Helen is still as fast as ever. She managed to intercept Phyllis and get the story out of her, and then Phyllis passed it on to me. You are so busted."

Sandra winced.

"And I came down here to wish you luck before you took off."

"Oh!" Sandy blinked in surprise. "So. This is all right with you?"

"Truth be told it isn't." Newton stepped closer so that his voice could be easier heard among the sounds of the flight line. He folded his arms across his chest. "I kept trying to come up with all sorts of reasons to stop you and Phyllis from just rushing off on this trip. Even your brother hasn't jumped off the high board this quickly before."

Sandy felt she could debate the issue, but decided to keep her mouth closed.

"No, Sandy, it isn't all right. And it wasn't all right when your grandfather went down with the Silver Cloud."

"I've been tearing myself apart wondering how Dad would take all of this."

"I know." Newton ran a hand through short greying hair. "This . . . this . . ."

"Uncle Ned I got to find out."

"I know," Newton repeated. "I was there, Sandy. I saw all that happened between your father and your grandfather. This is the one part that never got finished. If there's even a chance of getting closure out of this---"

"We'll do our best."

"I just want you to be careful."

"We're just going to go down to Ecuador and look around for a week or so. That should be long enough."

"That isn't what I meant. I know you'll be careful about the trip. I want you to be careful about any answers you'll find."

"We will." Impulsively Sandy leaned close to wrap her arms around Newton, hugging him tight. "And thank you."

"I'll ride shotgun at this end, although your Dad pretty much has his hands full at the moment. At last report the Core Cannon is reaching critical depth, and Tom's getting ready to release the probe."

"Wow. They made it sooner than I thought."

"Yeah and everyone's watching a core-rigidity zone that might be maneuvering between the Core Cannon and the surface. Tom and Bud might have to pull back soon."

"Now I'm starting to feel like a heel for running off like this when the guys are in their situation."

Newton shook his head. "Don't. This is important and you're doing what needs to be done. Don't worry and forget what I said about what your brother would or wouldn't do. You're not being impulsive . . . you're just being a Swift."

Sandy hugged him again, relief washing through her. "Did you want to go say bye to Phyllis?"

"We already did back at the house, and I told her to watch after you." Newton once again looked up at the seacopter. He could now see Phyllis and Bingo waving at them through the port, and his daughter blew a kiss.

Newton returned it and looked back down at Sandy. "Like I said, I'll clear things with your mother if and when she calls and asks what happened to you."

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm leaving you with the hard jobs."

"Tell me about it. I'm getting the feeling I'd be safer right now with Tom and Bud, and I thought I'd never say that."

Less than a half-hour later he and the rest of the ground crew stood by and watched as the seacopter majestically roared up into the evening sky, the landing legs retracting into the underside. The oval shaped vehicle slowly turned, continuing to rise until its main thrusters fired and it began picking up speed and distance, finally dwindling into a twinkling object in the distance.

Ned Newton shook his head. "Back to work," he murmured ruefully, heading for his car.

Further to the south, and gradually gaining altitude, the seacopter continued cruising into the growing dark. On the flight deck Sandy nodded to herself in satisfaction as she felt the familiarity with the controls returning.

Next to her Phyllis had finished entering commands into the computer. "There we go," she said. "Estimate reaching Ecuadorian airspace in . . . eight hours, fourteen minutes. You know we could go faster. Not complaining, mind you--"

"I'd like for us to arrive in Ecuador with the daylight,"

Sandy said. "In fact, before we set the cybertron and go to sleep I might adjust our speed and course a bit." She touched a button on the radio console, speaking to the lounge. "Bingo? You okay back there?"

"Smoother than riding in Jack Jackie's Chevy," replied Bingo's voice.

Sandy's eyes met Phyllis'. "I hope that's a yes," Sandy murmured.

"I hope so too," Phyllis replied. "I mean, I thought I sometimes had trouble with Chow, but . . . hey!"

But Sandy was seeing it too. One of the central display screens had switched on, and a message was spelling itself out.

SANDRA SWIFT

YOU ARE SEEKING THE GREEN GHOST

Note for prospective cover artists: mentally envision a variation of "Tom Swift & His Flying Lab". Sandra Swift is featured prominently in one corner while, in the background, a Seacopter can be seen skimming over a lush jungle.

And now . . .

Chapter Five: Suspicions And Destinations

Both women stared at the message. "Where's it coming from?" Sandy asked.

Phyllis' fingers began touching the switches on the communication console between them, bringing up information. "We're receiving on standard Swift frequencies," she announced, studying the results. "All data uplinks . . . transmission and receiving . . . everything's fine."

The message had faded. "Try and trace," said Sandy.

Phyllis obliged, working while her tongue poked at her cheek. "Whatever it is it came in on 1605 megahertz. That's--"

"Multisatellite GPS," finished Sandy. "We're not supposed to be receiving stuff like that off of that frequency. Run a check through IGSAGS troubleshooting."

Phyllis did, only to shake her head a few moments later. "No fault indicated."

"Well something sure as heck snuck in."

"The `Green Ghost'," Phyllis murmured.

"Don't you start," warned Sandy. "Don't even go there. Maybe I'm not the biggest expert in the world on paranormal phenomena, but I'm pretty sure ghosts do not haunt multi-channel satellite communication systems. And I'm also sure they don't break into Federal depots."

"I wasn't being spooky. I was just thinking aloud."

"Oh. Good habit."

"Mainly thinking what in the world it was supposed to mean?"

A warning?"

"Pretty odd one. But at least it makes me sure we're heading in the right direction. Someone went to a lot of trouble to get that message to us---" She closed her mouth, suddenly frowning.

Phyllis noted her expression. "What?"

"It's just . . ." Sandy shook her head. "It's just that, if I wasn't totally sure he was currently several hundred miles below the surface of the Earth with Tom, I'd swear this was one of Bud's jokes."

"Yeah, this is about his speed."

Sandy drummed her fingers on the control yoke, then reached down to touch the intercom switch. "Still okay back there, Bingo?"

"Sure."

Sandy switched off the intercom, staring moodily ahead.

Phyllis watched her. "Hold on."

Sandy remained silent.

"You're not suspecting Bingo?"

"It's just . . ."

Phyllis nodded. "Go on."

"It's just . . . okay, look at it. First we find out about the Silver Cloud and the break-in attempt at the depot. Then, all of a sudden, Bingo appears from nowhere. All in the same day."

"Oh Sandy."

"I know, I know . . ."

"She had the note from your mother, plus the amulet."

"I know."

"Plus Dad asked about her when I was at the house packing, so it's just a coincidence."

"Okay, so my middle name is `Paranoid'. But I'll bet Tom or someone could've found any number of ways to rig something back in the lounge that could've sent that message up here and make it look like it came from outside."

"But it's not Bingo. You really haven't talked to her as much as I have. She's okay."

Sandy nodded, "Yeah, and now I'm feeling bad about it. It's just . . ."

"What?"

"Well . . . if I arrived somewhere for the first time, and within an hour was getting ready for an impromptu trip to South America to investigate a mysterious air crash, I'd certainly be more inquisitive about it. Wouldn't you?"

"Yeah well, Bingo's had an advantage over us."

"What?"

"She's read all of Chow's books. She thinks this is par for the course for us."

"Point. Do me a favor."

"Sure."

"Contact Shopton and make sure nothing funny happened at that end, communication- wise. I'm going to check our course and set the cybertron."

Phyllis was already reaching again for the radio controls. "And then what?"

"Bed. Before something else happens."

The next day found the morning sun rising above the Andes as the seacopter soared along the Pacific coastline of Colombia, approaching the border of Ecuador.

Phyllis shambled out of her cabin, yawning and gradually recognizing that the sound she had been hearing for the past ten or so minutes had been Bingo clattering about in the galley. The young Texan was working and singing, although Phyllis had to stop and take a brief mental assessment before she was sure. Whatever the song was it obviously had something to do with the heat of the sun playing havoc with people associated with something called `The Near East Command'.

Phyllis pulled her t-shirt more securely on and quietly decided that an understanding of the majority of the lyrics wasn't worth pursuing. "Morning."

"That it is," Bingo gaily replied from her domain.

Sandy, already dressed, entered the lounge from the flight deck. "We'll be landing at Esmeraldas Airport in about an hour."

"Okay. Sandy, I just got up---"

"Esmeraldas is the closest major city to where the Silver Cloud went down," Sandy explained. "I figured that'd be the best place to start."

"Oh." Something began slowly occurring to Phyllis and she went to the couch, unfolding the computer console on the table top and tapping on the keys.

Bingo poked her head out of the galley and stared at Sandy, then over at Phyllis. She then stepped out of the galley to carefully peer down the corridor towards the flight deck.

"We need to find a hotel and stuff once we arrive," Sandy said.

"We're not staying in the seacopter?" Phyllis asked.

"Our friend with the `Green Ghost' message sent us what amounts to an open invitation."

"Uh, excuse me," Bingo said.

"The way I see it," Sandy continued, "if we're more visible then we may stand a better chance of finding out what's what."

"Excuse me," Bingo shyly repeated.

"Isn't this how Tom and Bud did things?" Phyllis asked.

"Yeah."

"And isn't this how they ended up usually getting bopped on the head, or shot at?"

"Well-lll . . ."

"Excuse me!"

Sandy looked up. "Yes, Bingo?"

"Not wanting to be a noodge or anything . . . but if you two are back here, then who's flying this dingus?"

"Cybertron."

"Oh." Bingo considered it. "Sort of like an automatic pilot?"

"Very sophisticated. It's what flew us during the night while we all slept."

Bingo quietly reasoned that, if neither Sandy or Phyllis were running around in a screaming panic, then this `cybertron' whasit was reliable. Slowly nodding she returned to the galley.

"Something smells good," Sandy said to her back.

Bingo had returned to clattering away with her pots and pans. "Well, seeing as how this was something in the way of an occasion, I thought I'd do something special, like prepare a nice polette tartufo con patate al forno . . ."

"Ooooh," exclaimed the two other women.

". . . but this galley is woefully understocked with ingredients, so I'm making pigs in a blanket."

"Oh."

"Oh."

"At least we're not getting Chow's rattlesnake omelets,"

Sandy added softly, settling on the couch next to Phyllis. She looked over at what her friend was bringing up on the computer. "Something important?"

"Pretty much so," Phyllis said. "When you mentioned `Esmeraldas' I kept thinking something was familiar . . . ah! I thought so."

"What?"

Phyllis tapped the screen. "Wintergruppe!"

"Gesundheit," Bingo replied, placing two plates of food down on the table.

"Wintergruppe is a German-based multinational corporation,"

Phyllis explained to the Texan. "More to the point they operate a large industrial research and manufacturing complex which just happens to be located . . ."

"In Esmeraldas," Bingo finished, her eyes growing wide.

"They've got a license from us to manufacture and distribute Tomasite and Inertite throughout Latin America," Sandy murmured, staring at the screen. "Now I remember. They're also operating one of our hydrodome franchises off the Ecuadorian coast."

Phyllis nodded. "A couple of their representatives were in Shopton some weeks back," she told Sandy. "You were at Hulse Aerospace and I had to meet with them concerning some of their marketing questions."

Sandy reclined back against the couch, her eyes gazing thoughtfully into space. "Two visitors from Wintergruppe . . . and, a few weeks later, the Federal depot gets broken into."

"You're right. Your middle name should be `Paranoid'."

"Oh? Well, Miss Newton, maybe I've remembered something you haven't yet. If I recall correctly, the Wintergruppe installation isn't exactly in Esmeraldas but located several miles north of the city. True?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah," echoed Sandy. "Do you happen to have the exact location of the facility? Because, if I'm right . . ."

Phyllis was accessing the map function on the computer.

"I'll save you the trouble," Sandy said, leaning forward and reaching for her plate. "The entire Wintergruppe property just happens to occupy the same area . . ."

"Where the Silver Cloud crashed," Phyllis said, staring at the map. "Oh my."

"Oh my indeed," Sandy agreed, taking a bite.

"We all better eat," Bingo concluded, going back for her own plate. "I got a feeling we're going to need sudden energy very soon."

Some time later the women trooped onto the flight deck.

Bingo quietly pulled down the observer's seat in the rear of the cabin, adjusting herself into it while Sandy and Phyllis kept up a rather heated dialogue.

"Wintergruppe is one of our biggest customers," Phyllis was explaining to Sandy.

Sandy settled into the pilot's chair. "I'm quite aware of that."

"So we can't just go up to them and accuse them of having broken into a Federal depot, or attempting to steal your grandfather's notes."

"And the idea that Silver Cloud went down on their property fifteen years ago? That doesn't interest you at all?"

"No because, at the time, it wasn't their property. Read the notes, Sandy. That area of Ecuador where Silver Cloud may . . . may, mind you . . . have crashed was jungle reaching practically all the way to the coast. Most of it still is jungle. Wintergruppe didn't come in and build their facility until nine years ago. In fact,"

Phyllis continued, strapping herself into her chair, "I find it odd that Wintergruppe could've developed all that property and not come across any remains of Silver Cloud."

"I'm not accusing Wintergruppe of anything," Sandy assured Phyllis.

"Good."

"Yet," Sandy added. "But there's still the `Green Ghost' message we got. And Grandfather's notes."

"I agree that there's definitely something worth investigating," Phyllis assured her friend. "All I'm saying is we should be careful before we go around ruffling the feathers of one of our biggest customers."

"I plan to be the soul of diplomacy."

"One part Kahlua," Bingo suddenly said from behind them.

Sandy and Phyllis both looked back at her. "Huh?"

"That's how I was taught to make a rattlesnake," Bingo explained. "One part Bailey's Irish Cream, one part Creme de Cacao and one part Kahlua coffee liqueur."

"Better make a pitcher," Phyllis muttered, turning back. "We might need it."

"Hush," Sandy replied, switching off the cybertron and taking control of the seacopter. Ahead of them to their right was the blue of the eastern Pacific. To their left stretched the "Green Province" of the Ecuadorian coast; an almost unbroken expanse of enormous mangrove forest. A small flock of herons took to the air as the seacopter turned to follow the southeastern path of the coastline.

"That's part of the Cayapas-Mataje Ecological Reserve," Sandy pointed out. "I did some reading up. It's maintained jointly by the Ecuadorian government and Hemispak. Some of the thickest vegetation growth east of the Amazon basin can be found here. It's protected with an iron hand."

Bingo was craning her neck to get a better look. "Place that well protected I'm surprised the Ecuadorian government let Wintergruppe set up a manufacturing plant in the area."

"Oh Wintergruppe enjoys a major ecological protection rating from Hemispak. Their record for environmental safety is outstanding, even better than the native oil refinery located further south. And speak of the Devil . . ."

Everyone looked as the jungle was suddenly broken by a long expanse of grey metal structures, buildings and a landing field. Trucks could be seen traveling through a gate which took them on south down a narrow road. Docks tightly hugged the coastal side, and several cargo vessels could be seen taking on or unloading shipments.

"Wintergruppe," Sandy announced. "And I see one, two . . . three seacopters of their own on the edge of that landing field."

Plus a couple of Whirling Ducks and Omnicopters. Yeah, we do pretty good business with these folks."

"Look there," Phyllis said, pointing.

The others followed her direction to see a long slender dock which stretched far out into the ocean. At its end was a broad circular platform where men could be seen working around what seemed to be a small refinery.

"That's the link to their hydrodome," Sandy explained. "The dome's way down below that platform."

"What're they using it for?" Phyllis asked.

"Tom set it up with them," Sandy replied. "I'm not sure, but I think they're mining for atomeron. We would've heard if they'd found any, so don't quote me."

The seacopter flew on, passing over more and more signs of human habitation which soon grew to villages bordered by expanses of cattle ranches, while small fleets of shrimp boats bobbed across the ocean to the right.

Sandy slowly began banking the seacopter inland, swooping over La Tolita Island. Reaching down to the radio she contacted the airport. "Ahh-hhh . . . Esmeraldas control del tràfico aéreo. Buena mañana. Èsta es Swift Enterprises seacopter que solicita acercamiento y que aterriza intrucciones, por favor. God I hope I got that right. My Spanish isn't as good as Tom's."

"Hola seacopter," replied a male voice from the speaker. "My English might be better."

"Thank God."

"I thought you had practiced your Spanish," Phyllis said.

"I'm good at it in normal use," Sandy replied. "But not for landing an aircraft. Yes, thank you," she continued to the speaker.

"And you are, again . . ."

"This is Swift Enterprises seacopter DS-114, ah . . .ah . . . oh bother. We didn't name this one, did we?"

Bingo suddenly leaned forward. "Coldwater," she said to the speaker.

"Coldwater," agreed Sandy automatically. She blinked and stared back at Bingo. "Coldwater?"

Bingo quickly motioned for Sandy to continue. "Ah . . . yes, Esmeraldas Air Traffic, this is the Coldwater out of Shopton, New York, USA, requesting landing instructions," Sandy said back to the speaker.

"Bueno," replied the speaker. "Coldwater, we have seacopters listed as standard helicopter traffic. We also show you on approach. Please use landing pad One which is closest to our Customs facility."

"Thank you, Esmeraldas. Coldwater out." Sandy snapped off the radio and once again looked back at Bingo. "Coldwater?"

"What?" asked Bingo. "You've never read Edgar Rice Burroughs?"

"Edgar Rice . . ."

"Try her on horse novels," Phyllis suggested. "She can quote Black Beauty and My Friend Flicka chapter and verse."

"I can not."

"And someday ask her about her carefully preserved collection of My Little Pony books."

"I do not have . . ."

"She's lots better on Aviation Week And Space Technology though."

"Phyl---"

"Not to mention her autographed photo of Jackie Cochran."

"Who just happened to be a very famous aviator," Sandy replied, trying to ignore Bingo's giggling in the back.

"And, while we're at it, let's discuss the collection of bodice rippers someone has in her book collection."

"Classic literature---"

"Yeah, and I recall your Mom's rather `classic' response when she happened to leaf through some of them. Especially the book where the heroine ended up being mistaken for a cheap London---"

"Land the seacopter," Phyllis said. "We can bore Bingo some other time."

"Oh heck no," Bingo commented from behind them. "Uncle Charles told me there'd be moments like this with you two."

With the mood quieting down, Sandy carefully followed the flight path readings beamed from the airport. Minutes later she was throttling back on the engines and, engaging the main rotor, brought the Coldwater to a hover over a circular landing pad located near the main terminal. Lowering the landing legs, Sandy gently reduced power to the rotor, settling the enormous craft onto the tarmac.

She began touching switches, powering down the engines. "Well we're here."

"I guess after Customs we can go find a hotel," Phyllis said. "Unless we got time for me to locate one through the computer. Or did you have something else in mind to do first?"

"Customs first," Sandy said. "And those guys coming this way could probably help us."

Through the forward port three men could be seen approaching the seacopter. One of them was carrying an official-looking black bag.

The women left the flight deck and stepped out onto the boarding ramp, moving down into the humid morning air.

The three men were patiently waiting at the foot of the ramp. Sandy smiled, extending her hand. "Customs?"

"Departamento Nacional de la Medicina," the man in the lead said. "I am sorry, Señora."

"For what?" asked Sandy.

The man in the lead exchanged some rapid Spanish with one of his partners, then turned back to Sandy. "For the present emergency I am afraid all three of you are quarantined!"

Chapter Six: Tales Of The Haunted Jungle

"Quarantined?"

The man continued to look apologetic, fidgeting around his knowledge of English. "You were not on a vuelo registrado. A . . . a . . ."

"Registered flight," offered Sandy.

"Si," the man replied, looking a bit more relieved. "We had no knowing of your health. Your inmunizaciones."

"Immunizations," Phyllis slowly said. "Oh dear."

"And there's a big malaria outbreak in this area at the moment," Sandy said, nodding half to herself.

"Not just the malaria, señorita, but all the regular shots needed," the man explained. "We would only need to keep you no longer than a day here."

Sandy felt her face boiling slightly. "A day," she began, but stopped as she felt a nudge on her ankle from Phyllis.

One of the other men now spoke to the first one, his eyes on the women. "Diga a señoras que podemos apresurar sus regimenes arancelarios y ayudarles con cualquier arreglo pueden desear."

The first man nodded briefly and turned back to Sandy. "He has said that, in the meantime, we would help with the Customs and whatever you need."

Sandy thought rapidly. "Is there anyway we could speak to a ranking American representative?"

"Oh Señorita, if I have done wrong---"

"No no no," Sandy assured him. "Nothing like that. It's just that we came here on business, and it would help if we could get some preliminaries out of the way."

"Ah, si!" The man turned and translated to his companions.

The man who'd spoken before thought for a moment, then answered back.

"The Embajada Americana is in Quito, Señorita," the first man explained. "But Señor Gradich, who is the head of the Delegación comercial del Americano is most helpful."

"That would be fine," Sandy said, mentally translating Gradich's title into "American trade delegation". Reaching into a pocket of her outfit she took a pen and wrote a series of numbers on the back of one of her cards. "If you could somehow get this to him," she said to the first man, handing the card over, "and have him get in touch with us through that number, I'd very much appreciate it."

The man accepted the card, bowing low, the perfect picture of Latin hospitality. "It would be my honor, Señorita. I assure you, this delay will be as quick as possible."

The formalities over, Sandy and the others followed the medical team into a building near the seacopter. There they were fussed over, poked at and given injections. An airport Customs official came by to examine their passports and ask questions about their luggage.

It was an hour later before the women were able to return to the seacopter. Sandy waited until she was safely inside and sitting within the lounge before letting loose with a loud string of vocabulary.

"My ears!" said Bingo, wincing.

"Calm down," Phyllis told Sandy. "We worried about getting here quickly, remembered our passports but didn't do anything about the fact that we were heading into a country currently going through a bit of a medical crisis."

"I know, I know," Sandy said, rubbing her forehead tiredly.

She gratefully accepted a glass of tea from Bingo. "It's just that Tom never got held up like this."

"Tom usually ended up in places where there was hardly a gas station, much less a fully staffed airport. Relax."

"True. I guess in the meantime we can get outfitted."

"I'll get the gear and also switch on the phone for when this Gradich person calls." Phyllis left the lounge.

Bingo watched her go. "Outfitted"?

"Just a few odds and ends we'll be carrying with us," Sandy assured her. "We probably won't need them . . . knock on wood . . . but I'll feel better if we're prepared."

Phyllis came back and laid a cloth pouch on the table, unrolling it to reveal several objects which resembled ordinary writing pens.

Sandy held one up and showed it to Bingo. "This is an improvement over one of Tom's earlier inventions," she explained. "Watch."

She carefully snapped the pen in half, folding the two sections together. "We call this the Snooper. One half is a small telescope with automatic night-vision feature. The other half is a directional microphone. Look through the Snooper at anything from a distance and you'll also be able to hear anything being said."

Snapping the pen back together she handed it to a wide-eyed Bingo.

She then picked up a somewhat thicker pen-sized object. "A girl's best friend," Sandy announced. "Twist the top part once and you'll be able to talk and listen to anyone else holding a similar device. All our communicators here are set on the same channel.

"Now, twist the top part one more click and it links you to the Swift Enterprises channel. I would suggest being prudent about using that."

Phyllis coughed.

Sandy ignored her. "One more click and an emergency siren goes off, as well as a homing signal which can be tracked through the Swift Enterprises channel.

"Now . . . in case you're really in trouble . . ."

Bingo's eyes widened even more and her lips moved silently.

". . . point the other end of the pen at whoever is following you, or troubling you---"

"Or whatever," Phyllis muttered.

"---and squeeze firmly. It'll take care of the rest." Sandy extended the object to Bingo.

It was accepted with extreme delicacy. "Does it disintegrate anyone?" Bingo asked.

"Ahhh . . . no."

"Roast their flesh with thousands of watts of voltage?"

"No."

"We'd really like to avoid killing anyone while we're here,"

Phyllis added. "Spirit of international relations and all that."

"Yeah." Bingo carefully pocketed the items. "I can think of a few dates I've had where this sort of stuff would've come in handy."

"Me too."

Sandy stared at Phyllis. "Tom would never---"

"Not him, but---"

Static briefly popped in the lounge, and a repeater screen lit up to announce OPEN COMMUNICATION CHANNEL WITH AMERICAN TRADE DELEGATION/ESMERALDAS.

"Hello?" a male voice asked.

"Is this Mr. Gradich?" Sandy replied.

"Yes. Is this Miss Sandra Swift?"

"Yes. Thank you for getting in touch with us."

"A pleasure. And I'm Eric Gradich, chief of the local trade delegation. I understand you and your associates landed here a little while ago and you're currently sweating out quarantine. I apologize for that, but there's been some outbreaks."

"It's quite all right," Sandy said, making herself comfortable on the couch while the others followed suit to listen.

"But, as you're the ranking American delegate here, I was hoping you could assist my friends and I with our business here."

"Swift Enterprises is always welcome down in these parts. How can I help?"

As briefly as possible Sandy explained about the situation involving the Silver Cloud. "I was wondering if, in the course of your work, you'd heard anything about an airship or aircraft crash in the northern jungle fifteen years ago?"

There was a brief silence before Gradich replied. "Not offhand, no. Of course I've done business with airport officials here, and they tell how there used to be quite a number of incidents involving planes going off course and such in the past. Before things became modernized. I could go and do a little digging on your behalf if you'd like."

"That would be lovely. Thank you."

"Not at all. I can also arrange for your quarantine to be sped up somewhat. I do this every so often for American VIPs. We've got access with the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, as well as UNESCO, WHO and OEA health records."

Sandy silently moved Gradich higher on her Christmas card list. "That would be very nice of you, Mr. Gradich."

"If I could make a suggestion, you might consider meeting with Señor Marquez, the Mayor of Esmeraldas. He would know more about the area's history than I would. I can send an introduction ahead to his office and make an appointment. I'm sure once he finds out you're with Swift Enterprises he'll roll out the red carpet."

Sandy crossed her fingers and was glad she hadn't mentioned her suspicions concerning Wintergruppe. "Mr. Gradich I'm afraid if you're any more helpful I'll have to propose marriage to you or something."

A warm chuckle came over the speaker. "Just trying to make amends for your being held up at the airport. Would you and your companions be free tomorrow evening?"

Sandy raised an eyebrow at Phyllis and Bingo, received accommodating nods. "I see no problem. May I ask why?"

"It just so happens we're having a formal function at the Hotel Estuario. Many of the local dignitaries will be in attendance. Bankers, commercial and industrial leaders . . ."

At the mention of the words "industrial leaders" Phyllis could swear she saw Sandy's ears prick up.

"I think we'd very much like to attend," Sandy said.

"Excellent. And, as an added incentive, I'll see that rooms are reserved for you and your two companions at the hotel."

With all matters settled further social pleasantries were exchanged before Gradich signed off.

Sandy sat back on the couch, taking a long sip of tea. "Well, that was easy."

"Too easy," muttered Phyllis.

"Now who's being paranoid? A lot of the footwork has been swept away and we've got a few avenues of investigation to follow."

"Either that or we're being led about."

Sandy considered it. "If so, then that would also mean we're on the right track."

"Yeah, to the getting bopped on the head or shot at part."

"Pessimist."

Gradich was apparently as good as his word and, as the afternoon lengthened, a Customs official came to the Coldwater to announce that all medical records were in order and the women were cleared to enter the country. Taking their luggage they left the Coldwater and, after Sandy sealed the entrance to the seacopter, made their way through the airport to catch a taxi to the Hotel Estuario.

Within moments they were being chauffeured about the city, passing stands selling fried fish, cerviches and patacones. The air was filled with the calls of birds and the sounds of marimba music moving in and out of volume.

"We'll need to do some shopping," Phyllis remarked.

"Was wondering if anyone was going to mention that," Bingo replied, her face peering out the taxi window at the sights. "I'm not exactly packed for a formal do."

"We'll hit the stores," Sandy assured her friends. "Remember . . . visible, visible."

Phyllis had several immediate replies but decided to try and stop being a Gloomy Gus.

Arriving at the hotel the women checked into their room, finding that Gradich had managed to reserve the best available suite for them. Three beds were already arranged and waiting.

Bingo went and bounced onto the one nearest the window. "Mine."

"Closer to the mosquitos," Sandy said, going to the phone.

"Hah! First thing you learn in cooking school is never to be bothered by anything that can bite you." Bingo paused and blinked. "Or was that the first thing I learned in high school?"

"Who're you calling?" Phyllis asked Sandy.

"Seeing if Mayor Marquez is still in," Sandy said, picking up the phone. "Front desk? Hola. Podria usted decirme cómo está lejos a la ciudad pasillo de aqui?"

She listened for a moment before cupping her hand over the phone. "My accent must be horrible. The desk clerk's giggling . . .

ah si? Si?" Sandy listened for a while longer before lowering the phone. "Want to hear something interesting?" she asked the others.

"Surprise me," said Phyllis.

"It just so happens that Mayor Marquez is in the hotel and is waiting for us in the bar. He just gave the clerk the message." She raised the phone back to her head. "Si! Diga por favor a Alcalde que estaremos abajo pronto. Gracias."

She hung up the phone. "A Mayor who does business in hotel bars," she said slowly. "That's distinctive."

"You just ain't been in Texas for long," Bingo said, getting up from the bed to make a visit to the bathroom. "We're going?"

"Oh yes." Sandy looked thoughtfully at Phyllis. "The desk clerk would certainly know if this guy waiting for us down in the bar was really the Mayor or not."

"You're right, Sandy. He's probably a dacoit and is going to garotte all three of us."

"I didn't mean that---"

"And I don't think you'd get dacoits in Ecuador," added Bingo, coming out of the bathroom. "C'mon, let's check out the bar."

The women went down to the lobby and soon located the bar, their attention immediately drawn to a man who had been speaking to another man at a table, but who rose as they approached. A trim, bespectacled figure who put Sandy in mind of the actor Anthony Quinn.

Sandy stepped closer. "Señor Marquez?"

"And you are, of course, Sandra Swift." Marquez touched Sandy's fingers and bowed low over them. "Your resemblance to your brother is unmistakable."

Sandy nodded for the others to come closer. "Phyllis Newton and Belinda-Glory Winkler."

"Señoras." Marquez graciously offered them the other seats at the table, waiting until they were comfortable before resuming his own chair. "On behalf of my office, please allow me to welcome the three of you to Esmeraldas."

"You've met Tom?" Sandy asked.

"Your brother is rather illustrious in these lands, Señora. You may not be aware of this, but my wife's family came from the Verano region."

"Aha!"

Marquez nodded. "Her family had suffered hardship during the rebellion. Needless to say, the assistance your brother supplied did much to restore order." Marquez now spread his hands. "And if there is anything I or my office can do to make your visit a pleasant one I hope you will ask."

A waiter came by. Marquez asked for coffee while the women requested soft drinks. "And now, Señora. Señor Gradich mentioned you are here regarding the crash of an aircraft."

Sandy explained the reason for their presence in Esmeraldas.

