

## Dedication

It's not normally my practice to dedicate my works but, in this case, I wanted to make a special exception. This novel goes out, with the utmost respect and admiration, to a unique group of people whose number includes:

Gaston de Chasseloup-Laubat

Louis Rigolly

Henry Segrave

Sir Malcolm Campbell

Craig Breedlove

Donald Malcolm Campbell

Tom Green

Art Arfons

Bob Summers

Gary Gabelich

Richard Noble

Andy Green

Edward Shadle, Keith Zanghi and the rest of the American Eagle Team

And, finally, to George Harrison!

("He's the Master of Going Faster")

## Chapter One: A Blast From The Past.

"How fast is it going?"

Brushing a bit of her hair aside, Phyllis Newton raised a hand to her forehead and peered up at the smooth contrail arcing across the blue New York sky. "Well, even with our developments in sound reduction, we usually try to comply with local regulations in regards to flights," she explained. "Even those of a test nature, so a lot of our local flights tend to be below supersonic. Most of our sustained high speed flights take place out west, at the Dryden Research Center in California. We also," she added, her smile growing, "occasionally conduct high speed test runs once our planes are out over the ocean and heading for our facility at Fearing Island."

She looked back down at her audience. The thirty boys and girls from the Corning-Painted Post School District were, for the most part, following the progress of the distant aircraft. Some of them, however, were still staring around at the buildings, towers and general activity of the enormous complex which made up the grounds of Swift Enterprises.

Their interest was easily understood. Seeing Enterprises on a video was one thing. It was entirely another thing to experience in real life. Especially when standing on the flight line of the thirteen thousand foot long runway which stretched the length of the complex. The nearby scene was dominated by the broad metal shutters which hid the underground hangar for the "Sky Queen": the Swift Enterprises enormous Flying Lab. Beyond the other side of the runway glittered the waters of Lake Carlopa. As a depiction of scientific and engineering advancement at its most picturesque, one couldn't ask for much more.

"But, to answer your question more directly," Phyllis continued, "the plane is currently traveling at a speed of Mach point seven nine, or five hundred and twenty one miles per hour. It's one of our Swift Enterprises Pigeon Special D-21s; our single-seat variant. Its twin TS-340 engines are capable of producing 4600 pounds of thrust at takeoff."

The boy who had asked the question peered harder up into the sky. "You can tell what kind of plane it is from down here?"

Phyllis nodded softly, her eyes returning to the distant streak in the sky. "Oh yes."

A klaxon suddenly began its sonorous wailing and the youngsters jumped slightly, while Phyllis glanced at her watch and smiled. Right on time.

Warning lights began blinking around the metal shutters covering the underground hangar, and then the shutters began sliding open. As the students watched, goggle-eyed, an enormous winged shape slowly lifted into view, sitting atop a giant hydraulic lift.

Within moments the group was dwarfed by the sleek form of the "Sky Queen II", its shadow almost touching them as it sat glistening in the late morning sun.

One of the boys broke the silence. "Is that gonna take off?"

"Not at the moment," Phyllis pointed out. "It's just being brought to the surface for some routine maintenance work." Which, of course, could've easily been done down in its hangar, she silently added. But the hangar crew had been receptive to her idea of orchestrating a bit of drama for the sake of the visiting students, and Phyllis mentally patted herself on the back as she considered how well her idea had worked.

I should move to Hollywood, she considered.

"We'll be taking a closer look at the `Sky Queen' later on," she told the group. "In the meantime . . ."

She had made certain the group could see her as she suddenly waved an arm back towards the runway. All eyes followed and . . .

Right on schedule (Phyllis sending a silent prayer of thanks) the Pigeon Special D-21 which, only moments before, had been high in the sky above Enterprises, now screamed in for a sudden landing, the cries of the hawk like shape muting to low throbs of power in the humming pulses of its Silentenna sound canceling array. Once again the crowd of students stood entranced as the aircraft seemed to sniff them out, turning and coming to a full stop only a short walk away from them.

"Hot pilot," commented one of the older boys.

Phyllis bit her lip to try and keep from chuckling. They all watched as the canopy slid smoothly back, and a figure in an Enterprises flight suit carefully climbed out, making it down to the tarmac just as the flight line support vehicles began showing up.

To the surprise of the students the pilot began walking towards them.

"I thought perhaps some of you might want to meet our Senior Test Pilot here at Swift Enterprises," Phyllis remarked casually to her audience.

The approaching figure clearly had the attention of the students. Even more so when the flight helmet was removed, revealing a full expanse of honey-blond hair which cascaded down over the shoulders.

"Whoa!" one of the boys whispered.

"I'd like to introduce all of you to Sandra Swift," Phyllis said.

A sunny smile matched the glow in the blue eyes of the approaching young woman, and Phyllis silently estimated that about two-thirds of the boys in the group were now hopelessly in love.

For her part, Sandy allowed herself to become gradually surrounded by the students, answering both questions and requests for autographs.

"That was really you flying up there like that?" one of the girls asked shyly.

Sandra nodded as she jotted down her name again. "My brother's been experimenting with a new reheat design in our engines, and I was gathering data on the radial burner system." She shrugged. "Just a matter of taking it up and programming the thrust system to perform particular burns at specified moments. Nothing serious." She smiled, handing the autograph book back. "I usually try to get at least five hours a week flight time as a pilot. Enterprises require that all its test pilots try to maintain the equivalent of a FAA GS-9 rating or better."

"Have you been back to the Moon yet?" one of the boys asked.

"Not yet," Sandy replied. It had, in fact, been several months since Sandy and Bud Barclay had returned from an adventure which had taken the both of them deep beneath the surface of the Moon, uncovering a lost colony of Brungarian space explorers.

"We saw the Moon Children on the Discovery Channel special," a girl remarked.

"Then you'll be happy to know they're all doing well," Sandy replied. "I spoke with some of them last weekend, in fact."

Smiling, Phyllis silently dismissed herself from the crowd, leaving Sandy in the middle of her admirers.

It was two hours before Sandy caught up with her friend in the Swift Enterprises cafeteria. Phyllis waved slightly as she sat down at the other side of the small table. "Finally managed to hand them over to Arv for the 'Sky Queen' tour," Sandy remarked, reaching for the coffee creamer. "I just barely got to Debriefing and Post-Flight intact. Whew!"

"Thank you," Phyllis said.

"Oh they'll be here shortly for lunch, and you'll get them back for the lab tours and the Gift Shop." Sandy took a grateful sip of her coffee. "So! How did I do?"

"Your timing on that landing couldn't have been better," Phyllis said.

"The things we do for education," Sandy said.

“And we’re doing them well,” Phyllis pointed out. “You and Tom should be happy to learn that Enterprises has picked up another citation for our work.”

Sandy nodded. "Believe me, I am." And, in truth, she was rather pleased at Enterprises efforts on behalf of promoting science and engineering among school-age students.

They both settled into the silence of long association; Phyllis' willowy brunette frame complementing the bloneness of her friend. The daughter of the manager for the Swift Construction Company, she had risen to a senior position within the marketing and public relations division of Enterprises.

Phyllis was consulting some notes regarding the student field trip itinerary. "It certainly doesn't hurt matters to have school kids see a relatively young woman---"

Sandy glanced at her. "'Relatively'?"

"---climbing out of the pilot seat of a hot jet aircraft. Especially if that same woman is also known to have had trips into space and to the Moon."

"Are there any down sides?" Sandy asked with a smile.

"Well," Phyllis shrugged. "Unfortunately, it does tend to make it harder to entice any of the little bottom-feeders into pursuing a career in public relations or advertising art."

"Perhaps we should've mentioned how you were tracking down German spies while in Ecuador. Or helping to outrun torpedoes while in a seacoast."

"Usually, when I'm looking at a resume," Phyllis slowly replied, "I'm admittedly more interested in seeing skill levels in Adobe or QuarkXPress than I am in skullduggery."

"It's no different at my end," Sandy remarked. "Test piloting requires care, attention to detail and a natural tendency towards caution."

"So how'd you get hired?"

Sandy briefly stuck her tongue out at Phyllis.

Something occurred to Phyllis. "You just reminded me of something with the remark about the Gift Shop. If you see Tom before I do, tell him that the Earth Blaster model kit is outselling the Flying Lab."

"Huh! That means I win a bet with Bud. He didn't like the Earth Blaster kit."

Phyllis was about to reply when the air was suddenly rocked by the sound of an explosion, the ground shaking ever so slightly.

Both women paused and, with everyone else in the cafeteria, looked around anxiously. Sandy stood up. "What was that?"

Alarms began wailing all about. "Whatever it was," Phyllis said, "we weren't the only ones who noticed."

Both women hurriedly joined the rest of the cafeteria crowd as they left the building.

Outside Sandy stopped and pointed. "There."

Phyllis had also seen the dark figures rising into the air. The unmistakable forms of Swift Enterprises Security/Emergency Response personnel flying with the aid of Werewasp suits.

"They're heading for the West Fence," Sandy said. "C'mon."

Phyllis followed her friend, the two of them jumping into one of the nearby utility carts. Switching it on Sandy immediately pulled onto one of the roads which criss-crossed the complex. As they drove the sirens began gradually vanishing.

"Your kids," Sandy said.

"With luck Arv should still have them in the `Sky Queen'," Phyllis replied, mentally crossing her fingers as visions of her carefully planned presentation to a crowd of young innocents crumbling into disaster filled her mind. "They might not even hear anything." But she took out her phone and, dialing Arv Hanson's personal number, made a personal check while Sandy continued driving.

The cart soon reached the outer road which circled Enterprises. Spotting a pair of emergency vehicles, Sandy made them her destination.

"The kids are fine," Phyllis reported, putting her phone away. "Arv was showing them the `Sky Queen' hangar deck."

Sandy nodded, her attention on the emergency vehicles, their lights flashing. Above her two Werewasp suits raced by, the downwash from their turbine rotors briefly blowing across her body as they sped on. They were flanked by three of the Enterprises robot surveillance drones, a group of which had been automatically launched when the alarms had sounded.

Pulling up at the scene, Sandy switched off the cart and jumped out, Phyllis close at her heels. She immediately headed to where three familiar figures were standing at the nearest of the vehicles. One of them was her brother Tom: a slightly taller and older male replica of herself.

He was in conversation with his father. Tom Swift Sr. was, along with his son, dressed in a business suit, and Sandy remembered that they had both been involved in a business meeting which had doubtless been interrupted by the emergency. He was as tall as his son and carried his slightly stockier form easily.

Another man stood nearby, adjusting his large horn-rimmed glasses while glaring through them with a clear air of authority. Despite being only a few years older than both Sandy and Tom, Sherman Ames had long ago proven himself capable of being the Chief of Security at Enterprises. He had learned his trade . . . quite literally . . . at the knee of his father: the redoubtable Harlan Ames. A man who maintained a marble column build with the aid of intensive martial arts work, Sherman seemed to see everything at once, and he was the first to notice Sandy and Phyllis as they approached, nodding briefly at them before returning to giving orders into his phone.

The two Toms then noticed the approach of the women. Sandy's father nodded. "It seems to be over," he remarked.

"Over!" declared Tom hotly, turning to scowl at something.

Sandy followed her brother's look, her eyes widening.

The Swift Enterprises complex was surrounded by two layers of perimeter fence: both walls stretching up to eighteen feet in height. A narrow stretch of protective electrical wire crowned the upper edge of the fence line. Although deceptively mild when in comparison to the sort of defense used by similar facilities, Sandy knew that both layers of fence were liberally laced with a variety of protective systems. The fence material itself was reinforced with a resin composite based on Tom's Durastress plastic: each strand supposedly harder than synthetic diamond fibers. Tests had shown that the fence could withstand a high-speed collision with a speeding truck.

Something, however, had managed to beat the tests. Sandy saw a ten foot wide gap in both fence lines. Where the gap ended the fence edges appeared to be twisted and curled, almost as if the fence had been exposed to enormous heat.

The picture of great heat was completed by the large burn mark in the ground which marked where the gap was once crossed by the fence.

Tom Sr. tried to reassure his son. "It's all right," he said, placing a hand on Tom's shoulder. "So far there doesn't seem to be any further damage."

Tom nodded silently, the touch of his father apparently calming him down.

Sandy was less inclined to be mollified, but she reminded herself that her father had, in his own day, experienced adventures and challenges which made a blown section of supposedly unbreakable fence mild by comparison.

For his part, Sherman Ames was not easily settled and he paced about, still speaking into his phone, staring out at the treeline beyond the fence as if daring the thick collection of maple trees to suddenly confess. Sandy could see Swift security people wandering about the fence, as well as searching about the trees themselves. Above her floated a small cloud of surveillance drones and Werewasps.

Sherman finally snapped his phone shut and turned to the group. "No immediate signs of any unauthorized vehicles in the area," he reported. "Preliminary report on the explosion site reveals nothing as to what caused the break, but I've got a team from the Chemistry Department coming over to take samples.

Tom Jr. nodded gratefully. "Thanks."

Touching his glasses in what passed for a salute, Sherman moved off to personally join his people.

Tom turned to Sandy and Phyllis, a small smile appearing as he looked at the latter. "Was your presentation ruined?"

"I hope not," Phyllis replied, running a hand through her hair anxiously. "I guess I ought to go and try to recover the situation. And I guess I'd better go ahead and contact Dody and the others in Legal and begin some sort of damage control. Just in case."

Tom nodded, moving to give his girlfriend a brief hug. Long practice told both Sandy and Phyllis that Tom's mind, or at least most of it, was still involved in what had caused the break.

Sandy's father was equally occupied and he looked around, his hands on his hips. "We're near Physical Plant number one," he remarked. "Cooling and water treatment. Nothing really to suggest why a break-in would occur here."

"If it was a break-in," his son replied thoughtfully.

Sandy went closer to the gap in the fence, wanting a closer look. No odd odors were noticeable, and the ground didn't even seem warm. But the forces which had torn apart the fence had to have been intense and she frowned at the wide burn mark at her feet.

"Hey!"

Everyone looked up to see a Swift Security officer waving from near one of the trees. It became a race to reach him, with Sherman just barely beating both Tom and Sandy to the spot. Above them the drones and Werewasps began to draw closer.

The officer was now kneeling next to a prone figure who had, up to now, been hidden in the shadow of a thick maple. The dark colors of her tunic had also worked to prevent her from being immediately seen.



If she had been standing, Sandy guessed that the woman would be a bit taller than herself. Perhaps the same age. Casually dressed, possessing a clear complexion and a head covered by dark auburn hair cut short.

"She seems unconscious," the officer was saying as the others came closer.

Reaching for his phone Sherman barked orders and, with a rush of jetwash, two Werewasps settled down nearby, the turbine wings folding back as their operators unlimbered medical kits and moved towards them.

Kneeling down alongside the officer, Sherman performed a rapid search, eventually producing a slender wallet from a small purse clutched in the woman's hand. Opening it he examined the contents.

"Mmm . . . mmm . . . yes! Here we are." Sherman straightened up slightly. "A Shopton driver's license issued in the name of Ithaca Fogger."

## Chapter Two: Problems.

Hours passed before matters settled down enough to allow for a post-mortem of sorts. Phyllis managed to herd her young charges safely back onto the bus (their bags loaded with model kits, action figures, home science kits and die-cast replicas) and, feeling something like the Red Queen from *Through The Looking Glass*, rushed to the Administration Building just in time to be the last person to enter the conference room.

Sandy nodded up at Phyllis' arrival, indicating the empty seat next to her, and Phyllis gratefully settled into it, managing a smile at Tom across the broad round table. He was sitting between his father and Sherman Ames . . . and then Phyllis was surprised to also see Sandy and Tom's mother seated next to Tom Sr. Mary Swift was a graceful matronly blonde who now calmly swiveled her chair back and forth, giving Phyllis a smile which could calm ocean storms.

Apparently, however, Sherman Ames was a weather front which couldn't be diverted, and Phyllis could read how a lot of the tension in the air was radiating from the Enterprises Security Chief. He was glaring down at a computer display screen, as well as a few open folders, and everyone in the room seemed to be expecting a volcano to erupt.

Phyllis' perceptions were confirmed when Sherman finally broke the silence.

"So!"

Sherman Ames was a competent and effective security boss. He was also of the opinion that dramatics occasionally belonged in his business, and the opinion extended to his

speech patterns. When angered, or upset, his voice tended to take on a thick, clipped cadence which made Phyllis think of the British actor Steven Berkoff.

He now pushed himself away slightly from the table and slowly presented everyone at the table with a burning stare. "So!," he repeated. "I only now find out that our mysterious visitor is, among other things, closely related to a former adversary of Mister Swift. This . . ." he peered back down at a folder, "Andrew Foger."

Tom Senior sighed gently. "Sherman---"

Sherman raised a hand for silence, his eyes moving back down to one of the open files. "Foger," he read aloud. "Andrew Alpha. Only son of Arlington Alpha Foger, prominent banker associated with Snedecker-Foger Savings & Loan of Syracuse and Rochester.

"Extensive arrest record . . ."

Tom Sr. closed his eyes.

". . . mainly associated with numerous misdemeanors, felonies and frauds. Managed to escape several lengthy jail terms due to his father's influence."

"He was mainly a bully, Sherman," Tom Sr. said.

An authoritative turn of the page. "Through details which even my people have been unable to yet uncover . . . even after making use of Pierce Library assistance . . . Andrew Foger managed to enlist in the United States Marines. Served three tours of duty with no problems." Sherman's scowl deepened.

"Married Eleanor Grace Vroom of Seneca Castle. One child, a daughter: Ithaca."

Sherman slapped the folder shut. "And now this 'Ithaca Foger' happens to just show up outside our security fence at the same time said fence is damaged by contact with an as-yet undetermined destructive force."

Phyllis mentally wondered if Sherman's attitude would improve if she tossed a haunch of meat across the table at him.

The security chief let out a long slow breath. "I appreciate the brilliance and cleverness of all you people," he said in a lower voice. "But did it ever occur to any of you to perhaps let me know about this past problem with the Foger family?"

Tom Sr. tried again. "Sherman . . . Andy Foger was just a bully. An irritant, really."

Sherman looked down, seemingly prepared to read off Foger's criminal record, and Tom Sr. sped up. "I mean, do you keep records of everyone who teased or bullied you while you were growing up, or when you were a teenager?"

Sherman looked up, eyes blinking in slight surprise behind the glasses. "Yes."

"Oy," Sandy murmured.

Mary Swift now took the opportunity to speak up. "I believe what Tom is trying to say, Sherman, is that you needn't go into conniptions over the Fogers." She lifted a finger as thunderstorms gathered on the security chief's face. "I'm not denying the fact that Ithaca's sudden appearance warrants further investigation. None of us here are. But, before we break out the flaming pitchforks and agitated villagers, perhaps we should gather more information."

Sherman nodded, apparently a bit more mollified, and seemed to settle down. Phyllis noted the small smile on both Sandy and Tom's faces, and suddenly remembered how, when he was growing up, Sherman Ames could always be brought to heel by a plate of Mary Swift's cookies. "What have you come up with so far?" Mary continued.

Sherman, unexpectedly unsaddled from his Stephen Berkoff voice, shuffled his notes about briefly before continuing. "Chemical analysis of the fence blast area still inconclusive," he reported, his voice much calmer now. "Conventional explosive traces would've shown up by now so we're now considering more exotic options. Ah-hhhh . . . I've requisitioned one of your atomic trackers for help in this," he added as an aside to the younger Tom.

Tom nodded. "Requisition away. I'd like to know what could punch a hole through my fence. Any other signs?"

"Damonscope analysis shows no radiation. A Gauss meter reading has indicated some residual magnetic force---"

The two Toms glanced at each other, and Sandy could almost see the equations zipping across the air between them.

"---and we're looking into that. I'm passing all results to various laboratories."

"What about Ithaca Foger?" Sandy asked.

Sherman nodded, seeming more on solid ground with the new topic. "She is currently at Shopton Hospital, admitted with a diagnosis of concussion. I have our people keeping her under observation." Here he tapped the edge of his glasses, which everyone at the table knew included a sophisticated multi-function radio receiver. "At last report she was still unconscious, and I hope to be present when she awakens."

"Gently," Mary softly cautioned.

Sherman nodded, consulting his notes. "No automobile tracks were spotted anywhere near the place where Miss Foger was picked up. No unoccupied vehicles have been located anywhere in the vicinity of Enterprises, and none of the local taxi companies report having delivered her here." Sherman touched his glasses. "I'm now considering asking around to see if anyone working here happened to pick her up and drop her off at the fence."

Phyllis envisioned Sherman's version of "asking around"; her imagination producing visions of red-hot pincers and boiling lead.

Well . . . for that matter she also wanted to know more about Ithaca Foger's presence.

Sandy looked around briefly, then spoke up. "I'm probably going to sound stupid here, but has anyone thought of asking Ithaca's parents about whether or not they know why she's here?"

She noted how her parents looked at each other. "The Fogers haven't . . . exactly been a part of our social scheme of things," Mary reported to her daughter.

Deponent sayeth not, Sandy mentally concluded. "I'm sort of understanding that now," she replied. "But the perverse side of me is thinking that it might be interesting to see the sort of reaction that occurs when the Fogers learn that their daughter has been found unconscious outside of Swift Enterprises."

Across the table an evil smile appear on Sherman's face. The security chief began tapping on the computer screen before him, and Phyllis sent a quiet prayer heavenward, suspecting that anyone caught in the Fogers shoes would be facing some uncomfortable times in the near future.

Tom Sr. had been sitting in silence for a while. Now he nodded to himself and stood up. "I'll drop by the labs and see what further results were made on the tests you ordered, Sherman," he said mainly to the table top. "Keep me informed."

He left the room, and then it was Sherman's turn to nod. "I'll get back to my own work," he announced, switching off his screen and gathering the files. "If anyone needs me I'll be at the hospital, awaiting Ithaca Foger's recovery. I've also increased security around the Residences," he added, heading for the door.

Everyone waited until he had left before exhaling noisily.

"I like Sherman," Mary Swift began. "I really do, but . . ."

"Harlan created a monster," Phyllis finished.

"Well . . . not quite that bad, perhaps."

"I heard the capital `R' when he used the word `residences!'" Phyllis looked around. "Didn't anyone else hear a capital `R'? How does he do that?"

Tom was scratching the back of his head, grimacing. "My problem is that I want to know the answers to the questions Sherman's asking," he said. "I'm afraid I'm not in a position to assume moral or ethical superiority here."

"Sherman wouldn't do anything untoward," his mother declared.

Beneath the table, Phyllis crossed her fingers.

She then noticed how both Tom and Mrs. Swift were staring rather moodily at the table top. "Well, if anyone's wanting some good news," she piped up, "the field trip worked out very well today. Plus we've received inquiries from other area schools about visits and on-campus demonstrations of Swift inventions."

Silence from both Mary and Tom.

"And the cheers were deafening," Phyllis muttered, sitting back.

Sandy was frowning. "What's the matter?" she asked her mother and brother. "I mean, so okay . . . the fence gets busted by a mysterious force and the daughter of an old enemy materializes out of nowhere. Is that any reason for us to worry?"

Everyone looked at her and she did a mental replay, eventually nodding. "Yeah. I can't believe I just said that."

"It's got nothing to do with Ithaca Foger`s mysterious appearance," Tom told her.

"And I can't believe you just said that," Sandy replied.

Tom almost smiled. "Actually, the problem's with Dad."

Sandy blinked. "Huh?"

"He's sort of . . . pre-occupied," Mary Swift pointed out.

"I noticed that," Phyllis said. "Back at the fence today. Mister Swift seemed really calm about the whole business. I was sort of impressed with his cool."

Sandy stared sharply across the table at Tom and her mother. "What's wrong with Dad?"

"It's not so much Dad," Tom replied. He exchanged a look with his mother, then continued. "We've received some bad news today from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission." Tom sighed. "We might have to close down the Citadel and stop

production of our atomicars and Mighty Midgets." Another sigh. "All our work in nuclear energy has to halt immediately."

### Chapter Three: Problems (The Sequel).

Sandy stared, wide-eyed. "That's . . . crazy!"

"We had a visit from NRC reps shortly before the fence got broken," Tom replied. "Thank God they weren't on the premises when that happened."

Sandy was still trying to take it in. "Wh-why is the Commission on our backs all of a sudden? Our safety record in relation to atomic power is unprecedented."

Next to her, Phyllis was nodding. "There's never been a recorded accident involving a Mighty Midget." She was referring to an invention of Tom's: a cold fusion atomic power capsule which provided energy for several Enterprises inventions. The Midget was the major power source for one of Enterprises' major exports: the triphibian atomicar.

"The Commissioners mentioned the business in Faisalabad---" Mary Swift began.

"Which was due to those Kranjovian whack-jobs trying to modify a Mighty Midget into a bomb," Sandy quickly pointed out. "Hell, we were unable to put the Midget out on the market in the first place until we proved . . . proved . . . that tampering with a Midget only turned it into expensive junk. The Kranjovians suffered more damage from their own explosives than from the mess they made of the Midget."

"And all accidents involving tommycars have been due to standard pilot failure," Phyllis added. "If anything, the fact that the Midget goes inert after a severe impact proves its safety track record."

"Absolutely," Sandy said. "And it's not like we just hand out atomicars to anyone. If anything, people have complained because our licensing and training process for owning and flying one is more stringent than it is for owning a private jet." She blinked and looked at Phyllis. "Refresh my memory. How many triple-A's did we issue last year?"

Phyllis held up three fingers.

"Three," Sandy pointed out. "Only three qualified last year to pilot tommycars without constant cybertron guidance." She sputtered in exasperation. "A kiddy ride at the park would give a driver more freedom. We're taking baby steps here in commercial atomic power application. And don't even get me started on the safety procedures down at the Citadel."

"You're preaching to the choir, dear," Mrs. Swift gently pointed out.

Sandy tried to collect herself. "I know. I . . . know." She sat back down, frowning across the table at her brother and mother. "It's not just about the atomicars and the Citadel and Faisalabad, is it?"

Tom and Mary exchanged a look. "Your father feels that members of the Commission are somehow receiving pressure from outside sources," Mary said to her daughter.

Sandy's eyes sharpened. "Who?"

"Dad's best theory, right now," Tom said, "is that perhaps the pressure is coming from a loose conglomeration of legislators representing the oil-producing states, as well as certain industrial interests in league with oil-exporting nations."

Sandy felt as if her face was going to fall off. "That's nuts!"

"Is it?" Tom softly asked.

"Dad's work made it possible for nuclear power to be both plentiful and practical," Sandy pointed out. She quickly nodded, "Yes, I know a good portion of the world still depends on fossil fuels, but does everyone want to suddenly go back to the 1960's?"

"It's all about money," Phyllis said, turning slightly towards Sandy.

"I know." Sandy had stood up and was now starting to pace back and forth, running a hand through her hair in exasperation. "It just . . . irks me that we've been using nuclear power for so long now, without any severe problems, and now the officials are bringing up safety issues."

"On the bright side," Tom said, with a small chuckle, "sales of our solar batteries has increased."

"Hmph! And why haven't the high and mighty Commissioners declared that we simply switch over from Mighty Midgets to solar batteries for the atomicars?"

She paused, noting the look that passed between Tom and her mother. "Oh God. Now we're letting government agencies dictate product development?"

"We haven't completely knuckled under yet," Tom declared.

Sandy nodded, suddenly feeling tired. "What's Shunnon doing in Washington? What are we paying a lobbyist for anyway?"

"Cole's in overtime mode right now," Tom told her. "We're waiting for a report from him concerning Dad's idea about an oil-based coalition opposing us."

Sandy was shaking her head, chewing on a knuckle. "Poor Dad."

"It's not like things will happen overnight," Tom said. "Despite their insistence on immediate action, the Commissioners are fully aware that we can't just throw a switch and turn off the Citadel."

The Citadel was Swift Enterprises' atomic research facility, located in New Mexico. For years it had served as one of the crown jewels in Enterprises scientific and industrial efforts.

"That's true," Sandy said, turning suddenly to look at Tom. "And what about all the government-sponsored research going on down there? Won't General Johnson have anything to say about the Commission's decision?"

Tom nodded, "And also on Cole Shunnon's to-do list today is a call to the Pentagon."

"Good," Sandy said, half to herself. "Good."

Phyllis took in Tom and Mary with a look, then stood up to touch Sandy's arm. "Lunch break," she announced.

Sandy's eyes met hers and, at first, it seemed as if there'd be an argument. Then Sandy briskly turned and stormed out of the conference room. Giving Tom and Mrs. Swift a parting, despairing glance, Phyllis quickly followed.

She caught up with Sandy halfway down the executive office corridor. "Hey, Sunshine!"

Sandy mumbled something, still walking towards the elevator.

"Chief test pilot isn't enough," Phyllis continued in a light-hearted mood. "Now we're applying for a new position as well."

Despite herself, Sandy glanced at her friend.

"Defender of the Faith for Swift Enterprises."

Sandy coughed around a chuckle that tried unsuccessfully to escape. "It's just . . ."

"I know," Phyllis agreed.

Reaching the elevator, Sandy stabbed at the button. "Do you know what Dad put into the Citadel?"

"Hey," Phyllis assured her, "I said I know!"



"That man started out building engines from scrap and refurbishing motorcycles in his father's workshop," Sandy hotly declared. "He barely had time for a formal education. And now they come to him. Nuclear physicists and respected scientists from all over the world. They come to him!"

The elevator door opened and Sandy stormed in. "So his reward is to get his life's dream declared 'unsafe'," she muttered, adding a few choice nouns which Phyllis pretended not to hear.

Instead, she tried to calm the other woman down. "San, once again you're preaching to the converted. I'm one of your Dad's biggest fans . . . although I suspect I'd have to stand in line behind my folks."

"I'm just, I don't know. So mad right now."

"You have a right to be," Phyllis declared, selecting a destination for the elevator. "And I'm sure everything will come out okay. It's not like this is the first time your brother and father has come up against legal problems."

"It's different this time," Sandy pointed out.

Phyllis raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"This time I'm going to help."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Miss Foger?"

From her hospital bed, the young woman looked up from the newspaper she was reading to smile at her doctor. "Yes?"

"Just wanted to let you know we've been getting some of your test results back," the doctor informed her. He seemed a bit nervous about something. "Your Cantu guideline scores are fine. You haven't complained of headaches, there's been no vomiting and, other than being unconscious when you were found, there've been no apparent motor coordination problems. Your Glasgow score was 13, which isn't too bad at all. We've diagnosed you as having minor head trauma although, truth be told, other than the unconsciousness I mentioned earlier, there's really no evidence of any problem." The doctor looked up from his notes, seeming to fidget once more.

The woman smiled again. "So I'm free to go?" Her eyes flicked beyond the doctor's shoulder. "Or is the gentleman patiently standing behind you wanting to ask a few questions?"

The doctor coughed a bit, looking over his shoulder at the man who stood in the corner. "Miss Foger, this gentleman would like to inquire---"

"If you're nervous about legalities," the woman broke in, "then please don't bother." The smile on her face grew as she patiently folded the newspaper and set it on the table next to the bed. "I'm certain Mister Ames' business is entirely legitimate, and I'll be happy to speak with him."

