

Chapter One: Missing!

Bud finally had to call out a third time. “Sandy, are you deaf?”

In point of fact Sandra Swift’s hearing was rather healthy . . . always had been . . . but she had been concentrating with her thermal and evolved gas analyzer and wanted to carefully scale her efforts back to normal perspective before replying. She finally looked up at Bud Barclay with a hint of annoyance. “Busy, Bud. See me busy?”

If Bud looked contrite it wasn’t noticeable. Especially since his face was similar to hers. Both of them were gazing at each other through multi-lensed armored turrets at the end of flexible metal stalks. At the time of design expression had been considered something of a non-essential luxury.

His voice, however, carried an apology over to her. “Sorry. I just wanted your help.”

Sandy couldn’t see where Bud needed it. Like herself he was standing some three meters tall: a body made of jointed cylinders composed of Tomasite reinforced Duralloy surrounding a flattened disc, giving the both of them a crablike shape. The crab form was heightened not only by the video stalks, but by the four jointed metal legs and instrument-laden arms which made up the rest of their appearance.

Bud was, at the moment, some eighteen meters away. Sandy concentrated, using the laser rangefinder. Ah . . . exactly eighteen point seven two two meters away. He seemed in no apparent distress. “What is it?”

“Look over at the lower slope of G-21. Tell me what you see.”

Sandy turned her turret to focus where Bud was indicating. G-21 was the designation assigned to the nearest edge of the Montes Jura, rising to the north of them just over a kilometer away. Somewhere beyond the slope to their left was Crater Bianchini, while Crater Maupertuis lay some distance further to their right.

She scanned the slope, registering nothing. “Okay, so I’m dense---”

“No, no. It’s right there in front of you. See the bright line running diagonally down?”

Oh. So obvious she was missing it. “You mean that line starting near the top of the slope?”

“Uh huh. I’ve been looking for minutes now and, the more I study it, the odder it seems. It’s almost more like a scar . . . like something tried to take a slice out of the mountain.”

“And the slice went down.” Sandy extended her telescopic eye as far as possible, giving the line a thorough examination. “What would cause that?”

To her amusement she noted how Bud’s turret shook back and forth. “Something about it’s familiar,” he replied. “I keep thinking I should know the answer, but nothing comes. Do you think we could manage a closer look?”

Sandy consulted her notes. The current test had slightly over another hour left on its schedule before they had to board the donkey and return to Swiftbase. They were well ahead of their assigned tasks so some sightseeing was reasonable. “I think Florian would like some samples from the slope at any case. Sure.”

Both of them retracted their legs, settling down upon the tread assemblies. Before driving off, Sandy beamed an update to both the relay satellite high above them, as well as to the recording package on the donkey which waited eight kilometers away. She then moved to follow Bud, both of their treads raising gentle clouds of dust behind them.

Putting on a burst of speed, Sandy soon brought herself close alongside Bud. “If it was a rock fall,” she said, still examining the long scar, “then why aren’t there any debris between it and the bottom of the slope?”

“I know. I’m not a geologist but it bothers me too.”

Sandy continued her study. “Looks more like maybe something side-swiped the mountain---”

A hiss of static. Bud’s version of catching his breath. “Like a trail left by an airplane crash,” he exclaimed. “That’s what it reminds me of.”

Sandy considered it. “Meteor impact?”

“Could be. Maybe we’ll locate some of the fragments when we get closer . . . what!”

“Bud!”

But it was no use. The world suddenly shifted, heaving violently and tilting upwards. Sandy found herself staring into a growing darkness. A few odd flashes of light . . . an inability to move . . . and then she was surrounded by static.

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“Test interrupted,” the controller announced over the loudspeaker. “All stations check their recordings.”

The sound of hydraulic pumps hissing filled the room as the metallic petals of the

virtual command shells slowly parted. Sandy Swift and Bud Barclay carefully shook themselves free of the transfer webs and rose from the moist interiors, lifting their goggles off and their eyes blinking as they accustomed themselves once more to the surroundings of the Virtual Lab.

Sandy nodded gratefully at the offer of bottled water from a technician, drinking heavily from it as she turned to watch Bud stagger out of his shell. “What happened?” she finally asked.

Bud Barclay . . . senior astronaut for Swift Enterprises . . . was holding one hand to the side of his head, grimacing and also drinking water as he approached. “Did everything suddenly flip over and go dark?”

Sandy nodded as she peeled herself out of the shell. “Just a few bright ticks in my vision, then nothing.” She looked up at the glass-enclosed control booth. “Freida? Anything?”

Inside the booth Freida Morgan, one of Swift Enterprises’ rising young cyberneticists, was slowly shaking her head as she reached for the microphone. “All contact was broken, Sandy,” she said. “We’re still checking data.”

“No telemetry at all?”

“Everything’s blank.” Lowering the microphone, Morgan exchanged some words with a technician in the booth. “We’re going to contact Swiftbase and see what happened at their end,” she finally told Sandy.

“We’ll be up there in a moment.” Exchanging a look with Bud they both left the Virtual Lab, slipping robes on over the snug-fitting transfer garments they both wore. Stepping up a flight of stairs they were soon in the control booth.

Morgan was at a console in the back of the booth, bending over an indicator with a technician, and she nodded at them as they came closer. “Everything was all right until this point,” she said, her finger tracing a path on the indicator where various lines of data were suddenly replaced by zeroes. “Telemetry was fine. No indication at all of internal systems malfunction.” She looked up to peer at the both of them closely. “You sure both of you are okay?”

“We’re fine,” Bud replied, intently studying the indicator. Sandy found her attention on him and she held back a smile. People who thought they knew Bud only saw him as a continually joking character. They never saw him when a test flight . . . even one that never left the ground . . . came up against a problem. They never saw the one-hundred per cent professional which emerged at those moments.

Of course Sandy reflected that, if she had her druthers, such “moments” would never arrive in the first place.

There had been more than friendly concern behind Morgan’s question. She was

not only in charge of the Foresight Project but had been the chief designer of the Foresight robots, as well as having supervised most of the programming which had gone into her creations. The robots were not only vulnerable to mechanical or electronic problems, but also to any problems which their human “hosts” brought with them. Head colds . . . stomach aches . . . any sort of ailment could return along the feedback loop and cause operational problems within the robots.

Sandy sent a reassuring nod past Bud to Morgan, who was happy at the immediate news, but still concerned over the reported failure. “Keep drinking water,” she told both of them. “No one’s supposed to transition out of VR that quickly.”

“Let’s see the recorded feed,” Sandy suggested, and the three of them turned to face the glass wall of the control booth. Ahead of them, the broad space of the Virtual Lab darkened as the telejector systems came on, producing two separate lobes filling the upper portion of the room with an image of what the two Foresight Robots each saw during their final moments.

Once more Sandy and Bud “saw” themselves approaching the slope of G-21. They watched as, once again, everything suddenly heaved up . . . then flashes of light . . . static, and finally darkness.

Sandy was shaking her head. “If I’d remained a meter or so behind Bud I could’ve at least seen what happened to him.”

“Re-run at forty per cent,” Morgan instructed one of the technicians.

The telejector image faded briefly, then resumed from the beginning of the previous scene. This time everything had been slowed down, and everyone in the control booth watched as it happened again. Even given the additional clarity of the telejector imaging there seemed to be no new clues.

“Okay, so the both of us obviously fell into something,” Sandy said, absently using a corner of her robe to pat some of her blonde hair dry. “But that area was checked for holes or crevices. There should’ve been nothing.”

Morgan had been reading a report which a technician had passed to her. She wordlessly passed it on to Bud. “Swiftbase reports no seismic activity in the region,” he told Sandy, his eyes on the report. “They’ve got their own satellites sending back images. The dust we kicked up is still settling, but there’s no immediate trace of either of us.”

Sandy took the report, knowing full well she wouldn’t see anything the others had missed, but simply wanting something to do with her hands while she thought. “A hard enough shock . . . maybe from a fall . . . would’ve knocked out communications and we’d lose telemetry,” she said.

Morgan nodded. “Both robots could still be functioning, but we’d have no way of getting back in touch with them.”

Sandy chewed on her lower lip. “What’s the programming protocol in such instance?”

“Well-llll . . .” Morgan rubbed at her cheek, her eyes looking back towards where the telejectors were re-running the final images. “Both robots would shut down and remain where they ended up as secure as possible to try and minimize further damage.”

“So, eventually, we should find them.”

Bud had moved closer to the technician who was handling the telejector. He now turned back to the others. “We’re getting the live feed from the satellites.”

As everyone looked the image shifted, the two lobes bleeding into one. Within moments it had settled into an overview of an arid gray landscape.

Bud stepped closer and pointed. “There’s our tracks.” His finger shifted, “And they lead right to . . . there.”

But, with the exception of a faint cloudiness, “there” was absent of any sign of the robots.

Sandy eventually sighed. “All right.”

“We’ll continue studying our results at this end,” Morgan assured her, “and we’ll contact Shopton when further developments come in. Doubtless Juney and Swiftbase will chime in with their own updates as they happen.” She looked away from the telejector image at both Sandy and Bud. “I know you guys say you’re all right, but I really think you should get at least six hours rest and observation before doing anything else. That was still a rough transition.”

“Yes ma’am,” Bud softly agreed. Touching Sandy’s robe he turned to leave the room, with Sandy following.

The two of them slowly walked towards the Medical Section where they knew beds, and post-VR examinations, would be waiting.

Sandy leaned briefly against Bud, who murmured a response, his mind elsewhere.

“You’ll notice that Frieda didn’t say she was gonna . . .”

“I know, I know,” Sandy replied. “And I don’t think either Florian or Juney are going to take the time to do it either.”

“So you know what that means.”

Sandy nodded. “One of us is going to have to tell Tom about this.”

“Umm. You want me there with you when you make the call?”

“Ach! Well Thank You, Mister Barclay. My hero.”

He was almost smiling. “I just felt . . .”

“I’ll tell Tom.” Sandy exhaled loudly. “And I guess we ought to do it before the Med people slip us something and make us sleep.”

“Yeah.”

One of his hands reached out to take one of hers, and a mutually fond squeeze passed within the grip.

They were now walking alongside a window looking out over the cluster of buildings which made up the Swift Enterprises Center For Advanced Robotics. Beyond it could be seen the gleaming dome and support buildings of the Citadel: the Swifts atomic research center.

But their eyes were fixed on something far above the buildings. The pale disc of the Moon which was even now rising into the early evening New Mexico sky. A quarter of a million miles away. From the vantage point of the window it hung in space, silent and inoffensive; and, somewhere on its surface, the two robots of the multi-million dollar Foresight Project were missing.

Chapter Two: Sandy Makes Plans.

“So both robots ran into the same trouble.”

Both Sandy and Bud nodded. They were sitting side by side on a bed in the Medical Section, facing a communications screen.

On the screen Tom Swift Jr. became silent, and Bud took the opportunity to glance at Sandy. A stranger might’ve thought Tom and Sandy were twins, instead of older brother and younger sister. Especially since, right now, both of them were wearing the same intense expressions. Admittedly, Sandy was nicer to look at . . .

And the few years since she had taken on more responsibility with Swift Enterprises had changed her. She was definitely no longer the cheerful and vivacious girl who could be expected to remain placidly at home while things went on at Enterprises. Not that she had lost any of her cheerfulness, but more and more she had gained a predilection for getting her hands dirty. Becoming more involved.

The changes had required Bud to undergo some personal re-design of his own. He had always liked Sandy. Sometimes very intensely.

Nowadays . . .

He gave her another glance, noting the determined edge to her gaze as she watched her brother's image on the screen. It was still taking some getting used to . . . but Bud definitely felt he could stand being along for the ride. Wherever it took him.

On the screen Tom now shook himself out of his reverie. "I guess we can wait and see if the satellites pick up anything. If the robots manage to recover they can still transmit."

"What's being done to locate them?" Sandy asked.

"All we can manage," Tom replied. "Besides the satellite scans of the area where the robots disappeared, I've ordered a total scan with the space probes here, on the space station and on Nestria when it rises into range. Dad's also been talking with the people handling the probes at Jodrell Bank, SAAO, Arecibo, Kitt Peak and Keck. He thinks, and I agree, that we can count on their cooperation to at least devote some time to scanning the area. By the end of the week that part of the Moon should be thoroughly mapped down to the last grain of dust.

"What about Swiftbase?"

"Florian will do what he can, given the resources there. I'm also going to speak with van Dieman over at the AstroDynamics base, plus Dr. Tsushima at Japan Prime. They're the closest to Sinus Iridium and would be in a better position to know something. How about you two robot wranglers? When're you coming home?"

"We're gonna sleep off any traces of transition trauma," Bud told him. "We'll catch the morning flight back and should be home tomorrow afternoon."

Tom nodded brightly, showing the first pleasant sign he managed since Sandy had initiated the call. "That'll be good. Don't worry, troopers. We'll come out of this yet."

"Ah-hhhh, the famous Swift enthusiasm."

"It's worked before. Out here."

"Out here," replied Sandy, reaching over and switching off the screen. She then sighed and sat back. "He took that better than I thought he would."

"Well-lll . . . there's that bit about omelets and broken eggs."

"Yeah, but this 'omelet' is costing us a pretty piece of change." Sandy thrust her hands hard into the pockets of her robe. "Damn it."

"It's not your fault," Bud assured her.

Sandy managed a small smile as she looked at him. "A test pilot not taking at

least some of the responsibility? This is the same Bud Barclay who went into a week long convulsion after crashing the Hyper Pigeon prototype?"

"Catharsis," Bud assured her. "Back then there was more of a chance of me ending up pasted all over the Michigan landscape."

"Tell me about it," Sandy replied softly, recalling how her own heart had almost stopped during that particular episode.

The door to the room opened and a Medical Section nurse entered, smiling apologetically as she approached with a tray bearing two hypos.

"Our signal to enter Dreamland," Bud announced, sliding off the bed. "I'll retire to my own lonely room and leave you to sleep the sleep of the innocent." Leaning close he brushed his lips against Sandy's cheek, sensing that her thoughts were a million miles away.

Or perhaps not as Sandy turned her face to meet his kiss with one of her own, and Bud felt a rather nice tingle pass through him.

"Well," he murmured to her. "There's medicine and then there's medicine."

Sandy smiled a bit wider, their noses almost touching. "Something to help you relax."

"Thank you, ma'am." With a final grin at her he accepted one of the hypos from the nurse and left the room.

Sandy took the remaining hypo and applied its contents before easing out of her robe and allowing herself to relax back against the bed. She felt she definitely needed to relax, even with the comforting knowledge that Bud was nearby. Despite his comments, Sandy knew he felt very deeply about the loss of the Foresight robots.

Which was okay. Her own mind was in equal high gear as the medicine slowly took effect.

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"What is this?" Sandy asked, leaning over her mother's shoulder and peering down into the skillet.

Mary Swift smiled back at her daughter. "Seafood fettucine Alfredo," she said. "Bingo managed to bring in some scallops and she's been teaching me how to handle them."

“And it’ll be ready in about a half-hour,” Bingo Winkler announced, entering the kitchen, “so that’ll be more than enough time for you to bathe and get ready.”

“Yassuh, Boss. Anything you say, Boss. Good to see you too, Bingo.”

The diminutive brunette smiled at the other girl. The Foresight tests had meant an extended stay away from home, and a special dinner had been planned for Sandy’s return to Shopton. “Not that you and Bud haven’t probably been eatin’ pretty good, bein’ down in New Mexico. I’m just trying to make up for it, with your Mom’s help.”

Sandy nodded, wrapping herself in the familiar comfort of the Swift kitchen. “Oh, and speaking of food, Johnny at the Longhorn Steakhouse wanted me to tell you ‘hi’.”

Bingo beamed, moving to join Mary Swift at the stove. “Was he responsible for the jalapenos you brought back?” she asked.

“Uh huh.”

Bingo gave Mrs. Swift’s work an appraising glance before turning back to her. “Good. I really got to try and start growin’ my own pepper plants here.”

“Good luck,” Mary replied. “Your uncle tried on numerous occasions.”

“Uncle Charles’ a genius sometimes,” Bingo admitted, “but he can’t grow worth a flyin’ whathaveyou. I should have better luck.”

Mary Swift now glanced over her shoulder. “All right, Sandra.”

Sandy was caught a bit off guard. “Um?”

“Before your father and Tom come home from a hard day of bending electrons why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind?”

“Mind?”

“The way you’re capering about the kitchen makes me think back to when you were trying to work up the nerve to tell me you were planning on piloting the Fusion Bear when Tom had that new idea for fixing the reactor seals.”

Bingo was grinning from ear to ear at Sandy. “Busted.”

“It was a successful test,” Sandy replied innocently.

“Uh huh.” Mary stirred the scallops around the skillet. “After the two red alerts and after the computer almost . . . what was that again?”

“SCRAMMED the fusion pile,” Bingo offered.

Sandy fixed the other girl with what she hoped was a lethal look.

“Plus Bud told me you were rather thoughtful on the trip home and kept studying available reports from Swiftbase.”

“Bud’s got a big---”

“He’s just as much a professional as you are, dear.” Mary turned away from the stove, allowing Bingo to slip in behind her and take over. “I know you’re upset at what happened on the Moon, but everything’s being taken care of.”

“More could be done,” Sandy said.

“And I’m sure more will be. But you can’t take it all on your shoulders.”

Sandy shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Sandra!”

“I’ll go and wash,” Sandy said, her face an unreadable mask as she turned to leave the kitchen.

Mary watched her go, feeling something twitch inside her. It used to be that Tom had been her problem child. Now . . .

“Bingo?”

“Ma’am?”

“We’d better plan for a light dessert. I’m getting this feeling appetites might be affected tonight.”

“Fraid so, Ma’am.”

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“Not that didn’t like your fried chicken,” Tom Swift Sr. said to his wife. “Nor any of your usual dishes. But I have to confess I’m finding it interesting the way Bingo’s expanded the menu around here since she signed on.”

Mary smiled as she took her place at the table alongside her husband. It felt even better than usual, seeing as how she also had both her children back under her roof.

For the time being, she silently added, mentally crossing her fingers.

Bingo circled about, distributing portions of food and keeping up a running commentary on the progress her uncle was making with his latest book.

“As long as he doesn’t overdo it,” the younger Tom Swift remarked. “I saw some of his chapter roughs, and he’s making the whole Core Cannon business sound more dangerous than it really was.”

“It certainly sounded dangerous while it happened,” Bingo said.

“I agree,” Mary added, looking at her son. “The way you told it, going deep down into the Earth was just a walk in the park.”

Tom shrugged, although he wore a pleased expression. “Practically.”

Everyone settled down to say Grace and eat, and conversation fell into its normal Swift household routine. Tom discussed the progress being made on his latest project . . . the Werewasp Suit . . . while his father asked about how soon it would be before flight tests could commence.

Mary Swift kept her eyes on Sandy however. Her daughter usually chimed in with remarks about flying, dates with Bud, horse riding . . . generally keeping up a running dialogue which told her all was right with the world concerning her daughter.

Sandy was eating with what seemed to be genuine appreciation for the seafood. But her silence was beginning to weigh fairly heavily, and Mary could see that Sandy’s eyes were apparently focused on something far away.

Perhaps as far away as the Moon, she considered.

But she reminded herself not to be surprised. Not when her tomboy daughter had fulfilled her dream of becoming a Swift Enterprises test pilot in her own right. And there was the business of only a few months ago; when, accompanied by Phyllis Newton and Bingo, Sandy had traveled down to South America to explore the mystery of the missing Barton Swift.

Her husband and Tom she felt she could understand better. They were both scientists, and any dangers they encountered were simply part and parcel of the research goals they embraced. With Sandy, however . . .

As if on cue, Sandy suddenly looked up from her contemplations. “What’s the latest from Swiftbase?” she casually asked.

The two Toms glanced at each other. “Nothing too new,” her brother answered after swallowing a forkfull of food. “Florian’s been talking with van Dieman. It’s agreed that there’s been no evidence of any seismic activity at the area where the robots disappeared.”

Sandy slowly nodded. “And the scans from the space probes?”

“We should have a total surface profile of the area by tomorrow morning.”

“Good. I’ll want to look at the profile closely when it’s available.”

Silence at the table.

“Florian and the rest of the lunar cartography group at Swiftbase will be giving the profile a complete analysis,” her father said.

“I’m aware of that,” Sandy said. “I’ve also been thinking.”

Here it comes, Mary quietly thought, preparing herself.

“A few things come to mind,” Sandy continued.

Her brother nodded. “Okay. Like what?”

“The scans can only do so much. If the robots haven’t been located through what the satellites have already been able to see, then we’ve got to conclude that something happened which a visual survey can’t uncover.”

“Granted,” Tom concluded, “but---”

“A more direct form of action has to be taken.” Sandy locked eyes with her brother. “The area where the robots disappeared has to be investigated, and directly. Not by scans or remote observations, but by an actual presence.”

Tom looked at his father, and Sandy could almost feel the thoughts passing between them.

“Swiftbase . . .” Tom began.

“Has one hundred and seventeen scientists and technicians,” Sandy finished. “All of them are currently working on high priority projects of their own. You know this. I know this. No one’s been allowed to just go up to the Moon and twiddle their thumbs. None of the people up there can drop what they’re doing and explore the area the way it needs to be.”

Tom had the look of someone being backed into a corner. “And your conclusion?”

“Obviously, someone else has to go up to the Moon and investigate.”

“Someone else . . .”

“Someone like me,” Sandy added, daintily dabbing at her lips with a napkin.

Chapter Three: Debates, Contacts And A Warning!

The objections began practically immediately.

“The people at Swiftbase . . .” Tom began.

“Are busy,” Sandy replied. “We just discussed this.”

“And you’re not?”

Sandy shrugged. “The reason Bud and I were involved in the Foresight Project was because our respective schedules were free. Phyl’s still getting the kinks out of the new catalog . . . we’re all waiting for the results of the union contract talks before seeing if the Fallbrook plant plans will happen . . . the TS-340’s still undergoing static tests . . . right now would be the best time. The sooner the better.”

“We’ve got other qualified astronauts,” her father pointed out.

“Qualified as astronauts, yes,” Sandy agreed. “But qualified with Foresight?”

Her father and brother looked at each other. At her place, Mary Swift slowly shook her head. She knew her daughter well enough to know that Sandy had thought things out carefully on the trip back home. Others may have considered it a longshot, but Mary felt she had a pretty good idea of where to safely put her money down on the outcome.

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The argument continued the next day, in the office of Tom Sr. at Enterprises. The elder Swift sat behind his desk while Tom Jr. leaned his lanky form against the other side, both men watching Sandy as she paced about.

“It’s not that I have a problem with your reasoning---,” Tom Sr. began.

“Then what?” Sandy shot back, stopping to stare at him.

Her father sighed. “Young Lady . . .”

“Oh please,” Sandy muttered.

“What?”

“You usually start out with ‘Young Lady’ whenever you want to go all paternal on me.” Sandy stepped closer to the desk, crossing her arms. “Dad, I love you dearly . . .

but don't try to object to this simply because I'm your daughter."

"I'd be the last person in the world to stand in the way to a child of mine doing something which involves some risk," Tom Sr. said dryly with a slight glance at his son. "I respect the both of you too much for that. And I'll be the first to admit you've become an excellent test pilot in your own right." He sighed again. "Plus . . . the occasional disaster notwithstanding . . . you did manage to handle the Ecuador business well."

"Then what?"

"Then . . ." The elder Swift spread his hands out, tried for a response and failed.

"If we're sending someone to the Moon," Tom Jr. spoke up, "then why not Frieda Morgan? It strikes me she'd be the logical choice."

"She would," Sandy slowly agreed, "at first thought. But Frieda's still busy examining the telemetry from the Moon, as well as running tests on the remaining Foresight robot down in Texas, trying to duplicate whatever happened to determine a way to re-establish contact with the lost robots. She has all she needs to work with where she is. Plus there's the fact that Frieda is not qualified for being on the Moon."

Her brother's eyes narrowed. "And you are?"

"I've completed astronaut training," Sandy pointed out, her chin rising slightly. "That includes the requisite one hundred hours in the lunar simulator, plus in-space survival training."

Tom turned to his father. "Well? I'm running out of objections."

Tom Sr. was rubbing his hands together slowly, looking one way and then another. Finally he began touching buttons on the keypad upon his desk. On a nearby wall a screen showing an electronic map of Swift Enterprises shifted to an image of the home page for SwiftSpace: Enterprises' ongoing space effort.

Tom Sr. scrolled through the available information until he found what he was looking for. "'Themis' is scheduled to take off from Loonau for the space station in three days," he remarked. "Routine ferry run. It goes on to Nestria from there, but 'Oceanus' is currently at the station, still unloading equipment and then it's scheduled on to Swiftbase."

Sandy fought to keep down the rising excitement. "Then . . ."

"You'll take every precaution?" her father asked.

"You know I will."

Behind her back, two of Sandy's fingers crossed.

Tom Sr. sat back in his chair and let out a long, loud breath. “Then . . . you’ve got yourself a mission.”

He had always known his daughter excelled in athletics. But even he was surprised at the speed at which she raced around the desk to throw her arms around his neck.

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“The Moon?”

Sandy looked up from her desk to see Phyllis Newton . . . Marketing Executive for Visual Arts at Swift Enterprises and Sandy’s closest friend . . . standing in the doorway.

Sandy smiled at her and bent back over her computer. “Rumors are to that effect,” she said.

Phyllis shook her head and stepped into the office, helping herself to coffee. “I thought I heard screaming and wails of anguish from the Swift home last night.”

“It wasn’t that bad---”

“I’m surprised everyone capitulated so easily,” Phyllis said, settling down into a chair.

“No big surprise, I just had superior arguments.”

“Uh huh,” Phyllis nodded. “Against your father and brother? Two of the smartest people I know?”

Sandy had been studying the weight limitations for luggage, trying to decide what she could take to the Moon. She looked up at Phyllis. “Hmmm?”

“You leave for Loonai . . . when?”

“Ah-hhhh, tomorrow morning.”

“So that gives all of today, plus tonight, for something to happen.”

Sandy slowly looked up from the computer. “Like what?”

“Oh-hhhhhh, let’s see.” Phyllis became speculative. “Flight cancellation due to rocket failure . . . you flunk the pre-flight physical . . . you catch a nasty bug between now and liftoff . . . suffer some sort of minor yet important accident . . .”

“Phyl, nothing like that is gonna happen.”

Phyllis shrugged, sipped at her coffee.

“My family cares about me, that’s true. But what you’re suggesting is way and beyond what they’d do. I trust them.”

“Uh-huh. Well, if I were you, I’d be careful what I ate, drank or where I stepped all the way up to the point I’m actually in the spaceship.”

“Goodness, you’re paranoid.”

“I guess. I mean, I just . . . I just . . .”

Sandy smiled. “You’re just wishing you could go along.”

“Just to keep you out of trouble.”

“I don’t plan on getting into trouble. I’m just going up there to find out what happened to the robots. Just a quick look around.”

“Yeah, like we went down to Ecuador to ‘just look around’.”

“We solved the problem, didn’t we?”

“And you almost blew up Ecuador.”

“I did not almost blow up Ecuador,” Sandy said. “The blast took place offshore.”

“Yeah,” Phyllis replied with a smirk. “Tell that to the State Department.”

Sandy tossed a wadded piece of paper at Phyllis, who neatly ducked.

“Sometimes I wonder what I have to do to get myself taken seriously around here,” Sandy said, returning to studying her computer.

“Everyone takes you seriously,” Phyllis replied, finishing her coffee. “The problem isn’t that.”

“Then what?”

“You’re still so busy believing that no one takes you seriously that you put yourself into positions such as this.” Phyllis raised a palm at the objection growing on Sandy’s face. “I’m not saying that the business concerning the lost robots isn’t important. It is. And I agree you’re qualified to check it out. But you’ll try so hard sometimes at making yourself ‘serious’ that you’ll take risks where you don’t have to.”

Sandy thought it over. “Was I that bad in Ecuador?”

“Well,” Phyllis considered, “we survived. I guess that should stand for something.”

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“Sandy,” Mary Swift called from the study, “you’ve got an incoming from the space station. They tried to reach you at work but you’d already left.”

“Okay, Mom.” Tossing her satchel onto the couch Sandy wandered into the study.

She was intercepted by Bingo. “Peep-bo!”

“Hi . . . oh thanks,” Sandy said, accepting a tall frosty drink from the girl.

“You’re gonna call the space station?” Bingo asked.

“Uh-huh . . . mmmmm. This is good.”

“Banana smoothie with protein powder,” Bingo explained. “Figured you needed it. Ah-hhh . . . you talking to anyone in particular up there?”

Sandy shrugged, heading for the console in the study. “Probably Ken wants to finalize arrangements or something.”

“Ken Horton?”

“Yup.” Something in Bingo’s voice, though, made Sandy look back at her. “Why?”

“Oh nothing. Nothing.” Humming to herself, Bingo left the study.

Sitting down at the console, Sandy pressed the blinking buttons which finalized the connection between the Swift’s ground antennas and the space station orbiting some several thousand miles above the Earth.

The screen before her came to life, showing the command deck of the station. A communications technician, dressed in the blues of a SwiftSpace working uniform, looked up and smiled. “Ms. Swift.” He looked offscreen and spoke a few words before leaving his position.

It was soon filled by the familiar sight of the space station commander. “Hi, Sandy.”

Sandy smiled. “Ken.”

“The talking drums have already announced how you’ll be coming up with ‘Themis’,” Ken said.

“I hope the drums also said I wouldn’t be bringing any explosives or mysterious artifacts with me.”

Ken gave his usual lopsided grin which, in some ways, reminded Sandy of Bud. “I’m one of those people, Sandy, who actually look forward to having you up here, even if for a while.”

“Well thank God for that.”

Ken consulted an adjacent display. “And ‘Oceanus’ will be available to ferry you on to Swiftbase. Plus we’re continuing to get any updates that come down from the Moon concerning the robots so we’ll have a briefing ready when you arrive.”

“Ken you’re a good deed in a naughty world.”

Ken nodded, then leaned a bit closer to the screen, his eyes spotting something.

Sandy looked over her shoulder . . . then immediately looked away again, fighting hard to keep from bursting out laughing.

Bingo had quietly stepped into the study. Although her role clearly stated that she was the cook for the Swift family, she was currently busy running a large feather duster over the bookshelves, softly humming to herself. From somewhere . . . Sandy had no idea where . . . the girl had managed to get hold of a classic French maid’s outfit: all crisp black and white lace, and with the requisite (and stereotypical) décolletage.

“Is that,” Ken slowly began. “Is that . . . Bingo?”

The girl turned towards the console, as if noticing it for the first time, and smiled widely at the image on the screen. “Ken!”

“Bingo Winkler! I’d heard you’d joined up with the outfit.”

“Yes I had,” Bingo replied, moving closer and leaning forward a bit. “Hi! It’s been a while.”

Sandy, her eyes on the screen, couldn’t help but notice how Ken’s attention was thoroughly focused on the girl. “Yes it has,” Ken agreed. “I didn’t know you’d left---”

“Cooking school,” Bingo broke in quickly. “Yes I had. Graduated and came to work for Miz Swift and the others.”

Ken continued to take in the sight of the girl. “You look . . . you look nice.”

Sandy fought to keep her mouth shut.

“So do you,” Bingo replied shyly. “I’ve been keeping track of you . . . your work with the space station and all.”

“Really?”

Bingo nodded. “I guess you’re busy all the time up there.”

“Usually, yeah. It’s good work, though.”

“I’m sure.” A pause and then: “Do you ever make it down to Earth regularly?”

To Sandy’s ears it seemed as if Bingo’s voice had dropped a few octaves.

“Oh I come down as part of the regular rotation and take leave,” Ken was saying. “Say every few months or so.” He thought for a moment. “Maybe I ought to schedule another leave soon.”

“That’d be nice. Maybe you’d like some regular cooking for a change. I mean, if you visit the Swifts,” Bingo quickly added.

Ken slowly nodded. “Not a bad idea.”

“I’ve gotten pretty good at chicken fried steak and jalapeno cornbread.”

Ken’s eyes widened.

“And I’ve found a supply of Shiner beer here in Shopton,” Bingo slowly said.

Ken was beginning to look like a drowning man who’d been thrown a life preserver. “You’ve got Shiner beer?”

“Uh huh.”

“I will . . . I’ll have to get back in touch when I set up my next trip down,” Ken said. “Umm, in the meantime, I’ve got to get things running along up here. You take care of yourself, Bingo. Okay?”

“Sure will.”

“Ahem,” Sandy murmured.

“Oh . . . yeah.” Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but Sandy thought the space station commander was working to contain a blush. “You take care, too, Sandy and we’ll be looking for you up here in a few days. Space station out.”

“Out here,” Sandy said and broke off the contact. Silence for a few moments, then she slowly turned to face Bingo. “Girl.”

“Hmmm?”

“You play hardball.”

The blush was definite on Bingo’s face. “Well . . . he’s up in space. What else am I gonna do?” Holding the feather duster in both hands, Bingo quickly left the study.

Sandy watched her go, smiling. Well, well, well, she thought to herself. Ken Horton and Bingo Winkler. Well, well, well.

* * * * *

The next morning Sandy rushed into her office, wanting to pick up a few things and make final arrangements before boarding the Pigeon Special heading out to the Pacific island where the majority of SwiftSpace’s launches took place.

She almost missed it at first but soon noticed the folded card leaning against the keyboard to her computer. Curious, she opened it and read the handwritten message inside.

Sandra Swift: Disaster awaits you on the Moon!

Chapter Four: Pre-Launch.

“So what do you think?” Sandy asked.

Phyllis continued staring closely at the note. “I’d say yeah. I mean, look at the way the ‘S’s are looping in your name. Plus the way the ‘M’ in ‘Moon’ is written. That’s his work.”

“My old nemesis,” Sandy muttered.

“Well, you can’t fault him for trying,” Phyllis said, putting the note back on the desk. “Especially now.”

Sandy pulled the zipper shut on her travel bag. “I guess not,” she said. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. But sometimes . . .”

“Save the sometimes for later,” Phyllis interrupted, looking at her watch. “Someone’s got to catch a plane.”

Leaving the Administration Building, the two women took an electric cart out to the broad Enterprises airfield. A sleek “Icarus” long-range version of the Swift’s venerable Pigeon Special line of aircraft was waiting, its twin TS-310 engines idling as it prepared to fly across the world.

A small crowd was gathered near the entrance, and Sandy smiled as she saw her parents and Tom. The smile wavered slightly as she noticed Bud among them, but she kept her composure as the cart came to a stop and she got out to go to them.

She entered a sea of hugs and endearments. “I’ll be heading down to the Citadel,” her father told her, “and I’ll be stopping off at SECFAR often for updates.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Tom nodded in agreement as he slipped an arm around her. “I was up all night with the latest news from both Florian and Dr. Morgan. The more I look at this the more I think you’re right about this whole thing. We do need to have someone on the ground checking things out.”

“I’ll be careful,” Sandy assured her brother.

“I know you will. And best of luck.”

Something wet brushed on Sandy’s cheek as her mother embraced her. “Momma . . .”

“Just remember what the Tao Te Ching says,” Mary Swift whispered, loosening her hold a bit and stepping back.

“And what’s that?”

“‘Going on means going far’,” the older woman intoned through a small smile. She gently touched a fingertip to the end of her daughter’s nose. “‘Going far means returning’.”

“Sage advice,” agreed Sandy. “I promise to keep in contact regularly. And I suspect Bingo will be more than happy to call up the space station for updates.”

“Yes-ssss, I noticed some of that too. Take care, dear.”

Sandy then tried to shake hands with Phyllis, who said “You’re kidding,” before throwing her arms tight around her friend’s neck.

“Phyl! I’ll be OK . . . if you let me breathe a little.”

“This isn’t right,” Phyllis whispered. “I mean . . . we’re a team, you and I.”

“If my suspicions are correct,” Sandy murmured, her eyes shifting a bit, “the lack of a teammate won’t exactly be a worry with me.”

“Yeah, but it won’t be me!”

With a smile Sandy moved away and, recovering her travel bag, headed for the open door of the plane. “C’mon,” she said to Bud.

Bud gave the others a raised eyebrow look before following Sandy. Behind him the door was sealed and the crowd began moving away from the flight line.

Inside, Sandy nodded at the five others who were also taking the shuttle to Loonauai, moving past them to reach the final pair of seats. Placing her bag up into the overhead compartment she sat down and began strapping herself in.