Marquez listened patiently, nodding every so often. He then motioned to the man he'd been speaking to earlier. "This is Señor Lavallen of my staff. He is in charge of collecting records for our Oficina Civil de la Investigación. I had asked him to look into aircraft crashes for the last twenty years."

Having been invited to join the conversation, Lavallen brought over a large manila folder and gently placed it on the table. "Of course I haven't had an opportunity to study the records in depth," Lavallen explained to the women, "but I must report that, so far, I haven't found anything yet."

Sandy toyed with her drink. "I appreciate all that's been done so far. But we're talking about an airship over a thousand feet long."

"I understand, Señora---"

"So please understand my position. I've come into possession of evidence which strongly leads to the Silver Cloud having crashed in the northern jungle fifteen years ago. Certainly there had to have been some account of something that large coming down."

Lavallen looked helplessly at Marquez. "We understand your position, Señora," the Mayor said. "Now please understand ours. The northern jungle has, for most of the history of this country, been unpassable, unexplored and, with the exception of a few villages on the fringes, wholly undeveloped. Not until recently has any notable inroads been made into that area."

"Ummmm. Mr. Gradich mentioned how that area used to be notorious in regards to aircraft going off course."

Lavallen nodded. "Si! Planes have been lost, it is known. It used to be quite common for some aircraft to be drawn off course and become missing. But finding them has been difficult, if not impossible. The jungle is quite dense. The animals there have a particular reputation for fierceness."

"Any particular reason why?"

"That part of Ecuador has always held one problem or another," Marquez replied with a shrug. "Animal attacks, equipment breaking down in the jungle . . . and now, of course, the ghosts."

All three women suddenly felt as if ice water had been poured on them.

Phyllis wasn't sure she had heard correctly. "Ghosts?"

"Or however you would describe it," Marquez replied with a hint of apology in his tone. "Keep in mind, Señoras, that we are all educated people here. But when we have visitors coming to our country and bringing back reports on encountering something . . . unusual . . . in the jungle, then it becomes wise to listen to all considerations."

"You said it was visitors to the country seeing ghosts?"

Marquez and Lavallen exchanged a long look between them. "Señor Gradich said you would be coming to the reception here tomorrow evening," Marquez told Sandy. "You should make a point of talking to Señor Nospe who will be there as well."

"And he is?"

"The director of the Wintergruppe complex. His people have spent most of the time and work in that area of the country. If anyone would know more about these `ghosts', then he would be the one to speak to. But I can assure you, Señora, there is much to support these stories. If you stay here and look into it you will see for yourself."

Sandy was trying very hard not to glance at Phyllis. Instead she focused on Lavallen. "May I be allowed to study these records, Señor Lavallen?"

Lavallen glanced at Marquez who gave a brief nod.

"I'll return them to your office."

"That will be sufficient, Señora. Gracias."

Drawing the folder closer to her, Sandy stood up. "In that case I think we'd best go back to our room. We've had a long flight and I'd like to be able to look these over so I can get them back."

"No need to rush, Señora . . ."

"It shouldn't take long," Sandy replied. "And I'm grateful for you to come by in person, Señor Alcalde."

"It is my pleasure," Marquez said. "I only hope your visit here will be pleasant and you can find a resolution to your mystery."

Leaving the bar the women returned to their room. "Not even in town one day," Phyllis said, "and already Sandy meets a Mayor and gets a souvenir."

"And an injection in the sit-upon," added Bingo.

"I tell you, is Ecuador great or what?"

Sandy said nothing. "You going to spend all night looking at that file?" Phyllis asked her.

"Some of it," Sandy admitted, putting the folder on the table next to the fruit basket. "I'll do some reading while you two get first crack at the shower."

"Shower . . . Sandy, it's humid here, but we're not that rank."

"Save me some hot water," Sandy continued, sitting down at the table and opening the folder. "And get into your dancing clothes when you're cleaned up. We're going nightclubbing."

Phyllis and Bingo froze.

"Nightclubbing?" asked Bingo. "As in you, Phyllis and me?"

Sandy silently nodded, turning a page in the folder.

"She used to be this vivacious before she started working at Enterprises," Phyllis pointed out to Bingo. "Must be the Latin air."

"Nothing of the sort," Sandy replied, her eyes still on the pages in the folder. "More like something I noticed when we arrived at the hotel. The rather obvious little night spot across the street with the sign above the door reading El Fantasma Verde." Sandy slowly turned another page. "Or, in English . . . The Green Ghost."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: One thing I need to correct. The communicator devices which Our Heroines are carrying also possess a micro video camera. I forgot about this detail, and it'll come in very handy later on during a Climactic Chapter.

And, with that taken care of . . .

Chapter Seven: Night Of The Green Ghost

From somewhere in her luggage Bingo had managed to locate a black silk sheath and she was now smoothing it over herself, watching the effect in the mirror. "Not that I expected to go out honky-tonking," she half-remarked to her reflection, "but it's not a bad idea."

Sandy, finishing adjustments to the Navy blue top and bottom she had pulled on, made what she felt was an affirmative sound.

"Or, since we're doing this in a foreign country, does that make us Tonk Honkies?"

Sandy paused and silently wondered how much trouble it would take to have Bingo locked up in the seacopter.

Her reverie was interrupted by the arrival of Phyllis from the bathroom, shaking her hair loose. For the evening she had opted to wear a green floral print halter top and matching skirt. "This isn't going to be formal enough for the thing tomorrow night," she pointed out to Sandy, "but it's the best thing I brought to wear."

"Yummy," Bingo said, glancing at her.

"And, as I mentioned, we'll go shopping tomorrow," Sandy added, reaching for her shoes.

Phyllis joined Bingo at the mirror. "So remind me," she asked. "Is tonight for fun or for work?"

"A little of both, I guess," Sandy said, coming to join them. "But having a place called 'The Green Ghost' across the street from the most popular hotel in the city strikes me as being just a tad too convenient. Which means everybody keep their Snoopers and communicators handy."

"So we're expecting trouble," Bingo said to the mirror as she poked at her hair.

"I hope not. But let's keep our eyes open and see what happens."

Bingo went for her handbag.

Sandy was watching her. "Bingo, there's something I've been meaning to mention."

"Ummm?"

"Just the fact that I really don't see an awful lot of Chow in you."

Bingo was slipping her Snooper and communicator into the handbag. "You mean because I tend to favor my Mama instead of Daddy?"

"Wel-lll . . ."

"Or is it because I don't dress like a stolen car?"

"I was going to try and put it a bit more politely."

"Don't bother," Bingo airily said, slinging the handbag over her shoulder. "One reason Uncle Charles was so glad to hook up with you people is because the chuck wagon and trail ride business was starting to peter out. At least for him."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. His clothes were starting to upset the wildlife. Let's boogie."

The women left the room and traveled down to the lobby. "So what happens if we're propositioned in the nightclub?" Phyllis asked.

"Mama always said keep at least one foot aimed so you could kick up---"

"I meant being propositioned about Silver Cloud."

"Oh."

"Play it by ear," Sandy said. "Someone sent us that 'Green Ghost' message, so my feeling is that someone wants to lead us in a certain direction. Either that or get in touch with us. I know this isn't going to sound good but, like it or not, we've got to let them make the next move."

Leaving the hotel they became wrapped in the humid marimba air, feeling it do its work to make them a part of their surroundings. An open invitation to blend in with the beat and the vital, unwashed spicy odor of the coast.

Out of habit Sandy looked up into the night sky. Esmeraldas wasn't as light polluted as most northern cities, but most of the stars were still crowded out by the urban glow around them. Sandy, however, was more interested in much nearer objects. The Moon was hanging low and fat in the sky. Above it Nestria showed as a pale disc.

Sandy kept searching, realizing that their position meant the Swift space station would be at a higher angle. Her eyes soon found the bright point and she gazed at it for a few moments, finding an odd sense of relief in seeing what was, to her, a visible sign of home.

Returning her attention to Earth she caught up with the others as they crossed the street. Ahead of them yawned the open oval doorway of El Fantasma Verde. It was circled in green neon tubes which depicted a man who bounced back and forth, waving his arms in what was supposedly meant to be a menacing fashion.

All three women felt their steps slowing as they reached the entrance, pausing on the sidewalk to peer inside. Darkness broken by the ubiquitous glowing bar signs and, every so often, a silent explosion of green light that seemed to pulse in tune with the deeper bass notes of the throbbing music.

"Well there's something you don't hear every day," Phyllis commented. "A marimba version of 'Bridge Over Troubled Waters'."

"We knew this was going to be hazardous," Sandy replied. "C'mon."

Moving inside they found the air cooler, and mixed with an indescribable zoo of aromas. Tables and booths could be seen stretching out on either side, occasionally made clearer by the musical flash of green light. In the center the shapes of people could be seen only as shadows of rhythm. When the green light flashed it would freeze them in first one pose, then another.

Paying the maitre d, Sandy allowed herself and the others to be guided to a small table near the dance floor. She sat, her eyes still trying to adjust to the surroundings.

Phyllis joined her but Bingo shook her head, leaning over the table so she could be heard above the music. "I'm going on over to the bar and choke a couple of choirboys," she explained. "I'll be within shoutin' distance."

She moved off towards the bar and Phyllis slowly turned to face Sandy. "Did she say she was going to---"

"I heard the same thing," Sandy assured her.

Phyllis shook her head. "Do you think we could handle her if she gets drunk?"

"Phyl . . . somehow I suspect that, if push came to shove, Our Miss Winkler could drink us under the table."

"Ummm, true."

"At least she's not boring." Sandy suddenly looked up, but it was only the waitress wanting their drink orders. Sandy ordered a mojito while Phyllis settled for a glass of white sangria.

"Well we're here," she said, looking around. "Where're the spies?"

"Patience," Sandy said. "Maybe I've just let my imagination run away with me and we're going to have a pleasant time tonight."

The band chose that moment to switch to a marimba cover of "Hey Jude".

"Or not."

Phyllis was attempting to study the menu card. "Were you hungry?"

It occurred to Sandy that they hadn't eaten much since they'd left the airport, and here they were going to be drinking on an empty stomach. Not a good idea.

"They've got empañadas, jumbo shrimp . . . no big surprise . . . something called 'yucca bites' . . ."

"I guess we'd better try and rope in Bingo if we're going to eat." Sandy peered through the room towards the bar, seeing it clear in a sudden flash of green. Several patrons, but . . . "No Bingo."

At that moment she felt a movement under her hand and looked down at the table top. She realized she was standing halfway up and her palm was resting flat on her purse. The movement she was feeling was . . .

"And His Imp will appear," she muttered, opening the purse and taking out the vibrating communicator. Switching it on she held it to her ear, "Bingo?"

"Over by the little girls room," Bingo's voice murmured through the speaker as Sandy strained to listen. "I decided to take a chance and watch the room through my Snooper thingy. Sit back down, Sandy. Please. You're not looking natural."

Sandy did so, ignoring a questioning look from Phyllis.

"There were four guys watching . . . ow!"

Another green flash had happened throughout the room. "Okay, so I'm not using the night vision scope again for a while," Bingo declared. "But, like I said, four guys watching from a booth at your six."

Right behind me, Sandy mentally breathed, trying extremely hard not to turn.

"I thought okay . . . maybe they just like the way you guys look. So I stayed put and watched a little more. Two of them have just left, though, and from where I'm standing I can see them leaving the place and heading across the street towards the hotel."

Trying to appear as casual as possible, Sandy had taken her own Snooper out of her purse and used it to jot down a few words on a napkin which she slowly slid across the table to Phyllis.

Phyllis glanced down at it and bit her lip, her eyes wide, before she slowly looked back up to gaze past Sandy's shoulder. A green flash picked that moment to arrive and, as it faded, Phyllis gave a tiny nod.

"Okay," Bingo continued. "Weather report. The remaining two men have gotten up. One of them is starting to circle off towards the bandstand while the other is slowly coming to you. I'm on my way back."

Sandy forced her fingers to lower the communicator, turning it so that the protective end was ready. At the same time she was watching Phyllis' expression; timing the tilt of her friend's face, the direction of her eyes . . .

She quickly stood up and turned, finding herself face to face with the man. In the darkness he was slightly taller, but a green flash painted dark narrow eyes above slender lips locked in a small smile. The body possessed the muscular build to match the confidence of his expression. He didn't seem all that much older than her.

"Having a good time?" he asked.

"Just leaving," Sandy replied, turning to nod at Phyllis who rose from her chair, tossing some money onto the table top.

"But you just really got here," the man pointed out. "My friend and I noticed you coming in and wondered if either of you were interested in dancing?"

Phyllis was moving closer, flowing like a panther, and Sandy caught the glint of a communicator in her hand. She looked around for either Bingo or the other man.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Dance. Like I said." A green flash caught the whiteness of his widening smile. "You girls came here looking for something. Am I right?"

Sandy froze, staring harder at the man. Trying to read something that was or wasn't there. "Maybe we should start with who you are, first."

"Heyy-yyy-yyyy!"

Squealing happily, Bingo suddenly came up from behind the man, wrapping her arms firmly around his waist.

"Introduce me to the cutie."

"Bingo," Sandy scolded, moving to dislodge the other girl's grip. "Not nice. You know it's all for one and one for all."

"So share already. I'm easy."

The man managed to break clear of the joint embrace, all the while keeping his eyes on Sandy. "Actually I sort of prefer your type," he said.

"Some other time." Sandy took in the others with her eyes and they began heading out of the club, trying hard not to hurry or appear overly anxious. At any moment Sandy expected to feel the touch of the man's hand on her shoulder, and she kept her communicator at the ready.

Making it outside they rapidly crossed the street, reaching the safety of the hotel before stopping to look back. But there was no sign of pursuit. "Well that was special," Phyllis muttered. "We made contact with a dance partner."

"Later," Sandy told her. "Let's get back upstairs. I'm worried about something Bingo reported before he showed up. And that was nice work, Bingo."

"Thank'ee."

Going back to their floor they moved down the hall to their room, Sandy signaling to the others to be quiet.

The door to their room was slightly ajar and Sandy felt herself gasp as she rushed inside.

"Sandy!"

But she ignored the warning to stand just inside the doorway, her fists clenched.

The others joined her and Bingo's eyes widened. "Oh crimony biscuits."

It had been a quick and thorough job. Whoever had been in the room had made a token attempt to put things back in order. But it was clear to the women that the suitcases and closets and drawers had been searched through.

Something caught Sandy's eye and she went over to the table.

The folder with Lavallen's notes was still there.

Next to it lay a piece of silvery cloth. Sandy looked at it and let out a long, tired sigh.

Phyllis joined her. "They didn't take the Oralum sample."

"They didn't have to," Sandy replied, reaching for her purse. Opening it she removed another piece of cloth, laying it beside the first one. "I'd taken our sample of Oralum along with us in case we ran into someone there who wanted some sort of proof that we were who we were."

"Then . . ."

"Another fragment of Oralum," Sandy said. "We made contact all right. Our mysterious friend left his calling card." A thought occurred to her and she rushed to her suitcase, pawing through the contents for a few moments before angrily slamming the case shut.

"Sandy, what---"

"Grandfather's diary."

"What?"

"Gone. Stolen."

Chapter Eight: Countermoves

Phyllis stared at Sandy. "Why would they---"

"It all makes sense," Sandy snarled half to herself, sitting down on the bed. She looked at Phyllis and Bingo.

"Someone was after Grandfather's diary. They tried to break into the Federal depot and failed."

Phyllis nodded.

"So they reason that it would only be a matter of time before someone came down here to investigate personally. Not only investigate but, hopefully, bring the diary here as well. They somehow found out about our trip and planted that `Green Ghost' message---"

"Sandy . . ."

"Knowing we would probably stay in the best hotel in the city, which just happens to have a nightclub named `The Green Ghost' positioned prominently across the street. We go for a rendezvous, like a bunch of idiots, and while we're there they're over here ransacking the room and locating the diary. They wanted it and I practically gave it to them on a silver platter." She slammed a fist down on the mattress.

"Sandy, there's a lot of suppositions in all that."

"You think? The diary's gone, Phyl. Our friends in the nightclub saw to that. Which reminds me. You have your Tiny idiot with you?"

Reaching into her handbag, Phyllis removed the hand computer she used for work and gave it over to Sandy who opened it, switching it on.

"Only this time," Sandy muttered, "I wasn't completely stupid."

The others moved closer to look at the tiny display screen. "What's going on?" Bingo asked.

"When you grabbed our friend at the club I took the opportunity to slip my communicator into his pocket. I'm now trying to get a bead on it . . . ah!"

The screen was showing a map with a blinking dot in the center.

Sandy studied it closely. "My communicator is currently moving north of the city along the coast. Now . . . I access the political and economic databases for this region and overlay the information onto the map ann-nnnnnnnnd . . ."

The map blossomed with symbols and labels.

Sandy nodded. "And our friend is heading north along the coast." She looked up at the others. "Towards Wintergruppe."

Phyllis remained quiet, crossing her arms.

"Now if we only knew a little more about my erstwhile dance partner."

"Oh that," Bingo replied, reaching into her own handbag and producing a slender black wallet which she handed out to Sandy.

Sandy gingerly accepted the wallet. "Is this . . ."

"Almost missed your fingers by seconds," Bingo said, smiling.

"Bingo," Phyllis scolded. "That's . . . really illegal."

"So's breaking into a hotel room, and theft," Sandy said, opening the wallet and flipping through the contents.

"Dollars . . . our boy came loaded. Ah, here we are." Sandy held the wallet up to peer at something. "According to this his name is Duran Geiner. German driver's license as well as an Ecuadorian one." She smirked up at Phyllis.

"You're enjoying this," Phyllis said.

"Very much so. Especially because of this." Sandy held the wallet open to the others. "If I'm not mistaken, that's the Wintergruppe corporate symbol on the ID card next to his license."

"Go ahead and say 'I told you so' and get it over with, San."

"I'm not trying to be mean or smart, Phyl. I'm just relieved to have some information at long last." Keeping an eye on the computer display she sat further back on the bed, hugging her knees to herself. "I just wish I knew why Grandfather's diary was so important."

"That's what I was going to ask," Phyllis said, moving over to the table to get comfortable in one of the chairs, Bingo sitting near her. "Did you have much of a chance to read through it?"

Sandy shook her head. "Not too much. I concentrated mainly on the last pages. The crew of the Silver Cloud had been tracking down what they felt was the source of some of magnetic anomalies which had been reported over the years. Then, all of a sudden, readings of fluctuations in equipment readings."

"Including navigation equipment?"

"Uh huh. From what I could tell the captain ordered the engines shut down and wanted to simply drift until the problem was corrected. Grandfather kept making notes on the Silver Cloud's position. And, apparently . . ." Sandy shrugged.

Phyllis reached over for the Oralum fragment the thieves had left behind. "So at least we also know that our mysterious 'friends' have had access to the Silver Cloud wreck."

Sandy nodded. "And that's what bugs me. I don't care what Marquez and Lavallen say about the jungle, an aircraft the size of Silver Cloud does not crash without someone noticing it."

"Someone apparently did," Phyllis pointed out, waving the Oralum fragment.

"My point."

"Do you think your Grandfather's still alive?" Bingo asked in a small voice.

Sandy hugged her knees closer. "That's . . . a very good question." She gently rocked herself back and forth for a few moments.

"He was pretty old when he left on the expedition," Phyllis pointed out.

Sandy turned her head away.

"And a crash in the jungle couldn't be the best thing in the world for a man in his sort of condition."

"So he's dead."

"San---"

"Phyl I can face reality just as much as you can. I'm not blundering into this with the hope that he's somehow been alive all these years. But whoever found that Oralum has answers. And I'm going to get them." She glanced back at the display screen. "Aha!"

"What?"

"Herr Geiner has reached the outskirts of the Wintergruppe complex," Sandy said. "QED." She began tapping on the keyboard.

"So now what happens?" Bingo asked. "Or is that a bad question?"

"First off," Sandy replied, "I'm sending my personal code to my communicator which is, when all is said and done, in enemy hands.

I'll have to get a new communicator out of the Coldwater tomorrow."

Bingo's face held a guarded expression. "Why?"

"Because Geiner will obviously be reaching for his ID card to gain access to the complex," Sandy explained. "He'll find out his wallet's missing, and he has a rather odd pen in his pocket. I would rather not have him or anyone else closely examining the pen and so . . ." She tapped a final button. "There."

"There what?"

"Sandy tripped a security device in her communicator,"

Phyllis explained. "Her brother has a mania about Swift gizmos falling into `the wrong hands'." She made quote signs with her fingers.

"So what's gonna happen?"

"Nothing serious. Only that the protective function in the communicator will backfire into the body of the pen, rendering all the workings inert."

Bingo shook her head. "You guys are a fun bunch," she muttered, heading for the bathroom.

Sandy was folding the computer up. "So what's next on the agenda?" Phyllis asked her.

"Are we now in agreement that Wintergruppe is involved in some way in this?"

Phyllis slowly nodded.

"Sehr gut. Then the next move is, as I said earlier tonight, a shopping trip tomorrow. And then, we've been invited to a formal function here at the hotel. A chance to meet the `local dignitaries'." She thoughtfully leaned her chin down on her knees.

Phyllis kept further reservations to herself, even through the next day; allowing herself to enter into the spirit of the shopping excursion in and about Esmeraldas in search of formal wear. This after a visit to the parked seacopter to acquire a new communicator for Sandy. Part of the fun was in watching Bingo rush about from clothing rack to clothing rack in search of something suitable.

"How about this?" Bingo asked, holding up a cornflower colored strapless satin gown.

"I'd try for something a shade darker," Phyllis replied, contemplating a black evening formal for herself.

Bingo bounced off and Phyllis peered over the rack to see Sandy frowning at a lavender outfit. As Phyllis watched she glanced over her shoulder.

"Spotted them yet?"

Sandy looked back. "Um?"

"The thugs from Wintergruppe you've been expecting to be tailing us all day?"

"Am I that obvious?"

"Sandy, you're practically wearing a t-shirt reading FOLLOW ME."

"Sorry."

"And lavender isn't your color."

Sandy muttered something under her breath.

"What?"

"Nothing." Sandy now held up a deep blue formal. "Bingo?"

Try this one."

"Oh yeah," Bingo replied, skipping over. "Now we're talking."

"Speaking of talking," Phyllis said, "now that we're in a fairly secure place, and away from the hotel, can you explain to me now why we haven't reported the break-in at our room?"

Sandy was considering a pillbox hat. "I'm not really a hat person," she concluded.

"San."

"Okay. I believe Wintergruppe's involved in this. But are they alone? Who else could be in on this thing? Marquez? Gradich? The delay at the airport was sure convenient. I decided I wasn't going to report the break-in because I'm admittedly curious to see if anyone raises any interesting questions."

"Like Geiner when he tells the local cops his wallet's been lifted?"

"Have you seen any police lately?" Sandy asked.

"Well-lll . . ."

"And you won't. Geiner can't afford to let the police know he was involved in a break-in at our hotel room---"

"Which we really have no evidence that he was."

Sandy ignored her. "Not to mention involvement regarding Silver Cloud."

"Ditto ditto."

Sandy calmly regarded her friend across the rack. "Think so? Let's see what happens tonight. Oh . . . if you're not gonna pick that maroon one then can I see it?"

Later on, after sunset, the women descended from their room to find the ballroom of the hotel decked out in velvet curtains of gold and white. A gauntlet of liveried doormen guided them into the midst of a crowd of people chatting, drinking and helping themselves to a nearby sumptuous buffet. A string quartet played softly over in a far corner.

Sandy noticed Bingo trying to appear smaller. "This isn't the same girl who was `choking choirboys' in a nightclub last night?" she asked with a smile.

"I am really out of my league here," Bingo whispered.

"You're doing fine."

"Besides," added Phyllis, "we're out of our league too."

"No we're not," Sandy declared.

"San, the guy who opened the door for us was better dressed."

The conversation faded at the approach of a man who walked with the careful tread of a prizefighter. He smiled widely at the women, extending his hand. "Ms. Swift?"

"Mr. Gradich," Sandy said, recognizing the voice. She shook the offered hand. "Thanks for inviting us."

"Most certainly," Gradich replied. He nodded politely to the others. "Ms. Newton and Ms. Winkler."

Gradich, Sandy silently concluded, had been talking to Marquez.

"Please make yourself comfortable," Gradich said, indicating the room with a wave of his arm. "I hope you've been finding Esmeraldas worthwhile."

"Interesting," Sandy replied, taking a drink from a tray being offered by a waiter.

"Have you had time to engage in any further research concerning your missing aircraft?"

Sandy studied Gradich's face but saw no hint of anything else being implied. "We've been spending time studying local records," she said. "Señor Marquez and his office has been most helpful."

"But nothing definite as yet has surfaced?"

Sandy mused as to how much to tell him. To trust him with. "We've uncovered enough to feel that it would be worth our time to remain and dig further," she said, slowly moving towards the buffet table. "Marquez suggested that I might talk with the director of the Wintergruppe establishment here."

Gradich slowly nodded. "Nospe."

"Do you think he might be helpful?"

"You can ask him yourself," Gradich replied, nodding over Sandy's shoulder.

Sandy turned to see a tall man walking towards them from across the room. Well-built, with short-cropped steel grey hair above eyes as blue as hers.

Phyllis moved close. "Stop it," she hissed.

"What?"

"Stop staring at the man like you're looking at him through a gunsight."

Sandy hid a reply behind a slow swallow from her glass, her eyes still on the approaching figure who smiled broadly as he drew closer. "You are Miss Sandra Swift," he said in English with just a trace of an accent.

Sandy slowly nodded, working up a smile.

"Earhardt Nospe," Gradich said, once again assuming the role of host for his American guests. "Director of operations for Wintergruppe in Ecuador."

"Our company does a great deal of business with yours," Sandy said to Nospe, extending her hand.

Nospe grasped her fingers gently, bending low over them. "As well I know," he said, straightening up. "And when I heard that three representatives of Swift Enterprises were going to be attending tonight's function, I became more determined than ever to show up."

His eyes roved over Phyllis and Bingo, taking them in. "In fact, several of my company's people were visiting your offices only a short time ago."

Where else did they visit? Sandy wondered quietly.

"I'm hoping that you and your companions will take the opportunity to visit Wintergruppe while you're in Ecuador," Nospe continued. "I would consider it a privilege to personally provide a tour of our facilities here and point out how much Swift Enterprises has contributed to our fortunes."

"As would I," Sandy said in a silky voice that made Phyllis wince. "In fact, I'm extremely interested in studying your facility. We flew over it on our way down here."

"Ah!"

"An impressive property."

"And growing more so all the time," Nospe said, helping himself to a small dish of cake from the buffet.

"I've studied your financial and marketing reports," Phyllis said. "Wintergruppe has done rather well down here. You've also accomplished much for the local economy."

From the corner of her eye Sandy noticed that Marquez had appeared at the fringe of the group. Or at least within listening distance.

"We certainly try, Miss Newton," Nospe was saying. "We find that the local economic climate, as well as available resources, has made Esmeraldas a rather fortunate choice for us in terms of a South American base of operations."

"And the property to the east of your complex?" Sandy asked, deciding to stick her toe in the water.

She thought she heard Phyllis and Bingo draw in sharp breaths, but her attention was firmly on Nospe who, to his credit, didn't seem to feel there was anything untoward about the question.

"We are, of course, very careful with the part of our property that involves the jungle," Nospe said. "Our nearness to the ecological preserve requires that a greater than usual amount of restraint be taken in regards to any operations we have. Have you an interest in that area?"

"Just things I've been hearing," Sandy said, giving Marquez a glance. "I've been told, for instance, that the area is haunted."

"Ah-hhhhhh." Nospe nodded. "Then you've become familiar with one of the local legends."

"According to some, it seems to be more than a legend."

Nospe's eyes rested for a moment on Marquez. "Then I'd be more than happy to discuss the matter with you during our tour tomorrow."

Sandy raised an eyebrow. "Tomorrow?"

"Unless you have an objection," Nospe replied. "Or perhaps some other obligations or appointments? My staff and I would be at your disposal."

Sandy wanted very much to look at Phyllis and Bingo and gauge their reactions. Instead she fought to keep her concentration on Nospe. "Tomorrow would be fine, then, Mr. Nospe. Shall we say around nine?"

"Ausgezeichnet," Nospe said from behind a huge smile. "And then perhaps, Miss Swift, we could lay these ghosts you've discovered to rest."

"Nothing," declared Sandy, "would please me more."

Chapter Nine: Connecting The Dots

Tomorrow morning the women were surprised to learn that Nospe's invitation went so far as to include a limousine patiently waiting for them outside the entrance to the hotel. Without saying anything, Sandy and the others silently checked to make sure their Snoopers and communicator pens were close by and, with a smile at the chauffeur, entered the car.

For her part, Phyllis was glad there'd been time to discuss things up at the room, preventing the possibility of the chauffeur listening in. She had asked what would happen if, in the course of their tour, they happened to encounter

Duran Geiner. Sandy's reply was that everything would remain calm, and Geiner would simply be told that they had discovered his wallet on the floor of the Green Ghost nightclub.

Phyllis thought the story incredibly lame but kept her opinion to herself.

Now, however, after the leisurely drive up the coast road, and with the high security fence of Wintergruppe looming ahead of them, Phyllis wondered if not commenting on the cover story was such a good idea. But the security guard at the gate cheerfully waved them through, and Phyllis tried not to think of being a plucked goose being eased into a hot oven.

"Some layout," Sandy remarked.

"No kidding," Phyllis agreed, gazing out the window. The limousine was driving towards the glass-and-steel Administration Building for the complex. Beyond it, on either side, stretched a line of warehouses, laboratory buildings, manufacturing plants and support structures. To the left could be seen the blue of the Pacific while, to the right, the complex was clearly bordered by the thick Ecuadorian jungle.

"Practically as big as Enterprises," she said.

The limo pulled up to the front of the building where none other than Nospe himself was waiting. He came down the steps, smiling, and held the car door open for his guests. "Welcome, ladies, welcome."

Sandy glided out of the limo, matching Nospe's smile. "Herr Nospe."

"I'm so very pleased you've decided to come."

"So have I," Sandy said honestly, looking about. "This is a fabulous place you've developed here."

Nospe shrugged, although he seemed pleased at the comment. "More and more we've been needing large physical resources for our research," he explained. "As such, my corporation has been expending time and effort looking for hosts outside of the confines of Europe. I'm sure I need not explain this situation to you."

"Certainly not. Believe me, I understand totally."

"Shall we begin our tour?" Nospe said, indicating an open-air cart nearby which bore the Wintergruppe logo.

"Is this here the biggest place your company has?" Bingo asked.

"Indeed, Miss Winkler," Nospe said, settling in behind the driver's seat. "Our headquarters, near Heide, is more of a global administrative center than a research and production facility these days. A goodly part of Wintergruppe's research efforts takes place here, as well as all of its manufacturing concerns for our Western Hemisphere customers."