The doctor and Sherman Ames stared at each other for the space of a few heartbeats. Then the doctor nodded. "In that case, I'll be back later on."

He left the room, perhaps a bit hurriedly, and Sherman Ames, crossing his arms, slowly approached the bed. His eyes were steadily fixed on its occupant. "We seem to be on a familiar basis," he said in a low voice.

"I suspected that, by now, you'd know all there was about me," Ithaca Foger told him. "And I'd certainly be remiss if I wasn't familiar with the formidable Chief of Security at Swift Enterprises."

An eyebrow rose above one of the lenses on Sherman's glasses. "Indeed! Then I'm sorry to say that, in spite of my reputation, I don't know everything there is to know about you."

Another step closer. "Beginning with your arrival at Enterprises this morning."

Ithaca folded her hands upon the sheet over her lap. "My business involves an inquiry into the whereabouts of a particular scientist."

Sherman's voice hardened slightly. "And does your business often involve simply appearing out of nowhere, plus the destruction of nearby security fences?"

Ithaca's lips parted, revealing well cared for white teeth. "I suppose that, if I denied knowing nothing about any of this . . ."

"Please," murmured Sherman, shaking his head.

"Ummmm." Ithaca seemed to consider the situation. "Perhaps, for my sake, I should reconsider the doctor's offer of legal representation. You already seem to have me measured for a plea of guilty. Of course," she added, partially to herself, "we must then deal with the question as to whether or not any lawyer in Steuben County would be willing to stand up against the mighty Swift Enterprises."

"Especially," replied Sherman, "if the accused insists on making herself as much an object of suspicion as possible."

Ithaca considered the statement. "Very well, Mister Ames. Let's begin at the beginning." She nodded towards an empty chair. "What, for instance, do you know about my professional background?"

Sherman ignored the offer of the chair. "Admittedly not as much as I'd like."

"All right," nodded Ithaca. "To repeat: my employers are interested in the current whereabouts of a scientist. A Doctor Letitia Pinon. She was last reported to be involved in some work at Swift Enterprises."

Sherman remained calm while his memory raced to place the name. "Your employers?"

Ithaca's eyes softened into slits. "Let us, for the moment, concentrate on other things."

"Fine," nodded Sherman. "If we must concentrate on current whereabouts, let's begin with your own. We have no evidence of you having taken any taxi or renting any car. No vehicle was found anywhere in the vicinity of your location. You were simply discovered out within the tree line near Enterprises with no apparent evidence of how you got there other than perhaps walking out from Shopton."

"On such a lovely day," Ithaca added.

Sherman worked to keep his face free of heat. "The section of security fence nearest to where you were found was blasted apart by some sort of unusual force."

"And since, I am a 'Foger', you automatically suspect me of possessing some sort of super weapon designed to be used against the Swifts."

"I automatically focus on the person found nearest the event," Sherman shot back. "The fact that your personal family history features heavily with that of the Swifts . . . and quite against them, I might add . . . I'll trust you'll forgive me for treading down some obvious paths."

"Of course," Ithaca agreed. "Believe me, Mister Ames, I knew what to expect when I took this assignment." Her voice hardened. "You consider my presence here, plus the circumstances surrounding it, to be part of some complex scheme of revenge engineered by my father against Tom Swift. Do I have the facts so far?"

"So far," agreed Sherman.

"And, in the time since my discovery, you've no doubt begun squeezing every possible fact you can surrounding both myself and my family, looking for some sort of link to this revenge theory."

"What I'm looking for," Sherman broke in, "is an answer for both your arrival and what happened to the fence."

Both people glared at each other.

"I can't explain to you what happened to the fence," Ithaca finally said.

"Can't or won't?"

"There's not an answer I could give that would make me innocent in your eyes."

Sherman moved over to the side table. "Is that why your denials have been so poor?" he asked, looking down at the folded newspaper.

"I said I knew what would happen when I came here," Ithaca told him. "I was condemned the moment I arrived."

Sherman took the folded newspaper which lay upon the table, suddenly frowning at it. Rather than being a local publication it was, instead, a copy of the Reno Gazette-Journal.

"Then help me to clear your name, Ithaca," he finally said. "Work with me."

Ithaca's face tightened into resolute lines and she laid back against her pillow, her eyes closing.

"We both have our jobs, Mister Ames. Mine involves Dr. Letitia Pinon. Find her for me, and I'll cooperate."

Sherman stared at her for several moments. Then, lightly slapping the newspaper against his thigh, he stormed out of the hospital room.

Outside he walked to one of the small group of Swift Enterprises security people who had been waiting nearby. "Within an hour I want to know everything there is to know about Ithaca Foger," he declared, raising the newspaper and pointing it at the man. "Dissect every moment of her life . . . then bring every piece to me."

He stalked off down the hall. "Now, children."

The security people raced off to obey.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in the hospital room, Ithaca Foger opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. Almost a minute passed before she produced a long, mocking laugh.

"Oh yes, Sherman Ames!" she declared.

In a single smooth movement she sat up in bed, her right arm straightening out ahead of her. Metal glistened and a slender blade was now stuck in the wall opposite the bed.

Ithaca's eyes sparkled in delight.

"Oh yes!"

#### Chapter Four: Phyllis Has An Idea.

"It's like a tomb around here," Sandy said.

On the monitor screen Bud Barclay nodded. "I'll be on my way home tomorrow. But don't worry. We've been up against things like this before. If Tom gets too down in the dumps, remind him about the Earth Blaster tests."

"I know," Sandy replied, leaning back in the chair at her office and exhaling noisily. "It's just . . . it's just frustrating seeing what this is doing to Dad as well."

"Well, between the brain power in those two, I bet a solution will be in the works before I touch down."

"I can't wait," Sandy said, smiling now at the screen. She and the senior astronaut of Swift Enterprises had been dating for years and were what many people considered an "item". "So. The negotiations are going well?"

"Going very well. Dr. Kimura agrees to the site selection and we can begin with the layout proposals at the next UNLISCO meeting." He shook his head slightly. "I sort of wish I'd had Phyllis with me. Or you. I'm not up to these diplomatic powwows."

Bud was currently in Tokyo, representing Swift Enterprises at a meeting with officials of the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency. The purpose of the meeting surrounded the eventual development of a joint multi-national facility to be established at the lunar ice deposits which he and Sandy had discovered.

"From what I've heard you're doing fine," Sandy said, reaching for her coffee. A smirk grew across her face. "Especially with Satomi Kimura."

Bud looked as if something had suddenly been dropped on his foot. "I . . . what . . . oh . . . hoo boy!"

"You didn't know that footage made Entertainment Tonight?"

"You never watch Entertain----" Bud closed his eyes, took a breath and tried again. "Dr. Kimura suggested I let his daughter show me around the town."

Sandy demurely sipped at her coffee. "Mmm-hmm. From what I saw, she was showing you quite a lot. Pretty impressive architecture."

"Sandy . . ."

"Quite all right, love. I know it was all in the name of business. You had absolutely no interest whatsoever in that nasty girl."

"Sandy . . ."

"I must admire your acting abilities, though. You certainly managed to fool everyone into thinking the two of you were being closely intimate."

"She's already engaged."

"Yeah, and I got a pretty good idea of what she was engaged in." Sandy blew a mild kiss at the screen. "Take care on the flight home, dear, and we'll discuss the road show of *The Mikado* later on."

Bud, looking rather winded, nodded blankly and reached for an offscreen switch. The monitor went dark and Sandy chuckled.

"Was that the sound of a chain being yanked?" a voice asked.

"More like a leash being pulled a little," Sandy replied, smiling at the doorway. "Hi, Bingo."

Bingo Winkler . . . all five foot five inches of her . . . trotted into Sandy's office, waving some envelopes about. "Your copy of *Air & Space* arrived," the diminutive black-haired girl remarked, "and I thought I'd bring the rest of the mail by."

Sandy nodded, accepting the items.

Bingo nodded at the dark monitor screen. "So. Buddy finished foolin' `round with the *Dragon Lady* and is on his way home?"

"As I recall," Sandy said, leafing through the envelopes, "the *Dragon Lady* was supposed to be Chinese instead of Japanese. And you've got good hearing."

"The women in my family always get better hearin' when menfolk are concerned. It's a survival skill." Bingo perched herself up on a corner of Sandy's desk. "And it never killed a man to have to be nuzzled back into the herd. But I wouldn't necessarily worry much about the Budster. Everybody can see you're number one on his *Hit Parade*."

"I know," Sandy said. "My problem is that Bud seems to be number one on the Hit Parade of a lot of other people."

Bingo nodded a bit. "Yeah, well . . ." She sat for a moment, rocking her legs back and forth. "Your Daddy and brother work themselves out of this new hole yet?"

Sandy was staring at an AOPA membership renewal form, but her ears had pricked up at the tone of the other woman's questioning. Mary Swift had hired Bingo to help handle the cooking for the Swift family while Bingo's uncle Chow . . . the Swift's former cook . . . was busy with his writing career.

There was no doubt that Bingo was competent at her job, but Sandy had recently begun to suspect that there were hidden depths beneath the girl's folksy outer demeanor. During the adventure in Ecuador she had seemed unusually resourceful for someone simply trained to handle pots and pans. At times Bingo demonstrated a sense of care and protectiveness which seemed to leap beyond what wine to serve with roast beef.

Sandy had also noticed that her mother . . . who had taken to worrying when Sandy began her test piloting career . . . seemed to be more at ease whenever Bingo was in the area. As if a security blanket had been located.

For her part, Sandy wasn't too concerned. If Bingo had something which relieved Mary Swift's concerns then she wasn't in a mood to complain.

"They don't seem to be too worried," Sandy remarked, still going through her mail. "At least not as upset as I've been over this. But, like Bud and Phyllis said, this isn't the first time we've been in a legal bind."

"Speakin' of dragon ladies, what about Miz Foger?"

"Yeah." Sandy turned towards the girl. "Now there's a piece of work."

"You think she had anything to do with the destruction of that piece of fence?"

"Bingo I'd sell you an answer if I had one."

"Her family up in Rochester has disavowed all knowledge of her whereabouts over the past few years," Bingo softly pointed out. "Ithaca Foger was supposed to be a consultant or something like that."

Sandy idly tapped an envelope against her chin, considering that "disavowed all knowledge" was a rather interesting turn of phrase for a self-professed chuck wagon cook.

She then reminded herself that Bingo was a Cordon Bleu chef. Lord alone knew what sort of vocabulary one picked up from such an experience.

"Where are the others?" she asked.

Bingo nodded towards the door. "I saw your Dad headin' towards the conference room a while back."

"Um. Let's go and see what's what." With Bingo in tow, Sandy left her office and walked towards the conference room.

Reaching it she saw her father, her brother and Sherman Ames staring at an image on one of the large curving wall screens. Bud's face watched from an adjacent wall screen, and Sandy suspected he could also see the image the other men were studying: the cheerful face of a woman in her forties. Glasses shading clear blue eyes in an expression framed by a blonde, page-boy cut.

Over at another end of the table, Phyllis looked up briefly at Sandy and nodded before returning to her reading. She was engrossed in a newspaper, her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands.

Sandy gave Bud's image a nod and joined the men. "Who's this?" she asked, indicating the woman's image.

"Ithaca Foger's price tag for cooperation," Sherman Ames reported, still staring at the screen. "Dr. Letitia Pinon."

"O-kay. And she is . . ."

"Was," her father corrected, leaning back against the table. "Last year she spent three months here at Enterprises, helping out with revision work on the Fusion Bear project. She's a plasma physicist; currently the leading authority on adiabatic invariances."

Painful experience had taught Sandy that, if she asked for an explanation concerning "adiabatic invariances" from either her father or brother, she wouldn't leave the conference room short of mandatory retirement.

"She had supposedly returned to her lab at MIT when she finished her work here," Sherman added. "But we've just now learned that she simply disappeared and hasn't been heard from since."

He turned to look at Sandy. "Ithaca Foger's employers would like to know Dr. Pinon's whereabouts. They sent her down here because we're the last place Dr. Pinon was reported working at."

"Huh." Hands on hips, Sandy moved to get a closer look at Dr. Pinon's face. "No one's investigated her disappearance?"



"At first it was thought she had taken a leave of absence after leaving Enterprises," Sherman explained. "Police and FBI have been unable to determine what's happened."

"And who hired Ithaca Foger?"

Sherman sighed. "That's another brick wall I'm working at tearing down. According to my most recent findings, Ithaca Foger's name has been linked to both the RAND Corporation and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. That's all as of a few years ago. Over the last few years, though, she doesn't show up in relation to anyone. At least no one we've been able to pin down. Yet."

"And her family won't explain where she's been during that time."

"Unfortunately, the agents I sent to Rochester dropped the name `Swift' early into the conversation," Sherman replied. "They were practically thrown off the premises." He suddenly looked at Sandy sharply. "And I just found that out myself five minutes ago."

Sandy glanced over to where Bingo was leaning over Phyllis' shoulder, reading the newspaper.

"Hearing gets better when certain things are discussed," Sandy explained to Sherman, her eyes still on Bingo. "It's a known fact."

"Hm. Well." Sherman returned to his study of Pinon's image.

"Have you learned anything connecting Foger to whatever destroyed the fence?"

Sherman shook his head. "But it's interesting that the missing Dr. Pinon was, among other things, an expert in magnetic phenomena. At least that's what I gained from listening to your brother. Increasingly we're beginning to believe that whatever tore the fence apart involved the application of magnetic power on an incredible scale. I don't know about you, Sandy, but I don't believe in coincidences."

"Which makes two of us." Sandy looked over her shoulder to where her father and brother were discussing something with Bud in low tones. "How much are we gonna get involved in the search for Pinon?"

"I think I can still crack Ithaca Foger apart without producing Pinon's whereabouts. In any case, I'd like more information up my sleeve before confronting her again. Right now, your father and brother have other worries."

Sandy's spirits drooped. "Don't I know it."

Either Phyllis was another living example of Bingo's theory concerning feminine hearing, or Sandy and Sherman had spoken their last comments louder than either of them had

thought. "We've really got nothing to worry about concerning the Commission," she announced.

She suddenly had the attention of everyone in the room. Even Bud's image on the screen looked in her direction.

Phyllis kept her eyes fixed on the newspaper spread out before her. "Our safety record concerning nuclear power stands on its own strength, correct?"

Everyone looked at each other. "Well, yes," Tom Sr. admitted. "But the Commission---"

"Even the Commission would bend to favorable public opinion," Phyllis broke in. "The public traditionally has problems following what it perceives to be esoteric bureaucratic ramblings and the results of Washington hearings and such."

She looked up. "But they always rise up in support of things they can grasp. Things they can understand. Especially if a thing grabs the imagination and has the chance to enhance national pride."

Tom Jr. took a few steps closer to Phyllis. "What do you mean?"

"We demonstrate to the public how safe Swift nuclear energy is," Phyllis declared.

Tom glanced at his father before turning back to Phyllis. "We have tours of the Citadel, and the educational videos and such---"

Phyllis was shaking her head. "I'm talking about something bold. Something dynamic. Something that'll grab the public's attention and place them thoroughly in our corner."

Tom nodded slowly. "Okay. And that would be---"

In answer, Phyllis turned the newspaper around and firmly tapped a finger down on a page.

Moving around the table, Sandy stood next to Bingo and stared down at the paper, seeing the item which Phyllis was indicating.

**LAND SPEED RECORD ATTEMPT TO BE MADE!**

Chapter Five: Another Blast From The Past.

Sandy could feel the weight of a lot of polysyllabic questions starting to build within the room and decided to cut things off with a tight opening comment. "We try for the land speed record?"

Phyllis nodded brightly.

"That's 'we', as in . . ."

"Swift Enterprises," Phyllis concluded. "We've done things like this before. Rocket races . . . Tom and Bud's swim across the Atlantic . . ."

"Those were also scientific projects," Tom pointed out.

"And this could be one too," Phyllis told him. "A purely scientific project, but one which could really grab the public's interest."

Sandy recovered the conversational ball. "Wait a minute. You're actually suggesting we try for the land speed record . . . wait! Just what is the record right now?" she asked, looking around.

"Mach two point eight seven," Bud replied instantly from the screen. "Made by that British/Italian consortium two years ago. One thousand nine hundred miles per hour."

Sandy nodded. "So you're suggesting we try to go over twice the speed of sound with a nuclear powered car?"

Phyllis nodded again, smiling brightly.

Nobody said anything for several moments. Then Bingo sighed loudly. "Y'know these silences get pretty interestin'," she remarked, heading for the door. "But I got me biscuits to make and they ain't gettin' made listenin' to nothing. Don't get me wrong," she added, turning back as she reached the door, "I'm as impressed as all heck. Nobody told me so much scientific stuff got done with everyone standin' around and not saying anything."

She walked out, leaving everyone else still frozen in place.

Sandy eventually recovered her voice. "But . . . the atomicar's top ground speed is only 168 miles per hour. Presuming, of course, you're planning on using an atomicar for the attempt."

Phyllis airily waved off the problem. "Tom'll figure something out."

"Tom will . . ."

"You think I'm kidding?" The smile on Phyllis' face widened. "Especially with Tom over there wearing that oh so familiar contemplative look on his face? And Bud's face is behind me right now, but I'm willing to bet he's drooling all over the screen."

Glancing up, Sandy saw that Bud indeed wore the sort of expression one usually found on small boys peering into a candy shop.

Bingo poked her head back into the room. "And we got peach cobbler for dessert tonight, so y'all be careful about washin' your hands before coming to the table. I ain't risking infections over my cobbler. The Frito Pie was another thing altogether. It's supposed to clean your system out if it's made properly. But some of you scientists are the dirtiest people in the world, I swear," her voice echoed as she once again strolled down the hall. "Latex gloves and soap ain't that expensive. And I don't get paid extra around here for comedy relief, just lettin' you know."

Tom was exchanging a long speculative look with his father.

"The land speed record," Tom Sr. murmured. "Accomplished with the help of Swift atomic power."

Tom's eyes were slowly narrowing, and Sandy could already hear the circuits beginning to heat up inside her brother's head.

It was a condition apparently obvious even from the other side of the world. "Skipper," warned Bud, "you're not gonna do anything `till I get back are you?"

Tom shook his head, slowly grinning. "It'll take time to get things together for the sort of effect I want," he said. He slowly turned to look at his friend. "Besides . . . I'll want my best man at the wheel."

"Oh yeah!" Sheer desire burned on Bud's face. "Oh . . . Yeah! I am so on my way home now. See you in a few."

The screen went dark and Tom chuckled.

"A ground vehicle exceeding twice the speed of sound," Tom Sr. contemplated softly. "That'd push a Mighty Midget to the extreme, exposing it to maximum conditions." He seemed to be staring at something on the table before him. "If it failed . . ."

His son was slowly shaking his head.

"No," he whispered to his father. "If it succeeded!"

Tom Sr. looked up and was soon matching his smile. Sandy couldn't help but think that, if they'd been holding glasses of champagne, the glasses would've clinked in salute.

Turning, Tom moved closer to Phyllis. "When and where is this speed attempt being made? Who's doing it?"

Leaning back in her chair, Phyllis pointed at the newspaper article.

Tom focused on the item. "October 27." A small frown crossed his face. "Three months."

He became quiet. "Are you planning on competing with the other attempt?" Sandy asked him.

Tom didn't answer. "The test'll be held out at Black Rock Desert in Nevada."

"Oh good," Sandy said, brightening. "If we need information on the other group we can call up---"

"Where'd this paper come from?" Tom suddenly asked, fingering the pages. "The Reno Gazette-Journal?"

Sherman Ames spoke up. "That's from me, I'm afraid," he said. "I inadvertently picked it up from Friend Foger's hospital room."

Tom nodded, still reading.

"Who's making the other attempt?" Tom Sr. asked.

Sandy wondered if she was the only one who noticed her father's use of the word "other".

Tom scanned the article. "The project is being organized and financed by the Mexico City based multinational corporation . . ." He paused, and Sandy saw his eyebrows raising.

"The Comité para la Electrónica y Mecánicos." Tom slowly looked up to meet his father's eyes.

Tom Sr. nodded. "CEM/Anahuac."

And this, Sandy felt, was where the creepy organ music should've begun. Although only five years old, CEM/Anahuac had already established itself as a major player in the global industrial market, its name occasionally mentioned in the same breath as Swift Enterprises. There had even been recent talk of the corporation establishing its own space station, as well as its own facility upon the Moon.

"CEM/Anahuac never expressed interest in advanced automotive engineering before," Sandy pointed out.

"CEM/Anahuac never expressed interest in anything before," her brother replied. "They've always played their hands close to their chest." Tom's expression became more distant. "Not only could we prove the hardness of our atomic power system, but we'd be bringing the land speed record back to the United States."

His mind was obviously trying to get away to some other far off point and he suddenly nodded. "I've got to go work out a few things," he announced, folding up the paper and tucking it under his arm. "Dad?"

"I'll go get on the phone with Ned and tell him to clear the decks," Tom Sr. replied, following his son to the door. "I suspect we'll be pulling a few all-nighters around here."

The conversation between father and son continued, their voices fading down the hall.

Sherman Ames chose that moment to cough. "And I'd better be getting back to work," he remarked, gathering up his own notes. "This has all been very interesting, but none of it's going to uncover Dr. Pinon anytime soon. And my expertise at high speed automobiles stops at watching action films." He nodded to Sandy and Phyllis. "Later."

Now there was only the two girls in the room, and Sandy crossed her arms, staring down at her friend. "Cleverly produced, I'd say."

"I'd be inclined to agree," Phyllis replied with a smile.

"Not only do you manage to work Dad out of his funk," Sandy pointed out. "Not only have you outlined a plan to rescue our atomic energy program. But . . ."

Phyllis grinned. "But?"

"But . . . with this being a joint scientific and public relations project . . . this means you'll naturally be spending more close time with Tom."

Phyllis looked as if she needed to lick cream off her lips. "Check . . . and mate!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Entering his personal laboratory/workshop, Tom went immediately to his design table. "On."

Around him the room darkened as, above the table, a telejector lobe formed.

"Open atomic file: basic."

The air above the table glowed, and a three-dimensional image of the Swift's triphibian atomic appeared. Slowly it began rotating.

Tom stared at it. "Open new file."

"File name," the table replied in Phyllis' voice.

"Velocity`."

"File established."

Staring at the floating image, Tom absently tugged at his lower lip. "Eliminate all flight and aquatic subsystems."

The image flicked and numerous components vanished.

"Ummmm . . . open new lobe. Expand power plant subsystem and place."

A smaller telejector lobe materialized near the main one. Within it appeared an image of the atomicar's power system.

Hands on hips, Tom looked the images over. He let out a breath. "Open the following files: transonic propulsion . . . extreme materials test results . . . vibration studies . . . atmospheric friction . . . super-critical airfoils . . . ah-hhhhh, ultra high speed telemetry processing." He pressed the tip of his tongue into his cheek. "Integrate those files into the main lobe. Open new lobe. Open file compression lift and place."

Quickly the table rushed to obey, images flickering in the air before Tom's eyes.

"Oh, and some music please."

\* \* \* \* \*

On the large screen: a grainy black and white picture of a smiling man.

"Gaston de Chasseloup-Laubat," Tom announced. "December 18, 1898. Top speed: 39.24 miles per hour."

"Woooooo," Bud Barclay remarked, earning a mild dig in the ribs from Sandy. The two of them, along with Tom, Tom Sr. and Phyllis, were once again in the main conference room, watching Tom's presentation. It was several days later, and Bud was now firmly back at Enterprises and, to Sandy's personal estimation, chomping at the bit.

Two additional people sat at the table. Next to Sherman Ames was Ned Newton: Phyllis' father and the head of the Swift Construction Company. On his shoulders would rest the responsibility for building whatever idea arose from Tom's mind. He was patiently quiet, knowing his turn was soon in coming.

Smiling, Tom touched the screen controls. "Maybe this will impress you more," he said, changing the view.

Another black and white photo; this showing a man sitting in a torpedo-like vehicle.

"Camille Jenatzy," Tom announced. "First man to exceed one hundred miles per hour. April 29, 1899."

"Go, Camille, go," Bud stage-whispered.

"Mister Barclay is rather difficult to please," Tom remarked to no one in particular. "Let's try this."

This time the photo showed two men and a car which looked more like an open tool bench than an actual piece of road equipment.

"America enters the race," Tom announces. "Henry Ford. January 12, 1904. 147.05 miles per hour on a frozen lake, driving the Ford 999 racer."

Bud declined comment.

The next photo showed a color shot of a sleek, open-cockpit red roadster.

"Now that's my idea of a car," Tom Sr. remarked.

"The Sunbeam 1000," Tom said. "Driven by Henry Seagrave. First car to exceed 200 miles per hour."

"March 29, 1927," Bud murmured.

"And British," added Tom. "On March 11 of 1929, Seagrave would drive the Irving-Napier Golden Arrow to a top speed of 231.36 miles per hour. For the next thirty-four years the land speed record would be in British hands."

He touched a button. "Then this gentleman shows up at the Bonneville Salt Flats."

Bud nodded vigorously at the face which appeared. "Breedlove!"

Sandy stared at the image of Craig Breedlove; noting what seemed to her to be an inexplicable and near-impossible mixture of easy-going determination. It was the sort of mixture which seemed to possess some people. For some reason she found the man's expression comfortable. Then it struck her: she had often seen the same look on the face of her father, her brother and Bud.

"In September of 1963, Breedlove breaks the four hundred mile per hour limit with the turbojet powered Spirit Of America," Tom explained.



Something tickled Sandy's memory. "Wasn't there a problem in recognizing the attempt?" she asked.

Tom nodded. "Since the Spirit only had three wheels, the attempt had to be ratified by the international body which governed speed records set by motorcycles."

"Picky, picky, picky . . ."

"It can get that bad," Tom admitted. "Back in 1967, Parnelli Jones was smoking the competition at Indy with a revolutionary gas turbine car. Afterwards, turbine cars were no longer allowed." He smiled. "I didn't quite hear that remark, Bud."

"You don't want to hear it," Bud muttered.

Tom returned to his lecture. "Breedlove manages to dominate the land speed record chase for the next several years, including reaching the 500 mile per hour mark in October of 1964."

"And damn near killing himself in the process," Bud commented.

Sandy tried to push that item to the back of her mind.

The screen switched to show a blue needle-nosed shape projectile. "Gary Gabelich's Blue Flame," Tom announced. "His record of 630.478 miles per hour in 1970 would stand for thirteen years. After this the situation gets a little . . . sticky. The Budweiser Rocket team claims to break the sound barrier in 1979, but the recording procedures weren't clearly established, and so the official honor of breaking Mach One in a car goes to the British Thrust SSC team in 1997.

"Afterwards, it becomes almost a repeat of the race which took place back in the 60's. The Thrust SSC people against the North American Eagle team. Mach 1.10 . . . Mach 1.25 . . .

"And then, two years ago, the Norfolk Lampo rocket-powered car, produced by the engineers at Ferrari/Lotus. Breaks the Mach 2 speed record. Just about sets the world on its ear when it happened."

The image on the screen shifted to show a group of people gathered around a sleek predatory machine. "Now this is what I wanted to point out," Tom said. "I want all of you to notice the distinctive airfoil shape here---"

"Wait!"

Tom looked up in surprise, and Sandy glanced back.

Sherman Ames had left his seat and was approaching the screen. If Sandy felt the Norfolk Lampo had seemed predatory, it had nothing on the expression Sherman now wore.

He was staring at the screen. "Over on the left. Second from the end. Can you focus on that person?"

Tom played with the controls and, on the screen, the picture expanded until it was filled with the image of a single person.

"Oh . . ." Tom whispered.

". . . my God," Sandy finished.

Sherman didn't answer, but a small hiss escaped his lips as, with everyone else in the room, he gazed steadily at the smiling face of Ithaca Foger.

### Chapter Six: Attack!

No one spoke for several moments, and Sherman turned away from the screen, shaking his head.

"How is it possible?" Tom Sr. asked.

"How?" Sherman replied, turning back. "You mean how does Ithaca Foger mysteriously appear on our doorstep . . . then turns out to have been involved in a land speed record attempt some years earlier, just as we're planning on one?"

"Which was inspired by an article in a newspaper you'd picked up in Foger's hospital room," Sandy pointed out.

Phyllis sighed. "And the way the paper was creased, when I began reading it naturally opened to the page that the story was prominently placed on."

Across the table Tom Jr. and Sandy were looking at each other.

"I know that expression on your face," Tom said.

Sandy nodded. "And yes, I think it's possible that we've been manipulated towards this course of action. A long shot---"

"Long shot?" Bud snorted. "I wish I had that sort of reach when I was playing outfield back in my high school days." Seeing the look Sandy was giving him he quickly pushed on. "Foger would've had to have known that we would be facing some sort of trouble

with the authorities over our atomic energy program. She would've had to have somehow known that Phyllis would dream up some sort of combined engineering/PR program to get us out of our fix."

"And what's the point?" Sandy's father chimed in. "Why would Ithaca want us to become involved in a land speed record attempt?"

Sandy stared down at the table top for a moment.

"I don't know," she finally said, standing up and slowly moving closer towards the screen that Tom had used for his presentation. "All I know is that this," and she waved a hand at the image of Ithaca Fogger, "bothers me. The timing is just too neat to be sheer coincidence."

"It bothers me too," Sherman declared. "And I plan to dig into it."

A look passed among the others in the room before Tom spoke. "Well, regardless of the circumstances, the land speed project is still too good an idea to simply shelve on the basis of this development." He added to Sherman, "But let me know what you learn about Ithaca's involvement with the Ferrari/Lotus group. It should be interesting."

Sherman was already tapping a message on his computer pad, but he nodded.

"Before we get sidetracked again," Phyllis said, "and speaking of stories in newspapers, Tom, I'd like something in the way of a progress report that I can include in the media package I'm putting together for the Bulletin and other press outlets."

"Yeah," Tom replied, rubbing the back of his head, "and I'll have something ready for you, Phyl, as soon as a few more details are being worked out. In fact, I should have a definite idea later on today on how the final design and construction of our land speed car is going to be carried out. I'll know more as soon as I hear back from the Microbiology department. But that reminds me." He looked around. "Has anyone been able to find out anything about the sort of car that CEM/Anahuac is going to run in their attempt?"

Sherman, Tom Sr. and Bud all shook their heads. "I've made a few inquiries," Sherman reported, "but nothing so far. As usual, CEM/Anahuac isn't broadcasting anything beyond the fact that they're making an attempt."

Tom nodded absently. "Call Dan at the Bulletin and see if he knows anything."

"If Sherman does that," Phyllis warned, "then Dan will get suspicious as to why Enterprises is interested in CEM/Anahuac's attempt. He'll sniff out what we're planning before I'm ready to stage the formal announcement."

"And, if he does, we'll promise him his usual exclusive," Tom replied smiling. He suddenly looked up as a gentle chime sounded. "Ah! I've got some computer models completing. Kids, we'll get together again later on, but let me get back to this."