Bud slowly approached and, after a few moments, took the remaining seat and began copying her movements. “You don’t seem surprised,” he said after a while.

“That you’re going to Loonauai?” Sandy made a final adjustment and settled herself comfortably. “Not at all. I reasoned that the others would be satisfied with seeing me off here. You, on the other hand . . .” Looking over at Bud she gave him a smile.

Bud had the grace to look somewhat contrite. “Well . . . couldn’t let my best girl race off to the Moon without being there.”

“I am so very pleased you support me in my mission.”

“I do, San, I really do.”

Sandy nodded. “Good. Then I imagine this is simply a figment of my imagination.” From a pocket of her slacks she produced the card which had carried the warning, tapping it ominously against her cheek.

Bud stared at it. “What’s that?”

“I’m going to count to five,” Sandy told him.

“I don’t understand---”

“One . . . four . . . fi--”

“OK . . . OK, it’s mine.” Bud managed to flounce slightly back against his chair.

Sandy sighed, also sitting back. “You’re slipping, by the way. You thought I’d forgotten all those other times . . . like that business with the Ngombian statue.”

“Which, by the way, saved your brother’s life.”

“I’m not admitting otherwise. And practically everyone knows your handwriting by now, Bud. You’re a sweetheart . . . but you’ve really got to come up with new material.”

Now Bud managed to grin, glancing at her. Around them the aircraft thrummed to life as it began rolling out onto the runway for departure.

“I mean,” Sandy slowly continued to him, “I’d really hate to think that you didn’t feel I should be going to the Moon.”

“The words never crossed my lips,” Bud declared.

Sandy stared at him for several moments before letting a hand drift across the narrow aisle and take his. Their hands continued to remain linked, tightening as the plane’s engines soon roared and, with an eventual mild thump, soared into the morning sky.

* * * * *

The jet continued racing the sun westward. Sandy and Bud allowed themselves to be fussed over briefly by the flight attendant . . . and politely declined the offer from the flight crew to join them in the cockpit (“they don’t need us looking over their shoulders,” Bud said) . . . before extending the thin plastic screen across the aisle, turning their section of the plane into a private lounge.

As Bud opened his computer and began collecting his notes, Sandy took the opportunity to watch an in-flight showing of the latest SwiftSpace presentation on her chair’s monitor. She nodded to herself, noting that Phyllis and the rest of her crew had done their job well.

“You’ve finally made the decision to extend the boundaries of your company,” the narrator remarked as the scene pulled away from the Earth’s surface. “Now is the time to consider SwiftSpace!”

A shot of a sleek vehicle the size of the jet they were in flashed across the screen.

“Our ‘Star Spear’ class of rocket provides reliable and affordable access to Earth orbit, and is perfect as an executive transport for multinationals, as well as a light payload carrier.”

She noted that Bud had been watching and was now bringing up the presentation on his own monitor. Turning back she saw the ‘Star Spear’ soar pass a much larger spacecraft.

“SwiftSpace’s fleet of nineteen ‘Titan’ class ships are available at any time, and can handle even the most demanding of payload delivery needs. These workhorses have an unparalleled safety and service record, and are in operation year-round.”

“That was durn good footage,” Bud admitted. “Phyllis did a good job setting up that shot.”

Sandy said nothing.

On the monitor the ‘Titan’ was now drifting pass the space station. Floating near it were two of the deceptively fragile looking Cosmic Sailers, their hulls glistening in the sunlight.

“Whether your business takes you into Earth’s orbit, the Moon, Nestria, the asteroids or beyond, you’ll find that the Swift Space Station is a necessary ally. Our recently upgraded Orbital Business Center provides the latest in telecommunications and related support systems, literally placing the entire solar system at your fingertips. The OBC’s staff includes the finest in advisors who are thoroughly trained in suggesting the best way to achieve your off-world goals.

“And the sky is never the limit with SwiftSpace. Our growing fleet of ‘Ulysses’ class deep space transports continue to extend the reach of Earth’s ambitions. Three of them are currently accompanying the ‘Challenger’ . . . flagship of SwiftSpace’s Exploration Arm . . . on its unprecedented survey of Larissa as part of the ongoing Neptune Initiative.”

An animation of the solar system slowly danced across the monitor, soon to be replaced by the SwiftSpace logo.

“If your work is causing your company to consider looking into the night sky, be assured that SwiftSpace can truly place it in your hands.”

“That halfway didn’t flop,” Bud said, pushing the monitor away. He looked over to see that Sandy was still staring at her now blank screen.

“San?”

“Umm?” She glanced over at Bud.

“You sort of drifted off.”

“Just seeing some of that made me go back to the Moon.”

“Ah.” Bud adjusted his seat, turning it slightly more towards her. “Any conclusions as of yet?”

“I don’t work the same way Tom does,” Sandy said with a small smile. “I don’t just pop up with answers. I’ve just been trying to figure out what happened by asking myself what I would do if I wanted to make the two robots disappear upon the Moon.”

“Keep in mind,” Bud slowly said, “that one of the reasons you’re going is because there’s not a whole lot of available information. Someone . . . and you convinced your

folks that it needs to be you . . . needs to go to the site directly and take a close look.”

“I know. But that entire area has been looked over by satellites, not to mention intensely scanned by eight different megascopes. If a microchip had been dropped there it would’ve been seen.”

Bud rubbed his palms together thoughtfully. “There’s still some dust settling in the area,” he said. “That was in Bea’s last report from the observatory.”

“But no evidence of seismic activity from any of the lunar bases we contacted.”

In answer, Bud picked up his computer. Switching it on he soon found the best and most recent image available of the area of the Moon where the robots had last been seen. “There’re the robot tracks,” he said, tracing them with a fingertip. “We were just reaching the foothills . . . look! You can see that scar in the mountainside that I spotted.”

He tapped the screen and the image expanded. The tracks could now be seen to end in what appeared to be a smudged area, but what was known to be a slowly settling cloud of lunar dust.

“The probers were able to penetrate the haze,” Bud said, tapping the screen again. The smudge faded to show both sets of tracks abruptly ending almost where the Montes Jura slope began.

“Nothing,” said Sandy.

“True,” Bud admitted with a shrug. “But look at it this way. The tracks don’t reappear and lead away anywhere else. Whatever happened is probably still there.”

“Ummm. Personally I’d feel better with a ransom note, or something equally tangible.”

Bud felt otherwise, but kept the thought to himself.

* * * * *

Hours later the pilot announced that the plane was beginning its descent to Loonau, and both Sandy and Bud leaned towards their windows to see. Both of them had been to the remote Pacific island many times, but their eyes still felt drawn to the approaching sight.

The tiny island was still in many ways a tropical paradise. But it had been overshadowed by the years of development brought about by Enterprises. The entire eastern side was now a fully functioning spaceport. From their altitude Sandy and Bud

could easily see the launching pits for the “Titan” class rockets, as well as the gantries for the smaller space vehicles.

Sandy nodded. “There’s ‘Themis’. The launch pit on the far left.”

“Nothing looks out of place,” said Bud.

To the west of the launch sites were the support buildings and power generation facilities, with the administration center beyond them. East of the launch sites . . . out in the ocean . . . transport ships were nudged up against semi-submerged storage facilities.

Using the plane’s inflight system, Sandy called up the SwiftSpace home page on her seat monitor, searching for the launch schedule and nodding as she saw: SS TITAN-10/”THEMIS” --- EARTH/STATION/NESTRIA --- T MINUS 18 HOURS/23 MINUTES/18 SECONDS.

Sandy nodded in satisfaction. Unlike most government space flights, there were no pre-arranged “holds” on launches. A countdown continued all the way unless a problem occurred. In eighteen hours . . . around three o’clock the following afternoon . . . she’d be on her way.

“Who’s piloting ‘Themis’?” she heard Bud ask.

Sandy searched further. “Mmmmmm . . . Clay McMahon.”

“He’s good,” Bud said. “He’s one of the runner-ups for the ‘Star Spear’ deep space variant test.” A pause. “You getting excited, girl?”

“You know I am,” Sandy said. “It’s never dull. Never!”

Once again their hands touched, remaining so as the jet made its final approach to the island and soon settled down upon the broad runway only miles away from the launch pits.

The jet was soon nuzzling up against the accessway at the central terminal, and Sandy and Bud politely waited until the other passengers had disembarked before following them into the building.

They were met by several members of the facility, including two wearing the badges of Launch Operations.

One of the people in the group nodded. “Ms. Swift . . . Commander Barclay.”

Bud nodded back, taking the other man’s outstretched hand. “Harry. Great to be back.”

One of the Launch Operations people now stepped forward, first glancing at a hand held computer. “Ah-hhhh, Ms. Swift? We’ve got you scheduled to enter launch

quarantine upon arrival.”

Sandy was surprised. “Oh?”

“The Met office shows a storm front in the area,” Harry explained almost apologetically. “We’re making contingency plans and might advance our launch window if possible.”

“By how much?” Bud asked, his professional voice appearing.

“Still well within the original window, Commander,” Harry told him. “We’re running computer projections and matching them to the weather data.”

“I’ll want to see those projections.”

“Of course. But, in the meantime . . .”

He had glanced over at Sandy and a slight blush appeared on his face.

Sandy felt her own face grow warm. Just how much gossip passed through all of Enterprises?

She turned towards Bud. By silent assent the greeting party drifted away out of earshot.

“Well,” Sandy murmured.

“Well,” Bud replied, trying to work his face into something but not quite getting there. “I guess . . . I mean, so much for an evening’s celebration before lift-off.”

“I guess so.”

Sandy was feeling something bubbling about inside her. It had been emotional enough leaving the folks behind in Shopton. Here, on the other hand . . .

“You’ll be watching the launch?”

“You kidding? I’ll be on top of it all the way to zero.”

Sandy took a breath. Released it. “So . . .”

A pause, then the two of them were hugging each other, the action soon developing into something deeper as they kissed closely.

Long moments passed before some space appeared between them. Not much.

“This is your way of getting me to change my mind?” Sandy murmured, trying to calm her breathing.

Bud gently stroked her cheek with a fingertip. “Well . . . you’re the one who said I needed new material.”

A laugh escaped Sandy. “Mmmm. Allow me to say I approve of your efforts.”

He was staring down into her face, his expression serious. “Watch your step.”

“I will. You know I will.”

Further conversation became impossible for the next few minutes. Then the young couple slowly released each other, and Bud stood there as Sandy wandered off in the company of the Launch Operations people, sending many a glance back in his direction until she was out of sight.

Bud stood there a few moments more, then turned to head for the Administration Center.

* * * * *

“T minus thirty minutes and counting,” a voice intoned over a speaker. “All passengers and final clearance launch support crew report to Pit Three.”

Sandy sat still in the transport car, her flight helmet in her lap, her eyes half-closed as she tried to relax. It hadn’t been easy. She had been given a final medical check and tried to eat a meal before going to the quarantine sleep center and making a half-hearted effort to rest.

It would’ve been good to sleep. It would’ve been even better if she had been allowed to spend the evening with Bud’s calming influence. As it was now she was charged with adrenaline and she knew she wouldn’t get any real rest for a while.

Maybe once on the space station. She knew she’d have to catch up on her sleep sometime, or she’d be useless once she arrived on the Moon.

One of these days, she thought, I’ll have to ask Tom how he does it.

Glancing around she looked at the nine others heading for “Themis”. Two of them, in fact, had accompanied her and Bud on the shuttle. One of them was reporting for work with a medical research team currently up on the space station. The other was a geochemist on his way to the base on Nestria. The others were standard rotation personnel for the station.

She was going to fly in the co-pilot’s position on “Themis”. According to the launch schedule, Clay McMahon was supposedly already on board with the launch

support crew, putting the giant spaceship through its checklist. Technically she should've boarded "Themis" along with McMahon, but had been assured that everything was going as planned.

A small lie, she reckoned. She suspected that somehow it had been arranged for her to be held back in case Bud had wanted to make another goodbye.

Sandy smiled. Not that anything could've been done except speak through an intercom. Bud, in fact, was being remarkably mature and supportive about the entire thing and had not burdened her with needless final chat and worrisome comments. Nothing but that last sweet parting at the terminal. He was behaving himself very well.

Still . . .

The transport came to a halt and backed into place against the accessway to the launch pit. A few moments later the rear door opened and Sandy stood up, the SwiftSpace flight suit flexing about her as she moved with the others out into the narrow corridor.

The sides of the accessway were transparent, and Sandy could easily see the entire bulk of the waiting "Themis" looming before her. As with its sister ships in the "Titan" fleet it stood six hundred feet high and measured ninety feet in diameter. Its polished hull shimmered with reflected sun and work lights, only the white lettering identifying the vehicle, as well as the SwiftSpace logo, breaking the dark grey color of its hull.

Four-fifths of the immense rocket was sunk into the launch pit. Even though most of the access arms had already been retracted the pit was still a center of activity as last minute checks were completed. Through the wall of the accessway Sandy could still hear the announcements of final preparations.

"Launch commit criteria still on schedule A . . . APU test in three minutes . . . oxidizer loading complete . . . repelatron cathodes aligned against target . . . simulator reports RCS response green . . . prepare launch reactors for five minute test at one hundred per cent . . ."

A tap on her shoulder interrupted Sandy's sightseeing. "Ms. Swift?"

She turned to see a launch technician pointing to a side door. Yes . . . the lift to the flight deck, and she entered it as her fellow passengers continued on into the bowels of the ship and the pressurized flight compartment within.

The technician accompanied her as they rode the lift up to the final floor of the pit gantry. Stepping out, Sandy moved down the passageway to where the open hatch to the flight deck awaited. As befitting their utilitarian nature, the newer generation of "Titan" spacecraft were modular. Both the flight deck and the passenger flight compartment could, in the event of an emergency, be separated and function as individual emergency vehicles.

Reaching the open hatch, Sandy gave a final smile to the technician who'd accompanied her. Two other technicians were standing by and they carefully helped her through the hatch and into the ship. As she had practiced on numerous times, Sandy reached up to grab the support bar and, in a single movement, swung herself into the co-pilot's chair.

She faced a console which was a duplicate of the one the pilot would be using. Above it were the thick curving viewport which now showed the afternoon Pacific sky. To her immediate left was the central console which provided access to the ship's computer, as well as communications control.

To her further left . . .

The pilot's chair was empty. No McMahon!

How could a launch be going on without . . .

"T minus fifteen minutes and counting."

Chapter Five: Into Space.

Sandy tilted her head back so she could cry out through the still open hatch. "Hey! Where's McMahon?"

One of the technicians bent closer. "What?"

"McMahon," Sandy shrieked. Trying to keep herself under control she slapped at the empty seat next to hers. "Where . . . Is . . . The . . . Pilot?"

The technician stared wide-eyed at the other seat, as if seeing it for the first time, and Sandy's despair deepened. Oh great, she thought. A launch crew from a modern education system.

But the technician nodded back at her. "The pilot's on his way," he said. "There was a last-minute conference in Operations."

Sandy looked at the timer. Fourteen minutes and ten seconds until launch. Supposedly . . . in theory . . . the rockets of SwiftSpace could await a flight crew until the absolute last moment. But it wasn't a habit worth encouraging.

The launch crew seemed unperturbed, though, and Sandy bit her lip and settled back into her chair as her hatch was closed and sealed. She worked at linking herself to the Launch Center. "'Themis' Co-Pilot in position," she reported.

“Roger, ‘Themis’, we have you logged in position,” a voice from the Center replied. “Your pilot should already be on his way.”

“Well thank God for that.” Sandy worked to keep the sarcasm out of her voice and concentrate on things at hand. “Did you want me to pick-up the checklist . . . oh!” She turned to see someone in a spacesuit sliding his way into the pilot’s seat. “Thank God you made it. I was beginning to wonder.”

The figure was busy strapping himself in, but he turned to smile at Sandy.

“Yeah,” said Bud, “for a moment I didn’t think I was going to find a suit in my size. Sorry.”

Sandy stared at him. “What . . .”

“T minus eleven minutes and counting,” the Center reported.

“Check booster couplings,” Bud asked, still working to get himself firmly into position. “The simulator never sent back a response. Also backup telemetry channel C21 needs to be locked into the loop.” He glanced over at Sandy. “Please.”

Sandy continued to stare at him for several moments. Then her hand angrily slapped at a series of switches.

“A hold has been called,” the Center announced. “Repeat: a launch hold has been called. All stations mark their places and prepare to report.”

“Sandy---”

“Where is McMahan?” Sandy asked quietly.

“Ummm?”

“McMahan,” Sandy slowly repeated. “The astronaut who was supposed to be flying this mission.”

Bud seemed to think it over. “Ah-hhhhh . . . there was a reassignment in the astronaut rotation.”

“A reassignment,” Sandy repeated dully.

“Uh-huh.”

Sandy’s eyes never left Bud. “I know the astronaut rotation schedule, Bud,” she told him. “I studied it carefully on the way out here. That’s why I know you’re not scheduled for another space flight for six months. It’s another reason you were available to help out with the Foresight tests.”

Bud had finished with his adjustments and nodded back at the waiting

technicians. “Yeah,” he said as his hatch was closed and sealed. “But I had a talk with Harry and some of the others, as well as with Tom and your Dad over a video circuit. It was decided that maybe you’d need an extra set of eyes investigating the disappearance of the robots.”

“It was decided.”

“Yeah.”

“Without consulting me.”

“You were . . .” Bud shrugged, “busy.”

Sandy was struggling against the thing which was reeling hot and boiling throughout her body. “Bud Barclay . . .”

Bud turned wide eyes to her. “That is the truth.”

Sandy shook her head. “Your lips have a habit of moving whenever you tell a lie.”

“Sandy---”

“You don’t really think I can handle this assignment, can you?”

“That’s not it,” Bud said, becoming angry. “I’ve got every bit of faith in you.”

“When you and Tom came back from Africa and found out I’d gone to Ecuador you practically threw the book at me.”

“Sandy!”

“Your poor defenseless little girlfriend going out and doing something like that on her own. And now here she is again.”

“Will you please---”

“Going where she’s not qualified.”

He reached over and took one of her wrists firmly in his hand. “Will you please let me say something?”

“That depends,” Sandy said evenly. “Will you tell me the truth?”

Bud opened his mouth, closed it, nodded.

“All right, then. Go ahead.”

His grip relaxed on her wrist. “If I didn’t have any faith in you,” he slowly said,

“then I’d be doing everything I could to keep you from carrying out test flights and stuff like that. Right? Am I right?”

Sandy slowly nodded. Points for him.

“And yes I guess I overreacted when I found out about your Ecuador trip. And I’ll go ahead and admit that haven’t been feeling too good about the idea of you going to the Moon by yourself. But it’s got nothing to do with my feelings about your competence.”

“Then what?” Sandy whispered.

“Then . . . it’s . . .” Bud’s face reddened slightly.

Sandy waited.

“I can’t help it, San. It’s just the idea of you going into danger.”

“Bud---”

“Someone I . . . care about very much.” Bud now sat back firmly in his chair and began calling up readouts on the display screens.

“Better cancel the hold,” he finally said. “We’re eating up our window as it is.”

“Bud?”

“Umm?”

“Take off your helmet.”

He looked over at her. “Huh?”

“Take off your helmet,” Sandy softly said, working to remove her own.

Bud did so, and then Sandy leaned across the console to gently kiss his cheek.

“You’re a moron, Bud Barclay,” Sandy said, putting her helmet back on and fastening it. “But you’re a serviceable one.”

“I . . . guess I’d better continue to be serviceable,” Bud murmured, working his helmet back into place.

Sandy had removed the hold and was contacting the Center. “Sorry about that,” she reported. “Ah-hhh . . . minor launch procedure malfunction. Software error. It’s been cleared up.”

“We suspected as much,” replied the voice from the Center, and Sandy couldn’t help but notice a touch of dryness. “We can pick up the count at T minus ten minutes.”

“Sounds good,” Bud reported.

“‘Themis’ now at T minus ten minutes and counting,” the Center reported. “All support crew are to clear the area.”

Sandy and Bud assisted the Center in going down the checklist of items which had to be attended to prior to launch. At T minus five minutes there was the sound of hissing and creaks as the gantries pulled away.

At T minus three minutes they looked up through the viewport to see an electrical blue glow start to form around the rocket.

“Repelatron launch system online,” the Center announced. “Launch cathodes focusing on target.”

Sandy and Bud knew that, far below them, a battery of powerful repelatron transmitters were being switched on and aimed at the broad plate of Space Metal which covered the bottom of the rocket’s first stage. Invented by Tom, Space Metal was a special alloy of certain materials which the repelatron transmitters would, upon the end of the count, be tuned to react against. The “Themis” would begin its flight riding a tower of repelatron energy.

Bud nodded as a row of lights blinked green on his console. “Repelatron launch system tuned to ‘Themis’,” he informed the Center.

“Roger, ‘Themis’,” the Center replied. “Repelatron launch corridor established.”

Above and around them the electrical blue glow rapidly expanded upwards. “Themis” was now a bullet at the bottom of an energy barrel some one hundred and twenty miles high.

“T minus two minutes and counting.”

“Roger,” replied Bud. “All systems nominal.”

Sandy worked at quieting herself. She had been into space before, and it was interesting to contemplate how, on those earlier trips, no one had thought to hook her up to the medical telemetry systems. Nowadays her trips beyond the Earth’s atmosphere were few and far between, and the sensors in her suit were no doubt tattling to the Medical officers at the Launch Center.

To hide whatever trembling she was going through she called up some final checks on her own console. “Flight Compartment secure,” she said. “All passengers in position.” She pressed another button, studied the readout. “Cargo modules secure.”

“Roger that,” said Bud.

“T minus one minute and counting.”

“Escape systems armed,” Bud said.

Sandy nodded. “Flight reactor on ‘standby’. Post repelatron boost course laid in.”

“Forty-five seconds.”

“Acceleration buffers tuned to maximum effect.”

“Thirty seconds.”

“Orbital insertion correction to twenty-eight degrees . . . locked.”

“T minus fifteen seconds. ‘Themis’ you are now in float mode.”

Down near the bottom of the launch pit the final connections and umbilicals were removed from the rocket and it hung, suspended at the bottom of the repelatron energy corridor. Below the rocket the launch repeltrons began to keen with power.

“T minus ten seconds. Have a pleasant flight, ‘Themis’.”

“Roger,” murmured Bud.

“Bud?”

“San?”

“I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Ditto.”

“Count at zero!”

A starburst of light flared at the bottom of the launch pit. Surrounded in a brilliant blue glow, “Themis” rose out of the launch pit and ascended into the sky, its speed increasing every second.

On the flight deck, Sandy and Bud kept their eyes on the instruments as the neutralators built into their seats kept the effects of the acceleration to a minimum. Bud was especially interested in a display which registered the “Themis” as a blip flying through the gently curving tunnel of the repelatron launch corridor.

Sandy watched as well, but was also making sure the passengers were feeling no ill effects. She also kept her eyes on a numeric indicator which was rapidly counting. “Coming up on one hundred sixty seconds, Pilot.”

“Thank you, Co-Pilot.” Bud let one of his hands drift down to a series of switches.

One of the display screens suddenly beeped and announced REPELATRON SUPPORT THRESHOLD APPROACHING.

Sandy glanced out the viewport. Sure enough the blue glow of the repelatron launch corridor was fading all around them.

Bud was silently counting to himself, then he threw several switches in succession. "Launch stage jettisoned," he announced.

Below them the first stage of the "Themis" . . . along with its shield of Space Metal . . . broke away from the rest of the craft and began drifting back towards the Pacific. From a storage container within the stage a Duratherm Wing began inflating, soon producing an aeronautical surface which, when accompanied by instructions beamed from Loonau, would work to guide the stage back to a landing at the launch complex.

At the bottom of "Themis" main stage a metal shield irised open, revealing the nozzles of the ship's main engines.

Sandy consulted her instruments. "Reactors nominal."

Bud nodded and moved his hand to the main throttle. "Beginning orbital maneuvering burn," he announced, making adjustments to the throttle. Around them the "Themis" hummed with power as the powerful atomic engines of the spaceship came to life.

His eyes were back on the display he had been watching earlier. Now it showed the relationship between "Themis" and a specific point some 22,300 miles above the Earth. Bud worked at the maneuvering controls, trying to establish a system by which the distance between "Themis" and the point in space would gradually reduce.

He knew he could easily punch up a computer program which would handle the details. But he was also aware of a pair of large blue eyes watching him and felt . . . oh, what the hell?

Watching the displays and indicators he continued making slight shifts with the throttle before finally nodding in satisfaction to himself. "In five . . . in four . . . in three . . . in two . . . in one . . . MECO!"

"Securing reactor," Sandy said.

Bud leaned back, smiling in satisfaction at the instruments. Feeling a small nudge in his ribs he looked over to see Sandy blow a small kiss at him. "Show Off!"

"Thank you, Co-Pilot." Reaching up, Bud thumbed the intercom contact with the passenger section. "Ladies and gentlemen we've just completed orbital insertion. Our estimated time for rendezvous with the space station is . . . one hour, seventeen minutes from now. We'll soon be opening the compartment viewports so that you may observe."

“Themis” drifted rapidly through space, its curving path gradually taking the ship to where it would soon intersect the orbit of the space station. A brief application of retro-rockets, and the ship would be fixed in the same orbit, continuing its approach.

Although much of the ship’s systems were in the hands of the onboard computer, Bud and Sandy took it upon themselves to monitor as many functions as possible. They also remained in contact with the Launch Center at Loonau . . . learning that the launch stage had indeed made it back safely . . . and sent messages down to their respective families.

It was Sandy who, some time later, first spotted something. “Is that it?”

Bud peered through the viewport, then glanced down at the navigation display. “I bet you’re seeing one of the battery farms . . . yeah! I’d say we’re . . . twenty minutes out.”

Sandy touched the communications controls. “Titan Ten ‘Themis’ to Space Station Traffic Control. Checking in.”

“Roger, ‘Themis’,” replied a female voice. “Our systems show you on approach. Please prepare for final maneuvering instructions.”

“Confirmed, station. Commander Barclay and I will be ready.”

“Oh . . . hi, Bud!”

Sandy looked over to see Bud very interested in his work. “Commander Barclay sends his regards,” she said. “Keeping channel open, Traffic Control.”

Sitting back, Sandy began humming to herself as she lowered a small telescope into position near the viewport.

“It’s a small station,” Bud declared suddenly.

“I didn’t say anything,” Sandy replied bending close to peer through the scope. She could now see the object she had spotted earlier: one of the four immense grids which orbited near the space station. Their purpose was to serve as “farms” for the solar batteries which provided Swift Enterprises with one of its main sources of income. Upon the grids racks of batteries received carefully measured doses of pure sunlight.

The particular grid Sandy had spotted was reflecting Earthlight . . . meaning its position had been shifted away from the sun so that the batteries could be safely harvested and brought into the station for distribution elsewhere. If the scope’s resolution had been better . . . or if Sandy decided to use the long-range forward camera . . . she knew she’d be able to see the robots removing the battery racks.

“‘Themis’ this is Traffic Control,” the station reported back. “Your downtrack error is well within safety margins. Final onboard maneuvers should be completed at T

minus eighteen minutes on my mark . . . two, one, Mark!”

“Locked in,” replied Bud.

“We’ll be bringing you in to Spoke One.”

Sandy could now make out their destination glittering ahead of them. Her brother’s space station hung silently in the cold wastes high above the Earth. Surrounding the spherical hub were twelve enormous interconnected spokes. Although dwarfed by the battery farms, the enormous size of the station was made apparent by the dust motes which glittered around it . . . “motes” which turned out to be astronauts involved in EVA work, or robots similarly engaged.

Four of the spokes served as dedicated docking ports for spaceships. Sandy searched with the scope, then sat back. “‘Oceanus’ is at Spoke Seven,” she said, securing the scope.

Bud nodded, having unlocked the maneuvering controls and applying small bursts with the forward thrusters, slowing “Themis” approach to the station. Sandy checked her own instruments, noting that the passengers . . . all of them professionals . . . had already noted the approach to the station and were all in their seats.

The time continued to count down and the station began looming larger before them. As they grew close they could see the docking port for Spoke One slowly open. Within was the blue glow of a repelatron.

Sandy touched a switch. “Docking collar extended.”

On the upper portion of the spaceship’s hull panels extended outward, forming a ring around the nose of the ship. The inner section of the panels were covered in Space Metal. The repelatron within Spoke One acted similarly to its larger cousin back on Earth but, rather than working to repel Space Metal, it was tuned to attract the substance.

Sandy and Bud felt “Themis” shudder slightly as the ship fell into the repelatron’s grip. A central display produced a series of numbers, then announced DOCKING SYSTEM ENGAGED. DOCKING IN T MINUS NINETY SECONDS.

“All maneuvering controls locked,” Bud announced. “Main engines sealed.” He sat back and gave Sandy a smile. “Hardly worth setting up a flight deck for.”

Sandy returned the smile, her stomach still doing a flip-flop as she remembered back when Bud had been on a similar ship during a total repelatron failure. The ship . . . it was “Phoebe” she now remembered . . . was in danger of completely crushing the docking spoke. Bud had regained manual control of the ship and, with only seconds to spare, managed to avoid a catastrophe.

She hadn’t told Bud but she had gone to bed that evening and had not gotten out of it for almost two days.

Yes . . . having him close by was definitely better.

Both of them watched as the circular docking port of the spoke stretched around them. Ahead waited the extended grappling collar, blurred in the glow from the docking repelatron. A few more moments . . . some final thumps . . . and the collar slowly closed around “Themis”, locking her in. Only then did the repelatron switch off.

“We’re here,” Bud announced simply, switching down the ship’s systems. Sandy nodded, doing the same at her end as they both felt the crew access arm snuggle up against the hull.

““Themis’ you’re completely pressurized,” announced Traffic Control. “Feel free to egress whenever ready.”

“Thank you, Traffic Control,” Bud replied. “Another smooth job.”

“Just for you, Bud,” the voice replied prettily.

With a loud breath Bud reached back and unsealed the hatch which would allow them to move back and leave “Themis” along with the rest of the passengers. “It’s a small station.”

“I didn’t say a single solitary thing,” Sandy assured him.

Silence continued as the two astronauts drifted down a narrow tunnelway, reaching the passenger compartment in time to follow the last few as they moved into the access arm.

Outside the ship the passengers were being processed by one of the station personnel. He nodded as he saw Sandy and Bud, then stepped quickly aside as another figure drifted into the small reception chamber.

“Hi, Kids,” said Ken Horton with a smile.

Bud moved close and locked hands with his old friend and fellow astronaut. Ken then turned to Sandy who found herself at the receiving end of an old-fashioned Texas bear hug.

“Good to see you guys have finally made it here,” Ken remarked, turning to help usher the new arrivals onto the station.

“You make it sound like an emergency,” Sandy said.

“Well it might be,” Ken replied with a shrug. “We’ve got to get you two to the command center as soon as possible.”

“What’s wrong?”

“We’ve had a message from Frieda Morgan at SECFAR. They’ve managed to

really clean up one of the final telemetry images from one of the Foresight robots.”

“And?”

Ken was shaking his head. “You’d better see this for yourself.”

Chapter Six: Lunar Phantom.

They quickly followed Ken up the length of Spoke One, holding onto the powered grips which sped them along the bulkhead. Sandy, being less of the space veteran than either Bud or Ken, had to work a bit to make the adjustment, but soon managed to become accustomed to the standard mode of travel throughout the station: making the transition from one grip “route” to another, and shimmying slightly to avoid collision with people traveling in the opposite direction.

Eventually they reached the hub of the station, and Ken directed them towards the command deck. “Doctor Morgan and her telemetry crew’s been working overtime with what little they managed to collect from the robots prior to their disappearance,” he explained over his shoulder. “They finally managed to clean up an image and came up with something really weird.”

Drifting into the command center Ken moved aside to let his guests follow. Several of the duty technicians looked up from their work to nod at Bud . . . a familiar presence on the station.

One of them . . . a rather attractive redheaded female . . . leaned back in her seat with a wide smile. “Why, hello Bud--”

“I’d like to introduce Sandra Swift,” Bud suddenly announced, a bit loudly. “This is Sandra Swift.”

He had the attention of everyone on the deck.

“I think these people know who I am,” Sandy whispered to him.

“Right,” Bud replied, nodding to himself. “Right. You’re right.”

Ken directed them over to his work area. “Scrunch over here,” he suggested.

“Certainly,” replied Sandy. “I keep hearing how this is a small station.”

Strapping himself into his chair, Ken pressed several buttons and nodded up at one of three large screens which dominated the curving ceiling of the deck. “Do you remember what the last thing was you saw when the robots disappeared?”

Sandy slipped her feet into a support harness near Ken's chair. "Sure. Some flashes of light. Static."

The screen lit up to show a bright white glare crisscrossed with curving lines of static.

"Here's one of the things you saw," Ken explained. "Freida and her people ran this and each similar image frame by frame through their analyzers. They thought they caught a pattern with this one."

Bud had also perched himself near Ken. "It's not just straight static then?"

Ken shook his head. "Watch this. Here's what they found once they cleaned up the image with digitization and retroscopying."

The screen began changing, darkening. As Sandy and Bud watched a definite picture began to emerge. Again and again it underwent digital re-scanning, becoming clearer.

"Oh, Lord," Sandy breathed.

"This was as good as they managed to get it," Ken said. "But you can see . . ."

Sandy nodded, her eyes wide. Next to her Bud was also staring at the screen.

The image was blurred, dominated by a brightness which occupied the rear of the picture. Nothing definite could be made of the surrounding edges. But the brightness was, however, enough to identify the object silhouetted in the center.

A humanoid figure. A dark shadow standing, holding onto a slender rod taller than itself. No features were available . . . no identifying marks whatsoever.

Yet . . .

"Someone was there," Sandy said.

"Where?" Bud asked. "Who? There was no evidence of anyone else on the surface with the robots."

"That's your evidence," Sandy declared, pointing at the screen.

"We've all been studying this while you were on your way up here," Ken said, turning to them. "I've been in contact with Freida, Tom and your father. We can't make out any further details, so this is all we've got to work on."

"Zoom in on it," Bud asked.

Ken obeyed and the human figure filled the screen.

Bud slowly hissed. “Nothing identifying any particular sort of spacesuit.”

“What about washing up the surroundings?” Sandy asked Ken. “Can we get an idea where this person is?”

Ken shook his head. “Tom’s considering ultracooling one of his retroscopes processors to try and improve the definition, but he isn’t promising anything.”

“Weirder and weirder,” Sandy said.

“And I’ll go ahead and beat you to the punch,” Ken added. “Tom’s already contacting Japan Prime and the AstroDynamics base to see if they had any people on the surface out there at the time the robots were lost. We’ve also checked for any evidence of another expedition in the area. So far, nothing.”

Sandy met Bud’s eyes, the two of them thinking silently.

“Who knew the Foresight robots would be at the Jura Montes foothills?” Sandy quietly asked.

She didn’t like the look which slowly came over Bud’s face. “We decided on that area purely at random,” he replied. “We wanted a geologically mixed location which was also adjacent to a smooth lunar field, remember? Besides us, Frieda and the support team at SECFAR knew where we were taking the robots---”

“I meant on the Moon, Bud.”

“Sandy---”

“I’m not accusing anyone.”

Bud collected himself. “I’m aware of that,” he said. “I know. And we’ve been victims of security leaks before. You and I both know that.”

Sandy continued to stare at him.

Bud sighed. “The Foresight support crew up at Swiftbase would’ve known. Say, maybe eight or so people . . . I don’t know. We’d have to contact Florian and ask how many were assigned to personally ride herd on the robots. But San, the robots traveled out to the test site on a donkey that could’ve been easily tracked by any number of people.”

Sandy nodded half to herself.

“And not only by Swiftbase but by others. It’s a given under the UNLISCO accords.”

Sandy nodded again, familiar with the rules established by the United Nations Lunar Industrial Safety Cooperative which called for all parties engaged in Moon work to

provide assistance in tracking and possible rescue situations.

She waved a hand at the figure on the screen. “That tells me that, more than likely, someone was already in place awaiting the arrival of the robots. That means advance information. It means someone had a plan in mind and was ready to intercept the robots.”

“From Swiftbase?” Bud shook his head. “That’s like stealing from your own pocket.”

“I know.” Sandy reached up to rub at her temples. “I don’t like the way this is going either. I can’t phrase any of my questions or theories without sounding like the Wicked Witch of Shopton.”

Ken had been watching the both of them. “You guys have had a long trip,” he softly pointed out. “I’ve assigned quarters for you both on Spoke Five. Rest up a bit and we’ll have supper. You’ll need to unwind before ‘Oceanus’ undocks tomorrow.”