Starting up the cart, Nospe began driving along a smaller road which curved around the building and pointed them towards the complex. As he drove he pointed out various landmarks. "You see our airfield and shipping area over to the left. As you can see, we're currently loading up freighters for delivery. They'll be heading to ports up and down the Pacific coast, as well as going through the Panama Canal."

Near the docks Sandy could see the long causeway to the Wintergruppe hydrodome stretching out across the water. "I was, of course, interested in your undersea operation facility," she told Nospe.

"I'm sure," Nospe replied with a nod. "We'll be meeting later on with the engineers in charge of maintaining it."

It was on the tip of Sandy's tongue to ask for a personal tour, but she decided to keep her mouth closed for the time being. Something, though, kept her eyes on the causeway until Nospe turned the cart away from the area and drove deeper into the complex.

Silently she removed her Snooper from her pocket and held it casually. Her thumb moved across the clip, exposing and activating the digital camera.

"One of our production centers," Nospe was explaining, pointing to a large building. "Here's where we manufacture Tomasite. You can see how it's connected to the warehouse which, in turn, ships the finished product out to our customers."

"Can we take a closer look?" Sandy suddenly asked.

"Certainly."

Nospe glided the cart to a stop at the low, domelike building and gallantly helped the women out. Bypassing the operations office he led his charges directly into the structure where, in an observation gallery, Sandy and the others watched as a semi-automated chemical foundry carefully mixed a variety of substances into the polyolefin mixture which served as the basis for the light and flexible radiation-proof plastic that had been one of Tom's earliest inventions.

Sandy, being somewhat knowledgeable on the physical plant requirements for Tomasite production, engaged Nospe in several questions while Phyllis wandered off to talk to some nearby technicians. Bingo remained in the background, quietly watching everything.

At one point the door to the gallery opened and several men in lab coats entered. With what seemed to be obvious glances at Sandy they motioned Nospe over. Making apologetic noises, Nospe left Sandy to go over to them.

The men drew into a close circle, talking quietly but excitedly among themselves. As casually as possible Sandy pointed the Snooper lens at them, taking several shots.

She then noticed Phyllis coming closer, staring closely at the screen of her Tiny idiot. Looking up at Sandy she shook her head briefly.

After several more moments Nospe returned while the other men left the gallery.

"Nothing serious, I hope," Sandy asked.

"Not at all," Nospe assured her. "A minor problem in one of our labs. Shall we continue?"

For the next few hours Nospe led the women about the complex, pointing out details concerning their production and research efforts. He allowed them to tour several laboratories and ask questions of the scientists, technicians and engineers. Sandy couldn't help but notice, however, that there were several laboratories which they weren't allowed access to, or led towards.

As best as possible, though, she made a point of making sure the camera lens of her Snooper peeked through open doorways or windows. She was pleased to note that Phyllis and Bingo had picked up on her silent cue and were also surreptitiously taking pictures.

The high point came after lunch when Sandy and the others were ushered into a small auditorium to meet with a man and a woman. "Doctor Avril von Hofmannstahl and Doctor Frederich Sebald," Nospe explained. "They are in charge of operations for the hydrodome."

Sandy worked to maintain a grateful exterior and immediately settled down to ask several questions. But she had wanted to be taken out directly to inspect the hydrodome and wondered if there was something behind the lack of an invitation to visit the facility itself.

"How big is the area produced by the dome," she asked at one point.

"Seven hundred feet in diameter," Sebald replied.

Sandy, wondering if she was being just a bit too suspicious, thought she'd heard a pause before Sebald's answer. "I was a little curious as to what was being done down there. My brother handled the original franchise arrangements and I never got around to learning the reason."

"Actually, we've been hoping to find further traces of the golden city your brother located," Sebald confessed. As such, the hydrodome is being operated and funded with assistance from anthropological interests in both Germany and Ecuador. In the meantime, though, we've uncovered underwater deposits of nickel and cobalt that we're mining and producing to help offset further costs."

Sandy noticed Phyllis casually relaxing her Snooper in such a way as to let the camera lens get a good look at the scientists.

"I was wondering if it would be possible to be taken out there?" Sandy asked them. "Get a closer look?"

In answer the scientists looked at Nospe. A conversation in German was muttered between them and Sandy listened closely, at one point catching the German word for "insulation".

"We'll have to consult with our safety engineers," Nospe finally said to Sandy. "The hydrodome is usually safe, but everyone who works down there has undergone hours of training. Impromptu tours . . ." He shrugged apologetically.

"I totally understand," Sandy said. "If you could provide any pictures or video footage that would be just as well."

Nospe once again spoke quietly with his people. "We could provide a photo file of our facility," Sebald assured Sandy. "It'll be ready before you leave."

"There was an additional reason I asked you to meet our hydrodome command crew," Nospe explained. "Doctor von Hofmannstahl is one of the people you've especially wanted to meet."

"Oh?"

"She's seen one of your ghosts."

Sandy, Phyllis and Bingo focused their entire attention . . . plus a few Snooper lenses . . . at the shyly blushing scientist. "It is nothing, wirklich," she stammered. "I mean, truly."

"But it was an actual ghost?" Sandy asked.

Von Hofmannstahl nervously ran a hand through silver hair. She had obviously been asked such questions before but was still not comfortable with them. "Sometimes ganz herum," she replied in heavily accented English. "All around. Some of us have seen das Geist des alten Mannes." She looked to Nospe for help.

"She's one of the people who have seen what appears to be the ghostly figure of an old man," Nospe explained to Sandy. "This figure appears in connection to certain . . . events."

"Such as?"

"Storms . . . movements of animals." Nospe shrugged. "We are all scientific and logical people, Miss Swift. But when so many of my qualified workers report this sort of thing then I have to consider it as being somehow real."

"You seem to have a fairly well-equipped research establishment here," Sandy pointed out. "Has nothing shown up on your instruments?"

"Not a thing." Nospe spread his hands out. "It's a true mystery."

"Ja," echoed von Hoffmannstahl, nodding excitedly.

The meeting signaled the end of the tour and, after exchanging thanks with Nospe, the women returned to the limo for the trip back to Esmeraldas. By mutual silent consent they didn't speak of their visit other than in safe generalizations.

Back at the hotel, though, and once they were alone in their room, the conversation turned more direct. "Bingo, pass your Snooper to Phyllis." Sandy followed suit by handing her own over. "Phyl, send all those images back to Shopton. Have them look over everything and get me some identification somehow on the faces we didn't get introduced to."

Phyllis accepted the Snoopers and settled on the edge of the bed, quietly plugging the devices into her Tiny idiot and preparing for upload.

Sandy went to gaze out the window.

Bingo joined her. "You were upset that they didn't let you down into the hydrodome."

"We could probably inquire about the sort of nickel or cobalt mining that Wintergruppe's been doing," Sandy replied, "but there's any number of ways that sort of operation could be faked."

"What about the atomeron business? Searching for more of the golden city?"

Sandy shrugged. "We're a ways off from Aurum City. But we could check with local and German authorities and find out if anyone's been subsidizing a search for other traces." She shook her head. "Nospe was on his best behavior, but something was definitely wrong."

"Something was," Phyllis announced, detaching the Snoopers from her computer. "You remember the Tomasite plant?"

"Sure."

"I was talking to several of the engineers and plant techs while you were with Nospe. Did you know that, in the past year alone, Wintergruppe has produced some 87,000 tons of Tomasite? In both polyolefin as well as in ready-shaped forms?"

Sandy frowned. "That's . . . certainly a lot."

"It is?" Bingo asked.

"Our facility in Shopton only manufactures nine thousand tons or less," Sandy explained. "Enough to handle shielding for our vehicles and reactors, plus what we ship to my Dad's facility in Texas, not to mention our own customers."

"Now look at this," Phyllis said, holding out her Tiny idiot. "One of the benefits of being a provider is that we're privy to Wintergruppe's stockholder reports."

Sandy accepted the computer, studying the screen. "But this says Wintergruppe only shipped out about 14,000 tons of Tomasite last year," she finally said.

Phyllis nodded. "So here's the obvious question. Where's all the additional Tomasite that's been made?"

Sandy chewed her lower lip, handing the computer back to Phyllis. "In their warehouse?"

"There's some," Phyllis said. "I looked at the storage figures which a technician provided. But there sure as heck isn't no 73,000 tons of Tomasite in that warehouse. A lot of it has been going somewhere and is not being reported."

"Is there a business in smuggling Tomasite?" Bingo asked.

"A little," Sandy admitted, thoughtfully chewing on a fingernail. "License infringement problems, things like that. But that much missing Tomasite would eventually have to show up."

"Someone's shielding an awful lot of radiation somewhere," Phyllis quietly pointed out.

Sandy locked eyes with her. "And I think we know who . . . and where," she eventually said.

Phyllis nodded.

Bingo looked from one to the other. "Why am I getting the same feeling I got back when Miz Birnley told me I had to repeat high school Biology?"

"Because we just figured out our next step," Sandy said, "and that's to take a closer look at the Wintergruppe hydrodome."

Chapter Ten: "New Growth Trees"

The women set out for the airport early the next morning. Phyllis settled into the taxi next to Sandy. "So what do you think of this business with the ghost that these people keep seeing?"

"I'd been meaning to ask you about that."

Sandy had just given instructions to the driver and she now sat back. "Good question. I mean, like so many other things we've encountered here, it'd be easy to pass it off as some sort of hoax.

But . . ." She shrugged.

"The ghost of an old man, von Hoffmannstahl said."

Sandy had been gazing out the window, and she now turned a slow burning stare onto her friend. "Don't . . . you . . . start."

"San---"

"You're thinking it might be the ghost of Sandy's grandpa," Bingo asked Phyllis.

"And I think that's the notion Nospé and von Hoffmannstahl, and Lord knows who else wants to plant in my head," Sandy told the two of them. "But, like I said before, ghosts wouldn't be breaking into Federal depots. Or stealing diaries. Or spying on us like Geiner and his friends were doing. Which reminds me," she now looked at Phyllis, "any results on the Snooper shots we took yesterday?"

"Not yet. Enterprises Security wasn't able to produce any positive identification yet, but they're running the pictures against everything we've got on file concerning Wintergruppe employees. I've also gone ahead and contacted the Pierce Library in Austin, asking for their help."

Sandy nodded, noticing that the taxi was arriving at the airport. After paying off the driver they first went to the flight desk where Sandy dutifully filed a plan detailing a morning's pleasure trip in Coldwater. The women then trooped out onto the field where the seacopter was waiting.

Boarding it, Sandy first checked the security devices. "No one's tried to enter."

"Why should they?" Phyllis asked. "If we're all suspecting Wintergruppe then they've got seacopters of their own."

"Well," Sandy replied, settling down into the pilot's chair, "it's what I'd do if I were in their shoes." She began powering up Coldwater while Phyllis and Bingo took their own seats.

"Atomic batteries to power," Sandy intoned solemnly. "Turbines to speed."

Bingo paused in the act of fastening her safety harness. "I'll be jiggered . . ."

"She's pulling your leg," Phyllis assured her. "Too much television, and also too much Bud Barclay."

"Actually I'm not that far off in regards to operating this thing," Sandy said, but she was wearing a crooked grin on her face.

Watching her, Phyllis was quietly relieved to see that Sandy wasn't being constantly beaten down by the pressure of their inquiry.

"Rotate," Sandy finally announced and, with a roar of power, Coldwater lifted up off the pad. Clearing the airport buildings the seacopter turned practically due east before Sandy engaged the main thrusters.

Phyllis glanced at the instruments, then out the main port. "We're not heading directly for Wintergruppe?" she asked Sandy.

"Eventually. But we're gonna take a sort of long way around." Reaching between herself and Phyllis she began tapping instructions into the seacopter navigation computer. "I'm feeding in those last reported coordinates of the Silver Cloud. It might be worthwhile to take a closer look at the area."

"Ummmm. Keep in mind, San, that Silver Cloud's crash site might be further off than what your grandfather wrote down."

Sandy nodded. "I'm taking Coldwater up to six thousand feet so hopefully that'll cover everything. Get the sensor pallet ready."

Phyllis nodded, her fingers touching buttons on the console next to her.

"What're we gonna scan for?" Bingo asked. "I mean, if it's not a big secret?"

"Seacopters like this are outfitted with a standard battery of sensing devices," Phyllis explained to her. "Along with the usual stuff we're also carrying a Damonscope for radiation studies, a retroscope for elapsed-time readings, and the latest version of Tom's multi-environmental atomic tracker."

"So we're pretty well fixed."

"Well . . . yeah." Phyllis returned to her work.

The Coldwater skimmed high over the Ecuadorian jungle, eventually approaching the area where Barton Swift had recorded the last position of the Silver Cloud.

Over to the west could be seen the glistening buildings of the Wintergruppe complex.

"Switch on sensors," Sandy told Phyllis.

Phyllis threw a switch. "We're recording."

From behind them Bingo was watching with interest. "This stuff the Silver Cloud was made of."

"Oralum."

"Will all these dinguses you got on board be able to locate fragments? I mean, if we're thinking Wintergruppe located the wreck, then that doesn't mean they could've found all the fragments."

Sandy sighed. "The good news is you're right. If this is where Silver Cloud went down then there's every reason to imagine that fragments of Oralum would remain."

"And the bad news?"

"Since Oralum was used so rarely, Tom never took the trouble to enter its chemical makeup into the database. Now we could pick up traces of the basic chemical components of Oralum. But then we'd have to take the time to piece the evidence together."

Coldwater continued soaring over the jungle. "Sensor sweep results starting to come in," Phyllis announced.

Sandy nodded. "Good, but let's swing out to the ocean before someone decides to take a particular interest in our presence here. We can study the information closely once we're in the water."

Moving the control yoke Sandy started Coldwater on a long curving path out towards the ocean, making sure that the Wintergruppe facility was being left behind.

"I'm sure they spotted us," Sandy said. "I'm just wondering why they didn't say anything."

"Wah wah wah," Phyllis replied. "Sandy, you'd complain if the Titanic didn't sink."

"Would not. I just don't like the idea that I'm doing what they want me to do."

"Maybe they're waiting to see what else we do before trying something."

"Like what?"

"I'd just as soon not speculate."

Sandy quietly agreed and concentrated on taking the seacopter out over the ocean, reducing altitude until they were barely clearing the surface of the water. Behind them the Ecuadorian coast receded further into the distance until it was but a darker line on the horizon.

"Reducing speed," Sandy announced. "Regulating rotor thrust." She kept one hand on the throttle as Coldwater slowed, the ground effect bubble created by the central rotor gradually shrinking until the seacopter's lower hull finally connected smoothly with the water.

"Okay. Switching to submersible control overlay. Prepare to dive."

As Bingo watched, Sandy's fingers danced over the instrument panel. Several controls altered slightly, the labels on some of the buttons and switches being replaced by new names. Sandy continued working and Coldwater began humming in a deeper tone. Bingo saw the water start to rise outside the seacopter as the vehicle slowly sank. Within moments Coldwater had slipped beneath the waves.

"Engaging undersea thrust. Forward velocity three knots. Angle of descent fifteen degrees."

Outside the port the water began to gradually grow darker.

"Course now 170.3," Sandy announced. "At this rate we should reach the general area of the Wintergruppe hydrodome in about . . ."

"Forty minutes," Phyllis replied, looking at the instruments.

Bingo continued staring out the port, her eyes looking up towards the fading glow of the sunlight above. "Ah-hhh . . . doesn't this thing have lights?"

Sandy nodded. "But we won't use them unless we really have to. Don't need to attract attention. In the meantime . . ."

She touched a control and glowing patterns appeared on the surface of the viewing port.

"Submersible heads-up display projected on Tom's SmartGlas surface," Sandy pointed out to Bingo. "Sonar, fathometer . . . the works."

Phyllis had been working at her own console and she now straightened up. "You want to look at the information from the forest now?"

"Go for it."

Phyllis switched on a large monitor over her head. "Here's the projected crash site in normal view."

Sandy and Bingo were staring at an ordinary photographic image of the jungle they'd flown over.

"Now I'm skipping over the biological readings and concentrating on the metallic and other findings," Phyllis announced, adjusting a control. "What we'll see is a mixture of thermal images, magnetometer readings, things like that."

The image began shifting into different color patterns, accompanied by computer-generated labels and markers. Everything Phyllis put up on the monitor was detailed to the last pixel, but there was nothing which indicated the presence of a wrecked aircraft.

Sandy let out a slow, frustrated hiss.

"San, it's been fifteen years," Phyllis gently pointed out.

"But there should still be something," Sandy declared. "An aircraft the size of Silver Cloud just doesn't . . . vanish . . . and not leave some sort of trace. Was everything plugged into the scan?"

"Retroscope, magnetic anomaly detector. Everything."

Sandy continued staring hard at the monitor, almost looking as if she was going to reach up in the next few moments and drag answers off the screen.

Bingo slowly leaned closer, also frowning. "Phyllis, you said you didn't bother with putting up the biological readings. Why?"

Sandy was still glaring at the screen, but Phyllis looked back at Bingo. "We're . . . looking for a crashed aircraft," she said. "Nothing really biological to look for."

But Bingo was now waving her hands quickly alongside her head. "Let me think for a moment. Let me think." Her hands grew still as her forehead wrinkled. "This retroscope thing you used."

"Uh-huh."

"If I remember from Uncle Charles' book, it could look at something and produce a reconstructed image of what it used to be.

Right?"

She now had Sandy's attention as well. "That's sort of an oversimplification, but---"

"But am I right?"

Sandy and Phyllis exchanged a look. "What're you getting at?" Sandy finally asked Bingo.

In answer Bingo unsnapped herself from the seat and stood up to move closer to the monitor. "This is where Silver Cloud was supposed to crash, right?" she asked, indicating the image with a hand.

Sandy nodded.

"It was a pretty big ship, right?"

"Uh-huh."

Bingo turned from the monitor to look at them. "So what happens when a big aircraft crashes into a jungle? All those trees. They'd get knocked down. And even if every piece of the aircraft was taken away by someone there'd still have to be a crash site, and it'd be marked by---"

"New growth trees!" Sandy said, her eyes shining. "Bingo, you're a genius."

Phyllis quickly turned back to her console. "Switching to the retroscope bioscan data. We'll now see the area of the jungle in terms of plant age. Younger plants will show up as darker colors . . . ah! Now!"

The women watched as the monitor image changed again; everything gradually growing pale with the exception of a long dark oval shape which dominated the right side of the screen.

Phyllis touched a button and studied another readout. "Time reference: fourteen years, six months. Margin of error minimal."

She looked over her shoulder at Sandy.

Sandy was sitting back in her chair, looking slightly deflated. "QED," she softly muttered.

"The scale's a little off but it could still pass for Silver Cloud."

Sandy slowly nodded. "That blurred bit in the upper corner could indicate where the ship originally hit the ground. The wreckage would've pushed on along the ground a bit before coming to a stop." She let out a long sigh. "We found it."

"Or at least where it came down." Phyllis resumed touching controls. "Look at this."

Two wide dark straight lines now ran from the oval spot to the right side of the screen.

"Time reference on those?"

Phyllis studied her instruments. "Eight years, four months.

The same time when Wintergruppe set up shop on the coast."

Bingo was staring at the screen, her lips moving. "At our altitude," she murmured, "and on that scale, those lines would make pretty decent sized roads."

Sandy nodded. "For construction equipment. Or, more likely, excavation and salvage gear. Those roads, if they were roads, lead back directly towards Wintergruppe."

"They chopped up the wreckage of Silver Cloud and took it to their complex," Phyllis murmured. She frowned back at Sandy. "But why?"

"Believe you me, I'm very much in a mood right now to slam Nospe up against the nearest wall and find out."

"And what in the world happened to the survivors?" Bingo asked.

If any, Sandy silently added. She slowly turned back to the controls.

"It doesn't make sense," she finally said to the air. "Silver Cloud crashes in the jungle. Some years later Wintergruppe finds the wreckage and quietly picks it up without telling anyone. What's the point? What's the big secret?"

Phyllis and Bingo remained quiet.

Sandy's eyes flicked over the displays on the viewing port. "We're approaching the coastline. The hydrodome is . . . fourteen miles ahead."

"And you think an answer might be there?" Phyllis asked.

"God, Phyl, I don't know. But it's the one part of Nospe's set-up we haven't looked at yet. Before I do anything . . . before I accuse anyone of anything . . . I want as much facts as possible."

Phyllis returned to her own console, securing the information from the sensor sweep of the jungle.

Bingo once again leaned closer. "How deep's this dome we're gonna look at?"

"Almost seven hundred feet underwater. It's sitting not too far from an undersea tributary of the Atacama Trench--"

"Sandy."

"Ummm?"

Phyllis leaned away from her console. "Take a look at this," she said, touching a button and nodding at the viewport.

Sandy and Bingo looked to see one of the displays now sporting a blinking outline. A blip was slowly approaching what appeared to be two giant tubes; the upper one blue and the lower one red. The tubes slowly shifted and undulated as they watched.

"Temperature and current activity indicator," Phyllis explained.

Bingo nodded at the blip. "Is that us?"

"Uh huh," Sandy said, studying the readout. "There're two undersea currents in operation nearby. One's pulling water into the shore, and the other's pushing water out."

"And the lower current is many degrees warmer than the surrounding water," Phyllis added. She turned back to her controls. "I'm focusing the sensors on where the currents reach the shore."

"Maybe I'm wrong," Bingo said, "but don't those currents meet pretty much under the surface of the sea below Wintergruppe?"

"You're not wrong," Sandy assured her. "Phyl?"

"Wait . . . wait. Okay, here it comes."

The women returned their attention to the monitor over Phyllis' head. It came to life showing the ghostly outline of a computer-enhanced image of the ocean floor immediately beneath the Wintergruppe facility.

Two large slotted vents could clearly be seen carved into the surface of the rock.

"Weirder and weirder," Phyllis said. "The upper vent is pulling in tons of water, and the lower one's expelling it at higher degrees. I'll go ahead and beat you to it, San, and wonder out loud just what the heck Wintergruppe is doing?"

"And, interestingly enough, I think I've got an answer this time."

"Oh?"

Sandy nodded. "I've seen this sort of setup before. On some of the fission reactors Dad's designed." She pointed at the monitor. "The upper vent brings in seawater to help cool the reactor core, and also provide a source for steam to drive turbo-generators."

"And the lower vent is the heated seawater being returned?"

"Uh-huh."

"But there was no atomic reactor on the Wintergruppe site."

"True. Not on the surface." Sandy gave Phyllis a knowing look. "I think we've found our missing Tomasite."

"Wintergruppe built an underground reactor on their premises?"

"That's what it's starting to look like."

"But why? They're getting enough electrical power as it is from Esmeraldas."

"Let's move on to the hydrodome and see if the answer's there."

Coldwater continued moving through the depths, and the women could soon see something glowing in the distance ahead of them.

Sandy checked her instruments. "That corresponds with the location of the hydrodome. But it's sort of . . . bright. We're still a good four miles away. Phyl?"

"Yeah, let me get some scans on it."

"Coming to a stop," Sandy announced, pulling on the control yoke. "Setting seacooper on station keeping."

"Try this," Phyllis announced.

Another enhanced image of the ocean floor appeared on the monitor. This time, though, the screen was dominated by the sight of a large dome-like object which pulsed with a pearly light. A series of curved metal ribs seemed to strain to hold the dome in place.

A circular metal platform capped the dome at its apex. As the women watched, an object resembling a soap bubble separated from the platform and began moving up a taut length of cables heading for the surface.

"That's the elevator connecting the hydrodome with the surface," Phyllis explained to Bingo, who nodded in response.

"Why is it . . . glowing like that?" Sandy asked.

Phyllis turned to her console. "Scanning with Damonscope.

No evidence of harmful radiation."

"It's like whoever's in charge of maintaining the hydrodome surface is running it at maximum," Sandy said. "Or more."

She noticed that Phyllis was still studying her own instruments. "Phyl?"

"It's . . . nothing. I'm just getting some sort of odd spike here and there."

"Radiation?"

"Neither the Damonscope or the computers can answer."

Sandy had gone back to looking at the monitor. "At this range, and with the sensors, we should be able to see through the surface of the hydrodome."

"Move in closer?" Phyllis suggested.

Sandy thought for a moment, then shook her head. "Take the controls," she said, unhooking herself from her seat.

"Why?"

"I'm going out there for a closer look."

"San!"

"Phyl I don't want to bring the seacopter in closer to where it might be spotted. If it's just me in a hydrolung then I'll look like one of the fish. I just want to get close enough to see through the dome inside."

"Yeah but . . ."

Sandy paused. "But what?"

"Just that, if you get killed, I'm the one that's gotta tell Bud and your folks."

"It'll be okay. Trust me."

"The renowned Swift optimism," Phyllis muttered, taking Sandy's seat and motioning for Bingo to sit in her chair.

Sandy went aft to where the airlock was located. Opening an adjacent locker she pulled out a large plastic envelope which, when unsealed, contained the elements of a Swift electronic hydrolung.

First she slipped a protective bodysuit around her clothes, sealing the adhesive flaps shut. Then she attached the density control to her waist before slipping the pillow sized underwater jet pack onto her back. Finally she unfolded the flexible breathing helmet and slipped it on, fastening it securely to the neck of the bodysuit. The hydrolung unit was then attached to her waist opposite the density control. Slipping on the control gloves was the final touch before she turned to open the airlock.

Stepping in she squeezed the communicator control on her palm. "Coming through clear?"

"Please don't do this, San."

"Was that a test, or an opinion?"

"Both. Will it work?"

"The test, yes." Sandy pulled the airlock door closed then, taking a deep breath, pressed the button which began flooding the small compartment. She felt water rising rapidly up about her, filling the airlock within moments.

The hydrolung, sensing the presence of the water, automatically switched on. Sandy began taking careful breaths, her hand poised near the emergency button. When she was certain the hydrolung was operating properly she moved her hand to the lever which opened the hatch beneath her feet. A brief sensation of falling . . .

And she was floating in the ocean, suspended beneath the metal bulk of Coldwater.

Making fists with her hands she selected the lowest setting on the jet pack and drifted forward, rising when she cleared the nose of the seacopter and presenting herself to Phyllis and Bingo. A cheery wave did nothing to remove the worried looks on their faces.

"Guys, I'm fine."

"Good," replied Phyllis, "because we're not."

With a sigh Sandy turned. Aiming herself at the hydrodome she gunned the throttle on the jet pack and began moving like a torpedo through the water.

"Are you still reading me?"

"Yes," Phyllis replied. "We're getting good telemetry from your suit. I've still got the sensors focused on the dome."

"Good. Let me know if there's any change."

Effortlessly gliding through the water, Sandy skimmed closer to the sea bottom, peering through the face mask of the helmet at the approaching glowing bulk of the dome.

"I should really be close enough to see through the dome's surface," she reported, "but the glow is obscuring my view. I'm gonna get a little closer and see if that helps. Anything at your end?"

"No changes, San, but there's still an occasional odd spike on the Damonscope. I keep running the reading through the computers, but no joy."

Sandy was now within a thousand feet of the dome. She couldn't tell, but she thought she could hear a distant throbbing sound that made her uneasy in a way she couldn't quite figure out.

She happened to glance down at the sea floor, paused, then looked closer. "Phyl."

"What?"

"Sebald said the dome was seven hundred feet in diameter, right?"

"Yeah. That pretty much matches what we're seeing here."

"Yeah, but I just noticed how the ground down here has been scraped clean in what seems to be an area that borders the dome. Almost like the dome's been expanded, then withdrawn."

"Huh. Can you do that with a hydrodome?"

"I think so." Sandy studied the metal ribs which held the dome in place. "The supports seem to be flexible enough to allow some growth---"

She suddenly winced as the throbbing sound rapidly grew in intensity, spearing her through the head like an icepick. Pressing her hands to her head she began turning in all directions, trying to locate the source of the sound. It seemed to come from all directions.

Sandy then noticed that what seemed to be a mass of needle-like shapes in the distance had suddenly shifted and was now heading rapidly in her direction. As the objects came closer their forms became recognizable.

Barracudas!

Chapter Eleven: Pieces Of The Puzzle

Something inside Sandy kept trying to remind her that barracudas were generally placid fish unless provoked. But reading the expression on the faces of fishes was never quite her forte, and the barracudas now swimming in her direction seemed provoked enough.

Regardless of their attitude, the sharp teeth were clearly evident in some of the nearer ones and Sandy clenched her fists, gunning the jet pack and, she hoped, thrusting herself out of harm's way. Her teeth were gritted as she also fought to drive away the throbbing sound which seemed to grip her head in a vise.

She was becoming disoriented, at one point having to jerk her body about to prevent a collision with the surface of the hydrodome. But the maneuver resulted in pointing her back towards the barracudas and she once again gunned the jet pack, trying to stay clear of the fish.

Then a large dark shape suddenly loomed before her, and Sandy shrieked . . .

But it was the Coldwater, and Sandy blindly reached out for the hull, grabbing at a protrusion and allowing the seacopter to carry her away from the scene. She clung to the ship, trembling, letting the throbbing die away as distance increased between herself and the hydrodome.

She felt something grab at her and twisted about, only to find herself staring into the anxious eyes of Phyllis through a diving mask. Phyllis continued pulling at her, and Sandy allowed herself to be guided by the other girl and carefully stuffed up into the airlock. She felt numb and distant, hardly noticing as Phyllis squeezed up into the airlock alongside her and pressed the emergency button. The pumps howled around the both of them, filling the chamber with air, and Phyllis didn't wait but, once their heads were clear, unsealed the door and pushed it open, letting the both of them spill wetly onto the deck.

"Coming through," Bingo declared, rushing to them with the seacopter medical kit. Phyllis leaned away, pulling her mask off.

Bingo was doing the same with Sandy's mask, but Sandy flailed her hands slightly at Bingo's ministrations. "I'm okay."

"Uh huh . . . and we're gonna make sure. You're coming back with me to the lounge."

"Bingo---"

"Shut up."

"I'm going to take us out into deeper waters," Phyllis announced. "But Sandy'll have to take the controls to get us back to dry land."

Bingo nodded as she began herding a still-protesting Sandy aft. "She looks okay, but I'm still gonna give her the once over."

"Guys---"

"Sandy, you keep arguin' with Doc Winkler then riled-up guppies'll be the least of your worries. Git."

Bowing to the inevitable Sandy let herself be guided to the lounge. She admitted to herself, however, that the couch did feel rather nice after her ordeal. Not to mention having her hydrolung kit and clothes replaced by a comfortable terrycloth robe. And a steaming cup of herbal tea certainly made Bingo's examination much easier to take.

Phyllis entered the lounge as Bingo straightened up. "She's okay," Bingo concluded, with what seemed to be a touch of reluctance to Sandy's ears. "Mainly just having to catch her breath after what went on out there."

"Which brings us to the prize question," Phyllis asked. "What did happen out there?"

