

Chapter One: The Problems Of A Cowgirl.

"Too oo-o-ld to wrangle, or ride on the swing. Yooouu beat the triangle and you curse evereee-thinggggg. If dirt was a kingdom then yooou'd be King . . ."

Sandra Swift paused in her singing. Or attempted singing, she quietly added. Actually, as she considered her surroundings, the New Mexico landscape hardly rated such a harsh condemnation as what the last verse suggested. Especially now, with the scrubby trees and bushes freshly dusted with early morning snow. McKinley County could be rough, but there were moments when it presented a clear face of Western charm. Moments such as now.

Reaching down she idly patted the skin of the light buckskin Quarter Horse she was riding. "You don't mind my singing do you, Babycakes?"

The horse whickered softly and Sandra smiled, wondering for the umpteenth time what in the world possessed someone to name a stallion "Babycakes"?

"Pretty Boy," she assured him. Lightly giving the reins a flick she soon had the horse moving a bit faster along the edge of Highway 602 and was feeling free in the saddle: a lithe blonde girl in her twenties, dressed in a grey cotton shirt, Levis and leather mule-ear boots. The whole package topped with a felt Plainsman hat. "On the Goodnight Trail . . . she sang. "On the Looo-ving Traaaaillll . . ."

And, behind the smile, a mood which was slowly fading into blue.

So why am I upset?

Automatically letting Babycakes lead the way, Sandy once again considered the recent catalog of her life. Perhaps it had a lot to do with the way so many things had been flipped upside down. Maybe she was more of a creature of habit than she realized.

After all, here it was late January and she was still experiencing exile in New Mexico, along with the rest of her family. Or some of them, she sourly amended. Sandy, as well as her father and mother, had been obliged to leave their home in Shopton, New York. This following the near destruction of the Swift Enterprises research complex a few months earlier by European thugs using advanced versions of Nazi superweapons.

Their actual house had been untouched by the violence. But her father, the celebrated scientist and engineer Tom Swift Sr., didn't want to waste any available working time and so moved everyone down to New Mexico where he could devote his energies to one of his pet concerns: the atomic energy research facility he called the Citadel. At the time no one seemed inclined to argue the decision. And it couldn't be claimed that everything had been bad. Christmas in New Mexico had been a rather festive and attractive affair, and Sandy had made numerous trips back and forth to Shopton, running errands on behalf of her father.

As a passenger.

This time the smile on her face vanished completely. Sandy had been the chief test pilot for Swift Enterprises. But the injuries she had suffered during what was now called the "Cyclone Gun Incident" had taken her off flying status for the time being. To her way of thinking, Sandy felt her physical condition was better than it had been in years. Especially after rigorously following the regimen of her physical therapist. But she still had a slight limp which was constantly catching the eye of her father no matter how hard she tried to hide it. So it was that, when she was engaged in her cross-country errands, she was thoroughly barred from the cockpit.

"I can ride a horse along a bumpy trail," she muttered to herself, "but I'm not allowed to even fly a kite!"

Things might have been better if all the Swift family was together. But her brother, Tom Jr., was practically living up in Everett, Washington as he supervised the finishing touches on the third Flying Lab.

But it wasn't that Sandy was lonely.

Oh no, she thought. Not in the least.

"The old woman's lonesome tonight," she sang softly. "But she really isn't," she murmured sullenly. Bud Barclay, Tom's best friend and a Swift Enterprises astronaut, was very much nearby. He wasn't the problem, though.

Harrison Link was the problem. Perhaps an odd way to think about a resourceful New York City Police detective, trained in counter-terrorism, who'd been so very helpful in busting up the Cyclone Gun organization. But he was also handsome, kind, literate, clever and was very very adept at keeping a girl warm.

Sandy sighed. Perhaps it was all her fault. She had allowed herself to go out on dates with Harris whenever she made a trip to Shopton (a lot of times via New York City). It hadn't been her intention to take the situation anywhere beyond the casual stage. But Harris was . . . well, he was Harris . . . and he possessed an extremely enticing way of letting it be known that he was quite willing to take matters between him and Sandy much further.

She still possessed feelings for Bud. Considerable feelings.

But Harris . . .

The fact that her parents and friends were noticing what was going on didn't help the situation. Everyone liked Harris. It was difficult not to. But Sandy had caught the very pointed looks sent her way whenever Harris entered the scene. Especially when he had even gone so far as to come to New Mexico on a few occasions. He was always very pleasant and courteous . . .

But still those looks. And Sandy's mother had a way of saying "Harris is a very nice boy" that made Sandy feel like an utter heel.

Bud certainly wasn't making matters any less worse. He was very amiable and friendly towards Harris on the mercifully few times the two had met. But he was also seeming to find more and more excuses not to be alone with Sandy. Even worse, he had started dating Dody Ames: the daughter of Enterprises' former chief of security and sister of Sherman Ames, the man who currently held the position. If Sandy felt like a heel for dating Harris then she disliked herself even more for feeling the way she did about Dody Ames. Sandy liked Dody.

A whinny from Babycakes snapped Sandy's attention back to the here and now, and she realized she had been riding the horse at a full gallop. "OK . . . OK," she said. "I'll whoa up here, fella. Sorry."

Babycakes accepted the apology as he slowed to a mild canter. "Can't even take things out on myself," Sandy said. "I have to punish the horse. What else can possibly go wrong?"

She reminded herself that the Shopton Jetmariners had finished the season without making it into the playoffs. "That's probably my fault too," Sandy confessed to Babycakes.

Horse and rider had reached the town limits of Tenderly, and Sandy couldn't quite hold down a smile as she once again read the billboard: WELCOME TO TENDERLY --- HOME OF THE SWIFT WESTERN RESEARCH DISTRICT.

Underneath the message someone had spray painted: Here's where all the atomic stuff happens. Robot stuff, too! The added comment had been there as long as anyone could recall, which only helped to raise New Mexico a few notches in Sandy's eyes.

The phone she had clipped to her belt now chirped the signal which meant a personal message was coming in. Unclipping it, Sandy raised the phone to her head. "You got Sagebrush Sandra . . . the Princess of the Purple Mesa. Ah got mah ears on and am on the flip-flop in the hammer lane. Kick it in and come on back."

A considerable pause. Then: "I think I will have to have a talk with Bingo about the movies you've been watching with her."

It wasn't Bud. "Oh! Hi, Mom."

"Just a question," Mary Swift's voice said from the other end of the connection. "If your ears are flopping on a hammer, should I have bandages and iodine ready when you get here."

"I'm all right," Sandy said, laughing in spite of herself. "I'm just reaching town and will be at Casa Rapido in a few minutes."

"Oh good, because we're getting ready to have brunch out on the patio."