“Best idea I’ve heard since arriving,” Sandy muttered.

* * * * *

All things considered, Sandy reflected, Ken Horton was experienced as a space host. Even though her room on Spoke Five was small, the absence of gravity was more than sufficient to make up for any lacks. Not only the porthole view of the Earth, but the sinful delights of the zero gravity bath which Sandy made more than adequate use of; allowing the warm moisture to shape and flow about her body, driving the kinks away.

Dinner with Ken Horton also turned out to be a rather pleasant affair and, by mutual unspoken consent, all talk of business was tabled as the three friends caught up with each other. Bud and Sandy were especially amused at the interest Ken exhibited in the addition of Bingo Winkler to the Swift household.

“So you and her . . .” Sandy began.

Ken shrugged. “She was always getting underfoot at the ranch,” he replied. “Back then she was just knees and elbows but, as she got older . . .” He shrugged again, concentrating on his food, but Sandy could see the faint blush in his cheeks. She let the subject drop as the talk shifted over to Bingo’s uncle Chow, and his latest book tour, and then Ken brought them up to date on the progress the “Challenger” and its support fleet was making out at Neptune.

He soon suspected, however, that his two guests wanted a little time on their own before settling down and excused himself to check on the command deck before turning

in. Nodding gratefully, Sandy and Bud left his quarters and, hand in hand, drifted down to where their own quarters waited.

Without saying anything they ended up in Bud's room. He closed the door behind them. "San, I've been working on a puzzle."

Sandy folded down the single chair in the room and slipped into the support frame. "A lot of them, I'll bet, but go ahead with what you're currently thinking."

Slipping his feet into the support loops near his bed, Bud turned to her. "A lot of this is centered around the disappearance of the robots."

"Obviously."

"Obviously," echoed Bud. "So . . . let's say you want to make both robots disappear. Become wholly unseen by all eyes in space. How do you accomplish this?"

The subject had been on Sandy's mind as well and she hugged at her knees. "Well . . . keep in mind that, whatever happened, there was some obscuring dust for a period."

Bud nodded.

"But the dust would eventually have to settle."

"Enough of a dust layer to hide the robots?"

Sandy shook her head. "No, and you know that as well as I do. The megascopes would've seen through that, and I'll bet Tom also retroscoped those images as well." She sighed. "What would it take to distort an area enough to cloud both megascoping and retroscopying?"

Bud frowned, turning his head slightly in thought. "A heck of a lot of effort, I'd bet. We might want to pass that one down to Tom, though."

"True."

"What about the robots themselves? Let's go ahead and say that the object of all of this was to maybe steal them."

"Ah-hhhhh." Sandy nodded. "We're back to our mysterious friend on the screen."

"What would someone gain by stealing the robots?"

Sandy mulled it over. "The whole idea behind Foresight was to allow people on Earth to work on the Moon through remote control. It's not a new idea. There was nothing specifically brand new on the robots themselves. Frieda's virtual reality teleoperating system is really the only valuable technology worth going after---"

“And all that’s back down on Earth.”

“Right. If someone wanted to steal that then there’d be an attempt at SECFAR.” Sandy shook her head mournfully. “We keep coming back to square one.”

“Maybe not entirely,” Bud pointed out, gazing through the viewport at Earth. “After all, we’ve now got a playing piece on the other end of the board.”

“So. Big question. Who was it we saw on the screen?”

“Ummm, I was hoping saying all of this out loud would jar something loose, but so far no luck.”

“I really don’t want to accuse anyone at Swiftbase, Bud.”

“I know, I know.” Bud closed his eyes for a moment. “I was just feeling the arrival of Sandra Swift . . . Hard-Boiled Space Detective . . . and it was making me sort of nervous.”

Sandy smiled. “I promise to keep my brass knuckles away until we’ve learned more. I’m especially interested in any further news which comes from any of the other bases in the area.”

“AstroDynamics has been at odds with us before.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring that up earlier, but I don’t see this at being in their line.”

“You’re right,” Bud agreed, “but I’ve met van Dieman, the AstroDynamics Moon commander. He’s pretty much an example of the sort of people the company have at their top positions ever since that shake-up they went through a few years back.”

“Who on the Moon, if anyone, do we have to worry about?”

“That’s just it. Of the eight bases currently in operation on the Moon all are simpatico with us.”

“Someone up there, though, is up to something.”

“True.” Bud turned away from the viewport. “I guess maybe we’ll be needing the Hard-Boiled Space Detective after all.”

“Well, maybe the two of us can try the ‘Good Cop/Bad Cop’ routine once we arrive on the Moon,” Sandy said, chuckling.

“Could work,” Bud agreed. His expression grew softer. “You could be a very Good Cop.”

Sandy’s expression matched his and she allowed herself to drift free of the seat

and travel across the short distance into his arms. For long moments the two of them floated quietly in the center of the room, rotating ever so slightly.

“A very Good Cop,” Bud eventually murmured.

“We have got to rest,” Sandy said, a bit breathlessly.

“I know,” Bud whispered back, lightly touching her cheek. A final, lingering kiss, and then he was helping her to ease out of his room and on down to hers next door. He then went back to his room, concentrating on getting into bed and trying, rather unsuccessfully, not to think of her presence so near to his. There was definitely quite a bit to said about weightless dating.

And perhaps some drawbacks. Bud reflected that, in all his research, Tom had never looked into the effects of weightlessness upon female astronauts. It tended to have an effect upon some which, to most male observers, was extremely distracting.

In Sandy’s case the effects could be downright lethal.

Chapter Seven: Disappearance!

“Pressurization complete,” a voice announced over a speaker.

The inner lock door opened, and Sandy and Bud smiled at the welcoming committee waiting for them on the other side. Mackay Florian . . . commander of Swiftbase . . . was a sparsely built man with thinning wisps of gray hair upon his head, and he returned the smiles of his visitors through slender glasses. “Ms. Swift . . . Commander Barclay.”

“Mac,” Bud murmured, shaking hands with the elderly gentleman.

Sandy copied the greeting, but her smile was already widening for the other man who was waiting. “Harlan!”

Harlan Ames . . . former chief of security for Swift Enterprises . . . was grinning widely, and then he was almost knocked back by the impact of Sandy’s arms around him. “Careful, honey . . . mind the gravity.”

“You mind it,” Sandy said, cuddling him again. “How have you been?”

“Doing much better, thank you.” Having suffered a few heart attacks, Ames had resigned his post back on Earth. He then accepted a similar post at Swiftbase where the lesser gravitational pull of the Moon put less of a strain on his health. That, and the

experimental medical nanobots which were currently moving slowly throughout his body. He had volunteered for the project as part of his move to the Moon.

Bud's greeting to Ames was just as sincere, albeit not quite as enthusiastically delivered. "Both Toms send their greetings," he reported. "Everyone does, in fact."

Ames nodded. "My boy doing okay back at Shopton?"

Bud grinned, knowing Ames kept a constant contact with his son, the current chief of Enterprise security back on Earth. "Sherman's got everything under control. His people call him 'The Shark'."

"He'd better be one," Ames replied, although pleased at the remark.

Sandy, in the meantime, had accepted Florian's silent invitation to join him at a nearby porthole. She gazed out, nodding at what she saw. To her left stretched the long wall of the northern rim of Peary crater, practically at the lunar northern pole.

Swiftbase hugged the northern rim. Sandy's eyes looked up to the solar collector arrays which clustered like spider webs along the mountain tops. Her gaze followed the power transmission lines down to the low dark grey bulges in the crater floor. The bulges indicated the location of the structures which made up the majority of Swiftbase. Most of them were buried deep beneath the lunar soil and rock.

The exceptions were the apertures for the three observatories which lay further out, safe in the permanent shadow of one of the smaller craters within Peary. Also further out were the exposed grids and conduits of the super and ultraconductivity experimental stations.

The other exception was the spaceport which was even now working to secure "Oceanus" within its bosom. Soon the giant ship would be delicately lowered into a service silo for refurbishing before being allowed to take off once more.

As Sandy watched, one of the heavy "donkeys" . . . the workhorses of the base . . . was lifting off from a nearby pad. She looked higher and guessed its destination was the "Ulysses" class Cosmic Sailer waiting in orbit high above.

She turned to smile at Florian. "It's still incredible. I don't visit here often enough."

"Thank you, Ms. Swift."

"Sandy," she softly corrected. "We've been working together long enough now."

"You don't seem to be lacking for things to do, though," Ames remarked as he and Bud joined them. "Sherman sent up a complete report on your little vacation down in Ecuador."

“That’s gonna haunt me---”

“It shouldn’t,” sighed Ames. “You’re just being a Swift, that’s all.” He glanced at Bud. “So when are you gonna give Sandy something else to fill her time with? Like raise a houseful of little Barclays?”

“Like that’s any safer?” Sandy asked, smiling not only at the remark, but at the interesting red tone which Bud’s face was assuming.

Florian chuckled. “Let’s go down,” he offered.

“Please,” Bud replied.

Entering a small elevator the foursome traveled further down into the depths of the Moon. “I don’t know what to tell you, Sandy,” Florian began. “Ever since we got that cleaned up picture from SECFAR we’ve been going nuts.”

“Dr. Florian, I want to get something straightened out here,” Sandy told him. “The presence of Bud and I should in no way be taken as a criticism of the way you’re handling this base, or the investigation into the missing robots.”

“I explained as such,” Ames added.

The elevator stopped and they entered a narrow corridor. “It was felt that Swiftbase’s schedule shouldn’t be interrupted more than necessary,” Sandy explained. “Bud and I, being closely involved with the project, decided to come up here personally and let you people get on with work.”

“I appreciate that,” Florian said. “But the project was an important one, and I just felt that I . . . let things down.”

“You didn’t,” Bud spoke up. “If there’s any blame to be passed out, then our mysterious friend in the picture should be catching it. Not you.”

Florian nodded gratefully and led his guests further into the base.

“What preparations have been made for us in regards to getting out to the site where the robots were last reported?” Sandy asked.

“We have a donkey on standby,” Florian said. “We’re still getting telemetry from the donkey which transported the robots out to the test site so it’ll be no problem finding the exact location.”

“Good. Bud and I will be wanting to get out there as soon as possible.”

Florian paused and looked back at her, thoughtful. “I can have flight crew give the donkey a final check-over. You and Bud weren’t wanting to rest up a bit?”

“We had plenty of rest on ‘Oceanus’,” Sandy said with a smile. “Frankly, we’re

in a mood to get started.”

Florian nodded. “Good . . . good. Admittedly we’re all sort of curious.” He gave the both of them a speculative look. “Will you be needing additional crew?”

Bud shook his head. “Sandy and I are both cleared on donkey operation.”

“And, odd as it might seem, the two of you are more familiar with the area where the robots disappeared than anyone else here at base,” Florian mused, rubbing his head. He nodded. “Okay. I’ll go on to Command and get things rolling.”

“We’ll be ready to go in . . . say, two hours?”

Florian nodded and led them on to their quarters. Two suites, both hardly larger than the rooms which they had enjoyed on the space station, with a connecting commons.

Sandy waited until Florian had left, then turned to Ames who had remained behind. “All right, Harlan,” she said softly, crossing her arms.

“I’ve got people on the inside of every base on the Moon,” Ames told her. “That’s including AstroDynamics and Japan Prime. There are currently five hundred and sixteen people on or near enough to the Moon to have been at the test site when the robots disappeared.” He sighed. “The presence of each and every one has been accounted for.”

Sandy let out a sharp hostile breath.

“San,” warned Bud.

“I know . . . I know.” Sandy paced about the small room. “I was just hoping . . .”

“I’ve also been in touch with Sherman,” Ames reported. “He’s been making discreet inquiries down on Earth, as well as studying all the communications which we’ve been able to intercept. He’s still looking but, so far . . .” He shook his head.

Sandy had been staring at the slowly shifting liquid art display on the wall. She now turned back to Ames. “Okay, Harlan. Best guess. Who’s the person in that picture?”

“That is what I’d give a pretty to find out,” Ames replied. “It’d be a whole lot simpler if someone had turned up missing when the robots disappeared. But we’ve got to face the fact that someone . . . somehow . . . has managed to make it onto the Moon without being seen.”

“Is that possible?” Sandy looked at both Ames and Bud.

The two men stared at each other. “I guess it’s possible,” Bud slowly said, “because it’s obviously been done. But . . .”

“It’d be damn near impossible,” Ames added. “Someone had to get here in a spaceship. And we know of every ship that comes here.”

“Damn near impossible,” Sandy echoed, her hands on her hips. “But apparently not completely impossible.”

“No,” Ames agreed reluctantly. “I guess not.” He fidgeted back and forth a moment, then spoke again. “I know you two were planning on going out on your own, but---”

“No,” Sandy said, shaking her head. “I appreciate the offer, Harlan, but Bud and I are handling this on our own.”

A low frown appeared on the older man’s face. “I’m not an invalid, Sandy---”

“I never said you were---”

“Truth be told I’m in better shape up here than I was back on Earth.”

“I believe you,” Sandy said softly, coming closer and slipping her arms around his neck. “But I’ll have enough on my hands with Bud---”

“Gee thanks.”

“---and we’re not planning anything dangerous. Just a careful and thorough examination of the area, and then back here.”

Ames looked down into the blue eyes. Not too far down, he admitted, realizing just how much the little girl had grown.

“Your brother,” he slowly pointed out, “also never planned anything dangerous.”

“Well,” Sandy replied with a shrug, “I’m a better organizer than he is.” She leaned closer and gave Ames a kiss. “We’ll be okay. Honest.”

Ames sighed and looked at Bud. “She gets away with a lot of stuff like this, doesn’t she?”

“Tell me about it.”

* * * * *

“Adjusting thrust,” Bud said.

Sandy nodded, watching as they cleared the upper edges of the crater rim wall.

Ahead of them stretched the broad landscape of the lunar northern polar region.

They were riding in one of the smaller “donkeys” used at Swiftbase. Variations of the craft were in common use throughout the Moon. Bud and Sandy stood in the small flight compartment which occupied the forward half of a circular platform. The other half was open to the lunar environment and could be used to haul small cargo.

Beneath the platform were four landing legs. They surrounded a cluster of gas thrusters which provided lift and thrust for the vehicle.

Sandy now touched a button, causing a steady light to blink on a small map display located between her and Bud. “There’s the donkey’s tracking signal,” she said, pointing to where the donkey which had delivered the Foresight robots still patiently waited on the surface of the Sinus Iridium.

Bud glanced at it, nodding. “Increasing altitude,” he said. “Adjusting course.”

Their plan was to take the donkey in a high curve, gradually descending down to the test site. The trip would only take an hour and, with the ten hour supply of air in their suits, they reasoned they had more than enough time to carefully investigate the test site.

As Bud guided the donkey, Sandy leaned closer to peer out the porthole. Already she could make out the craters Scoresby and Challis as the donkey gained altitude. It wouldn’t take too much longer before she’d be able to see the wide expanse of Plato, and then follow the Mare Frigoris to where the crater Harpalus served as a landmark. With that, and with the more direct aid from the donkey’s electronics, it wouldn’t be long before they would see the broad plain of their destination on the opposite side of the Montes Jura.

“Look,” Bud said, tapping a display above his head. “We’re now being detected by eighteen different sensing systems. Not to mention the people watching us from the space station back in Earth orbit.”

Sandy looked out and could just see Nestria appearing beyond the limb of the Earth. “Will they be watching us too?” she asked.

“Possible,” Bud replied. “I suspect both Tom and your father have lit fires under everybody they could.”

Sandy settled back alongside him. “There is no way a ship could’ve landed undetected here.”

“Look, I’m with you on this. This mystifies the heck out of me.” He noticed her gloved fingers tapping near the console and smiled. “We’ll be there soon enough, and then all the answers will be piling in.”

“From your lips to God’s ears,” Sandy murmured.

Soon the donkey was one hundred and eighty miles above the surface of the Moon. When the la Condamine craters began to pass beneath them, Bud looked at his instruments and nodded in satisfaction. “We’re losing altitude properly,” he reported. “Landing in . . . twenty-two minutes.”

Below them stretched the rough terrain of the Montes Jura. Sandy looked down to where the first donkey was still transmitting its position to the map display, then gazed out the porthole. She could now clearly see where the Montes Jura met Sinus Iridium.

And somewhere down there, the Foresight robots had disappeared.

Bud noted her attention. “Okay, Detective. Whereabouts do you want to put down?”

Sandy considered it, then pointed to the map screen. “Put us about . . . oh, I don’t know. Let’s say ten meters from where the robots disappeared.”

Bud nodded slowly, his eyes on the controls. A hand shifted, and braking thrust was soon being carefully applied. The donkey continued dropping silently out of the lunar sky, its speed gradually decreasing as the minutes passed.

“There’s the other donkey,” Sandy said.

Bud looked up and saw the larger transport vehicle patiently sitting on its legs far below them.

“Landing in one minute,” he announced. “Speed decreasing. Altitude decreasing.”

Sandy watched as he gently moved the controls, nodding silently as he expertly brought the donkey level with the lunar surface. A bit lower, and clouds of dust began to rise as the landing jets disturbed the ground.

“Ten,” Bud murmured. “Six . . . three . . . cutting thrusters.”

Sandy found she was holding her breath and she forced herself to let it out. But there wasn’t even a bump as Bud began powering down the donkey, turning to her with a smile. “We’re here.”

“Another smooth ride courtesy of BudSpace.”

“Thank you . . . thank you . . .”

Sandy contacted Swiftbase, assuring Florian and the others that the landing had been safely made. Then she turned and carefully began disconnecting herself from the donkey’s onboard life support system. Bud followed her example and the two of them were soon using their suit systems exclusively. Per standard procedure they checked out each other’s suit, making sure everything was properly working.

Bud then opened the rear hatch of the compartment and stepped out onto the platform. Sandy followed, closing the hatch before turning to stand alongside Bud.

He was pointing towards the nearby foothills of the Montes Jura. “There’s where we got to go,” he said. “You can still see the tracks the robots left.”

Sandy nodded before she realized Bud couldn’t see the gesture while her helmet was on. “We got to give Frieda Morgan an ‘A’ for effort. I mean, Florian was right . . . this whole terrain is so familiar to us.”

Reaching down to his belt, Bud took the end of a reinforced nylon safety line and attached it to a connecting pleat on Sandy’s belt. He then reached down and touched a switch on his belt. “Dust field on.”

Sandy copied his action. Their suits were now producing an electrostatic field which would help to drive away the lunar dust, a prevalent worry to long-term explorers upon the Moon. In case of a possible radiation storm the fields could even be increased in intensity and provide short-term shielding against harmful subatomic particles.

Turning, Bud moved back and slowly climbed down the ladder attached to one of the landing legs. Sandy waited, letting the safety line spool out from his suit, before he stepped back and waited, and then she turned and followed him.

It occurred to her that in all her trips . . . including two previous ones to Swiftbase . . . she had never been able to truly take an opportunity to go out on the lunar surface. In truth, she’d spent more time exploring via the Foresight robots.

Taking a deep breath, Sandy moved off the ladder, and allowed herself to sink down upon the Moon’s surface. As she watched, the layer of dust about her feet and ankles spread away from the electrostatic field she was generating.

She looked up to see a smile on Bud’s face through the visor of his helmet. “No pithy comment?” he asked.

Sandy actually had several, but she didn’t know who else might be monitoring their transmissions, and she wanted to be careful concerning her language. She settled for blowing Bud a kiss through her own visor.

“Good enough,” Bud said and turned. Together the two of them began walking, eventually settling into a comfortable sliding hop sort of pace which took them across the surface. Within minutes they had reached the nearer of the tracks which the robots had left and they stopped.

“Really don’t know what to expect to find here,” Sandy murmured.

Bud was bending low. “Still . . . “

Sandy searched about. “I know what I’m looking for,” she finally said. “Any

other tracks besides those the robots left.”

“Yeah. Nothing here, though.” Straightening up, Bud slowly began following the robot tracks, the safety line continuing to spool out. Every so often he would pause, closely examine the ground, then move on.

Sandy followed, copying his actions. But her spirits were dropping. The beauty of such an investigation was that every mark made on the Moon remained there, undisturbed by the lack of wind or rain or other factors which would’ve erased similar marks back on Earth.

The problem, though, she silently grumbled to herself, was that there was nothing suspicious to be seen. Just the robot tracks . . . and Bud’s.

“Hey!”

Sandy suddenly looked up. Ahead of her Bud was leaning forward, his hands on his knees, staring down at the ground.

“What is it?”

But he didn’t answer. Instead he straightened up, and as Sandy continued moving towards him, she saw his helmet tilt backwards as he examined the sky. Then he bent forward again, his helmet looking down at the ground.

“I’ll be . . .” Sandy heard him softly exclaim. “So that’s it.”

“Bud, what?”

“The simplest solution is always the best one.”

“Bud!”

Then he took a step forward . . . and promptly vanished.

“BUD!”

Chapter Eight: Mislead The Eye.

Even though she couldn’t hear it, she could feel the safety line whining as it spun out ahead of her. It had seemed as if he had simply slipped through the ground, and she was already trying to reach the spot where he’d been, bouncing ahead as quickly as possible. “Bud respond,” Sandy said.

No answer, but the safety line suddenly stopped moving and began growing slack. Sandy could see it slowly collapsing ahead of her, reaching a point on the ground. “Bud, are you there?”

“I’m here,” came the reply.

Sandy almost fell over in her attempt to come to a halt. “Where are you?”

“I think you’re almost there. Wait. Let me reel in some of the safety line.”

A pause and then, as Sandy watched, the line began moving once more. She followed its progress with her eyes, finally seeing where it ended some eight meters ahead of her.

“Are you . . . underground?”

“Sort of,” Bud replied. “Come on closer, but be very careful. I almost tripped into it.”

Her fear gradually becoming replaced by curiosity, Sandy edged her way along the path of the tightening safety line, also following the track of Bud’s footprints. Eventually she saw the place where they ended, and where the safety line suddenly stopped, seemingly attached to the Moon’s surface. “Bud I’m just at the spot where you should be.”

“Come closer another little bit and then look down.”

Sandy did and stared . . .

And shook her head, and stared again. “Well I’ll be . . .”

“Me too.”

Sandy was staring down at a space-suited Bud Barclay who seemed to be barely less than a foot high. At least that’s what it seemed at first glance. But as she stood there and looked down she eventually realized that what she was actually seeing was Bud standing on a ledge some fifteen or so feet below her.

His helmet was tilted up towards her and he waved. “Do you get it now? Do you see what happened?”

“I think so,” Sandy said, bending down to place her hands on her knees.

“This lower ledge,” and here Bud indicated his surroundings, “is exactly of the same color as the surface you’re standing on. It’s probably an extension of the Montes Jura foothills. But with no weathering, and the drop-off being so sharply defined, there’s no way to tell from above that there’s even a lower ledge here. What’s that phrase Phyl used once? That French one which describes art that deceives?”

“‘Trompe l’oeil’. Literally: ‘mislead the eye’.”

“That’s it.”

Sandy straightened up to stare into space, realizing she was copying Bud’s movements from before. “From orbit you wouldn’t see anything.”

“Exactly. Same with telescopes. I bet even Tom’s megascopes and retrosopes would’ve missed it because no one realized what they should’ve been looking for. The retrosopes have a function . . . I think Tom calls it ‘confocal microscopy’ . . . that might’ve caught it . . .”

“And, as soon as we tell him, they’ll pick up this crevice.” Sandy craned her neck to look down more. “Y’know, Bud, that really wasn’t the safest thing to do, jumping down there like that.”

Bud’s spacesuit attempted a shrug. “Seemed like an idea at the time. I figured I could take the fall easy in this gravity, and I could climb back up.”

Sandy eyed the slope of the opposite end of the crevice. It was steep, but manageable. “Bud, do you see the robots? Shouldn’t they be visible down there?”

“That’s the bad news. See here?”

Sandy peered down closer and saw where Bud was indicating the ledge in the direction beneath where she was standing. “You can’t make it out from where you are, but this slope continues on down deep into the ground. Imagine yourself standing on the prow of a ship. The rock wall I’m facing is the prow and it’s continuing way the heck down.”

“And the robots slid on down there?”

“Yeah. It’s dark and I can’t make out a thing, even with my suit lights.”

“Ouch. How far down do you think it goes?”

“A pretty fair piece. I can make out places here that I think are where the robots impacted when they fell, and then there seem to be slide marks, but there’s more rock than dust down here.”

“Ouch again. I guess what we can do . . .”

Her instincts felt it before it registered on her conscious mind, but it was still too late. She felt the ground crumbling beneath her feet, followed by the horizon suddenly tilting crazily as her suit began tipping over. “Bud!”

But it was too late and she was tumbling down into the crevice.

If there was a benefit to falling in the Moon’s lesser gravity, it was in actually

having time to take in scenes as they occurred. Scenes such as the sight of Bud as he reached out for her, and missing. And then passing the ledge entirely and continuing on into darkness.

Then there was the hard impact upon the slope, followed by the dizzying sensation of tumbling end over end. In her helmet she could hear Bud's surprised gasp as the safety line pulled him off the ledge (had he tried to anchor the two of them somehow?), and then the feeling of the safety line beginning to coil around her suit as she fell.

Sandy tried to grab something. Anything. But she was rattled about inside her suit, and the occasional impacts against rocks and such caused her to bounce hard. As tumbled she tried to catch a glimpse of Bud, at least making sure he was somewhere near.

But then there was a single jarring impact, and Sandy's face hit hard against her visor, causing a sudden sick darkness to pass over her.

* * * * *

The first thing she realized was the taste of blood in her mouth. Slowly she licked at it, grimacing and realizing it was only the first of the troop of discomforts she felt approaching.

More consciousness snapped in and her eyes opened. For a moment she was confused. Then she remembered where she was and realized she was seeing the indicator lights inside her helmet.

That was all she could see, however, and she blinked her eyes experimentally, trying to clear them. If she could see the helmet lights her eyes were fine, but where was everything else?

Bud . . .

"Bud, are you all right?"

No answer, and Sandy silently moaned. Try and keep it together, girl, she cautioned herself. Touching her chin to the emergency button she was relieved to see a diagnostic readout begin running on the display strip beneath her visor. Apparently her suit was still intact . . . a moot point since she was still breathing . . . with the overall systems operating at forty per cent or less.

She looked down at her air gauge. Six hours, twelve minutes left. She'd been unconscious for a few hours then.

“Bud?”

Still no answer. Working hard to ignore the dread, Sandy experimented further and was relieved to find that she could still move her arms, although more and more she was beginning to feel like a discarded punching bag. She continued moving her arms, feeling about and reaching for the buttons on her sleeve which would've switched on the suit lights.

One of the buttons still worked and the darkness outside her visor became considerably less. Frowning, Sandy realized that something was smeared across her visor and she batted at it with a gloved hand, succeeding in wiping some of it away.

Now she could see that she was lying on her side on the ground, propped up against a boulder. What seemed to be slowly falling snow was, she realized, lunar dust settling all around her. Checking her suit she learned that the dust field was inoperative. Trouble. If the pernicious stuff started getting into her suit systems . . .

Bud!

She saw the other spacesuit only a few feet away. There was no movement and she began desperately crawling towards him. “Bud, please respond.”

Still no movement and Sandy's anxiety grew as she finally reached him. “Oh God, oh God!”

His helmet was cracked. Sandy swallowed her despair as she saw that the reactive repair sealant had worked to fill in the cracks, but how much air had passed out in the meantime?

Working quickly she uncovered a diagnostic probe on her wrist and inserted it into the corresponding slot on Bud's suit controls. The readout in her helmet flickered, then re-settled to begin reporting on the condition of Bud's suit.

Bad. Most of Bud's suit was irreparably damaged, operating on borderline failure at best. This was especially true of his life support system, and Sandy almost swallowed her heart as she saw he had only two hours of breathable air left before there was a complete shutdown.

Adjusting the probe slightly she brought up a medical report, reading that his vitals seemed consistent with those related to a grade-three concussion. Sandy pressed hard on a button on Bud's chest. It should have caused an injection of antibiotics and related support drugs to be directly administered, but her own suit couldn't tell if such an injection had taken place, if at all.

She peered closely into Bud's visor, trying to make out his face, and not succeeding very well. His visor was far too damaged and crisscrossed with sealant to make out anything.

Straightening up she touched the communication control on her chest. “Emergency. Emergency. Mayday. This is Sandra Swift calling Swiftbase. Sandra Swift calling anyone.”

There was no response, and Sandy dialed through the options, trying to pick up anyone which might’ve been trying to contact her. Given the time which had passed, plus the circumstances, she felt that by now her and Bud should’ve been at the center of a massive rescue effort. Not only that, but the initial pressing of her emergency button automatically caused a radio beacon to be activated. Someone should be hearing it.

“Sandra Swift calling. Can anyone hear me?”

Still nothing. Sandy moved into a sitting position, wincing as she felt a sudden sharp pain in her leg. The suit hadn’t broken, but that didn’t mean she could’ve escaped injury and she touched the medical button on her own chest, feeling the prick of the internal hypodermic as it delivered its cocktail of drugs.

Finally sitting alongside Bud she looked up.

“Oh Lord . . .”

Slowly her eyes followed the path of her suit lights as they described the seemingly endless miles of slope which her and Bud had fallen. Directly above her, looming like the ceiling of a cathedral, was the rock wall of the “ship’s prow” Bud had described earlier.

The two of them had apparently slid down the underground extension of the Montes Jura foothills. For how long . . . or how far . . . Sandy had no way of telling. But as hard as she could she couldn’t make out any sign of the ledge which Bud had originally settled upon. They were far beneath the surface of the Moon.

Sandy leaned closer to the slope. “Sandra Swift calling. Can anyone receive?”

She was beginning to suspect that her radio, operating at best on reduced power and efficiency, was unable to broadcast beyond the layers of rock separating her and Bud from the surface. Not only that, but she had no way of determining how many miles they had fallen, and how far they now were from their landing site. The suit beacon . . . one of the most durable items in the spacesuit’s inventory . . . was hopefully broadcasting its signal at full strength. But would it be enough?

Sandy looked back down at Bud, considering options. Worse came to worse she could attach Bud’s suit to her own life-support. But that would diminish both their chances and put a strain on her already-jarred system. And if her life-support failed . . .

She looked around carefully, trying to gain more about their surroundings while she thought. Other than being sandwiched between the Montes Jura subterranean slope, and the “prow” slope, they seemed to be in a cavern which stretched for miles in either direction. Sandy’s suit lights weren’t working at full strength, but she could see that the

cavern floor was composed of random boulders and rock falls sitting on solid ground.

At least there wasn't any chance of falling further. But the damage had already been done.

Studying the Montes Jura slope again, Sandy weighed the possibilities of hauling both herself and Bud back up to the surface. Even given the lesser gravity she knew it'd be next to impossible, but she felt she had to do something.

Anything.

Taking a sip of water from the helmet nozzle, Sandy tried to remain calm as she continued to examine her surroundings. If she only had more tools. A rocket-launched safety line or something.

Wait.

Something had glittered briefly as Sandy moved her head. Moving it slower, Sandy watched carefully . . .

There it was again. It hadn't been her imagination. Something shiny and not too far away. Trying not to hope too much, Sandy worked herself away from Bud and began a careful crawl across the cavern floor towards the sight. The movements took longer than she thought, especially as she had to clear herself free of the safety line, but she was soon pulling herself along by her hands and knees, feeling again the sharp pain in her leg.

She finally reached it and, in spite of herself, almost laughed. Well, one mystery solved.

The two Foresight robots lay in a crumpled heap, almost hidden by a boulder. For the most part their main bodies were still intact, but most of their external instruments had been badly smashed by the fall.

Sandy pulled herself closer. Not that she didn't expect too much. In popular fiction, she reminded herself, the plucky protagonist would locate additional air tanks, or something to repair a spacesuit with, or emergency supplies. But Sandy knew the robots wouldn't carry any of these things.

Still, they weren't totally useless. Reaching out, Sandy snagged one of the broken support struts for the "legs" of one of the robots. It was light and solid and, using it carefully, Sandy managed to gracelessly pull herself to a standing position. The pain in her leg almost made her bite through her tongue. The leg didn't feel broken, but even sprained or strained it was going to be a burden to work with. She reasoned that at least she was on the Moon, and she could walk on the leg if she used the strut as a crutch. On Earth she wouldn't have been able to do this.

Then she reasoned that, back on Earth, her and Bud would've been killed outright in the fall.

Looking over the robots again she followed a hope and searched for anything else that might be useful. Perhaps the sample tray could be removed and adapted into a sled to carry Bud with.

She froze, then bent closer.

Footprints.

The robots . . . and, presumably, both her and Bud . . . had caused surface lunar dust to fall down into the cavern with them. It was still falling all about her.

In the thin dusting on the ground near the robots she could clearly make out the imprint of footprints. Something . . .

Someone . . .

Sandy slowly turned back towards Bud, and then froze once more.

It was more than footprints this time. This time it was a complete figure that was standing next to Bud. A figure which, as Sandy watched, straightened up to stare directly at her.

Chapter Nine: Hidden Base.

As near as Sandy could judge the newcomer stood about six feet tall. The lights from Sandy's suit caught the reflection off of a visor which stretched across the front of the dull grey mask the person was wearing.

It was obviously someone in a spacesuit. But the suit was unlike any which Sandy had ever seen. It seemed to consist of . . . the best description Sandy's mind could come up with was the sort of wrappings found on Egyptian mummies. What seemed to be the suit's life-support system appeared to be little more than odds and ends which could've fallen from a junk dealer's wagon; the entire mechanical mess clustered about the stranger's back, neck and waist like some form of prehistoric crustacean.

There were no markings or any sort of identification to be found. Instead, the stranger held onto a large staff and stood there, returning Sandy's gaze.

Reaching for her communication controls, Sandy selected the "all channel emergency" band. "Can you hear me?" she said.

No response from the stranger who, instead, pointed once down at Bud, then at Sandy, and then began to turn as if preparing to leave.

“Wait,” Sandy cried, suddenly waving her arms.

The stranger paused. Using her improvised crutch, Sandy started hobbling over to Bud. “He’s injured,” she explained, trying to make herself understood not only through her voice but through gestures as well. “He can’t move by himself.”

No response from the stranger other than bending down and picking up what appeared to be a large leather bag which it blithely swung over one shoulder. It then casually took a step back and waited patiently for Sandy to come closer.

How in God’s name did . . . whatever it was . . . navigate in the dark? Sandy wondered. There seemed to be no lights on the odd suit.

Pushing the thought aside she reached down and grabbed a sleeve of Bud’s suit. “We need to get him to help,” she said desperately, looking up at the stranger. “He’s injured.” Hot tears stung at her eyes. “He might die if he doesn’t get help soon.”

The stranger stood there quietly for several moments, leaning on its staff. Then it pointed down towards the opposite end of the cavern before reaching out for Bud’s other sleeve. Slowly, but with increasing confidence, both Sandy and the stranger managed to enter an easy sort of rhythm as they dragged Bud across the ground, with Sandy giving thanks for the Moon’s lesser gravity with every fifth breath or so. This would’ve been impossible back on Earth.

As they pulled and eased Bud down the cavern, Sandy tried numerous times to engage the stranger in conversation. But none of her suit’s channels seemed to get through. Either that, or the stranger was ignoring her completely.

But it was someone. Someone who maybe meant safety, and help for Bud.

Sandy had no way of guessing how far they traveled. It seemed as if they’d been moving for days, descending down one rocky passageway and then rising through another. She dearly wanted to pause and run further checks on Bud, but she also didn’t want to jeopardize what seemed to be the stranger’s arbitrary sense of help. Sandy had been left with the impression that her mysterious companion had thought long and deep before deciding to bring Bud along.

So intent was Sandy on trying to make the trip as smooth as possible for Bud that it was a while before it occurred to her that they had been following what seemed to be deep scars in the rocky floor. Reminding herself that no detail could be overlooked Sandy tried to concentrate on the path they were taking. Something heavy had apparently traveled . . . or had been dragged . . . along this part of the cavern.

She wracked her brain, trying to remember all the lunar activity which the various international concerns were carrying out. Nothing she could recall had involved being beneath the surface of the Moon.

Sandy was still trying to work it out when she almost tripped over herself.

Realizing that her companion had stopped she looked up to see the stranger pointing ahead of them.

Sandy stared, the lights of her suit immediately catching something which gleamed dully. Frowning she tried to make out more of it, but couldn't quite determine what she was staring at. Regardless, it seemed to be their destination, and Sandy resumed tugging Bud further, the three figures inching further down the cavern.