Sandy provided an account of what occurred out near the hydrodome. "There was no excuse for those barracudas to just charge me like that," she said."

"Tom or someone else once told me that barracudas are attracted to bright objects," Phyllis mused. "Maybe the glow of the hydrodome . . ."

"Or maybe that noise you heard in your head," Bingo said to Sandy. "Maybe the fish were hearing that too and got crazy."

Sandy nodded to herself. "None of you heard it inside the seacopter?"

The others shook their heads. "All we got was a humongous spike on the Damonscope just before you panicked," Phyllis said.

"I did not panic---"

"Oh right," Phyllis nodded. "You were just trying to impress the barracudas with an impromptu display of aquabatics."

Sandy decided to swallow her immediate reply and focus on more immediate issues.

"Did the computer ever make heads of tails of those spikes?"

"No. I've tried several of the analysis programs but, so far, nothing. I'm not the theorist or scientist Tom is."

"Umm." Sandy finished her tea, thinking. "Let's get back to shore and try and figure things out. I could also use a rest."

"Agreed," Bingo said, taking the empty cup and gathering up the medical kit before leaving the lounge.

"She was a regular ball of fire when the trouble started,"

Phyllis quietly confided to Sandy as they took the other corridor back to the flight deck. "I don't know if the jury's still out on your end, but I like her."

"Well, it was Mom who once said that the Winklers are trees who keep their fruit hidden," Sandy replied, reaching for her clothes and settling into the pilot's chair. "Now I know what she was talking about."

The Coldwater soon burst out from beneath the waves and soared up into the afternoon sky, gradually curving back towards Esmeraldas. Less than a half-hour later it was settling back down on the airport landing pad.

Returning to their hotel room, Sandy groaned and stretched out on the bed.

"Good idea," Bingo commented.

"Yeah but I don't want to sleep," Sandy said, staring up at the ceiling. "We need to consider what we've found out today---"

"Barracudas don't like glowing hydrodomes and jet-propelled swimming blondes."

"Besides that. We also need to decide where to go from here."

Phyllis had been checking the phone. "No messages."

"Now that's really scary," Sandy said. "Nospe has got to know that we overflew his property earlier. And his hydrodome crew might have spotted either me or Coldwater."

"You couldn't see into the dome?"

Sandy shook her head. "Almost like a strobe effect. Maybe you're right about it affecting the fish, although I'd still like to look at those Damonscope readings."

"I've downloaded them into my Idiot," Phyllis said, pulling out the computer. "Maybe we could contact someone back at Enterprises who could . . . hold on."

Sandy peeked over at her friend.

"We've got some responses on the Wintergruppe pictures we took," Phyllis announced, touching buttons and staring at the screen. "Let's see . . . ah! Sandy you remember those lab guys who talked to Nospe while we were in the Tomasite plant?"

Sandy nodded.

"No one at Enterprises was able to identify any of them, but the Pierce Library came through on one." Phyllis was reading something off the screen.

"Anything interesting?"

"Weird would be more like it. One of the men talking to Nospe was Doctor Johannes Tanzen, formerly Professor of Linguistics at Georg August University in Göttingen."

"Linguistics?"

Phyllis slowly nodded, still reading the screen. "The Library sent over an accompanying file. Tanzen apparently specializes in locating common roots between language groups. He also wrote a paper on . . . the genetic connection to language in higher organisms."

"Huh. Who was it said 'Language was a virus'?"

"William Burroughs," Bingo said.

"You got a Burroughs fixation," Sandy commented, fluffing some pillows and sitting up against them. "What else, Phyl?"

"Wait a moment." Phyllis was scrolling through the available information. "Ah . . . here we go. You took a picture of a blackboard in a laboratory?"

"Yeah."

"Betty Durger in our Microbiology section sent a note saying that the picture wasn't too clear, but the writing on the board seemed to be," and here Phyllis frowned in concentration, "data regarding something she calls codon redundancy. She included a comment saying it has something to do with genetic analysis." She turned a puzzled look up to Phyllis.

"Do we all go 'huh' at once or take turns?" Bingo asked.

"This is insane," Sandy said. "The more we know the crazier it gets. Wintergruppe is an industrial facility. Granted it's also devoted to research. But genetics . . . and linguistics?"

"Not to mention the Silver Cloud."

"Agreed." Sandy thought to herself for a few moments, then reached for the phone, dialing for the front desk. "Ahh-hhh yes, éste es Sandra Swift. Podría usted conectarme por favor con el Delegación comercial del Americano? Quisiera hablar con el Señor Gradich? Bueno. Gracias."

She lowered the phone. "They're still giggling at my accent. I give up."

"Gonna talk to Gradich?" asked Phyllis.

"It's about time we got some official backing on this. I get this feeling I step too much further . . . ah! Mr. Gradich? Hi. Yes, this is Sandy. I was wondering if you had a moment to spare for us?"

She listened for a bit then nodded, smiling. "Then we'll be by your office shortly. Thank you." She hung up the phone.

Phyllis crossed her arms. "This should be good. You're going to tell Gradich about the barracudas?"

"No. About Silver Cloud. Much more interesting."

Freshening up, the women left the hotel and took a taxi to the office building where the American trade delegation was located. Within moments they were admitted into Gradich's office.

"I was hoping to have a chance to meet with all of you again," Gradich said after motioning for his guests to take chairs. "You seemed to make quite a hit with Nospe at the reception the other night."

"Yes, well-lll . . . it's about Nospe and Wintergruppe we'd like to talk to you about," Sandy told him. She went on to explain how Coldwater had picked up evidence of the airship crash, diplomatically neglecting to mention the undersea visit to the hydrodome.

Gradich patiently listened, his usual cheerful expression growing more and more reserved as Sandy related her tale.

"You've . . . really uncovered something," he finally said.

"Mr. Gradich believe me, I'm aware of the importance of Wintergruppe to this area. I know I'm possibly stepping on a lot of toes with this. But I'm holding onto irrefutable scientific evidence proving that someone from the Wintergruppe facility located the wreckage of the Silver Cloud nine years ago, disassembled it and took the pieces away. For what reason I don't know. Plus there's also the problem of what happened to the . . . remains . . . of the airship's crew."

Gradich didn't say anything but gazed out his window.

Sandy swallowed a bit and decided to go one step further. "And we also have evidence that Wintergruppe is secretly operating an atomic reactor on the premises."

Gradich turned to stare at her. "What?"

"The same instruments we used to locate the crash site of the Silver Cloud also picked up information that an atomic power source is buried beneath the facility."

Gradich slowly leaned back. "God in Heaven."

"That's why we've wanted to meet with you," Sandy explained. "We've been looking for answers to what happened to the Silver Cloud but, at this point, we don't want to go any further without first checking with you."

"I appreciate that," Gradich replied. "I'm going to have to talk to the embassy in Quito about this. Probably the State Department as well." He looked up at the women as if seeing them for the first time. "You're going to remain in Esmeraldas?"

Sandy nodded. "One way or another until this business is cleared up."

"Good . . . good. I'll contact my superiors and, once they advise me, I'll be back in touch with you."

Sandy stood up, offering her hand. "I apologize for bringing all this onto your shoulders."

"Not at all, Miss Swift," Gradich replied, taking Sandy's hand. "I appreciate the fact that you come to me with this problem, rather than going out further on your own. Are you all right, Miss Newton?"

"Just swallowed something wrong," Phyllis assured him.

Thanking Gradich further, the women left the building. "He wasn't too immediately helpful," Phyllis said, pausing at the taxi stand.

Sandy shrugged. "I didn't expect much at the onset," she admitted. "But I wanted to start the ball rolling. Gradich might surprise us. Besides, if Nospe is planning to react to our flyover and hydrodome visit, I'm hoping our contacting the authorities will come out of left field as far as he's concerned."

"Or at least expected," Bingo murmured.

"Pardon?"

Bingo casually turned, pressing herself a bit closer to the others. "If we're gonna get a taxi we might want to hustle. Unless we're in a mood to share with the guys watching us from down the street."

Sandy and Phyllis looked up at the direction Bingo indicated.

"Including, I might add, our dance partner from the other night. Duran Geiner."

Chapter Twelve: New Allies

Sandy could clearly see Geiner standing in the doorway of a nearby building. He was accompanied by another man, but Sandy couldn't recognize him as having been part of the group which had been at the Green Ghost nightclub. Nor was she in any particular hurry to find out. But there wasn't a taxi anywhere in sight at the moment, and Sandy was feeling less and less in the mood to wait. Especially as Geiner and his companion were now leaving the doorway to stroll in their direction. She began turning back towards the entrance to Trade Delegation building, but it looked as if Geiner and his friend would intercept them before they managed to make it to safety. Instead, she touched Phyllis and Bingo on their shoulders. "Let's go see if we can find any transportation further up the street," she murmured, guiding them.

They began walking briskly down the sidewalk, trying to resist the temptation to look over their shoulders. But Sandy could feel Geiner's eyes on her back.

"We've all got our communicators?"

"Yes," replied Phyllis, "and don't you dare suggest that we split up."

"Wasn't going to. I'm just happy we're all packing."

"Things gonna get that bad?" Bingo asked.

"Hope not." Sandy finally peeked back. Geiner was still about thirty paces behind them, but the other man had just turned to sprint down an alley. "Oh crap."

"What's wrong?"

"They're splitting up. And it occurs to me that they know the layout of the city more than we do." Sandy looked about. "We could be getting guided towards an ambush. Dang it."

Bingo was also looking about. "What's the Spanish for 'help Police'?"

Phyllis snorted. "Yeah, and what's the Spanish for 'we've got nothing really incriminating on them, but we, on the other hand, lifted Geiner's wallet'?"

"Phyl . . ."

"San, I'm sorry for being a party pooper; but I suspect I'd even be sorrier if I ended up in an Ecuadorian jail which is, you have to admit, a severe possibility."

Sandy nodded roughly. "Okay, I see where you're coming from. So let's try calm negotiation for the time being."

"I'm liking this better and better."

"Which means, unfortunately, changing my mind and having us splitting up."

"Scratch my last comment. San---"

"I'll go down this upcoming alley, and the two of you continue walking on. We keep our communicators open and see what sort of move Geiner makes. If he follows me then that'll give us a chance to talk alone which, I suspect, is what he's looking for."

"San---"

"The two of you can then double back and we'll have Geiner between us."

Bingo looked at Phyllis. "Wow. I can hear your teeth grind."

Phyllis glared at the both of them. "Geiner's got a legal edge on us, Sandy."

"And, with all we've learned today, maybe we've got just as much of an edge. Here I go." Before Phyllis or Bingo could object, Sandy smoothly turned to her right and began walking between two buildings, almost following a group of people who seemed to be heading for a restaurant. She concentrated on not looking back, hoping that Phyllis and Bingo would continue with the plan. She reached for her communicator, switching it on. "Anything yet?"

Silence for a few moments, and Sandy almost repeated the comment before she heard Phyllis' voice. "Geiner's slowed down a bit. Now he's stopping."

Sandy continued walking deeper into the alley, passing the restaurant entrance and approaching the edge of a loading dock.

"San? Geiner's turned and is sprinting back away from us."

"Can you see why? Any cops around?"

"Nothing. He just stood there, looking as if he was thinking something over, then turned and started in the other direction . . . he's just gone out of sight around a corner."

Sandy stopped walking and moved closer to a wall. "We couldn't have scared him off. I got the idea he and his friend were waiting for us and were supposed to follow us."

"Me too. I don't like this."

Sandy quietly agreed. She looked back down the direction she came, but was now out of sight of both the sidewalk and her friends.

The small crowd which had been going to the restaurant had entered, leaving her alone in the alley.

Or not. Sandy turned at the sound of footsteps . . . And immediately dodged as Geiner's companion was almost on her. She quickly stepped back, putting distance between her and the man who was now straightening up.

He faced her calmly, slowly raising his palms up. "Mein Freund und ich haben einige Fragen für Sie."

"I'm sure," Sandy muttered. "Is he on his way here?"

The man lowered his hands and slowly began approaching Sandy.

"Stop! Halt!"

The man continued approaching and Sandy raised the hand she was holding her communicator in. The other end was now pointed at the man and Sandy firmly squeezed the pen barrel.

There was a loud pop as if a flash bulb had gone off. The man was thrown back hard against the wall. His chest was covered by what seemed to be a yellow splotch of paint.

The splotch quickly began spreading over the man's body and he flailed at it, his movements becoming slower as the substance continued spreading over him.

"Bitte," the man cried out. "Hilfe bitte."

"You'll be all right," Sandy calmly told him, wishing her knowledge of the German language went beyond aeronautical texts. "You've been hit with an adhesive shell designed to immobilize you. It'll dissolve by itself in about five minutes but, in the meantime, you'll be okay. Unable to move, but okay."

Looking around she raised the communicator. "Guys, I've got Geiner's friend tied up in the alley. You can come in now."

Silence.

"Phyl? Bingo?"

"An interesting situation," Geiner's voice replied from the small speaker. "You have my friend, and I seem to have yours."

Sandy closed her eyes, feeling ice forming in the pit of her stomach.

"They're quite all right, Miss Swift. But, if you'd really like that talk, then perhaps you could come peacefully out of the alley."

"Geiner---"

"The clock, as they say in your country, is ticking."

Sandy kept several obscenities behind her tongue and, with a final smoking look at the still-struggling form of Geiner's trussed-up confederate, pocketed her communicator and began sprinting back up the alley.

Bud hears about this, she thought, and I'll never live it down. And she added a quick prayer that she'd at least have the opportunity to live it down.

The sidewalk and street were now ahead of her. Parked along the curb was a long black sedan. As Sandy approached the sedan a door on the passenger side opened to reveal a softly smiling Geiner.

Sitting near him were Phyllis and Bingo. Everything innocent and above-board. Nothing to indicate to the casual passerby that matters were out of the ordinary.

Sandy slowly approached. "You two all right?"

The other two women nodded, their expressions not the happiest in the world. Sandy let her eyes search rapidly. No one else waiting nearby. Geiner wasn't armed. Besides him there was only the driver of the sedan and another man who was standing on the other side of the car, watching her.

Sandy slowly crossed her arms. "All right, Mr. Geiner."

He shook his head. "Not out here in the open, Miss Swift. There've already been far too many mistakes made. Too much trouble. I convinced your associates that I think we need to start working together for a change, and the less eyes watching the better for all concerned."

Sandy raised an eyebrow.

"In spite of what things might look like," Geiner continued, "none of you are in any danger. As part of my arrangement your friends still have their communicators and, if you wish, you may use yours to contact your people at Swift Enterprises now."

Sandy looked back at Phyllis and Bingo. Phyllis let out a small shrug. Her eyes still on Geiner, Sandy slowly allowed herself to slide into the sedan, sitting next to Bingo.

"We'll just sit here at the curb and talk in peace for a while," Geiner said, leaning back as the door closed. "By the way, was it really necessary to zap poor Eugen like that? He and I were only making sure you weren't being followed by Nospe's people."

He now had even more of Sandy's attention than he had before. "Huh? But don't you work for Wintergruppe?"

Geiner was slowly shaking his head. "That's my immediate cover. Mine and the cover of my associates here. In truth, Miss Swift, my friends and I are agents for BSB. German counter-intelligence."

The ice wasn't breaking up in Sandy's stomach. "And I'm supposed to believe that?"

Geiner shrugged. "Obviously I'm not carrying around any sort of identification with me which would prove that, but I've allowed my photograph to be taken by Miss Newton. You're able to contact your people. I'm sure that, with time, you could verify my claim."

Sandy looked at Phyllis. "He's been all sorts of cooperative," Phyllis admitted to her. "Plus . . ."

"Plus, as I've said, I've left them with their communicators which, I'm sure, would be just as formidable as the one you've used on Eugen. Which reminds me." Geiner reached into a pocket of his suit and produced an item which he passed over to Sandy. "I believe this is yours."

Sandy accepted the item which turned out to be the communicator she'd originally planted on Geiner. Putting it aside she nodded at Geiner. "All right. Now what about the diary you stole from our hotel room?"

Geiner glanced at Phyllis.

"Sandy, we really don't have any proof that Geiner and his friends were the ones who broke into our hotel room and stole the diary," Phyllis explained. "We do know, on the other hand, that Nospe and Wintergruppe have been hiding something."

"But you were at the nightclub," Sandy pointed out to Geiner.

Geiner agreed. "Ever since you arrived in Esmeraldas my men and I have been keeping you under surveillance. I had hoped we could talk while at the nightclub but you were rather ah- hhhhhh . . .excitable."

Sandy felt herself blushing.

"We were so busy watching you that we neglected to keep your hotel room observed, which allowed Nospe's people to break in. However, allow me to make amends."

Once again Geiner reached into his suit and produced yet another familiar item. Barton Swift's diary. Despite herself Sandy yelped and grabbed at it.

"I located it in Nospe's office and sort of `claimed' it,"

Geiner said with a small smile and a shrug.

Sandy was rapidly leafing through it. "It looks all right," she murmured.

"It should be. Apparently Nospe kept it to himself while it was in his possession. I took the trouble of examining the cover for fingerprints. Other than mine and a few others, Nospe's are the only ones I've identified as having handled the book recently."

Sandy lifted her eyes from the pages to stare at Geiner. "The floor's yours."

"For some years now the German government has been suspecting the activities of Wintergruppe here in Ecuador," Geiner explained. "I was sent as part of a team to infiltrate and try to find anything out."

"What exactly is your organization suspecting?"

Geiner sighed. "Some sort of . . . illegal collusion between Nospe and the Ecuadorian government. We haven't been able to put our fingers on anything definite, but there've been rumors. Suspicions. Some instances of misappropriated technology. Several German technical experts suddenly leaving to devote themselves to research here which has no genuine bearing on what Wintergruppe was originally established for."

Sandy thought back to the information concerning Wintergruppe's apparent interest in linguistics and genetics. "Misappropriated technology?"

"Again, nothing definite," Geiner admitted. "But it's been noted that a good number of Wintergruppe's physical plant budgeting, as well as technician hirings, could have quite a bit to do with nuclear engineering."

So neither Phyllis or Bingo had mentioned the hidden reactor. "You're actually on the inside at Wintergruppe," Sandy pointed out to Geiner. "You haven't been able to find out anything?"

The agent shook his head. "My position with Wintergruppe is mainly involved with the clerical and accounting end. I haven't been able to gain entrance to the technical sections."

"Including, I presume, the hydrodome."

"Ah-hhhhh." Geiner's eyes slitted. "So you also suspect the hydrodome."

"Admittedly it's . . . a closed book."

Geiner agreed. "My team has spent months trying to uncover any information we could about what goes on down there. No progress. Nothing. And then you and your friends come down and, in a matter of days, manage to shake things up more than we've ever been able to."

"You don't seem too surprised by our presence here."

"We were alerted when Nospe's people performed the break-in at your country's storage installation," Geiner said. "We kept matters under observation and noted your coming to Ecuador."

"Oh?"

Bingo gently touched Sandy's hand. "They're the ones who sent that message to the seacopter `bout the Green Ghost."

Sandy nodded dully, then suddenly glanced back over her shoulder at a movement just on the corner of her perception. But it was only Geiner's companion Eugen; stonily staring at her through the sedan window and still brushing off the now hardened and brittle fragments of the immobilizing shell.

Geiner waved him off with a motion of his fingers, but was also trying to hide a chuckle. "I'm just happy you don't go in for more lethal accessories. But I hope you can see why I wanted to clear things up between us."

Sandy turned back to him. "Not that you've done that great a job," she said. "I mean, if you were responsible for the message we got on the trip down here, couldn't you have been a bit more clear?"

"Regrettably no, Miss Swift. You see . . . we knew an expedition from Swift Enterprises was coming to Ecuador. But we didn't know who else was accompanying you. We didn't want to take the chance of inadvertently alerting any potential opposition. Our plan was to meet with you later on and use the `Green Ghost' message as a password but, unfortunately," and here Geiner shrugged, "things got slippery."

"And this helps?" Sandy raised her grandfather's diary. "Stealing this out of Nospe's office? Not that I'm ungrateful, but--"

"I'm professional enough to where I was able to get the diary without anyone being the wiser," Geiner assured her. "Plus, I want Nospe to continue to be on the defensive. Just as he's been ever since you've arrived."

Sandy sighed. "What exactly do you want, Mr. Geiner?"

Geiner leaned closer. "As I've said, you've shaken things up around here. I would've liked to have been able to do that, but it would've compromised my cover. Now, however, Nospe and his people have their eyes on you. Plus the diary that had been taken has now been taken once again. Nospe's going to be more nervous than before. Hopefully he'll be nervous enough to make the sort of mistake I and my team need to secure definite information.

"What I want from you, Miss Swift, is to continue stirring the waters."

Sandy studied Geiner from behind hard eyes and tightly pressed lips. "I'm not putting myself and my friends in any sort of danger for your sake," she finally said.

"I wouldn't ask you to," Geiner replied. "My team and I will be in position to run interference if things get rough. You simply continue with your investigation and, whenever you make some sort of progress, please get in touch with me."

He produced a card which he passed to Sandy. "That's a private line which will reach me any time of day. Of course, you already have my Wintergruppe work number."

"We do?"

Geiner smiled. "From my wallet. Which . . ."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess we could give that back now. It's at our hotel."

"Then that'll be our next destination," Geiner said, leaning back to tap the driver on the shoulder and give instructions. "You can send the wallet down and everything will be fine."

"Oh sure." A hint of sourness entered Sandy's voice. "Now, on top of everything else, we're caught between a corporation with a hidden agenda and the German Secret Service."

Geiner at least had the grace to look apologetic. "I wish there was more I could do to improve the situation."

"I'd like a home cooked meal," Phyllis spoke up.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Preferably at home."

Chapter Thirteen: "Full Fathom Five . . ."

Upon waking up the next morning Sandy decided that a session of work on board Coldwater was called for. "I don't know about you," she confided to the others as they left the taxi at the airport, "but things are starting to feel sort of pressed in around here."

"You want an argument from me?" Phyllis asked. "If we're gonna talk sneaky and stuff then I'd feel lots better in more familiar surroundings."

"You think our room was bugged?"

"With all that's been going on, that would just about be the icing on the cake."

Behind them Bingo tugged two large shopping bags. Sandy and Phyllis had obliged her on the trip to the airport, stopping for a while to allow her to make some purchases at several of the vendors who'd just been opening up. She now followed Sandy and Phyllis, humming happily.

Climbing on board the seacopter, Sandy waited until Bingo slipped by with her cargo, then sealed the vehicle shut. "There. Safe at last."

"Debatable," Phyllis murmured, poking at the buttons of her Tiny idiot as she followed Bingo back to the lounge. Sandy, in the meantime, opened one of the lockers, tapping the combination for a small storage safe within. Opening the safe she slipped the diary and the Oralum sample inside before shutting it again.

"There," she breathed, feeling secure for the first time in days. Giving the safe a small pat she went to the lounge, following her nose as it picked up the gently rising scents of Bingo working in the galley.

Poking her head into the galley she saw Bingo clattering about with pots and pans while, at the same time, loading items into the storage bins. "Little One, what're you up to?"

"Making myself busy," Bingo replied. "We'll be having brunch."

It occurred to Sandy that eating during their adventure had been, at best, haphazard. A decent and peacefully prepared meal, courtesy of a Cordon Bleu chef, could only be considered as nothing less than a step upward. Nodding to herself she went to sit alongside Phyllis on the long couch.

"Well here's one worry over," Phyllis said, staring at the screen of her Tiny idiot. "A confirmation that Duran Geiner is, indeed, an agent for the Bundesamt fur Verassungsschutz. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Germany's domestic counter- intelligence organization."

Sandy took the computer from Phyllis to look at the screen. "So why aren't I doing handsprings for joy?"

"Ummmm . . . low ceiling?"

Sandy scrolled through the information. "Ah. You called in favors from Dale and Brattleboro at the Bureau."

"Uh huh."

Sandy handed the computer back. "I don't like this idea of being used by a German spy organization."

"Even if we're working for the same goals?"

Sandy shrugged. "If the German government has a legitimate suspicion against Nospe and Wintergruppe then they should be able to come out into the open with it."

"What about the possible connection with the Ecuadorian government?" Before Sandy could reply Phyllis continued. "There was that convenient delay of the quarantine when we arrived. Okay, so the local officials had a good excuse. And our friend, Mayor Marquez, sort of has a tendency to listen close whenever we mention Wintergruppe or Nospe."

Sandy gave her friend a small smile. "You know, I somehow felt that if you hung around me long enough some of my suspicious nature would rub off on you."

Phyllis poked the tip of her tongue out at her. Both women then turned as Bingo began settling plates of food on the table in front of them.

"Oh my, this looks good," Sandy said, reaching for her napkin. "What're we eating?"

"We're starting out with sopa de tomates con platanos," Bingo explained. "That's tomato soup with bananas for the linguistically challenged among us. This over here is llapingachos, otherwise known as the local version of the potato pancake, and on this plate is lomo salteado which is just thin beef strips covered in onions and tomatoes."

"Smells fabulous," Phyllis said.

Bingo smiled, heading back to the galley for her own plate.

"You're bound and determined to outdo your uncle with this sort of cooking."

"Well-ll, I did want to experiment with some of the local cuisine," Bingo replied, coming back to the couch. "I considered trying caldo de pata."

"What's caldo de pata?" Sandy asked.

"Boiled cow hooves," Bingo serenely said, helping herself to food.

Sandy and Phyllis froze.

"But I decided against it."

"Sandy and Phyllis slowly resumed eating.

"I also decided against trying to cook tronquito."

Sandy eyed her warily. "Which is?"

"Trust me," Bingo said as she reached for some llapingachos, "you do not want to know." Reaching beside her she picked up a small bowl of a thick vegetable laden liquid and placed it alongside the courses on the table. "This, on the other hand, is aji, the local picante sauce. Be careful in using it. It's got a bite worse than what my uncle can make."

The women sampled the sauce and immediately confirmed Bingo's description. Fortunately, Bingo's shopping had also netted several bottles of a locally bottled blackberry juice which she had thoughtfully served in iced containers.

"Bingo we may have to retire your uncle," Sandy finally declared. "This is delicious."

"Thank'ee."

"In the meantime, though . . . and maybe it's because of the food . . . but my head's clearer than it has been in a while. We should plan our next move."

"Go home and let the Germans and Ecuadorians sort it out," Phyllis suggested around a mouthful of lomo salteado.

"Believe it or not, I'm sympathizing with you," Sandy said as she relaxed with her juice. "But I can't throw this away just yet."

"Oh I agree. I wasn't expecting you to. But, as they say, hope is the thing with feathers."

"Emily Dickinson," Bingo replied, gathering up some of the dishes and heading back for the galley.

Phyllis watched her go. "I like her lot. I really do. But I really also wonder about her."

"Let's review," Sandy said, scrunching up on the couch. She began counting on her fingers. "Silver Cloud crashes fifteen years ago. Seven years later Wintergruppe arrives and disassembles Silver Cloud."

"Five years ago they get the hydrodome franchise and set it up offshore," Phyllis added. "And that reminds me of something I found out a while ago and wanted to tell you. Friend Nospe wasn't the first guy in charge of the Wintergruppe complex here. He's only been in Ecuador six years. Prior to that the complex was being run by a . . . Wilhelm Ruhl."

"Mmmm . . . anything on him?"

Phyllis shook her head. "He died, which is why Nospe is currently in charge."

Sandy rubbed idly at her chin, gazing out the window at the airport. "We've got to get down into the hydrodome. That's where the answers are."

She grew quiet, which caused Phyllis to slowly grow cold. "San . . ."

"I'm not talking about anything underhanded or dangerous."

"So why am I not relieved?"

"Probably the aji."

"I heard that," Bingo called out from the galley.

"Phyllis listen." Sandy turned towards her. "I know what Geiner told us about mucking up the waters and making Nospe nervous. But maybe there's a better way of doing this."

"I'm open to suggestion."

"You're closer to the Sales and Legal goings-on than I am, right?"

Phyllis shrugged.

"Can you access the hydrodome lease contract? See if there's a safety or inspection clause somewhere that we can invoke that'll get us down there."

Phyllis slowly nodded, reaching for her computer. "That might work. The way that dome was glowing . . ." She began working.

Bingo had finished with her chores and was returning to the couch with another cold bottle of juice. "I know I slept through Mr. Wizard," she asked Sandy, "but what was so important about the way that dome was glowing?"

"A hydrodome is supposed to be transparent," Sandy explained to Bingo. "If Wintergruppe's dome is glowing like it is, then something's really wrong."

"Like what?"

Sandy shrugged. "I wish Tom was here. He'd do a better job."

"What about those weird radiation spikes we were picking up back when you were swimming around down there?"

"Good question." Clearing a space on the table, Sandy unfolded the computer terminal, switching it on. "We can access sensor data from here."

"Got it," Phyllis said. "Thought so. Our equipment lease contract firmly states that Swift Enterprises can perform on-site inspections if there's a question of legitimate risk."

Sandy nodded to herself, her fingers moving on the computer keyboard. Figures and graphs began appearing on the screen. "Phyllis where did you . . . oh. Here it is."

The women gathered around to look at the screen. "I'm just here for moral support," Bingo said to the others.

Phyllis pointed to a graph. "See? The closest the Damonscope analysis came to describing what we were detecting was as some form of electrical discharge."

"I really wish Tom was here," Sandy muttered. "If this is just electrical discharges then there's no need for the hydrodome to be glowing like it is."

"Unless it has something to do with some malfunctioning equipment or something," Phyllis pointed out.

Sandy made a decision and nodded. "Okay, kids. Next stop Wintergruppe. It's time we got to the bottom of this."

"I'd . . . really appreciate you using a different phrase, San."

"Sorry."

Leaving the Coldwater the women summoned a taxi, giving the driver instructions to take them up the coast to the Wintergruppe facility.

"Taking the direct approach?" Phyllis asked.

"Seems the best way," Sandy concluded. "Maybe our problem is that we prepare too much . . . Bingo's excellent attention to cuisine notwithstanding."

"Oh thank'ee!"

"But do you remember all those movies where the hero gets trapped, and he tells the Bad Guy that he's made a complete report to his superiors . . . or contacted reinforcements . . . and the Bad Guy goes 'ha ha' and calls his bluff?"

"Yeah."

"Well . . . this time let's leave a message with Gradich, our FBI friends in Albany and, last but not least, whoever's minding the burners back at Enterprises."

Phyllis reached for her cell phone. "And what happens when Nospe mentions the missing diary?"

"Huh! Frankly, I'd be surprised if he brought the subject up."

The taxi soon reached the front gate of Wintergruppe and the women paid the driver and got out. Sandy noticed the security guard immediately recognizing them and quickly picking up the phone at his station. The women politely kept their distance.

A few minutes later one of the Wintergruppe carts sped up to the gate. At its wheel was Dr. Sebald, one of the people in charge of the hydrodome.