"Now that," Sandy replied, "sounds exactly like the sort of thing I need. I'm definitely on my way."

"Good." Mrs. Swift was quiet for a moment. Then she asked: "Do you know anything about a visitor arriving?"

"Not in the least. Why?"

"Well, when we woke up, there was a text message saying we were to expect a visit from someone. No identification but, according to the access code, whoever sent the message had full security clearance."

Sandy considered that it said something about the sort of family she was in where visitors were obliged to acquire full security clearance.

For one thing, it made things dicey for Christmas carolers. "Fraid I can't help you, Mom."

"It . . . wouldn't be Harris, would it?"

Sandy inwardly sighed, grateful that her phone lacked a video pickup. "Harris knows better than to drop in unannounced," she said, "and he hasn't called me." At least not about a visit, she continued mentally, feeling a few of her fingers cross.

"I apologize for being nosy. I was just wanting to have things ready in case it was."

"I know, Mom."

"Just remember this conversation when you're the mother of an adult daughter."

Sandy began whistling and hissing. "Lots of static here, Mom," she said. "Probably auroral interference, or laser space bats or something. Get back to you later. Save me some grapefruit. Bye!" Closing the phone she allowed herself to relax.

"The posse's closin' in from all sides," she announced to Babycakes as she returned the phone to her belt. "Best make tracks for the hideout, big fella! Heyaaa!"

Babycakes, by now fully attuned to the moods of his mistress, hardly bothered altering his pace into the requested "heyaaa" and placidly continued trotting, carrying Sandra further into Tenderly. The town was small enough to where several people waved, recognizing the young woman on the horse, and Sandy smiled and waved back, occasionally calling out greetings.

Minutes later she turned down a side street and, slipping off the saddle, walked alongside her horse towards the two-story custom log house at the far end. Sitting amidst eleven acres, Casa Rapido served as the Swifts residence whenever they were attending to business in New Mexico. Although rustic in appearance, it bristled with all the electronic amenities and security systems which the Swifts had come to accept in their lives.

"I'll be in in a minute," she cried out, leading Babycakes into the adjacent stable.

"They saw ya comin' up the drive," a voice replied, and Sandy turned to smile at the sight of Bingo Winkler entering the stable. At five foot four, with short blue-black hair surrounding a face possessing large dark eyes, the Texas-born Belinda-Glory "Bingo" Winkler was not only the Swifts cook, but one of Sandy's close friends and confidants.

Sandy was now loosening the saddle. "Do me a favor and check his hooves."

"Certainly," the other girl affably agreed to and bent down, murmuring assurances to the horse. "Your folks still don't know who's comin'," she added in a louder voice.

Sandy was unbridling Babycakes. "Yeah. It can't be Tom. He's not gonna tear himself away from Everett."

Bingo was now carefully removing the saddle. "Wouldn't be Harris, by any chance?" she asked casually.

She suddenly met Sandy's eyes over the horse and inwardly winced. "No, I guess it won't be Harris," she concluded half to herself, turning to put the saddle up.

"No," Sandy replied tightly, reaching for Babycakes' halter. "It won't be."

Bingo kept busy (and more or less out of sight behind Babycakes) for a few minutes. Then she straightened up. "Y'know you can chunk a rock at me if I ever step out of line?"

Sandy sighed. "Bingo, if I threw rocks at everyone who I thought was being nosy, I'd need my own quarry. Let it pass . . . and let's go see who's here," she said, turning to see a taxi pull up to the front of the drive. With Bingo following, Sandy walked out onto the front lawn.

They both stopped as they saw a young woman get out of the taxi. She was about the same height as Sandy and seemed to be the same age. A rich fall of curly chestnut brown hair curtained halfway down her back, helping to identify her as . . .

"Phyllis!" Sandy cried out, coming closer. "Hi."

Phyllis Newton gave her best friend a small smile which was dead on arrival and concentrated on paying the taxi driver. "Hi," she murmured.

"This is great," Sandy said. "You're here for brunch. But why didn't you say it'd be you who was coming? Why the mysterious message."

"Oh it wasn't me who sent the message," Phyllis replied. She nodded back at the taxi. "It was the guy who came in with me. We shared the taxi."

But Sandy and Bingo were already noticing the other person who was climbing out of the axi. At the sight of him Bingo suddenly shrieked loudly.

Chapter Two: The Visitor From Outer Space.

Within moments Bingo had broken into a wild run towards the newcomer, her arms outstretched as she shouted: "KEN!"

The newcomer was in his mid-thirties with short-cropped black hair, clear dark eyes and an athletic build which was as smooth as his smile. Or at least that's how he would've normally appeared. Right now, however, his mass had increased violently due to the sudden addition of one hundred and twenty three pounds of petite female Texan which firmly attached herself to him. Not that the sudden change in physique seemed to cause any distress. From Sandy's point of view he was seeming quite pleased by the condition.

She smiled at him. "Ken."

Kenneth Horton, formerly a Major with the U.S. Army's 63rd Expeditionary Signal Battalion had, for the past several years, served as commander of the space station built and operated by Swift Enterprises. Now his military and space background was being put to the ultimate test of endurance as he worked to balance Bingo against him while she wrapped her legs around his waist and clung as closely as possible. In fact, judging the extreme lack of distance between the two, Sandy found herself quietly trying to recall the address of the nearest parson.

A movement behind her caught her eye and, turning, she saw her parents stepping out onto the front lawn to witness the results of the collision. Tom Swift Sr. was a trim, clear-eyed man who, even now, was casually slipping an arm around his wife. Mary Swift was a smaller version of her daughter, the main difference being her eyes which were brown instead of blue. Both people were now smiling at the scene before them.

It was Sandy who remembered the other visitor. "Phyllis," she said, turning to her. "We weren't expecting you back from Everett." Sandy glanced around. "Where's . . ."

"Tom's still up in Everett," Phyllis said simply, managing a smile as she watched Bingo and Ken maintaining their balancing act.

The senior Swifts now came closer. "You came here without Tom?" she asked.

"Yes," Phyllis sighed. "I came here without Tom."

Mary Swift had not spent her years around scientists . . . as well as two grown children . . . without being able to immediately process information with only the slightest amount of

available data. "Well it's wonderful to have you down here," she said sunnily. "Have you contacted your folks yet?"

"I did when I flew out of Washington," Phyllis said. "I'll call them again in a few moments. Meanwhile," she added, giving Ken and Bingo a slight nod.

Everyone returned their attention to the couple who were, for all intents and purposes, oblivious to everything else.

"Maybe we should go out to the patio for brunch," Mary suggested in a slightly louder voice.

No answer.

"Maybe we should get the luggage inside and everyone settled."

No answer.