His face eager, Tom strode out of the room, heading for his workshop.

Sandy leaned close to Sherman. "Not wanting to horn in on your act, but I'd like to be with you when you figure out the connection between Ithaca Foger and Ferrari/Lotus."

Sherman nodded.

Bud was frowning. "I'd like to follow Genius Boy and peek over his shoulder, but I think I need to go over to the clinic and get my hearing checked."

Ned Newton had been quietly chatting with his daughter, and he now looked up at Bud. "Oh?"

"Yeah. Did I or did I not hear Tom remark that part of his car planning scheme involved the Microbiology department?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Going back to her office, Sandy noted how the door to Tom's workshop was closed. Something inside her felt that, in this case, the adjective "closed" was more than usually applicable to the current situation. There were little signals that Sandy recognized whenever her brother welcomed an audience to witness his work, and she wasn't getting them now.

She smiled at the mental image of Tom bent over his design table, smoke pouring from his ears.

The smile vanished, however, when she saw the prone figure lying on the floor ahead of her, hearing an anguished groan at the same time. It was a man dressed in the uniform of an Enterprises security guard, slowly crawling near the open door to her office.

Rushing towards him, Sandy immediately slapped at one of the large bright red buttons which were placed in strategic locations along the walls of the buildings at Enterprises. A low chime began to fill the air

"State emergency," the automated system replied in Phyllis' voice.

"Medical emergency," Sandy shouted to the air. "Executive Floor, Sandra Swift."

She was already kneeling down beside the guard, carefully touching him. Her eyes swept about the area. "Lisa?" she cried out. "Lisa?"

No response from her secretary.

"This is Medical," a male voice said from the ceiling speakers. "We're dispatching a team to your location, Ms. Swift."

Sandy now recognized the guard as Sam Varigroud, one of Sherman's lieutenants. His face was pinched in pain and his breathing was ragged, but there seemed to be no mark on him.

"Sam."

The guard groaned again, his eyes fluttering open. He seemed to struggle to focus on the woman hovering over him. "Miz . . . Swift . . ." The eyes painfully flickered over towards the door to Sandy's office. "There . . ."

But Sandy was already straightening up and moving to enter the reception area of her personal domain.

"Oh God!"

Lisa Kuttner was slumped over her desk and Sandy immediately rushed to her side. At that moment she felt something . . . almost like a brief burst of wind . . . whip past her. But nothing in the way of a source for the sensation could be seen.

Shaking the mystery away she concentrated on Lisa Kuttner. The woman seemed to be suffering from whatever had happened to the guard and, at Sandy's touch, she groaned and tried to move.

"Shhhhh," Sandy said. "Lie still."

Hurried footsteps, and both Tom and Bud suddenly appeared in the doorway. Sandy noticed that Sherman was in the background, bent over the guard.

Bud reached her first. "What---"

"It looks like electrical shock of some sort," Sandy said. "Both Lisa and Sam."

More sounds and two Enterprises paramedics appeared; their Swift-designed "Paradox harnesses" giving them an almost insect-like appearance.

One of them bent over Sam, touching a sensor-laden glove to the man. The other slipped past Sherman, Tom and Bud and stood next to Sandy, performing the same action on Lisa Kuttner.

"Getting readings," the medic announced. "Yeah, it's shock. No evidence of burns or anything. EEG and prelims seem okay. Let's get her into a more comfortable position."

With Bud helping, Sandy and the medic carefully eased Lisa down onto the floor, propping the woman's legs up on her chair. Tom was out with Sherman and the other medic, doing the same for the guard and glancing back at his sister.

"Back up," the medic advised, spreading out his hands, and both Bud and Sandy leaned away. The medic's hands began gently spraying a mist over Lisa's body from the supply tanks located on his belt. The mist settled, coalescing into a thin thermal antiseptic blanket.

Sandy's father now appeared at the doorway. "What in God's name---"

Sherman straightened up, his hand touching a button on his belt. The emergency chime deepened and its rhythm increased.

"Security alert," he announced to the air. "All stations, report in. We have an assault in progress on the Executive Floor."

Both Bud and Sandy were looking about for a possible accidental source for the shock, but could see nothing.

"I came here and found them like this," Sandy told Sherman. Sherman nodded grimly, looking back at the fallen guard. Then he quickly moved past Sandy to stand in the doorway to her office. For several moments he stood there, slowly gazing about.

"I want a scanning team at Sandra Swift's office immediately," he said to the people listening in via the emergency systems. Turning back to Sandy he added, "I don't want you going into your office until I've cleared it."

Sandy nodded.

Below them, Lisa groaned again and her eyes opened. "Wh-what . . ."

"Move both of them to the Infirmary as soon as possible," Sherman ordered the paramedics. He was pacing around, his eyes (as well as the instruments in his glasses) taking in everything.

"No reason to attack this office," he was muttering. "Not currently involved in high-level work . . ."

He suddenly locked eyes with Tom, the two men suddenly going pale with realization.

"Diversion!" Sherman said.

"Workshop!" Tom said.

With Bud, Sandy and Tom Sr. sprinting behind them, Tom and Sherman raced back down the hall towards Tom's office.

"Tom, stay back!"

Tom wasn't listening to Sherman's warning but, instead, was running faster. And now Sandy could see the door to Tom's workshop. Or, rather, what was left of it. Both halves of the sliding door had been crumpled aside as if they had been made of tinfoil.

Without pausing for a moment, Tom rushed through the opening, disappearing into his office. From where she was, Sandy could hear Sherman swearing as he also picked up speed.

Arriving at the wrecked door Sandy took in several things at once. The first was the sharp tang of ozone filling her nostrils.

The next was the sight of her brother, his fists clenched, standing in the center of his workshop and staring angrily at the smoking remains of his design table.

## Chapter Seven: The Photon.

Sandy slowly stepped into Tom's office. "Tom . . ."

Tom made a sudden, sharp movement with a hand, his eyes still on what was left of his table. Sandy became silent and stood there, quietly looking around. She saw Sherman Ames doing the same and noted a steel tenseness within the man. In her mind she knew exactly what was going through his head. Swift Enterprises employees attacked . . . Enterprises security breached . . . the Boss' office vandalized . . . and all on his watch with him only a short distance away.

For a brief moment Sherman's eyes met hers, then they moved away before unsuccessfully managing to hide the aching embarrassment. He moved away a bit, pulling out his phone and starting to murmur into it before heading back to the doorway to meet the Enterprises security people who could now be heard moving towards the office.

Sandy turned back towards Tom, stepping closer to the wrecked table, Bud and her father close behind her.

Tom didn't immediately acknowledge their presence, but eventually nodded. "This was meant as a demonstration."

"How so?" his father asked.

"This was the work of someone who could clearly penetrate the security around here and work fast at delivering damage. If they could accomplish this," he said, nodding at the table, "then our mysterious adversary could've done worse. Much much worse. This was simply a calling card."

"How much of your work was lost?" Tom Sr. asked.

"That's another reason this could've been worse. All my work gets automatically stored to the central cores. I never keep anything permanent on the table. This is an inconvenience," Tom grimaced, "but little else."

"You're certainly free to use the table in my office until yours gets replaced."

"Thanks. I was wanting your input on a few things at this stage anyway."

Leaving the little group, Sandy went to where Sherman and his people were at the doorway to Tom's office. Sherman was closely running his fingertips along the ruined edge to one of the crumpled doors.

"This is incredible," Sandy heard him murmur.

"No one's supposed to easily be able to come through these doors," Sandy said.

"The key word is 'easy'," Sherman replied. "There's always a way through if you've got enough time and force. These doors were pushed apart. To do this would take some impressive industrial equipment . . . and there's no way for stuff like that to be smuggled unseen. The only other explanations would be high explosives, but this doesn't look like a bomb did it. And we would've heard an explosion."

"The only other remaining possibility that occurs to me---"

"Magnetic power," Sandy finished.

Sherman's eyes met hers.

"On an incredible scale," she added.

"Indeed."

"Most of the doors here at Enterprises are constructed with Tomasite," Sandy pointed out, referring to a durable plastic which had been one of her brother's earliest inventions. "Tomasite is resistant to magnetic effects."



"Magnetic power alone, yes. But could Tomasite stand up to magnetic power in conjunction with something else?"

"Like what?"

Sherman was about to answer when he heard Tom call out his name. Sandy noticed how the young man suddenly appeared as if he'd been summoned to stand in front of a firing squad, and she followed him as he slowly moved towards the group standing near the design table.

"Mister Swift," he intoned solemnly, "it seems that I can no longer protect this facility, or you---"

"Sherman."

Sherman closed his mouth and the two men looked at each other quietly for a few moments.

"If your father taught you anything then it was we've had moments like this before," Tom explained softly. "When they happened, Harlan immediately got to work and kept it from happening again. I think you can do the same."

"He already has," Sandy pointed out. "Sherman feels there's a connection between what happened here and what happened back with the fence."

Interest lightened the faces of the two Toms and Bud, and Sherman seemed to straighten up, but not before he threw Sandy a brief and grateful look.

"I'm still investigating," he pointed out, "but it would seem that the same force which tore through the security fence is also responsible for what happened here."

Tom's eyes narrowed.

"So what you're saying," Bud said, "is that we've got an invisible boogerbear wandering around the place that can tear through walls."

"Maybe," Sherman replied with a grimace. He signaled over to one of his people who came forward and handed him one of the Tiny Idiot hand computers which were in common use among Enterprises personnel.

Keying in some instructions, Sherman passed the device over to Tom. "I've had my people pull the security readings for this floor. Everyone who was supposed to be on this floor was accounted for. But look . . ."

Sandy moved closer to peer at the small screen. She saw the layout of the floor where the major offices were located. Green icons revealed the position of people such as herself, Tom and Sherman.

But she spotted something else. A red icon which blipped about the screen, appearing here and there.

"I'm having it looked into," Sherman explained. "It seems to be an equipment failure. Or it could be something which the sensors were trying to pick up, but couldn't."

Bud was frowning. "What could bollix the sensors?"

"Several factors," Sherman replied. But he looked at Sandy, who immediately knew where Sherman was heading.

Tom also knew. "Distortion through magnetic power."

"I've already ordered several security teams to begin searching the Flying Lab hangar, the computer cores, the power station, the fuel and chemical storage depots . . . all maximum sensitive areas," Sherman announced. "I'm also launching additional drones into the air, as well as increasing security patrols. The drones and the patrols will be equipped with sensors to pick up unusual electrical or magnetic activity."

Tom was nodding and he handed the computer back to Sherman. "Sounds good."

Sherman smiled thinly and turned to go.

"Stay on it . . . Security Chief."

Sherman's step faltered only briefly, and Sandy could see the smile widen on his face as he returned to work.

Her father watched him go. "If I know Sherman," he murmured, "he'll also have increased security at our homes."

"Yeah," replied Bud. "I'd better have my ID with me when I shower."

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SWIFT ENTERPRISES TO MAKE LAND SPEED RECORD ATTEMPT.

ATOMIC POWERED ASSAULT ON THE LAND SPEED RECORD.

RADICAL DEMONSTRATION OF SWIFT ATOMIC POWER SAFETY RECORD.

## TOM SWIFT TO BRING LAND SPEED RECORD BACK TO AMERICA.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Arvid Hanson!"

"Hey, Sunshine!" The lanky man broke into smiles as Sandy rushed to give him a hug. "How's Swift Enterprises' prettiest pilot?"

"Been missing my sweetheart. Oooooooh!" Sandy wrapped her arms around him, squeezing. It'd been years since Hanson . . . once the doyen of the Swift Enterprises model-making team . . . had left the company to form a special-effects studio out in Hollywood.

"And congratulations," Sandy added, smiling up at him. "I hear where Hanson works will be doing the effects and set design work for Childhood's End."

"Cross your fingers," Hanson replied. "Getting that property out of Limbo has taken decades. In the meantime, we're still designing the props and models for the series I'd like to produce on your brother."

"I thought you were busy with working on the Jules Verne series for PBS."

"I was but, when your brother called, I was more than happy to traipse back here and do a little model-work. Besides . . . this I couldn't pass up."

Still smiling, and with an arm still around Hanson's waist, Sandy moved closer to the table in the conference room. The entire crowd had gathered for the formal unveiling of Tom's land speed car design. Besides him and his father, the table was ringed with Bud, Mary Swift, Sherman Ames, Ned Newton, his wife Helen and Phyllis. Even Bingo was in attendance, having supplied a large tray of Danish and a steaming pot of her special coffee.

In the center of the table lay an object lightly covered by a silk cloth bearing the Enterprises logo. Looking at it, Sandy suspected some of Phyllis' dramatic touches at work.

Tom smiled at everyone. "Ready?"

Bud raised an eyebrow. "After three weeks of waiting? Why don't we take two additional hours for supper?"

"Say, that's an idea. Mom? Can you get us reservations at---"

Bud groaned loudly. Chuckling, Tom reached out and, with the air of a magician uncovering his latest trick, pulled the cloth aside. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you . . . the Photon!"

"Oh . . ." Bingo breathed.

Mary Swift agreed. "Nice!"

Glancing up, Sandy saw a look of sheer lust on Bud's face. Smiling ruefully, she returned her attention to the model which Arvid Hanson had constructed of her latest rival.

Everyone was looking at a broad, sleek metal arrowhead, the nose rounded and blunt, giving the entire object the overall appearance of a manta about to strike. The forward end sloped gently upwards, then the remaining one-fourth of the vehicle sloped down at a twenty degree angle. Slight bulges could be seen on the port and starboard undersides.

Moving around, Sandy could see more details in the rear. Twin exhaust ports flanked a dark hexagonal section which made up the more blunt aft section of the vehicle. By peering lower she could also just make out the extension of wheels on the bottom, on the inner sides of the bulges.

"Oh yeah," she heard Bud softly remark. "We're going places."

Mary Swift, universally more pragmatic than Sandy's beau, had also come for a closer look. "I'm going to presume these are the engine nozzles," she asked her son, pointing at the exhaust ports."

"Some of them," Tom admitted.

Mary looked up, blinking. "Some of them?"

Even Bud tore his eyes away. "Maybe we'd better get the full mission profile, Skipper."

Tom nodded. "OK. First off, keep in mind that our objective is to maintain a particular speed over a course of fixed length. In this case, one mile. To get the record we've got to average the same speed on two runs in opposite directions."

"Two one mile trips at Mach 3," Bud considered half to himself. He was staring back at the model, his lower lip pushed out slightly. "Possible."

"Mach 3?" Helen Newton spoke up. "But I thought---"

"The Norfolk Lampo went Mach two point eight seven," her husband pointed out. "If we want to beat that----"

"Then why not go for a nice round number?" Tom finished. "We break the Mach three barrier."

Mary Swift looked up at her son. "Tom, remember I majored in music and took an honors degree in Advanced Girlishness, so . . ."

"Two thousand two hundred and eighty-three miles per hour," Bud murmured. "Roughly."

Mary's mouth made an O.

"I figure I'll cross that one mile in, say, one second," Bud added. "Maybe two. Back home in time for lunch."

Tom was watching his mother. "Why so worried?" he asked her. "Bud and I have traveled at faster speeds before."

"That was in space," Mary pointed out. "Or in the air. This is on the ground. This is more dangerous. And yes, if someone had told me, ten years ago, that I'd be having a conversation like this, I would've laughed."

"I don't think it's Tom's intention to splatter me all over the Nevada landscape," Bud pointed out.

"Hopefully not," Sandy muttered under her breath.

"Let's continue with the gruesome details," Tom said. He indicated the model. "Length: sixty feet. Width: forty-four feet. Estimated total weight: seven tons."

Taking a pointer he touched the forward end of the vehicle. "The Mighty Midget atomic power plant goes in the forward section here. The pilot . . . my esteemed friend, Mister Barclay . . ."

"Autographs available in the lobby," Bud added.

". . . will be safe and secured back here," Tom touched his pointer to the hexagonal section at the rear of the Photon.

Bud pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Maybe you and Arv aren't quite finished yet," he said, "but it seems as if you're a little shy on windshields or viewports here."

"Not at all," Tom replied. "I wanted as few seams hitting the forward end of the car as possible. There won't be any viewports at all."

He had the attention of everyone at the table. "But he won't be driving blind," Tom went on. "The entire forward skin of the Photon will be laced with a sensor web similar to

what I use in my SmartGlas. Bud'll be getting real-time virtual telemetry fed directly to him in the cockpit."

"How long will the sensors hold up to the punishment you're going to be putting them through?" Ned Newton asked. "Unless I'm missing my guess, you're going to be exposing the car to monumental air friction temperatures."

"True," admitted Tom. "And, if the Photon was going to be traveling at great distances, I'd worry. But keep in mind that this car is being designed only for Mach three speed at a relatively short interval. Bud won't need the sensors for much longer than the length of the trip."

Ned nodded but Sandy could sense that his head was still working around the problem.

"So," Tom continued. "We get to the mission profile. Note the rear exhausts flanking the pilot section. Those are solid-fuel rocket motors. They'll be used to begin propelling the Photon towards supersonic speed. When they burn out, they'll fall away, making the Photon lighter.

"At that point . . . Arv?"

Hanson smiled and touched an object he had in his pocket. As everyone watched, the slight bulges beneath the edge of the Photon suddenly folded outwards.

"At that point twin ramjet engines will take over, propelling the Photon to Mach three. These engines have been designed to allow a safe cruising velocity at Mach three, yet the engine inlets can be repositioned so that, if necessary, the engines can also be throttled down to provide for subsonic travel."

Bud slowly whistled. Sandy glanced over to see Phyllis staring steadily at the model and making rapid notations into her computer; her mind no doubt filled with visions of double-page photo spreads and History Channel documentaries.

"It looks as if you've managed to get it going," she said to her brother. "Now how about what happens when it's time to stop?"

"That's the simplest part of all," Tom told her. "It doesn't."

Once more everyone was staring at him. Only Tom Sr. was quietly chuckling.

"To coin a phrase," Sandy said, "'huh`?"

Tom was smiling. "Putting it simply: Bud and the pilot capsule will stop. The Photon, however, will go on."

Sandy shook her head. "Okay. You're losing me."

"And she has company," Bingo piped up.

"Remember the ultimate goal of this project," Tom pointed out. "We want to prove the safety record of our commercial atomic power systems. Everything hinges on how much punishment can a Mighty Midget take and still remain not only intact, but possibly still functioning. A dramatic demonstration, as Phyllis requested.

"So . . . what better demonstration can there be than arranging a high-speed crash involving an atomic powered vehicle?" Tom nodded again to Hanson, who once again touched the hidden control in his pocket.

"We make and confirm Mach 3," Tom pointed out. "Bud then ejects in the pilot compartment."

As everyone watched, the hexagonal section in the rear of the Photon separated from the main body of the vehicle. "The pilot compartment then fires forward-facing retro-rockets which will slow it down. "As for the main body of the Photon . . . which is carrying the Mighty Midget . . . it will continue on course for a planned crash impact with Black Rock Point, which is located at the extreme end of the Black Rock Range." Tom looked around at his audience.

Phyllis coughed and Tom looked at her. "Yes?"

"I'm just wanting to get this straight," she asked Tom. "You're planning on having Bud break Mach three in the Photon, and then you're going to fire an atomic warhead at a mountain?"

"That's not quite---"

"No," agreed Phyllis, "but that's what the media will turn it into. Trust me."

"Everything will be monitored and controlled," Tom explained. "Besides, this isn't just a wild whim of mine." He looked over at his father. "Dad?"

"We've been receiving inquiries from the Department of Defense and several engineering research centers," Tom Sr. explained. "Even the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has pedaled back on some of its complaints and is talking about sending observers. It seems there's considerable interest in seeing the effect of a Mach three crash. Bud may end up taking along several recording instruments."

Bud shrugged. "The more the merrier."

"Can you deal with that?" Tom asked Phyllis.

Phyllis shook her head but resumed poking at her computer.

"I'd like to pick up on an earlier issue," Sandy said. "I'm sort of in the boat with Uncle Ned concerning this business about the effects of friction. If I recall correctly, the Norfolk Lampo encountered some severe problems along those lines. There were some accidents before they finally succeeded."

Tom nodded. "True. And the problem's been on my mind as well."

"The Photon will be traveling faster than even the Flying Lab," Sandy pointed out. "I know Tomasite is good, but--"

"But the Photon's skin won't be completely made up of Tomasite," Tom said. "I've developed an entirely new approach to producing an alloy which should withstand extreme temperatures and related stresses long enough for the Photon to complete its run."

"Okay," Sandy replied. "All and good. But Bud and I have been brainstorming over this, as well as checking out the activity in some of your usual labs. We haven't been able to figure out what you came up with, so we were naturally a bit curious."

"Understandable. But I didn't use any of my standard materials processing technology to create the skin for the Photon."

Sandy raised an eyebrow. "Oh? So what did you do?"

"Simple. I grew it."

#### Chapter Eight: Sandy Receives An Invitation.

Sandy's eyebrows climbed higher. "You . . . grew it?"

Tom nodded, smiling.

"Like a mushroom?" Bingo asked. "Like a tadpole? Like a bluebonnet?"

"A bit more complicated than that," Tom told her.

"Color me surprised," Sandy said.

"Yeah," her brother continued a bit ruefully. "Let me explain. As I mentioned, the Photon will have to resist extreme air friction temperatures for the relatively short amount of time it'll be traveling at Mach three."



"You're sort of making a disposable car," Bud commented.

"Yes, but not a disposable pilot."

"I appreciate it. Believe me."

"Thanks." Tom went over to a cabinet near the display screens, returning with a smooth and gently curved length of material in his hands. To the people in the room the material seemed to glimmer with a pearlescent light.

"A sample of the Photon's hull," he announced, passing it to Bud.

Bud accepted the sample of what was to help keep him alive during the Mach three run, examining it closely and slowly nodding. "Feels light."

"And, comparatively speaking, it's far and away more advanced and durable than even the material we use to make our aircraft and spaceships," Tom pointed out. "I was looking for a specific combination of my primary armoring and heat-resistant materials: Durastress, Asbestalon, Atomeron, Lunite, Mangalloy and Tomasite. The result had to be mixed with the electronic fibers which would take sensory data hitting the hull and transmit them to Bud in the cockpit.

"My main trouble wasn't in finding a proper mixture, but in finding an equally durable bonding agent. I managed to come up with a metallic matrix of molecular nanotubes composed of a carbon allotrope."

Helen Newton nodded. "Sort of like a diamond?"

Everyone looked at her.

She looked back. "Well . . . I've been married to Ned all these years . . ."

"And you're correct, Aunt Helen," Tom pointed out. "The matrix can best be described as a synthetic diamond resin. Not the easiest stuff in the world to work with, but I managed."

"So get to the point where you `grew' this stuff," Sandy said, accepting the hull material sample from Bud.

"I needed to bind all the hull components at the molecular level," Tom explained. "Even with computer-guided laser pantograph design technology I was having trouble finding a way of weaving all of it together.

"Then I had an inspiration." Tom moved to the display controls. "Allow me to introduce the latest members of the Swift Enterprises materials development team."

A telejector lobe formed above the model of the Photon. Within it could be seen a cluster of greenish sausage-shaped objects.

Sandy frowned at the image. "Robots?"

"Of a sort," Tom admitted. "Organic robots. They're e coli."

Bud looked from the image to Tom. "Huh?"

"Escherichia coli," Bingo murmured.

"You mean, like the bacteria?" Ned Newton asked.

"Exactly like the bacteria," Tom said. "What you're seeing is an extreme magnification of the genetically modified e coli bacteria that Dr. Wiesz and his people in the Microbiology labs helped me develop."

Bud slowly raised a hand. "Genius Boy, you've flipped my mind out many times before with your ideas, but this might turn out to be the topper. You're telling me you used bacteria to grow the hull for the Photon?"

"See? Was that so hard to understand?"

Bud stared at Tom, who chuckled. "Okay, let's continue with the two dollar lecture."

"Going up to five-fifty at this rate," Bud muttered, but with obvious interest in his expression.

"We've been gradually developing more and more nanotechnology," Tom explained. "A lot of that work has involved developing organic nanotech. For example," Tom indicated Sherman Ames with a small wave, "the nanobots which help keep Sherman's father healthy."

From across the table Sherman nodded vigorously.

"We're developing surgical and medical nanotech," Tom continued, "so why not engineering nanotech?"

"When I was working on the hull material problem I remembered a paper I once read on a project to use a modified form of e coli to create ultra-thin layers of tessellated iron for industrial use. The bacteria were exposed to a unique mixture of materials and, as they spread along specific chemical trails, they left behind deposits of pure iron.

"What we've done here has been similar, but understandably a bit more complex."

Small choking sounds were heard from Bud, Mary Swift and Helen Newton.

"I broke down my hull composition formula to a form which the modified bacteria could feed upon," Tom explained.

"That's why you were doing that work on a formula for the breakdown of Durastress," Ned Newton said.

Tom nodded. "The bacteria ate the mixture, and all that we then needed was to have them reproduce and deposit their results upon a chemical template for the Photon's hull. The result?"

Touching a button, Tom caused an image to appear on one of the display screens. Everyone was able to see the interior of an enormous transparent cube. Within it moved people dressed from head to toe in protective pressure garments.

In the center of the cube a large gleaming shape could be seen bathed in light. Although not quite finished, the shape of the Photon was unmistakable.

"The Photon is currently bubbling its way towards completion in the Level Four Biohazard Chamber over in Microbiology," Tom announced. "Estimated time for completion of the basic shell: another five days. After that comes the systems integration phase."

Mary Swift was shaking her head. "OK. Now I'm upset."

Tom turned to her. "What's wrong?"

"I can't even get my roses to come up, and you're growing a car!"

Tom had the good grace not to laugh too much.

Arvid Hanson was smiling in admiration. "Tom, you'll set the engineering world on fire with this."

"Maybe," Tom replied, sharing a warm look with his father. "Dad and I figure that, with further work, maybe we can create some sort of self-healing metal. Imagine machines and vehicles that would repair themselves the way wounds heal on our own bodies."

"Well . . . Mach three first," Sandy pointed out, although she was inwardly proud of her brother's latest accomplishment. "I still have a few more immediate questions."

"Yeah," Bud chimed in. "Do I have to water the Photon every so often?"

"Sandy, I think you had the floor first," Tom replied with a smile.

"The Mach three run involves two runs of one mile," Sandy said. "Correct?"

Tom nodded.

"So, if Bud jettisons after breaking Mach three, how does he complete the second run?"

"Bud won't jettison until the second run," Tom pointed out. "He'll make the first run, then turn and make the second run before bailing."

Sandy goggled at her brother. "Bud's going to make a Mach three turn?"

Bud shrugged, "I just open the door, stick out my leg and----"

"I mentioned how the ramjets on the Photon can be throttled down," Tom pointed out. "At the end of the first run Bud will throttle down to subsonic. He'll then turn---"

"How?" broke in Sandy. "Unless you plan for a really wide turning circle."

"I don't. Normal turning under such conditions would be almost impossible. Even retro-rockets wouldn't be dependable for what I need. Instead, the Photon will use a closed loop ferromagnetic fluid system to change angular momentum and produce rotation."

Sandy considered it. "That's going to play Hob with the wheels, won't it?"

"Admittedly," Tom replied. "But Dad came up with a new foil bearing design which would help the wheels survive the stresses and high temperature changes."

Bud had been listening, mulling it over. "OK, so how do I handle the G-stresses? An anti-G neutralator?"

"Not entirely necessary, although one will be installed," Tom said. "Your cockpit will be floating inside a liquid suspension which will be super cooled just before the run begins. Not only will this provide you with a capsule that turns at a rate more smoothly than the Photon, but the frozen outer shell will help protect you from the heat friction build up. At the worst, the liquid will be thawed out by the time you eject. All of this also means that all vehicle controls will be wireless, transmitting signals directly through the shell." Tom looked back at Sandy. "Anything else?"

There was, but Sandy felt that some areas she wished to discuss would cause concerns which would perhaps be unwarranted, and which might be best entered into under more private circumstances. Biting her lip she shook her head.

Tom let out a breath. "OK, so . . . having survived this first round of debate, we can now all go back to work on the nickel and dime departments. Phyllis? Did you have those promotional ideas you wanted to talk about?"

The crowd began breaking up, most gathering around Arvid Hanson and the Photon model while Tom and Phyllis wandered off to a corner to quietly converse.

Sandy was about to move closer to Bud when a sudden sharp hiss from Sherman Ames drew her attention. The security chief was holding his phone to his ear.

"What?" she heard him say. He stared straight ahead.

Then: "Backtrack and keep me informed. I'll be there shortly."

He lowered his phone, shaking his head. "Ithaca Foger's vanished," he told Sandy.

"What? I thought she was still in the hospital."

"Not recently," Sherman admitted. "She was released some time back and had been staying in a hotel room. We've had her under surveillance, but all she's been doing . . . apparently . . . has been privately researching for the whereabouts of Dr. Pinon. And now my people have lost her." He shook his head in irritation. "That's not supposed to happen."

"So what now?" Sandy asked.

"For now?" Sherman's look became speculative. "I think we've been approaching this the wrong way. Instead of trying to keep an eye on the elusive Miss Foger we should, instead, intensify a search for the good Dr. Pinon. If that's Foger's target then, the sooner we find the Doctor, the sooner we'll find her."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening found Sandy in Shopton, heading for the assisted living center where Mrs. Baggert . . . the Swift's former housekeeper . . . currently resided. Bingo had made some peach preserves to pass along, and both Sandy and her mother had developed the habit of occasionally spending time in the company of the elderly woman.

Besides, Sandy felt the need to drive with the top down and let the cool air of the evening move about her, helping her think. Her head was whirling with the notion of her brother's latest invention, and of the fact that Bud would soon be racing across the desert in it.

It of course wasn't unusual for either Bud or Sandy to be at the controls of one of Tom's inventions. But Sandy was of the opinion that caution was an appreciable conceit for a test pilot. As she kept her eyes on the road she also kept a mental eye on the problems she suspected were currently going through Bud's head at the moment. The radical turn maneuver Tom had outlined. The G-stresses. The dangers involving air friction. The condition of the surface at Black Rock Desert . . .

Sandy considered that going to see Bud after seeing Mrs. Baggert would be a sensible idea. And perhaps more than sensible, she quietly added with a smile.

Her consciousness snapped to attention as a large black sedan suddenly swerved in front of her, cutting her off. Sandy hit the brakes just in time to prevent a collision with the other car, and she glared ahead angrily, preparing to give the reckless driver a considerable piece of her mind.

But she soon realized that there was more than bad driving at work as, from within the sedan, four men dressed in business suits quickly appeared and moved to flank the sides of Sandy's car.

"Please don't move, Miss Swift."

Sandy had already been reaching for the emergency button on the dashboard of her car, but froze at the sight of gun barrels leveled steadily in her direction. She knew she could still push the button, and she knew it was possible that such a move could very well be the last one she would make.

Remaining still, she stared steadily at the man who had spoke.