Leaving the cart, Sebald trotted up to the gate which was opened at his approach. He anxiously approached the women. "Fräulein Swift. I was not aware you were going to visit us again."

"Business matters bring us here, Dr. Sebald," Sandy explained. "Is Herr Nospe available?"

"Herr Nospe is currently supervising some production problems," Sebald explained. "Perhaps if you could tell me . . ."

"Since you're involved with the hydrodome," Sandy said, "then that'd be sufficient. Phyllis?"

Stepping closer, Phyllis extended her Tiny idiot to Sebald. "We're here to invoke the on-site inspection clause as stated in our contract with your company."

Sebald looked at the page displayed on the computer, then raised uncomprehending eyes to the women. "Fräulein---"

"We have reason to believe," Phyllis smoothly continued, "that there are safety problems involving the hydrodome and are here to make a direct inspection."

Sebald seemed to stand on firmer ground now. "I can assure all of you that the hydrodome is working properly."

"That's what we're here to determine," Sandy told him. "We want to be taken down to it. Now."

"But---"

"It should be pointed out," Phyllis said, "that a refusal to allow on-site inspection can be used as grounds to cancel the lease."

Sebald seemed to think it over. He then went back to the cart and picked up a small phone, speaking softly but excitedly into it for several moments.

"If the shooting starts," Bingo murmured, "I think we can make the jungle."

But Sebald was now slowly walking back towards them. "I have instructions to take you to Doktor Nospe," he said in a soft, defeated voice. "He will be waiting for us at the hydrodome jetty."

So now it's Doctor Nospe, Sandy silently thought as she and the others followed Sebald to the cart, climbing in behind the scientist. Starting up the cart, Sebald drove them towards the coast, aiming for the point where the long causeway to the hydrodome touched the shore. Sandy wondered if it was her imagination telling her that Sebald was taking both a slower pace and a longer route than when they had been on their earlier tour of the premises.

Nospe was a lone figure standing near the causeway, frowning at the approaching cart. His expression didn't improve as Sebald brought the cart to a stop and climbed out, walking quickly over and speaking quickly.

Sandy tried to follow as closely as possible without appearing too nosy, and nothing could hide the obvious way both Nospe and Sebald looked at her, their conversation fading into silence.

Nospe then came to her, Sebald fading into the background. "I'm sorry you feel this is necessary, Miss Swift," he said. "I'm hoping there's something I can do to dissuade you from taking this step."

Sandy crossed her arms. "I'm sorry as well, Mr. Nospe. Believe me. You and your people have been nothing short of courteous. But we've received recent . . . information . . . which indicates severe trouble with the hydrodome. As a representative of Swift Enterprises, I feel obligated to address these issues."

"May I know what this information is?"

Sandy had silently dared Nospe to raise the issue of the diary, but apparently he wasn't going to take the bait. Too simple. "We can discuss it later. After the inspection."

Nospe was about to protest. "Or we can hold this discussion in more formal surroundings," Sandy added. "Perhaps also bringing in the Ecuadorian government, representatives from Hemispak and the International Atomic Energy Agency."

At the mention of the last agency Nospe froze ever so slightly. He quickly recovered. "Believe me, Miss Swift, I want to be helpful," he slowly said. "But I must also consider your personal safety. If, as you pointed out, there are issues involved, then certainly you and your companions wouldn't want to place yourself at risk."

Sandy remained silent.

Nospe glanced back at Sebald, then finally turned back to the women. "All right," he murmured with a sigh. "Maybe . . ."

He shook away whatever thought was in his head. "This way," he said, indicating the causeway. He and Sebald led the way, the others following.

Approaching the causeway Sandy could see that it was made up of two broad tracks flanking a metal bridge. On one of the tracks waited a capsule-shaped shuttle car.

"We use these to transport personnel and equipment to the hydrodome," Nospe explained in a dull voice, indicating the car. "We have larger ones for cargo and we use the central bridge in case of power failure---"

"Mr. Nospe," Sandy gently said, "I know you're upset with us. There's no need to play tour guide."

Nospe had been opening the door to the shuttle car. "I appreciate that, Miss Swift," he said, turning back to her. "I just hope none of us regret our decision."

Climbing into the car the women made themselves comfortable upon the cushioned bench which lined the wall, while Nospe and Sebald followed behind them, sealing the door. Nospe then pressed a button and the car began smoothly traveling down the track, picking up speed.

Sandy couldn't help but keep her eyes on Nospe. He was returning her stare with equal silence, and Sandy felt that he knew everything about the diary and the seacopter inspection. It seemed as if one was waiting for the other to bring the subject up, but Sandy felt bound and determined to remain quiet.

Almost five minutes later the car slowed to a stop at the surface link to the hydrodome. Opening the door, Nospe stepped out, followed by Sebald, and they helped the women out of the car. They were at the edge of a broad circular metal platform. As well as two helipads the platform carried a generator building, a small dock and a metal structure resembling a truncated pyramid.

Nospe pointed to the last structure. "That's where the elevator down to the dome is located. Ladies?"

He and Sebald led the women to the building, and Sandy noted how Bingo's fingers were brushing near a pocket of her jeans. The pocket where her communicator was. Then Sandy realized that her fingertips were also brushing at her waist.

Entering the building the women were led to a large vertical column. Going to it, Sebald pulled a switch and a circular hatchway slowly opened in the column, revealing the interior of an elevator large enough to accommodate trucks as well as people.

"After you," Nospe offered.

Sandy resisted the urge to give Nospe a slow look and, instead, stepped through the hatchway, followed by the others. The hatchway then swung shut. He then went to a small control panel and murmured into a microphone mounted upon it.

The entire chamber hummed. A sinking feeling followed and the elevator began descending. The women could see that the elevator wall panels were transparent and, as they slid beneath the surface, they could clearly see out into the ocean.

"A rather impressive ride," Phyllis said.

"It can be," Nospe agreed. "We run lights further down so as to keep the view as the water grows darker . . . Miss Swift?"

Sandy shook her head. "I'm all right," she told the others, although it wasn't quite the truth. As the elevator continued down she felt a slight uneasiness begin to pass over her. Maybe she had been too quick to praise Bingo's cooking . . .

But no, it was something else. Something familiar and, as she found herself leaning against the cool surface of the elevator wall, she began to realize what it was. At first she thought she was hearing the machinery of the elevator. But she now knew where she'd heard the sound before. It was the throbbing she'd heard while swimming near the hydrodome.

And it was gradually growing louder.

"Guys . . ."

Everyone turned towards her as if in slow motion. The throbbing sound began to grow in volume.

Sandy's attention was then drawn to the center of the elevator. A glowing green mist was slowly rising through the floor.

As she watched the mist it coalesced, took sudden form . . . Became the glowing green figure of an elderly man who was pointing a lean finger directly at her. A man who, to Sandy's eyes, seemed uncomfortably familiar. A face from old memories and photographs . . .

The face of her grandfather. Barton Swift.

He was trying to say something to Sandy. Reaching out to her now. Sandy was struggling as if caught in amber, trying as hard as possible to reply. To do anything. But the noises inside her were driving all thoughts away.

Noises, including a piercing scream from her as she collapsed on the elevator floor.

Chapter Fourteen: Ghostly History

Sandy felt herself gradually rising from within layers of warm chocolate clouds and she cuddled deeper within the feeling . . . Then her eyes snapped open and she sat up. "What?"

She was in a hospital bed. Around her was a bright and clean room; sunlight streaming through a shuttered window. Her Wintergruppe costume had been replaced by a hospital gown.

"Hey!"

The door to the room opened and a nurse poked her head in. "Ah, Señora Swift. Dèjeme ir consiguen al doctor y a sus amigos."

She was about to close the door, and Sandy was about to protest, when the door opened wider and Phyllis and Bingo burst into the room, rushing to the bedside. Sandy, to this point feeling fine, now faced the threat of strangulation as she became enclosed in two different bear hugs.

"Okay, okay . . . I'm glad to see you guys too," she finally managed to breathe out.

"Had us scared," Phyllis said, drawing back a bit. Bingo nodded in wide-eyed agreement.

"Okay but, first things first. Where am I?"

Phyllis gulped a bit, catching her breath and calming. "We're back in Esmeraldas. You're in the hospital." Her eyes flicked to Bingo.

"You were showing all the signs of electrical shock," Bingo explained to Sandy. "You screamed, then collapsed."

"Bingo administered CPR while we went back to the surface,"

Phyllis continued. "Nospe then hustled us into one of the Wintergruppe helicopters and we broke all speed records getting you here."

Sandy had several hundred more questions to ask, but the nurse returned, followed by both a doctor and Eric Gradich. Phyllis and Bingo drew back and allowed the doctor to look Sandy over. Beginning in halting English . . . but speeding up once he realized Sandy understood Spanish . . . the doctor confirmed Bingo's diagnosis of electrical shock and went over the treatment she had received while at the hospital. So far there hadn't been any indications of internal injuries, but the doctor suggested she might consult a specialist as soon as possible.

Thanking the doctor for his efforts, Sandy made herself comfortable in the bed under the watchful eyes of both the nurse and Bingo. Phyllis and Gradich, in the meantime, had taken seats near her bed.

"I need to tell you now," Phyllis told her. "Nospe and Sebald and a few others from Wintergruppe are waiting out in the hall."

Sandy's eyes narrowed. "What do they want?"

"San . . ." Phyllis rubbed at her forehead tiredly, "I think we need to move carefully with Nospe. He seemed just as surprised as we were over what happened."

Sandy slowly nodded. "Okay," she said, with a glance at Gradich, "let's go ahead and put the cards on the table. What exactly did happen in the hydrodome elevator?"

Phyllis and Bingo looked at each other. "We saw him,"

Phyllis said in a small voice, looking back at Sandy.

"You saw---"

"A face off a picture my Dad has from when he and your Dad ran around a lot," Phyllis said with a small catch in her voice. "Your grandfather."

Gradich let out a small gasp. "What the---"

Sandy held up a hand for silence. "Did he say anything?" she asked Phyllis.

"No. He just pointed at you and you collapsed. Then he sort of broke up into a cloud of green light that faded away." Phyllis let out a long breath. "But it was him, San. I'd swear it."

"I would too," Sandy replied, feeling a slight strain between her eyes. She rubbed at them before looking over at Gradich.

The man sighed. "Miss Swift . . . ladies . . . I don't honestly know what to say. I've got people from the embassy in Quito on my back, plus the State Department. This is beginning to get way the heck out of my range here."

"Join the club," Sandy muttered. "Mr. Gradich I apologize. I really do. It certainly wasn't my intention to get you or your office into any sort of difficulty. But this whole business keeps growing by leaps and bounds."

He was watching her carefully. "The doctor suggested getting more detailed help."

"Which I interpreted as a tacit request to go home to my own doctor. I know." Sandy resumed rubbing at the space between her eyes.

"So what are your intentions?"

"And now a tacit request from you."

"Miss Swift---"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gradich." Sandy leaned back against her pillows, accepting a glass of water from Bingo. "That was mean of me." She sipped at the water, thinking. "You might have your superiors in Quito, as well as the State Department, contact the FBI office in Albany. The agents there have information which will help fill in some of the gaps and, hopefully, help them decide a course of action."

Gradich seemed to accept this. "And you?"

"I . . . suspect our end of this business will be concluded in a few days," Sandy said as she contemplated her water glass. She could not only feel Gradich's eyes on her, but Phyllis and Bingo's as well.

"So you're not leaving immediately?" Gradich asked.

"The doctor seems to feel I can be released, now that I'm conscious again. A few days rest and I can move on. Of course I'd keep the hospital informed if my condition changed."

Gradich had stood up. "And what about your . . . grandfather?"

"You mean his ghost?" Sandy looked up into Gradich's face. "That, Mr. Gradich, is another reason why I need a few more days."

Gradich picked up his briefcase and reluctantly moved to the door. "I'll do what I can with Quito and State," he told Sandy.

"Thank you."

"But I can't guarantee anything. Like I said, this is way over my head."

"Believe me, I'm in the same boat as you."

"That's where you're wrong," Gradich assured her. "I know where my grandfather's buried." Nodding at Sandy and the others he left the room.

"Parthian shot," Sandy murmured.

"Got to admit he's in his rights," Phyllis pointed out.

"Oh I'm not going to deny it. For some reason I seem to be causing the most amount of trouble around here. Stirring things up. I'll bet friend Geiner is really enjoying this . . . which reminds me. Is he one of the people outside?"

"No, amazingly enough."

Sandy thought for a moment. "I want to talk to Nospe."

Phyllis nodded and went to the door.

"Alone."

Phyllis stopped. "San---"

"Alone, Phyl. Please. Maybe he'll talk easier about what happened if it's just him and me."

Phyllis stared at her for a long moment, then at Bingo. Then, motioning for Bingo to follow, she left the room. Sandy quietly asked the nurse to leave and she did so, arriving at the door just as Nospe entered.

"Miss Swift," Nospe said, carefully closing the door behind him.

Sandy nodded. "Herr Nospe."

He kept his back to the door, his posture that of a school student who'd been caught at something by his teacher. "I'm glad to see you've recovered."

"I'm glad to be recovered. Now." Sandy primly folded her hands onto her lap. "I think one of us here has something to explain."

Nospe took a few steps closer, nervously moving a hand through his hair. "Miss Swift . . . I'm very sorry for all that's happened---"

"An explanation, Herr Nospe."

Nospe sighed, looking several years older. "Then I take it, Miss Swift, that what you saw was indeed---"

"Barton Swift. My grandfather."

Nospe nodded tiredly. "We had confirmed as such by our own research . . ."

Sandy lay in bed, patiently waiting, watching Nospe as he went to the window to peer outside.

"I want to tell you everything, Miss Swift. Believe me. I never should've allowed you to try and go down to the hydrodome, but Sebald and I had hoped that if your grandfather's . . . image . . . materialized and confronted you then somehow it would answer several questions. I'm afraid it didn't."

"Is my grandfather alive, Herr Nospe?"

"I honestly do not know." Nospe looked from the window to her. "Please believe me."

"Then what in God's name did I see in that elevator?"

"Miss Swift!" Nospe's expression bordered on agony. "I wish I could tell you more. I do. But I've been in contact with my government and I am under orders not to reveal anything else until the situation is examined further."

Bidding a quiet farewell to patience, Sandy slapped the sheets of the bed. Hard. "That's not gonna cut it, Herr Nospe. Not an inch. After days of finagling and maneuvering I finally get a chance to go down to your hydrodome. While on the way I'm visited by an image of my grandfather. Now . . . you're not going to stand there and tell me that the German government is suddenly deciding to keep everything secret. I need answers, and I intend to get them."

"Miss Swift---"

"What did your people do with the remains of the Silver Cloud?"

"I . . ." Nospe suddenly turned and headed for the door.

"Herr Nospe!"

The man stopped, turning to look at her. "I must contact my government once again, Miss Swift. I must impress upon them the seriousness of what has happened."

"Explain it to me now!"

Nospe shook his head. "I cannot. I thought perhaps that if . . ." He once again approached the bed. "Was there anything that happened out of your contact with the image of your grandfather? Anything you could tell me?"

Sandy slowly shook her head.

Nospe seemed defeated. "Then I have no other option other than to wait until I hear from Berlin. I'm sorry." He turned once more to the door.

"You walk out that door, Herr Nospe, and I'll continue to try my hardest to find answers on my own."

"Please don't," Nospe said over his shoulder. "I can tell you that I've been living with this much longer than you. And you haven't begun to experience what I have."

He left the room, and Sandy fell back with a frustrated moan as Phyllis and Bingo came back in.

"So I take it . . ." Phyllis began.

"He's hiding behind some sort of restriction set up by the German government," Sandy replied, scowling at the ceiling. "Apparently he and Sebald were hoping that I'd have some sort of important reaction to seeing my . . . the ghost. But whatever happened it wasn't enough to allow him to slip around the restrictions. At least that's his story." She turned her head about. "Are my clothes in here? I'm in a mood to leave."

Bingo had been quietly watching her. Now she spoke up. "You could use some more rest."

Sandy almost used a rude word. "I feel rested. I feel fine. I just want to get out and do."

Phyllis had recovered Sandy's regular clothes from the hospital room closet. "And what're you wanting to do?" she asked, handing them over to her.

"Are we checked out of the hotel?"

Phyllis and Bingo exchanged a look. "I guess we could be, if we need to be checked out. Most of our stuff's already on the seacopter after our get-together with Geiner."

"Who I'm in a serious mood to call," Sandy said, pulling herself into her clothes. "Do me this: go to the hotel and get what's left of our stuff and check out. Then meet Bingo and me at Coldwater. We're moving back there for the duration."

Phyllis nodded. "Just as comfortable there, plus we don't have to worry about the water. Are we . . . are we leaving soon?"

"Not quite yet."

Phyllis gave a worried glance to Bingo, then quietly left the room.

Bingo continued to watch Sandy as she dressed. "You took a pretty big bite of lightning there," she said. "You okay with walking?"

Sandy nodded. "How long was I out, by the way?"

"This is the day after we tried to go down to the hydrodome."

"Ouch." Sandy finished tugging at her blouse and looked up to see Bingo's silently examining face. "I'll live."

"I guess so," Bingo reluctantly agreed. "I'm just wonderin' what the heck is it we all saw, and what it's gonna mean."

"You're not alone, Bingo. That was definitely my grandfather."

"Then . . ."

"I wish I could close up that pause in your comment, but I can't." Sandy stood up, took a few experimental steps and seemed pleased with the results. "I've been running possibilities over and over in my head but I can't come up with anything." She sighed.

"Wishing for your brother to be here again?"

"Huh. You want to know how bad the situation is?"

"Well . . ."

"I don't even think Tom could figure this out by now."

Checking out of the hospital the women took a taxi to the airport, after first making a few detours to allow Bingo to stock up with more supplies for the Coldwater galley. "I get this feeling we'll still be here for a while," she explained to Sandy.

"I won't argue."

"Sorta wish you would."

The women returned to the seacopter where Bingo once again took charge. "I know you're the Avengin' Angel and all that," she said to Sandy, "but you're gonna relax in the back and eat a nice meal before we all go kyoodling about. `Sides, it's gotten too late in the day for adventurin'."

Sandy had long ago stopped trying to figure out what circumstances triggered Bingo's accent. Besides, in spite of her declarations on how well she felt, fatigue was starting to pull on her and she concluded that she could think better after another rest and one of Bingo's meals. Nodding half to herself she trotted back towards the seacopter lounge.

Bingo went forward and found Phyllis in the co-pilot's chair, sitting before the sensor console and studying the computer screen.

"We're ho-ome."

"So I hear and see," Phyllis replied, although her eyes remained fixed on the computer screen.

Bingo leaned closer. "What'cher doing?"

"Got back from the hotel and decided to do a little research of my own," Phyllis said, nodding at the screen. "I was thinking back to some things that had been said. Mainly about how the `ghost sightings' had been a fairly recent occurrence."

"That's right," Bingo agreed, leaning against a bulkhead. "I remember that. So you're now thinking that maybe all these sightings were of Sandy's grandfather?"

Phyllis didn't answer immediately but, instead, turned slightly back and forth in her chair.

Then: "I really don't know. I've just been looking at available facts, combining and cross- referencing evidence along paths that others might've missed." Phyllis turned more towards Bingo. "For instance: Marquez implied that the majority of the ghost sightings were experienced by visitors to the country, rather than natives.

"I've been performing searches for accounts of these sightings. Concise reports of paranormal activity in this part of the world isn't the greatest, but I've managed to locate enough hard data to learn two important things."

"Such as?"

"First: the majority of the visitors who reported ghost sightings originally came to Ecuador via Colombia."

"And the second thing?"

"The second thing?" Phyllis sighed and reached over to switch off the computer. "The second thing is that, without a single exception, everyone who's experienced a ghost sighting has had a relation who flew on board the Silver Cloud."

Chapter Fifteen: Into The Breach

Sandy had stretched out upon the couch in the lounge, a damp cloth covering her eyes, but she lifted it to peek at the sight of Phyllis and Bingo approaching.

Here come The Gloom Sisters again, she thought and immediately quashed it. It wasn't as if Phyllis and Bingo always had some sort of bizarre or troublesome news when they had that expression on their faces.

"Hi."

"We wanted to talk," Phyllis said.

Then again . . .

Sandy sighed and adjusted herself up into a sitting position. "I'm gonna get something dumped on me, aren't I?"

"Well-lll," Phyllis began and explained to Sandy her discoveries concerning the ghost sightings. She finished as Bingo returned with glasses of cold fruit juice and the three of them got comfortable upon the couch.

"Phyl, you know your talent for research has become creepier ever since we've come down here," Sandy pointed out.

"It could well be because, up to now, I've kept to things like marketing and advertising work."

"Yeah, well . . . I can't help but wonder what it'd be like if Tom took you along on his trips instead of Bud."

"Deponent sayeth not," Phyllis murmured.

"Huh?"

"Nothing, nothing."

Sandy thought it over. "A couple of questions."

"Shoot."

"Did you learn whether or not the people who saw ghosts saw their own relatives, or did they see Grandfather?"

Phyllis shook her head. "The few descriptions I found just indicate they saw a ghost."

"Ummm."

"Wouldn't they have mentioned it if they saw one of their relatives or something?" Bingo asked.

"That's what I'm thinking," Sandy replied. "That would've been important enough to mention. This business about all the people who had sightings originally coming from Colombia is interesting."

"I wanted to know more about that," Bingo said.

"It was originally believed that Silver Cloud crashed in Colombia," Sandy explained to her. "I should've known we wouldn't have been the only ones to have searched there for the wreckage."

Bingo considered it. "But, back when your Daddy was searching, why wasn't he drawn here to Ecuador like the others?"

"These sightings were fairly recent," Phyllis pointed out. "I couldn't find any evidence of them back during the time when Mr. Swift was looking in Colombia."

"Oh."

"We've been forgetting something," Sandy murmured.

"Something good or something bad?"

"Don't know yet. Remember, though, the reason Silver Cloud was down here in the first place."

"Looking for magnetic anomalies," Phyllis said.

"And the anomalies . . . or anomaly, rather . . . was powerful enough to cause Silver Cloud to crash."

"So you're definitely seeing a connection."

Sandy nodded, "And it brings us back to whatever's down in the hydrodome. Something which requires enormous amounts of atomic power to contain . . ."

"And causes your grandfather to appear," Bingo added. "Was Silver Cloud atomic powered?"

Sandy slowly shook her head.

Phyllis had been idly gazing out the rear windows. Now she frowned. "Uh oh."

"What?" Sandy turned her head and looked to see Duran Geiner out on the landing pad, waving up at them. "Criminy."

"What'll we do?"

Sandy sighed again and put her drink down on the table. "I'll go see him," she said, standing up. "You guys sort of look around up here and make sure everything's locked away."

"You don't trust him," Phyllis said. It wasn't a question.

"Phyl, outside of you and Bingo, I'm wondering if there's anyone down here I can trust regarding this thing."

Lowering the ramp, Sandy stepped down to the tarmac where Geiner patiently waited.

"I'm glad to see you've recovered," the agent told her.

Sandy crossed her arms. "And what can I do for you, Mr. Geiner?"

"After all that's happened, I was hoping you'd be able to help further with our investigation."

"Ummm." Sandy idly poked at the tarmac with her shoe. "Something I've been wondering a lot."

"Yes?"

"I would think that someone with your background would've had little or no trouble finding out everything. Infiltrating the hydrodome and such."

Geiner looked about. "Could we perhaps continue this inside? We're sort of in the open."

Sandy calmly studied the man for a few moments before silently turning and walking back up the ramp, motioning for him to follow.

Back inside the seacopter Geiner looked around admiringly. "An impressive vehicle. I've had experience flying on Swift Omnicopters and Tommycars, but never anything like this."

Sandy led him back to where the others waited. She noted how Bingo was positioned within the galley, seemingly busy but, at the same time, standing where she could keep a clear eye on Geiner.

Phyllis was also settled further down the couch, and the term clear fields of fire registered in Sandy's mind.

She resumed her place on the couch and motioned for Geiner to sit nearby. "Now, Herr Geiner . . . back to my original question."

"My . . . efforts had to move as carefully as possible,"

Geiner slowly explained. "I should've explained that I'm only part of a recent investigation, and my orders were explicit to try and maintain a low profile."

"Nospe claims he's under orders by the German government not to reveal anything to me."

"And you believed him?"

Sandy raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps. What can you tell me to change my mind?"

Geiner considered the question silently for a few moments. "I mentioned how Nospe is suspected of cooperating secretly with the Ecuadorian government. Also the unusual hirings of several scientists and technicians from my country. It's also felt that there are perhaps . . . elements . . . within Germany who might be assisting Nospe. This is another reason I've had to move carefully. Until we know for certain if my organization's involvement has remained secret I've got to concentrate on maintaining my cover."

"But, if sound evidence was uncovered, and your organization was in the clear, the German government would immediately move against Nospe and Wintergruppe."

Geiner nodded.

Sandy considered it. "I would . . . very much like as many answers as possible, Herr Geiner but, unfortunately, I've got a few more questions."

"Believe me, I understand."

"Good. First off, when we visited Wintergruppe I caught how Nospe was referred to as 'Doctor'. Does he have a professional scientific degree of some sort?"

Geiner blinked. "You didn't know?"

"Know what?"

"That was another mystery we've been trying to uncover. Prior to taking on his job at Wintergruppe, Nospe was ostensibly with the Institut für Astrophysik und extraterrestische Forschung in Bonn."

"Institute for Astrophysics and Extraterrestrial Research?"

Geiner nodded.

"That's crazy."

"Not at all. Doktor Nospe was an up and coming authority in the field of deep space astronomy."

Sandy noticed that Phyllis had her Tiny idiot out and was tapping on the keys. "You said 'ostensibly'," she asked Geiner.

Geiner nodded again. "It was not widely advertised, but Nospe was also attached to what was known as 'Section Omphalos' of the European Union Team."

Sandy was trying to keep her head from whirling. On top of all the weirdness she'd faced, this was one more domino threatening to fall. "The European Union . . ."

"Europe's SETI effort. Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence."

"Ohh God!" Sandy leaned back hard against the couch, closing her eyes. "What next?"

"That, Miss Swift, is what we'd desperately like to know. Nospe has been a competent administrator for Wintergruppe, but no one could reason out why the corporation selected him to head up the facility here."

Sandy's eyes were still closed and she was massaging her temples, feeling another headache approaching.

"So," Geiner gently prompted. "Have you uncovered anything?"

"I've still got a few more questions. For instance: do you have any idea why people going down to the hydrodome are supposed to get rid of all paper and cellophane and stuff?"

Geiner shrugged. "Just that it's a strictly obeyed safety clause. I do know that something like it was first established about five years ago. There was a fire or explosion of some sort on the Wintergruppe premises. In my own investigation I found out that, after this happened, there was a strict injunction against bringing any sort of paper or similar items onto the Wintergruppe complex."

"That must've been difficult."

Geiner nodded. "The injunction was soon lifted but it remains firmly in place when trips to the hydrodome are concerned."

"None of this is making any sort of sense," Sandy muttered.

"Which is another reason I've been so anxious to follow your own efforts," Geiner pointed out.

Sandy nodded, then slowly opened her eyes. "Herr Geiner . . . I would think that any of this would be grounds to have the German government simply come in and conduct a thorough investigation." She raised a palm to silence Geiner's immediate response. "I'm aware of the delicacy of the situation . . . the international implications and such . . . but I keep encountering mystery piled onto mystery. What exactly has to happen before your people simply move in and take charge?"

"As I mentioned, confirmation that my organization hasn't been compromised in its efforts here."

Sandy quietly felt that Bingo could supply a few well-chosen Texas terms to describe Geiner's comment. "What else?"

"A definite idea of what's down in the hydrodome."

Sandy's thoughts went back to the image of her grandfather materializing before her. "Believe me, I've been trying."

"May I know what your next plan is?"

Sandy attempted a sigh, but it sounded more like a snarl. "Herr Geiner, I very recently tried to get down into the hydrodome, as you no doubt know. I've suffered what amounts to a severe shock as a result and I'm still recovering."

"I understand---"

"Good! So please excuse me if I'm not in an immediate mood to place myself back in harm's way."

Geiner closed his mouth and sat there, quietly staring at her.

"They said you saw something down there," he finally murmured.

"That is correct."

"May I know what it was?"

"I guess you can chalk it all up to another reason why you and your government should move carefully," Sandy said, standing up. "And now, if you'll excuse us?"

Geiner slowly looked around, then reluctantly rose to his feet. "I want you to believe I'm on your side, Miss Swift."

"And I want to believe it too, Herr Geiner," Sandy replied, extending her hand. "But you've got your reasons for moving carefully, and I have mine."

Geiner shook hands with her and allowed himself to be led back to the ramp. Phyllis and Bingo waited in the lounge until Sandy returned. She went to the window and stood there, watching as the German agent walked away across the tarmac.

"Get ready," she said. "We take off in a few minutes."

Phyllis blinked. "Wait . . . whoa!"

Sandy had already turned and was heading for the flight deck.

Phyllis quickly followed. "Where're we going?"

"Where else? Back to the hydrodome." Settling into the pilot's chair, Sandy began going through the preflight checks. Behind her she could feel Phyllis' presence like a lead weight.

"Tell me once again about not placing yourself in harm's way," Phyllis finally said.

"He's down there," Sandy replied.

"San---"

"And both Nospe and Geiner have their agendas which involve examining every move I make under a microscope. I'm tired of it."

Phyllis slipped into the co-pilot's chair. "You haven't been feeling good---"

"I admit my head's pounding."

"Then, in that case---"

"It's not like I'm planning to go out again, Phyl," Sandy assured her. "This time we'll move closer to the hydrodome and use Coldwater's instruments."

Bingo rushed onto the flight deck, took in the situation with a look and settled down in the rear seat, buckling herself in.

Phyllis was still trying. "Wouldn't a good night's rest be best?"

"Phyl . . . believe me, I'd like nothing better except, maybe, a tap on the phone to hear whoever Geiner's no doubt talking to now. He and Nospe are getting plenty of time to make additional moves before I get a chance to do anything else, and I want a chance to make a move ahead of either of them." She shook her head. "Astrophysicist! Go figure."

Contacting the airport tower, Sandy received clearance for takeoff. The central rotor whirling rapidly, Coldwater lifted off and was soon speeding over the ocean.

"Phyllis, I want the Damonscope to watch out for any more of those weird spikes you picked up before," Sandy asked. "They might have something to do with . . . Grandfather."

"But he didn't make an appearance when you first approached the dome."

"No he didn't, but let's keep our eyes open anyway."

Phyllis began adjusting settings on the radiation analyzer.

Glancing back at Bingo she noticed that the young woman was holding one of the seacopter's first aid kits firmly in her lap.

Sandy flew Coldwater out in a long clockwise arc over the water, approaching the Wintergruppe portion of the coast low and from the sea. Six miles from the shore she settled the seacopter down upon the water. Moments later the vehicle sank smoothly beneath the surface.