They were almost upon it before Sandy was finally able to identify what they were heading for. "Oh my God!"

It was an enormous cylinder . . . forty or fifty feet in length and fifteen feet in diameter. At one time its hull must have been gleaming and near flawless. Now it was pitted and scarred, blisters evident everywhere on its surface.

Despite the punishment it had been through, there was still enough of the original hull left to allow Sandy to see the remains of markings. They were dulled . . . heavily scratched . . . but Sandy could still recognize Cyrillic lettering when she saw it.

"Russian," she murmured.

Her reveries were interrupted by a sharp tug, and she realized the stranger was indicating that they move to the nearer end of the cylinder. Sandy obeyed, helping in dragging Bud over to where a makeshift ramp became visible. A bit more struggling, some shifting of mass, and Sandy managed to move Bud onto the ramp. Then it was simply a matter of pushing while the stranger pulled, the two of them taking Bud up over the lip of the cylinder and then onto a wide metal grid which faced a large circular hatchway.

As Sandy crouched, catching her breath, she noted the stranger gazing steadily at her and Bud. Then it turned and, putting its staff to one side, grasped the handle of the hatch with both hands and tugged. With a few moments of effort the hatch slowly swung open, revealing what seemed to be an airlock within.

The stranger then straightened up and, recovering its staff, turned back to Sandy. Miming carefully it signaled that the airlock was only large enough for two at a time. Sandy didn't like the conclusion to the silent conversation but realized the stranger was right. It would be better if Bud entered the cylinder first and she carefully nodded assent.

Apparently satisfied, the stranger stepped into the airlock and motioned for Sandy to help in getting Bud into position. Sandy wanted to follow so much she could taste it, but she kept reminding herself about ports in a storm and helped ease Bud into the chamber. She then stepped back and, her heart racing, watched as the hatch slowly swung shut.

Alone on the porch she tried not to dwell on uncomfortable thoughts. She still had five hours of air left. It had taken roughly an hour to reach this place.

And she suspected that if she tried to barge into the cylinder she'd meet all sorts of resistance.

At least Bud was getting help.

She hoped.

It seemed like hours, but was only five minutes before the hatch once again swung open and the stranger beckoned for Sandy to enter the airlock. Moving faster than she thought she could Sandy clambered into the lock, feeling much more secure as the hatch swung shut behind her. After all, she reasoned, the stranger wouldn't try anything harmful while in the same room.

Again she hoped.

Sandy had no way of telling how long it took the airlock to cycle, but soon the stranger was pushing on the inner hatch, swinging it open. Not waiting for an invitation, Sandy stepped across the threshold . . .

And walked straight into a jungle.

Stopping immediately, Sandy swallowed her surprise and tried to assess her surroundings. Thick tendrils of moist green plant life cascaded all around her suit. Carefully brushing it aside, Sandy could make out bloated clusters of cream colored bladders crowding the curved ceiling above her, sharing space with a single long strip of incandescent lighting.

A metal grill served as a deck for her feet, and Bud had been left on his back only a few feet further on. Ignoring her surroundings, Sandy moved to his side, dropping to her knees. Once again she ran a diagnostic scan of his suit.

No change. Not good, but at least nothing seemed to have deteriorated. It would really be better if he was out of his suit, and Sandy moved to unseal Bud's helmet . . .

And was suddenly struck across the arms by the stranger's staff. Quickly leaning back Sandy saw that the stranger had been standing above them. "What?"

Once again miming, the stranger indicated that nothing be removed. As Sandy watched, the creature moved about, reaching for the clusters of bladders which it seemed to caress and gently adjust.

In the lighting from above Sandy was able to make out her host more clearly. She could now see that the spacesuit was clearly made piecemeal from fragments of cloth and other materials. The crazy-quilt life support system had been removed and was sitting in the corner near the airlock. Apparently the stranger carried enough air in its suit to work at whatever was going on.

Turning slowly, Sandy brushed fingers at the greenery which seemed to be

everywhere. Beneath the verdant surface she could see the remains of old instrument panels, the original Cyrillic markings still visible.

Sandy chewed her lip. Her Russian was scant at best, whereas Bud could speak and read the language comfortably.

On impulse, Sandy checked the environmental conditions of her surroundings. There was indeed air inside the cylinder . . . but the gauge only registered 7.2 PSIA. Half of what was considered normal air pressure.

The stranger had now finished whatever work it had been doing with the bladders and turned back to face Sandy. As she watched, the stranger reached up with a hand and slowly unhooked a thin hose from its mask. A stream of gas hissed out from it.

The stranger now reached with its hand and, very carefully, peeled the mask off its face. A brief shake of the head, and a snow-white fall of hair fluffed into place around the face.

It was a woman. Pale, almost albino-like skin framed in the icy hair. Her eyes were as green as the plant life which hung all about, but Sandy could see an arctic hardness in the woman's gaze. The thin set of the pale lips only helped add to the overall coldness of the expression.

She looked old, but Sandy could only guess at the woman's age.

The woman now pointed firmly at Sandy, indicating her helmet. Sandy took the gesture as being given permission to finally open up and, keeping her eyes on the woman as much as possible, unsealed her helmet and lifted it off.

As she expected the air was very thin, and Sandy found herself breathing loudly and slowly. There was also the odor of the plants, the faint trace of growing things touching her nostrils.

“Kak vas zavoot?” the woman suddenly said, her voice a throaty croak.

Sandy felt the beginnings of a headache and suspected she'd probably have to take a “booster shot” from her air tank soon. She was also trying to translate the woman's question and finally realized she was being asked for her name. “Sandy,” she murmured. Something deep inside made her hold back the revelation of her last name.

Besides, it was an effort to speak, much less breathe.

For her part the woman raised an eyebrow. “Vi gavareetye pa rooski?”

Sandy pushed her mind to try and come up with a reply, succeeding only in shaking her head. “I'm sorry.”

The woman frowned deeper. “Angliski?”

Sandy slowly nodded. "American."

"American," the woman slowly repeated. The tone of her voice didn't exactly promise a pleasant time of it. "I speak American."

She slowly settled down on her knees near Sandy and pushed her face closer. "Woman, you must understand," she said. "My air . . . my plants only make enough air for one. You . . . him," and here she indicated Bud, "strain my system to the most."

"I understand," Sandy replied. "My . . . his suit is damaged. He needs medical care."

The woman glanced down at Bud. "May not live long," she murmured. "May not live at all."

"Can you contact help? The surface?"

The woman seemed not to hear but, instead, stood back up and, once again, tended the bladder clusters.

"You are not from my son?" she finally said. "Not from GSKB or Russia?"

Sandy shook her head. "Your son . . . who are you?"

"I must know," the woman muttered. "You are first to make contact after so long." Leaving the bladders she turned back to Sandy. "As for me, I am Ykaterina Rotzog."

Chapter Ten: The Moon Witch.

Ykaterina Rotzog.

Sandy tried to clear her throbbing head. Somehow she knew that the name was supposed to register something in her memory. She was having trouble breathing and reached for her suit collar, pulling loose the tube which connected directly to her life support system, and she took several large sips of air.

Her head began to clear and, flashing a look at the woman, bent down over Bud.

The woman suddenly put a hand on her wrist, and Sandy shook it away. "I have to see if Bud is all right . . . or even alive," scowling up at her.

"The air---"

“I can feed him off of my system, or his if it’s still functioning.” Turning back to the job at hand, Sandy carefully opened the seals on Bud’s helmet, then pulled it off.

Rotzog watched with interest. “Sophisticated,” she murmured.

Sandy’s focus was considerably more pedestrian. “Oh God! Oh darling!”

Bud’s face was a mass of dried blood. Trembling, Sandy extended the water tube from the collar of Bud’s suit and carefully squeezed it over his face. A small stream of liquid dribbled out dreamily in the lunar gravity, and Sandy desperately wiped at the blood.

“Sweetheart?”

Her heart was resuming its normal rate as she realized that most of the bleeding seemed to come from a severe cut on his lip, as well as a similar gash across the top of his head. His left eye was almost lost within an enormous swollen bruise.

“Oh Bud!”

Motion, and Rotzog was kneeling next to her. “Feed him air,” she instructed.

Her fingers shaking, Sandy unclipped Bud’s air tube, pressing the tip into his mouth. She then opened a panel on the front of his suit and, unhooking a hose, attached the other end to the system on her own suit.

“His suit’s heavily damaged,” she explained to Rotzog. “I’m putting his life-support system under control of my suit.”

“Do not talk so much,” Rotzog murmured. She was carefully feeling about Bud’s arms and legs. “Woman---”

“Sandy.”

Rotzog shook her head once. “I cannot examine him while in suit. Take him out.”

Working to keep her fingers steady, Sandy moved to unseal Bud’s suit. As the seals opened Rotzog slowly and carefully worked to peel the outfit open. From the touch of her fingers, and the way her eyes flicked across the various parts, it was evident she was impressed at the technology which the suit represented.

Sandy’s interests were concentrated on the suit’s contents. She could see Bud’s chest slowly rising and falling, and the constant desperate brushing of her fingertips revealed warmth and the pulse of blood. Despite Rotzog’s admonition against talking, she heard herself whispering a steady stream of endearments while trying to keep the hot presence of tears from blinding her vision.

Once again Rotzog began moving her hands about Bud's body. "Left arm broken," she murmured. "Evidence of concussion. Possible cracked ribs. Left leg fractured."

Sandy reached for the medical button on her suit, turning it. A hiss, and the suit extended the flat metal case of her medical system. Taking it she cocked one end back, revealing the tip of the pneumatic injection needle. After checking the dosages remaining she made several selections and pressed the tip into Bud's thigh.

Rotzog had moved out of sight but was now returning. As Sandy watched the woman began laying out splints and bandages and slowly began applying them to Bud.

"Spasiba," Sandy murmured.

Rotzog was shaking her head, her mouth a thin line. "Do not speak Russian if you are not good at it. It hurts my ears. Vi menya panimayete?" She continued working on Bud. "It is obvious this your man."

"Well . . ."

But Rotzog was already turning her attention back to Bud.

"Ti sil'naya," she murmured softly.

She then rocked back on her heels before returning her icy gaze to Sandy. "Now, woman, you must explain. How is it you are here? Where are you from? Where is my son?"

Sandy took another sip from her air hose, clearing her head more, and thinking wildly.

"We were supposed to rendezvous here after the race," Rotzog said. "He never came."

Race!

Everything suddenly clicked inside Sandy's head, and she slowly lowered her air tube. "Your son," she said. "Rotzog! The race the Rocket Society had set up years ago."

The woman was nodding.

Sandy once again breathed from the tube, trying to hide her surprise. Of course the name was knocking at the back door to her brain. It was all coming back. The Rocket Society's international race for privately funded spaceships that took place some years back. Tom had entered the newly developed 'Star Spear', and a man named Rotzog had been his chief rival . . . the competition becoming murderous at several points.

And Sandy was now beneath the surface of the Moon, sitting inside an ancient Russian spacecraft module with Rotzog's mother only a foot or so away.

She stared at the woman, her mind spinning. How in the world was she supposed to let the woman know that not only was her son currently languishing in a Russian prison, but that she was the sister of the man who had defeated him in the Society's race?

"You know about the race," Rotzog was prompting. "Are the Russians on the Moon? Did they cheat my son out of our goal?"

Sandy worked to collect her thoughts. "There are Russians," she slowly said. "They have a base on the far side. They're operating a radio telescope system in Korolev crater."

Rotzog slowly rocked back and forth. "And my son? What of him?"

Sandy decided there was little to gain by attempting to lie.

"He failed to win the race," she slowly said.

The woman's eyes widened. "What?"

"He was . . . arrested by Russian authorities upon landing. He is in prison."

And then Sandy was suddenly thrown back, the collar of her suit firmly in the grip of Rotzog's hand. The glacial face was only inches away, the breath hot on Sandy's cheek. A loud snarl, and Rotzog pushed Sandy back hard against the bulkhead.

As Sandy watched, Rotzog straightened up. Grabbing her staff the woman gripped it tightly for several moments, as if silently debating how to use it and then, snarling again, she rammed the tip of the staff hard against the airlock door. For a few moments Rotzog clung to the staff, her body silently shaking. Then she turned and, without so much as a glance at Sandy, stalked away through the plant growth, heading further on into the base.

Sandy tried to peer through the plants to see where the woman was going, but all thoughts in that direction vanished as she heard a low groan from Bud. Quickly she bent over him.

"Oh Bud . . . Bud . . ."

Part of her knew she wasn't gaining any points for clear thinking in a crisis, but she decided to take a small liberty and softly kissed him.

She felt his lips tremble a bit beneath hers and drew back to see his eyes fluttering weakly open.

"Wh' d'you know," he moaned softly. "It really works."

“Oh Bud!” There was water once more on his face, but it was from her eyes rather than from the suit.

“Wh-what’s happening?” He tried to move, then winced.

“Shhhh,” Sandy whispered, trying to settle him back down. “Shhhhhh.” As quickly and as softly as possible she whispered to him, explaining the situation.

Bud tried to take it all in. “But Swiftbase? Tom?”

“I don’t know,” Sandy replied. “I guess they’d find the crevasse where we fell in. But we spent so much time wandering through caverns and side passages to get here. It might not be easy for a search party to find us.”

Bud attempted to move again, groaning at the pain. “Help me.”

“You really shouldn’t be moving,” Sandy argued even as she worked to settle Bud up into more of a sitting position.”

“Ykaterina Rotzog,” he murmured. “God in Heaven.”

“Could it really be her?” Sandy asked. “I mean, after all this time . . .”

Bud nodded, then his good eye spotted something past Sandy’s shoulder and she turned to see for herself.

Rotzog was returning through the foliage, calmer now but still frowning. Her scowl deepened as she saw Bud.

“Zdravstvujte,” Bud said to her.

Rotzog’s frown didn’t lessen. “Kak tvoyo zdorovie?”

Bud grimaced and, with his good hand, indicated his chest and his broken arm and leg. “Zdes baleet.”

“Hmph. Vi gavareetye pa rooski?”

“Da, gosphazha.”

“Ahem,” Sandy said.

“Hmph,” Rotzog repeated. “Better you were unconscious and he not,” she said.

“Many thanks,” Sandy said sourly.

Rotzog stared at them a moment longer, then went to the airlock door. Reaching down she picked up the leather bag she had carried back to the base. As Sandy and Bud both watched she took the bag over to one of the consoles attached to the far side of the

room.

First she pulled open a large panel which made Sandy think of a night depository slot at a bank. Then Rotzog opened the bag and, as if she were handling a baby, gently removed the glistening object within.

It wasn't exactly pristine, being greyish in color. But it caught the overhead light and sparkled. Bigger than a basketball, irregular in size, and both Sandy and Bud recognized it immediately.

Ice.

Worth more than gold on the Moon. Almost as precious as air. Human settlements on the Moon thrived or withered based on the amount of water they could eke out of the ground. Practically all the existing bases on the Moon devoted a sizeable number of its crew towards the task of prospecting for ice. A good portion of Swiftbase's infrastructure was devoted to the mining of the traces of lunar ice it found, as well as the carefully monitored recycling of water.

Sandy and Bud knew the lump Rotzog was now feeding into the slot of her machine could keep Swiftbase's water refineries and recyclers operating at peak for weeks. They watched as she closed the slot and, pressing a few buttons, watched a gauge, finally nodding in satisfaction.

She then turned back to them, kneeling down once more. Nodding as she read the expression on their faces.

"Yes," she murmured, nodding. "The ice I found here has helped keep me alive. The water keeps plants growing." With a small wave she indicated the thick growth all about her. "Plants keep air clean. Give me food."

The scowl on her face returned. "As I told your woman," she said to Bud, "only enough air for one. Me. Long time I wait here for my son. Keep base going." She nodded at Sandy. "She tell me my son in prison! Our project failed.

"You . . . and your woman . . . hard on my air. My water. I must know more about what happened to Anton. That my price." She waited, staring at Bud.

Bud was breathing slowly, and he took another sip from his air hose. "U menya vsyo po prezhnemu," he said.

"You lie," Rotzog declared hotly. "She knew some. Both of you cosmonauts. Your suits. Moon suits. Advanced. You know!"

Bud indicated his surroundings with a moving of his head. "Your ice . . . plants. You should be making more than enough air and water to sustain all of us."

"Hmph." Rotzog straightened up. "Much of systems . . . broken over years.

Operating small. Plants need constant care.”

“I could help,” Bud offered.

Rotzog stared down at him for several moments, and Sandy could almost hear the gears grinding behind the arctic eyes. Finally she reached again for her staff.

“I need to know of Anton,” she murmured, fingering it. “We talk more later. Grow stronger. Do not touch plants. Do not touch systems. Do not try to leave.”

Rotzog turned and touched a dial on the console behind her. Slowly the lighting in the module reduced until little could be seen but the few small lights glowing on some of the instrument panels.

“Lazhites’ syooda. Rest!” With that she turned and disappeared again into what was now the forbidding thick darkness of the plants.

Sandy slowly arranged herself until she was settled next to Bud. “Do you need more injections?” she asked.

Bud had been watching Rotzog go. “No, I’m fine right now. But we better space out the painkillers. I’ll need them but I don’t know how long we’ll be down here.” He turned his bruised face towards her. “Hey, honey, I didn’t even bother to ask how you were?”

“I got a bum leg but, other than that---”

He was gently touching her face with his good hand.

“Other than that you’re beautiful,” he murmured. “My angel.”

Despite herself Sandy could feel her face growing warm, and she touched Bud’s hand, turning to kiss his palm.

“I guess we’re in bad trouble here,” she whispered.

Bud coughed, the action causing him to hiss in pain once more. “Bad trouble?” he said. “Well . . . that’s a matter of opinion. I didn’t ask, but obviously you haven’t told her your last name, or mentioned our association with Swift Enterprises.”

“No, I---”

“Because if you did,” he continued. “If you told her that you were the sister of the man responsible for her son being in prison . . . and I was co-pilot of the rocket that defeated her son’s spacecraft . . . then she’d throw us both out the airlock without so much as a thought. Do you call that bad trouble? I sure do.”

Chapter 11: Russian History

Bud lay quietly, his face pressed close to Sandy. “Can you see over me clearly?” he whispered.

Sandy glanced up over the side of him and softly nodded.

“So you can keep an eye out for her and we can at least talk. I don’t think she has listening devices installed here, although I bet she’d give a pretty ruble to know what we’re thinking.”

“Me first,” Sandy said. “How in the world . . . or should I say off it . . .”

Bud was nodding. “You never knew about Rotzog’s mom, although Tom and I and your Dad do. Not to mention quite a few others.” He bent his head to sip from his water tube. “You remember back when Tom sent me over to Russia to talk with the VPK about possibly getting the Energia people to handle Titan construction out there?”

Sandy nodded. “Missed you.”

A smile skipped across Bud’s face. “Yeah, well . . . thought a lot about you too. Anyway, I not only taught myself the language, I spent a lot of time talking to some of the people involved in a lot of the programs there. Naturally the subject of Rotzog came up.

“Remember all the hooraw when the Brungarian separatists broke off? Tom and his Dad and I used to wonder where they managed to build up such an impressive space capability so soon. Remember Steffan Mirov?”

Sandy nodded. “Nestria.”

“Right. Turns out he was one of Chelomei’s bright boys. Also had his finger in the pie over at the Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center, where one of his special pupils was . . .”

“Anton Rotzog!”

“And the lady gets a gold star! Mirov was quietly working to pack the Russian space program with as many Brungarians as he could. Did a fairly impressive job of it. When the separatist movement comes to a boil, Mirov jumps ship and takes all his proteges with him. Quite a haul, including several cosmonauts . . . Rotzog included . . . and, best of all, Chelomei’s chief research assistant.” Bud gave Sandy a nod. “Care to go for another gold star?”

“Our gracious hostess.”

“Two for two. Ykaterina Rotzog handled most of the donkey work for Chelomei’s efforts in developing a lunar landing program up to the time when Korolev regained control of the Russian manned lunar effort.” Bud sighed. “There’s talk that Mirov was Rotzog’s father, but no one could prove one way or the other.

“What we do know is that, after the Brungarians break off, Mirov and Madame Rotzog immediately set up housekeeping of the Brungarian space effort. Along with their haul of warm bodies they also managed to make off with eight prototype N1 boosters, three Vulkans, modules from the L3M and LEK programs, several Soyuz and Progress modules---”

“God, Bud . . . how . . . didn’t the Russians do anything?”

“Mirov planned the getaway,” Bud said, shaking his head. “Remember, the Brungarians timed their break to coincide with the confusion around all the other movements and revolts which were going on. Mirov managed to convince several people in authority that he was moving space hardware to safe locations.” Bud sighed again. “It was also felt that, since all of the launch sites were fairly secure . . . with the exception of maybe the Ukraine . . . no one would try anything as daring as outright theft of spacecraft. Where would you launch them?”

“Y’know, that was gonna be one of my next questions.”

“And we wondered about that ourselves. Tom nearly went crazy trying to figure out where Rotzog launched his ship from. Turns out his brilliant Mom had an idea up her sleeve. She’d been quietly gathering up mobile ICBM launchers from the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces. She had an idea for adapting them into space capable launchers. That’s been the secret of the Brungarian space program: their whole launch infrastructure is mobile.”

“Wow!”

“Okay . . . fast forward to when the Rocket Society announces their competition. Tom sees this as the opportunity to test out the ‘Star Spear’ and, through that, launch SwiftSpace. Mirov sees this as a chance for an even bigger plan, although I now sorta suspect Katy Rotzog was whispering into his ear and it was her idea all along.”

“Colonizing the Moon.”

“We’re really rolling,” Bud agreed. “Madame Rotzog wanted to beat Chelomei and the Russian moon effort---”

“And the Americans.”

“That too,” conceded Bud. “When Rotzog finally landed in southern California he was arrested by US marshals and, eventually, extradited back to Russia. The Russians made some investigations and eventually uncovered a load of data. It turns out Rotzog had more in mind than simply beating Tom. He and his mother wanted to use the activity

surrounding the Rocket Society race to hide their real plan.”

“I remember some of this. I remember you talking with Tom and Dad when you got back from Russia.”

Bud nodded. “During the Rocket Society race there was gonna be a lot of spaceships in orbit. Tracking them all was gonna be a headache, and there was more than one national defense system which was crossing its fingers during the whole affair.

“The ‘Star Spear’ was tracked. So was Rotzog’s ship. So were all the other entrants . . . including the two rockets which weren’t really in the race and managed to slip in.”

Sandy slowly looked around at their surroundings.

“Oh so clever,” Bud whispered. “Oh you’re so smart. Rotzog’s ship was designed to be the ‘guide ship’ for what we now know was meant to be a major moon colonization effort. While he was up in orbit, two bigger ships were launched from Brungaria. They were designed to form the core of a lunar colony. Rotzog was supposed to rendezvous with the core ship, and then the whole assembly would continue on to the Moon.”

“And Ma Rotzog was piloting the colony ship.”

“Either her or one of Mirov’s other cosmonauts. We don’t know. But you remember that mysterious ‘other ship’ Tom and I encountered out there?”

“Oho!”

Bud nodded. “We’re currently sleeping in it.”

“Oho part two. But, if this is the colony ship---”

“Then what happened?” Bud was quiet for a while, thinking to himself. “All these years we never picked up traces of the colony ship,” he finally said. “It was assumed that it either returned to Earth and crashed, or simply drifted off into space.” Bud’s voice drifted off again, his good eye narrowing.

“That’s it,” he murmured.

“What?”

“Back on the lunar surface. With the Foresight robots. Remember I spotted that odd scar on the side of the Montes Jura?”

Sandy slowly hissed. “You said it looked like a crash scar.”

Bud nodded. “And now I think it was.” His head leaned forward until it softly touched Sandy’s. “Consider this with me. Madame Rotzog has to land the colony ship

without help from her son's rocket. She manages to come in, but comes in hot and scrapes against the mountainside before the whole works falls into the crevasse and disappears under the surface of the Moon."

"It fits," agreed Sandy. "But we've got to be miles away from the crevasse. How in God's name did Rotzog get the whole ship over here through the caverns?"

Bud shrugged. "Barmin and Chelomei played around with large Lunokhod type modules which could drive around on the Moon. And remember, our hostess managed to put an entire space program on wheels. Did you notice any signs of tracks or wheels on the outside of this thing?"

Sandy recalled the deep track marks she had seen just prior to reaching the base. "Yes."

Bud was looking around. "I'd like to get more of a look at this thing. I know Rotzog said the life support system was strained, but I can't figure her and her son setting up a base on the Moon all by themselves." He looked back at Sandy. "I saw the rough plans for the entire colony ship proposal. The overall base would've supported a larger crew than two."

Sandy glanced over Bud towards the darkness. "We still haven't seen into the farther end of this place." She looked down into his face. "And you're not going to order me to do so either."

Bud shook his head. "Don't worry. I need you as close to me as possible. And not just because I like your pretty smile."

Sandy smiled.

"We need to plan," Bud murmured. "We are in the absolute worst possible place I can think of. Sooner or later Rotzog's gonna put two and two together and come up with us dead."

"You think---"

"I think she's crazier than a bucket of wet rats. Call me judgmental, but she's apparently been on her own down here for quite some time, always on edge trying to keep the lunar environment at bay. That can't promote a healthy state of mind. Plus she has no reason to love either the name Swift or Barclay.

"So let's start with the bad news. How sick am I?"

"Concussion---"

"Urgh! Obvious."

"---left arm broken. Also some ribs. Left leg fractured."

“And you, sweetie?”

Sandy shrugged. “I got a bum leg. Bad sprain, mainly.”

“But neither of us are in a state to just up and run. How’re our suits?”

Sandy slowly sighed. “A lot of my systems are operating on backup, and they’re barely hanging on. Your suit’s worse and I’ve been running it off mine.”

Bud grimaced. “Have you had time to run a full diagnostic on my suit yet?”

She shook her head. “Let me go ahead and do so now.” Setting her helmet back over her head she lowered her visor and, making sure the connection between their suits was still intact, she watched as images began appearing on the inner surface of her visor.

“Bud---”

“I can see the red lights from here, honey.”

“Your suit’s brain is redlining all electrical systems. Fuel cell smashed. All life support on passive . . . you can’t recycle air or water. All you’ve got is what’s in your tanks.” Sandy could feel her hands clenching. “On your own your suit could keep you alive for . . . thirty minutes. Maybe.”

Bud seemed to think it over. “And if our suit systems remain linked?”

“It’ll put a strain on my suit. Hold on.” Sandy consulted her systems in depth. “If we were to remain linked, then my suit could guarantee the both of us for two hours before things begin to shut down. And that’s assuming I run on minimal life support.”

A slow breath from Bud. “And . . . if you left here on your own---”

“No!”

“Sandy---”

“I am not leaving you here, Bud, so just forget it right now.”

“You could make it back to the crevasse and try to locate Tom. Or whoever’s out there now probably trying to rescue us.” Bud saw the look on Sandy’s face as she angrily raised her visor. “Try to be reasonable . . . wait, who am I kidding?”

“Bud---”

“I forgot who I was arguing with. But San, even Rotzog agrees it’d be better if you were gone and I remained. I speak Russian---”

“She’ll kill you.”

“She’ll kill both of us,” Bud shot back. “We can’t expect rescue if they don’t know where we are. You just pointed out that we can’t make it for very long if our suits are joined. You can make it much longer on your own. Do the math, San.”

“I am,” Sandy replied. She was working to control her breathing. She tilted her helmet back. “We’re both forgetting the resources here. Maybe we can overcome Rotzog---”

“Hah!”

“Maybe we can, and then we can repair our suits using what we can find here.”

Bud considered it. “Maybe. But San, keep in mind we’re both injured---”

“I know.”

“And she’s dangerous. We’re trapped in here with a cobra.”

Sandy bit her lip and sat up. “Perhaps I could go now---” she slowly began, gazing thoughtfully down into the darkness where Rotzog had disappeared.

“And perhaps you couldn’t, like you pointed out earlier.” With his good arm Bud reached out for her. “Lie down.”

“Bud---”

“Just do it.” Bud sighed. “If I can’t convince you to try and escape on your own, then the next best thing is just to have you close. If we’re not gonna do anything then we should rest.”

“I don’t know if I can, after all’s been said.” But Sandy allowed herself to be cuddled closer alongside Bud.

“You try and sleep, honey, and I’ll keep one eye open---”

“Not funny, Barclay.”

Bud grinned. Then he gently touched Sandy’s face. “Sweetheart . . .”

“Shhhh.” Sandy lightly brushed her lips against his. “Take your own advice and let’s rest.”

“I was just gonna point out how I can’t say I find the sleeping arrangements totally unacceptable.”

“Hmph. You’re not feeling all that unhealthy.” But Sandy was smiling.

“We’re gonna make it out of here, San.”

“I believe you,” she whispered.

“Honestly.”

In the darkness her fingertips reached out to brush against his. Eventually their breathing grew softer as exhaustion overcame fear.

And in the plant growth beyond, eyes glittered.

Chapter 12: In Baba Yaga’s House

Sandy awoke to immediate disorientation. She didn’t know where she was and she wondered if she’d been sleepwalking again. Years ago she had woken up to find herself in an dark and oddly confining space, and several moments of raw panic ensued before she realized she had somehow ended up in her closet with the door closed.

Her mind rebooted and she remembered that she was sleeping inside her spacesuit. It was the day after she and Bud had fallen beneath the Moon’s surface (had it been only a day?) and the both of them were still in Ykaterina Rotzog’s subterranean base.

Bud!

Her eyes were already focusing on the battered man just inches away from her. He seemed so still . . . but she felt traces of his warm breath on her face, and she could now hear him snoring gently, so all was right with the world.

Or the Moon.

At least as right as circumstances allowed.

Struggling to a sitting position, Sandy reached for the medical system she’d pulled from her suit, selecting several dosages before pressing the hypo tip as gently as possible into Bud’s skin. Her efforts were rewarded with a low murmur and a shifting of Bud, and Sandy thoughtfully sat there and studied him. Perhaps Bud was simply tougher than she was, but she didn’t feel she could’ve remained asleep through even a small injection.

Pulling out her diagnostic probe she reached for Bud’s arm, inserting the tip into the metal band he wore on his wrist, then settled back to frown at the medical report appearing on her helmet monitor.

Okay, his readings appeared to be stable. But she didn't like the way his temperature seemed elevated. Having Bud develop a fever on top of severe concussions was a situation Sandy felt she could happily avoid and she touched Bud's water tube, causing a few drops to appear which she spread over his lips and forehead.

It was difficult to deal with the problem of survival objectively, and Sandy knew it. Logically she felt a rational outlook on things would produce more beneficial results. The problem was that it was Bud who was lying beneath her, all broken and ill, and she didn't need a mirror to know that her expression was one of extreme worry and concern as she gazed down at him, her finger still gently caressing his face.

"Where are you, Tom?" she murmured.

Realistically she knew where her brother was. No doubt burning up the distance between Earth and the Moon, while every available rescue vehicle from Swiftbase and the surrounding manned concerns were probably flitting back and forth over their heads at this very moment. For all she knew there was already a rescue party down in the caverns, searching for Rotzog's base.

Which reminded her, and she once again reached for her helmet, touching the communication control. "Sandra Sw . . . Sandra calling. Sandra calling."

She quickly glanced over her shoulder, but there was no sign of Rotzog amid the greenery. Almost blew it, she thought.

"Sandra calling . . . Sandra calling . . ."

No answer and Sandy first checked the power remaining in her suit before carefully opening up the system panel and peering within. The communicator shouldn't have been pulling that much off the batteries, or perhaps broadcasting within the caverns was difficult. The emergency beacon was still transmitting, so that was something.

She then checked her air supply. Throughout the night she'd slept with the air tube tucked in her mouth so that she could give herself booster breaths if needed. Rotzog had apparently raised the atmospheric pressure, but not by much. Even using her supply sparingly the total amount in her system was down to three hours.

And she knew she'd need at least one hour's worth of air to return to where she fell. Presuming, of course, she could retrace her steps. The recycler in her suit's life-support system was not reliable. Any sort of strain placed upon it would result in a total shutdown, so the amount of real air she could carry would be an important part of any plan she or Bud could come up with.

That and the fact that Bud's suit was practically useless.

Seeing the support strut she had been using as a crutch, Sandy reached out for it.

Several moments of groaning and wincing later she finally managed to move up into a standing position.

She carefully looked about, trying to identify which of the instrument panels could possibly be the controls for whatever radio system Rotzog used. Not that the woman had ever given any indication of talking with anyone, but the module must've originally had a communication system of some sort. At the very least something she could perhaps plug her suit's system into and boost the transmission.

Giving Bud another glance she returned to her work, irritated that her grasp of technical Russian was sparse at best. "Telefonom" was "telephone" . . . she thought (or was it "telefonu"?), and she knew that wasn't the word she was looking for on any of the panels, even if her command of Cyrillic was up to the task.

The test pilot in her was able to make some sort of reason out of her surroundings. She noted the absence of obvious flight controls or related instruments, so this was definitely some sort of habitat module and not part of a spaceship's command system.

A flight deck would've been much more likely to have easy access to a communication system. The thought made Sandy turn to try and peer through the thick foliage which separated the section she and Bud were in from the rest of the module. There'd been no opportunity to explore the rest of their current location.

Mainly because of the omnipresent threat of Rotzog.

Swallowing further ideas along those lines Sandy continued her examination of the immediate area. The airlock and spacesuit locker occupied the end opposite what she was beginning to call "the jungle". She and Bud had seen her load the lump of ice into what was obviously a water refinery.

Conclusion: she and Bud were currently in a part of the spacecraft which was devoted to life support. It would make sense since this would put needed air or water much closer to anyone coming in through the airlock who was in severe need.

Which brought up the interesting idea of somehow using the available equipment to replenish the air in both her suit and Bud's. Sandy leaned closer to the consoles, as well as the bladder clusters and the thick foliage.

And what was this foliage anyway? Sandy knew plants were used on both the space station and Swiftbase to help replenish the air supply, but she had never taken the time to study astrobotany (another item placed on her growing mental "to do" list). What function did the bladders perform?

With a fingertip, Sandy slowly traced a line of plastic piping from one of the consoles to the bladders . . .

. . . And the tip of Rotzog's staff suddenly inserted itself between Sandy's hand and the machinery.

Sandy jumped back to find herself staring into the hard green eyes.

"Dobroye utro'." Rotzog murmured. She then tapped at the bladders with her staff. "Please do not touch. Not ever."

"I was . . . just curious," Sandy replied, knowing she probably wasn't lying very well, and also guessing Rotzog knew it. "Your plants." Sandy quickly searched her memory for things she had heard Tom mention before. "Chlorella?"

Rotzog had been looking at Bud, but she nodded. "Mutated strain. Designed for air creation here."

"But you keep the air pressure so low, and you could create so much more---"

But Rotzog was shaking her head, still looking at Bud.

Sandy tried another approach. "He's running a fever. I've used medicines, but there's still a danger of infection. More air . . . if he could breath easier . . ."

Another shake of the head. "Woman---"

"My name is Sandra!"

"Woman!" Now Rotzog was looking again at her, and the eyes were still hard. "My system can only create air for me. I explain that."

"But all of this." Sandy indicated the entire habitat with a nod. "All of this was obviously meant for more than one person. You yourself said you were waiting for your son. This setup was designed for more people."

"Nyet!"

Sandy felt herself becoming exasperated. Which, a part of her mind tried to remind her, was probably a fast track to light-headedness and fainting. "At least you could try and let me get help. Contact others."

"Nyet!"

This time Sandy took a sip from her air hose, trying to calm down. "Listen to me. Bud is very sick. Injured. He could die if he doesn't get help---"

Rotzog tapped her staff hard upon the floor. "I am at war, woman. Eto panyatno? At war! I have been fighting for years."

Sandy blinked. “War?”

Rotzog nodded.

“With who?”

The older woman didn’t answer but, instead, turned her attention to some of the instruments on the wall consoles. “I am ne ochen’ harasho,” she eventually said, her fingers moving to touch a cluster of bladders. “Not so well. Understand?”

“Bud and I could help---”

Again the staff hit the floor hard and Sandy closed her mouth. She then watched as Rotzog unhooked two leathery pouches from her belt and, with what seemed to be an air of reluctance, passed them over. Taking them, Sandy could feel a heavy liquid sloshing about inside.

“Milk,” Rotzog explained.

“Milk?” Sandy stared at her. “From what?”