He came closer, the pistol in his hand never wavering an inch. "We'll take care of your car, Miss Swift. In the meantime, if you would, please accompany us."

Sandy was struggling not to add insult to injury by asking the obviously stupid question of "Why?".

But the question had apparently been anticipated. "I think you'll find it very profitable if you come with us," the gunman said. "Profitable for both you and your brother."

## Chapter Nine: The Coin Collector.

True to their word, one of the men slipped behind the wheel of Sandy's roadster and drove off in the general direction of Urbana. The remaining three closely escorted Sandy to the waiting sedan. Within moments she found herself in the back seat, rather firmly squeezed between two of her captors, while the third man took the wheel and began driving.

"You won't be harmed, Miss Swift," one of her captors assured her.

It had been the fourth time that particular sentiment had been mentioned, and Sandy was becoming rather weary of hearing it. Plus a little concerned, being firm to the belief that the more someone mentioned something, the greater the chance of a problem occurring with the subject at hand.

But, Sandy once again silently reasoned that, if her new "friends" had meant her any serious harm ("let's avoid the `D' word, the `M' word and the `K' word," she mentally appended) it could've been just as easily done back at the kidnap spot. And there was the intriguing statement that whatever was to happen was supposedly beneficial to both her and Tom.

She hoped her captors weren't noticing how two of her fingers were crossing. Then again, for all their imposing looks and actions, her companions didn't strike her as being all that professional in regards to mayhem. If she had been them, for instance, she would've taken greater pains to search her. If they had done their homework they would've known that Sandy had long ago fallen into the habit of taking advantage of the security extras which were part and parcel of being a member of the Swift family.

For instance: the electronic amulet she wore which allowed her easy access to Enterprises facilities was currently moving further and further away from the tracking device in her car . . . a fact which should soon be causing eyebrows to raise among the people monitoring Enterprises security.

Her captors had also been uninterested in the two fountain pens which she carried in the pockets of her slacks. An unforgivable error on their part as the pens was, in actuality, one of Tom's custom-built Snooper sets. Not only could the devices dispense blue ink upon demand, but they were loaded with a variety of electronic devices which included a communicator, surveillance and self-defense systems.

As casually as possible, Sandy had eased her hand into her pocket and was now fingering the larger of the pens. All she needed to do was squeeze the device, and an emergency tracking signal would be sent to Enterprises.

And, on top of being well-equipped, Sandy also had the advantage of many hours of training under the tutelage of Sherman Ames and others. She wasn't quite a black belt in Hapkido . . . yet . . . but, given an opening, she suspected she could come out ahead of the situation.

For the time being, however, she reminded herself that her destination was going to somehow be beneficial to her and Tom, so it seemed prudent to curb any unladylike impulses. It also occurred to her that Tom had gone through this sort of trouble on a regular basis and had managed to come out on top . . . albeit with concussions, contusions, bruises, broken limbs . . .

Sandy closed off that section of her mind deciding, rather, to concentrate on much more pleasant thoughts.

Such as the fact that they were currently driving along Van Ness Road, following the northern fence line for Shopton International Airport. Sandy instinctively made note of the traffic and the aircraft currently lined up along the terminal.

Her eye was immediately drawn to something she thought she would never see at the airport, even given the facility's increasingly cosmopolitan nature. An Airbus A380 was parked at the far end of the northern tarmac, considerably distant from the airport's main traffic. The enormous airliner primly relaxed among its surroundings, seemingly surveying the other and smaller vehicles with the air of a visiting monarch.

Sandy's eyes searched the plane for markings. The most obvious one was the logo on the tail of the plane: a sleek sunburst surrounding the image of a serene golden mask. Spotting this Sandy mentally nodded, assured now of her eventual destination.

Her suspicion was confirmed as the car turned to slip through a private gate, driving onto the airport service road and immediately heading for the waiting airliner. The plane was surrounded by a small crowd of service vehicles, and Sandy noted nothing which told her that a take-off was immediate. This meant no unplanned airplane rides which suited Sandy just fine. She felt that the next half-hour or so would be interesting enough without as it were.

Coming to a stop near the main entrance to the plane, the car doors were quickly flung open by waiting men wearing suits (and physiques) similar to Sandy's companions. Within moments Sandy was eased out onto the tarmac where, with a wave, one of the men indicated the stairs leading up into the plane.

Her hand fingering the Snooper in her pocket, Sandy briefly took note of her surroundings, wondering how far she could get if she suddenly broke into a run.

But there were answers awaiting in the plane.

Reminding herself that the Swift family had the best medical insurance policies money could buy, Sandy sighed and walked on up the steps.

Inside the plane she was met by a trim and smiling young woman dressed in a uniform which carried the sunburst decoration. Without saying anything the woman directed Sandy to a nearby circular staircase. Sandy obeyed, feeling driven to silence herself and noting the sumptuous surroundings of the plane. Plush carpeting, warm wood paneling inlaid with tiles of jade, onyx and porphyry . . . everything about the plane smelled of money.

At the upper level she paused, her eyes widening. Ahead of her stretched a darkened corridor, the walls curving above. She was currently bathed in soft indirect lighting, but another few steps would take her into darkness.



"Hello?"

No answer and Sandy took a cautious step forward. It was then she learned that, as she walked, the lighting increased around her, following and preceding her down the wide corridor.

Tiny objects glittered at her from the curving walls. Moving closer, Sandy saw that the objects were coins. A variety of sizes and nationalities and styles, all arranged neatly upon what seemed to be a deep velvet material covering the wall, and protected by a layer of doubtlessly well-constructed glass. Beneath each coin was a small bronze label identifying it.

Sandy was no expert on the subject, but she recognized an extensive collection when she saw it. As she walked she saw pennies, pesos and what looked like ancient Roman and Greek coins as well as Indian puranas and Japanese koban. Coins made of stone, copper, silver, gold and other substances glinted at her from all around. Hundreds, if not thousands of coins gleaming within their velvet bed.

And now her attention was drawn to what was apparently her destination. Ahead of her the light was revealing an executive office. Three comfortable chairs faced a broad wooden desk which included several computer screens and a small control console among its features. Behind the desk was the sort of chair Sandy usually associated with heads of state, or major corporate executives. Even her father didn't work in such comfort.

Behind and above the chair: an enormous bas-relief sculpture of the sunburst emblem.

Sandy slowly looked around. "Hello?"

Again no answer, and Sandy was debating whether or not to turn back and try to leave the plane. But a part of her suspected she was currently under some form of surveillance, although she had not noticed any obvious cameras.

As she looked her attention was suddenly drawn to a small cluster of coins mounted in what seemed to be a special place within the nearest section of the wall. Moving closer she peered closer at the coins.

Oho! Oh . . . ho!

A voice now spoke softly. "Miss Swift."

Sandy quickly turned to face the voice's source. A man . . . Sandy guessed five and a half feet tall in height and possibly in his fifties . . . smiling at her from an open doorway located to the right of the sunburst bas-relief. Eyes glittered kindly from a broad face in a large balding head, and the smile matched the gentleness of his eyes.

He was dressed in a robe of deep blue but, as he slowly moved around the desk, Sandy caught a glimpse of the now-familiar sunburst emblem embroidered upon the robe's back.

The man was now holding out his hand to her. "A very great pleasure to finally have an opportunity to meet the celebrated Sandra Swift: pilot, adventuress, explorer of the Moon. You flatter me with your presence."

Sandy let her hand lightly brush against his. "I guess I should be just as flattered," she replied evenly. "I was under the impression that only a privileged few gained the opportunity to meet the elusive Sun Ohm Erato."

The man's smile broadened. "I suppose it would be foolish to believe that my reputation hasn't preceded me."

"Among other things." Sandy nodded back over her shoulder. "There's not too much that's known about you. But two things are widely known. The first is that you seldom travel far from what is believed to be perhaps the finest coin collection in the world. It's a claim I'm personally willing to believe."

Sun Ohm Erato briefly bowed in acceptance of the praise.

"The second thing is that you're believed to be the silent and unseen chief executive of CEM/Anahuac." Sandy now nodded at the sunburst sculpture. "A rather distinctive corporate logo."

"Quite," Sun Ohm Erato agreed affably, glancing back at the bas-relief. "And you are correct, Miss Swift. I do occupy a position of considerable power and influence within the Comité."

Moving back behind his desk he indicated one of the chairs facing it with his hand. "Please make yourself comfortable, Miss Swift. Perhaps you'd appreciate some refreshment? I usually take tea with visitors but I am open to alternatives."

Crossing her arms, Sandy slowly approached the desk. "Do these alternatives extend to more polite invitations for company?"

Sun Ohm Erato's smile lost a little of its glimmer. "Yes, I suppose I must apologize for that. I am not . . . accustomed . . . to much social contact, Miss Swift. I consider myself an urbane and much accomplished person, and yet I fear I tend to be lacking in normal social niceties."

Sandy's voice heated. "Either my brother, my father or I would've been very interested in meeting you under more normal circumstances, and with far less in the way of threats."

"Yes but, unfortunately, these are not normal circumstances." Once again Sun Ohm Erato indicated the chair. "Please."

Sandy remained standing. She then felt a firm pressure on her right shoulder. A hand the size of a baseball mitt was closing on her shoulder.

Its owner was perhaps the most enormous man Sandy had ever seen. Even given the generous height of the curving ceiling, he had to bend over slightly. Almost seven feet tall . . . at least . . . and possessing the build of a healthy gorilla. Dressed as the other men in Sun Ohm Erato's service in a suit which had doubtless been custom-fitted. His size and apparent strength made Sandy think of the stories her father had told of his old friend Koku.

But there was none of Koku's kindness in the face which stared down at her. In point of fact, the eyes seemed as dead and as lifeless as the coins on the wall. There was no expression at all on the near-hairless head. No sign of emotion as the thick hand began to apply further pressure.

For her part, Sandy was mentally considering experimenting to see what five stiffened fingers would do when firmly delivered to the giant's throat. But Sun Ohm Erato suddenly spoke.

"Gently, Tiresias," he said calmly. "Miss Swift is a guest."

The giant looked up, and Sandy almost could hear thick gears turning slowly within the enormous skull. Then the hand lifted from her shoulder and Tiresias stepped back further into the corridor.

Another figure was approaching. This one as large as Tiresias, but it was clear that the newcomer was female. Unlike Tiresias, the giantess possessed an element of emotion on her face: an air of extreme sadness. Dressed in a large crimson robe trimmed in black, she seemed ready to burst into tears at any moment.

With a delicateness belying her size the woman came closer, carrying an elegant tea service which she carefully deposited upon the desk.

Sun Ohm Erato smiled fondly at the woman. "Thank you, Sestina."

With a slight bow the woman mournfully shuffled away.

"I truly must apologize for Tiresias," Sun Ohm Erato remarked softly, leaning towards the tea service. "As remarkable as it might seem, his manners can even be worse than mine. But he has an unfortunate habit of believing even my slightest suggestion to be Absolute Law."

Deciding to sit down in the middle chair facing the desk, Sandy swallowed the first remark that came to her mind and moved to the next one. "What's wrong with . . . Sestina?"

A genuine frown now appeared on Sun Ohm Erato's face, but he looked up at Sandy. "Tea, Miss Swift?"

Sandy shook her head.

"Yes, well . . ." Sun Ohm Erato proceeded to prepare a cup for himself. "Sestina. Yes. Both her and Tiresias are, as you've no doubt surmised, special cases which I've acquired through circumstances far too convoluted to perhaps go into here. When I met them they were both in danger of death from their respective malfunctioning biologies."

Sipping at his tea, Sun Ohm Erato settled back in his chair. "Using my personal fortune I subjected the both of them to years of extensive medical therapy and modifications. They are alive . . . they have purpose in life. I'm afraid that, in Sestina's case however, there is some damage which may never be repaired. Despite all the kindnesses shown to her she is, none the less, a woman who's misshapen form forever locks her out of the world that surrounds her. But I'm certain, Miss Swift, that my personal family problems are of little concern to you."

"You might be surprised," Sandy muttered.

Sun Ohm Erato seemed to consider the remark. "Perhaps. But, to business. I feel certain that you know of the matter which concerns us all."

Sandy raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Sun Ohm Erato sighed, a slight frown on his face. "I should point out, Miss Swift, that in spite of his bulk, Tiresias is remarkably sensitive to my emotional states. As such, it would be an unwise course of action to cause me considerable upset. Tiresias would feel obligated to take personal action against what he felt was the source of my disquiet. And personal action from Tiresias could be . . . memorable."

Sandy knew she could draw her Snooper out of her pocket within seconds. "Let's talk about considerable upset for a bit," she said. "Let's talk about your people kidnapping me and practically dragging me here."

Sun Ohm Erato was gazing down into his tea. "I explained that the circumstances required unusual actions on my part," he calmly said. "This upcoming business involving your company's attempt at the land speed record."

Sandy almost smiled. "So. We come to it."

"Indeed. It would be the height of unpleasantness, Miss Swift, if your brother or his father's company were to suffer unfortunate consequences due to this unnecessary involvement in the attempt. Unpleasant, and such a tragic waste."

Sandy raised an eyebrow. "Do you personally anticipate `unfortunate consequences'?"

"Let us, rather, consider alternatives. As an example: let us consider the possibilities of advancement and extensive profit if, for instance, Swift Enterprises and its resources were to enter a partnership with CEM/Anahuac. The rewards if both your brother and father were to seriously consider certain proposals which I'm prepared to make."

Sandy already had an answer, but she had long ago promised her mother that she wouldn't use certain words in polite conversation. Instead she concentrated on remaining calm, reminding herself that each moment she spent in the office meant an additional scrap of information.

"I see," she said. "Well, I'm certainly no financier, but I'd be curious to know what you felt would be the result if Swift Enterprises was to turn down your offer."

"In a nutshell?"

"Please."

Sun Ohm Erato gently blew on his tea. "Obliteration," he said, taking a sip.

## Chapter Ten: The End Of Swift Enterprises.

Sandy was surprised at how calm she actually felt. Despite her upbringing, she knew it was hardly the usual sort of thing for a person to be sitting inside a private jumbo jet (which included a pair of giants among its features), listening to a mysterious international industrialist nimbly use words such as "obliteration".

She suspected a good deal of her calm was due to having listened to her brother all these years. Tom would casually mention people such as the Black Cobra, or Steffan Mirov, and eventually Sandy accepted as matter-of-fact her brother's occasional association with what her mother referred to as "unfortunate people".

But then there were her own recent involvements. Foreign agents in Ecuador . . . Ykaterina Rotzog on the Moon . . . and Sandy felt she now had a better handle on how Tom felt during such times.

Not that the handle meant she liked the situation any better.

Wanting to cover her feeling of unreality, Sandy decided to make use of the tea service on the desk, preparing a cup for herself. The action wasn't wasted on Sun Ohm Erato,

who smiled softly from his chair. The smile briefly made Sandy consider hurling her cup across the desk, but she wasn't in the mood to wrestle off the nearby Tiresias.

Not yet anyway.

Settling back in her chair she tried to relax upon an air of adult calm. "Obliteration?"

Sun Ohm Erato grunted softly. "I believe Swift Enterprises currently enjoys a net income of some eighteen billion dollars. If I'm not mistaken, the total assets of your corporation come to seventy-three billion dollars."

"I'm certain you're not mistaken."

A thin smile appeared on Sun Ohm Erato's face and he glanced at one of the screens on his desk. "To be precise: seventy-three point seven nine three billion dollars in current assets."

"We manage to pay our bills," Sandy replied, taking a small sip from her cup.

"No doubt. My point, Miss Swift, is that it would be unforgivably tragic if such a successful industrial entity was to be suddenly . . . swept away?"

"There would be some tears shed, yes," Sandy considered while her mind tried to leap several moves ahead. "And I suppose you have some sort of notion on how this tragedy could occur."

Sun Ohm Erato took some time seemingly pondering the remark.

"Along with the production of aircraft and transportation systems," he finally said, "and its space industrial efforts, a good portion of Swift Enterprises efforts involves energy. A considerable portion of America's domestic energy is created through the use of Enterprise-designed nuclear reactors."

Sandy remained silent.

"The Enterprises `Mighty Midget' reactor is a marvel of technology, with the potential for use in a variety of applications. Its presence upon the global market has caused some understandable . . . concern, shall we say? . . . among many of your competitors."

Sandy shrugged. "The magic of the marketplace. If any of our competitors are so concerned it would be a simple matter for them to apply for a license to manufacture Mighty Midgets."

"Putting more money into the pockets of Enterprises."

A slender snake of anger reared up within Sandy. "We didn't create the situation. My father started out with a vision, and not too much more than that. And my brother brought little extra to the table other than his own genius. Add to that the sense of courage it took the both of them to move ahead with their plan. There was nothing to stop other companies from making similar attempts. There still isn't."

"Accepted," replied Sun Ohm Erato with a nod. "Just as there isn't anything to stop your competitors from trying to gain whatever advantage they can over Enterprises . . ."

His voice faded, perhaps at the sight of a slow light dawning behind Sandy's eyes.

"The penny drops," she finally remarked. "No pun intended."

Sun Ohm Erato raised an eyebrow.

"The recent efforts against Enterprises' atomic energy program," Sandy slowly said. "The investigation by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. It's your corporation that's been applying the pressure against us."

Sun Ohm Erato sipped at his tea.

Sandy felt like lunging across the desk and struggled to keep herself collected. "CEM/Anahuac's attacking us."

Sun Ohm Erato seemed to consider something distasteful in his tea. "'Attack', Miss Swift, is a rather overly-aggressive word. Let us, instead, refer to the actions of my comité as simply being necessary for overall survival."

"Not by discrediting the work of my father and brother."

"Your loyalty is admirable, Miss Swift." Sun Ohm Erato's voice hardened. "Now please grant me a similar virtue. I am loyal to my people, and they are equally loyal to me."

He placed his cup down on the desk. "CEM/Anahuac is only the tip of an iceberg: a global collection of other industries and individuals who've pooled their interests with me. All of us base our efforts upon the use of oil as a means for producing electricity and for powering vehicles. The production of oil, as well as its processing and distribution. Naturally we see Swift Enterprises and its advocacy of nuclear energy as a threat.

"As long as Enterprises limited its efforts to the domestic production of energy we were willing to turn a blind eye aside and continue as best as possible."

From across the desk Sandy glared at him. "But now?" Sun Ohm Erato stood up and, gathering his robe about him, began to slowly pace around. "Last year, Miss Swift, there were some sixteen million cars produced in the United States. Sixteen million cars which would normally mean sixteen million gasoline tanks needing to be filled."

He suddenly turned towards Sandy, his eyes hot. "However, a fraction of those cars are not being powered by gasoline engines but, rather, by Swift Mighty Midgets."

"Our atomicars," Sandy murmured.

Sun Ohm Erato nodded. "Admittedly a small fraction of the total automobile production in this country. Almost infinitesimal. But one that cannot be ignored. Especially not in light of certain recent facts which have come to light."

Sandy consciously made certain her left hand was near the pocket where her Snooper was. "Such as?"

"Fact number one: CEM/Anahuac has learned that Enterprises is in secret negotiations with the Chrysler Group for the mass production not only of atomicars, but for a possible model which would be limited to ground travel. Similar negotiations are taking place with Nissan Motors and the Fiat Group."

Oh God, Sandy silently moaned. Sherman Ames was going to go into conniptions once he learned of this. The negotiations were considered an extreme top secret.

"The deal," she pointed out, "is hardly set in stone. "As you yourself know, not everyone in the public is comfortable with the idea of atomic reactors on the road."

"A situation which your land speed record attempt plans to correct," Sun Ohm Erato remarked. "But there are other factors to consider. Which brings us to fact number two: the suggestion by the Nissan Motors people that the new Swift automobile should be powered by your company's solar batteries."

Sandy suddenly felt ill and put her cup on the desk. How much did this man know?

Sun Ohm Erato nodded again. "The public considers your precious solar batteries to be as safe as air. My associates and I could almost . . . almost . . . tolerate an automotive market which included cars powered by atomic energy. The wealth of public concern is a resource we could employ in our favor. But cars powered by the solar batteries?" He slowly shook his head. "Our markets would suffer."

Sandy carefully watched the man, wondering what had happened to the softly jolly individual who had welcomed her earlier.

"There is no guarantee," she said, "that cars powered by our solar batteries would be more efficient, or less costly, than standard automobiles."

"The experts at Nissan disagree with you," Sun Ohm Erato replied. "Several of their factories . . . including those in Mexico . . . have already received visitors from Tokyo



who've been talking about how best to redesign the facilities for the production of solar cars."

Bad, thought Sandy. Bad bad bad . . .

Sun Ohm Erato had moved around the table and was slowly approaching. His earlier humor seemed to be returning.

"I trust," he told her, "that you fully appreciate my dilemma, Miss Swift. And that you also now appreciate the necessity for this meeting."

Sandy trusted the notion that she had fallen into the center of something she would've just as soon avoided. Life was easier, she reflected, when her problems involved invisible magnetic invaders.

"What is it you want me to do?"

"Go to your father," Sun Ohm Erato told her. "Go to your brother. Tell them both that CEM/Anahuac is fully prepared to pay Swift Enterprises a rather handsome sum if, in turn, Enterprises drops all plans to enter or modify the automotive market."

"A bribe," Sandy replied dully.

"Rather, call it a gratuity. And considerably guaranteed to be much more stable than depending upon the profits of an admittedly unpredictable market."

"I can give you their answer now," Sandy told him. "If you insist, I can also use polite language."

Sun Ohm Erato sighed, looking down at the floor.

"Thanks for the tea," Sandy added, standing up and turning to leave.

"Miss Swift."

Sandy remained where she was.

"Recall the word I used before. `Obliteration'. If Swift Enterprises continues in its efforts it then invites all degrees of misery to be visited upon it."

"I don't like threats," Sandy remarked. "And my father and brother enjoy them even less."

"Then please help me to convince them as to the wisdom of my suggestion. Try and convince yourself. Turn away from this attempt at the land speed record."

Sandy now turned back to once again face Sun Ohm Erato. "Why is the land speed record project so important to you? It can't be just the hope that my father's atomic power work will be vindicated."

"I am only concerned for your safety," Sun Ohm Erato replied, moving back behind his desk. "To proceed further upon your course will bring you nothing but open graves. I would much rather have you and the rest of Swift Enterprises working in harmony with CEM/Anahuac."

"Get stuffed," Sandy muttered, turning away.

Her path was suddenly blocked by Tiresias, and Sandy automatically felt herself moving into position to begin delivering hand strikes.

But Sun Ohm Erato's voice spoke out from behind. "She is free to leave, Tiresias."

The bland expression gazed down at Sandy for a few moments before the giant stepped aside. Sandy resumed walking, her body still tensed and prepared to lash out at any moment, and her hand slipping into her pocket to touch the Snooper. She nodded at the sad form of Sestina as she passed the giantess, feeling darkness closing in behind her.

There was more darkness waiting for her when she descended the stairs down to the tarmac. It was fully night. But it was a cooler, cleaner darkness and Sandy gratefully breathed in the air, calming herself down.

No guards, no waiting cars. Just the shape of the enormous jet silently standing behind her. Apparently the interview was over in every sense of the word.

Firmly stepping on the desire to glance back at the plane, Sandy headed on towards the airport terminal, forcing herself to walk casually.

## Chapter Eleven: A Peculiar List.

"Take a look at this," Tom told Bud.

The both of them were in the office of Tom's father, bent over the design table. Tom was demonstrating the Photon's propulsion system to Bud by showing him an animation.

"The Mighty Midget is what'll help make the ramjets controllable," Tom explained. "Air entering the forward end will be superheated by a series of specially positioned electrical arcs. The arcs will, in turn, receive their power---"

"---from the Mighty Midget," Bud finished, nodding. "This is sort of an adaptation of what you use for the Sky Queen at high speeds."

"Exactly. In fact, the Photon could be a test bed for some ramjet modifications I've been wanting to make . . ."

Tom's voice faded as both he and Bud noticed Sandy coming into the office. Neither of them missed the detached expression on her face.

"Sandy?" Tom asked.

Nodding absently, Sandy went to the small refrigerator her father kept in his office, rummaging about inside for a soft drink and gulping a good portion of it down before settling back into a chair. "I'm okay," she remarked.

Both men were concerned now. "What happened?"

Sandy idly rolled the can of soda back and forth in her hands. "Oh-hhhh . . . I had a little detour tonight. Met someone new." In an even voice she began telling Tom and Bud about her abduction and meeting with Sun Ohm Erato.

She had hardly finished when Tom was busy with the office communicator. "I'm getting Doc Emerson up here to look at you."

"I already called," Sherman Ames said as he suddenly rushed in, heading straight for Sandy with a concerned look. "The guard who let you in called me and said a taxi had dropped you off and you were looking like a zombie. I contacted Dr. Emerson and he's on his way. I've also ordered the taxi to be followed and the driver questioned. Are you all right?" he finished to Sandy.

Sandy nodded, but was staring at Bud. He was standing near one of the chairs, gazing at her with wide eyes.

"This giant fella," he murmured. "This `Tiresias'."

Sandy nodded again.

"He put his hands on you?"

Bud's voice and expression were both amazingly gentle, but Sandy saw how his fingers were digging deeply into the upholstery of the chair before him. "He sort of . . . helped me sit down."

"I'll be back in a little bit," Bud commented, moving towards the door.

"Where're you going?" Sandy asked.

"I'm . . . just taking a little trip out to the airport. There's some geography I want to rearrange."

"Bud, stop." Sandy leaned forward in her chair. "I said STOP!"

Bud froze, and Sandy noted the effort it was taking. "Sit down," she ordered. "Now! Please. For me."

He turned back towards her. "San---"

"I know you want to grab both of Tiresias' legs and make a wish," Sandy told him.

"Frankly, I'm in a mood to help," Tom said in a low voice, his hands flexing ominously.

"And I'm thrilled to know that chivalry isn't dead. But punching out giants and getting into fights with Sun Ohm Erato won't solve the problem."

"No," admitted Bud, "but, right now, there's a lot to be said for immediate gratification."

Sandy gave him a look that, from past experience, she knew was guaranteed to focus a good deal of Bud's considerations in her direction. He seemed to deflate slightly and then, like a puppet on strings, moved to her side, settling down alongside the chair and gently taking her hands in his.

"You sure you're okay, honey?" he asked.

Sandy nodded. "Just stay close," she whispered.

The curving of his hands around her indicated that nothing short of a blowtorch could separate the two of them, and Sandy felt the tension easing.

Within moments a small crowd had gathered within the office. Along with Dr. Emerson was Sandy's father and mother. Also there was Bingo who had possessed the foresight to bring along some food and hovered nearby while Sandy worked on a sandwich.

"She's fine," Emerson concluded after straightening up.

"They actually handled me with kid gloves," Sandy explained, but was grateful to have the doctor's official diagnosis clear out a lot of the worry in the room.

"We noticed the way your car was moving away from your amulet," Sherman said to her. "I dispatched my people but, by the time they reached the airport, you had already taken the taxi to come back to Enterprises."

"What about my car?" Sandy asked.

"We found it parked outside of Wheeler," Sherman reported. "It's okay."

"I sent some peach preserves along with Sandy---," Bingo began.

"Nothing was found in the car."

Bingo's jaw dropped. "They done stole my peach preserves?"

"At least they have taste," Sandy said, trying to make a joke. From the look on Bingo's face she concluded she had no future as a stand-up comedienne.

Tom Sr. wore a look which wasn't much kinder. Storm clouds seemed to gather behind his eyes. "And Sun Ohm Erato?"

Sherman sighed. "The Airbus A380 took off from Shopton at about the same time Sandy arrived back at Enterprises."

Tom Sr. looked at his son.

"I can have the Sky Queen airborne and in pursuit in no time," Tom remarked.

"Hey!" Sandy remarked loudly.

Everyone looked at her. "Normally I'd enjoy being the only grown-up in the room," she slowly said, "but I'm all right, I'm safe and let's concentrate on the here and now before we go around beating up on people."

Her father sighed and rubbed at his hair. "Yeah, well . . . Sherman. Contact our friends in the FBI, the CIA and also at the State Department. Tell them what happened and what we can do in response. At the very least we need to let them know what Sandy found out."

Sherman nodded briskly, already pulling out his Tiny Idiot.

"Wait a moment," Sandy said, reaching into her pocket (an act which first required extensive rescue of one of her hands from Bud's embrace). Pulling out her Snooper she tossed it over to Sherman. "I should've remembered this earlier," she said. "When I got a chance I switched on the digital recorder and taped the entire conversation."

Sherman stared down at the Snooper as if it were precious gold. "An actual voice recording of Sun Ohm Erato," he breathed.

"Let's all hear it," Tom suggested.

Attaching the Snooper to his Tiny Idiot, Sherman played back the conversation between Sandy and the mysterious industrialist. Sandy noticed how the expressions of everyone hardened when Sun Ohm Erato made his veiled threats against Enterprises. And there was the stricken expression on Sherman's face when it was revealed that the negotiations concerning the development of solar and atomic powered cars was no longer secret.

When the recording finished, Tom Sr. shook his head and moved away slightly.

"This isn't good," Sandy heard him murmur.

Sherman detached the Snooper from his computer, handing it back to Sandy. "I'm impressed," he said. "I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of people who've had private audiences with Sun Ohm Erato. And not one of them brought out anything like this."

"It's as if he wanted his voice to be recorded," Bud said.

"I think he did," Tom replied thoughtfully.

Sandy nodded. "I think he actually wanted all of us to hear his words. I thought it weird that he didn't bother to have me searched. And he had to know about our security measures."

Sherman agreed. "But the recording is still a plus."

"Yes," said Sandy, "and there's more."

"More?"

"Mm-hmmm. How much do you know about Sun Ohm Erato's background?"

Sherman looked thoughtful. "Not too much. Prior to his taking control of CEM/Anahuac he's just a mysterious wealthy recluse who came out of nowhere. There's been speculations as to his origins, but . . ." He shrugged.

"He's Kranjovian," Sandy remarked calmly.

If she had suddenly sprouted horns she couldn't have attracted more attention. Agents of the Kranjovian Oligarchy had, in the past, caused Swift Enterprises considerable trouble.

"Kranjovian," hissed Sherman.

"Are you sure?" Bud asked.

Recovering her can of soda, Sandy took a comforting sip. "At least that's what I concluded. Just before we met I was examining his coin collection. There were six Kranjovian denarii conspicuously mounted in a particular place of honor."

Sherman looked like a wolf who had just spotted a limping sheep. "Now that's interesting. That's . . . very interesting."

Bud gave Sandy a small nudge. "Not a bad bit of detective work."

"If it's correct," Sandy pointed out.

"I'll get to work," Sherman announced, heading for the door. "I can have the vocal recording analyzed for traces of Kranjovian dialect. I'll also pass the suspicion along to the State Department. They might find it useful." He paused, turning back to Sandy. "Any time you want to change jobs, let me know. I can use talent like yours."

"Thanks," Sandy said with a smile, "but I'll stick to flying."