Settling once more into submersible mode, Sandy took Coldwater deeper, gradually heading for the bottom.

"There it is," Phyllis finally said, pointing. Ahead of them, through the darkness, the flickering light of the hydrodome was visible.

Sandy nodded, adjusting the controls. "I got pretty close last time before the barracudas showed up. I want to try to get at least within . . . a hundred feet of the dome."

"Won't we be spotted?" Bingo asked.

"I'm thinking not. I couldn't make out any details through the dome, so I'm going to presume that works both ways. Besides, I want to give our sensor suite every chance to get as good a look as possible."

Phyllis was nodding. "Everything's primed and ready."

"You're sounding more calm about this now."

"As if I had a choice," Phyllis muttered. "And besides, I know I don't sound like it sometimes, but I'd like to get to the bottom of this as much as you do."

Like an enormous manta, Coldwater glided closer to the dome.

Sandy watched the instruments. "One mile twenty feet . . . five thousand feet . . . four thousand seven hundred fifty feet . . ."

"Spikes," announced Phyllis.

"Same as before?"

Her eyes on the Damonscope display, Phyllis nodded. "Computer's redlining the analysis. Still not able to sort it out. Intensity reads the same as before, though."

"Cut in the cameras and scanners on the dome's surface as we get closer," Sandy asked. "Try and cut through the surface interference and get a look inside."

Phyllis nodded and was reaching for the controls when a pinging alarm was suddenly heard.

"Sonar!" Sandy said. "We're being tagged."

Phyllis turned to bend over her readouts. "The hydrodome?"

Sandy shook her head. "Coming from bearing 20 degrees. Range: three point six miles and closing."

Phyllis was still at her instruments, making adjustments. "Got it. Submarine."

Sandy had turned the seacopter and the women were peering through the forward port. The readouts were being projected onto the transparent surface collected near the center, outlining a slender lethal shape which was rapidly moving in their direction. One of the readouts announced: TENTATIVE IDENTIFICATION --- GERMAN U212 HUNTER CLASS.

"That's all we need," Sandy growled, her hands moving on the controls. "Coming about. Increasing speed."

"Can we outrun it?" Bingo asked.

"We should. The only thing that really worries me at this range is---"

"Now getting multiple contacts," Phyllis announced. "Four objects, speed . . . 57.6 miles per hour, closing." She turned a pale face to the others. "Torpedoes!"

Chapter Sixteen: Delivery From Shopton

Sandy pushed hard on the throttles. "Speed now at maximum."

Phyllis was bent back over her displays. "Contact with torpedoes . . . three minutes."

The Coldwater raced through the dark waters, putting more and more distance between it and the hydrodome. Close behind the four torpedoes followed, intent on their mission.

"Computer says the DM2A4 torpedo has a minimum range of twenty seven nautical miles," Phyllis reported. "Just in case anyone's interested."

Sandy realized she was biting hard on her lower lip. Reaching up she flicked three switches on a panel above her. "Aft point defense repelatrions on. Maximum intensity."

Blue lightning arced across the rear of the seacopter's hull, eventually settling into a steady glow.

"Course of torpedoes deflecting," Phyllis said. "Deflection angle increasing . . . increasing . . . I have detonation signatures. The torpedoes have blown."

Bingo had been holding her breath. She now let it out loudly.

"We're still getting out of here," Sandy said through clenched teeth. "I think we've overstayed our---"

"More torpedoes," Phyllis suddenly said. "Reading eight of them. Wider spread."

Sandy slammed a hand on the control yoke. "Crap!"

"Won't the repelawhatsits take care of them?" Bingo asked.

"They could, but they eat up power doing it," Sandy said. "Slowing us down." She seemed to come to a decision and pulled back hard on the control yoke. Her other hand began slapping at switches. Within seconds the seacopter was tilting radically upwards.

"Heading for the surface," Sandy announced. Reaching up she switched off the repelatrions. "Diverting all available power to engines. Hang on."

"Strapped in."

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want . . ."

Ahead of them the water gradually began growing lighter in color as they raced up from the depths.

"Torpedoes still pursuing," Phyllis announced. "Contact . . . twenty seconds."

"We'll be out of here in fourteen," Sandy assured her.

Keeping her eyes on the controls she rested her free hand over a large red button as she murmured off the seconds.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . . now!" Her hand hit the button. "Firing emergency solid rocket motors."

A geyser of water erupted as the seacopter broke from the surface. Once it cleared the waves twin spears of fire from the boosters blazed and Coldwater soared higher into the evening sky.

Below it the waters erupted once again as the torpedoes detonated on the surface.

On the flight deck the women hung on against the sudden acceleration, grimacing.

"I . . . don't think I'm . . . tall enough to ride this ride," Bingo moaned.

"Be over in a moment," Sandy said, her knuckles white as she gripped the control yoke. Next to her Phyllis was steadily being pressed deeper into her chair.

The muted roar from behind them suddenly stopped, and the pressure eased from their bodies. Everyone gasped and Sandy reached for the controls. "Booster burn-out," she announced. "Spent cores jettisoned. Is everyone all right?"

"NO!" This from both Phyllis and Bingo.

"Re-engaging normal flight," Sandy said, regaining control of the seacopter and leveling them out. "And kids, I sympathize. I wasn't expecting torpedoes."

"Neither was I," agreed Phyllis. "I didn't think Nospe would go that far."

"If it was Nospe."

Phyllis sighed. "San, I'm tired---"

"So am I. Not just physically, but sick and tired of this whole business. And now this on top of everything else. Every time I keep thinking something else can't happen the ante gets raised. At this rate we'll be fortunate if we survive to see tomorrow."

Phyllis nodded wearily, then stared out the forward port for the first time. "Ah-hhhh, we don't seem to be flying back towards Esmeraldas."

"Very true," Sandy replied.

Phyllis leaned forward for a better look. "We're slowly drifting down towards . . . the Wintergruppe complex."

"Got it in one."

"San---"

"Mahomet sure as heck ain't getting any closer to the mountain," Sandy declared, "so I'm gonna drop a great big mountain on Mahomet. We're bringing this right to Nospe's doorstep."

Coldwater continued to slowly descend. Below them the Wintergruppe landing field grew brighter as lights began coming on, several of them aiming upwards to catch the seacopter in their beams.

"Wintergruppe's airfield is trying to contact us," Phyllis said, noting the activity on the communications board.

"Let them yell," Sandy said. Picking an area of the airfield between the hangars and the hydrodome causeway, Sandy lowered the landing legs and reduced power to the central rotor, bringing Coldwater to a gentle landing.

Carts, jeeps and trucks were already racing across the field towards them. Sandy was grimly amused to see that two of the Wintergruppe Omnicopters, plus one of their seacopters, had taken to the air to assume position above and nearby.

"Feels good to be taken seriously for a change," she said.

Several of the trucks came to a halt near the seacopter, disgorging a large number of men who quickly formed a circle around the vehicle. Each of the men carried an automatic rifle.

"Oh puh-leaze," Sandy muttered, reaching up to touch the repelatron controls, causing blue lightning to dance back and forth across the seacopter's hull.

"Coldwater's hull can stand up to the bullets," Sandy assured Bingo, "but a little visual display never hurt."

"Here comes the big boss," Phyllis said.

Sandy looked to see Nospe racing towards them in a cart.

Parking behind the line of men he pushed his way through and approached the seacopter.

Reaching for the communication panel, Sandy picked up a microphone and thumbed it on. "That's quite close enough, Herr Nospe."

Nospe stood there, staring up at them. "Miss Swift, what is the meaning of this?"

"You tell me," Sandy replied hotly. "And in case you felt we were gonna tiptoe around the topic, yes I just paid another visit to your hydrodome. A very interesting experience. Especially the submarine and the torpedo attack."

Nospe was silent and glanced around for a few moments before looking back up. "Could I come inside and---"

"No. I warned you at the hospital what would happen if I didn't get more cooperation."

"This is criminal trespassing, Miss Swift."

Sandy nodded benignly. "Go ahead and call the police, Herr Nospe. Call everyone. Let's get all the authorities together and have everything brought out into the open. My grandfather's ghost. That submarine parked near your hydrodome . . ."

"Miss Swift---"

"That atomic reactor you've got buried below us."

From where they stood the women could see Nospe's mouth open, then shut suddenly. A small group of men, including Sebald, approached Nospe, forming a group around him. A discussion was being rapidly held, and Sandy was about to reach down and increase the gain on the hull microphones when Nospe indicated silence to his associates and once more addressed the seacopter. "At least, Miss Swift, you and your friends could come out and we could discuss this situation in more comfortable surroundings."

"At the very least," Sandy agreed. "Which is to say, my friends and I feel quite comfortable in here."

"You're being unreasonable."

"I'm being threatened, Herr Nospe. From all directions. It's going to stop and I'm going to get answers now. One way or another."

Nospe stared up at her for a minute. Then his shoulders slumped a bit. "I shall contact my government once again," he said. "Perhaps this time they'll speak to you directly."

"Do what you think is best," Sandy replied. "But here I am and here I'll stay."

Nospe nodded in acquiescence of the conditions and turned to move off, motioning to the armed men to shoulder their weapons and move away.

On the flight deck the women watched as the vehicles and men moved further off across the airfield. In the sky the Wintergruppe aircraft also pulled away and returned to their respective landing pads.

"At least the dogs got called off," Phyllis said.

Sandy nodded, switching off the repelatrns. "I hate this but, so far, we seem to be getting faster results from me just winging this than from actual planning."

"Including ending up in an Ecuadorian prison."

Sandy shook her head. "It won't come to that," she said, leaving the flight deck and heading for the lounge. "There's too much to hide concerning this, and I'm willing to bet the people at the top will be open to quite a bit of dealing in order to see that it's kept under wraps."

Phyllis and Bingo were following her to the lounge. "And I thought you wanted everything out in the open," Phyllis said.

"I do. But, if I can just get satisfactory answers concerning Grandfather and the Silver Cloud, I might be willing to accept an arrangement. Who knows? There might be a perfectly good reason for keeping whatever all of this is secret."

Phyllis settled on the couch. "I still can't believe Nospe had us fired on at the hydrodome."

"And I'm not sure it was him," Sandy replied, poking about the galley in search of some milk.

Bingo squeezed by. "Here," she pointed out to Sandy, opening the cold storage locker. "The big one on the top shelf. And if it was Nospe who fired those torpedoes at us," she continued to the others, "then he could've just as easily had his guys with the guns here start shooting."

"Where the heck is Geiner in all of this?" Phyllis asked.

"Hiding under the bed, keeping his precious cover identity close at his side," Sandy muttered, leaving the galley. "I can't say I've been all that impressed by German Secret Service agents."

Phyllis was about to reply when a soft ringing tone echoed through the lounge.

"Now what?" Bingo asked.

One of the repeater screens above the rear port flickered to life, announcing: SECY(SP)/51 . . . EX SHOPTON . . . ETA FIFTEEN MINUTES.

Sandy frowned up at the display. "A cycloplane?"

"Coming from home," Phyllis added, opening up the computer panel on the table and pressing buttons. "Tom and Bud certainly wouldn't be finished in Africa by now, would they?"

"Don't know."

Phyllis studied the computer screen. "Coming in on cybertron control. IFR further identifies the cycloplane as code-name `Dobbin'." She looked up at Sandy quizzically. "I can't imagine Dad using that name for a plane. And he wouldn't have left Shopton."

But Sandy's eyes had slowly closed, and an agonized look drifted across her face.

"It's not your Dad," she slowly said, reaching up to pinch the bridge of her nose. "It's worse."

"Worse?"

Sandy nodded. "It's Mom."

Chapter Seventeen: Mother/Daughter Bonding

Lowering the seacopter ramp Sandy and Phyllis stepped out onto the airfield.

Phyllis searched the skies. "Nospe's people are bound to pick her up on radar---"

But Sandy held up a hand for silence, hearing the distinctive sustained bass-drum roll of a Swift ultrasonic cycloplane approaching from the north. A few moments later and, from out of the darkness, the sleek wingless shape sped like an arrow into view.

As the women watched the plane smoothly maneuvered until it was hovering above the airfield near where Coldwater rested. The thrumming of its engines changed pitch and the plane gently descended to a landing only a few feet away from the seacopter. Sandy and Phyllis waited for the lift cylinders to slow to a stop before approaching. As they came close the cockpit slid back and the single occupant was already removing her flight helmet and shaking her head, letting her tresses go free.

Mary Nestor Swift was a slightly smaller version of her lanky daughter, albeit with brown eyes instead of the blue which both Sandy and Tom had inherited from their father. Spotting Sandy her face broke out in a merry smile. "There you are."

Sandy stepped up to the plane, her hands on her hips. "Mom," she said, knowing her next words were going to sound incredibly stupid, but unable to stop them, "what are you doing here?"

"And hello, Phyllis dear." Mary looked around at her surroundings for the first time as she busied herself with unstrapping from the cockpit. "You know this hardly seems like a regular airport."

Her observation was rapidly being confirmed by the approach of several of the armed Wintergruppe men.

This is it, Sandy thought hotly. I not only have to tell Dad that I found the ghost of his father, but I got Mom involved in a shooting war with corporate thugs. She struggled to help her mother out of the cycloplane cockpit as quickly as possible, but Mary was serenely taking her time about it.

Fortunately Nospe re-appeared, speeding ahead of the gunmen in a cart. From where she stood Sandy could see the acid expression on his face. That can be cured, she silently concluded. Bullet holes would tend to be a bit more difficult.

Nospe left the cart and stormed up to the women just as Sandy finally managed to get her mother out of the plane and onto the tarmac. "Miss Swift, this is wholly inexcusable. I cannot condone further---"

"Earhardt! Is that you?"

Nospe suddenly stopped and noticed the woman in the flight suit. Shock and surprise burst onto his face. "Mary! Liebe Dame . . . did you fly this machine here?"

"Certainly did. I hope you didn't mind."

"Of course not." Nospe was beaming now. "It's a pleasure to see you again. If I'd known you were coming I could've arranged for something."

"How's Tea'?"

"Tea' is doing well, thank you. She's currently visiting her sister in Munich, but I know she'd want to be here if she knew you were coming."

"I have to confess, Earhardt, that it was a sudden decision on my part. I had no idea that I'd find you if I tracked down Sandy."

"Not at all, not at all. You're most welcome. Would you like to speak to Tea' on the phone? By this time she should be up."

"Well, I was promising to send her an e-mail back when---"

Sandy was at the point of exploding. "Hold it!"

Nospe and her mother grew quiet and stared at her.

She motioned from one to the other. "Both of you know each other?"

"But of course, dear," Mary replied. "When Wintergruppe initially made its agreements with your father and brother, Earhardt and his wife visited for a weekend. You were in Dayton for the Air Show at the time."

Sandy was feeling the world slipping away. "I'm . . .I'm . . ." She pressed her fingertips hard against her temples, rubbing. "Ohhhhhh . . ."

"She was never this excitable as a child," Mary explained to Nospe.

Nospe nodded in sympathy.

"I hope she hasn't been causing any trouble down here."

Nospe's cheeks pinked slightly. "Well-lll . . ."

"Mom!"

"Yes, dear, I can read vibrations rather clearly." Mary turned back to Nospe. "I suspect Sandra and I need to have something of a private conversation, Earhardt. Perhaps we could get together later on."

"Nothing would please me more, Mary. Until later." With a warm smile directed at all the women, Nospe nodded a farewell and turned back to the cart, motioning again to the men who had gathered nearby. This time they backed off much further as Nospe drove away.

Mary had returned to the cycloplane cockpit and was rummaging about, eventually producing an overnight bag.

"You really need to work on your manners," she said to her daughter, straightening up. "You were rather terse with Earhardt."

"'Terse with Earhardt'," Sandy muttered. "C'mon." Motioning with her hand she headed for the seacopter ramp, pausing once to glance back over her shoulder at the cycloplane. "Mom, why'd you fly a Drumhawk down here?"

"I thought that'd be obvious," Mary primly replied. "I'm not a pilot, and the cycloplane has a cybertron. All I had to do was set it to home in on your seacopter and then sit back to enjoy the ride."

"We got cybertrons in the Tommycars as well, and one of those would've been much more comfortable."

"Yes, but the cycloplane is faster than a Tommycar . . . and you'll forgive me, but I somehow suspected that speed was of the essence."

Growling low, Sandy led Phyllis and her mother up into the Coldwater. Going back to the lounge she motioned idly at the doors to the cabins. "Make yourself at home."

"Certainly," Mary replied, sliding one of the doors open and nodding in satisfaction at finding it unoccupied. "I just want to change out of this flight suit and into something more comfortable."

"Please do." Sandy flounced down onto the couch, scowling.

Phyllis observed the mood her friend was in. "San---"

"Hush."

Phyllis opened her mouth again.

"I said hush."

"You're being rather short-tempered," Mary said from the other side of the cabin door. "I hope you haven't been this way with everyone down here."

"It's been sort of complicated, Mrs. Swift," Phyllis said.

"Phyl!"

"I can imagine it has been," Mary said, stepping out of the cabin and smoothing out her dark blue skirt. Above it she was wearing a pastel lemon blouse. "There. I finally feel human again . . . oh, Bingo dear," she said as the Texan entered the lounge. "Hello."

Bingo smiled at the older woman. "Hi, Mrs. Swift."

"I'm glad to see you weren't misplaced in all the confusion."

"Oh no. It's been a slice. Speaking of which, would you like some pie?"

"No but if there's any tea available I could use a cup."

"Coming up," Bingo replied turning to the galley.

Mary ran fingers through her hair and sat down on the couch near her daughter. "Well now . . . in answer to your first question---"

"'Bout time," muttered Sandy.

"I apologize if my presence here is disconcerting, but allow me to explain my position. I go on a shopping trip to New York City simply to keep from sitting at home and chewing my nails off while your brother is burrowing his way through the Earth---"

"How is he?"

"Doing well. They've returned to the surface safely," here Mary raised crossed fingers, "and are going over the usual tons of data they've managed to collect. I suspect it'll keep them busy for a week or so before your brother gets the next bee in his bonnet."

"But to continue: I return home, figuring all is hale and hearty, only to learn that my wayward daughter has become even more so. Considering that you're in South America, and Tom was hundreds of miles beneath the earth, I couldn't help but be disturbed by the fact that I was getting more messages from your brother. Wringing your Uncle Ned's neck provided little more in the way of clarification but, on the other hand, I kept getting bits and snippets

from the FBI and the State Department. Not only that but I learn that the new cook I hired has vanished from the face of the Earth . . ."

"Been having the time of my life," Bingo declared, coming over to pass a saucer and a cup of tea to Mary.

"Doubtless," Mary agreed, reclaiming the ball. "And thank you. So! Obviously it should be clear why I decided to throw on a flight suit, toss some things into a bag, climb into a cycloplane and come down here." She gently sipped at her tea. "Your turn."

Sandy slowly let out a breath, not bothering to look in her mother's direction but, instead, thrusting both her hands into her pockets and keeping her chin tucked low.

Phyllis, recognizing Sandy's body English, silently signaled to Bingo with her eyes and the two women tip-toed out of the lounge.

Mary took another delicate sip of tea. "Waiting."

Another slow breath and then, hesitantly at first, but with ever increasing speed, Sandy began recounting to her mother all that had taken place since Coldwater had arrived in Ecuador.

When she had finally allowed herself to run down and became silent she allowed herself to look at her mother.

Mary Swift had not sipped again from the teacup but had, instead, been staring steadily across the lounge, apparently seeing nothing while listening to Sandy's account.

"Well!" she finally said.

"I know it's a lot---" Sandy began.

"I was just thinking that all time I spent at the Rocksmond Young Ladies Seminary never quite prepared me for this."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"Really nothing to apologize for, dear heart," Mary said, carefully setting the cup and saucer down on the table. "But here's a memo you could consider jotting down for the edification of any daughters you might have. Never date an inventor."

"Mom! You don't mean that."

"I know, I know." Mary wearily leaned her head back. "The Good Lord knows I became accustomed to your father's adventures. I should've realized your brother was going to follow in his father's footsteps, but that still didn't quite make it any easier to take."

Once again she ran her fingers through her hair, and Sandy noticed the glints of silver shining through. "And then you took up piloting. That seemed safe enough . . . but then it turned into test piloting."

Sandy bit her lip.

"Please do not misunderstand me, Sandy. I'm very proud of the accomplishments of my children. I guess . . . I just guess I can't help but somehow wish that at least one of them would provide less of a strain to my nerves."

Sandy could no longer help it but slid across the couch to take her mother into her arms. Mary returned the embrace and the two women gently hugged for a while.

Soon they parted, and Sandy stood up to go to the galley to get herself some tea. "Then you don't mind the way I've been handling this?" she asked.

Mary sighed. "Just as long as it's not because you've been looking for an excuse to get out from behind the shadow of your father and Tom."

"Mom!"

"Sandra Helene!"

For the barest possible moment fire flashed between the two women. Then Sandy's face drooped. "Okay, so I guess I deserved that," she said, going back to the couch. "And maybe I was in a wall-eyed hurry to take charge of all of this

before Tom and the others got back. But it's all different now. It's all so . . . complicated, but I'm at the center of it and I think I've got the best chance yet of straightening it out."

"I know, dear . . . I know." Mary reached out and absently patted Sandy's knee. "And I'm sorry I made that remark. I should've known better. It's just that . . . that . . ." She struggled to find words, then simply turned a worried face to her daughter. "I mean, your grandfather?"

Sandy nodded briskly, gulping at her tea. "Mom, I know it sounds really crazy. But it happened the way I described it, and it was Grandfather I saw down there."

Mary considered it, her eyes thoughtful. "Y'know I didn't spend all these years being married to your father without picking a few things up. Have you considered the possibility of one of your brother's commercially available telejectors being used to create an image of your grandfather?"

"I did, but the gh . . . the image didn't quite have the same sort of texture as what a telejector would produce.

"Also," here Sandy frowned deeply, "also, ever since I saw Grandfather I've been getting these . . . feelings in my head." She tapped at her forehead. "Here. It's like there was a big guitar string in my brain and someone . . . or something . . . has plucked it."

Mary's expression narrowed. "Are you sure you're all right? You did say you received a rather powerful shock from the experience."

"I feel okay," Sandy assured her. "But I also feel something that keeps drawing me in the direction of the hydrodome. Not a compulsion, you understand. It's more like a definite assurance that the answer is down there."

"I can't believe that Earhardt would be up to anything untoward."

"Mom, I understand that you and him are friends. But something large is hanging over all of this. Larger than Mr. Nospe."

Mary stared down at her hands. "I . . . really should contact your father about this."

Sandy waited a while before answering. "But you're really not wanting to," she said softly.

Mary didn't immediately reply but shook her head.

"Sandy, it . . ." She sighed and tried again. "Your father looked up to your grandfather immensely. Always did. And then later on . . . when your grandfather started slipping and becoming less and less capable . . . it almost twisted your father in two. Those were the bad times for them. Then the Silver Cloud trip came up . . . your grandfather suddenly seemed to experience his previous clearness . . . and we all crossed our fingers and hoped that things would turn around."

"Now you know why I didn't contact Dad," Sandy said.

Mary nodded. "He'll be coming down from the space station soon, to coordinate the end of the Africa trip with your brother. He'll wonder what's going on with you and I." She raised tragic eyes to Sandy. "He'll have to be told."

Sandy reached out to squeeze her mother's hand. "By then it'll all be solved."

"Lord, Sandra, I hope so."

"In the meantime," Sandy said, standing up, "I'll go back out and seal up your plane. Not that I don't trust Nospe. Not with my Mom as a character reference---"

"Ho ho."

"But, with all that's been going on, I'm all against taking chances."

"I suppose bedtime is next on the agenda."

"More than likely," Sandy said, leaving the lounge, "before something else decides to happen."

Mary sat on the couch, idly humming a song she used to dance to with Sandy's father. She almost didn't see Bingo softly approach but finally looked up.

The small girl was standing there at parade rest, hands behind her back.

Mary nodded at her. "Bingo."

Bingo glanced back over her shoulder, making sure that the two of them were alone, before returning her gaze to Mary. "My apologies, Mrs. Swift."

"For what, dear?"

"For not moving fast enough."

Mary produced a small smile. "But you moved fast enough to get to Sandy on time and get attached to this expedition. Actually I'm the one who should apologize, Bingo. When we made our arrangements I wasn't expecting matters to move this rapidly."

"It's been exciting," Bingo admitted. "I've actually been enjoying it. But I should've made more of an attempt to establish contact with you."

"Things have worked out so far. I take it, then, that your cover is still intact?"

Bingo slowly nodded, "Although I really don't see the further necessity for it---"

Mary gently raised a silencing finger. "Sandy is in charge of this operation, dear. I don't want to give her any reason to believe otherwise. Just continue being your sweet, charming and home-grown self who is, most important of all, always there when needed."

Mary's smile grew. "And giving me what I've been after all these years."

"Peace of mind?"

Mary chuckled and rose from the couch. "One thing, though. You've had the opportunity to assess everything that's happened here?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then, in your opinion, are matters as . . . weird . . . as Sandy makes them out to be?"

Bingo slowly shook her head. "No, ma'am. They're weirder."

Chapter Eighteen: Revolt For Breakfast

All things considered, Sandy had to admit to herself that the situation was far more pleasant when everyone had awakened to greet the morning. Instead of armed guards the women descended from Coldwater to face a smiling Nospe who immediately offered his arm to Mary, the two of them chatting amiably as the others followed into a cart. Then a short drive to the Administration Building, and up to a sumptuously laid-out breakfast buffet in a conference room. Sharing food with Nospe and the women were Dr. Sebald and Dr. von Hofmannstahl.

Despite all that had happened the atmosphere was rather convivial; the result, no doubt, of the cheerfulness between Nospe and Mary as they caught up on mutual news. Helping herself to rolls and eggs, Sandy watched the two friends and silently blessed whoever was answering prayers that morning that her mother had decided to drop in.

"It's been hoped," Nospe said, finally sitting down at the table (with Mary to his left and Sebald to his right), "that we could peacefully work matters out without further . . . aggravation and unnecessary argument."

"Have you heard from your government yet?" Sandy asked, taking a seat opposite the table from him.

"I'm still waiting for a message," Nospe replied. "But, in light of recent developments, I thought that perhaps a more immediate solution might be found."

The "recent development" bit daintily into a jam roll. "Please don't feel obligated to put yourself at professional risk on our account, Earhardt," Mary assured him.

"Certainly not." Nospe smiled at her. "And please believe me, Mary, I wholly understand the personal aspect which ties you to all this."

One of these days, Sandy mused, I'm going to have to ask Mom how she does that. Then again, she reflected, the only men she ever had to deal with on a regular basis were her father, her brother and Bud. Hardly a wide cross-section.

"Herr Nospe."

He looked across the table at her.

"Is my grandfather down there in the hydrodome?"

This time even Mary was closely watching for an answer.

Nospe had stopped eating and was staring down at a spot on the table just beyond his plate. Both his hands rested on the table and he looked as if he was searching for as careful an answer as possible.

"Miss Swift . . . Sandra . . ."

"What happened to the survivors of the Silver Cloud?"

"I wish I knew." Nospe now threw an anguished look at her. "Believe me, I've been working with this problem for years. We all have here. But the answers haven't been easy in coming, I assure you."

Mary laid a hand on his arm. "It's all right."

"I wish I could be sure of that," he told her. "We're all scientists here, Mary . . . Sandra. We've been involved with the mystery that all of you have only recently come across. Every waking hour has been spent in research and the hunt for answers."

"And if you knew my grandfather and the Silver Cloud survivors were involved," Sandy replied, "then why didn't you contact us? Or at least our government?" She was trying to keep her voice steady and was managing to succeed. Part of her suspected that, if her mother hadn't been in the room, she'd be screeching.

"That is where my government comes in," Nospe told her. "Practically from the beginning they've demanded that the utmost secrecy be placed on all of this."

"Does it, perhaps, have anything to do with Section Omphalos of the European Union Team?"

Nospe sat back, his eyes wide.

"So," he softly said, finally settling once more into calmness. "Why am I not surprised?"

Mary looked from him to Sandy. "Pardon?"

"You didn't know that your dear friend was, among other things, a trained astronomer who's heavily involved in the European SETI effort?" Sandy asked her.

Mary made an O with her mouth.

"And there are a lot of people besides us who'd like to know the answers behind that."

As if on cue the door to the conference room opened and Duran Geiner entered. Everyone quietly watched as he walked around the table to bring a few folders over to Nospe. He then left as quickly as he arrived, but not without delivering a small glance to Sandy.

A thought rose like a snake inside Sandy. The room's bugged. I'd bet anything on it. She tried not to appear too obvious, forcing herself not to slowly examine her surroundings or peek under the table.

Nospe was casually leafing through the folders. "I'm aware that there are other . . . concerns . . . just as curious as you are."

"Oh. Then you know about the German Secret Service and their presence here."

He looked up at her. "Of course."

Sandy listened, but couldn't hear anything which sounded like Geiner's fainting body hitting the floor from the next room. "Then you know that some of your actions have placed you at odds with the same government who's sworn you to secrecy."

"I'm . . . aware that there are factions within certain levels of my country's bureaucracy which would like to take control of this project. Competition. Pressure from rival corporations which, I promise you, would only make matters worse for all concerned should they manage to succeed."

"Then let's help each other," Sandy said, leaning forward slightly. "Let's cut through everything and put all the facts on the table before things become worse."

Nospe stared tight-lipped at her.

"Herr Nospe, matters may be moving faster than you know,"

Sandy continued, thinking of Geiner. "Maybe that explains the reason your government currently has a submarine positioned near the hydrodome. Maybe that's why all the spies are closing in. We could help. Swift Enterprises could be a powerful ally in your corner."

Nospe seemed to be considering it, throwing looks to the other Wintergruppe scientists at the table.

"Earhardt," Mary softly prompted.

"Sie konnten uns helfen," Sandy heard Dr. von Hofmannstahl murmur to both Sebald and Nospe.

Nospe sighed and nodded, turning back to the others.

"My predecessor in this position---"

Sandy nodded. "Wilhelm Ruhl."

"Ja. It was he who originally began the research work here." Another sigh. "He was in charge when the Silver Cloud was . . . recovered."

Sandy realized she was gripping the edge of the table hard. She forced her fingers to relax. "Go on."

"By the time I was asked to assume control of this facility and this project, there were only a few fragments of the airship remaining. I was never made aware of how much of the Silver Cloud was actually brought back out of the nearby jungle."

Sandy felt as if she was trying to bore into his head with her eyes. She parted her lips, forcing herself to make the words she was having trouble forming. "And the survivors?"

Nospe slowly shook his head. "I do not know."