Rotzog shrugged. “Not quite milk. Food. Liquid. It comes from other plants. Eat. Drink. Both you and your man.” She seemed to turn away, then turned back and once again tapped at the consoles with her staff. “Do not touch!”

Sandy stumbled forward, grabbing for the other woman’s shoulder. “Let me try and contact my people. I can get help for all of us---”

With a growl Rotzog shifted, the movement pushing Sandy and causing her to crash back hard against a console. The Russian woman continued moving, swinging the staff about and knocking Sandy’s crutch out from under her, then hitting Sandy against her injured leg.

Howling, Sandy collapsed back against the bulkhead, slowly sliding down to the floor as tears leaked from her eyes. She had taken martial arts training, but none of it had prepared her for fighting while injured . . . on the Moon . . . in a reduced oxygen environment.

Too many mistakes, she told herself, fighting to ignore the pain. I’m making too many mistakes.

Her eyes working themselves open, Sandy looked to see Rotzog staring down at her before turning to give Bud another glance and then once again disappearing into the jungle. Trying to ignore the throbbing in her leg, Sandy reached out to recover the pouches, pulling them close to her.

Crawling back to Bud she once again eased into a sitting position beside him before taking one of the pouches and carefully opening it. Her nose wrinkled at the sour odor which rose from inside, but her stomach was also beginning to rumble.

Both their spacesuits carried a few days worth of concentrated rations, but Sandy silently reasoned that it would make more sense to save them for later. Not only that but, if it had been Rotzog's intent to kill them, it would've been much easier to do so outside in the caverns. Gingerly she raised the pouch to her lips and allowed a bit of the fluid within to enter her mouth.

And almost spit it back out. It was indeed some sort of "milk", as Rotzog described. A blood-warm and rather syrupy substance that tried to crawl all around her tongue and throat, assaulting her senses. It took everything within Sandy to force herself to keep her mouth closed and concentrate on swallowing. Much to her surprise her efforts were rewarded by her stomach stopping its complaining and starting to settle down.

Oh well . . .

Leaning over she touched the container opening to Bud's mouth. The odor must've reached his nostrils because his entire face seemed to clench, and his lips parted to enable him to breathe more, giving Sandy an opportunity to let some of the milk enter.

The results of the action were spectacular. Bud's face immediately turned crimson and he coughed violently, and Sandy felt her face being sprayed with spittle and regurgitated milk before she was able to move back in time.

Still coughing, Bud struggled up to a sitting position, his eyes fluttering open. "Wh-what--"

"Breakfast," Sandy told him. "Courtesy of our hostess."

Bud was still recovering, his tongue snaking rapidly in and out. "Ugh! Yogurt!"

"I don't think it's quite yogurt--"

"I hate yogurt, Sandy you know . . . what do you mean you don't think it's yogurt?"

"Trust me for the moment and accept the fact that we're at least being being fed." In a low tone Sandy recounted to Bud what had happened between her and Rotzog.

Bud listened calmly, but Sandy noted how his frown gradually deepened.

"I suddenly got a bad feeling," Bud said, reaching for his suit. "Rotzog is

apparently dead set against us making any sort of contact for help. But she's got to know our suits would be broadcasting a tracking beacon . . . ah, and mine's on."

"So's mine. Been broadcasting regularly . . ." A sudden coldness enter Sandy's heart and she once again checked her suit's communication system, tracing the connecting systems, just as Bud was doing with his.

They arrived at the same conclusion at the same moment. "Our beacons are on," Bud began.

"But the antenna leads have been snapped on mine."

"Same here."

Sandy heard a low hiss which she realized was coming from her mouth. At the same time she felt her hands digging into the material of her spacesuit. "She must've come while we were both asleep--"

"---and sabotaged the antennae. It would've been the easiest thing to do." Bud had pried open the antenna casing on his suit and was peering in. "I think I can reconnect this, but it'll take a bit of time. Hey! Do you think she originally found us by homing in on the beacons?"

"Maybe," Sandra shrugged. Still angry over the discovery she grabbed at her crutch and, once again, moved up to a standing position.

"Sandy--"

"I'm gonna go through the jungle and have it out with Madam Rotzog."

Bud reached out with an arm, but Sandy stepped back before he could connect. "No, Bud. Not this time. This time I'm gonna pin her to a wall and force some answers . . . and some help . . . out of her." Taking tighter hold of the crutch she steadied herself.

And then immediately stopped, her breath catching in her throat.

"Sandy? What's wrong?"

"Shhh . . . listen!"

Bud did and, this time, they both heard it.

The unmistakable sound of someone . . . or something . . . scratching at the airlock door.

Chapter 13: Fallout

They stood there, frozen, and Sandy mightily wished that the airlock door had featured a window. The thought was followed by another: did she really want to see what was on the other side?

If anything?

“Bud?”

He was slowly nodding, his eyes fixed on the door. “I suppose we could be hearing something simply settling on the other side.”

“Right. And you don’t believe it any more than I do.”

“Yeah.” For a moment it looked as if Bud wanted to move himself closer to the door. “You told me Rotzog said she was at war.”

“Yes, but she didn’t say with who.”

Bud suddenly glanced back over his shoulder, once, before returning to his former pose. “San, you don’t suppose she’d have snuck out through another door and is listening to us through the airlock?”

“Huh. And I thought Rotzog was paranoid.”

“Yeah, weird idea. Hey!”

Sandy quickly leaned aside as Rotzog suddenly appeared from behind them. The old woman was holding her staff horizontal and, as Sandy and Bud both watched, she hit the tip hard against the door. A pause, then she struck the door again.

“Teesh-TAN!” Rotzog shouted. Another hit on the door. Sandy quietly noted that, since there was no returning bell-like tone, it meant the airlock was currently in vacuum.

Did Rotzog automatically remove the air from the airlock chamber after each use? Or had the room beyond the door been exposed to the vacuum of the Moon? Say, by someone or something using the outer door?

Seemingly satisfied by the result of her action, Rotzog straightened her staff and leaned on it slightly, her eyes flickering over both Bud and Sandy.

“Dobroye utro,” she murmured politely to Bud.

Bud gave the older woman a careful nod. “What was that sound?”

Rotzog tilted her head slightly, and Sandy noticed how the woman's hands seemed to tighten around the staff.

"You told whatever it was to be quiet," Bud continued.

"You also told me you were at war with something," Sandy added.

Rotzog threw Sandy a dark look. She then turned her attention back to Bud. "Nadeyus'ty sebya harosho chuvstwuesh."

"I'm doing better," Bud admitted in a neutral tone, his eyes fixed on Rotzog. "Now, will you tell us what . . . or who . . . was outside? And then tell us why you sabotaged our suit communication systems?"

Rotzog's lips tightened. Sandy, reading the growing tension, began carefully shifting her position.

"Man," she finally replied, "your woman tells me my son is in prison." Rotzog tapped the tip of her staff against the floor. "He and I had plans. It is vital he be allowed to continue them."

Bud and Sandy waited.

"Two of you." She nodded at the both of them. "Valuable. Perhaps important."

"A hostage exchange," Sandy murmured.

The smile which slowly spread across Rotzog's face would've looked appropriate on a shark. "Da," she slowly said. "Ti takaya panimayushaya. And that is why I cannot allow the either of you to talk to the outside. Not until I'm ready."

Sandy tried to hold back a choking feeling. "Bud's injured," she said. "I'm not in too good a condition myself. We need help. All of us need immediate help."

"When I am ready," Rotzog replied hotly, turning to face Sandy fully. "When I am certain the Earth will release my son in exchange for the both of you. For Bud. And you."

Suddenly she frowned as something seemed to occur to her.

"Bud," she murmured to herself. "Sandy."

An "oops" bubbled within Sandy.

Bud apparently had a similar worry because he quickly spoke up. "In the meantime you still seem to have a problem with whatever it was who was outside. For God's sake at least let us try to help with that."

Rotzog angrily shook her head. Her mouth was opening again, but whatever she

was going to say was suddenly interrupted by a distant beeping sound coming from the jungle behind her. Muttering in irritation she turned and disappeared into the foliage.

Sandy watched her leave, then knelt down close by Bud. “So at least we know now where we stand in regards to her.”

Bud nodded. “And she looked like she was coming close to guessing who we were.”

“You don’t think that’d increase our value as hostages, to her way of thinking?”

“San, the mental state she’s in, she’d throw us both out the airlock first. Naked. Then she’d try and offer us as hostages.” He frowned in thought.

“The outer airlock door is open,” Sandy said.

“Ah. You noticed that, too.”

“Bud, if we can’t get our communicators repaired then we’ve got to get out of here. Both of us.”

“I agree. But go where? Can you take us back exactly to where we fell? And, even if you could, would we be able to return to the surface of the Moon?”

Sandy felt the truth behind his words eating at her.

“And there’s another problem,” Bud continued. “We’re both wearing Swift moonsuits. Rotzog’s equipment is jerry-rigged, but it looks as if what she has is based around an old Soviet design. I’m guessing something like a Yastreb. Incompatible with what we’ve got, and we’ve got to get our suits repaired and at least re-pressurized with air before we even try to break out of here.”

Sandy considered his words for a bit before reaching a decision. She began unsealing her spacesuit.

“San---”

“Shhh.” Carefully she peeled apart the upper torso of her suit. “Take the emergency repair kit. See what you can do in regards to increasing the stability of your own suit by cannibalizing mine. If possible.”

“Where are you---”

From habit Sandy knew better than to be within reach of Bud when she was obviously involved in something he didn’t like, and she now leaned back. “I’m going with my original plan and confront Mein Hostess about the living arrangements.”

“San---”

But Sandy was already struggling back up onto her crutch. “Be a dear and work up some sort of engineering miracle while I’m gone. We might need it.” Turning she began hobbling towards the waiting greenery, trying hard to ignore the objections he was throwing fiercely behind her.

The plant life almost seemed to reach out for her as she approached, and she tried not to wince as she gingerly started moving among the thick fronds of the mutated vines. Her mind was recalling all the adventure stories she’d read in her youth which carried accounts of giant carnivorous plants eating unwary travelers.

The fact that Phyllis had a terrarium in her office filled with sundews didn’t help her thoughts much.

Sandy soon noticed that one effect of wandering through the thick growth was that there seemed to be more air to breathe, allowing her head to clear. She felt it might have been her imagination, but she wasn’t sure. At the moment she was far too busy trying to assure herself that the plants weren’t about to start screaming in Russian that an intruder had arrived.

She suddenly froze at the sound of low murmuring up ahead. Trying to mask her breathing, as well as hoping that the reduced air was hiding the sound of her hobbling, Sandy inched a bit closer, raising a hand to gently part some of the vines so that she could peer ahead.

She was looking into a hemispherical room, the far end being a bowl in which a circular metal hatch occupied the center. The hatch was open and beyond it could be seen a heavily padded spherical chamber featuring a curving cot.

Rotzog’s nest. Or perhaps an escape capsule of some sort.

Flanking the perimeter of the bowl were curving instrument panels, while another stand alone console faced the bowl. The entire scene was bathed in blue light.

Rotzog was at the stand alone console. Her back was to Sandy, but the first thing Sandy was noticing was that the woman was out of her spacesuit. Instead, the old woman was dressed in a sheath of some filmy material. The color of the sheath had a familiar look to it, and it only took a few moments for Sandy to realize that Rotzog had somehow manage to weave the garment out of the vines which made up the greenery.

Sandy watched Rotzog, listening carefully as she tried to determine what the woman was up to. This part of the habitat was obviously more electronically active than the area where the airlock was, and Sandy peered about, trying to locate a computer panel or a communications board.

But then both she and Rotzog stood absolutely still as something new entered the scene. A faint tapping sound echoing around them.

Easing back into the safety of the foliage, Sandy watched a fierce expression of

hatred appear on Rotzog's face as the tapping continued. Growling, the woman returned to the console, her hands gently adjusting a pair of knobs.

Sandy concentrated on the tapping, wondering what about it was the source of Rotzog's upset. Was some mechanical system failing within the habitat? The tapping almost sounded like the sort of sounds one sometimes heard in old-fashioned steam pipes. Or almost like . . .

Morse code!

Sandy concentrated further, biting her lip as she tried to make a sensible message out of the tapping. But it was no good. Whatever it was, though, it was getting on Rotzog's last nerve. The woman was becoming more and more agitated.

"Chto ty delayesh?" she was muttering. She gave a hateful glance up at the hull. "EH? GAVARITE GROMCHE!"

Sandy started backing up further into the greenery, but suddenly paused as she spotted something crumpled in a heap only a meter away.

Rotzog's spacesuit.

Oh God!

It was too close and too tempting, and Sandy felt her hand reaching for it . . .

And freezing. She looked up at the trembling form of the angered woman working at the console just a slight distance further on. The lethal staff was nearby.

Sandy let her fingers flex automatically, testing herself. She still wasn't used to moving comfortably on her bum leg in the lunar gravity, and wasn't quite sure how effective her martial arts training would be. Her last "meeting" with Rotzog hadn't ended too well.

Well!

Sandy slowly stood up, carefully looking about and keeping one eye on the old woman.

* * * * *

"Rotzog."

"Eh?"

The woman turned, one hand automatically reaching for the staff. She was almost completely around when her face caught the full impact of one of the bladders from the plant support system.

The bladder burst open, causing a thick fan of greenish liquid and white gas to slowly spread across her face in the low gravity. With a screech Rotzog reached up with her hands.

Sandy was already moving, pushing down hard on the crutch and launching herself across the room. Her free hand was already moving into what she hoped was a good ridge hand strike.

She doubted she would get points for form from her instructor back on Earth, but the attempted blow was sufficient at least to knock Rotzog aside and, more important, further away from her staff. Sandy concentrated on holding the woman down hard against the console.

And was rewarded by wrestling with what seemed to be a tiger in human form. For all her age, Rotzog seemed to have the advantage of years of experience in moving around in lunar gravity and the arms blindly clawed out at Sandy, trying to throw her off. Taking a deep breath, Sandy linked her palms together and thrust, delivering a solid impact punch to Rotzog's chest.

The result was all Sandy could've hoped for as the woman's already abused eyes spread open wide in shock and the air was forced out of her lungs. Working quickly, Sandy struggled to keep Rotzog pinned to the console. Reaching down she grabbed at the cables she had spotted earlier while planning her attack. Within moments she had the slack of the cable looped tightly around the console, securing one of Rotzog's arms.

A bit more work, some careful untangling of the cables, and Sandy had Rotzog tied up to her satisfaction. She had even taken the effort of wiping the bladder fluid off of the other woman's face and eyes although, considering the expression Rotzog threw at her, Sandy wondered if she should have bothered.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I've got to think about Bud and myself. I didn't tie you up very tightly. You should be able to free yourself in about five minutes. Maybe. In the meantime . . ."

Sandy turned and, grabbing her crutch, began moving back into the foliage. As she left she let her hand swoop down to scoop up Rotzog's spacesuit. She began moving as quickly as she could through the greenery, leaving behind the sounds of struggle and Russian curses.

Minutes later she was breaking through the last barrier of vines to find Bud looking up from the work he was doing on his spacesuit. The sheer relief on his face was unmistakable. "I was about to--"

"Here," Sandy said, tossing Rotzog's suit to him. "Get into it."

She knelt down by her own suit and began crawling into it.

“Where’s Madame?”

“She should be arriving in about a few minutes. She won’t be in the most pleasant of moods.”

Bud was shaking his head as he tried to negotiate his body into the piecemeal collection of parts and fabric which made up Rotzog’s suit. “You girls should really try to get along.”

Sandy was about to throw the retort back in Bud’s face when she suddenly heard the tapping again. She paused, staring around her.

“Yeah,” Bud said, wincing as he stretched himself into the trousers. “I’ve been hearing it off and on the past few minutes.”

“It drove Rotzog nuts.”

“I can imagine.”

“I thought it was Morse but I couldn’t make it out.”

Bud chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“It would make sense, Sandy, if you knew Russian.”

“Oh!” Sandy blinked, then continued sealing herself into her suit. “Well, I’m the goat.”

“No, you just had a lot on your mind.”

“Ummm. So . . . what does the tapping say? Are there people out there?”

“San, I don’t know. It’s not . . . it’s not straight Morse. And I don’t even know if it’s straight Russian. I listened and listened and tried to make it out, and could only get a small part. I think.”

“What did you get?”

Bud didn’t say anything, trying to work out the intricacies of Rotzog’s junkyard helmet.

“Bud?”

“We have you’.” Bud turned large eyes towards Sandy. “You sure you want to take your chances out there?”

An almost inhuman screech echoed from within the foliage, almost making Sandy jump.

“Like we have much of a choice?” she muttered. “Let’s go.”

Bud shook his head but continued dressing. “How’s your air?”

“Three hours worth. How’s yours?”

“I can make out the dials on Rotzog’s gear. Apparently milady recharged this dingus before changing clothes. It’s showing five hours.” He began carefully wrapping the “mask helmet” of Rotzog’s suit around his face.

“Ewwwww.”

“What’s wrong?” Sandy asked.

“It smells like Katy Rotzog in here.”

Sandy started to close her helmet but paused. “How’re we gonna communicate with such different systems?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Bud said, his voice now muffled by the layers of Rotzog’s helmet. “I’m gonna remove the ruined faceplate from my helmet and take it, plus the electronics. We can attach the probe wires to our diagnostic bands and send text messages.”

Sandy nodded, glad that someone in the team was on the ball.

“I’m almost done here, honey. See if you can work the airlock.”

Gathering her crutch, Sandy struggled to her feet and stumbled over to the airlock door. The controls seemed fairly simple . . . at least there was an analog gauge for pressurization (currently reading zero). The door itself was controlled by a lever system.

Which meant that the smaller levers beneath the gauge controlled both the outer door (hopefully) and pressurization (equally). Working her way through the Russian lettering, Sandy pulled at one of the levers, hearing a faint groaning of machinery in the distance. She then pulled the other lever and, after a few moments, was gratified to see the pressurization gauge start to move.

As she waited a thought occurred to her and she turned back towards the greenery. Working carefully she removed one of the bladders from the vines, tucking it within the belt of her suit and making sure it was secured.

She then turned to Bud and, bracing herself, began working to get him upright. It wasn’t going to be easy moving him with both a leg and arm broken, and she knew she was risking a lot trying to move him at all with a concussion. But their choices were

limited.

Working together they finally managed to make a system which resembled contestants in a three-legged race. From the shudders which Bud was transmitting through his suit, Sandy could tell that he was in a great deal of pain and her heart was breaking. But she knew better than to try something different.

Instead she began working the levers on the airlock hatch, tugging at it. It took a bit of effort before, with a groan, the door swung open. Feeling like some sort of hunchbacked ogre, Sandy worked at maneuvering Bud and herself into the room, pulling the door shut behind them, then working to seal it.

There was a large knob on the wall with two settings, and Sandy now turned it, her ears barely picking up the hiss of depressurization.

A movement and touch, but it was only Bud carefully inserting his diagnostic probe wire into Sandy's wristband. A pause, and then Bud began tapping on the small keyboard he had salvaged from the electronics in his old suit.

Words began appearing on the display strip inside her helmet: OKAY?

Opening the keyboard on her own suit she began tapping: YES.

She saw Bud's face gazing down at the display strip of his helmet frame, and then he nodded. Together he and Sandy operated the levers of the outer hatch, eventually managing to push it open.

It was crazy, Sandy thought. Bud needed serious time in a hospital. Instead he was wearing a patchwork spacesuit, involving piecemeal technology, being dragged out into the Moon.

Perhaps she should've thought to maybe tie Rotzog up more. Then they could've worked on having Bud recover more, as well as repairing their suits more fully or, better yet, somehow making contact with a rescue party.

But Sandy recalled the lethal look Rotzog had given her at the end. Continuing to stay would've kept a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads.

She and Bud lurched out onto the porch, and from there on down the ramp to the surface of the cavern, almost falling over in the process.

STILL WITH ME? she typed.

BAD WORDS, BUT I LOVE YOU.

Sandy smiled and shook the tears free from her eyes.

WHICH WAY?

Sandy had been trying to find the path which she and Rotzog had taken to get to the habitat. Did they want to go back to the remains of the Foresight robots? That was the logical place a rescue party would arrive.

But who had been tapping on the hull of the habitat? Sandy looked around but saw no one. She saw the deep scars which the habitat had left in the lunar dust, and which was the path she and Rotzog had taken, but there were no signs of anyone else . . .

Or wait!

No, it was useless. Those might have been scuff marks made against the lips of the scars. But had they been recently made, or had she or Rotzog made them when they had brought Bud back?

BACK TO ROBOTS, Sandy typed. WHERE RESCUE OBVIOUS.

GOOD CALL, Bud's fingers replied.

It was also the first place a vengeful Rotzog would head for, Sandy felt, but didn't think she needed to burden Bud with that bit of information.

As carefully as possible the two of them began lurching across the cavern floor, trying as hard as possible to remain upright. It was, Sandy felt, like learning to dance for the first time. As long as Bud didn't expect too much in the way of grace then everything would be all right.

Or so she told herself. But Sandy soon began calculating and her heart fell. Burdened with Bud it was going to take her three or four times as long to get back to the Foresight wreck. This was assuming, of course, that she could accurately get them back. She and Rotzog had, after all, taken a rather circuitous path.

Whatever, the both of them were going to be low on air . . . very low . . . by the time they reached the site. And if no one was there to rescue them?

Which left returning to Rotzog the only option.

And then Sandy almost tripped as Bud suddenly stopped moving.

WHAT?

ROTZOG.

Horrified, Sandy looked around but could see no one. WHERE?

In answer Bud was slapping a hand against his head, and Sandy realized that Rotzog was still in contact with the spacesuit.

SHE'S WARNING US.

“Huh?” Then Sandy remembered that Bud couldn’t hear and typed WHAT?

YELLING IN RUSSIAN. CAN’T HEAR CLEARLY.

Sandy watched as he listened and, after a few moments, saw him shake his head. WHAT?

I MAKE HER OUT BUT CRAZY.

WHAT?

Bud paused, seeming to listen again. Then his fingers began tapping. TELLING US TO BEWARE THE LITTLE PEOPLE.

Chapter 14: Canyon Of Ice

Sandy carefully tried to resume their stumbling joined walk while working on an answer. Her fingers soon slapped at the buttons on her keypad. STILL SCREAMING? NO.

Then: SAN.

WHAT?

LITTLE PEOPLE.

???

SPACEFRIENDS?

To be honest, Sandy's mind had been burrowing about in that direction. Could Rotzog's reference to "The Little People" be somehow related to the elusive aliens which the Swifts kept contact with? After all, an intelligent species capable of moving a mass the size of Nestria into Earth's orbit would have no trouble reaching the Moon. And, back when Tom and the others had made their rendezvous with the Space Friends' automated ark, there could've been numerous opportunities for the aliens to probe the Moon for further use. Or what if . . . interesting thought . . . the space ark hadn't been as automated as originally thought? Could it had been carrying passengers who had remained behind? DON'T KNOW she finally keyed back to Bud. GOOD IDEA THO.

Bud almost seemed as if he was pausing, but he managed to adjust to Sandy's pace.

Another message on her display. SENDERS?

Sandy had been afraid Bud would bring that up. During her adventure in Ecuador she had made contact with an alien artifact sent by a race which seemed to be competing with the Space Friends. A race which Sandy had christened "The Senders". The artifact had destroyed itself, but not before leaving Sandy with the distinct impression that some form of extraterrestrial information had been downloaded into her brain. She had confessed as much to her family and Bud, and had allowed herself to undergo extensive tests, but nothing out of the ordinary had appeared.

Nothing but, on occasion, the odd dream in the night. And, sometimes, the feeling that something else was peering out at the world from behind her eyes.

If the Senders were intentionally hiding from the Space Friends then it would've made excellent sense to secret themselves within the Moon.

Even . . . maybe . . . planting in Sandy's mind the obsessive idea of coming to the Moon in the first place.

She angrily shook the thoughts clear from her head. It was too much of a string of theories, she kept telling herself. And Bud was still waiting for an answer.

DON'T THINK SO. DOESN'T SEEM LIKE.

The patchwork quilt of Rotzog's helmet turned towards her.

SURE?

Sandy shook her head, hoping the gesture was visible to him, and she pointed forcefully at her keypad, indicating the previous message.

They resumed concentrating on shuffling painfully across the cavern floor, entering a narrow chamber which Sandy felt looked halfway familiar. She peered about, trying to spot landmarks as well as any of the footsteps which she and Rotzog would've made when dragging Bud back to the habitat. But the floor was solid rock with hardly enough dust to make any sort of worthwhile sign. Signaling a halt with her body, Sandy leaned the both of them back against the high wall. Peering at her instruments she felt a stab of despair. The effort was eating up her air at a rapid rate. And the strain being put on her suit's life support system was beginning to tell. No warning lights. Yet. But Sandy could feel how her suit was overcompensating while trying to keep her alive. A catastrophic systems failure could occur at any moment.

She indicated Bud's suit with a querying gesture and was rewarded with a slow nod. Sandy tried to lean closer to read the dials on Rotzog's suit but Bud only shifted away.

AIR she typed anxiously.

FINE.

Sandy told herself that Rotzog had depended on her suit for years to keep her alive when out on the Moon. But Bud was still in need of serious medical help and could only move a little bit at a time, sometimes clutching himself tighter against Sandy. Sighing, she tugged at Bud and they resumed their walk.

SEE OTHER SUIT, Bud typed.

???

R.

Ohhhh. NO.

The answer resulted in another nod from Bud.

Had they taken Rotzog's only suit? Was the old woman now marooned in her habitat? Sandy sent a glance back over her shoulder.

They could go back and get Rotzog later. When they were rescued. Rotzog had plenty of air, and food, and she had recently replenished her water recycler.

When they were rescued . . .

A sudden turn, and Sandy almost slipped as her foot stepped off a ledge. Regaining her balance (with some assistance from Bud as a counterweight), she saw that they had reached a shallow terrace of stone which curved gracefully away from them, the steps heading deeper into the cavern.

And Sandy let out a slow breath. She had not encountered such an area when she had been with Rotzog. This was someplace different. Maybe on the way to the Foresight wreck, and maybe the both of them were lost.

Best not to tell Bud and upset him---

WERE LOST RNT WE?

"This is what I get for dating a brilliant test pilot," Sandy muttered. She slowly touched her keypad. NOT HERE B4.

SME WAY 4SITE?

Sandy hoped so. But she felt the both of them were thinking the same thing.

Either continue to push ahead, and hope that the new path would eventually bring them to the wreck site . . .

Or turn around and head back, wasting more time and air.

Sandy sighed and turned to where she could peer into the dull visor of Rotzog's suit. Her fingers rested on the keypad.

OPINION?

The visor turned one way, then another, and Sandy could tell the circuits were clicking in Bud's mind.

? TO WRECK, he finally sent.

1 HOUR AIR.

He no doubt knew the situation they were in. They had to weigh all the options. BACK TO ROTZOG? he sent.

Sandy bit her lip, glad that he had mentioned it instead of her. Rotzog was probably waiting for them, but not with open arms. If they went back to the safety of the habitat they'd no doubt have to fight her. Seriously. This time they'd have to thoroughly bind her and keep a watch.

Fight Katy Rotzog. The both of them injured and weakened and desperate, and Rotzog no doubt prepared for their return.

SUIT? Bud sent.

It was useless to lie. This wasn't the place.

NOT GOOD. EXPECTING TROUBLE ANYTIME.

Bud lowered his head, and Sandy felt a darkness growing inside her.

MOVE FASTER W/O ME.

NO.

GO ON. GET HELP. RETURN.

NO.

Bud reached out, catching Sandy's arm in a tight grip. But he was still in a bad way and Sandy was able to pry his fingers loose and hold them securely in hers.

When she was certain he wouldn't try anything she released his fingers and reached for the keypad. WE GO, she declared. 1 WAY OR NOTHER.

Bud's head angrily shook.

WE KILL RSELVS ARGUIN.

This seemed to give Bud a sense of pause and his struggle lessened.

Sandy bore in with her argument. WE TRY MORE THIS WAY THEN DECIDE.

Bud stared down the winding terrace and Sandy wondered if he was actually seeing it.

But a message soon glowed on her display. OK.

Letting out a breath Sandy gathered him back into position against her and, this time with greater care, the two of them resumed their efforts, easing down the stone way.

A small beep attracted her attention and she swore softly. Her fuel cell was signaling that it could not operate at its current level for very much longer.

Hoping that Bud wouldn't notice, Sandy brushed a finger against the button that would bring up the reserve system. Her effort was rewarded by a louder beep and the message that the reserve power system had long since shut down due to sustained damage.

Safety procedure at this point clearly indicated a return to a secure habitat. Unfortunately . . . She felt Bud suddenly stop and worried that he had somehow noticed her distress. But she glanced up at him and saw that the visor was staring straight down the path they were taking. Sandy turned her head, following the direction he was looking.

Light!

Faint. Almost ghostlike in appearance. But there definitely was some form of illumination ahead of them around the bend. Bud tightened himself against Sandy and she looked back at him to see him inscribe a R in the air with his finger.

So maybe Rotzog did have a spare suit. And doubtless the woman knew enough about the local terrain to somehow circle around and approach them from ahead.

Signaling to Bud that she understood, Sandy and him carefully pressed themselves tighter against the cavern wall and resumed moving. As they did the light seemed to dance, but it gradually grew brighter. A pearlescent glow.

If it was Rotzog then she was burning flares ahead of them. What could it . . .

They turned a final corner and came to a halt.

"Oh . . . God!" Sandy breathed.

No answer from Bud, but she suspected he was similarly impressed.

It would've taken an enormous effort not to be impressed.

Not by the sight of twin enormous glistening walls of white stretching far ahead of them into a distant darkness. Sandy and Bud were at the entrance to a cathedral-like hall composed of some sort of pristine substance which greeted the both of them with its soft glow.

The chamber was narrow, but the walls soared high above them. All of Swiftbase could've fitted into this area, with room for several spaceships and Tom's Flying Lab.

Sandy stared at the vision, almost expecting it to fade away. But soon she felt a touch from Bud.

Her display lit at the same instance. BEEN HERE?

Sandy slowly shook her head. She knew now that the both of them were definitely lost. But oh . . . what an incredible place to be lost in.

A thought which had been trying to get attention now waved harder in her mind and she frowned, staring about at the sight. The cavern was, like everything else, buried far beneath the Moon.

So . . .

WHY LIGHT? WHERE LIGHT COMING FROM?

Bud had apparently been considering the same problem because he now pointed ahead of them. Following his arm, Sandy now saw that several glowing spots of light were positioned about the floor of the cavern.

One of them was seven or so meters away and they stumbled and shuffled closer to get a better look. It was a bladder similar to the one which Rotzog had tending her crops. But this one was larger and was glowing steadily with the sort of radiance that made Sandy immediately think of the chemical "safety lights" which were commercially available.

Sandy looked around rapidly but saw that there was no sign of Rotzog. But there was sudden movement and she panicked briefly before settling down and regaining her

breath. The "movement" was simply the reflection of her suit lights playing on the surface of the nearer "cathedral wall".

By unspoken agreement they moved closer to the wall, noticing now that what they originally thought was a pristine surface was pitted and scarred. In several places holes could be seen, while deep scratches had also been cut.

Sandy gazed up the length of the wall, trying to keep from falling over backwards. She could now make out ledges and gentle outcroppings marking the surface. But nowhere else could she see the scars and cuts which were visible just before them.

She then saw Bud reaching out to softly touch the wall.

Through the layers of both their suits she could feel him tense, and she knew the answer as soon as he did.

Ice.

Tons of it. Millions of metric tons of ice stretching out ahead of them. They were standing in a narrow passage at the bottom of a lake . . . perhaps even an ocean . . . frozen solid beneath the surface of the Moon.

Sandy knew she was injured and that Bud was worse. She knew that death was sitting on both their shoulders. But she couldn't help it. There was no possible way to drive off the feeling electrifying her. She was seeing it, and she knew Bud was seeing the same thing. The vision of the Moon slowly bristling with cities, laboratories. Entire communities transforming the barren sphere into the center for human expansion into space.

The key was here before them. Swiftbase and the other lunar settlements were struggling for drops of water. Trickle. They were accomplishing miracles with thimblefuls of moisture, when here . . .

when here . . .

And the scene was lit by stationary lamps.

They had uncovered Rotzog's source of lunar ice. It had doubtless been her hand which had made the scars and pockmarks in the wall. She'd been mining this place for years in order to obtain the water which kept her habitat running.

Sandy slowly shook her head. Small wonder Rotzog had led her about in circles on the trip to the habitat. The greatest treasure beyond Earth was now close enough to touch.

Thinking back on the lamps Sandy switched off her suit lights to save further

wear on her tortured fuel cell. She then looked back up at the ice wall . . .

And stood absolutely still at the same moment she felt Bud freeze next to her. They both stared ahead of them. The ice wall was not the best reflective surface in the world. But, with the aid of the lamp bladders, it provided enough of a mirror to show Sandy and Bud their reflections.

Their reflections . . . and the reflections of the person standing behind them.

Then another person.

Then two more.

Then six . . .

Chapter 15: The Hive

The hand which Bud had been resting on Sandy's arm gave a mild squeeze, but Sandy already knew better than to make a sudden move. As if she could, she mentally added, what with Bud's bulk still leaning against her.

Slowly they both turned to face the newcomers. In her mind Sandy knew better, but her automatic instinct was a rescue party!

She really should've known better.

She and Bud were now facing six individuals. All were tall, the bodies attenuated, putting Sandy in mind of a row of Giacometti sculptures. Not exactly the sort of vision she had been hoping to see under the mental category of "rescuers".

Nor did she think potential rescuers would be dressed in spacesuits which resembled close-fitting strips of cloth. The eyes covered by thick goggles. Piecemeal life-support systems. Formidable looking rods held in slender hands.

Sandy let out a long sigh. If anything, the suits which the strangers were wearing resembled nothing so much as a parody of the survival gear worn by Katy Rotzog.

She looked around but could see no sign of the older woman.

As casually as possible she let her fingers drift across the keypad. ???

NKNOW came the reply. PL BY EAR?

WE HAVE CHOICE?

Sandy could almost feel him deflating reluctantly against her, and the two of them began shuffling slowly towards the newcomers.

For their part the strangers moved like spiders performing ballet. In one smooth motion four of them crouched, their rods lowering like lances . . .

And all aiming at Bud.

Sandy started raising her free hand in protest, but one of the remaining strangers made a signal to the others, at the same time indicating Sandy.

That's right, Sandy mentally said, trying to cross two of her fingers. I'm wearing a different space suit than Bud.

She rapidly tapped on the keypad. THEY THINK UR RTZ!!!

I KNOW.

R THEY TALKN?

Bud shook his head.

The strangers moved closer, their motions practiced and confident. Thin hands pressed against Sandy and Bud, trying to separate them.

"Hey!"

Sandy angrily whacked away at the nearest of the strangers with her hand, driving the space suited figure off. They all backed away, their bodies curving in an obvious indication of surprise.

In response Sandy pointed to Bud and then firmly knifed her hand horizontally. Hoping the signal would be unmistakable. No!

The strangers gazed at themselves for a few moments, and Sandy suspected that their suits carried some sort of radio unique only to themselves. Then the leader . . . or at least the one who had first indicated Sandy . . . pointed directly at her, then turned to point in another direction.

Sandy looked and saw a narrow opening in the far ice wall.

Giving Bud's arm a squeeze she tapped on the keypad. WELL?

GAME.

Sandy silently prayed that, wherever the newcomers were pointing to, it wasn't going to be far away. The sooner they got to wherever it was the better it would be for Bud.

And probably her as well. Whoever these people were . . . or whatever they were . . . they seemed to have some sort of animosity towards Rotzog. Or at least Sandy was hoping that was what she was reading in the body English.

Tugging at Bud they began moving across the ice chamber. The strangers watched them, the goggled eyes sometimes rising to regard their comrades, and Sandy would've given her bad leg to be able to hear the conversation passing back and forth between them. Presuming, of course, that she could understand it.

I make it out of this, she silently promised herself, I'll improve my Russian.

Now flanked by three of the strangers on either side, Sandy guided Bud to the waiting opening. She noted how it wasn't too well hidden within the ice wall, and doubtless Rotzog would've known about it.

But, she reminded herself, there were more of whoever their escorts were than there were of her. These silent giants who were even now helping to ease her and Bud through the opening and into the channel beyond. At least they weren't making threatening moves towards Bud anymore, but it seemed to Sandy that they were more solicitous towards her than towards him and she worked her arms more around him.