Tom Sr. had been whispering with his son. He now looked up. "Sherman, also see what you can find out about CEM/Anahuac's land speed record project. I want to know more about why they think it's so important that we bow out of the race."

Nodding, Sherman left the room.

Tom was thoughtfully pacing about the design table. "Despite his threats, Sun Ohm Erato strikes me as being a bit paranoid. I mean, sure it'd be nice if every car ran on Mighty Midgets or our solar batteries. But our talks have been based on our current output."

"How do you mean?" Mary Swift asked.

"If we wanted to produce enough solar batteries to power a goodly amount of the domestic car market," her son explained, "we'd have to increase battery production by at least five hundred per cent. Right now all the batteries we produce are snapped up as soon as they arrive on Earth from the orbital farms."

"Chrysler and the other auto manufacturers we've talked with have discussed helping with the cost of expanding our orbital facilities," Tom Sr. explained to his wife, "but that sort of investment is still way in the future."

Mary slipped a protective arm around Sandy's shoulder. "So what's Sun Ohm Erato worried about?"

Father and son exchanged a look.

"I don't know," Tom concluded. "And that's what I'm worried about."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Try one of these," Bingo asked.

Sandy accepted what looked like one of Bingo's biscuits and bit into it. "Mmmm," she commented. "You've always had a nice way with these."

Bingo gave one to the now fully-recovered Lisa Kuttner, who smiled in return. The three of them were in the anteroom to Sandy's office. "You don't taste anything different?" Bingo asked.

Sandy shook her head.

"Good. I'm experimenting with a new recipe for biscuits that'll hold together better in weightlessness and stay fresh. I'm making a batch to send up to the space station."

"And Ken Horton?" Sandy asked with a smile.

Bingo's face reddened. "Well-llll . . ."

"This is actually quite good, Bingo. You should maybe consider marketing these."

Bingo's expression became thoughtful. "Brand my space biscuits? Hm . . ."

Sandy then noticed Bud coming into view, slowly walking towards them and frowning at the screen on a Tiny Idiot. "Hey, Handsome."

"Hey yourself," Bud remarked, entering the office. "Sandy, you're up on the top people in propulsion, aeronautical engineering and such."

"I . . . like to think that I am."

"Look at this," Bud said, passing the computer to her. "Sherman managed to dig up the list of the scientists involved in CEM/Anahuac's land speed project."

Accepting the device, Sandy gazed at the list, a frown slowly developing on her face.

"I think I've heard of a few of these people," she finally said. "Maybe. But none of them I can recall as being the sort of people who'd I'd expect to be working on a high-speed car."

"OK, so it's not just me then." Looking out the door, Bud called out: "Tom! Hey Tom!"



Tom was walking down the corridor past the office but he stopped and entered. "What's what?"

"Show him the list," Bud asked Sandy, who handed out the Tiny Idiot. "These are the people Sun Ohm Erato has working on his land speed project."

Tom studied the list, and his eyes widened into a stare of disbelief.

"This is incredible," he said.

## Chapter Twelve: Bolt From The Darkness.

"What's wrong, Skipper?" Bud asked.

Shaking his head, Tom spent a few more moments continuing to read the list. "I've got to show this to Dad," he finally said. "C'mon." He began rapidly walking down the corridor. Exchanging a look, Sandy and Bud fell into step.

In his office, Tom Sr. looked up as the group entered. "Oh, Tom. I just spoke with Ned. The template for the heat exchange cradle will be in on time."

Nodding, Tom handed the computer over to his father. "Take a look at this."

The older man accepted the device and studied the list. His eyebrows soon rose. "Now this is what I call a nice little collection," he murmured. "Some sort of line-up for a conference?"

"Those are the people CEM/Anahuac has working on their land speed project."

Tom Sr.'s face rose in surprise, his mouth falling open. "You're---"

"Sherman confirms the information," Tom said, with an accompanying nod from Bud.

Tom Sr. stared back at the screen. "But this is . . . incredible."

Bud and Sandy looked at each other, and then Sandy sighed loudly. "OK so, once again, class is in session for Bud and myself. Can you explain to the Dumbski Twins what's so special about the names on that list?"

"Other than the fact that none of those names seem to be associated with engineering," Bud added.

"And you're right," Tom replied. "Most . . . practically all of those names . . . are involved in physics. Christian Goree's one of the foremost theoretical physicists known today. He's done incredible work in extended supersymmetry. Then the list's also got Pieter Lauterbach from the Jülich Research Centre in Europe. His main field is superconductivity and condensed matter physics."

Still studying the list, Tom Sr. nodded. "I've met a lot of these people. Annabelle Scordich: heavy ion work. Tomonaga Ikemizu: Planck mass transition. Oh, and here's someone with some engineering: Marija Kolozov. Remember her, Tom? We spoke with her two years ago during the conference in Stavanger. She's the one who's been developing the idea of a special 'folded' geometry for superconducting magnets. She claimed she could radically reduce the size needed for a particle accelerator/collider array. I've been wanting her to come do some work at the Citadel."

Tom was nodding. "Yeah. In fact, she said she was going to collaborate with . . ."

His face suddenly paled. "Oh, my God!"

Everyone looked at him. "What?" asked Sandy.

"I just remembered. Doctor Kolozov said she was going to collaborate with Letitia Pinon."

Bud whistled low.

Tom Sr. quickly searched the list on the computer. "Pinon's name isn't on the list."

"Which I consider to be odd," Tom slowly said, "considering all the other names and fields involved."

"One more for Sherman," Bud muttered. "He's gonna love this."

"But what does all of this have to do with constructing a car for an attempt at the land speed record?" asked Sandy.

"I'm just as mystified as you," Tom muttered, frowning. "None of the names on the list have been involved in work on propulsion, materials science or engineering except maybe in slight passing, such as Kolozov." He stared at his father, the two men gazing at each other for several long moments.

Then: "They've got the new design table set up in my office," Tom declared. "I want to go think about this for a moment. Put these names and fields and such through the computer and try to find some association."

"Do that," his father said, handing the computer over to him. "I want to finish reviewing your design work on the ignition arc placement and have everything ready for Ned by tomorrow."

Nodding, Tom left to go back to his office.

Giving Sandy a gentle nudge, Bud indicated the open doorway. The two of them quietly left.

They waited until they were out of earshot before speaking. "This thing just gets weirder and weirder," Sandy said.

"Tell me about it," Bud replied.

"Has Sherman mentioned any progress on locating Dr. Pinon?"

"No, but his department has been humming nonstop for days. Which," he ruefully added, "is hardly noticeable from the way he usually runs his office."

Sandy smiled.

Bud glanced at her. "You busy right now?"

The tone of his voice caused a slight tingle to move through Sandy, and all sorts of possibilities entered her mind. "Not at the moment," she said, allowing her fingertips to brush against his.

"Good. I want to introduce you to someone."

Which was not quite among the possibilities, but Sandy allowed her fingers to remain in contact with his. "Who?"

"Down in Microbiology."

"The Photon?"

Bud nodded, smiling.

Still not quite what Sandy had in mind, but she felt her excitement rising. "Okay."

\* \* \* \* \*

The third airlock door hissed open, allowing them entrance into the Level Four Biohazard Chamber. "I've been trying to keep up on the construction work," Sandy admitted, but suddenly interrupted herself, pausing. "Ooooooo!"

Before her gleamed the curving winglike shape of the Photon. Even surrounded by gantries and support devices, the vehicle seemed almost to bow before her, as if introducing itself before setting out on its journey.

Bud gazed at it fondly, hands on his hips. "Actually," he told Sandy, "we could've moved the Photon out of this chamber days ago. The last of Tom's bacteria-bots have died out, and the Photon's been classed as a negative biohazard. But some of the outer skin is still undergoing curing while the instrumentation is being fitted. Fortunately for us this means we don't have to wear containment gear."

Sandy could practically feel Bud's heart going out to the vehicle. But she was enough of an enthusiast herself to feel the attraction of the sleek machine.

Around the Photon several Enterprises scientists and technicians were working, and some of them smiled and waved at Bud, who nodded back.

"Want to see the interior?" he asked Sandy.

"Sure."

They walked to where a metal frame stretched over the center of the Photon's hull. "We go up these stairs," Bud pointed out, "and enter the Photon from the middle of the catwalk."

"No direct contact with the hull yet?"

"Well, yes . . . if you don't mind having Tom yell at you for a month."

"Hum! I think he has enough on his mind right now."

"Agreed."

Climbing the narrow stairs they stepped out onto the catwalk; Sandy staring down in appreciation at the shining hull.

Noticing a hatchway further forward she pointed it out to Bud. "That's where the Mighty Midget will be inserted?"

"Yup. And the pilot goes in here."

He had stopped alongside a ladder firmly attached to the catwalk. The other end of the ladder disappeared through a circular opening below them.

Bud nodded. "Go on down."

Taking the ladder, Sandy carefully descended into the Photon, passing through several thick layers before entering a snug, roughly hexagonal chamber. It was hardly bigger than the cockpit of an aircraft and, with two people, she realized it would be a very close fit.

A large chair dominated the chamber. Letting her professional eye look over it, Sandy nodded, mentally comparing what she saw to the design notes Tom had shown her weeks before. The chair would mold itself to the pilot, holding him firm and providing as much protection as possible against the stresses of acceleration.

Bud's voice drifted from above. "Sit down. It'll make room for me to come on in."

Sandy settled into the chair, feeling almost lost in it. But she knew the pilot would be wearing a special pressure suit, and the chair would, when activated, adjust itself more snugly to the pilot's dimensions.

A long metal arm rose from the right side of the chair. Touching it, Sandy carefully swung it down across her, snapping it into place against the left arm rest. In her lap she now had a slim control console, complete with twin control grips. Between and above the grips a series of blank displays waited.

To her immediate right, well within reach, waited several banks of controls. Sandy looked them over, nodding at the more familiar-seeming ones. Her left side, as well as the narrow space behind the chair, was clustered with what she knew were the life-support and computer systems.

Before her curved a broad surface of dull grey. Sandy knew that the surface was laced with telejector transmitters. When the Photon was in motion the grey would be replaced by a real-time forward view, the information supplied by the SmartGlas sensors woven into the hull.

Bud was now entering the cockpit, ending up close between her and the forward viewing surface. Shifting as much as possible into a comfortable position he smiled at Sandy. "Well?"

Sandy let out a slow breath. "What can I say? Even standing still I feel as if I'm in motion."

Bud nodded, giving the surroundings a pleased look. "Yeah. She's a sweet machine. You'll find out for yourself."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Tom's finished the simulator software."

"Oho! So it came through on schedule."

"And he wants a select group from the test pilot pool to co-train on handling the Photon." Bud gazed up at her. "Tom was going to ask you, but . . ."

"Yes," Sandy said simply, meeting his eyes.

"I sort of figured you'd move yourself to the head of the list."

The two of them became quiet for a few moments.

"Two thousand, two hundred and eighty-three miles per hour," Sandy whispered.

"Mmm," Bud replied, still looking at her. "Sandy, neither of us are stupid."

"I won't argue. At least not too much."

"And you and I both know this is dangerous. And we both know Tom'll take every possible precaution."

"And you and I both know, Mister Barclay, how many things could still go wrong. That's why life insurance salespeople jump out of windows whenever they see test pilots heading for their offices."

"We know the risk. But I want the risk because . . . I want this."

Despite herself, Sandy smiled. "Yes. I've noticed the maintenance people out there mopping up the drool."

Bud chuckled a bit before eventually becoming serious again. "I can't chase away the fear," he told her. "But Tom and I figure that, if you know as much about piloting the Photon as possible, it'd help."

Sandy considered it. "Good call. And you're right, I would've put myself at the head of the list of people for co-training."

"Good." Reaching out, Bud touched her knee, giving it a brief squeeze. "Tom and I want our best people handling the ground crew for the attempt. In my mind that crowd includes my best girl. I'll feel better knowing you've got my back."

"Oh, I'll have more than that," Sandy answered, her eyes hardening slightly. "This land speed attempt clearly falls under Enterprises test pilot protocols. As Chief Test Pilot, I'll have final say on whether or not you'll climb into the Photon and take off."

"Um!" Bud pondered the situation. "Yeah."

"Bud."

"Yeah?"

Sandy gazed down solemnly at him. "Have I ever bumped you from a test?"

Bud let out a slow breath. "Not yet."

"Not yet," agreed Sandy. "And, so far, I've come across nothing to bump you from this one. But yes, when the Photon simulator is completed, I'll practically be living in it. By the time of the test I'll know this machine inside and out. Better, in fact, than the pilot."

"I believe you."

"I've never lost a test pilot yet," Sandy declared. "And you're not going to break my streak."

"I'm glad," Bud said with a smile.

They stared at each other for a while. Then: "you know, Bud, we could've had this discussion in perhaps less crowded surroundings."

"True," Bud admitted, "but the Photon cockpit has one additional design feature which I was counting on."

"Oh?"

"It's one of the few places where Sherman's security people wouldn't be watching us," Bud said, moving closer to Sandy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Even in as paper-free a working environment as Swift Enterprises, there was still the occasional dependency on hard copy. Nowhere was this more evident than in the office of the Chief of Security.

Sherman Ames sometimes needed paper. Computer displays were very useful, but he was still accustomed to scribbling out his thoughts on pieces of paper, then moving them around on his desk like chess pieces.

He now frowned down at his desk, as if trying to mentally command the various sheets of paper to somehow re-arrange themselves into a reasonable pattern. The information on CEM/Anahuac's land speed research team . . . the notes on Sun Ohm Erato . . . Ithaca Foger . . . the missing Dr. Pinon. All the facts he had were before his eyes and they stubbornly refused to provide an answer.

And the land speed test was soon. Very soon. Sherman knew that, if the test team went to Nevada before he had any real answers then they'd be heading for disaster. He believed it as he had never believed anything before.

Sun Ohm Erato was currently back in Mexico City. Or at least his plane was.

Letitia Pinon was still missing. Taking a pen, Sherman angrily scribbled circles around the name several times.

Ithaca Foger was also still missing.

Nearby a computer was silently providing updates as to Tom's attempts to locate a pattern among the scientists on the CEM/Anahuac list.

Growling low, Sherman straightened up, trying to relax the pains in his back. He needed time in the gym. He needed food. Sleep.

He needed answers!

Then he held still as a low alarm buzzed, his eyes locking on one of the display screens in his office. He had programmed the alarm to go off in the event of a certain event occurring.

The presence of an intense magnetic field somewhere on the Enterprises grounds.

The screen was shifting to show a floor plan. One of the floors of the Administration Building.

More precisely: the area where Enterprises kept its Security Office.

And now Sherman could see a red blip erratically moving about on the floor plan. Jumping rapidly from place to place. Somehow managing to escape all the other sensors.

Sherman Ames was hardly a genius on the level of either Tom Swift or his father. But he was brilliant enough to immediately realize two facts within the space of a second. The first was that the button which would summon assistance was easily within reach of his hand.

The second was that, if he was correct about the course of the blip, its next appearance would be . . .

Sherman stared at the figure in the doorway.

"You!"



A hand raising. Flesh. Then the other hand pulling at the first, stripping away the flesh to reveal the gleam of silver as the air was filled with a deep humming sound. A flash of brilliant light.

And then Sherman Ames was violently thrown backwards against the wall of his office.

The figure turned, tensing as if to go, but suddenly paused in the shadows, pressing back closely against the doorway as it spotted something.

Far away down the corridor. The sight of Sandra Swift leaving the elevator.

"Even better," the figure whispered, raising its hand. Once again the humming sound rose.

### Chapter Thirteen: Preparations.

Stepping out of the elevator, Sandy was immediately struck with a feeling of wrongness. It wasn't anything she could put a finger upon; only that the silence extending ahead of her through the main corridor of the Security Section somehow didn't seem right. Rather, it seemed false. Heavy.

And, at the far end of the corridor, the door to Sherman's office was open. Nothing too unusual in that, but she could also see that the office was dark.

There was also a sharp tang in the air. Almost as if a winter thunderstorm had passed, and Sandy found herself beginning to regret having managed to evade the security "nursemaids" Sherman had assigned to her. After all, the reasoning went, what could be safer than going directly to the Chief of Security?

Sandy cautiously took a step, then her eyes caught a glint in the far darkness.

"What . . ."

A flash, and then Sandy cried out as something hard violently pushed her back. She felt herself slamming against the closed elevator doors, everything slipping away.

\* \* \* \* \*

"She's coming around."

Sandy was becoming aware of a refrigerator sitting upon her chest. She groaned, and somehow the sound came to her ears as a tinny squeak.

"Easy, honey."

She opened her eyes, sat up straight and stared at everyone around her. Or at least that was her plan. In reality her eyes tried to flutter open, failed, and that was all the movement she could muster.

"Circulation and respiration are still good," a voice said.

"OK, Sandy," added a voice which Sandy recognized as belonging to Doctor Emerson, "just take it easy."

Sandy let out another groan and, this time, the result seemed more genuine. She once again tried opening her eyes, succeeding and finding herself gazing into the sort of aseptic surroundings which automatically said "hospital". The picture was completed by the sight of an Enterprises paramedic in full Paradox gear.

He now stepped back to let Dr. Emerson come near. "Sandy, you've experienced a massive electrical shock," he explained. "You seem to be recovering now. We've been treating you." Glancing aside Emerson added, "the readings are similar to the earlier incident."

Sandy concentrated on looking about, seeing not only Emerson and the paramedic, but also Bud, her parents, Tom and Bingo.

She tried to work her mouth.

Bud spotted the movement and leaned closer, the concern on his face helping to lift the pain from her heart. "Don't talk, baby. Just lie there."

Sandy wanted to obey, but fought to make her lips work. "Sher . . . man."

"He's . . ." Bud glanced over at Tom, who came closer, wearing an expression which looked as if it could've been carved from granite.

"He'll live," he explained to Sandy, "but, right now, he's in a coma. The doctors don't know how long he'll be like that. He took a pretty big shock, and it was meant to kill him."

Swallowing hard, Sandy gained more control of her voice. "Murder?"

"It looks that way," Tom replied with a sigh. "Fortunately, Sherman's the patron saint of caution around here," Tom replied. "Ever since we started having these electromagnetic attacks he took the precaution of setting up additional sensors all over Enterprises. Whatever got into the building last night hit Sherman with an electrical charge massive

enough to cause heart stoppage. At least!" Tom frowned down at his sister. "And I suspect the same thing was intended for you."

Next to Sandy, Mary Swift let out a long slow breath, Sandy groaned and, with the help of both Bud and her mother, moved up into more of a sitting position.

"Not that I'm complaining," Sandy managed to croak, "but why are me and Sherman still alive?"

Tom grunted and moved over to a corner of the room. "In Sherman's case, it was his inborn sense of paranoia," he said, picking up a dark object and bringing it back. Sandy could see that it was a black tunic composed of a ribbed plastic-looking material. "He'd been wearing one of these under his clothes ever since our troubles started."

"That's . . . one of the protective suits used by the maintenance crew."

Tom nodded. "The Tomasite armor insulated Sherman against the full lethal strength of the electrical shock, although he still received enough to put him under."

"OK, but I wasn't wearing any armor."

"No," admitted Tom, idly running his fingers over the material of the suit, "but my theory goes that the attacker . . . whoever or whatever it was . . . used a good deal of its power on Sherman. When the attack was launched on you there wasn't quite enough voltage left to deliver a killing charge."

"Imagine my disappointment," Sandy said drily.

"All right," Mary declared, looking from one to the other of her children. "This is the second time this thing has struck. Maybe the third, if we count the business with the fence." The expression she gave Tom was anxiety mingling with exasperation. "What are you doing about it?"

Tom, along with everyone else in the room, heard the whipcrack tone in his mother's voice.

"Mary," her husband softly said.

"No!" Mary insisted. "No, Tom. I'm surrounded by geniuses, and something is out there trying to kill my children. Do something."

"We are," Tom Sr. promised. With a nod he indicated someone standing in the doorway. Turning her head, Sandy recognized the owlish form of "Pico" Jefferson: Sherman's second-in-command. A man with the stereotypical appearance of a bank clerk, and the instincts of a ferret.

He nodded at Sandy. "We've been studying the videos and sensor readings. Some of the videos indicate something moving in and out of the corridors but, as before, we've been unable to get a precise fix or image. We're currently running the clearest frames through computer analysis," he added, half to Mary Swift, who's frown didn't lessen at the news.

"I'm modifying our security amulets," Tom added. "They'll now sound an alert whenever there's any indication of excessive magnetic or electrical energy in our vicinity. A similar alert will sound in Security."

"We're also re-examining the records of all Enterprises personnel hired within the last year," Jefferson continued. "Specifically, we're looking for any possible security risks which might've been overlooked the first time around."

"Fat chance Sherman would've done that," Bud pointed out.

"True," agreed Jefferson. "But I feel we should make an additional effort in all directions." This delivered with another glance towards Mary.

"Did you notice anything before you were shocked?" Tom asked his sister.

Sandy tried to think back. "The corridor was quiet . . . dark. And then I spotted something shining far ahead. Something in Sherman's office."

"Shining? You mean glowing?"

Sandy shook her head. "More like something made of metal."

"Part of the electrical weapon," Tom Sr. said.

His son nodded. "Possible. I'll have additional tests run in the corridor and in Sherman's office. Compare them to the attack on my own office. Maybe retroscopying will pick up something we've missed earlier."

"Hmph!" Mary remarked.

"Mom, we're trying."

"I believe you, dear," Mary replied, bending down to give her daughter a brief kiss before leaving the room with Bingo in tow.

\* \* \* \* \*

Feeling much better the next day, Sandy was able to sit in with Bud and Phyllis on Tom's planning session for the land speed attempt. They relaxed in his office as Tom went over his notes. "We'll use the Sky Queen to take the Photon and all the support gear out to

Nevada," he was explaining. "Additional equipment will be requisitioned from the San Francisco depot. The Sky Queen will serve as not only our base of operations, but the control center for the attempt."

Phyllis looked up from her computer, frowning a bit. "Wait. Isn't Bud going to be piloting the Photon? Why do we need a control center?"

"Maybe I should've rephrased that," Tom replied. "By control center I mean a sort of blockhouse overseeing the attempt. But it'll be more. A large part of the Photon's operation will be handled and coordinated from the center. Bud will be controlling the car but, even as sophisticated as it is, the Photon will still require systems monitoring and backup guidance from an outside source."

"At the speeds I'll be traveling," Bud explained to Phyllis, "I'll need as much personal focus as possible handling the car. If I can pass a lot of systems monitoring to others, then so much the better."

Phyllis nodded in understanding.

"There'll be three layers of monitoring," Tom continued. "This will supplement the officials who'll be making their own recordings of the attempt. We'll have four cycloplanes airborne and positioned along the route. They'll act as chase planes for the attempt."

"Sandy? Before Bud sets off, you'll take the Sky Queen up and position it above the entire test site. You'll be the second layer."

Sandy considered it. "Could be a slice. So what's the third layer?"

"Our space station. When the test starts we'll have a full battery of sensors watching from orbit. When Bud sets out, he'll have complete coverage from beginning to end."

"Then I land the Sky Queen when Bud finishes?"

"Well . . . pretty much so." Tom smiled. "After all, we'll need you in the winner's circle to smother the bold pilot of the Photon in contributory kisses."

"Hmmm," Bud considered. "That part of the test might require extensive rehearsal."

He moved his ankle just in time to avoid a kick from a nearby blonde. Then everyone looked up as a knock was heard.

Pico Jefferson stood in the doorway, his normally calm face wearing an expression most people would have labeled "peculiar".

Tom motioned him in. "Pico? Is it about Sherman?"

"No, sir," Jefferson said, shaking his head as he entered. "But our investigations have uncovered something odd which I thought I should bring to your attention."

"Go ahead."

"You remember we had lost track of what Ithaca Foger had been doing over the last few years. And then Mr. Sherman spotted her as part of the crew for the Ferrari/Lotus land speed attempt."

"Yeah."

"Well, it's like this. We were researching the Ferrari/Lotus attempt. Their car was successful, but only after having suffered several technical setbacks. Primary among these was an explosion which occurred at the test site. The blast killed several members of the Ferrari/Lotus team." Jefferson paused to collect his breath before continuing. "And one of the people reported killed was Ithaca Foger."

#### Chapter Fourteen: Departure.

Jefferson had the full attention of everyone in the room.

"Killed?" Bud finally said. "As in . . ."

"As in killed," Jefferson replied. "As in dying as a result of the explosion. Ithaca Foger was one of three people who was listed as a casualty."

Everyone at the table slowly looked at each other.

"Oh this is getting weirder," Phyllis murmured.

Tom pointed a finger at Jefferson. "Pico, Sherman confirmed Ithaca Foger's identity through fingerprints when she was in the hospital."

"I know, sir---"

"Tom."

"I know, Tom. It's . . ." Jefferson shook his head. "We found the confirming bits of this information on Mr. Sherman's desk. Apparently he'd just put the pieces together before he was attacked." Sandy and Tom looked at each other, and the others noticed the similar hawk like expression on the two faces.

"And maybe," Sandy slowly said, "this was something our mysterious attacker didn't want Sherman to know, or spread around. If I hadn't shown up at the Security office . . ."

Tom was nodding. "And, when I think of who would want this sort of thing squelched, I can only come up with one candidate."

"Miss Foger herself."

"Indeed." Tom turned back to Jefferson. "What progress has been made on locating Foger's whereabouts?"

Jefferson's thin lips became even more of a line than usual. "Still nothing. She's vanished as quickly as she appeared."

"Increase the guard around---"

"Mr. Sherman," Jefferson chimed, nodding. "Already in hand. Full electrical and magnetic sensors." He gave everyone in the room a slightly critical look. "And we're reviewing arrangements for all of you as well. If this information wasn't supposed to be common knowledge, then we're all in worse danger."

"Wait," Phyllis broke in, "if Ithaca was supposed to be dead all this time, then wouldn't her parents have mentioned this back when we first questioned them?"

"Remember that our agents were shown the door before the Fogers would tell them much," Jefferson pointed out. "And, if Ithaca had been killed, then that would've explained their reaction even more."

"Yeah," Bud agreed. "They might not be too sold on the idea that their blown-up daughter has returned from the dead to become an invisible magnetic monster who throws lightning bolts around. It'd bother me, and I don't have kids."

Tom had been thinking. "Pico, contact the space station. Have them launch some monitor bots equipped for electromagnetic survey. Have the bots take up position over Enterprises." He became silent for a moment. "Inquire also if any of the Swiftsats can be re-positioned as well. Let's see if we can expand our coverage."

Nodding, Jefferson turned to leave. Behind him, silence remained in the room for several long seconds.

"Tom?" Sandy finally spoke.

"Mmm?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm beginning to think I'll feel safer once we're out in Nevada."

Her brother sighed. "I'm inclined to agree."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day found the sleek mass of the Sky Queen II rising on its jet lifters from the Enterprises field. Below a crowd of onlookers, including Tom Sr. and Mary, waved and cheered as the Swift Land Speed Attempt group formally took off for the journey to the Nevada desert.

Sandy and Bud were handling the controls. "Applying full thrust on verticals," Sandy announced, her hands moving over the touch screen instruments. "Approaching minimum insertion for horizontal flight."

Bud nodded. "Supersonic propulsion at your discretion, Pilot. Course for Nevada plotted and entered into cybertron."

Sandy nodded, and glanced over her shoulder. "Oh, Bingo. Hang on, sweetie, we're going for daylight here."

Behind them, Bingo steadied herself against the doorway to the flight deck as, around her, the Flying Lab began its transition from vertical lift to horizontal flight. As with its famous predecessor, the plane was designed for smooth flight; yet there was no denying the sense of momentum building as, through the forward viewport, the clouds began rocketing past faster. There was also the unmistakable feel of the entire plane's outer appearance altering itself as the speed increased, finally becoming almost bullet-like as it plunged higher and faster across the sky.

Bud soon nodded. "Pilot, I report Mach two point one oh seven. Silentennas operating at maximum, sonic boom disruption complete. Altitude: 60,033 feet. Current course: two four nine point one degrees west-southwest."

"Thank you, co-Pilot." Sandy beamed at him. "Always a pleasure to work with you." Still smiling she looked back at Bingo. "Want to take a hand at the controls?"

"No-ooo," Bingo replied, pushing the small cart onto the flight deck. "I'll stick to my bread machine, thank you. Breakfast is now being served."

Switching on the cybertron, Bud rolled his seat back and turned it about. "Now this is the flavor I've been missing," he commented, reaching for the cart. "These missions just didn't seem the same without a Winkler in the galley." Lifting the lid on a plate he frowned. "But where're the steamed horned toads?"

"Not for breakfast," Bingo primly replied, bending down to lock the cart into place. "You need your protein."



"Smells good. Paté."

"Gila monster liver on toast," Bingo replied, turning to leave. "Enjoy."

Bud cautiously lifted the morsel to his face, examining it closely.

Sandy chuckled. "Ask a smartass question . . ."

"Yeah," he replied, taking a delicate nibble. Then proceeding to eat more. "Wow," he finally said. "You and Phyl weren't kidding about her."

"She's good," Sandy agreed, turning her chair and reaching for her own plate. "If you haven't been gallivanting all over Creation recently you'd have more of her meals."

Bud nodded, reaching for the juice.

Tom's voice appeared on the intercom. "We on our way up there?"

"On schedule," Sandy replied. "How's the baby?"

"The Photon's secure in the cargo bay. I'll be up later on. Phyl wants me for a conference on the press presentation for our arrival in Nevada."

"Have fun."

The intercom clicked off and Bud was licking at his fingers. "So," he said. "How much work do you think Tom and Phyl will actually get done?"

"Be nice," Sandy gently admonished. "What with all the stress and stuff we've been going through recently, Tom and Phyl have hardly had any real time alone."

"True," Bud admitted.

"And isn't this something of an improvement over the old days, when Phyl and I were usually left behind?"

Bud considered it. "I shall confess I prefer the current company on the flight deck to your brother. I'd say more, but I don't want to distract the Pilot with what she might consider as potentially impolite dialogue."

Sandy gazed at Bud for a moment. She then turned back to the controls, touching a button which caused the door to the flight deck to slide shut.

She then switched on the intercom. "All hands. There will follow an extended test of the cybertron automatic piloting system. Plus a bulkhead seal test on the flight deck door."

Switching off the intercom she sat back in her chair, looking over at Bud while sipping at her juice.

"So," she softly said, lightly touching a toe to his shoe. "Let's hear some of this potentially impolite dialogue."

\* \* \* \* \*

Just over an hour later the Flying Lab was swooping down out of a blue Nevada sky. Below it stretched the glaring expanse of the dry lake bed which made up the Black Rock Desert.

The flight deck held a full audience. Besides Sandy and Bud there were Tom, Phyllis and Bingo; all of them peering through the viewports.

"Extending wings to full deceleration," Sandy announced. "We'll be switching to vertical thrusters for landing in about five minutes."

Bingo's face was pressed tight against a viewport. "Wow!"

"Thought a Texas girl like you would be used to something like this," Bud commented.

"Budster, I'm mainly a Piney Woods gal. Did spend several weeks in Yuma some time back, but nothing like this."