"Herr Nospe---"

"I do not know," Nospe said, slamming a hand down hard on the table. "That has been one of the hardest parts of the mystery. Remember that the airship's wreckage had been in the jungle for years before Wintergruppe came along. Who knows what happened to the bodies by then?"

"Not all of them," Sandy pointed out.

"True," admitted Nospe sadly.

"O Mother Macree!"

Everyone looked at Phyllis who was staring down at her Tiny idiot.

She raised her face, returning their stares. "The ghost haunting reports," she said.

"What about them?" Sandy prompted.

"I went back and checked my notes. Wilhelm Ruhl's brother-in-law was Franz Odemar."

"Who was . . ."

"Navigator on the Silver Cloud."

Sandy closed her eyes. "Ohhhhh . . ."

Mary and the Wintergruppe scientists were looking at Phyllis in mild confusion. "Was ist dieses?" von Hofmannstahl asked.

As quickly as possible, Phyllis explained to the others the connection between the "hauntings" and the relations to the Silver Cloud crew. "It all fits," she added. "Ruhl was ultimately compelled to establish the Wintergruppe facility here. He was searching for his brother-in-law."

"Of course," Sebald said, nodding vigorously. "I should've remembered it. Ruhl's family was involved in scientific research years before."

"And if I looked back into Swift financial records," Phyllis said, "I bet I'd find that German research money partially financed the Silver Cloud expedition."

"So Ruhl was in an understandably desperate rush to locate the Silver Cloud," Sandy mused.

Further ruminations were suddenly interrupted by the sound of distant explosions. These were quickly followed by the warbling of sirens.

Nospe stood up, reaching for the phone which was on the desk and punching buttons. "Was geschieht?" he commanded sharply into the headset.

He listened carefully for a few seconds. Then: "Mein Gott! Entfalten Sie alles Sicherheit Schutz. Versuchen Sie und lokalisieren Sie den Hydrodome Eingang!"

Slamming the headset down he rushed for the door. "Das Hydrodome ist unter Angriff," he said to Sebald and von Hofmannstahl.

Another explosion could be heard, and Sandy and the others stood up. "What's happening?" she yelled at the departing Germans.

"The hydrodome!" Nospe's voice drifted back.

Sandy quickly rushed to follow, the others rushing into step alongside and behind her. They missed out on the elevator which Nospe and his assistants had taken, but silently agreed to duck into a side door and race down the three flights of stairs to the ground.

Outside they found Nospe and the others surrounded by men wearing the livery of Wintergruppe security personnel. Carts and emergency vehicles were racing about and the air was laced with acrid fumes.

"Tear gas," Bingo said, sniffing.

Nospe was barking orders at some of the security people. He was also speaking into a radio handset.

Sandy moved closer. "What---"

Nospe didn't look at her but lowered the handset. "A small group of men have shot their way onto the hydrodome causeway," he said, glaring towards the direction of the shoreline. "They fired off gas bombs to cover their attack and they're heading for the hydrodome. Verdammung!"

"Herr Nospe . . ."

He now seemed to notice her for the first time, and his expression was fierce. "Congratulations, Miss Swift," he told her through gritted teeth. "You may soon get more answers than you wanted. God help us all. Komm," he barked at some of the security people. "Folgen Sie uns."

With Sebald and von Hofmannstahl in tow he rapidly led the crowd of security people towards a waiting van.

Behind him Sandy took a few following steps then stood still, watching them go. She then turned, running towards an unoccupied cart. "C'mon," she said.

"I'm going to regret asking---" Mary began.

"Makes two of us," Phyllis added.

"Me makes three," Bingo chimed in.

"Back to Coldwater," Sandy said, slipping into the driver's seat of the cart and fumbling at the ignition.

Mary felt a coldness tickling her stomach. "May I ask why?"

"I'm betting that idiot Geiner jumped the gun," Sandy said as the cart hummed to life. She began driving towards the airfield. "Either that or he received sudden orders from his people in Germany. Whatever it is it looks like everything's coming to a head and, if that's true, then there's one thing I definitely want to do."

"What?"

"Crash the party."

Chapter Nineteen: In The Hydrodome

The attack upon the hydrodome had the Wintergruppe complex responding like a kicked beehive, and so no one was available to get in Sandy's way as she raced the cart to the waiting seacopter.

Phyllis couldn't make up her mind if she was pleased or not. Part of her was curious to learn what would've happened if someone had tried to stop Sandy. She'd never seen a human being reduced to rubble before.

As it was, Sandy almost collided violently with one of the seacopter's landing legs before managing to bring the cart to a halt. The women spilled out . . . almost literally . . . then raced up the ramp and into Coldwater. Without breaking stride they crowded onto the flight deck, Sandy slapping at controls even before she had strapped herself into her chair. In what seemed like moments Coldwater roared to life and blasted off from the airfield, skimming across the airfield and out over the water.

On the flight deck, Mary, Phyllis and Bingo struggled to hold on. "Not one of your better takeoffs," Mary breathed.

"Not doing this for points, Mother," Sandy muttered, her eyes on the controls.

"And, on that note, I think I should make my way back to the lounge and strap in there," Mary continued, carefully holding onto the bulkhead. "Leave you more room in case you decide to panic."

"I am not panicking---"

"I'll come back with you, Miz Swift," Bingo declared, unstrapping herself and getting up to follow.

"Hurry up," Sandy told them. "We'll be hitting the water shortly."

"Sandy---"

"Yes, Mom?"

"Best two out of three."

"Thanks, Mum, I'll remember." Sandy leveled out Coldwater, circling the surface link to the hydrodome. From their position both Sandy and Phyllis could see a crowd of people milling about on the platform. Wintergruppe boats were crowded about on the water, and the company's own fleet of seacopters were gliding through the air below them.

"I can't tell if the elevator's still working," Sandy said.

Phyllis had pulled a pair of binoculars out from a compartment below her seat and was studying the scene. "Seems to be mostly security people on the platform. I can't pick out Nospe or any of the other official muckety-mucks."

"There doesn't seem to be any damage to the platform." Sandy circled the seacopter about again. "Whatever happened it looks as if the explosions were all gas bombs. We hope." She touched the intercom button. "You two all right back there?"

"Yes, dear. All strapped in."

"Then, in the immortal words of Laurie Anderson, 'we're going down'." Sandy pushed the control yoke forward and Coldwater plummeted towards the water.

Phyllis was gritting her teeth, her hands gripping the arms of her chair. "Oh God, I hate doing this."

The seacopter tilted down even more, its engines whining as it knifed into the sea, sending an enormous spray of water up into the air less than fifty feet away from the hydrodome link.

Once beneath the waves Coldwater leveled out and began descending, following the elevator tube down into the depths.

Phyllis was still trying to unfasten her fingers from her chair. "Sandy . . ."

"I'm sorry, but the sky was getting too crowded. And we need to get down to the dome as quickly as possible." Once again she touched the intercom. "Everything okay?"

"I . . . I'm sorry I ate breakfast," Mary's voice replied a little breathlessly. "I'll clean it up."

"Later. Stay strapped in and keep a watch on the repeater screens and the action behind us."

Coldwater continued descending into the darkening water. "The hydrodome elevator's working," Sandy pointed out, nodding at one of the bubble-shaped cars descending down the tube.

Phyllis was once again using the binoculars. "Looks like security people heading down." An alarm briefly chimed and she lowered the binoculars to consult her instruments. "One of the Wintergruppe seacopters has just entered the water," she reported.

"That doesn't bother me. Keep an eye out for that submarine, though. And let me know if the Damonscope starts reporting any more of those spikes."

"There's a seacopter coming down from above," Bingo's voice called out from the intercom.

"We know. Thanks." Sandy glanced at Phyllis. "You wouldn't happen to know off hand if any of the seacopters we sold to Wintergruppe were modified to carry nasty surprises like depth charges or anything, do you?"

"No."

Sandy felt relieved.

"I don't know."

Relief was short lived. Sandy concentrated on keeping Coldwater's descent even. Something was happening outside, though, and Sandy reached for a control, lowering the lights on the flight deck so they could see better.

The sea beneath them had been growing darker as they left the daylight above. But now it was beginning to brighten with a quicksilver pulsation, like lightning flashes during a severe thunderstorm.

Unstrapping herself, Sandy rose from the seat to lean over the console and stare down. "Criminy!"

Phyllis followed suit. Both women were looking down at the approaching hydrodome. Its surface was a dancing fire of opalescent light.

"That can't last," Sandy declared. "Whatever's going on down there is reaching the breaking point. Phyl, take over."

Phyllis had automatically moved towards Sandy's seat, but paused to stare wide-eyed at her friend. "Why?"

"I'm going inside the dome."

"And how . . . might I ask?"

"First off I'm going outside---"

"Sandy!"

"This time I'll use the Fat Man. It should give me all the protection I need."

Phyllis didn't look too convinced. "And then what?"

"Here." Sandy stepped aside to allow Phyllis to strap herself into the command chair. "Once I'm outside I want you to approach the dome."

"You want me to ram it?"

"Not exactly. They're running the repeltrons in there at critical. They've got to be. There should be fractures in the surface. Frequency gaps. I forget the term Tom uses."

"I want you to get Coldwater as close to the dome as you can. Switch on the forward point defense repelatrns and run them up to full power. If I remember what Tom talked about once there should be an interference pattern established which'll create an opening I can use to slip inside."

"And if we just end up poking a big hole in the dome surface?"

"After I'm inside the dome back away and switch off the repelatrns. The dome field should re-establish itself." I hope she added silently. "It's a procedure Tom worked out for evacuating people from a hydrodome in case of mishap."

"Ah-hhhh, and has this procedure ever been tested?"

"All I need is just a few moments."

"I thought so," Phyllis moaned.

Going back to the airlock, Sandy opened it. As she was about to step inside her mother and Bingo appeared.

Phyllis you tattletale.

"Sandra---"

"It's going to be all right, Mom," Sandy replied, mentally crossing her fingers. "But your friend's in trouble down there and we've got to do something to help."

Mary opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "This is what happens for letting you date Bud Barclay. You're learning to play dirty."

"Mom . . ."

"All right but . . . be careful." Defeated, Mary gave her daughter a quick hug before heading on to the flight deck, followed by Bingo.

Entering the airlock, Sandy closed the door behind her, then rotated the small compartment. Soon she was facing the curving egglike surface and large viewing plate of the Fat Man diving suit which the seacopter carried. Opening the circular viewing plate she grabbed the overhead bar in the compartment and slid into the Fat Man feet first, wiggling into the exoskeletal control harness. She then carefully turned around, adjusting herself to fit more securely into the suit before reaching out and closing the viewing plate shut.

Touching several switches she brought the suit to life, then slipped a headset on. "Tubby to Phyllis. Am I coming through?"

"Yes," Phyllis' voice buzzed in her ear. "I'm hovering about ten or so feet above the ground. The hydrodome's twenty feet away."

"Okay. Ejecting." Taking a breath, Sandy triggered the airlock. A curt roar of compressed air . . . a rush of water past the viewing plate . . . and she was staring out at the ocean as the Fat Man dropped from the seacopter's hull.

Ahead of her the hydrodome glittered violently, and Sandy adjusted the polarization of the viewing plate, cutting down on the glare.

"Switching on thrusters," she announced. "Heading for the dome."

"So are we," Phyllis replied.

Gripping the control sticks, Sandy throttled the diving suit thrusters and the small egg- shaped vehicle began slowly moving towards the hydrodome. Above her Coldwater also began moving and Sandy worked to remain in the shadow of the larger ship. The distance to the hydrodome reduced. Fifteen feet . . . ten . . . five . . .

Blue lightning danced across the forward end of the seacopter as Phyllis engaged the forward repelatrns. The lightning arced from Coldwater over to the surface of the hydrodome. Color mixed, brightness shifted . . . and what seemed to be an angry red weal spread across the curving surface of the dome.

Pushing the control sticks, Sandy glided the Fat Man to the dome. In her earphone she could hear a growing crackling sound (but not, praise God, the bizarre throbbing sound she had heard before while being so close before).

The Fat Man made contact with the red stress point on the dome. Lightning played across the diving suit and Sandy pressed on. As she suspected, the repelatron energy forming the dome was being reinforced with some sort of thin flexible material. Sandy applied more thrust . . . felt the material begin to part . . . And suddenly she was tumbling about as the Fat Man rolled onto the floor of the hydrodome. Sandy reset the gyro controls for the suit, righting it, then slipped her arms and legs into the sleeves which controlled the articulated limbs for the suit.

With a whirl of power the Fat Man stood up on two metallic legs. Arms unfolded from either side of the suit. Looking around Sandy saw that some water had leaked into the dome behind her. But she could make out the shape of Coldwater slowly receding, and the red weal was rapidly shrinking shut. The repelatron were being pushed to the limit to keep the sea out of the break she'd made in the dome . . . but she reasoned that, if her theories were correct, the dome was facing worse troubles.

Suddenly she felt herself being rocked from what seemed to be a rapid hailstorm. Turning back she was shocked to see several men dressed in black jumpsuits firing at her with small machine guns. The bullets were bouncing harmlessly off the Tomasite hull of the Fat Man, but Sandy felt her temperature rising. "Enough," she hissed, moving the Fat Man forward.

The gunmen were surprised to see how rapidly the large egg-shaped object bore down on them. They shook off their amazement and resumed firing but, by that time, Sandy was among them. With a swing of one metal arm she knocked a machine gun out of the hands of one of the attackers, sending him spinning away. She then whirled to face the next closest one. A metal arm flashed out and caught the machine gun in its grip. Within the Fat Man, Sandy's fingers closed in the control sleeve, and the gun was crumpled as if made of tinfoil.

The other gunmen were backing off, still firing, but men wearing Wintergruppe security uniforms closed in on them. Sandy could faintly hear German shouts and commands. One of the attacking gunmen was turning as if to open fire on the Wintergruppe guards, and Sandy reached out to grip the man with one of the metal arms, violently pulling him off balance.

The Wintergruppe guards were now collecting and disarming the rest of the attackers, and Sandy stepped back to give them room. It was then that she noticed Nospe coming close, waving to try and get her attention.

She switched on the outside speaker. "Herr Nospe."

"Sandra. Are you all right?"

Sandy couldn't help having a small smile move across her face. "I should be asking you that question."

"We are fine, and am grateful for the assistance you've brought."

"Herr Nospe what is the situation?"

"It is . . . critical."

Sandy nodded. "Then I'm coming out," she said and had the Fat Man kneel.

"Sandy . . ."

She paused. "What?"

"I must know," Nospe said. "Are you carrying any paper on you? Anything along those lines? Photographs? Things like we mentioned before?"

Sandy was mystified. "No."

Nospe seemed to relax but just barely. Securing the diving suit systems, Sandy opened the viewing plate and swung herself out. Straightening up she examined her surroundings. The air was thick with an electric tang that made her feel as if she were chewing on aluminum foil. There was also smoke, although whether it was from the gun battle or from something else she couldn't immediately say.

At the center of the dome was the bottom portion of the elevator tube. There were also a small collection of prefabricated huts. All of these, however, were overshadowed by an enormous bunker-like structure made of some sort of shining material. Hexagonal and windowless it squatted before Sandy like a toad.

Looking about Sandy could also see the repelatron generators which were evenly placed around the interior circumference of the dome. From where she stood she could hear the machines whining furiously, and noted that each generator was being desperately attended to by a crew of technicians.

"Sandy . . ."

Sandy raised a hand, interrupting Nospe. Something about the repelatrons was wrong. She looked at them again . . . "five, six . . ."

The penny dropped. "Herr Nospe, I studied the arrangement we made with your company. We only contracted for four repelatron generators, but I see six here."

"Miss Swift---"

"And if these include the four original generators, you couldn't have been running them at this level for so long. At this rate they would've reached Carey's Limit years ago. Unless you had them practically rebuilt from the ground up. Or . . ."

A thought occurred to her and she carefully stared at the generators again. Their shape . . . the make-up of their visible parts . . .

She turned a smoking look to Nospe. "You're using bootleg repelatrons."

Nospe was wearing a tragic expression. "Sandra, I---"

"Are you trying to have your company shut down?" Sandy asked. "You actually want a repeat of the Tashkent Catastrophe down here?" She waited, hands clenched.

After several moments, Nospe finally sighed. The sound of a man who'd been finally defeated. "No, Sandra. And if there's any guilt from any of this then I'll accept it. But, before you pass final judgement on me, perhaps you should have all the facts first. Maybe then you'll understand why we've been doing all of this."

He turned and began walking towards the bunker.

Sandy fell into step alongside him. "Where are we going?"

"Into that building," Nospe replied, nodding at the bunker. "I think it's time you finally met someone."

"Who?"

"Your grandfather. Barton Swift."

Chapter Twenty: Language Barrier

Removing a small device from his pocket, Nospe pointed it at the bunker. A low rumble, and a section of the wall before them retracted, then slid aside.

When the opening appeared Sandy suddenly paused. Something had struck her like a slap in the face and she winced, bringing her hands to her head.

Nospe had seen it. "Sandra?"

"I'm . . . ok," she replied, lying through her teeth. Once again she was hearing the mysterious throbbing sound, the noise gripping her spine and caressing it up and down, like knuckles rapping on a tuning fork. In the center of her brain she could feel something like a cold blue radiance growing, as if something was shining a flashlight on all her memories.

Nospe had been silently watching her. "Just as we theorized," he murmured. "It has more of an effect upon you than upon us."

Sandy gave her head a violent shake, trying to push all the feelings into the background, and continued following Nospe into the bunker. As she passed into the doorway she noticed the thickness of the bunker walls. At least ten, or maybe even fifteen feet, of layers upon layers of what seemed to be . . .

"Tomasite," she said.

"We've been struggling for years to try and at least contain the majority of the . . . transmissions," Nospe explained.

Sandy was duly impressed. Her father hardly used this much shielding at his atomic power research station in Texas.

She turned to see where they were headed and, at another command from Nospe's device, lights began to rise ahead of them. They were approaching an inner circular chamber. A wide, low- ceilinged room lined with tables and benches upon which rested a variety of laboratory equipment and computers. A few powered hoists and fork lifts were scattered about.

In the center of the room was a low dais. Upon it rested . . .

And Sandy's steps slowed as her memories flew back to years ago. An explosion taking place at Swift Enterprises. A crater gouged out of the ground. Her father and brother and others closely examining a black cigar-shaped object which had fallen out of the sky.

But this wasn't Shopton, and the object was patiently resting on the dais before her. Sandy could feel . . . she knew that she was seeing the source of the sensations moving through her body. Dark and shining, larger than the one which had landed at Swift Enterprises. Its form slanted in what seemed to be a lifting-body design. Faint oval discolorations near the fore and aft ends which, to Sandy's eye, suggested the possibility of sealed exhaust ports.

Another one. The realization kept hammering away in her brain. Another one, another one, another one . . . Calling to her.

She realized she was breathing rapidly and forced herself to calm down. Turning her head she saw Nospe at a small control console. "Everything which is happening is being recorded," he told her. "I'm transmitting all that happens to recorders located on the surface."

"Herr . . ."

"You wanted answers, Sandra." Nospe nodded at the object on the dais. "Does that help?"

"It's radiating."

Nospe nodded, studying some instruments. "It broadcasts at a wide range of frequencies. Searching. Probing. Learning. Defending itself."

"Defending itself?"

"So far we've found no evidence of lethal radiation," Nospe continued, coming to join her, "but we've taken every precaution possible. The transmissions which our . . . friend . . . here tends to deal in usually are of an incredibly subtle nature."

"Wintergruppe found this in the jungle."

"To be honest about it, your grandfather found it."

"Silver Cloud."

Nospe nodded again. "Among its many abilities, the object here is capable of transmitting a powerful beam of electromagnetic energy. Capable not only of distorting aircraft navigational instruments but, it would seem, actually able to pull aircraft out of the sky if they get close enough."

Sandy slowly began walking around the room, gazing at the thing on the dais. "You said the object could defend itself?"

"Or, rather, it doesn't like to be confined. Come here a moment."

Sandy went to where Nospe stood next to a computer display. "When we first recovered the object we kept it secured in a warehouse on the surface," he said, tapping some buttons on a keyboard. "The warehouse stood next to a greenhouse we were using for experiments involving some of the local plant life. One day the greenhouse simply exploded. Violently.

"We managed to recover some fragments of the greenhouse, as well as some shreds of some of the plants we'd been working with. Look."

The computer display lit up to reveal a chemical diagram.

Sandy stared at it.

Nospe noticed the furrowing of her brow. "Come come, Sandra. Surely your father didn't devote himself entirely to educating your brother?"

Sandy bit her lower lip. There was something familiar about the diagram. She knew she'd seen it on numerous displays and blackboards before during the years.

Another clue bubbled up from her mind. Nospe's admonition against bringing photographs or paper or similar items into the hydrodome . . .

"This is the diagram for cellulose."

Nospe nodded, smiling. "Full marks. Cellulose. The material which provides the basis for materials such as cellophane, celluloid, paper and a host of other products. The material which makes up the cell walls of plants everywhere.

"When we examined the plant fragments we recovered we found this."

Nospe touched a button and the diagram shifted slightly. Now there were some changes. Expansions. Some additional items. Sandy, rummaging through what chemistry she'd picked up throughout the years, pointed at a particular area of diagram. "The hydrogen atoms here. They've been replaced by," she struggled with her memories, "they look like nitro groups." Her eyes widened in sudden realization. "Oh-hhhhhhhh."

"Even so," Nospe agreed. "The cellulose in every plant within the greenhouse had been converted into highly unstable cellulose trinitrate. The greenhouse had become a weapon, the molecular structure of the plants inside it converted by transmissions from the object."

"That's why you had to move the object down here."

"Exactly. Our complex was only meters away from the edge of the jungle. We couldn't take the chance that the object would convert hundreds of acres of trees and related plant life into an enormous bomb. Now you understand why we also established conditions forbidding the bringing of cellulose-based objects down into the hydrodome."

Sandy turned back to the object, once again staring at its surface.

Nospe watched with her. "It's been relatively quiet over the years," he murmured. "Just an occasional burst of energy. Some sort of signal. Then you arrived and its activity increased."

Sandy could believe him. She could feel the object inside her, feel its invisible fingers pacing like a caged tiger in her mind.

"Symbols," she suddenly said. Leaving Nospe she went closer to the object. Studied its hull, realizing what she had been looking for but hadn't yet found.

"We found no symbols like the one which landed at Enterprises," Nospe said from behind her. "We tried everything we could think of. We used all sorts of dyes . . . various sorts of radiations and transmissions. Nothing."

Sandy looked back over her shoulder at him. "But my grandfather? Where is he?"

"That," considered Nospe, "is a very good question." He left the computer to stand next to her by the dais. "In fact, I'm surprised he hasn't appeared yet. We had all been under the impression that this was the moment he was waiting for."

"You mean my grandfather, or . . ." Sandy's eyes went back to the object.

"Another very good question. Come here. We'll try something."

Nospe led Sandy back around to the side of the object nearest the doorway. "Keep in mind, Sandra, that we hadn't been able to penetrate the hull of the object. Not with acids, drills or lasers. The object would either prove resistant to such attempts or bollix up the minds of those who tried stronger methods.

"In the course of our examination of the hull, however, we found that."

Sandy looked to where Nospe was pointing. At first she missed it against the darkness of the hull. But a closer look revealed an odd depression in the hull. A depression which, as Sandy leaned even closer, seemed shaped to fit a human hand. She suddenly felt a tingling throughout her left hand and kept it close by her side.

"It's safe to touch," Nospe softly assured her. "Lord knows we've done it on enough occasions. Go ahead."

Sandy actually stood there and argued with herself against doing so. But her hand seemed to have other ideas and slowly lifted up and moved forward. As if she was watching someone else doing it, Sandy stood there, wide-eyed, and waited for her flesh to make contact.

Her hand pressed firmly against the depression. Fitting smoothly. And Sandy jerked slightly as she felt the sensations within her suddenly . . . the closest comparison she could arrive at was changing channels. The throbbing was becoming more modulated.

Complex. Less of a pacing tiger and more of a patient teacher. The depression vanished, replaced by a smooth cool black square surface larger than her hand. Sandy almost bit her lip off but kept her hand steady, watching as the black surface began producing thin lines of green light which rapidly pulsed back and forth.

Beside her Nospe hissed. "We've all touched the handprint before," he said. "We all had that space appear. But the green lines are new." He backed away and rushed to a console, touching switches and speaking German into a microphone.

"I'm making sure all of this is being recorded," he told Sandy. "Please keep your hand in place."

"And if it falls off?" Sandy asked. But somehow she knew it wasn't going to happen. More and more she was beginning to feel in tune with whatever was going on between her and the object. Not that she felt entirely safe. But she somehow knew that the object was achieving a long sought after goal. It wouldn't harm her, as long as that goal had a chance of being totally met.

Something else was now happening. "Herr Nospe!"

He turned, suddenly gasping as they both watched. Once again a glowing green mist was forming in the air before Sandy. She stood there, her hand still on the object, waiting as the mist concentrated into the form of Barton Swift.

"Herr Nospe . . ."

"It's the first time it's appeared in conjunction with someone touching the depression," Nospe told her.

Sandy kept her eyes on her grandfather. The image of him. This time she wasn't going to pass out. She could study him at length. See how he wasn't entirely solid but was a projection of transparent green light.

He moved, sometimes flickering as if his image was undergoing occasional adjustment. His head turned, examining the surroundings. But soon it looked down at Sandy. The head tilted, gazing at the girl almost questioningly.

"You're supposed to be smaller," Sandy heard herself explaining. "I'm grown up now."

The image considered this for a moment. Then it flickered and resumed clarity, only now it stood at a height closer to Sandy's own.

"There's no trace of lethal radiation from the projection,"

Nospe was saying. "You seem to be standing in a magnetic bubble of some sort."

Sandy slowly nodded, still staring at her grandfather.

The image moved its lips. Considered trying to speak. Then it raised an arm and extended a hand to cover the one Sandy kept pressed tight against the object. Sandy felt a brief tingle pass through her and, for a moment, was worried she might pass out again. But she remained on her feet as, once again, some sort of channel change echoed throughout both her and the object. The flickering green lines on the depression increased in intensity.

Barton Swift suddenly disappeared.

"Wait," Sandy shouted. "Come back."

In place of the image was a green glow, like an oval cloud suspended in the air before Sandy. As she watched, bright green symbols began to appear within the cloud. One after the other, a new one with each heartbeat.

"Mein Gott!" Nospe said.

Slowly, Sandy raised her hand free of the depression. The symbols continued to flicker within the cloud. As carefully as possible she backed away from the object, her eyes on the projection. "I think I've definitely accessed something," she told Nospe.

"We're still recording," he assured her, his eyes burning as he stared hungrily at the object. "Translation, unfortunately, may be another problem entirely."

"Maybe not," Sandy said. Reaching into her pants pocket she pulled out her communicator, blessing whatever impulse made her bring it along.

Switching it on she moved closer to the doorway. "Phyllis?"

Phyl? C'mon . . ."

Peering through the doorway she could make out the shape of the seacopter waiting through the surface of the hydrodome. Sandy once again raised the communicator to her lips. "Phyl are you receiving me?"

Nospe quickly turned back to his own console. "I'm ordering the repelatrns to be tuned down," he told her. "Wait a moment and then try again."

Sandy nodded gratefully. Glancing back she saw that symbols were still flickering within the green cloud.

She tried the communicator again. "Phyllis?"

"Thank God," cried Phyllis' voice. "We've been trying---"

"I'm okay," Sandy assured her. "Listen. I need you to do something." Turning back to the object she pointed her communicator at it, uncovering the digital camera lens. "I'm sending images over to you now."

"Okay," Phyllis replied. "Getting them on my . . . Oh My God! Is that---"

"It is and we need to move fast," Sandy replied. "Launch the surface antenna buoy. Get in contact with the computers back at Enterprises. Bounce a signal through the space station if you have to, but do it. Access the Space Friends symbol translation function."

"Yes. Ah-hhhh, Sandy. I don't have the access code to the translator."

"I do," Sandy assured her.

Hearing this, Nospe closed his eyes and sighed in relief.

"Working," Phyllis' voice announced. "San, this'll take time."

"Let it take time. Just let me know when you need that access code."

"Roger."

Nospe moved closer to her. "I don't think we've lost anything," he said. "To me it seems as if the symbols repeat themselves."

Sandy nodded, keeping the communicator's camera eye pointed at the object. "I think what we're seeing is some sort of introduction," she said. "It made contact with me and now it's waiting for me to establish further dialogue."

"In the language of your Space Friends."

"Not my Space Friends, but I agree---"

"San?" Phyllis' voice asked. "Access code?"

"Orbit slash three three five slash diamond slash icebox."

A few moments. Then: "I'm in."

"There should be a scan and paste reading function," Sandy explained. "Please tell me you've been recording the symbols."

"Yeah, but---"

"Feed the symbols into the function and get back to me."

"Okay."

Sandy sighed, allowing her arm to relax slightly. "You kept all this a secret from us, Herr Nospe."

"Not entirely my choice, Sandra. Please believe me."

"A lot of unnecessary risk was being taken---"

"San!"

Sandy once again raised the communicator. "Go."

"It's working, but the program is redlining a lot of symbols. The best I'm going to be able to do here in terms of an accurate translation is forty per cent."

"Well, considering the circumstances under which we're doing this, I'm not surprised. We'll dot i's and cross t's later. Give me the best shot."

"Message reads: `Level One Access . . . something untranslatable . . . Awaiting'. That's all I've got."

Sandy nodded. "It looks like we've broken through the first layer of access. I really wish Tom was here."

"Me too," Phyllis assured her.

"Phyllis . . . on the translation program there should be a patch you can download into Coldwater's communication system. It'll be marked `Oscillator' or something like that, and it'll enable you to send a reply."

"Okay. Hold on."

"Thank you," Nospe softly breathed.

"For what?" Sandy replied.

"For cooperating with us on this."

"Oh there'll be issues later on," Sandy assured him. "Believe me. But also believe I want to get to the bottom of this just as much as you do."

"Sandy it's downloading," Phyllis reported from the seacopter. "What do you want me to say?"

"I think `take me to your leader' borders on trite," Sandy muttered. She shook her head angrily. "Damn it. What would Tom say?"

"Perhaps keep it personal," Nospe suggested. "After all, it produced the image of your grandfather."

Sandy nodded slowly.

"San, it's downloaded, and the radio's scanning for a frequency," Phyllis said. "What am I saying when it finds it?"

"Tell it . . . `This Is Sandra Swift Awaiting Further Instructions'. See what it does with that."

"Okay. Frequency found. Locked. I'm tapping in the message."

Sandy and Nospe waited.

"Transmitting . . . now."

For a few moments nothing happened. Then the symbols ceased flickering and the green cloud was empty, continuing to hang in space near the object. More moments passed. A minute.

"Maybe we should've asked for its leader," Sandy murmured.

"The transmission should've been able to reach into this chamber," Nospe added.

"Oh certainly. If I could send signals out---OW!"