"Maybe we should call the Fire Department," Mary finally observed.

"Well," her father considered, "it has been three months since Ken's been back from space."

"Three months," said Bingo, "two weeks (kiss), four days (kiss), seventeen hours (kiss) and eight minutes (kiss kiss kiss kiss)."

"Passionate little mugwump, ain't she?" Sandy commented.

She then noticed how Phyllis seemed to be looking rather wistfully at the affectionate display. Turning slightly to her mother, and employing the universal and age-old hand signals of Daughter-Mother Communication, Sandy cautioned discretion for the time being. Mary responded with a small nod and whispered a few words to Tom Sr. in the equally universal and age-old code of Wife-Husband Speech.

"Phyllis, let's get inside and we can figure out where everyone's going to be," Mary suggested.

"Oh, I can't impose, Aunt Mary---"

"Does `impose' exist in my dictionary?" Mary replied, a hint of matronly thunderstorms in the brown eyes. "You know perfectly well this barn has more than enough room for all of you. And I'm sure you'd want to be near Sandy."

You darn tootin', Sandy silently agreed, giving her mother a quick smile of thanks.

"Ken can stay in the downstairs west room," Bingo quickly said.

Which, Sandy reflected, would put Ken conveniently next door to Bingo's room. For prudence's sake, Sandy decided not to construct too many presumptions and put it all down to Bingo's inherent sense of hospitality. Of course, she continued to consider, it was hospitality such as the sort Bingo was currently demonstrating which made the United States a nation of over three hundred million people.

"Meow," she murmured.

Phyllis looked at her quizzically. "Pardon?"

Sandy shook her head.

Ken finally managed to come up for air (causing Tom Sr. to consult his watch and innocently mutter something about astronaut breath control). "Miz Swift, I can get a room at---"

"Commander Horton," Mary said sternly.

Ken sighed, smiling. "OK. I know when I'm licked."

"Certainly do by now," Sandy muttered.

"Besides," Tom Sr. added with a straight face, "if we have you under our roof, we'll have a pretty good notion of where Bingo is."

"Tom!" Mary admonished him.

Her husband maintained an air of virtue. "OK, kids," Mary sighed. "Let's all go in before a camera team from Eyewitness News decides to show up. We can meet out at the patio for brunch. And round two."

Picking up Phyllis' luggage, Sandy motioned for her friend to follow as she fell into step behind her parents.

Meanwhile, Ken had finally managed to gently peel Bingo off of him and set her back on the ground. "I've missed you too."

"You didn't call and say you were coming," Bingo declared, the glow on her face denying her complaint.

Ken shrugged. "I wanted to surprise you."

"And I ain't gonna waste time being mad about it."

Mary Swift poked her head back out the door. "Bingo dear . . . if you're finished mauling Ken, could you please tell me if I can take the cornbread out of the oven?"

"I'll get it," Bingo said, and Mary disappeared back inside the house.

Slipping an arm around Bingo's waist, Ken walked with her towards the door. "So you've really managed to fit in well with the family."

"Yep. Sure have."

Ken nodded. "And Sandy still has absolutely no idea of your background . . . Sergeant Winkler?"

Bingo suddenly froze and stared up at Ken, her face pale and her eyes wide. "Oh, gosh. Ken! Oh, wow! How . . . I mean . . ."

Ken almost looked pained. "Sweetie, I still have friends in the Army. Besides that, I still talk to your folks. Including your Uncle Chow."

Bingo was almost on the edge of panic. "You won't tell Sandy, will you? Please, Ken? Please please please?"

Ken really didn't want to admit out loud how firmly Bingo had him wrapped around her little finger. "OK, I won't," he said, touching her cheek. He glanced back towards the house. "But why?"

"C'mon," Bingo said, taking Ken's hand and pulling him inside the house. Looking around she noticed the elder Swifts already out on the patio, and no sign of either Sandy or Phyllis.

She led him into the kitchen and, taking some mittens, opened the oven to remove a pan of cornbread. "Miz Swift was worried sick about the possibility of Sandy ending up in the sort of situations both Mr. Swift and Tom had been getting into."

Leaning against a counter, Ken snorted. "Boy, was she on the mark."

Bingo nodded. "It was Uncle Charles who told Miz Swift that I'd just finished cooking school after leaving the . . . service." She glanced around again to make certain no eavesdroppers were about. "With Uncle Charles concentrating on his writing and his book tours, it was decided that mebbe I could come and cook for the Swifts."

"That being the cover story," Ken said.

"Yeah." Turning to the icebox, Bingo removed the bowl of Mexican salad. "What Miz Swift really wanted was someone with my . . . qualifications . . ."

"Ho boy!"

". . . to come and get chummy and stay close to Sandy," Bingo said from behind a slight blush. She paused for a moment, staring down at the salad without really seeing it. "As it was, I

barely got to Shopton in time to go with Sandy and Phyllis on the trip down to Ecuador. It was close. Very close!"

"And you've been doing a pretty good job."

"The hell I have," Bingo retorted sharply, looking up at him.

"Honey---"

"Where was I when she and Bud went to the Moon?" Bingo hissed angrily. "Where was I when she and that . . . that . . . Harris Link were investigating the Cyclone Gun agents?"

"You couldn't have accompanied Sandy to the Moon without blowing your cover," Ken calmly assured her. "And, from what I've heard, while Sandy was involved with the terrorists, you had your hands full guarding her mother. You're doing a great job."

Sighing, Bingo went to press her face against Ken's chest.

"You're doing fine," Ken softly repeated, letting his arms slip around her once more. "I've known Sandy longer than you have. Not to mention her brother. Mrs. Swift's intentions are excellent, but I'm telling you that you can no more keep a Swift out of trouble than I could fly back to the space station without a rocket. It's gonna happen, and all you can do is try to be there to run interference."

"I know," Bingo whispered.

"Then shut up and soldier . . . Sergeant."

A chuckle bubbled up from inside the girl. "Yes sir," she said, turning and reaching for a tray. "Take the tortillas out of the warmer, please."

Ken obeyed. "Y'know, I'm actually surprised that they let you out of the 20th," he remarked. "Especially since you successfully completed training down in---"

"Shhhh," Bingo replied. "That's all classified information. Anyway," she continued with a small frown, "certain people in that big funny lookin' building down by the Potomac still have old fashioned ideas about females servin' in certain positions."

"I certainly have no problem with your positions," Ken said with a grin.

Bingo's face was crimson as she gently touched a fingertip to Ken's nose. "Let's get the food out, Major."

"Yes'm." Taking hold of one of the trays loaded with the necessities for a Mexican style brunch, Ken followed a similarly equipped Bingo out onto the wide flagstone terrace where the Swifts were waiting, sitting at a large circular table.