With three of the strangers leading the way Sandy silently pulled at Bud, easing him down the passage; the walls sometimes almost too close to make progress smooth, and the icy surface of the ground making reducing their speed even more than when they were out in the main cavern. The fact that they were leaving the illumination of the ice chamber, and heading more into darkness, did little to ease Sandy's concerns. But the three strangers who were bringing up the rear were more than helpful in their offers to speed things up by pushing at Bud's body.

Escorting a prisoner?

The passage suddenly widened on both sides and one of the strangers leading the way clutched hard at Sandy, steadying her to a halt. A good thing as Sandy sensed she was on the edge of a narrow cliff. She allowed the stranger's arm to brace her as she adjusted herself to a full stop, half her feet (and Bud's) dangling out over an abyss.

Two of the three leading giants were on either side and, as Sandy watched, they began slowly stroking their chests. Eventually a cool light appeared on their suits, the glow similar to that produced by the lamps back in the ice chamber.

One of the giants now pointed out into the darkness, and Sandy looked.

She wasn't as knowledgeable about lunar geology as she felt she should've been, but she had something of a good idea as to what she was seeing. Apparently, sometime in the past, some sort of quake or disturbance had caused a massive shattering and collapse of the ice in this particular area. Ice, mixed with lunar rock, filled the floor of a domed enclosure the size of an aircraft hangar, the end effect being rather like a crystalline geode. The dome was composed of curving walls of cracked ice, one of the cracks forming the high ledge upon which Sandy and Bud and their escorts now stood.

Sandy's attention was fixed on an enormous object which glinted dully in the light from the spacesuits. A huge chain of six thick metal cylinders relaxing on the cavern floor below. At a few locations the cylinders narrowed where they connected to each other. There were no windows or viewports that Sandy could see but, looking at the far end of the structure, she noted what clearly appeared to be twisted metal struts. The obvious remains of what was meant to be landing legs.

Elsewhere on the structure, Cyrillic lettering.

Without being told, Sandy knew she was looking down at the majority of Katy Rotzog's lunar colonization ship. The connected remains of the two rockets which her son's guide ship had intended to dock with, minus the airlock module which Katy Rotzog herself inhabited somewhere in another cavern.

This was the obvious destination for her and Bud. But were these slender giants Russians? The remainder of Rotzog's original colonization crew? It somehow didn't seem possible.

Her attention now came back to her companions and she watched as two of them began carefully sidling their way along the ledge. Sandy followed the path with her eyes and realized the ledge they stood upon made a gentle corkscrew around the curving wall of the cavern dome.

Well . . . secure enough for emaciated giants in close-fitting spacesuits. But Sandy, carefully eyeing the ledge, had her doubts as to getting herself and Bud safely down to where the spacecraft waited.

Spacecraft, her mind echoed. Warmth. Air. Communications! Safety!

A touch on her shoulder and she turned her head to stare closely into the goggles of one of her escorts. The creature turned and, with a point, indicated a long length of cord which stretched down from the ledge onto the floor. The cord carried loops at regular intervals and, as Sandy watched, one of the giants was pulling it up.

The closer of the giants pointed again, indicating the loops, and it dawned on Sandy that she and Bud were meant to hold on to the cord at the loops and let themselves be lowered down to the ground. It certainly didn't seem firm enough to support their weight

and Sandy leaned closer. She now saw how the cord was securely attached to a piton which had been driven into the wall near the passage opening.

She also reminded herself how a rope wouldn't have to be too substantial to support weight in the lunar gravity. And a closer stare allowed Sandy to presume (at least to her satisfaction) that she was looking at a length of possibly nylon, or some other substance which was (hopefully) stronger than it seemed.

Still . . .

She touched her keypad. U FEEL OK W/THIS?

No answer.

BUD?

Still no answer and Sandy first checked to see that their wiring was still connected. It was, and Sandy felt the panic beginning to rise as she realized just how pliable and quiet Bud had been recently.

Quickly turning more towards him she tried shaking him gently. No response. Her heart skipping several beats, Sandy peered closely down at the dials which were visible on the piecemeal construction of the suit's life-support controls, looking for the one which indicated air pressure.

All the dials were firmly showing zero.

"Oh God!"

She shook Bud harder, trying to elicit some form of response. Was there any air at all in his suit? How long . . .

Her mind screamed at her. Think, girl, think.

Her suit was incompatible with Bud's.

Originally!

But Rotzog would've retrofitted and modified the suit over the years she'd been marooned down here. It was no longer the original Yastreb model.

Sandy's fingers anxiously scrabbled at the suit's life-support system, pulling a panel open near where the main hose connected with the helmet. Her mind was telling her that she would've known if Bud's suit had undergone sudden decompression. It would've been quick, but painful. There would've been some sort of reaction.

"Please," she whispered.

She was staring at twisted hose connections and patched circuitry; everything looking as if it would crumble at the slightest touch. With her eyes she anxiously traced the hose connection from the helmet.

There.

Her eyes fixed on the trouble spot Sandy pulled a connecting hose free from her suit. Bringing the end close to the mechanical chaos within Rotzog's equipment she took a deep breath and pushed hard, puncturing the frayed hose with her own line.

The feel of escaping gas was obvious and Sandy firmly closed her glove around the juncture. She was rewarded with the sight of Bud's suit inflating slightly.

There was no way she could let go. Not without threatening the fragile connection between their two suits. No way she could communicate with the keypad.

And no way of knowing how Bud was.

"Don't," she whispered to herself, trying to prevent the build-up of tears inside her eyes. She knew . . . she told herself her efforts were keeping Bud alive. He was maybe just unconscious from the failure of Rotzog's suit. Not able to move or communicate.

With her forearm she gently nudged herself against Bud's suit.

"Please," she whispered.

Still no answer, but Sandy looked up as a shadow passed close.

It was one of the giants, now kneeling alongside her. As Sandy watched, the creature carefully peeled back a strip from what seemed to be an epaulet on its own shoulder. Then moving purposefully . . . apparently not wanting to frighten Sandy . . . the giant firmly pried her fingers away from the connection. Before Sandy could scream out an argument the giant had applied the strip as a patch to the part where she had attached her own life-support hose.

Still no response from Bud, but Sandy gently touched his suit and felt a small cushion of pressure. But the dials were still reading zero.

Sandy looked back at the giant who seemed to be lost in thought. Then it straightened up, making gestures with one of its hands. Before Sandy could protest the lead giant, assisted by two of its fellows, had pulled Bud closer to them, being careful to disconnect the keypad wire. Working quickly but carefully they slipped Bud's legs and arms through the loops in the cord, then eased him off the edge of the ledge. As Sandy

watched they started lowering him down towards the bottom of the chamber where the two giants who had left earlier were waiting.

At least they weren't trying to kill Bud, Sandy reassured herself, re-attaching her life support hose.

She tried to ignore the small voice inside which said that maybe they didn't have to.

Chapter 16: The Nursery

Even encumbered by a spacesuit, as well as perched upon a narrow ledge, Sandy found it difficult to keep from dancing about impatiently as she waited for her chance to travel down to the cavern floor.

At least Bud seemed to be treated all right. Sandy watched as the giants carefully eased him out of the harness, as gently as possible carrying him over to the nearest of the cylinders. Ahead of them a hatch was already opening in the hull, another giant unfolding itself out of the structure to await the arrival of its comrades.

And now her attention was diverted by a touch from what she had come to call the Lead Giant. With a gesture the creature indicated that she should now follow Bud and the others down the wall and to the waiting spaceship. Sandy needed no further urging but, as carefully as she could manage, bent down and grasped at the cord. Before the giants could move to either stop her or assist, she had already maneuvered the cord about herself and was rappelling quickly down the wall.

Bud or Tom or her father would've given her a C-plus . . . maybe . . . on both form and compliance with climbing safety techniques. Shaking the thoughts away Sandy continued on down.

Once on the cavern floor she unlimbered herself from the cord, turning to see Bud's form being eased into the spacecraft. The two giants who had preceded her down to the floor were smoothly moving in her direction.

One of them . . . the nearest one . . . silently pointed about. Following the gesture Sandy saw that, closer up, the combination of rock and lunar ice had, in places, formed slender crystalline rods. Rods which, upon closer examination, carried needle-sharp points and whose edges glinted with razor thinness.

A misstep here . . .

Sandy nodded slowly at the giant, indicating that she understood, and began picking her way about the floor, trying to stay on the narrow twisting path which the giants were indicating. She was beginning to realize that the entire cavern was a deathtrap. Narrow

ledges . . . razors and needles lining the floor . . . an uninitiated person (Katy Rotzog perhaps?) could easily come to a bad end here.

But had this all been designed purposefully? Or was it a result of the spacecraft somehow bulldozing its way into this space?

Sandy actually allowed herself to become so engrossed by her surroundings that, before she knew it, she had made it to the spaceship. A few steps ahead of her was the open hatch into the near cylinder. Peering beyond the hatch Sandy could see a waiting airlock. Much smaller than the one on Rotzog's habitat.

One of the giants was indicating that she should climb inside, but Sandy was already pulling herself in through the narrow hatchway, settling in as the hatch moved into place and was firmly shut behind her. She occupied her mind with theorizing how long it would take to pressurize the lock, and whether or not the inner walls would stand up long if she began clawing desperately at them.

A rapid stream of what she hoped was air suddenly began blowing on her arm, and a faint hissing noise began to make itself known through her helmet. She remained still, forcing herself to remain calm and steady, but tasted blood and realized she'd been biting her lower lip far too hard.

But there was a movement above her, and she looked up to see a hatchway appearing. Moving faster than she suspected anyone normally could while in a spacesuit she climbed up out of the airlock.

Inside her eyes took a few moments to adjust to the greeting of bright light that she received. She soon saw that, whereas Rotzog's habitat was a mass of forested greenery, everything here was spotless and shining.

No, there were differences.

But her overriding concern lay practically within reach and Sandy pushed herself over to Bud's side, batting away the hands of the giant which was hovering close by. She realized that the creature was only trying to help . . . perhaps remove the helmet . . . but Sandy wanted the intense feeling of personal completion which she knew would come only with her own hands pulling the helmet off.

Besides, she was tired of silently repeating prayers. She needed action.

She finally managed to unpeel the headpiece, and a small whine escaped her lips as she saw the pallor on Bud's face. He made no movement and, leaning closer, she immediately began a combination of feeling for a pulse, and moving her hands into position to perform CPR.

A touch on her shoulder, and she saw slender hands moving an oxygen mask into place on Bud's face.

"Yes," she breathed desperately. Hopefully. "Yes."

Two more slender hands moved into view and began a steady CPR rhythm. Reaching for the medical kit, Sandy selected an injection of modified epinephrine and pressed the device firmly against Bud's arm.

Knowing there was little more left to do now than wait, Sandy rested back upon her ankles. Looking up she saw her rescuers for the first time out of their spacesuits.

Soft . . . slender . . . elfin. Those were the words which ran through Sandy's mind. She and Bud had somehow stumbled into a Lothlorien hidden beneath the surface of the moon. Outside of their spacesuits the giants were definitely human, but humans who easily towered above her. Graceful as reeds . . . as willows. Delicate bone structure, making their movements flowing and poetic. It took Sandy a moment but she was soon able to separate males from females among the group. Not that it was the easiest of tasks. Blonde, brunette, brown hair flowed about untamed. Large luminous eyes peeked over at her.

She managed to count about twenty of the creatures crowding around her and Bud. Not including the remainder of the escort group which was, even now, cycling themselves through the airlock.

Who were these people?

Working as slowly as possible . . . giving her hosts time to become adjusted to her . . . she unsealed her helmet and lifted it off.

Normal air pressure was the first thing she noticed. Not the air starved madness of Rotzog's world, but enough air to fully fill her lungs for what seemed to be the first time in ages.

And now she was hearing the sounds of the giants. As with their physique the sounds were soft, almost mewling.

"A bah," one of the creatures . . . a female . . . commented in Sandy's direction. Eyes large and blue filling with moisture. "Pree valek atellaya!"

Several of the others nodded, also regarding Sandy, making her feel as if she had stepped from the pages of a storybook or something. There was something about the way they spoke . . .

But a sudden cough came from Bud and Sandy fell forward, pushing away the oxygen mask and embracing him closely. Someone was sobbing nearby, and she was

tempted to tell whoever it was that it was all right and there was no need to cry. But the sobbing seemed very familiar and she decided to just go with it for a few moments. She felt entitled.

Bud continued coughing as she rocked him close in her arms, and as he began moving more she finally took it upon herself to allow him to breathe more clearly. It would've been bad form to asphyxiate him after seeing to his revival.

Gently laying him down upon the deck she softly brushed at his forehead before leaning away and beginning to remove her spacesuit. She noticed how the giants were giving Bud particular attention, occasionally glancing back in her direction and then whispering among themselves.

Bud's eyes soon fluttered weakly as Sandy finished climbing out of her suit. She once again insinuated herself among the crowd, her face bending low. "Sweetheart!"

His eyes focused on her. "There you are."

Unspoken thoughts ran joyfully between them as the fingers of their hands located each other and clasped tightly. "How are you feeling?" Sandy asked.

"Crummy," Bud replied, his voice a low croak. "My mouth feels like I used it to clean out a fireplace."

Pulling the upper harness of her suit closer, Sandy extended the water nozzle and placed it between Bud's lips, the action producing an "ahhhhhhh" from their audience.

Bud drank, his eyes continuing to clear as his attention now expanded to take in the others. "W-who . . ."

Sandy shook her head. "You got me. How much do you remember?"

Bud frowned over the memory. "We were almost at the end of that passage, and I felt like the bottom was suddenly dropping out of me. I tried to stop you and then I guess I passed out."

Sandy's mind went through some calculations, trying to determine how long Bud had been without air. He seemed all right, but was obviously a candidate for a complete medical examination once they were somewhere else.

Somewhere else!

His eyes were still regarding the giants, and Sandy quietly filled in the details of the remainder of their trip to the spaceship.

"So we've found the rest of the ship," Bud said, groaning a bit.

"It looks like it," Sandy agreed, sitting up and, for the first time, giving their surroundings more of an examination. She noticed that, unlike Rotzog's ship, more of the instrumentation seemed to be active. Indicators and lights were more in evidence. With not much effort it would've been easy to imagine the ship fully functional and cruising through space.

But Sandy's eyes now picked out some unique features. Several of the control consoles sported bright red splotches of color upon their grey surfaces. Looking around she now saw that green and blue markings indicated other consoles. Here and there the original Cyrillic labeling had been augmented with what seemed to be handwritten messages.

Some of the switches and buttons had been covered by what seemed to be tape. In a few places what appeared to be makeshift barriers hid a few consoles completely, lettering scrawled upon them.

As Sandy watched one of the females settled her lanky frame down in front of what seemed to be a computer. Throwing Sandy a brief, saucer-eyed glance the girl turned and began pecking away on the keyboard.

Another groan from Bud, and Sandy turned to help him raise up into more of a sitting position. "You got to take it easy," she pleaded.

"Sweetie, I've come way too close to playing a harp during this outing. I'm trying to take it easy but I want to know more."

Sandy shrugged. "You're more into Russian hardware than I am. Any ideas?"

Bud was gazing about. "This seems to be designed along the lines of an Almaz, but I can't be sure. It's broader . . . more room to move around in. What's the brunette cutie over there doing."

Someone was definitely getting better, Sandy mentally reflected. "She's working with the computer."

"Umm, I'd have to get a closer look." Bud was gazing about. "This seems to be a cleaner set-up than what Rotzog had."

"I know. I haven't been able to figure out the life support . . ." Sandy paused as one of the giants slowly approached. A female, one of the blondes.

In the giant's hand was, of all things, a small hairbrush. The giant shyly extended it towards Sandy, paused as if unsure of the rightness of her action, then offered the brush again.

Keeping her eyes on the girl, Sandy gingerly accepted the brush.

"Ba BAH," the female chirped happily, quickly turning about and leaning her head back closely in Sandy's direction. "AN-jel."

Slowly, her movements deliberate, Sandy reached out and began brushing away at the offered hair, the action eliciting a pleased purr from the giant.

"That could be an Argon computer," Bud was commenting. "I'd have to get a better look at it. Sandy, if it's operational, we might be able to rig something to contact Swiftbase with."

But Sandy, her hands still gently removing the tangles from the giant's shimmering hair, was slowly looking around. Several other of the giants were crowded around the female who was at the keyboard, some of them chanting in a low voice. Every so often they would cast looks in the direction of her and Bud.

Another group of the giants were huddled closer, watching silently and intently as Sandy brushed out the girl's hair. One of them . . . this one a male . . . leaned close and whispered into the ear of the male next to him.

One of the other males seemed to be concentrating on delicately moving closer to Bud. Trying not to stare too hard Sandy watched and, when the male managed to relax an ankle against Bud's leg, an expression of deep peace seemed to pass over his face. This was heightened as the male quickly and firmly inserted a thumb into his mouth.

"Oh my . . . God," Sandy breathed.

"What?" replied Bud, still trying to see the distant computer system from where he was.

"Perspective," Sandy slowly replied.

She now had Bud's full attention. "Huh?"

"It's the size that's been throwing us off all this time. Bud . . ."

"What is it, sweetie?"

"This is them. We've found them."

"Found who?"

"The Little People!"

Chapter 17: The Last Mother

Bud stared at her. "The what?"

"The Little People." Raising the hairbrush briefly, Sandy used it to indicate the giants gathered about them. "We've found them."

Bud's expression could best be described as "odd". "Sandy, are you sampling stuff out of your medikit or something?"

"No, but---"

"Look at these people. If I was a NBA recruiter, I'd be drowning in my own drool right about now."

"Listen to me for a moment. If I'm right this answers a lot of your questions."

Bud slowly nodded. "OK. You've got the floor."

"Back when you were telling me about Rotzog's original plan you said you'd seen the design for the colony ship proposal. You said it would've supported a much larger crew than just Rotzog and her son."

"Yeah."

"You figured out that Katy Rotzog lands the colony ship and it ends up down here in the caverns. We've been wondering what happened to the rest of the colony crew. I think we're looking at the answer here."

"Ach . . . San, are you saying the giants are the other cosmonauts?"

Sandy was shaking her head. "No," she softly said. "Not the cosmonauts. Their children."

"Wha-aaa-t?"

"Look at them." Sandy nodded at the giants. "Look at them. Forget about their size for a moment and don't see them as giants. See them as what they are. Eight and nine and seven year olds. I'm brushing a little girl's hair here. You've got a little boy over there aching to be held."

"San---"

Sandy shook her head hard. "Stay with me, Bud. Think about it. Children. Human children born and growing up in the reduced gravity of the Moon. What would they look like? How would their bone structure develop?"

Bud looked around with new eyes, considering the giants, finally focusing on the one who was crouched nearest to him, thumb still in his mouth.

"Hey," Bud murmured to him. "Hey, buddy. Vy menya panimayete?"

The boy's expression brightened and the thumb left his mouth. "Da!"

"The prosecution rests," Sandy said. "These are the kids which the original cosmonauts who landed here had."

"But what---." Bud suddenly turned back to the giants who were now gradually filling the air with happy, chirping tones as a result of his use of Russian. Except for the girl who was still dutifully tapping away at the computer . . . plus the one who's hair was being brushed by Sandy . . . the giants were closing more and more around Bud.

"Hey kids . . . Kids . . . hey khoroshiry moy malchik . . . prinstessa. Yeah, sweetie, it's OK. It's OK, shhhhhhhh."

Sandy couldn't help but smile as she watched Bud slowly drown in a growing pile of giants. The first boy now had his head fixed tightly on Bud's lap, while a lithe brunette blubbered softly on his shoulder, her arms fixed tightly around his neck.

"Why Bud Barclay. I never knew."

The words which Bud silently mouthed to Sandy were perhaps not quite meant for younger ears. He busied himself concentrating on comforting and rearranging the mewling pile about him as best as he could.

"So where are their folks?" he said. "What happened?"

"I have a bad feeling about that. But---"

Bud gently shook the arm of the calmest boy nearest him. "Hey. Hey . . . mama? Kak tvaya Mama?"

Sandy expected the question to be met with a collective storm of wailing. But, instead, several of the giants turned and pointed across the room towards the computer. As Sandy and Bud looked the girl at the keyboard turned away from her work to face them, her arms crossed.

Above her the display screen flickered on, settling to produce an image of a young dark haired woman.

"Ah-hhhhhh," the giants whispered joyfully.

"Ma-MA," a few of them added.

The woman's image began speaking slowly and clearly.

"Russian," Sandy breathed.

Bud was nodding, intent on the image. "I can translate."

"If you can understand me," the woman said (via Bud), "I am Major Ksenia Vladimirovna Viktorenko . . . Brungarian Liberation Space Force. If you are receiving this message then myself and my comrades have succeeded" . . . here she paused and swallowed briefly . . . "and I will be dead."

Sandy slowly inhaled.

"Listen carefully," the woman continued. "I am the last survivor of our group. The . . . the children are asleep and I am free to record this message without disturbing them.

"Commander Rotzog has murdered us. She is a killer, quite mad. She would kill the children if she had a chance, and it is not only my hope, but the hope of the rest of this group, that you devote your efforts to protecting them."

The woman paused to breathe, and it suddenly dawned on Sandy that she wasn't too much older than her.

Her hand had slowed to a stop in the girl's hair, but everyone's attention was focused on the screen.

"We were not able to rendezvous with Anton Rotzog as planned. Instead, Commander Rotzog decided to break orbit and make for the Moon with the majority of the Chukot. At the time we felt it was still possible to carry out the major objectives of the mission with later assistance from Director Mirov.

"We crashed upon the Sinus Iridium, our ship falling into a crevasse against the northern mountains. Once we recovered we managed to repair our ship as best as possible, but we were unable to make contact with Brungaria or anyplace else on Earth.

"Commander Rotzog decided to separate in the forward section and try and find a better vantage point to contact a rescue mission." The woman swallowed again, her face a mixture of tragedy and determination. "Nothing came of this and Commander Rotzog kept her module in a distant cavern, claiming to be working on a rescue plan, as well as research.

"We settled in to our own survival efforts and, eventually, we . . . began our own research."

At this point, even given the grainy image on the monitor, a slight blush could be seen on the woman's face. And the brief upturning of the ends of her mouth were unmistakable, producing a small chuckle from Bud.

"No translation needed," Sandy said, smiling despite herself.

Bud continued anyway. "Captain Aleksandr Nikolaevich Yurchikhin and I managed three babies."

"Good for you," Sandy whispered to the monitor.

"There were eight of us here in this ship," Viktorenko was explaining. "Between all of us we produced twenty-eight babies. A fine new colony for the Moon. For Brungaria. We managed to produce a working ecology here.

"And then Rotzog became twisted. She . . . She felt that the children were somehow interfering in efforts to contact both her son and Mirov. We now know that Anton Rotzog was her son by Mirov."

"Oho," Sandy said. "Looks like the suspicions were correct."

"She began attacking," Viktorenko continued. "She ambushed Sergey and Diana out in the caverns, slicing open their suits. By the time we realized what she was doing she had managed to kill five of us, including . . . Alek."

The woman swallowed again, then continued. "We sealed our ship off. We switched on the crawler drive and moved away from the original crash site. After several days we managed to accidentally discover enormous deposits of subterranean ice. It was part of Rotzog's secret for survival. She had originally found the ice and was planning on using it as a means to control us.

"We continued on, eventually finding the pocket of ice we now inhabit. Working as quickly as we could we managed to establish a safe redoubt. We settled down to try and survive. To raise and educate the children how to survive as best as possible."

She shook her head. "We knew it wouldn't be enough. Rotzog was patient and we knew she'd eventually succeed in killing us off. All we could do was concentrate on making sure our children knew how to live here. We taught them to be warriors, to fight if necessary.

"But we still needed time. With that in mind we decided to use what was left of our mining explosives to close off the major approaches to this cave. We succeeded, to an

extent." Viktorenko sighed, glancing down briefly. "Rotzog was out there waiting for us. She killed Sophia, and then Yevgeni.

Her eyes rose again. Resolute. "There's only one more piece of work left to accomplish out there. One more explosive charge to plant, and then the narrow channel atop the ledge will be the only access in and out of this place. The channel can be easily defended by the children. They know how. They are our . . . they are our warriors!

"Rotzog is still out there. She is waiting for me. I will . . . I will go out and set the final charge."

Sandy felt her eyes filling.

"The children know not to show this message to Rotzog, but only to those who might mean rescue. If you are seeing this then it means the children are safe." Viktorenko let out a long, tired breath. "Please . . . please . . ."

For a few moments she seemed at a loss for words. Then she resumed talking, her voice trying to remain calm.

"If you've made it this far then you have their confidence." She gulped. "You have . . ." Her eyes desperately searched out through the screen. "Alex . . . Nina . . . Roza . . . lyublyu tebya visem sertsem visey dushoyu."

Two of the girls and one of the boys whimpered softly.

In a sudden movement Viktorenko reached up and touched an offscreen control. The monitor suddenly went blank.

"I'm sorry," Bud murmured. "I didn't translate that last bit."

"You didn't have to," Sandy replied and turned to gather into her arms the lanky boy who had whimpered. The one whose eyes mirrored those of his mother.

"Shhhh," she whispered to him. "It's OK. It's OK."

Bud was slowly shaking his head. "Incredible."

Sandy didn't answer.

"These kids. These . . . infants. Growing up in a spaceship and learning how to survive in this sort of situation."

"Not too incredible," Sandy murmured, still comforting the boy, another arm reaching out to take in the girl whose hair she'd been brushing. "Necessity. Look around at this ship."

Bud did so.

"Cosmonauts aren't exactly dummies. It stands to reason their children would be equally intelligent. Add to that conservative Russian space engineering. Simplified controls and multiple redundancies."

Bud began nodding.

"I know it's a lot to take in," Sandy continued, "but think about it. You have to raise a child to be able to survive in the lunar environment. You have to make sure they know what happens if there's a hull breach, or what's needed to repair a spacesuit. I bet if we accessed that computer we'd find loads of instructional videos from the parents which tell the kids what to do. Things like `if A happens then do B'."

"The markings on the walls. The markings on the controls."

"On Earth we tell our kids not to touch hot stoves or electrical appliances. This sort of thing is only an extension. A desperate extension, to be sure, but apparently it worked. To these kids life in space and on the Moon is as natural as playing outdoors would be to a child on Earth."

Bud was unconsciously rocking one of the girls back and forth in his arms, the others still crowded around both him and Sandy.

Finally his eyes looked across to her. "So . . . Little Mother . . . what happens now?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Sandy replied. "We've inherited these kids. And, as weird as it seems, they know more about surviving down here than we do. We need each other."

Bud nodded. "And there's more," he said.

"Ummm?"

"These kids are at war with Rotzog."

"Yeah."

"So it looks as if we are too."

Chapter 18: Babysitting

Sandy knew that, if she lived to be a million, she would never forget the experience of the next few days. If someone had told her that she and Bud would someday be tending twenty-eight giant children in an ice cavern beneath the surface of the Moon she would have hooted in derision.

Yet here she and Bud were.

Tom never had days like this. "Bud . . ."

Bud was below her, reclined on the floor, peering intently into the inner workings of one of the control consoles. "Mmmmm?"

"Who was that German long ago who believed the Moon was made of ice?"

"Austrian, I think" Bud murmured, poking about. "Hans . . . Horbiger. Yeah." His hand carefully reached in. "Sandy, there's a variation of a Zenit control system which was standard on most Russian spacecraft in here. I'm also looking at what I think is a RTS-8 telemetry unit, but I'm not sure. A lot of this has been fooled around with."

Sighing he eased himself away from the console opening. "I've got a bad feeling that the main communications system for the colony ship is in the section Katy Rotzog's living in."

Sandy hummed and continued leaning against the console, looking down at Bud. "Now I'm wondering whether or not we would've been able to make contact with Swiftbase or anyone else on the surface even if we had the main system."

"There is that," Bud conceded.

They had been spending their time working on a plan to locate any available electronics within the ship which could've somehow been connected with the sabotaged communication systems in their spacesuits in order to make a call for help. On the one hand the systems inside the spaceship had been well tended over the years by the cosmonaut children.

On the other hand the colony ship had been of a modular design, and it was becoming clearly evident that much of what they needed was back with Rotzog.

"I'm starting to believe this was another reason Rotzog sabotaged our suits," Bud continued. "If this plan had occurred to us back then we could've maybe had done this sort of thing there."

"Not with her always looking over our shoulder," Sandy said. "But my original question still stands. You think we could send a message to the surface if we could rig something here?"

"Well-l-l-l-l." Bud leaned back into the opening. "If your estimate is correct we've got about a mile's worth of rock and ice between us and the surface. It'd be hard to get a signal through all of that. The thing, though, is that Tom and the others are doubtless tearing up the Moon in search of us. They've got to be listening for some sort of signal. Plus they'll eventually find their way down here and then it'd be easier to track us. I hope. If I could at least rig up something that could broadcast some sort of easy to follow pulse it'd help. All I need is something like a Skat. Even a Krypton or a Gvardyets would work here." He sighed again. "I never thought I'd be jerry-rigging Russian equipment on the Moon."

"You're doing fine, love," Sandy assured him.

Bud grunted, lost in thought, and Sandy took the opportunity to look up and regard their audience.

Twenty-eight pairs of eyes owlshly returned her attention. The children were arranged in a loose semi-circle around them, ready at a moment's notice to run and fetch a tool or glass of water or piece of food, but mostly wanting nothing more than to remain close and stare at the new grownups.

At the rising of Sandy's head several of them tensed to follow whatever command was to come, but Sandy indicated with a palm that all was fine and the group settled back down.

"I have some little shadows," Sandy murmured, misquoting, "that go in and out with me."

The children smiled in response, and one of the girls leaned over to whisper into the ear of one of her . . . sisters? Chums? Over the course of the last few days Sandy and Bud were still trying to sort out the details of who was who in the line-up. Besides an Alex and a Nina and a Roza there was a Semyon, a Timofei, a Vera, a Lev . . . not to mention Alyona, the solemn dark-haired youngster who was apparently in charge of the computer.

As Bud had suspected, the machine carried numerous recordings from the children's parents. These included instructions to the children that certain codes were to be given over to whoever came to rescue them. The codes . . . words scratched onto the console . . . had enabled Bud and Sandy to access the original operational files stored in the computer's memory.

From these it had been also determined how the spacecraft had remained operational for so long. For instance: at the rear of the habitat a carefully painted red line indicated

the location of the fission reactor which supplied power. Sandy and Bud's hearts had leapt into their throats at the notion of a reactor being handled all these years by children, but the device had been rendered as maintenance free as possible by the original cosmonauts before the crisis had settled in. Regardless of this both Sandy and Bud carefully examined as much of the reactor as they safely could before deciding that things were still all right. They were also informed by two of the children . . . Klara and Nelli . . . about the pictographs which had been carefully drawn onto the bulkheads on the "safe" side of the red line by the parents, and which served as instructions of what to do in case of trouble.

Air for the children's spacecraft was supplied and recycled through a carbon dioxide "freeze out" system. Along with the lunar ice, water was regularly replenished through the children dutifully following waste elimination instructions laid down by the parents ("Here's where toilet training really turned out to be important," Bud commented). The recycled wastes also contributed to the protein "mush" which served as the children's food, although the parents had also managed to jury-rig vats where algae from biological experiments was grown and combined with the mush. Despite all the care and precautions taken some loss was still experienced, which was why the occasional windfall . . . such as the bladder which Sandy had "liberated" from Rotzog's ship . . . was a source of great happiness from the children. Sandy and Bud had watched with considerable interest as the children had carefully integrated the bladder's contents, up to and including the skin of the bladder itself, into selected containers ("mush vats" as Bud called them); all the while following instructions relayed from one of the recordings left behind by the parents.

The children, however, provided the greatest source of curiosity. And, much to Sandy's quiet amusement, the feeling was reciprocal. It was interesting, if not a bit disconcerting, to have every move quietly followed by those twenty-eight pairs of eyes. Not to mention hearing the whispers behind their backs.

Bud and Sandy had been allowed to sleep on foam pallets in a compartment adjoining the "dormitory" where the children slept. And, after lights out, Sandy could clearly hear the rustlings about and the whispers.

In fact, one of Sandy's quiet concerns was the biological development of the children. She had pegged their ages as ranging from seven to nine, but had noticed what seemed to be the early stages of pairing developing between the girls and boys.

Then there was the type of attention which the children constantly demonstrated. The way the boys eyes tended to follow Sandy as she moved about, and the way the girls seemed to unconsciously nudge closer to Bud as he worked. Watching all of this, Sandy quietly reasoned that, official age or not, she and Bud might've arrived at the right moment to help out in further development.

Yes. Sandy mentally broadcast to the girls. Just let me improve my Russian somewhat, and then Aunt Sandy will teach all of you about dirty, nasty, smelly, yucky boys!

Still watching them she felt something clutch at her heart. "Bud."

"Mmmmm?"

"What are we gonna do about the kids?"

No immediate response, but Bud's work inside the console slowed.

"We can't just leave them here," Sandy insisted.

Bud carefully eased himself back out to gaze up at Sandy. "I know," he murmured. "But Sandy . . . we can't take them back to Earth with us."

The clutching feeling tightened around Sandy's heart. "I know."

"They grew up under lunar gravity. Terrestrial gravity would cripple them, although I'd love to send complete biomedical readings on the kids down to Enterprises and maybe the people at Teague before making a final judgment call. But Sandy . . . I suspect they'll have to remain on the Moon."

"I know," Sandy repeated. "But not here, Bud. Not in this place."

Bud nodded slowly. "Swiftbase would welcome them with open arms, I bet. Heck, I imagine all the lunar bases with medical research facilities would want them as permanent residents."

"These aren't guinea pigs, Bud---"

"I didn't say they were," Bud quickly broke in. "But consider that they represent the future. Eventually we're gonna have to deal with the reality of people having kids in space. Raising them on off world colonies." He let a hand reach out to cover one of hers. "These kids are just the first generation. The sooner we learn from them the better. And I suspect you and I won't be the only ones who'll grow fond of them."

Sandy smiled and her hand tightened around Bud's. "I think I can operate some of the medical scanning equipment here. Or maybe see if our own diagnostic equipment can run a scan. I take it you're interested in skeletal and cardiovascular development."

Bud nodded. "Just looking at them I bet their bone structure wouldn't allow them to move on Earth. And the strain on their hearts would be too much. But neither of us are doctors or biologists. They need thorough examinations, not to mention better continuing

nutrition and overall parental care. You and I won't be the only ones who see that they'll be treated okay. I bet they'll pick up a lot of unofficial aunts and uncles." Bud sighed and his expression became shadowed. "But it won't be easy."

"I know."

"Keep in mind, for instance, that they're the offspring of a radical separatist movement back on Earth. I know, I know," he quickly added, seeing storm clouds gather on Sandy's face, "and I'm not suggesting that the kids are gonna become terrorists or anything. But once news of this breaks open there'll be some hell to pay with not only the Brungarians, but Russia as well."

Sandy looked up at the elfin faces gathered about and felt that any hell to pay would have to pass through her first.

Bud saw the resolve in her face. "And keep in mind, Little Mother, that we've still got a more immediate situation on our hands."

"Rotzog."

Bud nodded and pulled himself further away from the console, struggling to a sitting position. Being in the complete atmosphere of the "Nursery", plus the increased amounts of water and food, had allowed him to heal somewhat but he still had trouble moving about. "The bit about this being a Brungarian installation reminded me of a bad thought I've had moving about in my head. We've searched up and down in the Nursery, and I hadn't found them, but I can't believe the Brungarians were gonna set up an installation on the Moon without them."

"Without what?"

Bud chewed on his lip for a moment. Then he looked over at Alyona. "Say, Sweetie . . . ti nuzhna mne." Bud continued rattling off instructions in Russian and the girl briskly nodded, turning and operating the keyboard.

Lines of text began slowly scrolling across the screen, and Bud squinted carefully at them.

"There they are," he finally murmured and softly swore. "And they're not here."

"What?"

Bud sighed, leaning back against the console and rubbing his head. "I had Alyona punch up a complete inventory of equipment which the expedition brought to the Moon. The items I'm looking for have to be with Katy Rotzog. Damnation!"

"Bud---"

Another sigh. "Battlefield nukes."

Chapter 19: Identified

Sandy slowly leaned back, her eyes growing wide. "Nukes?"