She suddenly pointed. "Is that Black Rock Point?"

Tom peered over her shoulder, nodding. "That's it."

"Soon to be reduced to atomic rubble."

"Well, not quite . . ."

But Sandy was leaning forward in her chair, frowning. "People? We got company. There on the ground . . . three o'clock."

Everyone was moving to look, and Sandy maneuvered the Flying Lab to give them a better view.

Down on the ground below them could be seen a great deal of activity surrounding something large which glittered in the sun. The tiny shapes of vehicles and structures were visible around the object. One of the vehicles was more noticeable. A jumbo jet.

His face grim, Tom left the group and went to the sensor cubicle in the rear of the flight deck. His hands moving over the controls he soon brought a magnified image of the scene up on a large screen. With the exception of Sandy and Bud, who called up the image on a repeater screen located between them, the others moved to gather around Tom.

"What in the name of Tinkertoys is that?" Bingo asked.

The magnified image was showing a clear picture of the large central object. Its shape resembled nothing so much as a barn . . . one composed of a collection of shining pipes, cylinders and dark metal cubes. At one end of the open structure could be seen a collection of parabolic dishes mounted on a skeletal metal frame. Cables ran from the huge object to a collection of prefabricated shacks and trailers which were lined up alongside.

"Looks like what happens when you let zeppelin hangars marry radio telescopes," Phyllis murmured.

"Hey, that's good," Bingo said. "I'll remember that one."

Tom wasn't amused but, instead, touched a button which caused a section of the image to zoom in. The jumbo jet now filled the screen. An Airbus A380, its tail emblazoned with the logo of CEM/Anahuac.

#### Chapter Fifteen: The Test Pilot.

"So," Sandy remarked. "It looks as if we'll have company."

"Oh good," Bud added. "And I'm in a mood to go over and meet the neighbors."

"Bud."

"Just to say `hello'."

"Bud!"

"And to deliver some sandwiches."

Sandy turned her eyes from the controls to glare at him. "Bud Barclay, you will not go over there and start a fight."

Bud was gazing out at the CEM/Anahuac compound, his expression unreadable. "No," he finally murmured.

Sandy was about to relax in her chair.

"Might finish one, though."

And found herself unable to. Sighing, she returned her attention to the controls, continuing to guide the Sky Queen II down.

Tom, still frowning, now shifted the image on the viewing screen, focusing on the peculiar structure which was the focus of the efforts by the CEM/Anahuac ground crew.

"Some of that," he said, half to himself, "looks very familiar. And all those people that CEM/Anahuac brought in for this project. Physicists. Nuclear engineers."

He began touching controls. "Switching in Damonscope," he announced, looking back up at the screen as his customized radiation analysis system peered down at the CEM/Anahuac object, studying it.

Data soon began scrolling up on the screen. "Yeah," Tom said. "Thought so. I'm showing a shielded radioactive signature at one end of that structure."

"A reactor," Sandy said, glancing at the image on her repeater screen.

Nodding, Tom made further adjustments on the controls, studying the results. "Now picking up some interesting temperature signatures. Some of those containers on the structure seem to be averaging out at around four degrees Kelvin."

Both Sandy and Bud whistled.

"I take it . . ." Phyllis began.

"Quite cold," Tom explained to her. "Something like on the order of, say, liquid helium."

Phyllis considered it. "Wouldn't you use something like that for rocket fuel? That'd make sense for a land speed car."

"Liquid oxygen, yes. Liquid helium?" Tom frowned deeper. "The answer's right in front of me, but I'm just not seeing it."

"Pilot," Bud said to Sandy.

Sandy nodded. "Beginning transition to vertical thrusters for landing. Everyone stand by." One hand shifted the control yoke while the other tapped upon the touch screen, causing the giant aircraft to come to a hover over the dry lake bed. Slowly and majestically it began settling down to a landing, its wings spreading to catch the air beneath them.

"Landing gear extended," Bud announced. "Attitude balanced."

As gentle as a feather, the Flying Lab settled its tonnage down onto the ground in a cloud of dust. Hydraulic stabilizer legs extended alongside the landing gear, settling into place. The wingtips of the plane slowly descended to the ground, allowing the wings to serve as a protective canopy for the port and starboard sides.

Just forward of the starboard wing root, a row of viewports opened below the flight deck. These indicated the location of the control center which would oversee the Photon land speed run.

"Setting brakes," Sandy said, her hand moving over the touch screen controls. "Powering down engines."

"All systems being switched over to housekeeping mode," Bud replied. "Pilot, I report aircraft is secure."

"Thank you, co-Pilot. Tom? We're configured for ground operations."

Tom was nodding as he moved to peer through a viewport. "Ummm. You've placed us just over a mile from the CEM/Anahuac base."

"Did I land us too far? I felt a little distance would be good in case something tried . . . to sneak up on us."

Tom considered it. "Nothing wrong with a little healthy paranoia, I guess. Go ahead and set up the security perimeter. I'm gonna head down to the Photon and supervise the unloading." With Phyllis in tow he left the flight deck.

Bud began unbuckling. "I'd better go help. All that talk about the super cold stuff over at the CEM/Anahuac place reminded me we've got our own refrigerants to unload. You've got everything up here, honey?"

Sandy slowly looked around. "I'm good."

Nodding, Bud rose from his seat and went to follow Tom and Phyllis. There was now only Sandy and Bingo on the flight deck.

"Truth be told," Sandy admitted, "I'm more than good. Unless Tom needs more hands unloading the Photon."

"Which he doesn't," Bingo pointed out.

Sandy nodded. "Which, as far as options go, leaves us with . . ."

A slow smile passed across Bingo's face. "Stretching our legs after the trip?"

"Something like that," Sandy agreed, matching Bingo's smile.

"Um! Any particular direction?"

"Only one place I can think of nearby worth checking out."

"Right with you, Boss."

\* \* \* \* \*

Taking the time to change into khakis, the girls left the Flying Lab to begin an easy trot across the landscape towards the CEM/Anahuac encampment. Sandy nodded at the crewpeople who were already busy with lowering the pallet bearing the Photon down from the cargo hold.

Bingo glanced up at the sun. "Might get a nice tan here," she commented. "Should've brought my bikini."

"If it's heat you want," Sandy commented, "I suspect we might be in for more than we want pretty soon."

"It'll get that bad?"

"Possibly." Sandy was staring ahead at the CEM/Anahuac area, frowning. Reaching into her pocket she pulled out her Snooper, unfolding the pen-shaped device and bringing the small telescope to her eye.

Bingo watched her for a few moments. "So what do you think?" she asked, pulling out her own Snooper.

"Oh, it beats the heck out of me," Sandy said. "I guess it could be the hangar for whatever the CEM/Anahuac people are planning to use for their land speed attempt, but I'm deuced if I know what the parabolic dishes mounted on the end could be for."

"Looks like a control cabin off to one end on the inside," Bingo reported, peering through her own scope. "Just below the further of the parabolic dishes."

Sandy nodded, then lowered the scope as she saw several jeeps bearing media logos drive past them, heading in the direction of the Flying Lab.

Bingo also noticed them. "Huh! We're missing our opportunity to be on the evening news."

"Tom and Bud can take the bows for a while," Sandy replied. "Right now I'm more interested in the competition."

"Anything I should especially be on the lookout for?"

"Yes. Two giant people and a kindly undertaker type dressed in a robe."

Bingo gave Sandy a quiet stare before returning her attention to their destination. As they approached they noticed more and more vehicles parked around what seemed to be hastily erected prefabricated booths. Much sturdier trailers, their air conditioning units humming, were lined up near the mysterious structure. In the background the CEM/Anahuac plane quietly sat.

They were soon close enough to be able to make out details without the use of the Snoopers. "Looks as if the CEM/Anahuac public relations machine's already been hard at work," Sandy said, refolding her Snooper into its camera configuration. "Unless I'm mistaken, those are concession stand booths over there."

"Yeah," Bingo said, brightening. "And they got funnel cake."

Sandy had been quietly began walking closer to the large skeletal structure, her eyes picking out what seemed to be enormous treads supporting the entire assembly. Looking around once she carefully began taking pictures with her camera, setting the device so that the images would automatically be sent to recording drives located on the Flying Lab. For several minutes she managed this before noticing she was attracting the attention of several people. They were dressed in jumpsuits bearing the CEM/Anahuac sunburst, and their builds and posture suggested "guard" to her.

Quickly slipping the Snooper into her pocket, Sandy began purposefully wandering towards the more populated area of the gathering.

"Hey!"

Sandy almost jumped out of her skin, but settled in time to recognize Bingo's voice. "Please don't sneak up on me like that," she said, turning towards the girl.

Bingo considered it. "Okay. How do you like to be snuck up on?"

"I meant . . . never mind."

Bingo extended a funnel cake and small lemonade to Sandy, who accepted the items (noting the CEM/Anahuac logo on the paper cup). "By the way," Bingo continued, "if I mention to you the term 'proton induced metastability', would it mean anything?"

Thoughtfully munching on the funnel cake, Sandy shrugged. "Sounds more like Tom's side of the street than mine. Where'd you hear it?"

"Over near the lemonade stand," Bingo replied, nodding back over her shoulder. "A couple of techie types in CEM/Anahuac jumpsuits were talking as they picked up some drinks. I tried not to be too obvious and listen in, and that's the main phrase I caught."

"Good work," Sandy replied, "even if it just makes this whole situation much stranger than it already is."

"CEM/Anahuac's using nuclear power," Bingo pointed out. "Just like us."

"Yes, but I get the feeling that their application is way different from ours." Sandy's face darkened slightly. "And this means their efforts to protest Dad's industrial use of atomic energy is a sham. Sun Ohm Erato admitted that CEM/Anahuac already knew of the potential for portable reactors in the automotive industry. They could've easily been in a position to move in with their own portable, auto-friendly power plants."

"All they had to do," Bingo added, "was somehow shut down your Daddy's operation."

Sandy nodded, scowling.

Bingo was doing the same thing, but in concentration. "But that still leaves Enterprises solar batteries. Wouldn't CEM/Anahuac still have to shut it down?"

"True," admitted Sandy. "The problem with that is that most of the solar battery production operation is out in space. It'd be hard to take out."

"I hope so," said a familiar voice, and both girls turned to see Tom and Bud approaching. "Wondered where you two had run off to."

"Escaped the media people?" Sandy asked.

"Phyl's handling them," Tom replied, looking back towards the gleaming shape of the Flying Lab. "They caught our landing, and Phyl's set up an impromptu press conference and formal unveiling of the Photon."

His eyes moved to take in the enormous mystery structure.

"I've sent pictures back to the Sky Queen," Sandy pointed out.

Nodding, Tom continued to study the object.

"I swear I'm seeing the answer," he muttered. "But it's not happening."

"Maybe we can get some answers over there," Sandy pointed out. Tom followed her glance and saw where a crowd was gathering in front of a raised platform bearing the now-familiar CEM/Anahuac logo.



Silently the Enterprises group wandered closer to the platform, noting that among the crowd were numerous people carrying video recording devices and sporting media logos.

"Looks as if we're making it in time for the unveiling on this side," Sandy muttered.

"Either that," Bud replied, "or our arrival here upped their time table somewhat."

Taking position as close as possible to the platform, the group watched as several people wandered about near a podium and bank of microphones.

One figure in the background caused Sandy to gasp and she gripped Bud's arm. "Sherman or Pico would give their kidneys to be here right now."

"Oh?"

"The man in the back. Second from the right."

Bud nodded. "I see him."

"Sun Ohm Erato."

No response from Bud, but Sandy suddenly felt tension in his arm. He took a step forward. "Bud!"

"Sandy . . ."

"Mama Spank!"

Bud seemed to deflate slightly, but Sandy noticed how his eyes were trying to burrow into the figure on the platform, burning every detail into his memory.

And now another of the men on the platform was approaching the podium. "Ladies and Gentlemen of the world media," he said into the microphones. "Honored guests. I am Feo Tomaquin-Greene . . . chief of public relations for CEM/Anahuac. I formally welcome you to this official opening of the attempt by my corporation to acquire the land speed record."

He stood and smiled politely, giving the photographers in the audience a chance to capture the moment.

"I'm certain all of you are interested in the nature of our efforts here," he continued. "Especially in light of . . . recent events." He delivered the last remark with an obvious glance in the direction of the Swift encampment.

"But first, before we continue further, I believe it is time to introduce to all of you the individual who has been selected to act as the test pilot for our effort."

Sandy felt a tap on her shoulder, and a low voice murmur, "Excuse me."

She turned and found herself looking directly into the face of Ithaca Foger. With a sweet smile, the other woman stepped past the Swift group and made her way up to the platform where, accompanied by a polite round of applause, she stood alongside Feo Tomaquin-Greene and waved to the crowd.

### Chapter Sixteen: The Expanded Ithaca.

The sensation of being strangled by a spider's web settled close around the members of the Swift party; rendering them numb as they watched the rest of the presentation. Watched rather than heard; the sudden shock of Ithaca Foger's appearance causing Feo Tomaquin-Greene's voice, as well as those of the others on the podium, to fade into silence.

At least that was the feeling which was coming over Sandy. But a glance around told her that the others were just as shocked. Tom's eyes were the usual blue coolness which came when staring at a problem, but there was also the way his jaw hung open.

It was Bud who finally broke the silence. "And there's something you don't see every day," Sandy heard him murmur. "A supposedly dead woman vanishes, and she reappears to be the test pilot for CEM/Anahuac."

"I'm surprised that it didn't occur to me," Tom replied softly. "It's all starting to make sense. After all, it was Sherman's initial visit with Ithaca which led us to this point. And Ithaca was involved with a land speed attempt before."

There was applause all around, but Sandy realized that it was being directed at the podium. The press conference was apparently over and there was a call for questions from the audience.

"And that's that," Tom said. He was glancing around at the collected news people. "Any moment now we're going to be spotted, and I think we've heard all we needed to hear." He turned to leave.

"What sort of car will CEM/Anahuac be using for the land speed run?" a woman from Sky News asked.

Tom froze. "Then again . . ."

Feo Tomaquin-Greene was smiling from the podium. "Our Comité has been very open so far in regards to this project. It will continue to do so on that particular subject. Our vehicle . . . which we have named Oro del Sol . . . will have its formal unveiling very soon, and I guarantee that, when it happens, all of you will be surprised." His gleaming smile widened. "Very very surprised."

Sandy was watching Sun Ohm Erato and finding her gaze returned. Across the distance between them the slow smile appearing on the smooth face caused ice to grow up Sandy's spine.

Next to her she sensed, rather than saw, Tom's nod. "Let's go," he said.

The group began moving through the crowd, and Sandy couldn't resist taking a final glance back at Sun Ohm Erato. He was moving close alongside Ithaca Foger, and the woman was leaning to listen to whatever he was whispering.

The ice grew higher up her spine.

They had almost made it clear when a CNN staffer spotted Tom. Soon the group was surrounded by an almost unbreakable ring of microphones and cameras.

"Tom, there's talk of the Photon breaking Mach three," a reporter for Figaro-Pravda asked. "You think your chances are still good?"

Sandy was amused to see that, despite the misgivings he had demonstrated earlier, Tom was suddenly all smiles and confidence. Another proud graduate of the Phyllis Newton School of Deportment, she thought with a grin.

"Our chances," Tom was saying, "are just as good as the engineering we've put into the Photon. That, and the skills of the rather devilishly clever man selected to test pilot the Photon: Mr. Bud Barclay."

Bud fell into character, bowing and offering his profile to the cameras.

"The officials from the FIA will be arriving tomorrow," Tom pointed out. "After that, very soon, I promise some genuine fireworks."

"What do you think of CEM/Anahuac's chances?" another reporter asked, this one from Fox.

Tom shrugged. "You people know as much as we do. So far all we have is a name . . . 'Sungold' . . . and not much beyond that."

"Whereas the real deal," Bud broke in, "can be viewed by one and all back at our encampment."

Don't overdo it, Sandy silently telegraphed to him.

"Miss Newton will continue to be giving out press releases when they're ready," Tom promised the crowd. "In fact," he said, glancing back towards the Flying Lab, "a lot of you should have already received the initial packets, which include the specs for the Photon."

Tom fielded a few more questions, including an offer from the Discovery Channel for an on-air interview, before the group was able to resume walking back towards the Flying Lab. The sun was beginning its downward course to the west, starting to stretch the shadows as the party strolled back across the desert floor.

"So where's this Sungold dingus they're gonna drive around in?" Bingo chirped up.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one wondering about that," Bud replied. "I mean, are they going to deliver the Sungold later?" Bud asked aloud. "Bring it in sections? Is it already here? Is it stored on that Airbus?"

"All very good questions," Tom considered.

Sandy was nodding half to herself. "Yeah, and I'd love to have that Ithaca Fogger close enough right now to answer some of those questions," she said.

"As you wish," Ithaca replied.

Everyone froze.

Ithaca Fogger was standing among them, her arms crossed, smiling serenely.

Sandy stared back towards the distant CEM/Anahuac camp, then back at Ithaca.

Bingo looked as if she'd been slapped hard. "How in Fanny's basement---"

"It is good to see all of you again," Ithaca calmly said. "Alive. Healthy."

No thanks to you was on the tip of Sandy's tongue before she rapidly bit it off. From her point of view it looked as if Tom was having the same sense of restraint.

"You continue to be a source of amazement, Miss Fogger," Tom said in a low voice.

Ithaca turned towards Tom. To Sandy's eyes it seemed as if she didn't so much move her body as one moment she wasn't facing Tom, and then the next moment she was.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Ithaca told Tom. Another blink of a movement, and now she was facing Sandy. "But you mentioned questions."

Sandy resisted an urge to take several steps back. "Let's cut to the chase," she said, deciding to roll the dice. "You were reported as having been killed when the Norfolk Lampo experienced an explosion some years ago."

A thin smile appeared on Ithaca's face. "Well . . . let us say that, for all practical purposes, I was clinically dead."

"My compliments to the hospital recovery team," Tom said.

Ithaca's face briefly motioned in Tom's direction; a knife-like slice through the air before the eyes returned to Sandy. "My employers felt I was too important an asset to be totally abandoned," she replied. "I was turned over to a group of engineers possessing the ability to reconstruct damaged tissue. And no, Miss Swift, my return was neither easy or pain free. But I did return, albeit . . . modified."

"Modified?"

A flicker of movement, and Ithaca was now standing to face the entire group. "As you can see," she pointed out, "my reflexes have been improved to where I can move far faster than the average human being."

Sandy's mind went back. Remembering the sight of something which flitted rapidly across a security display Sherman had shown her. Something too fast to track.

And something else. Back when she had found Lisa Kuttner unconscious in her office. Remembering a brief burst of wind, as if something had raced past her too fast for the eye to follow.

Raw curiosity was clinging to Tom's face. "Your . . . modifiers . . . seemed to require far more than just bringing you back to health."

"Indeed," Ithaca replied with a nod. "It's one reason I've come out here to speak with all of you. CEM/Anahuac has been planning this land speed project for years. As with your Photon, the Sungold will require advanced methods of control. With that in mind I was reconstructed into being the perfect pilot for a supersonic land vehicle."

Bud was frowning at her. "Lady, it'll take more than fast reflexes to bust Mach three."

"And my employers would agree with you," Ithaca said. She placed the fingertips of both her hands together, then drew them apart to show her palms to the others.

The tip of each finger now glistened with metal.

"Cybernetic contacts," Ithaca explained. "Watch."

She drew her fingertips across her forehead. A line of metallic dots now gleamed above her eyebrows.

"My body will be electronically integrated into the piloting system of the Sungold," she said. "Putting it simply, I am the control system for the Sungold."

"You're a cyborg," Sandy whispered.

Ithaca nodded. "If you wish."

"Your modifications are apparently quite extensive," Tom slowly pointed out, "if you're able to accomplish all of this. How are they powered?"

Another thin smile. "My body now generates an extensive electrostatic field which can be channeled to provide power for my systems."

Sandy's eyes narrowed. "How extensive is this field?"

The smile grew on Ithaca's face. "Quite extensive."

Everyone resisted the urge not to look at each other. Sandy could feel Bingo tensing up next to her.

"Miss Foger---" Tom began

"Mister Swift," Ithaca interrupted, "you received something of a warning regarding continuing on this project you're currently involved in. You chose to ignore it."

Tom crossed his arms. "My company was being threatened."

"And it still is. But you possess the intelligence to begin elsewhere. Or perhaps even align your interests with that of CEM/Anahuac. If you continue on your current path then I must tell you the consequences will be severe."

Sandy frowned. In Ithaca's voice she could hear the echo of Sun Ohm Erato's words.

"We are not enemies," Ithaca was calmly explaining to Tom.

Bud barked out a laugh.

"In spite of our shared . . . histories," Ithaca replied with a flicker of her eyes in Bud's direction. "I am bound to the desires and wishes of my employers. But I personally have no wish to cause harm."

Something boiled within Sandy. "Oh?"

Another flickering movement, and Ithaca was facing Sandy. "Accidents have happened, Miss Swift. Perhaps tragic ones." Her eyes roved over the group. "Please. I beg you. Turn away from this before something horrible happens. Something . . . Irrevocable."

Sandy felt her hands becoming fists. "Something fatal?"

The eyes, cold and glittering, focused on Sandy. "That, Miss Swift, will be entirely in your hands. Not mine."

"I see. You're simply the rattle of the snake before the strike."

Silence as Ithaca's smile widened. Her head rapidly shifted, her eyes not so much looking as searching. Scanning.

Fifteen or so feet away an orange plastic traffic cone lay on its side. Perhaps blown over from the CEM/Anahuac site.

A sharp exhalation of breath, and Ithaca's arm swept out at it. Across the distance something glittered in the sunlight. It now sparkled on the surface of the cone.

A thin metal blade the size of a human palm.

Everyone's eyes moved back to Ithaca, who was breathing softly as she stared at the cone. Closing her eyes she seemed to whisper something under her breath, her hand becoming a fist and moving to just before her face.

A flicker in the fading sunlight. The passing of a cold breeze, and she had vanished.

Everyone automatically looked around, but there was no sign of the woman. Sandy looked back towards the CEM/Anahuac compound. Was that a brief sight of something in the distance? A ghost? A mirage? She couldn't be certain.

Tom had gone to the traffic cone and was now carefully removing the blade. His back to the others he straightened up and stood there quietly, staring down at the object in his hand.

"Let's get back to the Sky Queen," Bud said. "Where it's safe."

"Is it?" Sandy heard Bingo whisper in a small voice.

Near midnight upon the wide playa of the Black Rock Desert. The sky above was clear and splashed with stars, with a moon high above and Nestria slowly beginning to rise from behind the Jackson Mountains.

Lights were also visible across the desert floor; the greatest concentrations being around both the Swift Enterprises and CEM/Anahuac encampments. At the latter site the sound of generators and tools drifted across the air from the enormous skeletal structure parked near the Airbus as workers labored beneath the glare of floodlights.

There was considerably less activity at the Enterprises site. And far less light. What illumination was available came from several windows in the hull of the Sky Queen II, as well as from several floodlights which illuminated the desert floor immediately beneath the giant aircraft, most of them focused on the tarpaulin-covered shape of the Photon.

A few men wandered about on guard duty near both the Photon and the lowered ramp which led up into the body of the Flying Lab. Within the hull of the aircraft itself, unseen electronic eyes continually scanned the surrounding landscape.

The men strolling about were experienced members of the Enterprises security staff: personally hired and trained by Sherman Ames, and hand-picked for the Photon mission by Pico Jefferson.

The sensor equipment on board the Flying Lab was the finest which could be installed; most of it personally designed or upgraded by Tom.

Tonight, it was all useless.

\* \* \* \* \*

Within the Sky Queen's Materials Science Lab, Tom sighed, backing his face away from the viewer of the spark emission spectrometer.

Sandy, Bud and Phyllis were sitting nearby, watching him closely.

"Well, Genius?" Sandy asked.

"I don't know, Sandy," Tom murmured, rubbing at his eyes. Opening the door to the specimen chamber he removed the thin metal blade which Ithaca Foger had thrown. "I just don't know." He turned the blade over in his hand. "The Mohs scale reading goes up off the scale. This blade is hard . . . possibly as hard, or harder, than rhenium diboride. I can't imagine how this stuff, whatever it is, was machined so thin. An aircraft hull made of this material would be practically indestructible."

"Or a suit of armor," Bud muttered.



"And I'm not even sure it's metal," Tom declared. He weighed the blade in his hand. "Hardly anything to it at all. Fantastic cutting edge, though. And, as a throwing blade, it's marvelously aerodynamic." He gripped the blade experimentally, looking as if he was preparing to throw it.

"Careful," warned Sandy.

Tom nodded, his eyes still on the gleaming object.

Phyllis now leaned closer. "And you say you never saw Ithaca pull the blade from a scabbard or pocket or anything?"

"Her hand was empty," Sandy replied. "Then she throws her arm out and zap! That knife appears out of nowhere. Of course, given her reflexes . . ."

"Yeah, what's the story on that, Tom?" Bud asked.

Tom was shutting down the equipment on the bench. "You got me, flyboy. I thought our own work in nanotech was cutting edge . . . no pun intended. But if what Ithaca told us was true, she represents a level of technology far in advance of anything we've been able to accomplish. We're talking about a complete re-wiring of the entire nervous and muscular system within a human body."

"Could she really be a robot?"

"I'd rather she was just a cyborg," Tom replied. "A robot that sophisticated would scare me even more than advanced nanotech."

"She all but confessed to having attacked me and Sherman and the others," Sandy declared.

"Right," Tom agreed, "but where do we go from here?" At the sight of his sister's opening mouth he pressed on. "San, I know. Believe me, I know. But we're still dealing with a lot of supposition here."

"Yeah, well . . . excuse me if I'd rather not end up beneath a tombstone which reads 'Died From Supposition'."

Tom was thoughtful. "We've brought some mini-drones with us, equipped with Eyespies. I was planning on maybe releasing them for a peek at the CEM/Anuhauc camp."

Sandy slapped her hands on her knees, "Well let's get busy then, and---"

Further comment was interrupted by the wailing of the alarm.

\* \* \* \* \*

One of the guards outside felt a brief touch of wind at the back of his neck. Instinctively he turned, catching perhaps the briefest glance of a tender smile in a pale face.

The touch of a hand, a crackle of electricity and he fell to the desert floor unconscious.

The other guard was calmly strolling about the forward end of the Photon. He saw his partner falling to the ground and his training kicked in as he moved towards him, his hand already reaching for the alarm button on his belt.

A shadow broke from the darkness across his field of view. Another crackle . . .

And Ithaca Foger, dressed from neck to foot in form-fitting black, was standing above the prone bodies of both men.

Her eyes swept about in all directions, rapidly taking in every detail. Above her head she could see a panel door set flush into the side of the Flying Lab's gleaming hull.

Aft inspection panel to power subsystems, she told herself. Providing access to reactor coolant loop. Cutting or damage of coolant loop results in catastrophic damage to aircraft reactor and aircraft itself.

She lowered her eyes to the covered form of the Photon before her. At her sides the palms of both hands slowly unfolded.

Sharp metal gleamed. Raising one of her hands she prepared to slash deep at the tarpaulin.

A blinding, stunning pain exploded within her head, and she cried out before whirling around to face its source.

A figure stepped out from behind the access ramp. Like Ithaca, the newcomer was dressed in black, but with differences. The outfit possessed areas of bulkiness about the chest, arms and legs. The head was completely covered in a shining ebon helmet.

In one hand the figure held a short black baton. Another one was lying at Ithaca's feet: the source of the sharp pain which had diverted the woman from her intended attack upon the Photon.

Catching her breath, Ithaca slowly nodded. "All right," she whispered. "All right. So we'll play hard then."

Her left hand whirled out, and the metal blade it had held sliced through the air towards the mysterious stranger. But the intended target had already been in motion, barely dancing out of the way of the hurled knife. As it moved it threw the baton it carried.

Ithaca easily dodged it, realizing that her unknown opponent had been aiming to disable her. And the figure was now pulling two more batons from holsters in the legs, standing in what Ithaca recognized as an eskrima stance.

Once again she raised her hand. Metal was once again gleaming, the air becoming filled with a humming sound. Gripping the batons tightly the figure before Ithaca crouched, then lunged . . .

And took the full brunt of a bright arc of lightning which passed between the two fighters. Electricity crackled across the body of the unknown warrior . . . and then Ithaca was surprised to see that, instead of falling down immediately, the figure simply rolled aside and quickly bounded back up onto its feet.

One of the hands lanced out with a baton; a crippling blow that Ithaca avoided only with the quickest of movements, causing her to dance several steps away.

Breathing hard now she stared at her opponent. Something about the outfit . . .

"Acrylic armor," she hissed. "Insulated!" She slowly nodded. "How clever."

She still had the blade in her right hand, and the inspection panel on the Flying Lab was still within range. Her arm moved to hurl the blade . . .

But she immediately changed tactics as the figure in black lunged again with the batons. Her hand swept out, intending to cut her opponent in half before the lunge could be completed. But the blade passed by harmlessly as, too late, Ithaca realized she wasn't the intended target. Instead, her opponent tumbled easily within reach of one of the fallen guards.

A black-clad hand slapped at the alarm button on the guard's belt. Sirens immediately began to wail all about the Flying Lab, and more lights clicked on, bathing the surroundings in greater illumination.

Swallowing a shriek within her, Ithaca glared down at her adversary. The helmet was featureless, but Ithaca could somehow detect a smirk on the face within.

"Next time," she hissed, stepping back. A whisper in the shadows, and she was gone.

And, when Sandy and the others came down to see the downed guards, there was no sign of the mysterious defender in black.

## Chapter Eighteen: The Visitors From Black Rock.

Sandy crossed her arms and stared at Tom. "Well?"

Her brother sighed. "You know, you sound just like Mom when you do that."

"Huh! Be grateful Mom isn't here right now. You know what her comments would be."

They were standing near the entrance to the Flying Lab's small sickbay, accompanied by Bud and Phyllis. Within the room a pair of Paradox-armed medics were hovering over the prone forms of the guards.

One of the medics now turned to Tom. "Electrical shock. They should be coming out of it soon."

Tom nodded tiredly.

"Just like before," Sandy muttered.

"Sandy---"

"Oh Tom, please. Ithaca practically did everything but leave a calling card behind. Hah! In fact she did." Sandy lifted one of the thin metal blades which had been discovered near the scene of the attack.

Bud put a hand on her shoulder. "San, easy."

She turned hot blue eyes to him. "What's it going to take, then? Sun Ohm Erato and CEM/Anahuac is at war with us. That much was made clear. And Ithaca is their assassin."

Phyllis was frowning. "If she's an assassin, then why didn't she come in here and try to kill us? I mean, as fast as she can move, she could've easily entered the Sky Queen."

"I think her target was the Photon," Tom remarked, with Bud nodding agreement. "I'm going to have to increase the guards, as well as improve the defensive sensor situation."

Phyllis and Sandy exchanged a look. "But if she was gonna to sabotage the Photon," Sandy asked, "then what stopped her? She had a clear shot."