Mary stared at Bingo. "You look a bit flushed, Bingo. Are you feeling hot?"

"Not yet," the girl muttered half to herself, sliding her tray onto the table, then assisting Ken with his.

She then noticed that Tom Sr. was intently listening to his telephone. He suddenly nodded and said, "We'll be expecting you, then."

Folding up his phone he began reaching for a plate. "The good news," he said to his wife, "is that I won't be suddenly flying up to Washington."

"That's a considerable relief," Mary replied, helping herself to a glass of Mexican hot chocolate.

"And the bad news?" Ken asked.

Tom Sr. looked up at him. "You've been working for us too long," he said ruefully. "The bad news . . . at least it might be bad . . . is that an investigation team from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission will be arriving sometime tomorrow."

"Trouble, sir?"

Tom Sr. shrugged. "Don't quite know, yet. It might have to do with something I've been hearing about. The possibility that radioactive material has been stolen from several facilities in this country." He reached for his glass. "Apparently someone thinks the Citadel has been targeted."

Chapter Three: Hearts Of The Problem.

Ken had been in the process of settling down into a chair. He now paused, staring across at Tom Sr. "Stealing radioactive material from the Citadel?"

Tom Sr. nodded, seemingly absorbed in what he had announced. Something then occurred to him and he looked up at his visitor. "I'm suddenly reminded to ask you something, Ken. Not that I'm complaining, mind you, but why are you here?"

Mary gave her husband a pained look. "Oh for Heaven's sake, Tom. Really!"

Maintaining a demure expression, Bingo moved a platter of breakfast burritos onto the table before sitting down next to Ken.

"Well, yes," Tom replied, idly scratching his face and smiling over at the young cook. "I suppose there is that. Much better than spending time giving each other long moony looks over a video channel."

Ken was busying himself putting food onto his plate. "Well . . . besides that . . . I was due for some down time. And Gorsky's been ready to try his hand at running the station for a while, so I'm letting him handle the center chair to see how he does."

"Good idea," Bingo replied brightly.

"Glad you approve," Ken said drily. Filling his glass he looked back over at Mr. Swift. "But this business about the Citadel. I mean, if any place on Earth has good security with radioactive material, that would be it."

"Ye-ess," Tom Sr. replied, returning to his earlier thoughtful state. "One would presume. Producing a sigh he closed his eyes, slowly pinching the bridge of his nose. "OK, what I'm going to tell all of you now shouldn't leave this table. A fairly reliable authority has recently informed me that there's a good possibility eighty pounds of plutonium is missing from inventories in this country."

Mary beat the others to it. "Come again?"

Opening his eyes, Tom Sr. looked at her. "A few days ago I was engaged in a secure video conference with several FBI agents and members of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. It seems an electrical accident of sorts had occurred at Texas A&M University. As a result, several of the campus computer systems had to be rebooted. When it was over a discrepancy was immediately discovered in the University's inventory of fissionable material. A further check found that material was actually missing, and the University computer had been hacked to help disguise the fact.

"Since then Fermilab, the Idaho National Laboratory . . . all such places in this country have been put on alert to carefully examine their stockpiles. The data is still coming in, but it now looks as if a considerable amount of plutonium has been quietly removed from places where it should be."

"Holy Magoo," breathed Bingo.

Tom Sr. nodded. "So far the investigation has determined that, given the various security procedures in place at facilities handling radioactive material, these thefts possibly began occurring eight months ago at the most."

"And that's all the authorities have uncovered?" Ken asked.

"That, and a pretty confident notion that none of the missing material has left the country. Yet."

"I don't know whether to be relieved or not," Mary murmured. "But someone thinks the Citadel is going to be robbed?"

"Apparently so," Tom Sr. slowly replied. "Late last week the FBI arrested a man in Albuquerque. At the moment he's currently undergoing questioning. Worry number one was that, among other things, he was wanted in relation to various thefts of weapons from Federal armories." Tom Sr. sighed again. "Worry number two was that, when the FBI picked him up, he had a fully completed employment application for the Citadel."

Bingo made an O with her mouth.

"Your security would've caught him if he'd actually tried to get a job here," Ken pointed out.

"I would hope so," Tom Sr. said, "but, according to the FBI, the information the man had on the application managed to pass a routine background check. Whoever he got the application from was obviously talented in establishing working cover identities. Possibly even effective enough to bypass our security. Needless to say, Sherman's been recently doing back flips checking on all the personnel files at the Citadel. But on the basis of this development, the FBI rightly feels that we're dealing with trained professionals."

"What other precautions have you taken?" Mary asked.

"Obviously, when I was told about this, the first thing I did was order a spot inventory check of the radioactive material we have at the Citadel."

Ken was frowning half to himself. "OK, I admit I'm not as up on the Citadel as I guess I should be. Are you storing any weapons-grade plutonium?"

"Not as such," the older man assured him. "On the one hand, the Citadel does produce plutonium-239, which is the material most desired for bombs. Keep in mind, however, that our fission reactor is of the light water variety. We can't easily produce Pu-239 at a quality sufficient to make into weapons. Unfortunately, the bad news is that there are methods for taking light water reactor plutonium and 'goosing' it into weapons-grade material."

"But we're not missing any?" Mary asked.

Tom Sr. shook his head. "Besides the report from Solomon I've ordered a direct on-site examination. That included the material we had at Enterprises which was transferred down here for the duration. So far so good."

Mary's eyes narrowed slightly. "So the NRC is sending people to check out the Citadel?"

"Just to formally review our situation and determine what else, if anything, can be done."

"The reason I'm asking," Mary calmly pointed out, "is because you seem to be taking this all rather calmly. I mean, considering our past dealings with the NRC."

"True," Tom Sr. admitted. "But I sort of consider that to be water under the bridge. Keep in mind that our earlier problems were brought about because the NRC was being manipulated by the Kranjovians who were, among other things, trying to destroy the space station."

"With Ken in it," Bingo added.

Ken nodded. "Yeah, I sort of thought that was important too."

"But the NRC's involvement has been another reason I've been trying to keep this whole situation sort of secret," Tom Sr. said. "Not only to try and help the FBI keep a nationwide panic from occurring . . . but also because I don't want to spend a lot of time getting Sandy out of jail."

* * * * *

In an upstairs bedroom Sandy briskly moved about, carefully arranging the clothes which Phyllis had packed. She was also peeking from the corners of her eyes at Phyllis, who was sitting on a corner of the bed, quietly gazing out through the window in a pose which put Sandy in mind of a Wyeth painting.

It was Phyllis who finally broke the silence. "Right now you're debating whether or not to demand an immediate and complete explanation, or gradually drag it out of me through the application of torture." All of this said without a change of pose or expression.