Bud nodded, still squinting over at the computer display. "Looks like the Brungarians brought twelve `Malchik Denamo' L-2 unguided battlefield missiles up here with them. Point seven five kiloton yield each."

"Nuclear weapons on a lunar colonization project?"

"A lunar colonization project established by radical Brungarian separatists," Bud gently amended. "And we're really not in a position to take on morally superior airs. Back in the late 1950's the US Army got together with von Braun to lay out the plans for a moon base. I'd have to go back and check but, if I recall correctly, the base was gonna have the capacity to defend itself with low-yield nukes and land mines."

"Insane!"

"You want an argument? Fortunately, space travel was still a pretty expensive proposition and, even during the height of the Cold War, the military couldn't budget a slingshot."

Sandy was staring around, her mind whirring. "We've been up and down this spaceship---"

"---and the warheads aren't here. Or maybe . . . Hey! Nelli? Klara? Moy angelohekis?"

The girls in charge of the reactor brightened up and leaned forward eagerly. Bud spoke to them and there followed a brief exchange among the group in their unique lilting Russian.

"Okay," Sandy eventually nodded. "Even I caught part of that. You were thinking maybe the kids' parents had hidden the bombs somewhere outside the ship."

"But they didn't. Which means Our Miss Rotzog has them." Bud was quiet for a moment. "San I was pretty out of it back at the other ship, and you saw more of it than I did. Can you recall anything . . ."

Sandy was already sending her mind back to those mad times within the jungle choked interior of Rotzog's base. "On the other side of the module was the control center. There was a hatch at the far end and, beyond it, I saw what looked like Rotzog's bedroom."

"Ummmm."

"The plant growth she kept could've hidden any number of locker doors," Sandy pointed out. "Or there might've been further storage space beyond her room, which seemed rather large for a typical spacecraft sleeping compartment. More like an adaptation."

"True . . . or maybe Rotzog could've buried the nukes somewhere outside." Bud let out a sharp breath. "Damn this really complicates things."

"If she had the nukes, and if she had wanted to wipe out the kids, wouldn't she have used them already . . . Oh! Wait." Sandy straightened up slightly as something occurred to her. "No, she wouldn't do that."

"Huh! Your faith in her is better than mine."

"No. Wait a moment. Ah-hhhh . . . kids?" With the aid of her reduced Russian Sandy mimed a piece of paper and a writing instrument. This resulted in an excited debate among the children until, finally, Semyon came forward with a brittle length of printout paper and a stylus.

"This'll have to do," Sandy said, accepting the items with a smile at the boy (who looked as if he was going to roll over on the floor with his paws up in the air). "Look," she demonstrated to Bud, scratching lines onto the paper with the stylus. "This is the ice cave we're in."

"Uh-huh."

"Above us is the big ice cavern, or canyon if you prefer. Basically two enormous slabs of ice leaning against each other. Beyond this is the system of caves and tunnels. It looks like this entire area of the Moon is hollowed out like some sort of stone and ice Swiss cheese. Pockmarks and segments and plates, and we've only seen a small portion of it. Now I'm not a geologist by any means---"

"Makes two of us," Bud muttered.

"---but I can't help but feel that setting off explosives in this sort of environment wouldn't be too smart an idea."

"Point," conceded Bud. "You'd get collapses and cave-ins."

"Not to mention possibly damaging the ice fields, which even Rotzog wouldn't risk."

"But the kids' parents set off explosives to try and seal off this ship from attacks by Rotzog."

"Did they set off nukes?" Sandy answered. "I don't think so. And, if neither of us are geologists, I'm willing to bet at least one of the Brungarians in the expedition was. Not to mention an engineer or two."

Bud slowly nodded. "They'd be able to plan careful detonations. Bring down just what they needed to get the job done. Good catch."

"But there's still the problem of the nukes that are here. Unless, of course, the parents used them for the sealing off business."

"Ummm, I wouldn't set off a three-quarter kiloton bomb down here under any circumstances," Bud considered. "And I don't remember how `dirty' an L-2 warhead is, but I wouldn't want to take the chance of possibly contaminating the ice."

They became quiet for a few moments. Then Sandy asked, "So what do we do?"

Bud's eyes were still focused somewhere else.

"I mean, we've both been banking on the fact that, sooner or later, Tom and the others are gonna come down in here. The chances are very good that they'll locate Rotzog before they find us. Rotzog will see a large body of people heading in her direction. She'll reason that they're not Brungarians---"

"And she'll go ape," Bud concluded. "Not nice." He looked around absently, taking in the result of their work. With a toe he poked at the partially dissected communications system of Sandy's spacesuit. "So. Where do we stand?"

"Or sit, in your case." Sandy gently tugged at a strand of hair. "I think we've reached the stage where we could broadcast a tracking signal to the rescue group once they enter the caverns."

Bud nodded.

"But, in view of all of this business involving nukes, I'd like to try to be able to send at least a small text message warning about Rotzog."

"Me too. But it'd help if we knew exactly when Tom was gonna show up."

Sandy couldn't help but quietly notice how it was always "when" Tom would show up and never "if".

"It'd be simpler if we were just sending out a continuing beacon signal," Bud continued. "If we want to send out some kind of detailed warning, even just a few words, then we might not be able to do that except once."

"There's also another problem."

"Ummm?"

"Rotzog perhaps listening in. She's crazy but she's not stupid."

"There is that," Bud admitted. He looked over towards the computer. "We might be able to burrow into the guts of that and rig up some sort of more complicated transmitter. That is assuming that Alyona doesn't blow a gasket when she realizes what we'd be up to. That machine is, after all, the only remaining link to their parents."

Sandy was smiling.

Bud noticed her expression. "What?"

"I'll tell you later. Let's eat something."

"Good idea. I'm actually hungry for once."

Sandy was heartened by the return of Bud's appetite. Even more so in the face of what passed for standard fare within the Nursery. Once they made their desire known everyone began arranging themselves in a circle near the recycling system. Then Timofei and Roza opened up one of the "mush vats" and carefully began spooning out grayish watery slime onto the simple bowls they used.

"Amazing," Bud muttered. "I'm still hungry."

Even Sandy, no stranger to the occasional hardship while on camping trips, felt her nose wrinkling and her gut turning at the thought of once again forcing down the muck which the children depended upon for sustenance. It obviously met all the nutritional requirements which was needed for survival but, "Y'know, if we introduce these kids to Snickers bars, they'd be our slaves for life."

"Right now I'd almost kill for a Ding Dong."

Looking over at Bud, Sandy felt the smile returning to her face once again. There was a small tug-of-war going on among the girls in regards of who was going to serve Bud his meal.

"Some-one has a girl-friend," Sandy softly sang. "Several, in fact."

"Um?" Bud then looked over his shoulder. "Oh. Girls. Zaychikis moy. Please, honeys." He gently but firmly managed to extricate his bowl from Nina, managing at the same time to give the other contenders a warm smile, before settling down to begin the task of eating. Then another "Oh" as Alyona managed to pass him a small slice of the firmly pressed and dried protein which dimly passed for bread within the Nursery, her action earning dark looks from her brood sisters.

"The Barclay charm works again," Sandy commented.

"Obviously they've got a thing for shorter men," Bud replied, slowly stirring his protein slice into the mush.

"A shorter man who they did not grow up with," Sandy pointed out. "A shorter man who is still obviously an adult . . . obviously a virile male in the presence of impressionable young female minds . . ."

"Hm." With great reluctance, Bud bit into his slice. "Speaking of impressionable minds, your dinner date has arrived."

"Huh!" Sandy looked about and suddenly realized she was practically hemmed in by the boys in the group. Several bowls of mush were being extended in her direction, accompanied by wide, hopeful eyes.

"Darn it. I don't want to step on their egos---"

Bud chuckled.

"But aren't they aware that I'm your woman?"

Bud looked up, smiling sweetly. "Why Sandra Swift!"

"Oh you know what I mean." Attempting to be as diplomatic as possible, Sandy accepted the nearer of the offered bowls while, at the same time, allowing her fingers to lightly brush across the cheeks of some of the others, hoping the gesture would serve as a consolation prize. Apparently it sufficed as she found herself surrounded by several variations of pre-teen male puppy love, each of the boys carefully watching as she ate.

"Less than the dust beneath her chariot wheels'," Bud softly misquoted.

"Oh bite me, Barclay."

"Mmmm, I don't think we want to take their education any further than necessary right about now."

"Y'know, your injuries could be retroactive."

Bud snickered.

The rest of the meal went on in merciful silence, occasionally broken by comments and questions from the kids which Bud and Sandy tried to answer as best as possible. When eating was finished everyone lined up at the "waste reclamation center", and Sandy was once again grateful that the design team responsible for the spacecraft had the sense of mind to include a privacy screen.

Afterwards, Vera shyly approached Sandy with the hairbrush and Sandy allowed the girl to lay her head in her lap. She gently brushed out the long hair while Bud murmured with Alyona and Lev about the computer.

Elsewhere, a few of the boys and girls were involved in what seemed to be exercises. It took a few moments before Sandy realized they were practicing some form of martial art, mock dueling with shortened versions of the rods they had used while outside the ship.

She pointed this out to Bud and he nodded. "Some type of eskrima, I'm thinking. It'd make sense that their parents were martial artists and that some of the exercises would be recorded for the kids to study. Using a slender pointed rod against a spacesuit strikes me as a rather good system."

Sandy also noticed how both the girls and boys tended to exercise with a minimum of clothing and once again resolved to have a private talk with the girls as soon as humanly possible.

But she suddenly remembered something. "Y'know, the way the kids act in regards to us reminds me of why we're pretty much safe against Rotzog using nukes."

Bud had crawled closer to the computer and he now looked over his shoulder. "Oh?"

"Trying to put this as delicately as possible, but we've got something she definitely doesn't want to see any harm come to."

She now had Bud's complete attention. "Like what?"

Sandy sighed. Sometimes he was so dense. "You."

"Huh? What?"

Sandy smoothed out a few more strands of Vera's hair, then motioned for Nina to come closer. "When we were with Rotzog she was speaking mainly to you and practically ignoring me."

"Well . . . yeah. My Russian's better."

Sandy slowly shook her head. "That wasn't entirely it. There was also the way she continually looked over you. Fussed over you. The way she was always willing to see to your comfort."

Bud's face was slowly growing pale.

"And there's the fact that, with the exception of the boys here, you're the only man within reach---"

"Do not go there, Sandy. Not even."

"Baby I'm sorry, but it's the truth. Deep down I know that, if she could've gotten away with it, she would've arranged for an `accident' of some sort to happen to me and would've been more than happy to include you into her little nest."

Bud visibly shuddered. "And I didn't think there was anything worse on the Moon than the mush we ate."

Despite herself Sandy laughed.

"Yeah that's real funny, San."

"I'm sorry, but I'm also relieved. I mean, as long as she has the hot puppies for you, we shouldn't have to worry about anything bad happening to us. She has absolutely no reason in the world to harm you."

* * * * *

Ykaterina Rotzog touched a few more buttons, causing more images to cycle up onto the display screen.

It was taking much longer than she thought it would, dealing with the scabrous itch burning within her mind. The man obviously had to be a cosmonaut . . . an astronaut, she silently amended . . . and therefore had been fully trained somewhere which would've provided some form of registration.

As a security precaution the expedition computer memory had carried complete records on all international qualified space personnel. The computer in her habitat wasn't as complex as the one which the Little People enjoyed, so the search was slower. But it was only a matter of time. It had to be.

It was not just his looks, she forced herself to believe. She had seen him somewhere before. And there was something about the . . . the woman!

Rotzog forced her fingers to unclench and once again concentrated on the job at hand. She had been through the available files of all NASA and ESA astronauts and was finally being obliged to search through the records of corporate test pilots . . .

There!

Third image on the left and her fingers worked to fill the screen with it.

There he was! And now the identifying codes were appearing . . .

No!

Oh No!!!!!!!!!!!!

The pale lips parted and a hiss angrily escaped. "Bar-clay!"

Barclay!

Returning to the original image she pressed a button, causing it to expand and allowing her to see the full photo. She now saw Barclay standing close to another man. A smiling blonde the same age as him, and dressed in a matching spacesuit.

And his face! She'd seen it before. Recently. But only in female form.

The lips stretched wider and the scream echoed throughout the habitat.

"SWIIIIIIIIFFT!"

Chapter 20: Remains To Be Seen

"This is the part of the plan I don't like," Bud said.

Sandy was concentrating on standing still while Vera slowly wrapped a spacesuit around her. It occurred to her that she now knew how a mummy felt. "There's nothing to worry about, sweetie."

"You mean other than the part that you're heading out into the caverns in a second-hand---"

"Third-hand," Sandy corrected. "Probably fourth-hand. We haven't really checked."

"Spacesuit," Bud continued firmly. "Alone where Her Nibs is probably lying in wait."

"For the absolute last time, I am not going out alone," Sandy pointed out. "Vera and Alyona and Nina are going out to collect some ice and I'm simply accompanying them to place the beacon." With a free toe Sandy gently tapped the makeshift device which rested nearby.

"And planning on wandering off."

Sandy sighed. "Bud, we've already argued about this---"

"Not nearly enough because I haven't won yet."

Sandy briefly closed her eyes before trying again. "We decided that we need to place the beacon so it can take advantage of the curvature of the main cavern, using it as a natural antenna. And I agree you'd be the perfect choice for the job---"

"There you go."

"But you're still hors de combat. I'm more nimble and can get out, get the job done and get back here quickly."

Bud, propped up near the computer panel, still didn't look too convinced. "At least wear your own spacesuit."

Sandy slowly shook her head, raising her arms to assist Vera with the dressing. "I know these suits are piecemeal, but they've been proven as workable in this environment. I want to avoid putting further wear on my own suit. Not only that, but I can communicate with the girls and with you in this rig, rather than trying to adapt the system on my own suit with what they use here."

Bud stared at her, thin-lipped, and Sandy was sure she could hear him swallowing further arguments.

"You set the beacon and get right back," he said.

"I could help the girls with the ice---"

"Back here, Sandy."

Sandy glared at him. "You'd let nine year old girls---"

"Hah! Vera's eleven if she's a day. Bet you anything."

"Nine to eleven year old girls go into danger while I scampered back to safety."

"Those `little girls' probably have more collective experience in being on the Moon than any astronaut we've sent up here," Bud pointed out. "Out on the lunar ice you're as graceful as a hog on roller skates . . . and you shouldn't be making that gesture in front of the kids."

"The beacon has got to be set," Sandy declared, reaching down and adjusting the folds of the suit with rough tugs.

Silence for a few moments, with the children exchanging worried looks.

Then: "Sandy."

Another tug. "What?"

"I'm just worried about you, that's all."

Sandy paused in her efforts, her eyes focused down on the deck.

"I know you are," she eventually answered in a voice cushioned around a sigh. Her eyes rose to meet his. "Love, I hate this having to juggle my job with my feelings for you."

"That works both ways, I hope you know."

"I do." Gently brushing Vera away, Sandy carefully knelt near Bud. "It's probably why so many astronaut and test pilot couples went sour," she said, leaning closer to softly kiss him. "This business of one half of the relationship having to remain behind while the other half went on a mission."

Bud echoed the kiss. "Neither of us is the stay at home type."

"So keep yourself busy," Sandy suggested, straightening back up. "Work with the others on receiving the beacon signal and, hopefully, listening for a reply from any rescue party. Once the beacon starts transmitting then I should be back in a half-hour or so."

His fingers were brushing across the edge of her boot. "Promise?"

Sandy gently nodded, then accepted the bundle of helmet "wrappings" from Vera, slowly enclosing her head within the material before adjusting the goggles into place, sealing them and then connecting the life-support hoses.

She then tapped at the jury-rigged computer chip embedded into the suit's throat. "Am I coming through?"

Over at the panel which was used to coordinate suit-to-ship communications Timofei turned and gestured with a thumbs up, the movement copied by the already suited Alyona and Nina. Nearby Vera began her final adjustments while Timofei touched a switch, causing the floor airlock entrance to open.

Minutes later, with Vera and Alyona already outside the ship, Sandy silently followed Nina into the airlock, pausing to give Bud what she hoped was a reassuring nod before squeezing into the compartment and letting the hatch close above them.

A while more, and Sandy was once again easing herself out onto the cavern floor. She gratefully accepted the offer of Nina's assistance in helping unfold herself out of the compartment, then taking the beacon and carefully securing it within her belt straps. She then helped Nina in closing the outer airlock door, securing it.

Then it was a matter of following the girls as they inched their way across the defensive path leading to the narrow ledge trail. Following the example of the girls, Sandy had taken one of the slender rods which seemed to serve as an all-purpose tool for the Nursery clan. She found it an enormous help in moving among the needle formations of the cavern floor, as well as a good way to maintain balance while edging one's way up the narrow ledge.

Sandy touched the chip at her throat. "Sandy to Bud."

"A little staticky," Bud replied, "but coming through okay."

"You know you're right."

"Ummm?"

"I'm not really graceful enough for this business of moving through the caverns."

"Well, if it's any consolation, you're probably better suited for it than I am."

"I know I'm holding the others up by being so slow. Once we're in the main cavern I'm definitely going to concentrate on placing the beacon, and then begin back. As fast as the girls are they'll probably make it back to the ledge before I do."

"Just be careful, hon."

"I can assure you, ending up pinned on a giant spear of lunar crystal is very low on my list of approved activities."

"I'll try not to distract you further."

"Thanky."

Concentrating on keeping her footing, Sandy soon made it to the top of the ledge, following the girls into the narrow passageway leading to the central ice cavern. Part of her was marveling at the way the makeshift spacesuit was managing to keep her alive. The parents of the kids had performed yeoman work in cannibalizing the existing cosmonaut suits into the scarecrow rag bundles which served to keep the inhabitants of the Nursery alive and able to work upon the Moon. There was obvious genius here. Almost of a preternatural level.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she once again found herself entering the enormous canyon of ice. Despite the necessity of her mission she found she couldn't help but stand for a few moments and regard the mammoth sight all around her.

For their part the girls silently stood and watched her, expressionless behind the similar masks of their own suits. But soon a command passed between them and they moved close to an outcropping of ice.

Sandy, tearing her attention back to the here and now, quietly watched. Now she saw that the girls used the long rods as icepicks, chopping holes into a section of ice. Then, with the tips of the rods inserted into the holes, leverage was applied and, before long, the section would break off and fall to the cavern floor. The girls would then scoop the ice into a bag before repeating the process.

Looking around, Sandy assured herself that there was no sign of a mad Russian woman crouching in ambush somewhere. "Bud?"

"Yes?"

"How do the kids know Rotzog isn't around? The girls don't seem to be watching their backs here."

Bud's voice crisped through the tiny earpiece in the helmet. "I've been wondering that myself and the kids seem to be watching for some sort of telemetry reading here. I'm gonna ask but I bet Madam Rotzog's suit gives off some sort of signal that they can trace."

Sandy nodded, not realizing Bud couldn't see the gesture. "I'm gonna go ahead and place the beacon."

"OK, love."

Sandy reflected that, if anything, their current situation had caused Bud and her to use more and more endearments. Not that she was complaining . . .

Moving away from the girls she began walking along the nearer canyon wall. Her destination was a bowl-like depression she had spotted during the first time in the cavern. Having discussed the matter with Bud they had concluded that placing the

beacon at the edge of the bowl would help in broadcasting the signal. Not only that, but the bowl could possibly concentrate any return signals.

The cavern floor evened out as she neared the bowl, making it easier for Sandy to move. Reaching the depression she removed the beacon from the belt straps. She then gave the depression another critical look before reaching a decision and moving closer . .

And suddenly stopped as a hand clamped on her arm. But it was one of the girls.

"What?"

In answer the girl . . . Sandy was almost certain it was Nina . . . pointed towards the nearby ice wall with her rod.

Static crackled in Sandy's ear. "Ti ne odna."

Sandy stared where Nina was pointing. One of the reasons she had been able to spot the depression before was that one of the light bladders had been illuminating the area. At the time she had shrugged it off as random placement to help in the ice mining.

She now saw that the placement of the light had been intentional. Looking closer Sandy saw ten dark shadows within the ice. Ten oblong images arranged one after the other in careful order.

Sandy moved a little closer and Nina's rod pointed hard again, only lower. Now Sandy could see the rough numbers and Cyrillic letters which had been carved into the ice.

Oh!

Sandy slowly nodded to herself. Yes, it would've been easy. The parents of the children didn't die all at once. Some sort of burial would've been arranged. The body of the last parent . . . Ksenia Viktorenko . . . had doubtless been recovered by the children and buried alongside the others. Eventually.

She realized she was standing at the shrine which had been constructed to hold the bodies of the parents. Glancing over her shoulder Sandy now saw that the other girls had joined Nina. All three of them were holding their hands over their hearts.

Sandy nodded at them, indicating she understood and pressed her own hand to the front of her suit. The gesture seemed to relax the girls. Slowly she returned to her work, not wanting to appear as if she was going to desecrate the tomb. Relationships with the kids was still on a tightrope as it were, and Sandy didn't want to risk anything further. Instead, she concentrated on handling the beacon, making sure she was going to place it within the depression and nowhere near where the others were buried . . .

She suddenly froze, not daring to move for a few moments. But slowly, almost as if fearful, she turned her head back towards the tomb.

"Oh-hhhhhh . . . God no!"

Emotions fought inside her for several moments before she reached up and touched the throat chip. "Bud, please refresh my memory on something."

"Go ahead."

"How many cosmonauts accompanied Rotzog to the Moon?"

"Eight."

"How many kids did the cosmonauts manage?"

"Twenty-eight . . . Sandy what's wrong?"

"Wait! Twenty-eight kids. And we have twenty-eight kids in the Nursery, correct?"

"Yeah."

Sandy's eyes widened as she continued to stare at the tomb. the original eight cosmonauts . . . the parents of the Nursery children . . . all had been killed by Rotzog and subsequently buried.

Twenty-eight children in the Nursery. Twenty-eight children accounted for.

And Sandy could clearly make out the indistinct form of ten bodies buried in the ice . . . with two of them being rather small.

The size of infants

Chapter 21: Infiltration

"Sandy? You okay?"

Sandy was quietly concentrating on controlling her breath. Slowly she maneuvered down onto her knees to place the beacon upon the stone floor, making sure it was balanced.

Bud's voice crackled again. "Sandy?"

"I'm switching the beacon on," Sandy said, struggling to keep her voice calm. "Bud, are you near the communications panel? Can you see the repeater we set up to receive telemetry from the beacon?"

"Sure, but---"

"I want to send some test signals and need you to respond." Her hands shaking slightly, Sandy worked to bend a slender metal rod, connecting the simple transmitter to the tiny fuel cell.

Rhythmically tapping the rod against the contact she whispered a small prayer, hoping that Morse code had not been part of the children's education. Her message went out to Bud. TEN GRAVES AT FAR END OF MAIN CAVERN. ALL EIGHT ADULTS AND WHAT SEEMS TO BE TWO KIDS.

Several aching long moments later Bud slowly replied. "Message received and understood."

Sandy glanced back over her shoulder. Nina, Vera and Alyona had all paused in their work and were standing near the ice wall, gazing in her direction.

BUD.

"Your signal is coming through, Sandy."

I CAN CLEARLY SEE THE TOMB FROM WHERE I AM. THE PLACES WHERE THE ADULTS ARE BURIED ARE MARKED IN RUSSIAN . . .

She paused, swallowing hard, once, and continued tapping. THE GRAVES FOR THE SMALLER BODIES ARE MARKED WITH SPACE FRIEND SYMBOLS.

Her earpiece buzzed with a word Bud seldom used, even when under stress. "We've got all the children here---"

NO WE DON'T, Sandy shot back in code. EITHER TWO SPACE FRIENDS HAVE DIED, OR . . .

"Two of the kids," Bud whispered. "Which would mean two of the kids . . ."

SPACE FRIENDS, Sandy finished. OR MAYBE SENDERS.

"This isn't good, Sandy," Bud said, and Sandy could tell he was trying to remain calm. "I advise immediate return."

Sandy was more concerned with trying to keep her immediate hygiene intact, but she appreciated Bud's efforts towards peace.

Space Friends . . . or Senders!

The extraterrestrials had always been open in their dealings with the human race in general, and Tom in particular. Or at least that's how they seemed.

Ecuador had changed everything. The discovery of the unmanned probe sent by the alien faction of Senders. The suspicion that the Space Friends possessed a private agenda involving the hunting down of their rivals. Everything . . . the placement of the original probe at the Swift Enterprises complex . . . the maneuvering of Nestria into orbit around the Earth . . . the business with the specimen ship sent to the Moon . . .

The Space Friends had always seemed benign, helping out the Swifts in the past. But was the help genuine, or was it all geared towards somehow flushing out the hidden agents of the Senders?

Sandy felt she had more than ample reason to worry. Despite all the extensive medical tests and examinations, plus the reassurances from experts, she couldn't shake concerns about how the Sender probe had somehow affected her. Not just concerns but suspicions that, ever since returning from Ecuador, she was now an unwilling device of the Senders.

It was a theory which admittedly held an attraction to the less sympathetic portions of her personality. The aliens had tried to recruit her grandfather, but Barton Swift had died before he could carry out whatever purpose they had in mind. Was she the success the Senders had been hoping for?

And what would happen if, and when, the Space Friends discovered this.

Sandy sighed in irritation as the thoughts buzzed in her brain. If the Space Friends were so benign, and if two of the Brungarian children were actually disguised aliens, then why remain hidden?

And if they were actually Senders . . .

"Sandy?"

She snapped back to the here and now. "What?"

"You just went quiet out there, love, and this situation is shaping into one where silence ain't exactly golden."

"Yeah, right. Ummmm, is the beacon working okay?"

"Nice strong signal. Anyone approaching the cavern should be able to pick it up. So . . . now what are we gonna do?"

Sandy knew Bud wasn't talking about the beacon. "I'm on my way back."

"Good girl."

Sandy slowly straightened up and turned to see the girls still facing her, all expressions hidden behind the mummy-like wrappings of the spacesuits.

Two of you can be false, she thought, staring at them. Or, worse yet, the false children could be with Bud.

And Sandy gave her head a rough shake. Focus. But, as hard as she tried, she couldn't avoid the sensation that, somehow, the Others (and how easily she now considered the idea) were somehow aware of what she and Bud knew.

This is bad, she thought. Very bad. On one side a psychotic murderer armed with nuclear weapons. On the other side a group of children who were, very probably, in the middle of what could be a war between two alien races.

Despite her misgivings she noted how the girls seemed grateful to let her help with the sacks of harvested ice. Then, moving carefully, they inched their way back through the narrow passage and returned to the cavern where the Nursery lay. Then it was long minutes of once again picking one's self through the spiny floor of the cavern until the hatch of the spacecraft was within welcome reach.

Even more welcome were Bud's arms drawing her firmly into the ship, and his hands unpeeling the spacesuit. His patience lasted only until Sandy's head was free of the suit's confinement before he was holding her even closer.

"God, we're in trouble," she whispered into his ear.

"I know," he replied, his arms tightening around her. "I know."

For their part the children watched the scene before them with their usual level of wide-eyed interest until, perhaps driven by years of habit (and becoming accustomed to the idea that being Bud and Sandy apparently required enormous amounts of hugs), they began the work of processing the lunar ice into the water extractors.

Hoping that the chores were distraction enough, Sandy and Bud gradually edged their way further back into the spaceship, not daring to raise their voices until they felt they were safely out of earshot. The both of them waited until they were crouched down by the reactor shield before beginning a conversation.

Sandy was surprised to see Bud almost chuckling. "What?"

"It's just that I'm suddenly flashing on the scene in 2001: A Space Odyssey, where Dullea and Lockwood are in the space pod trying to hide their conversation from HAL."

"I wish I had your ability to compartmentalize raw panic."

"You need to travel with Tom more often," Bud replied. His expression became serious again. "So what the hell are we dealing with here?"

"I don't have enough information," Sandy murmured. "All I know is that, either by accident or by design we've stumbled onto something here. We were blindsided . . . hoodwinked."

"Blindsided?"

"Both of us got royally fooled, big time. We found the kids and were brought to this place and what did we see? Children . . . human children surviving in the face of extreme adversity and hardship. Not only surviving but managing to carve out their own little civilization. The descendants of brave pioneers." Sandy shook her head. "Just the sort of thing we'd want to see."

"What about Major Viktorenko? The mom? The recorded account of the adult Brungarians?"

"I'm not denying any of that," Sandy said. "But think about it. In retrospect, and in spite of all we've been shown, how logical is it for human children to survive on their own under these conditions? Maybe they've been lucky. Or," and here Sandy's expression hardened, "maybe the kids had help besides the instructions their parents left behind."

"The Space Friends. Or the Senders."

"Look at this," Sandy said, moving away from Bud and standing up. She went over to the nearer bulkhead, pointing at the instructional pictographs which the children used to maintain the ship's reactor. "Something about these markings had been bothering me for a while, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Now I can."

Bud turned fully towards her, still squatted on the deck.

"You can decipher these markings to operate the reactor," Sandy concluded. "It's true. But don't you think some of these drawings are a bit too . . . involved . . . to be safely understood by preschool kids?"

"Maybe," Bud concluded. "Semiotics isn't really my field."

"No, but I've spent a lot of time with Phyllis. And she knows something about the subject. Remember she did those safety primers for the children of Enterprises employees.

"Look here," Sandy continued, reaching out to touch one of the pictographs. "This symbol used for coolant feed."

Bud nodded.

"I touch here . . . and here." With her hands she covered parts of the pictograph. "What do you see now?" she asked, turning back to Bud. "Or, putting it another way, where have you seen this symbol before?"

Bud sighed. "Space Friend symbol."

Slamming the pictograph hard Sandy returned to sit next to Bud.

"OK, Genius Girl," Bud said. "What's your theory? Space Friends or Senders? And what do they want?"

"I've got a bad idea---"

"Was afraid of that."

"Everything we learned so far has told us that the Space Friends would have trouble surviving in our environment," Sandy pointed out. "The placement of Nestria, as well as the animal sample ship sent to the Moon, proved that the Space Friends have evolved in a slightly different ecology.

"I now believe that the Space Friends main interest here has to do with the presence of the Senders." She gently raised a palm, "I know you and Tom and Dad all think I'm suffering from paranoia---"

"I never thought that," Bud declared, reaching out to take her hands.

"Okay," Sandy said. "Okay," she repeated more softly. "The Space Friends want more than anything else to ferret out whatever influence the Senders might've had on our society. Ferret it out and . . . maybe . . . destroy it and replace it with their own. I don't know for certain, but I believe they're secretly afraid that the Senders might've placed agents here on Earth."

In her head Sandy mentally crossed her fingers.

"The Space Friends have already concluded, to their satisfaction, that they can't survive directly on Earth. But they'll need agents to move directly for their benefit."

Sandy let out a slow breath. "Question: where do you go for raw materials with which to construct agents?"

Bud's eyes narrowed and he looked down the corridor in the direction of the main compartment.

"There's no way---," he began.

"Perhaps you're right," Sandy agreed. "After all, the kids would have their own problems with surviving Earth's environment. But maybe the Space Friends could somehow . . . retrofit their biology. Make them more suitable. Or, and this is even more devious, perhaps the Space Friends plan to allow us to take the kids back to lunar civilization, like we've planned. It wouldn't be much, but it would give the Space Friends more of an inroad into our technological and space borne infrastructure. Regardless, Rotzog's actions provided the Space Friends with what they needed most: a complete human template with which to build agents."

Bud was looking back at her. "And what about the idea that two of the kids could already be . . ."

"Perhaps the Space Friends can do more with a healthy template than just retrofit the kids," Sandy pointed out. "Maybe, given enough human material to quietly experiment with, they can actually alter themselves and assume human form."

Bud was slowly shaking his head. "Y'know, I love you dearly. But you've become creepier ever since Ecuador."

Sandy was about to provide a hopefully reassuring answer when a sharp electronic shriek was suddenly heard throughout the ship.

The sound was accompanied by plaintive wails from the mail compartment, and Sandy scooted up to begin running towards the kids. Bud followed as best as he could, half-limping, half-crawling along the bulkhead.

"Shhhhh," Sandy said, entering the compartment. "It's all right, it's all right." In point of fact it wasn't, not with some of the kids clutching at each other and most of the others clamping hands over their ears. Whatever was going on was an emergency which had never been encountered before.

But none of the life-support lights were blinking. The gauges all seemed to be reading normally. The only problem seemed to be a flickering button on the communication console.

Sandy slowly approached it.

"San!"

She glanced back to see Bud edging into the corridor. "What's going on?"

"That sound," Bud said, grimacing. "It's tone."

"Huh?"

"Tone! Someone or something's got missile lock on us."

Chapter 22: Shatterer Of Worlds

"Missile lock?"

But Bud was already limping past her to collapse against the console. He stared down hard at the instruments, as if expecting an answer to suddenly pop up from among the Cyrillic labels and glowing lights.

And Sandy's mind was whirling. "A launcher is being pointed at us . . . oh!"

Bud was nodding. "No need to guess who'd be doing---"

CLANG!

Everyone in the ship jumped at the sound. Something had smacked against the ship. Hard.

The sound was followed by a silence which was almost as deafening in its suddenness. Even the tone alert had disappeared while everyone looked at each other.

"Is she throwing rocks at us?" Bud asked.

Sandy slowly shook her head. "Although I'd like to think it's that benign. Somehow, though---"

The air was quickly split by a huge crackle from the speakers.

"---I suspect it's something else."

Both of them, as well as the children, turned in one direction towards the communications console. Just in time to hear a familiar accented voice hiss.

"Can you hear me, Barclay?"

"Oh God," Bud muttered.

"Can you hear me . . . Swift?"

Sandy closed her eyes.

"I am currently on the ledge high above your location," Rotzog announced, her voice thick in everyone's ears. "I have attached a transponder to the hull of your ship so that we may communicate directly. Now I repeat . . . CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

Sandy exchanged a long look with Bud before turning back to the console. "We hear you."

"Narmal'no. Listen carefully. I have re-loaded my launcher. It now carries a tactical nuclear missile. All I need do is pull the trigger, Tell me you understand what that means."

"I understand it means you're insane if you use that missile," Sandy replied calmly, her eyes still on Bud. "You'd kill yourself firing it."

"Myself, agreed Rotzog, "not to mention the best friend and companion of the man who disgraced and defeated my Anton. Plus his sister. I am tempted, Swift. I am so very, very . . . very tempted."

Sandy and Bud stared at each other, and both knew they wanted very much to talk to each other, but neither knew just how sensitive Rotzog's limpet transponder was. The children, in the meantime, had arranged themselves in a solemn circle about them, their eyes large and watching.

Sandy finally felt she read Bud's expression well enough and spoke. "What do you want, Rotzog?"

"Victory," the voice thundered from the speakers. "My son avenged and restored. My rivals laid low. My rightful place firmly established within the scientific hierarchy of the human race. Brungaria recognized and accepted at last."

"You're not going to accomplish any of that with the murder of innocents," Sandy argued. "Not to mention the destruction of perhaps the most valuable find on the Moon."

"We shall see."

"Brungaria's an outlaw state," Bud shouted out. "It maintains independence only by the barest of margins. You go on with your plan and you'll cover Brungaria with blood for centuries."

"That's the legacy you'll leave behind for your son and his followers," Sandy added.

"Don't talk to me of legacies," the voice shrieked. "We were Russia's only hope for domination in space. But Korolev received the lion's share of attention and, when he died, it was Steffan and the others who had the only real remaining plan. But we were ignored. We were called thugs . . . criminals. Even when your brother and the Americans were on the threshold of success with the Moon we were ignored. But Steffan had a plan. He and my Anton . . . and myself!

"Look around you, Swift. Look around and see all I've accomplished."

"You?" Sandy murmured, almost without thinking.

Bud looked at her sharply and, for a moment, he and Sandy wondered if Rotzog hadn't heard.

But there was a slow hiss over the speakers, like escaping air.

"Panyatno," Rotzog finally said softly. "So. We both know something it seems."

Sandy decided to grasp at a straw. "We can talk," she said. "You and I."

Bud's face paled and he quickly shook his head.

Sandy waved him off. "You know there's something we need to discuss, Madam Rotzog. Bud and I are weaponless, and you're holding the advantage. There'd be nothing to lose by a private conference to discuss certain . . . things . . . and everything to gain."

"Sandy," Bud hissed.

Sandy shook her head hard at him. "I'll come out alone."

Silence, while Sandy tried to ignore Bud.

Then: "I would've preferred Barclay."

Sandy held her breath.

"The main ice cavern, Swift. Thirty minutes."