"It's obvious. One of the guards managed to get the alarm sounded in time. If an earlier theory of mine is correct, Ithaca's rather prominent electrical power only gives her enough of a charge to make a few attacks. Then she has to withdraw to . . . recharge or something."

"The State Department," Sandy declared. "The FBI. Office of Homeland Security. The cops. The Highway Patrol. Something with a badge on it to act officially and take Ithaca and Sun Ohm Erato away."

Tom considered it, finally nodding. "It's early in the morning, but I'll contact home and see if Dad can get the wheels rolling at his end. Admittedly we've got bupkis in the way of clear evidence---"

Sandy choked.

"---but there should be enough suspicion to have something official happen in our favor." Thinking to himself, Tom began wandering off towards the flight deck, followed by Phyllis who gave Sandy a backward glance.

Sandy was prepared to follow but was stopped by a touch from Bud's hand.

"Go easy on him, honey."

Sighing, Sandy turned to move easily into his arms.

"I'm sorry. I'm . . ."

"Feeling helpless? Frustrated? Scared?"

"Feeling like I want to knock someone out violently."

Bud prudently let an inch or so of distance appear between them. Feeling the movement, Sandy chuckled beside herself.

"Believe it or not, Tom's been busier than you know. He remembered your theory that Sun Ohm Erato might be Kranjovian and was researching their efforts in nanotech and robotics earlier."

"Oh?" Raising her face, Sandy looked up at him.

"Yeah." Bud gave her a slight hug. "So far, though, nothing. At least nothing immediately evident. If Sun Ohm Erato is a Kranjovian, then it could be that CEM/Anahuac is working as the technical and scientific research front for Kranjovia."

Sandy considered it. "Interesting. Y'know, that way Kranjovia could sidestep the embargoes the UN made to prevent it from importing potentially lethal technology."

"Yeah and, if that's the case, then we'll definitely want to step in and take action."

"Oh, that's really reassuring."

Bud caught the tone of mild sarcasm and smiled. "Caution and concern from you? The same girl who practically arm-wrestled a nuclear warhead out of the hands of an insane woman while on the Moon?"

"I'm mellowing. Ignore me."

"Rather not. But I think this has all been enough excitement for one day---"

"Especially seeing as how it's now the next day."

"And it's time for bed. For all of us."

"And die in our sleep," Sandy muttered, but she allowed Bud to lead her to the sleeping quarters.

\* \* \* \* \*

"If they're planning on making a land speed attempt," Tom commented, "then they haven't made much in the way of progress."

Leaning back in a chair next to her brother, Sandy nodded. They were both up on the flight deck, sitting before the large screen in the sensor cubicle, watching the CEM/Anahuac efforts.

"I mean, we're chugging along nicely," Tom continued. "The Photon's prepped and practically ready to go." He glanced at his sister. "You and Bud finished the series-two examinations?"

Sandy nodded again. "We both ran launch simulations, trading places between the Photon and ground control. Bud's loading the results into the computer now. We're good. When the FIA officials arrive we can set up anytime you're ready."

Silence as they turned back to the screen.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you earlier," Sandy murmured.

Tom gently patted her knee. "I deserved it."

"No you didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"Tom, I'm not noble all this often. Work with me."

Chuckling, Tom worked the image on the screen, focusing on the mysterious barn-sized contraption which more and more seemed to dominate the efforts of their competitors.

Sandy looked up as she noticed someone entering the flight deck. "Hello Bingo."

The young cook nodded, bringing in two large frosted glasses. "Seeing as how some people around here feel they can avoid a complete breakfast, I brought up some juice."

Sandy gratefully accepted the offerings, passing one to Tom.

She then noticed something. "You okay, Bingo? You're limping a bit."

"Oh?" Bingo seemed to notice it for the first time. "Oh. Yeah. Tripped a bit last night."

"Well, please take care."

Nodding absently to herself, Bingo left the flight deck.

"You heard from Dad yet?" Sandy asked Tom, sipping at her drink.

"A bit. I wanted to make sure Mom wasn't listening in when I talked to him. We'd have worse things to worry about than Ithaca if she had." Tom sat back and drank from his own glass. "Dad's contacting the FBI and passing on what happened here. All these electrical attacks on us are obviously connected, and I suspect even a slight examination of Ithaca will reveal some damning evidence in our favor."

Sandy's mind briefly filled with the image of Ithaca Fogger on a dissecting table. She shook it away.

"Of all the people in the world to be used against us," Sandy said aloud. "Why her? And don't tell me it's because she was heavily damaged in the earlier explosion. CEM/Anahuac could've found any number of available corpses . . . or near-corpses . . . to turn into weapons. Heck, knowing Sun Ohm Erato, they could've picked someone to be a corpse. Why use someone who has a direct personal relationship with our family? Or did I just answer my own question?"

"Maybe," Tom considered. "Admittedly it's one thing to turn a person into a weapon. But where do you put in the motivation to undergo all that modification? What do you offer a person in payment for all the pain she had to go through in order to be rebuilt?"

"Revenge?" Sandy softly said.

Tom didn't answer, but suddenly turned back to the screen. "Hey. Look at that."

Sandy looked at the image. The parabolic dishes on the forward end of the huge CEM/Anahuac structure were all moving. Slowly shifting their position until they were all pointing upwards at a high angle.

"What is that thing, Tom?"

"I'd give a pretty to know . . . what?"

Sandy had also heard the small alarm and went to the pilot's controls to touch a button. "We've got company coming," she announced, reading the information which appeared on one of the readouts. "Small aircraft approaching rapidly." She looked back at Tom. "The FIA?"

"Maybe," Tom considered. "Let's go see."

Leaving the flight deck they moved down through the Flying Lab, stepping down the ramp where Bud, Phyllis and Bingo were waiting. Sandy was relieved to see a larger number of men standing watch near the Photon and its support gear. The men were carrying carbine-style versions of the Swift's non-lethal "area denial" system. When fired they would entangle the target in an adhesive mass.

Small, waist-high machines were quietly circling the Photon on treads, with others patrolling about around the entire Flying Lab. These were courtesy of Swift Enterprises Center For Advanced Robotics. Equipped with advanced sensors and also carrying area denial launchers.

Everyone was peering upwards at a sleek red and white vehicle which was gradually descending out of the sky, apparently coming to settle near the Sky Queen.

Shielding her eyes, Bingo frowned at the newcomer. "That's not one of your Tommycars."

Sandy felt a rising excitement. "No," she exclaimed joyously. "It's . . . oh wow!"

She broke into a run towards the machine as it landed, waving at it. Smiling broadly, Tom followed her at a somewhat slower pace, with Bud and the others just behind.

The top of the transparent bubble canopy slid open and the pilot was already clambering out. Seeing him, Sandy laughed. Despite the heat of the desert the man was, as always, dressed in a neat businesslike suit, complete with tie.

"Mad dogs and Englishmen," she cried out.

The man turned large, continuously curious eyes towards her and smiled warmly, the light of the sun glinting on the bald spot in the middle of his head.

"Errr-mmmm-gnahh, Sandra," he remarked. "Always satisfactory to see you, my dear."

He slid down from the vehicle in time to accept an enormous hug.

"Dr. B!"

"My dear."



"How're Mike and the Professor and the others?"

"Doing well. Doing quite well." The man's enormous eyes took in the others. "Ah. Tom! You are looking mmmm-ahh well."

"Good to see you, Doctor," Tom said, reaching him and taking his hand to shake it. "I was beginning to wonder when you or the others would visit."

"We've been mmmm, monitoring your efforts," the man replied. He glanced back at the CEM/Anahuac area. "As well as that of your gnahh . . . friends, it would seem." His eyes turned back, regarding the Photon. "Ah! You would certainly seem to be mmmmm, almost prepared to begin. Quite!"

Tom nodded. "Yeah. Just a little bit more to do. In fact, I'm glad you showed up. I've been hoping you'd consent to look over the thrust dynamic figures I've been getting. I could use your input on the fuel injection system I've designed for the ramjets."

"Mmmm . . . quite."

Bingo had slipped up near Sandy. "Who in the world is he?" she whispered.

"He and his friends operate a private research laboratory nearby," Sandy explained. "It's not too well known, but they helped Tom a lot when we were developing the atomicar."

"Oh?" Bingo considered it. "Why isn't it well known? Your brother never struck me as someone who'd hog all the credit."

"True. But Dr. B and his friends sort of prefer their secrecy. Long story."

"Oh. So why does he sound like his turntable is dragging?"

Sandy chuckled. "That's just the way his mind works. Truth be told, Tom believes Dr. B is actually smarter than he is."

"Wow!"

Bud was staring at the figure which remained in the vehicle. "Who's your friend, Doc?"

The man turned back and now seemed to regard his passenger for the first time. "Ah! Mmmmm-gnahhh, yes. Quite! She arrived at our laboratory some weeks ago and requested asylum."

Everyone was now looking at the person who was carefully beginning to climb out.

"Asylum?" Sandy asked.

"Mmmmm, yes. In fact, she was quite adamant on somehow getting in touch with mmm-errrr all of you. When we learned you were coming here for the Photon test it was mmm-ahhh, decided to deliver her then."

It was indeed a woman who was now sliding down onto the desert floor and turning to face the group. Adjusting her glasses she smiled shyly at everyone with sparkling blue eyes. A woman seemingly in her forties, with blonde hair cut in a page-boy style.

And Sandy's mind raced back. She had seen the woman before . . .

"Hello," the woman said. "I'm Doctor Letitia Pinon."

## Chapter Nineteen: Lethal Gold.

"And all the pieces are now in place," Sandy murmured, half to herself.

Dr. Pinon had now turned to look across the desert towards the CEM/Anahuac camp. At the sight of the enormous latticework structure she let out a long, slow breath, her hands gripping at the hull of the vehicle which had delivered her.

"They built it," Sandy heard her moan hollowly. "The fools. The stupid fools."

Tom took everyone in with a glance. "Ahh, maybe it would be better if we continued this conversation inside the Sky Queen," he said, touching Dr. B on the shoulder. With a few low instructions to the security team he herded the group into the enormous aircraft.

Soon (with the exception of Dr. B, who had excused himself to go have a look at Tom's notes), they were all gathered in the lounge section of the living quarters area. A long window looked out across the desert and, more importantly, off to where the CEM/Anahuac construction glinted in the sun.

Sandy noticed how Dr. Pinon's eyes never seemed to leave the object, and her lips continually moved as if mouthing some silent worry. Or a prayer.

"Thank you, child," she said to Bingo, accepting a glass of tea. She now turned to the others. "I suppose I must really explain," she said, and then paused, seeming a little unsure of herself.

"You were approached by CEM/Anahuac after you had finished work at Enterprises last year," Tom began gently.

The woman nodded. "A representative from the company wanted me to look at some notes regarding one of their projects. For a fee. I agreed and saw that, whatever it was, it involved the production of strangelets."

"And here we go," muttered Phyllis.

"Strangelets are hypothetical objects," Tom explained to her.

"Which means I'll only hypothetically understand."

If Sandy had been closer she would've slapped palms with Phyllis.

"They're only a few femtometers across," Tom continued gamely. "They represent a bound state of quark particles---."

"Tom . . ."

"Why don't we let Doctor Pinon continue," Sandy suggested quickly. "We can read the Sunday supplement later on."

"It's really quite simple," Tom argued.

Sandy's look silenced him.

Dr. Pinon recovered the floor. "I soon realized that, whatever CEM/Anahuac was working on, it involved some sort of particle accelerator. Naturally I was curious to learn more, and the representative I spoke with invited me to join the design team down in Mexico City. I went and was surprised to see that CEM/Anahuac had already gathered quite an impressive array of physicists."

"We've seen the list of the experts they gathered," Tom told her.

"With the intended purpose of building a car to break the land speed record," Bud added.

Dr. Pinon nodded.

"So now you're saying that CEM/Anahuac's project actually involves a particle accelerator?" Tom asked.

"Oh no, my dear. They do intend on breaking the land speed record."

"With what?" Tom asked, frowning. "All we've seen has been that giant object out there." He waved a hand out at the window.

"But you don't understand," replied Dr. Pinon. "That object is their car. Their intended vehicle."

Silence collapsed onto the lounge like an iron weight.

"That thing?" Sandy finally asked. "That's the size of a barn."

"And it's their vehicle," Dr. Pinon said, nodding vigorously.

Tom stood up and walked to the window, staring out across the desert. "OK, Doctor. From the top, please."

"It's an extremely radical propulsion design," Dr. Pinon explained. "Their vehicle---"

"The `Sungold'."

"The `Sungold', yes. The Sungold is designed to be propelled by gravity shift."

Tom locked blue eyes with hers.

"The entire vehicle is actually an atom smasher. A particle collider made up of layers upon layers of supercooled magnets. If you were to unfold the entire structure and lay it out flat, the total length of the construction would stretch some thirty-two miles."

Bud's lower jaw was in danger of scraping the floor. "But how . . ."

"Those parabolic dishes on the front," Tom murmured, a look of comprehension slowly dawning on his face.

Dr. Pinon nodded. "The `Sungold' will fire a series of proton beams ahead of its path at a rate of some eleven thousand times a second. Where the beams converge, a zone of quantum black holes will be established."

Sandy wasn't on her brother's level when it came to physics, but even she now knew where the discussion was heading, and she suddenly felt very small.

"The idea is for the gravitational focus to shift from the Earth to the zone of quantum activity," Dr. Pinon explained. "Theoretically on a highly localized level. The resulting gravitational attraction will pull the entire structure towards it, but never quite reaching it. By controlling the beams, the `Sungold' will control its speed, eventually reaching Mach three."

Tom's expression was near to vicious. "That's insane," he exclaimed. "It's like . . . it's like . . . I mean, yes it's theoretically possible. But it's like swatting a fly with a cannon."

"But that's the problem," Dr. Pinon told him. "Their theories are off."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Keep going."

"I checked their math," Dr. Pinon explained. "I went over their figures and talked with the other physicists. In theory, the quantum black holes are supposed to evaporate as soon as they're created." She shook her head. "They won't! At the most the black holes will exist long enough to sink into the core of our own planet. At the very least it could cause the equivalent of a small scale neutron star to materialize upon the surface of our world."

In her mind, Sandy saw a map of the Earth. Saw it slowly crumpling.

Tom had begun pacing about, his mind visibly ticking the problem over. "I can't believe they went to this sort of effort simply to move an object faster than sound."

"They told me they wanted to demonstrate their superior control over nuclear forces," Dr. Pinon said. "I confronted them . . . told them that their figures were wrong. They wouldn't listen, and that's when I decided to escape. I slipped out of Mexico City and hitchhiked my way up through Mexico. I wanted to reach the authorities. Especially you and Enterprises. But I kept encountering CEM/Anahuac agents everywhere I went, making it difficult for me to even use a phone. I barely made it across the border alive. It was then I had the idea of taking a different route and reaching the laboratory here at Black Rock. I knew the people here would keep me safe until I could contact you."

"And now." She looked mournfully out the window. "Now I might be too late."

"It'll be okay," Tom replied, absently running a hand through his hair. From where she sat, Sandy could clearly see he had at least fifteen different things running about inside his head. "It'll be okay. Obviously we can't let this thing happen." He glanced back at Dr. Pinon. "Did you bring any notes or specifications with you?"

She nodded. Reaching into a pocket she produced a slender computer disc. "I copied everything before leaving Mexico," she announced. "Everything's here."

Tom accepted the disc. "I'll look at this now," he promised. "And I'd better contact Dad and get him to light some more fires under the authorities. This has got to stop and it's got to stop now."

Dr. Pinon now seemed to deflate slightly. In relief, or perhaps exhaustion. Spotting this, Sandy took in Bingo with a glance. "And we'd better get you to a bed," she told the scientist, rising from her chair and touching the woman's elbow. "You'll be needing some rest."

With Bingo's help Sandy escorted Dr. Pinon out of the lounge.

Leaning a bit behind Dr. Pinon's back, Bingo whispered to Sandy. "Is all this sort of stuff really possible?"

"Tom believes it," Sandy replied. "And that's what really scares me."

\* \* \* \* \*

With Dr. Pinon settled in, Sandy went back in search of Tom, finding him and Bud in the Flying Lab's computer bay. They were studying the contents of Pinon's disc on a display screen, and Tom was rapidly entering data into a Tiny Idiot hand computer.

"So this wild business really works," Bud was asking Tom.

Tom sighed. "It does, and it doesn't. Hi San," he added, glancing up. "Dr. Pinon okay?"

"Bingo gave her a mild sedative," Sandy replied, leaning against the doorway. "So I guess it's no big mystery who the agents were who were pursuing Dr. Pinon."

Tom nodded. "It's wild, though, when you consider it. One of Ithaca's jobs was obviously to track down and locate Dr. Pinon. Amazing how it all comes back to CEM/Anahuac's chief agent possessing a connection to our family. Almost makes one believe in synchronicity."

"Except," Bud replied calmly, "in order to be genuinely synchronous, the events in a given situation should not be casually connected. It violates the classic Jungian description."

Sandy and Tom stared at him.

Bud returned their looks. "I read."

Sandy shook her head. "Sun Ohm Erato is going to figure out we've got Pinon," she said, stepping into the bay. "That means a visit from Ithaca."

"Wait," Tom said, raising a hand. He was still looking at Bud. "What I'm saying is that the coincidences surrounding Ithaca's presence represents an experience which suggests to me an obvious manifestation of parallel events within the presented underlying cause of change or growth. Doesn't that strike you as being purely Jungian?"

Bud shrugged. "Well, as I understand the concept of acausal parallelism . . ."

Sandy briefly wondered how much effort it would take to pick Bud up by the ankles and beat Tom to death with him. "Guys!"

Both of them stared at her.

Sandy took a breath, calming herself. "We are, quite possibly, in the sights of a killer cyborg. A device capable of possibly destroying the world is less than a half-hour walk

away from this very spot, in the hands of a man who has no compunctions against using it on us. Would it be too much to ask that we . . . focus on the here and now?"

Muttering, Tom turned back to the computer display.

"And it is not a `girl thing', Tom Swift!"

"I didn't say that," Tom replied. "But you're right in that we've got to really get going on this, thank you. I agree that having Dr. Pinon here places us at greater risk but, then again, the situation goes both ways. We've got what Sun Ohm Erato wants."

Bud was frowning. "Something's not clicking here. With her abilities, it should've been easy for Ithaca to track down and intercept Dr. Pinon. I know the Doc's supposed to be smart, but how did she manage to evade capture long enough to reach the guys at Black Rock?"

"A good question," Sandy replied, settling on a chair near him. "I got a better one. Was I hearing right when I came in? Dr. Pinon was correct about the `Sungold'?"

Tom's face hardened as he stared at the data slowly scrolling across the display. "A black hole of some twenty micrograms or less would, in theory, quickly evaporate in a burst of Hawking radiation."

He pointed a line of numbers. "But this told Dr. Pinon . . . and it's telling me . . . that the 'Sungold' will produce continuous quantum black holes on a slightly more massive level. These could potentially sink into the center of our Earth."

"And then the big zap," Sandy murmured.

Tom shrugged. "Theoretically. But it scares Pinon, and it doesn't do too much for my mellow either. The entire Earth could end up squeezed into a space less than nine millimeters wide."

"So we stop them," Sandy declared. "We break out the big guns, get on our horses, ride over there and do the whoop-de-whoop on the bad guys."

"Someone's been spending too much time with Bingo Winkler," Bud commented.

Tom nodded, still staring at the display. "But she's right. We can't wait any longer for Dad or the authorities. It's time we confronted Sun Ohm Erato directly."

"And Ithaca will be directly in our path," Sandy pointed out.

"Yeah but, hey . . . if this was gonna be easy, it wouldn't be nearly as much fun." The intercom buzzing, Tom reached for his headset, holding it to his ear. "Yeah?"

He listened for a moment, then nodded. "Okay, we'll be down in a few minutes. Have the security team close ranks around the Photon." Hanging up the headset he turned to the others. "A private jet has just touched down. It's the FIA officials for the land speed test."

"Oh!" said Sandy.

"Oh!" added Bud.

Tom nodded briskly. "Showtime," he said, standing up.

#### Chapter Twenty: "I Want To Be With Those Who Know Secret Things . . ."

Following Bud and Tom outside, Sandy noted that there were actually two planes moving to a stop on the desert floor. Both were Pigeon Specials; a long-range "Icarus" and a smaller "Merlin".

The latter plane was tricked out in United States Air Force livery and, as everyone watched, a trio of uniformed men emerged and began walking towards the group gathered near the Flying Lab.

The oldest of the officers shook hands with Tom. "Mr. Swift, I'm Major Warren Frome: Air Force Office of Scientific Research."

Tom nodded. "From Arlington. You're here for the demonstration."

"Yeah, but we've been picking up all sorts of official traffic while on the way out here." Frome glanced over his shoulder towards the CEM/Anahuac camp. "There might be some . . . trouble regarding what's going on out here."

"So the authorities have been alerted?"

Frome nodded. "We've got people from the NRC on their way out here. And I've been told that a group of Federal marshals are also on their way from Carson City." Glancing again at the CEM/Anahuac camp he frowned at Tom. "I suspect you know a lot more about what's going on."

"I do, but I need to ask something first. Can you get in touch with Nellis Air Force Base?"

"I know the commander."

"Good. If at all possible, I would like the Nuclear Emergency Search Team mobilized and sent up here."



Frome's face hadn't been too pleasant to begin with. It now darkened. "The purpose of this business, Mr. Swift, was to demonstrate the safety of your company's nuclear power program."

"And I intend to do just that," Tom assured the officer. "But it's not my program that's the problem."

Further talk was halted as a small group of men and women from the larger plane now approached. Their leader was a plump and stylishly dressed man who carried his bulk easily. "Sir Brian Mitford-Orsay, Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile," the man announced, offering his hand to Tom.

"You've made it here in time, Sir Brian," Tom replied.

"Yes but, for what, I'm not certain." In almost a near-perfect copy of Frome's earlier gesture, Sir Brian now glanced over towards CEM/Anahuac's base of operations. "Our headquarters in Paris has been relaying several recent reports which would seem to place the proceedings in some sort of doubt."

Sandy felt her breathing becoming regular, silently blessing her father for apparently managing to get things moving on official channels. Certainly now matters would be under control . . .

The sudden touch of a sharp breeze . . .

And Ithaca Foger was among them, dressed now as the consummate businesswoman.

"Gentlemen," she said to Frome and Sir Brian, insinuating herself into the group, "I am Ithaca Foger, representing the Comité para la Electrónica y Mecánicos."

Sir Brian was the first to recover from Ithaca's sudden appearance. "Miss Foger---"

"Swift Enterprises is currently harboring a person who has stolen classified documents from CEM/Anahuac," Ithaca continued smoothly. "Dr. Letitia Pinon. Mexican officials have been in pursuit of her for quite some time now."

Sandy could feel her hands curling into fists, and flames rising from inside her body to ignite the ends of her hair. "You little---"

"I have here warrants from the World Customs Organization, Hemispak and the Mexican Federal Investigations Agency," Ithaca said, passing documents over for Sir Brian to examine. "There is reason to believe that the vehicle Swift Enterprises has constructed employs several processes and devices patented by CEM/Anahuac."

Sandy moved closer, feeling her hands itching for Ithaca's throat. But Bud placed a warning touch on her shoulder.

Sir Brian was carefully looking the documents over, passing them over to Major Frome. "From what I've heard of Tom Swift," he said slowly, "I find these accusations hard to stomach."

"Nonetheless," Ithaca replied, "Letitia Pinon is currently enjoying the protection of the Swifts. I trust you will allow for a proper investigation to take place before they're allowed to carry out their land speed tests."

Sandy shook Bud's hand away. "By all means," she cried out hotly. "Let's investigate everything . . . including the calculations concerning the operation of the `Sungold'."

Ithaca's eyes were suddenly boring into Sandy's.

"Mister Swift," she slowly murmured, "you would do well to keep your dogs chained. They bark rather loud."

"All the better to help keep trouble away," Tom said evenly, his expression hard. "And, like Sandy, I look forward to seeing what a formal investigation reveals about the `Sungold'."

A rapid movement as Ithaca's glance took everyone in. Then she closed her eyes, whispering something under her breath. As she had once before her hand became a fist, drifting to settle just before her face.

A rapid gust of wind, and she was gone.

Frome stared around, wide-eyed. "What the hell . . ."

"That's been part of our problem," Tom explained. "I think all of you gentlemen might want to come inside for a considerable explanation."

\* \* \* \* \*

"It is not our intention to take any sort of action based on unsubstantiated accusations, Mr. Swift," Sir Brian was saying.

"And," added Frome, "from what you've shown us, there's every reason to believe that we're justified in looking closer at CEM/Anahuac's efforts."

Sighing, Sandy excused herself from the talk. It seemed as if Ithaca's impromptu visit had boomeranged and, rather than intimidate everyone into rolling over and playing dead,

had only served to place more suspicion on CEM/Anahuac. And the marshals, plus the NEST officers from Nellis Air Force Base, were due to arrive at any moment.

None of which explained why she presently felt as if she was firmly locked in someone's gunsights.

Feeling somewhat better after seeing Dr. B off (extracting a promise from him that he and his friends would be watching from their laboratory and come running at the first call for help), Sandy wandered through the Sky Queen, eventually finding Dr. Pinon in the Physics Lab. "Hi!"

"Hello, Sandra dear," the woman replied brightly, smiling at Sandy before returning to her work. She had pulled together several small electrical components and was carefully attaching them to a motherboard while, at the same time, watching data which was appearing on a computer screen.

Despite the misgivings which were wrapped around her, Sandy smiled. "If only you were twenty years younger," she said.

"Please don't get me started," Letitia Pinon replied. "Your brother is exactly the sort of man I wish I knew back when I was a knock-kneed undergraduate at MIT."

"Umm." Sandy took a seat next to her. "What're you doing?"

"Attempting to construct a miniature gravitational lens mirror," Pinon murmured. "At least that's what I call it. If and when the `Sungold' is switched on, it might give us a bit of an advantage, especially if your brother allows me to hook it up into the sensors of this plane." She gently touched the tip of a soldering iron to a section of circuitry.

"We're too late, by the way," she continued.

Sandy blinked, looking up. "What?"

"The `Sungold' is complete," Letitia Pinon remarked, her eyes on her work. "All they need to do is throw a switch, and the world will stand poised on a knife edge."

"Why?" Sandy insisted. "What does Sun Ohm Erato and CEM/Anahuac gain from all of this?"

"They feel they can control creation," Pinon replied, frowning at her handiwork. "They are confident in their abilities. Funny, though."

"What?"

The older woman sat back, rubbing absently at her eyes for a moment. "If their original intension was to propel the 'Sungold', then they have more than enough power on hand to

do the job. I've been looking over the specifications and notes I gave your brother." She looked at Sandy. "As it stands now, the `Sungold' could project black holes over a distance of hundreds of miles."

"Why?"

"We're not going to find out, dear, until we have Sun Ohm Erato and his crew pinned down somewhere and asked some very revealing questions. Unfortunately, I don't see that happening any time soon."

"We're bringing in marshals," Sandy pointed out. "The Air Force's nuclear response team---"

But Letitia Pinon was shaking her head sadly. "Too little too late, dear. That official bit of a fracas earlier today stirred the waters, but that was all CEM/Anahuac needed. Everyone's suspicious now, but they're going to have to wade through those suspicions before doing the necessary thing and destroying the `Sungold'."

"Tom will convince them."

Dr. Pinon continued shaking her head. "I've seen the angel of destruction, Sandra. I've seen Ithaca Foger."

"We scared her off earlier."

"So that was her today. I had wondered." Connecting another component, Pinon sighed. "She's not the sort of person one forgets easily. Truth be told, I've been seeing her everywhere I go."

"I know. She's creepy."

"Point of fact, I thought I saw her earlier. Here, on board the Sky Queen."

Sandy felt a grip of iron around her heart. "When?"

"A few hours ago. When those planes arrived outside."

The grip tightened. "Where exactly did you thought you saw Ithaca, Dr. Pinon?"

"Down the corridor," Pinon replied with a small nod out the door. "Near the other end of the plane. I think it was near the lower part, just beyond the wings."

Sandy mentally ran the Flying Lab's specifications through her mind. The place Dr. Pinon described was near the atomic power plant for the plane.

The fuel cells . . .

Ignoring the tightness in her chest, Sandy whirled around, her hand reaching for the alarm button on the wall . . .

And she was suddenly thrown off her feet as an enormous explosion ripped through the Sky Queen.

### Chapter Twenty-One: ". . . Or Else Alone!"

Smoke and the sound of alarms were wrapping around Sandy, and she struggled to shake them away and get back onto her feet. A pair of hands offered assistance, and a choking sound nearby told Sandy her benefactor was Letitia Pinon.

"Wh--what's happening?" Pinon asked.

"C'mon," Sandy said, taking the other woman's hand. Staggering out of the Physics Lab they both entered the main corridor. Red traveling strobe lights raced down light strips in both the ceiling and floor, and suction vents set into the ceiling were trying to draw the smoke away.

"There has been an explosion," an automated voice was calmly announcing. "Emergency measures are in effect. Please follow the moving lights which will guide you to the nearest emergency exit. If you cannot move, onboard sensors will soon have your location pinpointed for the crew to locate. There has been an explosion . . ."

Still holding Dr. Pinon's hand, Sandy spent what seemed like hours coughing her way out of the Laboratory Section and moving down to the main ramp, accompanying a few technicians who were also leaving the Sky Queen.

Outside, in the clear of the desert, Sandy looked back up at the giant aircraft, her heart plummeting. An enormous gash had torn the rear section of the Flying Lab, from the wing root all the way back to the main exhaust. Smoke and flames were billowing out from the crack.

The guards on the ground, assisted by the sentry robots, were firing bursts of area denial charges up at the gash, attempting to control the flames with the fire-retardant nature of the Tomasite foam. As Sandy watched, bursts of steam could be seen mixing with the flames, and she knew the automated fire prevention and damage control systems inside the plane were also hard at work.

"Miss Swift!"

Turning, Sandy saw Sir Brian Mitford-Orsay running towards her. "Thank the Lord you're all right," he said.

"What happened---"

"Mister Barclay was showing us the Photon," Sir Brian replied, catching his breath. "We had just left the Flying Lab when, all of a sudden---"

But Sandy suddenly felt two strong arms gripping her tightly, and she was whirled about to face Bud. "Oh God!"

"Sandy!"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but . . . Tom . . ."

"He was caught in the explosion," Bud said, his voice hollow.

Sandy felt her world falling away and Bud gripped her closer. "He's all right," he said. "So far. I mean, he's unconscious. He and the Air Force guys were going to take a look at the radiation safety gear we have on the Queen." Bud breathed once. "They were closer to the explosion." He nodded roughly towards one of the tents which had been used to protect the Photon. "We've got a triage and First Aid group running in there with Tom and Frome and the others."

Sandy tried tugging away but Bud continued holding on to her. "We can't do anything but get in the way right now, San."