Sandy knew thin ice when she skated on it. "Pretty fair summation," she slowly said, closing the closet door. "I'm turning over a few theories---"

"Tom and I had a fight."

And that was one of them, Sandy silently finished, briefly closing her eyes and trying to ignore the quick pain inside. Moving over to a chair she sat down and spent a few moments calmly arranging herself before gazing at her friend.

"Well?"

Phyllis seemed to lose some of her art studio model posture, deflating slightly as a hand rose to hold one of the corner bedposts. "OK. It really wasn't so much of a fight as it was . . ."

"Tom not being able to pay attention to anything unless it came in a test tube."

Phyllis seemed as if she'd been hit in the face with a small stone and she winced, raising her hand and firmly pressing the heel of her palm into the spot between her closed eyes.

Sighing, Sandra went on. "I don't like saying I told you so, but I told you it was a bad idea following Tom up to Everett."

"I know," Phyllis said wearily.

"Even though I was impressed you managed to convince your parents into letting you go. That was a prime piece of salesmanship."

"To be honest, I was sort of surprised too," Phyllis replied. She stopped rubbing between her eyes, opening them. "Maybe my folks know Tom better than I do."

"Well, you should know by now how Tom gets when he's in the final stages of a project," Sandy argued. "The new Flying Lab's almost finished and, no matter how persistent you were with whatever it was you were persistent with, I'm pretty certain it didn't have any effect on him."

"Ummm," Phyllis murmured, looking back out the window.

"So . . . out of curiosity, just how persistent were you?"

Small spots of color bloomed on Phyllis' cheek. "Let's just say you're absolutely right about Tom's ability to focus on a project and leave it at that."

"But the two of you had words?"

Phyllis seemed to deflate again as she turned back to Sandy. "Well, I made the big mistake of trying to bring up the issue while he was busy arguing with the representatives from Airbus about some of the issues raised concerning the construction bid Boeing made for the Flying Lab."

"Oops."

"Yeah, well . . . he snapped at me and---"

Sandy's eyes widened. "Tom actually snapped at you?"

Phyllis looked away, "Yeah."

"Oh dear."

"Uh huh." Phyllis took a deep breath. Let it go. "When that happened I decided I was either a big idiot, or Tom was, and I came to the conclusion that the best thing to do was to put some distance between us."

"So you came down here," Sandy replied with half a smile.

"Well . . . I didn't want to run back to Shopton with my tail between my legs. So to speak. I thought I could take advantage of all the space here and . . . I really needed you to talk to."

Getting up from the chair, Sandy went over to the bed and sat next to Phyllis, slipping an arm around her shoulders and giving them a mild squeeze. "It's OK, sweetie."

"No it's not," Phyllis declared. "I sort of went up to Everett with Tom for . . . ohhhhhhhh, I really don't know what I sort of went up there for. And I blew it. Big time."

"Tom will come to his senses," Sandy assured her. "He has to."

"I hope so," Phyllis admitted, looking sad. "Lord knows, though, that he's not the easiest man to love."

Smiling to herself, Sandy patted her shoulder. "Well, seeing as how practically all of Enterprises is down here for the time being, you might as well set up shop and get back to the public relations and marketing business."

"Yeah. I guess."

"It'll be great," Sandy declared. "The weather's nice, there's an extra horse out in the stable for you, you can cry on my shoulder and we can work to get our respective love lives in order. What could possibly spoil that?"

Chapter Four: The Citadel.

"Tell me again," Phyllis asked with a smile.

"You hush," Sandy shot back.

It was morning of the next day and both girls were strolling to the monorail station which was just over a mile from Casa Rapido.

Sandy was kicking a rock down the street ahead of her. "Just because I'm going to spend the morning helping to get you settled with the PR Department doesn't mean for a moment I'm going to be dealing with . . . those people."

"You've developed a rather interesting snarl," Phyllis observed.

"I said `hush'."

"I'm hushing . . . I'm hushing."

The girls finally reached the monorail station which the town of Tenderly maintained for the use of residents and visitors who wished to travel into the Swift Western Research District. They joined a group of commuters who were already waiting for the arrival of one of the automated people mover cars which regularly ran the route from Tenderly to the Citadel to SECFAR and back again.

One of the commuters, a tall dark-haired man, noticed Sandy and smiled. "Keshhi, Sandy. Ko' do' dewanan deyaye?"

"K'ettsannishi," Sandy replied, smiling back. "Elahkwa. How's Tusa?"

"Tusa's OK," the man admitted, running a hand through his hair. "The doctor says she still has a few weeks to go, but I don't know if our nerves will hold up."

"You'll both make it," Sandy assured him. "I don't know if you ever met him before during one of your visits," she said to Phyllis, "but this is Joseph Quetawki. He's in charge of the quantum optics laboratory. He was one of the first people to take advantage of the scholarship program Dad set up for the Zuni Pueblo."

Dr. Quetawki was smiling at Phyllis. "All of us in the tribe know Phyllis Newton. In our language she's called `She Who Follows'."

"And in our language," Sandy said, "Joe is also known as `He Who Swipes Dialogue From John Wayne Movies'."

Quetawki shrugged, "Well, it was either that or go back to calling Phyllis `She Who Wishes To Bring More Speed Into The World'."

Phyllis pondered over the remark for a few moments before she grimaced ruefully. "Cute," she murmured.

"Keep it up," Sandy told Quetawki, "and we'll start calling your baby `He/She Who'll End Up Marrying a Navajo'."

Quetawki's eyes widened, but he grunted out a small laugh. "Just don't let my Grandmother hear you say that. She's already telling everyone we're going to be the parents of a future Governor of the Pueblo . . . and no one argues with Grandmother."

It was then that a monorail car arrived at the station, and everyone in the group began boarding it. Once seated, it smoothly sped off down the long rail and began picking up speed, crossing over the high fence which surrounded the entire District.

"This car shall be arriving at the Citadel in twelve minutes," an automated voice was speaking from the ceiling. "Passengers traveling to SECFAR should remain on board."

Sandra spent a few moments feeling the acceleration gently pressing her body back into the cushions of her seat, looking at the scenery racing past the window before she noticed the closed eyes and morose expression on Phyllis' face. "Hey! Joe was only kidding."

Her eyes still closed, Phyllis shook her head. "It's not that. I'm just . . ."

"Up too early in the morning?"

A smile tried to climb onto Phyllis' face. "I guess I'm a little nervous about just walking into the Citadel and setting up office there. To borrow a phrase from Bingo, I'll probably be about as useful as tits on a snake."