Sandy staggered back a few steps, the inside of her head suddenly feeling as if it were being sprayed with icy splinters of granite.

And new symbols were appearing within the cloud. Slower this time.

Sandy felt Nospe's hands reaching helpfully, allowed herself to be straightened as she shook her head clear. "I don't know what just happened," she told him almost truthfully. Inside her had been another channel change.

She quickly raised the communicator back at the object, letting it see the new symbols. "Phyllis? What're you getting on this?"

"Hold on," came the reply from the seacopter. "I'm pasting them over to the program. Sandy it's practically throwing out every symbol I put in."

"It's got to be reading something."

"Wait . . . wait . . . wait. Got one. Maybe." A pause. "Got maybe another. Oh!"

"What?"

"Sandy, two words. And remember that the accuracy isn't good----"

"Just give it to me, Phyl."

"Two words. `Enemy Language'."

Chapter Twenty-One: Race To The Depths

Sandy and Nospe were staring hard into each others eyes.

"Feindliche Sprache," Nospe slowly murmured, almost to himself.

But Sandy was feeling something deep inside her mind. All the unusual sensations and inner sounds which the object had been producing inside her were being condensed into what seemed to be a single line of cool energy. A line which, even as she stood there, she could feel slowly beginning to shrink. Slowly.

And when it was gone . . .

"We've got to move," she declared.

Nospe frowned. "Vas?"

Sandy went to him. Gripped his shoulder hard. "Listen to me, Herr Nospe. You've got to evacuate the hydrodome immediately."

"I don't underst---"

"Immediately," Sandy repeated, shaking him. "Can you control the hydrodome functions from the surface? The repelatrons?"

Confused, Nospe nodded.

"Then, when you get everyone up to the surface, shut down the repelatrons. All of them."

"Sandy---"

"Collapse the hydrodome. I've got to get the object out of here. Fast." Sandy went over to the bunker entrance, raising her communicator. "Phyllis? Phyl?"

"Right here, San."

"Back the seacopter away from the hydrodome some. Get ready for it to collapse."

"Sandy----"

Nospe stepped up to her. "Sandy, I have to know---"

She waved him off, still talking into the communicator. "After it collapses I want you to open the cargo bay doors and lower the netting. I'll guide you from there. No time to argue, just move!"

Lowering her communicator, Sandy turned back around, examining the contents of the room. She started moving towards the nearest of the fork lifts. "Can the dais be dragged out of the chamber? Is it on runners or did you have to move the object itself"

"Sandra!"

Sandy turned back to Nospe. "We don't have much time. Not . . . much . . . time. Mistakes have been made and we're gonna pay for them if we don't hurry."

Nospe looked sharply over at the silent object. "It's going to explode," he whispered.

"That's its only option," Sandy agreed. "Please clear the hydrodome. Now!"

Nospe continued staring at the object a few moments more. Then he rushed over to one of the consoles and pressed a large red button. A siren immediately began wailing throughout the dome.

"Evakuieren Sie das hydrodome sofort," he shouted into a microphone. "Dieses ist eine Dringlichkeit!"

Sandy slipped behind the controls of the forklift and began worrying over the controls.

Nospe was running up to her. "I'll pull it out of the chamber," he promised. "Let me take over."

Sandy nodded and surrendered the forklift to him. As he powered it up she ran out of the bunker, heading for the waiting Fat Man suit.

She had just closed the viewing plate hatch and was powering up the suit as Nospe became visible at the bunker's entrance. He was driving the forklift backwards, looking over his shoulder. The forklift was groaning under the load of carefully carrying the alien object out of the bunker.

Powering up the suit's arms and legs she moved it to a standing position, then walked it over to the forklift. When Nospe noticed her she indicated a nearby spot for him to go, motioning for him to place the object there.

To his credit Nospe obeyed as quickly as possible, and Sandy backed off a bit to give him room."

"Sandy?"

She touched the headset she had slipped on. "Yeah?"

"We're positioned about a hundred yards from the dome. The cargo hatch is open."

"Right. Now watch out for the suction when the dome collapses, but move in as soon as you can."

"Okay. San . . . ?"

"Yeah, I'm shaking here too."

Nospe had carefully lowered the object onto the hydrodome floor and was backing the forklift away. Switching it off he stepped out of the machine and ran to Sandy.

She opened the viewing plate. "I'm going to do what I can," she cried out to Nospe, "but you might want to get your people off the hydrodome jetty and as far inland as you can."

He wore the look of a man being crushed by desperation. "It has a connection with you," he said.

Sandy nodded. "That's how come I know what's going to happen."

"You can't stop it? Switch it off?"

Sandy's eyes were tragic. "Herr Nospe . . . "

He stared up at her.

"We're running out of time." Reaching out, Sandy slammed the viewing plate shut.

Nospe turned and ran for the elevator tube. Sandy watched, waiting and, moments later, saw a large bubble begin rapidly rising to the surface.

She maneuvered the Fat Man over to where the object waited. Moving carefully she leaned the egg-shaped suit over the object, the mechanical arms stretched out as far as possible. Firing the anchoring bolts in the legs she first

secured the bottom half of the Fat Man to the hydrodome floor. Then she aimed the hands of the mechanical arms before firing the anchoring bolts embedded in the "palms". The armored pitons slammed hard into the hydrodome floor just beyond the object, pulling metal cables behind them.

Sandy retracted the slack on the cables until the Fat Man groaned in protest. The suit was now holding the object firmly in place to the floor of the hydrodome. Or so she hoped.

Inside her mind the cool glowing line was continuing to shrink. Mentally she begged and pleaded with it. Pushed at it. She knew none of it was going to do any good. Would it help if I said I was sorry, she wondered?

She suddenly looked up. Had the object heard her? Something was different . . .

But she soon realized that it was only the lack of a sound which had, up to now, been prevalent throughout the hydrodome. The howl of the tortured repelatrns was gone. Which meant . . .

Sandy braced herself within the Fat Man harness, wincing in anticipation. Her curiosity couldn't be held back, though, and she peeked about the edge of the viewing plate just in time to see the end. The normally smooth surface of the hydrodome was rapidly closing in on her, the thin polymer barrier bulging obscenely down under the weight of the ocean no longer held back by the rays of the repelatrns. Sandy closed her eyes as the impact struck in a seemingly endless pummeling of water accompanied by a freight-train roar. The Fat Man shook violently about but everything held, even as the remains of the polymer barrier were viciously stretched to the breaking point, then being torn as if by giant hands, leaving the Fat Man gripping its precious cargo at the bottom of the ocean.

A high keening sound still filled the air until Sandy realized she was screaming and fought to calm herself down. Opening her eyes she saw a constellation of red lights regarding her from the Fat Man's instrument panels. The suit had weathered the collapse of the dome, but only barely. And the object's countdown was still continuing.

Sandy pressed the button releasing the Fat Man from the anchoring bolts. Moving the arms and legs she made sure she had the object in as secure a grip as possible; a difficult feat given the size of the artifact.

"Phyl!"

"Cavalry's here, San. Look up."

But Sandy already felt something being pulled across both the Fat Man and the object. Peering through the viewing plate . . . which seemed to have acquired an ominous crack from somewhere . . . she made out the form of Coldwater's cargo netting settling nearby and realized that the sudden increase of darkness was due to the seacopter's presence.

As if reading her thoughts the darkness suddenly vanished as lights from Coldwater's underside speared down, illuminating everything.

Feeling a coldness begin to grow within the suit, Sandy gripped the control sticks and lifted up off the ground, feeling the suit groan in response. A sudden twist of the sticks and the Fat Man tried to roll back. At the same time Sandy released the grip of the mechanical arms from the object and tried to "kick" with the legs.

The combined motion had the desired effect and the object drifted away from the Fat Man and squarely onto the cargo netting.

"Pull it in, Phyl. Now!"

The cables from the cargo bay tightened and began drawing the netting and its payload up towards the waiting Coldwater. Sandy continued slowly tumbling back, trying to give the netting plenty of clearance.

It wasn't as if she had any real choice otherwise. More and more red lights were blinking inside the suit. Glancing down at a small screen between the control sticks Sandy read: HULL INTEGRITY NEAR COMPROMISE LEVEL. LIFE-SUPPORT FAILURE IMMINENT. MANEUVERING REDUCED TO 14% EFFICIENCY.

With the last ounce of control she had over the Fat Man, Sandy fired the thrusters one more time, trying to aim the suit at the seacopter above her. She was taking long, deep breaths and, after sending a silent prayer upwards, twisted the control sticks in opposite directions, yanking them out of their sockets.

Closing her eyes she missed the sight of the Fat Man parting into segments around her, the ejection charge freeing her from within. Surrounded by deep water she opened her eyes and began rapidly swimming upwards, the strokes

of her arms and legs pushing her towards the still open cargo bay. The netting was even now securing the object within the bay and Sandy swam up close to it, her hands stretching out anxiously for a thick yellow lever set in the hull. Reaching it she pulled hard and the cargo bay hatch slid shut beneath her feet. Even better, the waters surrounding her bubbled as the emergency pumps began filling the bay with air.

Her lungs were on the verge of bursting open as the water began clearing the access hatch. Twisting the locking knob hard she spilled out onto the floor of the seacopter, accompanied by several gallons.

Coughing hard she struggled to stand, finding two pairs of hands assisting her. She nodded gratefully at her mother and Bingo.

"Sandy?"

"Later," she croaked, limping towards the flight deck. Ahead of her she saw Phyllis regarding her from the pilot's chair, her eyes rimmed with concern.

Sandy roughly waved her aside and Phyllis quickly unstrapped, slipping into the co-pilot's chair. Feeling like a used washcloth that had been squeezed almost dry, Sandy tumbled into the pilot's chair, trying to ignore the pains lancing inside.

With her hands on the seacopter controls her thoughts seemed to clear. "Turning," she said. Her right hand rested on the throttles. Moved forward. "Thrusters to maximum."

"Where are we going?" Phyllis asked.

Sandy eyed the compass. "Setting course . . . two nineteen. Rate of descent . . . gradual increase until we hit over the edge, then forty-five degrees down."

Coldwater soared away from the remains of the hydrodome and sped into the darkness of the ocean. Phyllis continued to stare at Sandy as Mary and Bingo held on from behind.

"We've got that thing on board. Don't we?"

Sandy nodded. "It'll detonate---"

"Detonate?"

"In less than . . . fourteen minutes at my reckoning." Sandy continued watching the compass, then looked up to see the images being produced on the SmartGlas surface of the viewport. "We've got to get it as deep as possible, as far away as possible."

"Sandy---"

"I'm taking it as far down into the Atacama Trench as I can. That should be safe."

Phyllis' eyes read the instruments. "We're pushing the thrusters---"

"I'm gonna redline `em. I have to."

Coldwater continued plummeting into the depths.

"Nospe and I made mistakes," Sandy told the others. "We didn't realize what we were doing and the object is defending itself the best way it knows how." She gulped hard. "Nine minutes left. Maybe. We've got to release the object and get out of here before it blows."

Phyllis was looking from the SmartGlas images to the instruments, her lips moving in silent calculation. "Sandy . . ."

"Mmmmm?"

"In nine minutes the object should be far enough away to protect the mainland from a blast . . ."

Sandy raised her eyes to look at her friend.

"But we won't make it clear at this rate."

Sandy took a long breath. "All of you get back to the lounge."

"San---"

"Do it. I'll be back there shortly."

Phyllis unbuckled herself from her seat and rose to follow Mary and Bingo.

Sandy adjusted Coldwater's rate of descent, working the controls until the vehicle was aimed at the most direct and quickest route down the slope of the Atacama Trench. She then touched the autopilot.

Seven minutes if she was reading the decreasing line in her head properly.

Unstrapping herself she left the flight deck and headed for the lounge, almost having to crawl uphill. "Everyone buckled in?" she asked.

Nods from the other women. Sandy pulled herself close to the table and then, bracing herself against it, tugged at the carpeting.

Pulling aside a section revealed a small hatchway outlined in yellow and black stripes. Opening the hatch revealed two thick levers. Between them was a single large red button. Gripping the levers Sandy pulled them upright. The button glowed into life and Sandy slammed her hand down on it. "Hold on."

Metal shutters slid over the rear viewport. Similar shutters hissed closed on either side of the lounge, sealing it off from the rest of the vehicle.

A large, pie-shaped section of the hull separated itself from the rear of Clearwater and began drifting away. Seconds later airbags inflated on either side of the section and it began rising more rapidly up through the water.

The rest of the seacoaster . . . including the cargo bay and its contents . . . continued speeding down into darkness.

And Sandy closed her eyes as she began hearing a voice inside her head.

Her grandfather . . .

"Athana tec'ni . . . athana qua'ni . . . athana po'ni . . . ni'athana . . . sen erm . . . sen wyy . . . sen bishha . . ."

Coldwater was now thoroughly lost within the depths. The lounge section . . . now an escape capsule . . . still rose towards the lightening surface, tumbling slightly.

"Codo qua . . . codo po . . . codo . . . clu si erm . . . clu si wyy . . . clu si bishha . . . clu si jegu . . ."

Mary was trying to reach across the table to Sandy. "Grab my hand."

Sandy shook her head. "Hold on. Any moment now."

The line was almost gone from within her mind.

Barton Swift's voice kept intoning for her benefit alone. "Clu si pahh . . . clu si tec . . . clu si qua . . . clu si po . . . virhlaten!"

"Hold on!"

Nothing at first . . . then the feeling of something violently occurring far beneath them. A sensation of the violence approaching.

"Brace for shock wave," Sandy said, reaching out now for her mother's hand. But the impact struck the capsule just as their fingertips brushed, and the last thing Sandy knew was the feeling of being picked up in a giant's hand and thrown hard over her mother's left shoulder, colliding with the rear bulkhead.

Then silence, and darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Revelations In A Hospital Ward

All in all, Sandy reflected, she suspected there were probably far less stressful ways of visiting a foreign country. Not even in Ecuador two weeks and she'd been chased out of a nightclub, been assaulted by undersea wildlife and a submarine, driven off a German spy in a dark alley, experienced an armed uprising at a corporate facility, was damn near blown to bits by an exploding alien artifact . . .

And now, for the second time, she was in a hospital room lying in bed. The attending doctor was, in fact, the same one who had treated her during her first visit, and the expression he was currently leveling at her could best be described as both "stony" and "lethal".

So my brother designs scuttling controls without accompanying safety restraints, she silently telegraphed to him. Sue me. The slight effort produced an accompanying movement which made her wince, and she concluded the doctor had already issued in with his lumps. What with a large bandage covering the left side of her face, as well as having what seemed to be miles more gauze wrapped tightly around her chest, helping to keep her very annoyed ribs in place.

Or maybe the doctor's displeasure was due to the fact that, although a lone patient, Sandy was currently taking up the space of an entire ward. But even then she felt the accusation was unfair. She certainly hadn't asked for such a large crowd of attendants.

Her Mom, of course, was a given, and Mary Swift was now standing firmly by her daughter's bedside, regarding the rest of the crowd with as much of a scowl any lioness could summon up on behalf of an injured cub.

Bingo stood on the other side of the bed, ignoring the pointed looks given to her by the one nurse who was trying to attend to Sandy's immediate needs. Sandy noted how Bingo's right hand never strayed far from the pocket of her Levis, and Sandy let her own fingertips slip comfortably under the right edge of her blankets, reassuring herself.

Nospe was also in the room, accompanied by Sebald. Both men looked as if they were ready to eat themselves out of sheer desperation over the questions they no doubt wanted to ask, and Sandy had to appreciate the mental pins and needles they'd been sitting on for the past few days.

Geiner had also managed to show up, and Sandy couldn't help but notice the looks which had passed between him and Nospe. Confusion mingled with accusation and realization. Geiner had quietly drifted over to a corner of the room and was now also involved in playing the waiting game. Sandy knew that several of Geiner's people, the ones who had actually carried out the attack on the hydrodome, were currently in jail. But Geiner had elected to remain in the background until all the details were ironed out.

So!

The rest of the people in the room were also demonstrating varying degrees of patience ranging from unconscious mutters to professional stolidness. Without moving her head too much Sandy could not only see Gradich and Marquez, but three members of the Esmeraldas Police Department, both the American and German Ambassadors to Ecuador, a representative of Hemispak and various Excellencies of the local government up to and including the Honorable Secretary of State for the Republic of Ecuador, Señora Bridget Valbuena. All of them were currently looking at Sandy with variations of impatience flavored with curiosity.

For her part, Sandy leisurely sipped at a tall glass of mineral water. It wasn't her intention to stall, but she had hoped . . .

Ah! The door opened and Phyllis now slipped into the room.

At Sandy's look she slowly nodded and, as unobtrusively as possible, moved into position over in a corner.

Bingo had also caught the look and she now moved as well, quietly heading for a previously selected location in the room.

Showtime, thought Sandy, and she briefly collected her thoughts before raising her face to the crowd, hoping her expression was neutral enough.

"Okay," she said. "I guess Herr Nospe, the others at Wintergruppe and my associates have pretty much explained what went on---"

"Indeed," Señora Valbuena said in a rather ominous tone.

Sandy really couldn't blame her. Bad enough poor Señor Marquez had to explain to the officials at Quito why there'd been a 10.4 kiloton explosion off the immediate coast. Fortunately there hadn't been any radioactivity reported, but Sandy suspected the political fallout would be long in settling.

She sipped again at her water and decided to push on. "I guess the thing to do would be to start from the beginning. All of you know, of course, that my father and brother have long been in communication with extraterrestrials. What we've come to call the Space Friends."

Assorted nods throughout the room.

"What we've learned, in recent years, is that there're other . . . factions . . . out there in space. It's not just one big happy interstellar community but, rather, a collection of various groups, some of which have ideas that don't necessarily coincide with those of the Space Friends."

Another sip. "One of these factions I'll go ahead and call 'The Senders'. Apparently they're of the same general species as the Space Friends. They may even live on the same planet. I don't know."

"What I do know is that the Senders hold a different philosophy from the Space Friends. The Senders possess all sorts of advanced technology and feel that they have an obligation to share this technology with other races."

Another sip. "This technology includes a sophisticated artificial intelligence, matter transmutation and some form of electronic telepathy."

Nospe and Sebald were looking like children who'd just had their Christmas toys taken from them.

"The Senders program this technology into unmanned probes and send them out throughout the galaxy in the hopes that other races will benefit."

"That was one of their probes," Nospe said.

Sandy nodded. "It landed out in the jungle I don't know how long ago. Decades maybe, or even millennia. Following its programming it began carefully scanning for a native life-form sophisticated enough to access its contents. I'm not exactly sure what criterion it used to determine proper sophistication, but it didn't really 'wake up' until aircraft and other machines began coming within range. It then tried to signal them magnetically."

She nodded at several of the realizing looks within the crowd. "That's where the reports of planes going off course started to come in."

"And Silver Cloud?" Gradich asked.

"I'm not sure," Sandy replied, "but I got the impression that regular aircraft were traveling too fast for the probe to really affect. Silver Cloud, on the other hand, eventually entered the probe's sphere of influence at a speed slow enough to get a firm magnetic lock upon. Unfortunately, whether through accident or design, the magnetic beam used by the probe was not only sufficiently strong enough to pull Silver Cloud far off course, but cause it to crash as well."

Another sip. "I don't know how many members of the Silver Cloud crew survived the crash. I do know that my grandfather managed. Not only that, but he lived long enough to make it to the probe."

"He touched it. The probe performed a complete scan of him, including his genetic material. Maybe there's some sort of genetic difference between the Senders and the Space Friends and the Senders use genetic coding as part of their contact criterion. I don't know. But, for some reason, my grandfather was . . . no longer able to establish further contact."

"The probe then initiated a program of seeking out similar life forms to contact. Maybe it managed to collect genetic data on other survivors from Silver Cloud because, throughout the years, people who had an interest in finding out what had happened . . . relatives and such . . . would come here and report seeing 'ghosts'."

More knowing nods from the crowd.

"The probe was becoming desperate because it knew it was on a planet where it could share its knowledge, but it couldn't quite come into reach of someone who it could unload itself to."

"Given its sophistication," the German Ambassador said, "I am surprised it didn't try more direct methods."

"Umm, well . . . there was something else to consider."

Sandy paused to rub the cool surface of the glass on her forehead. "I'd mentioned how the Senders were at odds with the Space Friends."

"Somehow the Space Friends came to suspect that the probe had arrived on Earth. The impression I got from my own contact tells me that the Senders broke an important interstellar law in sending all this technology to Earth.

"The Space Friends had to investigate. They had to take a direct approach but play their cards awfully close."

Another sip. "I had always wondered," she said half to herself. "Dad and Tom also used to wonder a lot about it."

Nospé frowned. "Pardon?"

"The message from the Space Friends that landed at Swift Enterprises all those years ago," Sandy replied. "Didn't you ever wonder about it, Herr Nospé? An alien message just happens to land with pinpoint accuracy practically at the feet of my father and brother? The impact caused little damage and even less in the way of injury. Why did the Space Friends send their message directly to Swift Enterprises? Think about it a moment." Sandy relaxed for a moment.

It was Sebald and the American Ambassador who first glowed with realization, but Sebald opened his mouth soonest. "The probe. Here. It read your grandfather's genetische Unterzeichnung. His genetic signature."

Sandy nodded. "It probably sent back a signal to its homeworld. Maybe that's how the Space Friends learned of the probe's arrival here. The Space Friends copied the genetic signature and sent a ship to Earth. From orbit, I guess, they quietly scanned all of us, looking for a similar pattern. When they found it the next step was to determine just how far deep we were with the Senders. If at all."

"The message sent to Earth," Nospé suggested. "That was their way of investigating."

"Exactly. They sent simple symbols and waited to see what would happen. They certainly didn't want to come right out and reveal the motive of the Senders. Not without first knowing how much we knew. They didn't want to risk us getting our hands on Sender technology. We managed to pass their tests. Over the years we maintained contact with the Space Friends and exhibited nothing but innocent ignorance concerning the Senders. Even after being sent other opportunities to slip up. Things like the animal probe sent to the Moon, and the energy entity which was sent here."

"And Nestria," Nospé added.

"And Nestria," agreed Sandy. "I don't know how much of the information I got from my contact with the probe is on the level, but apparently one of the reasons the Space Friends sent Nestria into orbit around Earth was to set up a spy outpost to hunt for the Senders. A sort of 'police substation'."

Nospé was still frowning. "But surely . . . the Space Friends have been here much longer."

"Yes, and I think that's where a lot of the later trouble came in. The probe eventually realized that not only were the Space Friends aware of its presence on Earth, but that the Space Friends had a sort of . . . 'previous claim' . . . here. The arrival of Nestria caused the probe to lie low and only make occasional forays in regards to communication. The 'ghost' sightings weren't as frequent. Nor were the animal attacks."

Valbuena frowned. "Animal attacks?"

"The probe's attempts to establish contact had an effect upon the wildlife in the region," Sandy explained. "Señor Marquez had mentioned the way the animals in the northern jungle had been fierce. And there was the business with the barracudas outside the hydrodome. I didn't put two and two together until now."

"But getting back. Wintergruppe had, by now, acquired the probe." Here Sandy let out a long sigh. "And here's where a lot of blame gets passed around. Dad and Tom had shared as much information as they could concerning the Space Friends, but that didn't stop others from suspecting that information was being withheld."

The Germans in the room were being particularly quiet at this point.

Sandy let a touch of hardness enter her voice. "I'm presuming that this organization called 'Section Omphalos' is some sort of European effort to try and learn more about the Space Friends."

"Fräulein Swift . . ." the German Ambassador began.

"I'll inform my father about all of this," Sandy declared. "And he'll try . . . once more . . . to convince all of you that nothing has been kept secret from the rest of the scientific community."

She quietly noted how Nospe appeared particularly guilty. "If everyone had been more open," she said, "then a lot of this would've turned out different.

"As it was, maybe it was for the better."

"Better?"

"If Wintergruppe hadn't worked to keep the probe's existence secret then my brother or father would've probably encountered it. Then what would the Space Friends have done? As it was, it was a good thing that, out of everyone in my family, it was me who made contact with the probe." She once again leaned back against the pillows. "Good old dummy me."

"I . . . don't understand," said the Ambassador.

"Tom or my father would've properly unlocked the secrets of the probe. Then we could've been up against all sorts of interstellar trouble. But I tried to make contact in my own way. I used the language of the Space Friends. The language of the Senders' one true enemy.

"The probe realized the jig was up. Its primary contact was already under the thumb of the Space Friends, or so that's how it seemed. It had nothing left to do but exercise its last remaining option and destroy itself." Counting down its final seconds in the voice of my grandfather, she silently added. My last memories of my grandfather's voice. A countdown in an alien language.

It was Valbuena who broke the growing silence. "So we've lost all contact with these . . . Senders."

"Who knows?" Sandy replied dully. "But I expect there'll be quite a bit of interesting conversation between Earth and the Space Friends over the next few months."

She kept quiet about the other thing. The truth which she hadn't even quite worked up the nerve to reveal to her mother, or Phyllis or Bingo. The truth that contact with the probe had caused all sorts of information to be downloaded into her mind. Information which was still being sorted. She could feel it . . . little ants crawling through her brain.

Once again it was Valbuena who spoke up. "Well!" she said, glancing around. "Obviously there are still loose ends to tie up," and here she gave an especially hard look at the Germans, "but I think I can tentatively offer official thanks to Señora Swift for helping to eliminate a potential threat from the soil of my country."

Sandy considered that awfully big of Valbuena. Especially since, if matters had turned out differently, Ecuador would've stood to gain much from the Senders technology.

She carefully put aside the glass. It was showtime. "Actually, Madam Ambassador, I can sort of clear up one more loose end here and now."

Valbuena's expression was haunted. Probably wondering what I was going to blow up now, Sandy thought.

She rested the fingertips of her right hand near the hem of her sheet. Phyllis and Bingo were also tensing.

She kept her eyes on Valbuena. "The reason we first got involved in all of this was because my grandfather's diary, plus a sample of Silver Cloud's hull, had been found in a depot within my country. There'd been a theft attempt. Someone . . . a group of someones actually . . . had tried to break into depot to steal both the diary and the hull sample.

"One of the big mysteries of this whole business was how did my grandfather's diary end up in a Federal depot. The FBI agents investigating the break-in had wondered the same thing. But without the break-in we never would've learned of the presence of the diary. We never would've come to Ecuador and stirred everything up."

Sandy let her fingertips slip under the sheet. Let her eyes slowly move across the crowd.

"Herr Geiner, of the BfV, provided the answer." Here she smiled gratefully at Geiner.

Nospe and Sebald and the German Ambassador all turned towards Geiner, their mouths opening.

"He was the one who suggested I scan the diary for fingerprints. And I did, using the retroscope on board the seacopter. The retroscope, and the seacopter, are unfortunately both gone," . . . along with Grandfather's diary,

Sandy silently mourned . . . "but I'd had the foresight to have the data downloaded to Phyllis' personal computer." Sandy nodded over at her friend. "Phyllis has been taking the trouble to study the data in greater depth."

Nospe slowly turned back towards Sandy. "Sandy, I---"

"Your fingerprints are all over the diary," she said.

"I saw it, but---"

"And so are Geiner's. Understandable. What wasn't so understandable . . . at first . . . was finding the other set of Geiner's fingerprints. The much earlier ones."

Everyone in the room was now looking at Geiner. He was slowly backing away, his face whitening.

"Broke into any more Federal depots lately, Geiner?" Sandy softly asked.

At this Geiner broke for the door. Sandy's hand whipped out from under the sheet and she pointed her communicator at him, squeezing it. From where they stood Bingo and Phyllis also fired off their communicators, the three pops sounding almost as one . . .

And Geiner found himself firmly attached to the wall near the door, the adhesive growing rapidly over his body.

"Hilfe . . ."

"You'll be all right," Sandy declared, sitting back. "Just in time to stand charges of theft and counter-espionage against two countries. Maybe three if your own country decides to prosecute."

The German Ambassador, who'd barely missed being tagged by Bingo's shot, slowly straightened up to stare wide-eyed at Sandy.

Fräulein Swift . . ." he began.

"Oh I don't blame you, Mister Ambassador," Sandy declared. "I admit to having been confused for quite a while. Geiner was a legitimate agent with your country. That was the problem. It didn't occur to me until almost too late that he could've been turned by some of the other interests in Germany who were trying to undermine Wintergruppe's authority concerning the Sender probe."

Nospe and Sebald both let out long breaths.

"I was also thrown off by the arrival of the submarine outside the hydrodome. I thought maybe Geiner had sent for it in his capacity as an intelligence operative. I didn't realize that the German government had authorized its presence simply as a prudent move. Its . . . firing on us was simply a result of over-zealous security due to the tenseness of the overall situation.

"When Phyllis confirmed the older set of fingerprints something else occurred to me. Out of all the Germans we encountered down here, Geiner had the most accent-free English. Odd for someone assigned to work in Ecuador, but perfect for someone trained to engage in covert operations in America."

Geiner continued struggling, his head twisted back to glare at Sandy.

"Your group had been trying to get at the probe for some time," Sandy told him, feeling the anger creep into her voice. "You were getting nowhere and needed a different approach.

"It was your people who had Grandfather's diary and the Oralum sample. That's how you came to know about Wintergruppe's involvement in the first place. You and your people weren't breaking into the depot to steal anything . . . you were breaking in to place the diary and the Oralum inside the depot, making sure the items would be found. You knew we'd be informed and we'd launch our own investigation. Stir things up even more than you could and allow you and your people to stage your stupid little attempt!"

She felt her mother's hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently, and worked to calm herself down, settling back against the bed. Remained that way as the police and others worked to pull Geiner free from the wall . . . along with a good deal of the paint job . . . and moved him out of the room, followed by the German Ambassador who threw an apologetic parting look at Sandy.

"God I'm tired," Sandy finally confessed to one and all.

"Small wonder," Phyllis replied, moving closer.

"Yes," Mary Swift added in a firm tone of voice. "I think it's high past time someone came home for a much needed rest."

"I'm not in any mood to argue," Sandy replied. "To be honest, I think I've outworn my stay here. And," she added, sighing, "there's still a lot to explain to Tom and Dad."

"We'll help."

Sandy gratefully reached up and gave her mother's hand a squeeze. "Thanks. Believe me, once everything's settled, I intend on giving myself a holiday. A north of the border one."

Little did Sandy know that the time she'd spent in Ecuador would hardly signal the end of her adventures. Even with all that she'd experienced she had no way of guessing what would soon await her within the CAVERNS OF THE MOON.

"It sounds kind of weird," Bingo commented. "All this talk of things getting back to normal after all the time we spent together already."

"True," Sandy said wearily. "But don't worry, Bingo. Things are hardly back to normal."

"Oh?"

Sandy nodded. "Someday," she murmured. "Someday I still need to find out what finally happened to Grandfather." She stared up at the young Texan. "That story is still open."