"Bud!"

"He'll be okay. Just a hard clip across the side of his head." Bud stopped to catch his breath again. "The forward section of the Queen's still intact. Still operational. We can move Tom to the Medical Section once the smoke's cleared away. If necessary we'll separate the damaged section from the forward section and make do. I've radioed for a medical evac and, if we have to, we can take Tom out in one of the planes our friends arrived in."

"What about---" Sandy began, her eyes glancing towards the rear of the Flying Lab.

"The blast took out the rear hangar," Bud explained. "All the aircraft back there are useless."

"I can have our people get our plane ready," Sir Brian announced, turning to shout instructions to one of his assistants.

Sandy tried to force herself to calm down, finding that the nearness of Bud helped. She slowly looked around, now noticing that vehicles with blinking lights were approaching from the CEM/Anahuac side.

Bud was following her glance. "Looks like they may be sending help."

"I don't want them here," Sandy declared. "For all we know---"

"I know, I know."

Managing to slip out of Bud's grip, Sandy began shouting orders to the guards. Within moments a secure defensive perimeter was being established.

"Keep everyone back from here until either Bud or I give a personal okay," Sandy told them. Her eyes continued looking around. "Oh . . . Bingo!"

The little Texan was staggering towards the group, one hand held tight to her head.

"Got hit," she mumbled. "Kitchen fell on me."

Taking Bingo by the shoulder, Sandy eased her into the care of one of the technicians, directing him to escort Bingo to the medical tent. She turned back to Bud, seeing him listening to his Snooper.

Noting Sandy's attention he nodded. "The fire's under control now. All damaged areas of the Queen are being sealed off." He snapped his Snooper closed, staring grimly at the aircraft. "We're operating on reduced battery power for the time being, but it should be enough to fire up the Medical Section and keep us comfortable until we can get some help here."

Sandy was listening while, at the same time, looking about. "Had any of the guards been reported knocked out?" she asked.

"Not that I know of."

Sandy continued nosing about, her eyes searching among the stacked crates and support gear. "Ithaca left after speaking to Frome and Sir Brian," she explained to Bud. "We all assumed she returned to CEM/Anahuac. Maybe she did, but not after making a slight detour . . . hah!"

As Bud watched, Sandy bent down near a crate. Straightening up she now held one of the jumpsuits used by Swift Enterprises technicians. "Either one of our people is running around naked," she said, "or Dr. Pinon was correct when she said she had spotted Ithaca on board the Sky Queen earlier."

Bud was frowning. "I thought Ithaca's business suit looked a little full in some places." He glared over towards the CEM/Anahuac site. "Damnation!"

"Bud? I'm all in the mood now for paying Ithaca and Sun Ohm Erato a Very Serious Visit."

"San, if Tom was conscious he might argue. But Tom's out, so . . . let's lock and load."

"Wait!"

Sandy and Bud turned towards Letitia Pinon. The scientist was examining the machine she had been working on in the Physics Lab.

"I'm picking up evidence of magnetic flux in the area," she was saying. "Readings currently at sixteen teslas and rising. Rapidly."

Sandy quickly checked her security amulet. Like the others, it had been recently modified to react if Ithaca was nearby and using her powers. But the amulet was registering nothing.

"Seventy-eight teslas and rising," Pinon announced. She looked up, gazing towards the CEM/Anahuac area. "There!"

Everyone looked and now they could see a change in the enormous structure of the 'Sungold'. The parabolic dishes were glowing with a pale blue radiance.

"Oh God," Sandy said.

"They've activated it," Pinon declared. "They're going to run it."

"We've got to stop them."

"Three hundred twelve teslas and rising . . ."

A high, keening note echoed across the desert landscape. Arcs of lightning played across the parabolic dish array.

"Approaching kilotesla level," Pinon cried out. "Any moment now . . ."

Beams of deep blue light suddenly lanced out from the parabolic dishes, shining across the desert. Where the beams converged, far away, a globe of darkness appeared, tinged with crimson and cobalt fire. In the area immediately around the globe the world seemed somehow . . . warped.

Pinon moaned. "They're doing it! My readings have locked at eighteen kiloteslas! Look!"



Everyone watched as the `Sungold' slowly began moving forward on its treads. Slowly, but with each passing second the enormous vehicle picked up a bit more speed.

"They're gonna do it," Bud declared. "They're . . ."

"We've got to stop them," Sandy said.

"I'm open to suggestions." Bud eyed the cars which had been approaching from the CEM/Anahuac base. Some of them were still moving towards the Swift camp, but others had come to a halt and people were climbing out of them to watch the `Sungold's' departure.

Sandy went over to Dr. Pinon. "Do we have much time?" she asked.

The physicist was shaking her head. "Sandy, I don't know. I could maybe go back into the Flying Lab and use the instruments there---"

"Do it. It should be safe now."

Pinon turned and began running towards the ramp.

"Doctor!"

"Yes?"

"Is there anything we can do to stop it?"

Pinon was still moving towards the ramp. "I don't know," she cried out. "But, whatever you do, you'll have to catch up to the `Sungold' first."

She climbed up into the Sky Queen, and Sandy rejoined Bud.

"Our aircraft are damaged," she said.

Bud was nodding, his eyes on the planes that the Air Force and FIA people had arrived in. "By the time we get those in the air the `Sungold' will be moving too fast for them to intercept." He angrily ran a hand through his hair. "The cycloplanes we ordered from the coast aren't here yet. We don't have anything fast enough to catch the `Sungold'."

The vehicle in question was already appearing to travel at an increasingly rapid clip, leaving a trail of dust behind it as it followed the blue beams.

And Sandy and Bud, as one, turned to look at . . .

The Photon.

Bud slowly nodded to himself. "Possible."

"Doable," agreed Sandy. "It's the only thing we've got."

Bud began moving towards the Photon. "No time to get into the pressure suit," he announced, reaching out to grab the control helmet from a nearby work table, "but I can get it moving and intercept the `Sungold'---"

"Bud, no!"

"San, it's the only way---"

"I mean you can't go."

Bud turned back to her, questions in his eyes.

"Tom was supposed to handle the ground support while you piloted the Photon," Sandy explained to him, moving closer. "Tom's out, and that means you've got to take his job."

"But---"

"I've been in the Photon simulator as much as you have, but I haven't studied anything regarding the ground support tasks. You're qualified for it . . . I'm not."

"San . . ."

"Bud!"

The two of them stared at each other for a long second. Arguments, feelings, concerns . . . all passing between them in the space of a heartbeat.

Then Bud tossed the control helmet into Sandy's arms.

"Okay, people," he called out to the technicians standing around. "The lady's got some traveling to do. Let's go!"

## Chapter Twenty-Two: Supersonic Duel.

In the best of all perfect worlds, Sandy knew she would have dramatically vaulted over the support frame into the cockpit of the Photon and roared off into the fray.

As is was, she slipped on the ladder, nearly spraining her left ankle.

One of the technicians hovered nearby. "Miss?"

Waving him off, Sandy continued up the ladder, wincing and almost crawling on all fours along the narrow catwalk. Reaching the access hatch to the cockpit she gingerly began lowering herself into the Photon, hoping to avoid a fatal accident. At the last moment she looked to see the rapidly departing form of the `Sungold'.

Shaking her head, Sandy let go of the ladder, dropping down into the cockpit and almost managing to fall directly into the pilot's chair. Settling into it she swung the control arm down across her lap, locking it into place. She then began adjusting the helmet around her head as the access ladder pulled up and away.

"Miss Swift?" a voice was buzzing in the helmet. "Are you reading us?"

"Five by five," Sandy answered.

"We're sealing the hatches now and withdrawing the service gantry. Bud'll be here in a few."

Darkness closed around her as the above hatches sealed themselves. But there was a hum of power and, within moments, she was surrounded by the glow of instrument lights. As she watched, more and more red lights were switching to green as the various systems began activating.

"Cockpit sealed, released from its connections and is being suspended in liquid," the technician's voice came back. "Applying refrigerant . . . now!"

Although there was no way for Sandy to feel it or see it, she was able to easily imagine what was going on around her as the liquid layer surrounding the inner cockpit became rigid with cold.

The technician confirmed it. "All right, Miss Swift. Your cockpit is now isolated and the protective shell is frozen in place. Are you still receiving us?"

"Yes."

Leaning back, she allowed the helmet to come into contact with the life-support connection sockets of the chair. Immediately the humidity inside the helmet began clearing. The chair was also beginning to adjust itself more snugly around her, providing more of a cushion against the acceleration which was to come.

Let's not kid ourselves, Sandy thought. Even with the neutralator taking care of the acceleration, I'm still winging this without a proper pressure suit. I'll be like the last penny in the piggy bank . . . one that's been thrown off a cliff.

Bud's voice came into her helmet. "Sandy? I'm up."

Sandy nodded. "OK, Bud. Ground, this is Photon. Power up sequence completing. I'm switching on the forward viewing system . . . now!"

Touching a switch caused a telejector lobe to form upon the curving grey surface before her. A test grid was rapidly replaced by a crisp view of the desert. So wide was the viewing field that, to Sandy, it seemed as if she was now positioned directly on the nose of the Photon, floating just inches above the desert floor.

And, dwindling further in the distance, she could see the `Sungold'.

"People? Talk to me."

"`Sungold' is at Mach zero point six seven and climbing," Bud explained. "Rapidly."

Dr. Letitia Pinon now made herself heard. "Sandy? I'm up on the flight deck, in the sensor area. Bud's shown me how to lock in the Physics Lab sensors to the systems here. The magnetic flux production at the quantum zone is currently at the megatesla level."

"God . . . how long can the `Sungold' maintain that safely?"

"I'm not certain, but it must be balancing intense gravitational forces on the head of a very narrow pin. Right now I'm getting thermal spots from where the `Sungold's' proton beams are converging. According to your brother's Damonscope, it's Hawking radiation which means black holes are being produced on the quantum level."

Sandy was watching the Photon's propulsion system controls coming online. "Doctor . . . the short version, please."

"It's a good sign, so far. It means the black holes are evaporating as soon as they're being created. It's when the mass of the black holes increase that we'll be in real trouble."

Sandy unlocked the safety switch for the solid fuel rocket motors. Her hands now curled around the control grips. "Getting ready for primary ignition. Launch anchors still in place. All systems good."

"Sandra . . ."

Sandy stared ahead, feeling something in her throat. "Yes, Bud?"

A pause. Then: "Go for gold!"

Sandy wordlessly mouthed a reply, then her finger squeezed a trigger on one of the control grips. "Ignition!"

Raw thrust roared out from the twin solid fuel rocket cores at the rear of the Photon. The vehicle began shuddering, straining against metal anchors which held it firmly in place.

Inside the Photon, Sandy watched numbers climb on one of the control arm displays. When the red numerals changed to blue she pressed the trigger again. "Release!"

A series of sharp snaps announced the shearing away of the anchors. Like a bullet fired from a rifle, the Photon raced out from underneath the protective cover of the Sky Queen.

Inside the car, Sandy felt as if she had been hit in the chest with a baseball bat. She allowed the chair's cushioning, as well as the effects of the neutralator, to fight against the force of acceleration.

Her eyes flicked over the readouts arranged in front of her. "One record broken," she said through gritted teeth. "Zero to sixty in one point nine two seconds!"

"Sandy!"

"I'm OK," she said. No I'm not, she silently added. Without the pressure suit she was taking far more punishment than she was designed for. She could feel the effects of the neutralator trying to compensate, and concentrated on breathing steadily.

"So far all systems are good," Bud's voice assured her. "Your speed is one hundred eighty and increasing." A pause. "'Sungold' approaching Mach one. Also increasing but, at this moment, you've got the faster acceleration rate."

"Sandra," a new voice appeared.

Despite her situation, Sandy's eyes managed to widen in surprise. "Sir Brian!"

"I'm sitting here next to Mr. Barclay," the FIA representative announced. "I just wanted to let you know that, according to the instruments I'm looking at here, you should intercept the 'Sungold' in . . . fifteen minutes."

Sandy could still see the 'Sungold' far ahead of her. Or, actually, she was focusing on the flickering fiery sphere at the forward end of the proton beams.

Her hands made an adjustment to the controls. "Maneuvering active. I'm shifting my course slightly, trying to keep the 'Sungold' in my sights."

"We're watching you on radar," Bud announced. "We've got a good image relaying from the space station."

Something clicked inside Sandy's head. "The space station?"

"Yeah. Remember? We were going to have it assist in monitoring the original run. It's above us now."

Another click inside Sandy's head, and she didn't like the result that was being produced.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Bud beat her to it. "Huh!"

"What?"

"The CEM/Anahuac jet. The Airbus."

"What about it?" Sandy turned her head to see, but the viewing field of the telejector lobe didn't extend far back enough.

"It's taking off. Sun Ohm Erato and his people are getting away."

A slow dawn rose on Sandy's face. "Oh, gentle Jesus!"

"What's wrong?"

"The `Sungold'. Ithaca! She's on a suicide run!"

"What do you mean?"

"Bud, it's the only reason Sun Ohm Erato would abandon her. Don't you get it? They don't expect Ithaca to survive the run!"

Moments passed. Then Bud spoke again. "Sandy, abort!"

"No!"

"Sandy!"

"Bud, where can we go? We can't run away fast or far enough to escape whatever effect Ithaca is planning. The only chance is that I can catch her and stop her."

"Sandy . . ."

A beeping sound drew Sandy's attention to a readout. "Mach one in four . . . three . . . two . . . one!"

Ahead of her a ring of air had been boiling as it compressed into a shock wave around the Photon. A bit more acceleration . . . a push against the mass of air . . .

Thunder rolled across the desert.

"Mach one," announced Sandy. "One point five . . . point fifteen . . . point twenty . . ."

More thunder echoed.

"'Sungold' just broke Mach one," Sir Brian announced. "Estimate interception in nine minutes."

Sandy counted her blessings that the neutralator was finally starting to kick in fully, although she suspected the device would be so much pretty junk whenever the Photon came to a stop.

She squinted ahead. Something odd was happening in the distance. The landscape immediately around the convergence point of the `Sungold's' proton beams was beginning to twist. As Sandy continued to watch, more and more of the view was being stretched into concentric circles around the flickering convergence point.

"I might be having a malfunction in the viewing system . . ."

"I don't think so," Bud replied. "If we're looking at the same thing, I'm seeing it too."

"Space is beginning to immediately warp around the quantum zone," Dr. Pinon announced. "So far the effect is still extremely localized. What we're seeing is leakage. Within the quantum zone, atoms are probably starting to undergo radical deformation. I'm starting to see bursts of X-rays and gamma rays."

Sandy kept her mouth shut because she felt it was useless to make a comment to Bud about the fact she was currently racing at supersonic speed into a zone of high radiation, and the Photon carried little in the way of shielding.

Of course, she reminded herself, if things went from bad to worse, the lack of shielding would be the least of her worries.

"Photon approaching Mach two," Sir Brian said. "'Sungold' at Mach one point eight seven."

A thought occurred to Sandy and she looked at the controls to her right. Especially the small console which handled communications.

"I'm going to try something," she said, reaching over and touching a few switches. When the LED indicator replied with "wideband" she locked in the "transmit" button.

Sandy raised her voice slightly. "Ithaca?"

Silence from all around. Then: "Sandy, I don't think she's gonna---"

"Or perhaps I will," a familiar female voice replied in Sandy's helmet.

Sandy didn't immediately reply because she was staring straight ahead. A faint cloud of green mist had suddenly appeared in the cockpit directly in front of her. At first she thought one of the Photon's system was venting gas. But the cloud contracted . . . developed features . . .

And Sandy found herself looking into the face of Ithaca Foger.

The image smiled softly. "I presume, Sandy, it's you who's currently chasing me in the Photon. I'm flattered."

"Sandy," Bud's voice cried out. "How---"

"Shhhh," Sandy replied. She returned her attention to the image. "Ithaca, you've got to stop your run. You're in enormous danger, and I think you know it."

The image considered it. "I'm confident I can survive, Sandy. The question is, can you and the others?"

Sandy felt her hands squeezing the control grips tighter. "The `Sungold' is going to cause enormous devastation."

"Devastation, yes," Ithaca agreed. "Its level, however, will depend on how much interference I receive. And yes, Sandy, that was a hint. I'm offering you a chance to withdraw, to avoid being among the casualties that we both know must now come."

Moments passed with only the muffled sounds of the Photon's systems in Sandy's ears.

Bud spoke up. "Sandy---"

"I'm sorry," Sandy finally said in a low voice.

The smile on Ithaca's face grew.

"I'm sorry, Ithaca," Sandy said, giving one of the control grips a twist, then pushing both of them forward. "Engaging ramjets."

The rocket motors suddenly became silent. Small drag chutes popped out from the rear of the motor casings, pulling them free of the Photon. At the same time the ramjet nacelles blossomed open, and then the Photon roared into new life, racing faster now in pursuit of the `Sungold'.

"Mach two," Sandy heard a voice in her helmet. She couldn't tell who it was. "Two point two . . . point two five . . . point three . . . point three two five . . ."



Sandy's eyes glanced about her instruments. A few reds were beginning to blink among the peaceful greens and blues as the Photon was entering the area of maximum stress.

And, hanging before her, Ithaca's face sadly shook. "You can't stop me, Sandy."

"Estimate interception in five minutes." This had to be Sir Brian.

"I guess we'll find out in six minutes," Sandy told Ithaca.

But now several of the readouts were beginning to flicker before Sandy's eyes. Bands of static were twisting across the telejector lobe, breaking up the image, and the voices in Sandy's helmet were becoming less and less distinct. Only Ithaca's face before her remained maddeningly clear.

Sandy slapped at the buttons on the control arm, and then reached to adjust switches on the right-hand console, trying to stabilize the readouts. But nothing worked.

"People . . ."

"Sandy," a voice fought through the interference. Doctor Pinon? "You're approaching the event horizon for the quantum zone. The outer fringe of the warp bubble the 'Sungold' is making."

Which explained why the readouts were becoming bollixed. "Next time, Tom," Sandy muttered, "we go strictly analog."

"You're accelerating even more." This from Bud?

Diving into a black hole, Sandy thought. A nest of them. End of a perfect afternoon.

"Turn back, Sandy," Ithaca insisted. "You still have a chance."

"And let you do what?" Sandy shot back. "I can't let it happen."

"You can fight for your beliefs," Ithaca argued. "But I can die for mine!"

"We don't have to do this, Ithaca."

Ithaca's expression became grim. "Watch me."

Her image faded from the cockpit. And Sandy could now see the close image of the 'Sungold'. Watching as several of the parabolic dishes slowly began moving. Pointing their beams more and more upwards.

"Oh God," Sandy moaned, knowing now that her suspicion had been correct.

"Sandy!" A crackle from somewhere in her helmet. "The warp bubble."

"What?"

"Balance . . . fragile . . ."

Sandy's hearing clutched at the distant sound as if trying to escape drowning. "What?"

"Interrupt it!"

"How?" Sandy shrieked. But she already knew what the answer had to be. Drive the mass of the Photon, and herself, directly into the quantum zone. Essentially swan dive into infinity, destabilizing the careful balance of the warp bubble.

Hopefully Bud hadn't been the one making that decision. Like he had any notion how to . . .

Oh!

Working rapidly, Sandy pulled aside a plastic safety cover on the control arm, revealing three switches. One by one she began throwing them.

As her fingers reached for the final switch the cockpit began to slowly twist about her. She could feel invisible fingers gradually reaching for her body. Wanting to render it relative to the warping which was slowly taking place.

Her finger stretched, throwing the last switch. "Ithaca . . . one more chance!"

No answer. Bracing herself, Sandy sent a silent prayer out, then pulled the control grips back hard.

Outside, the hull of the Photon was rocked by a series of explosive bolts detonating all at once. The section of the vehicle holding the cockpit broke away and fell back as retro-rockets suddenly fired forward, slowing the cockpit down radically.

The majority of the Photon continued racing like a missile towards the quantum zone.

Inside the cockpit Sandy was slammed hard against the control arm, then she collapsed back as the chair made a vain attempt to hold her still. All around her was a roaring which she hoped was the retro-rockets continuing to fire. There was still a warping effect . . . the fingers of gravity still reaching out seductively for her flesh. Phantom colors burst behind her eyes as the signals of her brain were beginning to be affected by the twisted gravity.

When the Photon had separated everything had gone dark. There was no longer a telejector lobe to look out from. But the green mist reappeared, and Ithaca's face was harshly glaring out at her.

"It's not over, Sandy," the image declared. "Believe me!"

"Ithaca . . ."

"My employers gave me a message to pass on to you in case you got this far." The face twisted into a snarl. "I was to mention two words to you."

"What---"

"Stay Tuned!"

The words were still ringing in Sandy's ears as the image of Ithaca's face broke into a eye-searing burst of scattering green radiance. Then Sandy was alone as she bumped along in the cockpit, the sound of the retro-rockets slowly fading all around her.

She was still sitting in the chair, concentrating on keeping her breathing under control, when Bud and the recovery crew arrived to crack open the cockpit and pull her out.

### Chapter Twenty-Three: Finally Slowing Down.

"Now here's a pleasant change. For once I'm not the one lying in a hospital bed."

Tom looked up wearily from the Tiny Idiot he was reading, managing a smile as he saw Sandy approaching. She was accompanied by her parents, as well as Bud and Sir Brian Mitford-Orsay.

Pulling a chair closer to the bed, Sandy sat down in it, looking at her brother fondly. "How's it going, tiger?"

"I should be asking you the same question."

"Me?" Sandy considered it. "I almost drove into a black hole at supersonic speeds, risking radioactive contamination all the way. How should I feel? But let's talk about you. You're a mess."

Tom shrugged, causing some of the bandages covering him to shift slightly. "Concussion. Lacerations. Bruises. Second-degree burns in a few places. Frankly, I'd rather be at home."

"But you're going to stay here for a while and recover," Mary Swift remarked firmly. "We'll move you back home when the doctors say it's all right."

"Besides," Bud spoke up, "it'll give my folks a chance for a nice long visit with you."

Tom shrugged again, knowing from long experience when the jig was up. And, as recovery centers went, the University of California/San Francisco Medical Center was extremely adequate. At least they had internet connections available for the patients.

Either that, or Tom suspected some strings had been pulled on his behalf.

"So," he said, settling himself back. "Bring me up to date."

"You haven't been catching up from that?" Sandy asked, nodding at the hand computer.

Tom let out a long, low breath. "Only that they broke my plane." He stared ahead at nothing. "They broke my plane," he whispered.

"Ned's already getting the team ready back at Shopton," his father assured him gently. "They'll be ready for your input once you return."

"And, if I know you," Bud added, "you've already got the Sky Queen III thought out and designed."

Tom smiled crookedly. "I have been considering a few notions."

His mother almost returned the smile. "Hmph! You're recovering all right."

"So!" Tom looked around at all the others. "What else is happening? Or has happened?"

"Major Frome was down the hall from you," Sandy said. "But the Air Force takes care of its own and he was moved to the 61st Medical Group down in Los Angeles."

"Accompanied by more than a few dirty looks thrown in our direction," Bud added.

Tom winced. "Ouch! Didn't they know it wasn't our fault?"

"We're still smoothing the waters," Tom Sr. assured his son.

Tom nodded, his eyes moving to Sir Brian. "You don't look all that much worse for wear."

"A bit knocked about," the FIA representative replied, "but, other than that, it was quite exciting. Rather like the old days."

Tom gave him a smile before returning his gaze to the others. "I've been picking up bits and pieces from the downloaded files," he said, lifting the Tiny Idiot a bit. "But I'd like to have some gaps plugged in."

His audience looked at each other, then Sandy decided to take the ball. "First off, you'll be glad to hear that Sherman is recovering nicely."

"Wow! Great."

"Even more, we told him about what happened here. He says this confirms his theory: mainly that CEM/Anahuac is, in actuality, the scientific research and weapons development arm for the Kranjovians."

Tom's eyes narrowed.

"We've handed this information over to the FBI and the State Department," Tom Sr. added. "It'll be interesting to see what happens as a result."

Tom took the news in. "So. And Sun Ohm Erato got clean away?"

Sandy nodded. "But I suspect we'll be hearing from him again."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Sandy smiled serenely.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun Ohm Erato frowned at the object which was on the silver dish Sestina placed upon his desk. A simple white envelope. On it his name, written out in cursive by a practiced hand.

He looked up at Sestina. "And this has been scanned?"

The giantess nodded before shuffling mournfully away.

Sun Ohm Erato gently took the envelope, immediately sensing the presence of a small solid object within. Something which felt familiar to his hands.

Opening the envelope he tipped it over, allowing the object inside to clatter out upon the silver dish. At first blush it appeared to be a United States 25-cent piece. A quarter.

Curious, Sun Ohm Erato picked the coin up, examining it more closely. He saw that the coin was unique. It was the same size as a U.S. quarter. But it carried an unusual design. Both sides of the coin featured the same image: the rear end of a horse.

A small slip of paper had also dropped from the envelope. Unfolding it, Sun Ohm Erato read the message written on it:

THINKING OF YOU!

For a moment Sun Ohm Erato sat quietly. Then a crooked smile slowly crawled onto his face. Another moment, and then he bent his head back to release a long and wicked laugh.

"Very well, Sandra Swift," he finally said after recovering his breath. He expertly flipped the coin high into the air, admiring its gleam in the office lights. "Very Well!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"So the `Sungold' was actually designed to be a weapon?" Tom asked.

Sandy sighed. "A lot of this is still theory," she explained to Tom. "But, ever since the run out in the desert, I've been putting together a lot of facts and coming up with an interesting little notion."

"Go ahead."

"This whole business started because CEM/Anahuac had engineered a move against our commercial nuclear power efforts," Sandy said. "But then I met Sun Ohm Erato, and he told me about his concern that Enterprises would be branching out into mass producing cars running on our solar batteries."

Tom nodded. "I remember."

"I know. We maintained that such a move was still pretty much up in the air . . . literally . . . because all our solar battery production is in orbit, and we haven't yet worked out a cost effective means to bring enough batteries down to Earth to power the current level of commercially produced automobiles.

"Sun Ohm Erato wasn't convinced, and he was looking for a way to stop us. But how? The battery farms are near the space station, and even a missile attack was out of the question. The security was too good.

"It was Dr. Pinon who gave me the answer when she mentioned how powerful the 'Sungold' was."

"The 'Sungold' was going to project black holes at the space station," Tom murmured.

"Exactly," Sandy replied, nodding. "The business with the land speed run was technically just an elaborate smoke screen meant to allow the construction of what was essentially a long-range cannon capable of firing quantum black holes."

"The 'Sungold' was getting ready to attack the space station when Sandy managed to interrupt the warp bubble," Bud pointed out.

Tom slowly rubbed his forehead. "I'm sort of sorry I missed out on that."

"I wish I had missed it," Bud said.

In his mind he could still see the final moments of the 'Sungold'. The forward section of the Photon had struck the warp bubble. Immediately the quantum zone had begun to fluctuate, to wobble about. There was a brief burst of actinic light, and then enormous bolts of blue lightning angrily rained out in all directions over the desert.

The quantum zone flared . . . grew slightly . . . and then quickly collapsed into itself.

And the 'Sungold' continued following the proton beams. As Bud and the others watched, the enormous structure seemed to rapidly dwindle away in all directions as it moved closer to the quantum zone. The final sight of it was a green flash just before the zone evaporated.

"Dr. Pinon explained it as best as she could," Tom Sr. told his son. "In the space of less than a femtosecond, the Earth at that area found itself co-existing with a collapsing stellar mass. If Sandy hadn't destabilized the warp bubble . . ."

Tom slowly exhaled.

"As it is, we've got physicists from all over the world descending on Black Rock, covering it with instruments. It's the closest anyone's come to experiencing a black hole, and we're all trying to get as much data as we can."

Tom was quiet for several moments. Then his focus returned to the others. "And Ithaca?"

In response, Sandy took Tom's computer. She rapidly cycled through several of the files downloaded into the device.

Handing it back she tapped at the tiny screen. "The last moment of the quantum zone."

Tom looked at the screen, nodding. "I'd seen this picture earlier."

"There's a bright green fleck in the lower left portion. About seven o'clock. Zoom in on it."

Tom did. The image cleared, and he found himself looking at the green silhouette of a human figure.

"Dr. Pinon saw the same thing," Sandy told him. "Apparently that's Ithaca. She's trapped at the edge of the black hole's event horizon. Wherever the quantum zone went, she went with it."

Tom looked up. "Alive?"

Sandy looked at her father, who shrugged. "Ordinarily, I'd say no," he told Tom. "A human being couldn't survive the journey into a black hole. But Ithaca . . ."

"Theoretically she could now be anywhere in time and space," Tom murmured speculatively. "Something else for her employers to answer for."

Sandy opened her mouth, and then shut it. There would be time later for her to privately comment to Tom her own theory concerning Ithaca's origins. It had been assumed that she was a result of the scientists at CEM/Anahuac.

But her final words to Sandy had been "Stay Tuned".

The same words which the aliens had used when they had rescued her on the Moon. And, just as before, Sandy experienced the sensation of something smoothly connecting with her mind. A connection similar to what she had felt on the Moon, and back in Ecuador when she had encountered the alien artifact.

Since then she had been wondering just who Ithaca Foger's "employers" truly were.

She silently shook herself out of her reveries, paying attention again to Tom.

"We're somewhat more ragged for wear," he was commenting, "but I think I've reached the point where we can sit back and say `all's well that ends well'." He shook his head. "Too bad about the land speed run, though. That's been bollixed."

Sir Brian coughed discreetly. "Well . . . as to that."

Everyone turned to look at him.

He cleared his throat. "While it is true that the run didn't proceed to FIA specifications, I've been in contact with my associates in the organization. The run was, after all, monitored by the instruments on board the Flying Lab, as well as those on board the Swift space station. Plus I was contacted by some gentlemen who maintain a privately operated propulsion laboratory out in the Black Rock desert. They assure me they were also monitoring the run. Not only that but, as we had two vehicles making a supersonic run, we had a sort of baseline from which to measure against. Which means we knew the



distance the Photon had to travel in order to intercept the `Sungold', and we knew how fast the `Sungold' was moving. Therefore, we were able to safely estimate the speed of the Photon."

From inside his coat he withdrew a rolled sheet of paper and extended it to Sandy. "Keep in mind this is technically a disputable reading," he told her. "But a majority of the FIA board is willing to give you the benefit of the doubt."

Taking the paper, Sandy quickly unrolled it.

"Photon declared as having broken Mach three barrier'," she read excitedly. "And it has the date and time and everything!"

Bud peered over her shoulder. "And there it is in large print. Pilot: Sandra Swift."

Sandy felt like leaping out of the chair.

Her excitement was mirrored on the faces of the others in the room. No one could, at that moment, guess that the palpable emotion would soon be replaced by thrills of another sort as Sandy would find herself involved in the adventure of THE CYCLONE GUN.

"We'll try again," Tom declared. "I can build another Photon, and we can make an official run."

"Bud'll drive it," both Sandy and her mother replied.