"There's been an extra lot of work going on in the public relations department when we moved the majority of Enterprises down here," Sandy pointed out. "For one thing we've been needing to explain how this will provide a considerable short-term boost to local businesses, rather than negatively affect the overall employment figures for the county. I mean, you and I both know that the Research District is perhaps the biggest employer in this part of the state. Sometimes it just helps to remind everyone else of the fact."

Phyllis' eyes half-opened. "True," she admitted. She turned her head to look at Sandy. "What about you, though?"

"Hm?"

"What've you been doing down here all this time?"

Something unpleasant bubbled deep inside Sandy. "I've been Daddy's Little Princess," she muttered, looking back out at the scenery.

"No," Phyllis firmly replied.

Curious, Sandy looked back. "Huh?"

"You're Daddy's Little Princess who successfully uncovered a mystery concerning the disappearance of your grandfather . . . discovered an enormous supply of water ice on the Moon . . . broke the land-speed record . . . rescued your Mom and my Mom from European terrorists practically single-handedly . . . smashed a terrorist plot which would've killed quite a number of people . . . do I go on?"

"I hope not. I'm getting exhausted just listening to you."

"Sandy, you have absolutely got to get over this notion that your parents think of you as just a helpless little girl. OK," and here Phyllis slightly raised a hand, "you'll always be your Daddy's

Little Princess no matter what you do. That's a given. But just because your Dad's sentimental doesn't make him stupid. He's seen you develop into not only a qualified and accomplished test pilot, but one queen-hell of a world beater in your own right."

Sandy considered the remarks.

"I love you like a sister," Phyllis went on. "I really do. But I swear someday I'm gonna club you over the head. Hard. All these . . . adventures . . . you've been on. Maybe it's just my particular perspective, but it seems that you get into the biggest trouble when you try to overcompensate for the way you feel your parents think about you."

"Approaching the Citadel," the overhead voice announced. "Please remain seated until the car comes to a complete stop at the terminal."

"And thus endeth Pastor Newton's sermon for today," Sandy said.

Phyllis continued staring at her. "And?"

Sandy looked away.

Phyllis prodded her. "And?"

"And I will try to work myself out of my notions and overcompensations," Sandy said, turning back to give Phyllis a small smile.

Phyllis nodded in satisfaction. "Good."

The girls now watched as, ahead of them, an enormous domed structure was growing ever closer. Located directly in the center of the 630 square miles of desolation which made up the Swift Western Research District, the Citadel was a white jewel gleaming in the morning sun, fixed in a surrounding setting of metal and glass. Watching it, Sandy once again felt an enormous thrill growing within her. She could never help it. She knew she was looking at her father's ultimate dream made reality: an atomic research facility which was the talk of the scientific world.

Steal from this, Sandy thought smugly. Let them try.

The monorail car was still slowing as it approached the vast, shell-like metal arch which served as the official entrance to the facility. Passing through the arch it finally glided to a gentle stop within the wide reception terminal for the people mover.

The doors opening, Sandy and Phyllis joined the crowd which moved out into the terminal.

"You are in Green Zone/Section One," remarked a voice which was similar to the one that had spoke inside the monorail car. "Radiation danger: zero. Visitors should immediately go to the Reception desk. Access badges are required beyond this section."

Listening to the voice, Sandy pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I sometimes wonder if it's OK keeping that radiation announcement in? I mean, if there's no alarm---"

Phyllis was shaking her head. "It's good marketing psychology," she said. "People coming here are expecting to enter a sophisticated atomic research center. Naturally they don't want to be in danger, but it adds to their personal sense of specialness if they believe they've been granted the privilege of entering a place where the possibility of danger exists."

"Oh!"

"Same theory applies to roller coasters and reptile exhibits."

"Phyllis."

"Um?"

"Why the heck don't you talk to Tom like that? I mean, that's impressive as hell."

Phyllis stood still for a moment, considering it. "Huh," she finally said. "And to think of all the money I've been throwing away on makeup, perfume, sheer negligees and silk---"

She suddenly paused as she noticed Sandy staring at her with an evil grin and one eyebrow raised. "I mean throwing the money away for stuff I was thinking of using," Phyllis quickly said.

"Oh I believe you," Sandy said, sniggering low as she resumed walking.

They both went over to the Reception desk where Sandy waved at a young Zuni female. "Kesshi, Malia."

"Hi, Sandy," the girl replied. "Your father was just here, wondering if you had arrived yet . . . oh, here he is."

Sandy turned to see her father rushing up to her. "Was hoping you'd be getting here," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"Hopefully nothing," Tom Sr. said, "but I've got to attend to a really important call immediately."

"Oh! Sure. What do you want me to do?"

Tom Sr. caught his breath. Held it. Let it go. "I'd like very much for you to keep our guests entertained for a while."

Sandy could feel ice slowly creeping up around her. "You want me," she slowly said, "to entertain the NRC visitors?"

"Yes. Please."

"Daddy---"

"Sandra---"

Phyllis found herself wishing mightily for a referee's whistle.

A dangerous look appeared on Sandy's face. "I guess I could send them on an up close and personal tour of the fission core," she said speculatively.

"Sandy!" Her father paused, collecting his thoughts. "I know and appreciate your personal feelings concerning the NRC. Really, I do. But they're important, this situation is important and this call I have to take is very important."

Sandy stared steadily at him, her hands on her hips.

"Just be Daddy's Little Princess, OK?"

Sandy's eyes closed hard. She forced them back open and prepared to answer her father . . .

And it was then she noticed the severe look on Phyllis' face.

Sighing, Sandy counted to ten. Then did so once again. "All right, Father," she said in a carefully modulated tone. "I'll do this."

Tom Sr. knew that the way Sandy used "Father" meant there'd be Trouble later on. But it was a life preserver and he grabbed at it. "Thank you, Honey. Really." Reaching out to lightly brush a hand against his daughter's cheek, he strode off.

Sandy continued standing there, her hands still on her hips as she stared at the three business-suited men who were patiently regarding her from a distance.

She barely noticed Phyllis coming up alongside her. "Ah, San? They're gonna contact someone in PR to come get me. You can go on ahead."

Sandy was still glaring at the guests. "Yep!"

"Be nice."

"I'm always nice. I washed my spit first thing this morning."

"San!"

"I'm nice . . . I'm nice," Sandy said wearily, heading off in the direction of the visitors and struggling to place as pleasant an expression as possible on her face. The end result would've looked more at home on a hammerhead shark.

For their part, the three men waiting for Sandy didn't seem to notice the predatory gleam in her eye. Either that or they were too polite to say anything. To Sandy's view they seemed rather ordinary, with one of them appearing to be a bit younger and more in shape than his companions.

Stopping before the trio, Sandy willed her voice to be light and her fingers to unclench. Dad's got a point, she silently admitted to herself. I've really got issues here

"Dad had to be called away for a bit," Sandy told them, hoping her teeth weren't clenching, "and he asked me to take over."