The speakers let out a final electronic pop before settling into silence, and Sandy let out a long breath.

"No!" Bud declared.

"Bud---"

"No, San."

"Bud you can still barely walk, much less make it back up to the main cavern. I can do it. Besides," she quickly added, seeing Bud's face clouding over, "if she sets off that warhead you know there's no safety for anyone here."

Bud's head dropped slightly.

"I'm sorry for being right---"

"No." Bud looked back up at her. "You're relieved. You get to go out and face all the dangers, and everyone else gets left back here in almost-safety."

"I'm not claiming any special sort of bravery, Bud."

"And I don't blame you. Sandy, she's insane."

"Think I don't see that?" Sandy moved over to where her spacesuit was propped up near the airlock door. "But she slipped. She has demands she wants met, and she might be just desperate enough to listen to suggestions on how she can achieve them."

"Plus," and here Sandy's eyes took in the children with a glance, "it would seem that Madam R knows a little something."

Bud accepted the final comment with a small nod. Moving to collapse against the bulkhead near Sandy he reached out to help her as she slid into her suit. "You think she might be bluffing about using the missile?"

"Mmmm." Sandy worked a fastener closed. "That's occurred to me. She needs the cavern ice as much as the kids do. If she didn't she would've nuked this place a long time ago."

"But then she didn't have us in her target sights."

"There is that," Sandy concluded reluctantly. She slowly settled her helmet into position and locked it. Immediately the suit systems came on, and Sandy's heart fell as she saw the large number of red indicators which remained.

"Well," Bud sighed, "we tried to get it fixed."

"We could only cannibalize so much from the systems here," Sandy replied. "But I'd rather be wearing this. Lord only knows what she'd do if she saw one of the kids' suits."

Bud stared at her for a moment. Then he leaned close and, with some effort, managed to kiss her.

"Thank you, love," Sandy replied, waddling towards the airlock. "I'll try not to be long."

"Just try to return in one piece. And non-radioactive."

Sandy smiled at him and started to close her visor, but was stopped by a touch on her arm.

One of the children . . . Alex . . . now reached up to gently touch her cheek.

"Beregi z'derovy," he murmured, before stepping back and resuming his place among the others. All of them were watching her, their eyes revealing nothing but innocent concern.

Who are you? Sandy thought at them.

Suddenly turning her back on them she touched the airlock controls.

* * * * *

She had barely squeezed herself out of the passageway and into the yawning cavity of the central cavern before she heard the voice in her helmet.

"Close enough, Swift!"

Sandy slowly turned and finally saw the lean figure of the Moon Witch standing several meters away. Ykaterina Rotzog was down on one knee, leaning against what seemed to be a bazooka.

The upper portion of the device was tipped by a dark grey bulb. Sandy stared at it and felt the immediate menace.

"So you knew my suit's frequency from the beginning," Sandy said.

The head slowly shook. "Not until I made . . . modifications to the communication systems in your suit and Barclay's."

"You admit you sabotaged our suits."

"I admit to anything in the course of Brungaria and my mission." Rotzog slowly pulled herself onto both feet. "But this is advantageous, Swift. We can now talk freely."

Sandy frowned. "Is it just me, or has your English improved?"

The suited figure shook slightly. "When he was designing Brungaria's space program, Steffan felt it wise to send several . . . observers . . . over to America. I spent eight months in the secretarial pool at both Grumman and North American Rockwell. I would've tried Boeing and Swift Enterprises as well, but Steffan wanted to forward the date of the Moon project. So I returned, and this is not why we're here."

"I agree." Sandy took a breath and plowed ahead. "You've obviously seen the graves."

Rotzog nodded.

"So you know what it means."

"You mentioned the most valuable find on the Moon," Rotzog replied. "I think you and I realize you mean more than just all this ice. A redoubt of extraterrestrials in operation. Here."

Sandy remained silent.

"I have not seen any sign of alien activity directly," Rotzog continued. "But I cannot deny the possibility that it exists. Alien activity, which means alien technology. Technology which could push Brungaria far in advance of the other nations."

Sandy wondered if Rotzog had somehow heard news of Nestria, and decided not to pursue the issue at the moment. "So far the only evidence Bud and I have seen of alien activity is the fact that the children's habitat has been maintained at a highly operational state."

"But that doesn't deny the fact that there are aliens present down there," Rotzog declared. "Surely you must have wondered what sort of information they possess. What sort of knowledge."

The truth was that Sandy couldn't fault the statements. It was all just a difference in motive. "So we both know what's down there," she said. "OK. So now it comes to what do you want?"

"I've stated my demands---"

"Threatening us with a nuclear bomb in the process."

Rotzog slammed the weapon down hard on the cavern floor, and Sandy winced.

"You are not in a position to hold anything over me," the Brungarian declared. "The reason I agreed to meet with you is to arrange what I want and hopefully avoid risking damage to the prize."

Sandy nodded at the weapon. "Get rid of that and any talking we do will be easier---"

"Nyet! Or perhaps I will get `rid' of it, as you say." The older woman shook again. "Although perhaps not quite in a manner to your liking."

"You'd destroy not only the ice, but the aliens---"

"Or perhaps just you," Rotzog said. Reaching down she picked up one of the long utilitarian rods which the Brungarians employed in their lunar work. She hefted it comfortably.

"In my younger days I was a candidate for the Russian Olympic track team," Rotzog explained softly. "Specifically, the javelin throw.

"From this distance, Swift, I can easily puncture your suit. Perhaps even pierce to your heart. You'd be dead before you could turn away."

Sandy believed it.

"As hostages go," Rotzog purred, "I think I would definitely prefer Barclay over you."

Sandy really believed it. She didn't reply as her mind quickly tried to work out just how much protection her suit would provide.

But then she felt a vibration beneath her feet. Looking around she saw that the dust, as well as several of the rocks, were gently vibrating across the cavern floor.

And Rotzog was also feeling it, the other woman staring around. So she was genuinely surprised as well.

Sandy's first thought was a quake. Then, almost as quickly, another thought entered her mind: space friends!

But spots of brilliant light suddenly appeared on the cavern floor, and the entire chamber was becoming brighter.

Sandy looked up in time to see three star-hot points of light glowing high above in the chamber ceiling. The points widened to admit slender glowing rods which were slowly extending down from the rock.

"Earth blasters," she breathed.

Chapter 23: Pursuit Beneath The Moon

As Sandy watched, the earth blasters suddenly darkened; their electrodes rapidly cooling to reveal the mechanisms in their entirety. The blasters continued descending, soon revealing thick control cables.

The cables were quickly followed by a series of dark green spheres, passing through the openings like eggs from a chute. The spheres were ringed with viewing ports and Sandy immediately recognized them as lunar/space variants of Tom's Terraspheres.

Lights speared out from the lower Terraspheres on each of the cables, and the entire ice cavern was clearly illuminated.

And the speaker in Sandy's suit suddenly hissed into life. "SANDRA SWIFT, BUD BARCLAY . . . SANDRA SWIFT, BUD BARCLAY . . . RESPOND IF YOU CAN HEAR THIS SIGNAL. WE CAN PICK UP ANY REPLY YOU CAN MAKE. REPEATING: SANDRA SWIFT, BUD BARCLAY . . ."

Another sound was heard over Sandy's speaker. A vicious snarl and she looked back down to see Rotzog staring up at the descending machines. To her horror, the Moon Witch had quickly raised the missile launcher and was aiming it at the spheres.

"No!"

Acting almost on pure instinct, Sandy bent down, scooping up a large rock from the cavern floor. Her arm continued moving, feeling as if it were struggling through wet clay, and she hurled the rock in what she hoped was an effective pitch.

It took seconds . . . long seconds . . . and Sandy couldn't say why Rotzog hadn't been able to move any faster with her weapon. But before she could launch the missile the rock struck her squarely in the chest, causing her to stumble backwards.

"Suka!"

"SANDRA SWIFT, BUD BARCLAY . . ."

Sandy was trying to drive all distraction from her mind, concentrating on leaping and closing the distance between her and Rotzog.

The Moon Witch snarled again and swung the missile launcher in a wide arc while trying to regain her footing. Sandy narrowly escaped having her helmet connect with the tip of the missile and bent down, trying to reach the rod Rotzog had dropped in order to aim the launcher. But Rotzog was more nimble in the art of movement in the lunar gravity and kicked at the rod, sending it out of reach.

Her blood becoming hot and pounding in her head, Sandy stretched her arms out, reaching for Rotzog. Her grip connected with the launcher and both women struggled for control of the weapon while, at the same time, the searchlights from the descending spheres gradually began focusing on their position.

Rotzog had moved her hand away from the firing controls in order to maintain a clear grip on the launcher, and Sandy was fighting to make certain that the other woman didn't get a chance to improve her odds. They both pressed close against each other, and Sandy's ears were filled with the angered gasps from Rotzog's biting through the speaker. She was almost certain she could see the hateful glitter of the eyes through the visor of the other woman's suit.

Meanwhile the missile was weaving back and forth between them.

The recording from the spheres suddenly switched off to be replaced by the joyous sound of Tom. "Sandy? Is that you down there?"

Sandy wanted to cry, to scream, to almost laugh. But she fought to concentrate on keeping Rotzog as off balance as possible.

"Worthless blyat," Rotzog suddenly shouted, lunging forward with all her strength, and Sandy cried out as the launcher's trigger mechanism slammed hard against the faceplate of her helmet.

A spider web of cracks appeared on the surface of Sandy's visor, followed by the bone-chilling hiss of escaping air. Sandy felt herself falling backwards and grabbed out blindly, her hand connecting with the material of Rotzog's suit. She pulled hard.

"NYET!"

A wild shriek echoed in Sandy's ears and the launcher was suddenly pulled out of her grasp. Sandy felt herself slowly collapsing onto the cavern floor and worked to control her fall while, at the same time, desperately trying to keep Rotzog in sight. But the tumble went bad and she could see the cracks in her helmet visor expanding.

"Tom!"

A crackle of static in her speaker. "Sandy? What the hell---"

"SHUT UP," she screamed. "Just listen. We've got a nuclear situation down here. The other person has a warhead and is planning to use it---"

"He's getting away," Tom replied. "We can see him holding the launcher close and he's got his arms gripped tight around him."

Sandy didn't feel up to correcting Tom in regards to Rotzog's gender just that moment. The reactive repair sealant in her helmet was automatically responding and working to fill in the damage to the visor. Checking her systems she saw that her air supply was down to forty minutes.

She ached all over and knew that a beauty of a bruise was developing where her head had been slammed against the visor. Shaking her head to clear it she looked up. The world hadn't disappeared in a nuclear fireball so . . .

The figure of Rotzog was rapidly moving into a side cavern. Sandy recognized it as the one she and Bud had come through when they first found the ice cavern.

Turning her head she saw hatches opening in the bottom of the Terraspheres and ladders extending down past the earth blasters.

"Sandy?"

Her vision was blurred and she couldn't quite make out the faces peering in her direction through the viewing ports. "Tom . . . can you see the narrow opening in the wall immediately behind me?"

A pause, then: "Yes."

"Follow it through but move carefully at the other end. Bud's down there, in an old Russian spaceship---"

"Russian?"

Sandy nodded before she realized the uselessness of the gesture. "Search around with the frequencies a bit and you'll pick his radio up. He'll explain the situation better than I can."

Space suited figures were now climbing down the ladders. It would take them time to get across the cavern to her position.

"Sandy we'll be with you in a moment---"

But she was already reaching for the rod which Rotzog had kicked away. "I've got to go."

"Sandy!"

"Don't follow." Leaning against the rod Sandy struggled to an upright position, trying to catch her breath.

They had better spacesuits, she told herself. They were in better physical condition. They had better equipment . . .

They were too far away.

Biting her lip, Sandy ignored Tom's voice and began limping off in pursuit of the Moon Witch.

* * * * *

While working and living in the Nursery, Sandy had taken the opportunity to service and refurbish her suit's medical system as much as possible. She now pressed the injection button several times, dosing herself as much as possible with her remaining supply of antibiotics, painkillers and stimulants. She knew she was violating the safety protocols and probably over-dosing herself with drugs big time. Eventually her body would crash under the strain.

She reassured herself with the thought that, if she failed, then it really wouldn't matter.

Her helmet was filled with Tom's repeated protests that she return but she mentally tuned them out, concentrating instead on listening for transmissions from Rotzog's (hopefully damaged?) suit. She half-way expected Tom or some others from the spheres to follow her and drag her back.

But once she left the ice cavern she was once again in the now weirdly familiar maze-like realm of the channels and passages which wound their way about, twisting about the corridors and pathways and leaving followers far behind. Had it only been days since she and Bud had fallen down here? How long had they been under the surface of the Moon?

Of course Tom and the others could probably track her suit's telemetry and follow her. But she still had a good head start and knew that time was everything in dealing with Rotzog. If the Moon Witch had time to repair her suit she could still find a chance to use the missile.

Sandy touched a control on her suit, lowering the intensity of her spotlight to a bare minimum. She wanted to keep her eyes open for any signs of Rotzog's passage ahead of her, but she didn't want to give her own position away.

And Rotzog would be waiting in the darkness. Somewhere ahead of her.

Gripping the rod Sandy limped deeper into the cavern. Her view through her damaged visor wasn't the best in the world under the best of circumstances. With the spotlight irised down to a minimum she had to inch along carefully to keep from colliding with the walls.

The path she was taking was, amazingly enough, vaguely familiar. She knew that soon she'd reach the branching system of caves where Rotzog's habitat was hidden. Where the other nuclear warheads were stored.

What was the chance the woman would actually use them?

Sandy inched further down the cave, but suddenly stopped as a mild tremor registered beneath her feet.

Was Tom trying something with the Terraspheres? Had he switched the blasters back on? Sandy knew she wasn't a qualified geologist, but she felt she knew enough to realize that the delicate nature of the ice cavern area would suffer if it was exposed to extensive shocks. And, even if she wasn't a qualified geologist, Tom at least had careful training in the subject.

Another tremor. This one stronger. Sandy looked up and, in the mild beam from her light, saw a thin stream of dust fall past.

She touched her radio controls, listening carefully.

Yes! Some faint noise from the rescue group. ". . . three point oh Richter. Check the surface connections."

O gentle Jesus!

Tom was back there. Rescue was back there. Bud's arms . . .

She forced herself to look the other way and continue walking. It couldn't be much further now. Soon that branch with the Y-shaped crack in the roof would appear. The larger pocket with Rotzog's habitat would be just beyond . . .

A small hiss. Sandy froze. Was her suit leaking again?

The hiss appeared again. Human respiration. Someone was holding their breath. Someone had forgotten to switch off their radio.

Sandy gripped the rod and switched off the spotlight totally. How near was Rotzog? Was she back at the habitat?

Sweat burned down the side of her face and Sandy shook it away with a violent motion. She took a step.

"Do you hear me, Swift?"

Sandy froze. "Yes."

The hiss reappeared briefly, then settled into a steady breathing. "You almost killed me back there, Swift."

Sandy swallowed, wishing her throat wasn't so dry. "You would've killed . . . how many? . . . back there with your missile."

"Especially your brother, Barclay . . . and you."

"And the last remnants of the Brungarian Moonbase." Sandy allowed a bit of contempt to enter her voice. "An excellent legacy."

"It's a matter of degree, Swift."

Sandy limped carefully down the cavern. It was starting to open wider. Rotzog's habitat would be somewhere near. "Degree?"

"If all of us were to die here, Swift, then Brungaria would still remain. On the other hand, the precious fruit of the Swift genius would be obliterated."

For a moment Sandy thought her heart was going into overdrive. But it was only another tremor. Something was going on . . .

"Your dolt of a brother," Rotzog explained.

Sandy was caught by surprise. The Moon Witch had apparently guessed her thought. "Huh?"

"Slamming through into the caverns like that. This area has always been seismically delicate. Those idiots who came with me to the Moon almost destroyed the ice deposits when they blindly set off their demolition charges."

"An awful lot of concern," Sandy declared hotly, "for someone who was waving a nuke around not too long ago."

"The importance is not in whether a gun is fired," Rotzog smoothly replied. "The importance lies in whose finger is on the trigger."

Sandy shook her head. It was useless. Arguing with the old woman provided nothing but an exercise in sophistry.

"Are you prepared to kill, Swift?"

Sandy paused again in her tracks. "What?"

"I am prepared to be the finger on the trigger," Rotzog slowly breathed. "To stop me you'll have to kill me."

Then again, there was a lot to be said for sophistry.

"Even if you kill us," Sandy said slowly, "you don't succeed. We still have a viable presence on the Moon. In space. On the other hand your gesture would uselessly bury the one sole Brungarian achievement in space." Sandy moved further down the corridor, at last entering the larger cavern. "Setting off a point seven five kiloton nuclear warhead accomplishes nothing of importance. Not for you."

A pause. Then: "Point seven five, Swift?"

Sandy stopped. "I don't . . ."

"Try a nine kiloton explosion," Rotzog replied, her voice a soft murmur in Sandy's ear. "Try all of my warheads detonated simultaneously. In a geologically unstable area of the Moon that is even now currently undergoing tremors."

Sandy couldn't move. Could only stare blindly ahead into the darkness.

"But I am merciful," Rotzog continued. "I will give you time to try and contact both your brother and Barclay. Do so. Do so and tell them the world ends in fifteen minutes."

Chapter 24: The Finger On The Trigger

Fifteen minutes!

Sandy felt her breath racing and worked to bring it under control. In fifteen minutes she could possibly . . . possibly . . . make it back to the ice cavern and Tom.

Because in that amount of time the place in which she was standing would be near the center of a nuclear explosion. A blast confined in a cavern. In a vacuum.

Gripping the rod tighter, Sandy moved further into the cavern, edging against the rock wall, not wanting to be somehow outlined against the entrance. She didn't know Rotzog could see in the dark, but she didn't want to trust the Russian to be unprepared. Rotzog had already stepped over the line and was ready to do anything.

Sandy slowly looked about, trying to see in the darkness. With the touch of a button she could immediately brighten the suit lights, and also make herself a clear target for Rotzog.

Her memory told her that the habitat was beyond the other side of the cavern opening. Was Rotzog inside it?

How to see . . .

"Are you still there, Swift?"

Sandy gulped, wishing she had taken the time to fill the water reservoir in her suit. "I'm here."

A low rattle of breath. A deep chuckle. "So be it."

Had that been a glint of light? Over to the right, about twelve or so meters away. It wasn't where she remembered the habitat as being located. Trying to concentrate, Sandy began edging closer. "There's still time for us to work out a solution," she said into her helmet. "As angry as you are, I cannot . . . will not . . . believe that you would throw everything away like this."

"As you wish, Swift. Remain where you are for another . . . thirteen minutes and twenty five seconds . . . and you'll see how serious my intentions are."

"Suicide is unworthy," Sandy cried out, thinking how lame the argument sounded even to her.

"Chalk it all down to my incurable Slavic nature."

There was definitely some sort of light in the distance. A tiny brief blinking of red which settled into a steady glow. Something was ahead of her, and something was moving near it.

The cavern suddenly shook with a severe jolt, and Sandy bent down to steady herself as the entire chamber briefly reeled drunkenly about. Something fell close past her eyes and she almost shrieked as she saw a large piece of rock strike the cavern floor near her feet.

And Rotzog's voice was a sharp hiss in her ears. "That mudak brother of yours! He might finish the job before me."

Another sharp tremor, and this time Sandy could feel the cavern floor trying to rise beneath her. Trying, and suddenly stopping.

She was gasping heavily and once again worked to become calm. Then she saw the red indicator lights in her helmet and realized it wasn't only panic. Her long suffering life support system had finally given up the ghost and she was trying to breathe what was left in her suit. The warning lights and message strip were advising that she return to a safe source of breathing air very soon.

Sandy almost laughed. As if she had much safe time left. And the nearest source of air was in Rotzog's habitat.

But the tiny light she had been spotting was still over to the right of where she believed the habitat to be, and Sandy limped closer.

Ah!

This time she got a better look of the movement she had spotted earlier. There was definitely some sort of red light in operation ahead of her, and now Sandy had seen the briefly eclipsing form of a human figure. Rotzog was outside the habitat. Close.

Slowly, Sandy moved the metal rod in her hands, gripping it tightly near one end. She edged closer, trying to get a better look.

"I can't see you, Swift," Rotzog's voice whispered, "but your breathing is quite evident."

Sandy kept moving closer.

"By now that suit of yours must be leaking air like a sieve," Rotzog continued. "You're having more and more trouble."

The Russian gift for understatement, Sandy thought.

"You choose to remain here. If I were in your place, girl, I'd be spending my last moments trying to get back to the arms of Barclay."

Sandy shifted her position a bit more to the right, then paused, gritting her teeth as another tremor shook the cavern. She could definitely make out Rotzog now, the thin radiance from her spotlight providing just enough illumination to see that the woman was bending over what appeared to be a small metal box. The red light . . . whatever it was . . . was coming from the top of the box.

"You're a gambler, girl," Rotzog calmly remarked, still bending over the box. "You're somewhere out there in the dark, betting that you can somehow stop me." Another sharp rattling laugh. "I play for higher stakes than you, girl. Much, much higher stakes."

Sandy clenched the end of the rod firmly in her hands and swung it back behind her. At the same time she shifted slightly, letting the faint light from her suit play across the metal box.

"Rotzog!"

The woman turned sharply just in time for her suit's visor to take the full force of impact as Sandy swung the metal rod hard. In the airlessness of the cavern there was no sound except for an unholy shriek from the Moon Witch's lungs.

And Sandy could clearly feel the shattering of the visor transmitted through the length of the rod. She watched as Rotzog fell backwards, hands clawing desperately at her face as she collapsed head over heels onto the cavern floor.

"Your raise or call," Sandy muttered.

Dropping the rod she limped over to the box, turning the lights of her suit on full. The rising glow outlined the box clearly now, showing it to be a small control panel. Several buttons . . . a keypad . . . all labeled in Cyrillic.

And the red light: a LED countdown timer reading 00:05:48. As she watched the numbers continued marking down.

Less than five minutes. But where were the bombs . . .

Looking up, Sandy suddenly noticed what the darkness had hidden before. She was currently in the center of a large ring composed of twelve grey bulbous shapes sitting upon the cavern floor. Rotzog had, in fact, almost knocked one over in her backward fall.

Her insides icy, Sandy turned back to closely examine the controls on the box. Screaming at herself for not knowing enough Russian, and realizing that, even if she did, Rotzog would've taken steps to prevent her from somehow switching off the bombs.

Five minutes!

In five minutes, in the movies, the Hero was supposed to simply (simply!) or accidentally stumble upon the solution to switching off bombs. Touch the right button or open the box and reach in and pull the wires loose.

Sandy's hand automatically reached for the box, then stopped.

Her eyes swept around the circle of bombs. She could see the seams where, supposedly, the fuses would be located. Could she somehow disassemble the bombs before they detonated? Some of them? Enough to at least minimize the damage?

She felt herself starting to rise, then froze again, shaking her head. No matter what she tried, she wasn't an expert on disarming explosives.

Bud was. Or Tom. But the radio in her suit didn't carry the range or power to reach through the caverns.

Rotzog's habitat!

But when Sandy turned she realized what one of the earlier tremors had signaled. The Russian spacecraft featured an enormous hole in its side. The result of an explosive decompression, and Sandy realized that Rotzog had firmly intended to burn all her bridges behind her.

Four minutes!

Sandy realized her hand was tightly clutching a rock, and she slowly raised it, intending to take the rock and smash blindly through the control panel of the box. Destroy it. Destroy it and hope it was the right thing.

Hope.

Her fingers slowly opened and the rock slowly drifted back to the cavern floor.

"Are you listening?" she asked.

Silence, and she raised her face to stare hotly out into the empty cavern. "Can you hear me?" she shouted. "Have you been in the back of my head all these months? Hiding? Working? Using me?"

"Listen. There's not much time left and I need help. Everything you've worked for all this time . . . either for or against us . . . is going to be destroyed in a few minutes unless you decide to help."

Silence, as the countdown passed the two minute and thirty second mark.

"If you're going to do something," Sandy pointed out, "then I strongly suggest you do it now."

* * * * *

In the hive of the Little People Bud was about to lose his mind; trying to direct the efforts of the Swiftbase personnel who were busily poking about the spacecraft as well as cooperating with the medical technician who was attending to his injuries and, at the same time, keeping up a running dialogue with Tom who was still above in the main ice cavern trying to get a fix on Sandy and Rotzog.

Even with all the distractions, it was still him who first noticed the sudden movement from children. When the rescue team members arrived the Little People had shrank back into a corner of the habitat, wide-eyed and staring despite Bud's assurances that everything was all right.

A change now seemed to come over the faces of the children. They became more calm. More focused. As Bud watched in mild amazement, the children all moved into a circle and, as one, joined hands.

Then Bud lost consciousness.

As did the members of the rescue team.

As did twenty-six of the children, their bodies falling gracefully onto the deck of the habitat.

The remaining two children quietly looked around, then reached out to join hands and stare into each other's eyes.

Their flesh began to melt.

Chapter 25: "I Was The First!"

Two minutes left.

Sandy finally paid attention to the shrill beeping going on in her ears. She shook her head angrily, slamming her chin to the helmet control and canceling out the alarm. She already knew her suit was gradually failing all around her. The truth was that if she didn't get to a new supply of air soon, or a secure habitat, she'd be dead.

She'd be dead in under 120 more seconds. The bombs around her would detonate and she would be in the center of a nine kiloton fireball.

The bomb control was literally under her fingertips, and she had no way of knowing how to use it. The bombs were lined up all around her, and she couldn't disarm them. Not in time.

Not in one minute thirty-three seconds.

Once again Sandy reached down to pick up a rock. Smashing through the control box was an exercise in desperation . . . in futility. But was simply sitting there any better?

What did that famous t-shirt say? The Last Great Act Of Defiance?

Gazing down at the control box, Sandy slowly raised the rock.

And saw the green light she was bathed in.

Her . . . the control box . . . the bombs . . .

Another sharp tremor rocked the cavern as she looked up.

"Oh . . . God!"

The last time she had seen the two Foresight robots they had been lying at the bottom of the long fall they had taken down the chasm into the caverns. Their bodies had been intact for the most part, but their legs and other externals had been smashed.

They were still recognizable. Barely. They were still flattened discs of glimmering metal. But the video stalk had been removed and the "eyes" of the robots now gleamed with green light from within sleek turrets set directly into the hulls. The legs and the treads had been replaced by smooth ovoids set into the perimeter of the discs. There was no need for legs or treads . . . both robots now hovered several meters above the ground, the light from their eyes painting Sandy and her surroundings in green.

One minute ten seconds.

Another tremor, and Sandy was suddenly knocked over onto her side. New alarms and blinking lights filled her helmet's interior, and she felt a tiny and deadly breeze at her waist.

And the robots hovered there, watching her.

She felt her lips parting. Felt them already starting to dry from the gradually leaking air.

"H-help me," she coughed.

Fifty seconds.

"Please."

Something rang deep inside her head. Two words.

"What? What was that?"

No reply, no movement. But blue lightning suddenly played across the surface of the robots. Sandy felt herself violently punched in several places, and then realized something was happening to her suit. She couldn't tell what, but half the alarms in her helmet faded away and a cool mist played across her face.

Forty seconds.

More lightning. Sandy felt a small tremor, but it wasn't from a quake. Instead she saw one of the bombs in the circle suddenly crumple as if crushed by an invisible hand.

As she watched each of the bombs in the circle was, in turn, subjected to the same treatment: the deadly metal globes squeezed into shapeless lumps of scrap. There was probably still some danger left from the fissile material within the warheads. But, as explosive devices, the bombs were now useless.

A final burst of lightning, and the invisible fist punched the control box into a flattened piece of junk.

Sandy laid on the cavern floor, slowly collecting her breath, staring back up at the robots.

Then the lights from their eyes quickly faded, and Sandy noticed how shadows were flickering all about the cavern. Turning roughly she saw beams of lights spearing from the passageway which led to the ice caverns. The lights from spacesuits!

Bud! Tom!

She could now hear faint voices growing stronger in her helmet. "Sandy? Sandy?"

"I'm here," she shouted joyously to the voices. All the time in the world now. "I'm here!"

And a massive tremor suddenly rocked the cavern. Sandy gripped the ground as hard as she could, her eyes widening as she saw the crevice appearing in the floor around her. The cavern was splitting in two, a giant crack stretching wide.

The edge of the new precipice was inches away from Sandy's right hand and she carefully tried to scoot away. But the chamber rocked again all around her and she was obliged to gingerly follow the edge of the crack back towards the rescuers.

As she crawled she glanced down over the edge. Wherever the new chasm ended up it stretched far beyond the range of her eyes to see. Even with the light from her suit she couldn't see any sign of a bottom. Just straight walls plunging down . . .

Rotzog!

Sandy suddenly spotted the woman hanging onto the edge of the chasm. She had apparently been lying directly in the path of the opening when it appeared and had fallen in, but was now hanging on only by the tips of her fingers.

Alive!

Another tremor, and Sandy quickened the pace of her crawl, trying to reach the woman. In the back of her mind Sandy had thought she had killed the woman. But there was enough strength left for her to hang on.

She said it aloud: "Hang on!"

"We're almost there, Sandy."

Sandy had now edged over to where Rotzog clung to the chasm lip. She stretched closer, holding out an arm.

"Grab it."

No movement from the woman other than a mild tremble. Sandy stretched out further, trying to touch the woman's helmet. "Take my arm."

And then Rotzog's arm lanced out and gripped hard at Sandy, taking her spacesuit just below the helmet seal. Sandy shrieked as she almost lost her balance, and she quickly used both her hands to steady herself against the edge.

"Don't . . ."

Rotzog was slowly pulling herself up, moving closer, and Sandy could now clearly see into the helmet of the other woman. The visor had been viciously shattered by the blow Sandy had given it, but it hadn't been broken. Rotzog's makeshift spacesuit nonetheless lacked the self-repair capabilities of Sandy's suit, and Sandy knew that the woman only had moments left before she experienced total suit failure. She could see cracks slowly stretching in a lethal pattern across the visor.

Within the remains of the visor: an expression which leaked blood and raw hatred. A face already twisting in the opening throes of depressurization.

"I can help you up," Sandy declared. "Take my arm."

The snarl on Rotzog's face twisted even more, and her eyes shifted as she saw the lights of the approaching rescue party.

Then the venomous look focused back on Sandy.

"Tell him, girl," the ragged voice echoed in Sandy's helmet. "Tell your brother. Tell him I was on the Moon before he was. Tell him. Tell him I was the first. Remember! I was the first!"

"No!"

But the grip loosened and, as Sandy watched, the Moon Witch slowly fell . . . drifting out of sight deep into the darkness of the lunar underworld.

She was still watching, her eyes vainly searching for a final sight of the disappearing figure even as hands reached for her, turning her over. Sandy glanced about, could see no sign of the converted Foresight robots.

Her vision was suddenly eclipsed as Tom's helmeted face moved close. "Sandy? You okay?"

All she could do was nod.

"Sandy who was that? Who fell?"

"The first," Sandy mumbled.

"Huh?"

"The first," Sandy repeated softly, closing her eyes. She suddenly felt tired.

Chapter 26: Two Words

Three days later, and the Moon was now a huge departing globe in one of the viewports of the SwiftSpace rocket cruiser "Phoebe".

Sandy hung in weightlessness near the port, staring out at the sight, her arms wrapped tight around herself. It all seemed so still. Almost peaceful.

"Never again," she whispered. "I won't make that mistake twice."

The sharp rich smell of fruit, and Sandy noticed the bulb of juice being offered. She turned to see the concern on Bud's face and gave him a small smile, accepting the drink.

Turning more now to face Tom and her father, the both of them staring at her from across the confines of the passenger compartment. Bud remained close, his arm slipping gently around her waist.

They'd all been treating her like fine porcelain. Walking on eggshells even after the delivery of a clean bill of health from the physicians back at Swiftbase. But the conversation they all wanted to have . . . the real conversation . . . had to wait until the four of them were assured of privacy.

It had to take place here: before Sandy returned to Earth and disappeared into what she knew would be weeks of intensive examination.

She sipped at the juice, her eyes moving to Bud.

"There were twenty-eight kids in the ship before we all blacked out," Bud began softly. "Then we woke up, and there were only twenty-six left."

"Who?" Sandy asked sharply. "Who was missing?"

Bud sadly shook his head and the despair in Sandy's mind grew. They had personally come to know all twenty-eight of the "moon children". But now their memories only held clear pictures and names of twenty-six. The identities of the other two were now missing . . . systematically erased not only from the minds of Sandy and Bud, but from the minds of the rescue party members who had been in the spaceship.

There was more. All clues regarding the other two "children" had also been carefully excised from the computer records in the ship.

"They were thorough," Sandy muttered, turning back to the viewport.

Tom coughed. "We've naturally begun a search of the area."

Sandy nodded at the Moon. "Naturally. And you've found nothing."

"No sign of the two children, or the revamped Foresight robots. Of course we're still looking wherever we can. We've got mapping and scanning equipment down in the caverns. We're studying the Brungarian spaceships---"

"They're on the Moon, Tom," Sandy said, turning back to face him. "They're hidden down there, somewhere deep."

"We know," Tom replied calmly. He exchanged a look with his father.

"We're not abandoning the Moon," Tom Sr. said. "I've spoken with Florian and the commanders at the other bases. Our mutual investment in the Moon is too great to give it up, no matter what's happened."

"We're going to continue," Tom assured her. "Especially after discovering the ice deposits you guys uncovered. That whole area is going to be a new central site for lunar development."

Which might, Sandy silently concluded, be part of some greater scheme. She nodded, half to herself. "And what happens to the other children?"

"Oh they've got no end of new aunts and uncles at Swiftbase and the other facilities," Tom said with a growing smile. "An international medical research team is already getting together and will transfer to the Moon to carefully study the kids. Study them, and also help them adjust to a new life."

"There will be some international repercussions, of course," Tom Sr. added. "The Brungarians have already raised almighty hell over the situation---"

"They're not getting their hands on the kids," Sandy declared hotly.

"They won't . . . Little Mother," Bud promised, giving her waist a mild squeeze. He, like all the others, held firm memories of the emotional parting between Sandy and the Little People, and the solemn promise to keep in regular touch and return often to visit them in their new homes. Surrounded, now, by hope and love.

"The fact that the Brungarians brought atomic weapons to the Moon . . . in clear violation of several treaties . . . puts a lot of weight on our side," Tom Sr. pointed out. "The kids will be all right."

Well, Sandy silently concluded, if you couldn't believe your father, who could you believe? She drained the last of the juice.

"We'll also search for Rotzog's body," Tom slowly said, "but . . ."

"I know," Sandy softly said.

"Those last tremors opened up several deep canyons and chambers beneath the original system of caverns." Tom shook his head. "We've only barely begun to scratch at the surface."

Sandy grimaced, recalling her last sight of the Moon Witch.

Her father caught the expression. "Right now, Young Lady, our primary concern is you." He held up a hand as Sandy's face clouded. "It has nothing to do with the 'Poor Little You' syndrome you're so fond of, but everything to do with what you've experienced."

"I know," Sandy agreed sullenly. "I know. It's just . . ." She shrugged, leaning a bit into Bud's arm. "It's just all the work I have to do."

All the work, and all the things she had to sort out. Things which she still hadn't mentioned to anyone else. Things which possibly wouldn't be revealed even through the examinations she knew were to come.

Was it the Space Friends?

Was it the Senders?

Had they been somehow maneuvered into finding the giant ice deposits beneath the Montes Jura? Had the presence of Rotzog . . . and the Little People . . . somehow been part of some overall and monumental scheme designed to bring humankind to that one area on the Moon?

Rotzog had been pulling their strings . . . but who or what had been pulling hers?

Were the "new" Foresight robots a bonus for the aliens to use?

Sandy breathed slowly, her mind remembering the words she had heard in her head when the robots appeared. She had asked them for help.

They didn't say "yes". They didn't say "of course". They didn't say "we will".

They had said Stay Tuned.

Stay Tuned.

Sandy now felt she had an answer to the questions she had carried concerning the aliens. An answer . . . and dozens upon dozens of new questions.

Bud's arm tightened further. "I would've thought that, after all this, you'd want to slow down a bit."

Sandy almost chuckled. Later on she would remember the laugh during the as yet unknown events which would unfold throughout SANDRA SWIFT AND THE LAND SPEED RECORD.

"Bud dear," she murmured dreamily, "by now you should know that slowing down is the last suggestion you should make to a Swift."