The three men brightened somewhat. "Then you're Sandra Swift," the oldest of the three said.

"That's right," Sandy replied prettily, mentally adding: you scum-sucking bureaucratic toad.

"I thought I recognized your picture from the article Newsweek did on you," the man said, holding out his hand. "I'm Tyler Lellden, Inspector with District 4 of the Nuclear Regulatory Agency."

Sandy surprised herself by actually taking his hand, her eyes already going to the man standing next to Lellden.

"Bob Moss," the man said. "Also with District 4."

"Mr. Moss," Sandy murmured, touching his hand as well.

The somewhat younger man was the last to introduce himself. "Gary Alberts. FBI Special Agent-In-Charge: Critical Incident Response Group."

"You're the bodyguard."

Alberts' face froze slightly. "Beg pardon?"

Sandy shook her head. "Nothing. My mind wanders. And sometimes it comes back." She gave the first two men a closer look. "We have a NRC Resident Inspector already on the premises. Mr. Sheppard."

"And he facilitated arrangements with your father concerning our arrival here," Moss explained. "This in no way reflects upon his job. He made several reports related to the current . . . situation . . . and requested that a special inspection team meet with your father to discuss

possible additional precautions. We're supposed to meet with both your father and Mr. Sheppard later on, in fact."

Sandy nodded. "All right, that makes sense of some sort. I suppose Dad was going to begin with a tour of sorts. Presuming, of course, that none of you have been here before?"

The men shook their heads. "Interesting," Sandy remarked. "We hold guided tours for local grade school children, and yet two local NRC inspectors have never bothered to come by."

"The Citadel is not quite the only facility of its kind," Lellden said softly.

"You'll forgive some disagreement on my part," Sandy said. Be nice, she reminded herself, looking around a bit. "Right . . . ahhhhhh, oh! We can start over here." Motioning for her charges to follow, Sandy led them towards the far side of the terminal.

"By the way," Alberts remarked, "I want to say that I was very impressed at how you handled the Cyclone Gun terrorists."

"Thank you," Sandy said simply, grateful that none of the men could see her face. On the one hand she was happy about the fact that she had rescued not only her mother, but Phyllis' mother and Tèa Nospe from being held hostage by that particular gang. On the other hand she was still upset over the murderous rage which had driven her to bring about the death of Duran Geiner in the skies over Seneca Lake.

Shaking the ghosts out of her mind she stopped before a large wall screen which was showing an animated diagram of the Citadel.

Indicating it with a wave of her hand, Sandy began. "Gentlemen, this is the Citadel: the foremost atomic research facility on the planet. It is the largest fixed domed structure in the world, measuring six miles in diameter. It has ten levels above ground and four underneath. Within the Citadel research is carried out in fields ranging from microgravity two-phase flows to radiation tolerant cladding and neutron generation. Besides work in nuclear engineering, Citadel researchers also carry out experiments in theoretical physics. This includes the operation of the Wakefield Damon Memorial Particle Accelerator . . . the 'Damon Track' or, as many people like to call it, the 'Demon Track'." Sandy threw her audience a small smile. "Up until CERN developed its Large Hadron Collider, the Demon Track was the largest high-energy particle accelerator in the world."

"I would've thought your father would try to upgrade the Citadel's collider," Lellden commented.

Sandy looked at him. "We've been busy."

Moss coughed.

Turning back to the display Sandy was pleased to note that she had accurately timed her presentation to coincide with the scene now taking place. "As you can see, the Citadel is composed of three zones arranged concentrically. The outer one, where we are now, is the Green Zone. Here's where all the administrative, clerical and routine maintenance work is performed. No radioactive materials are present.

"Further in is the Blue Zone. This area contains the laboratories, reactor control rooms and research related workshops. Radioactive material is obviously worked upon here so access is strictly monitored.

"At the center is the Red Zone. This is where the actual reactors are operated and maintained. As you can see, this area is divided into several sections, or 'lobes'. In each lobe a different reactor design is operated and studied. One of the lobes contains the original graphite pile reactor the Citadel started with. Other lobes contain gas core reactors, liquid core reactors, fission fragment reactors and, of course, our fusion reactor project. For obvious reasons, no humans are allowed in the Red Zone except only in very extreme circumstances, and with the aid of maximum protection."

"What sort of shielding are you using for the lobes?" Leilden asked.

Sandy quickly searched her memory. "Intensity Series S5-T Tomasite/Durastress foamed armor."

Alberts had moved closer to the display. "The Red Zone is where your brother's robots are, isn't it?"

Sandy nodded. "Ator, Sermek and Capek."

"Can we perhaps see them?"

Sandy thoughtfully touched the tip of her tongue to her lip. "Maybe," she concluded, going over to the wall near the display and pressing a button located on a small panel. "Solomon."

A voice appeared from a hidden speaker. "Yes, Miss Swift."

"Mark my current location. Can you produce live images of Ator, Sermek and Capek on the terminal presentation display?"

"Yes, Miss Swift."

Everyone watched the display which, a few moments later, flickered and then resettled into a different image. Or actually two images. On the left hand side could be seen a human like figure. It was slowly passing a hand across a large curving metal surface.

At the bottom of the screen a caption read: NEUTRON INDUCED DAMAGE SCAN/LOBE-C.

Sandy was peering closely at the figure in the image. "That's . . . Sermek."

Alberts was frowning. "How can you tell?"

"Tom told me Sermek favors its left hand when performing scans. He hasn't yet bothered with ordering Capek to make repairs. So that means we're looking at Ator and Capek on the other side."

"I can tell there's more of a difference," Alberts said. And indeed, while the image featured a figure similar in appearance to Sermek, its companion was less human looking, resembling a cone which possessed the arms of an octopus.

The caption beneath them read: ROUTINE COOLANT MONITORING/LOBE-E.

"And no humans can reach the robots?" Moss asked.

"It would be . . . problematical," Sandy admitted. "That was the reason my brother finally built Capek. Capek can perform the same functions as Sermek and Ator, but it was mainly designed to carry out maintenance and upgrades on the older robots. Capek has access to a supply area within the Red Zone which not only carries material to service the reactors, but also Sermek, Ator and itself." Moving back to the panel, Sandy once again pressed the button. "Thank you, Solomon. You can return the display to presentation."

"Yes, Miss Swift."

Lellden had followed the exchange with interest. "You were speaking to the computer, weren't you?"

Sandy nodded. "Solomon is the name we've given to the computer which oversees all operations within the Citadel. It was developed and constructed by SECFAR based on the work my brother did with his robots."

"SECFAR," Moss commented. "The Swift Enterprises Center For Advanced Robotics. That's over . . ."

"Over at the northern border of the Research District, several miles away," Sandy said. "If you go over to the balcony there you can see it. SECFAR originally started out at Enterprises in Shopton. But with so much of its work ending up in the Citadel it was finally decided to move it here some years back and let it expand."

"I know," Alberts said. "The Bureau's been looking at some of your police robots. But, speaking of Solomon, were we going to see any of the Wives while we were here?"

"We should," Sandy said, looking around. "There's usually at least a few working in Green Zone . . . ah! Over there."

The men turned in the direction Sandy pointed. Smoothly rolling by was a machine standing fifteen feet tall. In many ways it seemed to resemble Capek. Above a black tread assembly was a wide conical form topped by a spherical "head".

Sandy moved back to the wall and once again pressed the button. "Solomon, mark my current location."

"Yes Miss Swift."

"I'd like to speak to . . ." Sandy peered closely at the number plate which was visible on the machine's surface, "W029."

"Yes Miss Swift."

Immediately the robot swung about and rolled towards the group. As it grew closer it could be seen that the "head" was a turret containing a variety of lenses.

It came to an immediate stop before them (Sandy amused to note that the guests took an instinctive step backwards). "Yes Miss Swift?"

"It sounds like Solomon," Moss said.

Sandy nodded. "I know SECFAR has discussed giving the Wives distinctive voices, but nothing's been decided yet." Moving closer to the machine she looked up at the head. "W029, what assignment were you on before you were called here?"

"Transferring cleaning supplies from the Receiving Dock to Administration Eight."

"Is that your only function?"

"No, Miss Swift. If necessary I can perform the following assignments: remote sensing/visible light, remote sensing/infra-red, remote sensing/radar, remote sensing/low-intensity x-ray, remote sensing---"

"Stop," Sandy ordered.

The robot went silent. "If I didn't do that," Sandy told the others, "we'd be here for quite a while. The Wives were designed to be thoroughly utilitarian, each one capable of performing numerous tasks. The center portion of each Wife stores eight different arms, with each arm having access to numerous internal tools. It could thread a needle or, if necessary, tear apart a battle tank. There are one hundred and ninety two Wives operating in various capacities throughout the Citadel."

"And Solomon controls them all?" Lellden asked.

Sandy nodded. "As you can see, a Wife can be individually operated by voice command. But Solomon usually has them engaged in a sophisticated routine which helps keep the Citadel functioning smoothly." She reached into her pocket, pulling out her phone. "Yes?"

"Sandy, there's a problem," her father's voice said.

"Wait one, Dad." Sandy turned back to the robot. "Return to your regular assignment, W029."

The robot rolled off and Sandy took several steps away from the group. "OK, Dad, what is it?"

"One of our scientists has been murdered."

Chapter Five: SECFAR.

Once again Sandy was grateful that her back was turned to her guests. She was certain her face was showing the way she currently felt.

"Murdered?" she tried to whisper.

"At SECFAR," her father replied. "One of the researchers there was apparently shot to death in his office. The body was discovered about a half hour ago."

"Oh wow!" Sandy absently ran a hand through her hair. "Dad, what . . . I mean, I guess you're already at SECFAR."

"Yes, I used the utility tunnel and am just getting the details now. Sherman's already here with his people, and so's the police. Investigators from Gallup have also been called."

"Speaking of investigators," Sandy said, glancing over her shoulder, "what do I do with the ones I've got?"

"Well, the last thing I think we need is an accusation of cover-up leveled against us by the NRC, even though there doesn't seem to be a connection between this and the examination of Citadel security."

Sandy heard the unspoken I hope pass between them.

"Use your best judgment, honey. If you want to bring them to SECFAR, feel free."

"Do you really want me to see what happened?"

Tom Sr. sent a heavy sigh over the phone. "In the best of all possible worlds, I'd answer 'no'. But I get this prickly feeling in the back of my head that you're going to see it sooner or later, so we might as well get it over with."

"Father really does know best."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Love you, Dad."

"Love you, Sandy. See you later."

Pocketing her phone, Sandy devoted a few moments to composing herself then turned to her guests, hoping she looked at least halfway confident. "I'm afraid we've had a problem develop at SECFAR."

She saw Alberts lowering his own phone, his face carrying a hard look. "I just got a call from the Albuquerque office concerning a murder."

I absolutely hate mass communication, Sandy's mind growled. "Yeah. My Dad just found out and called me. He's rather involved with it right now."

"Understandable," murmured Lellden. He and Moss were exchanging glances, and Sandy was willing to bet her Jacqueline Cochran autograph collection they were wishing they could go off somewhere private and confer.

She looked back at Alberts. "Is Albuquerque sending anyone?"

"They've got a team ready," he admitted. "However, they feel that as long as I'm already in the area . . ."

Sandy nodded wearily, "Right. I can get you over to SECFAR."

Lellden's face brightened. "Ah . . ."

"Come along as well, Mr. Lellden," Sandy said. "You too, Mr. Moss. The both of you will probably want to re-assess your schedule with my father into something sensible." Turning, she began walking back towards the monorail platform. "And Elvis will come back from the dead playing Rachmaninoff," she muttered.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing, Mr. Lellden."

A car was just arriving at the platform and everyone rushed to get on. Soon after it started to accelerate away from the Citadel, Alberts remarked to Sandy: "I'm presuming you've already got security people looking over the situation."

Feeling tired, Sandy had closed her eyes and seemed to be asleep. But she replied: "We've got Sherman Ames looking over the situation. And I bet that, right now, he's making life almighty Hell for his people."

"I've heard of Ames from some of the other offices. He's supposedly good."

"He's good without the 'supposedly'. Sherman learned from the best."

"Oh?"

"His father."

"I don't want to imply," Alberts slowly said, "that it's my intention to move in on Mr. Ames' jurisdiction."

"Good. You'll live longer." Sandy managed to open her eyes. "And I didn't mean to pull an attitude, Agent Alberts. This just isn't the way I was hoping this day would go."

"Understandable."

Across the aisle, Lellden and Moss had been listening to the conversation, and Moss now leaned closer. "I'm going to guess that, up to now, there hasn't been a murder at either SECFAR or the Citadel."

"Correct," Sandy answered, staring straight ahead.

"I'm just bringing up the subject," Moss continued, "because it certainly can't be denied that Swift Enterprises has gained some . . . opponents . . . in the past."

"Delicately put," Sandy said, "and you're quite correct. It can even be said that some people have opposed the Citadel in the past."

Moss opened his mouth, closed it. "Message received," he murmured, sitting back. No more conversation happened until the car announced that they were approaching SECFAR.

In contrast to the Citadel, the Swift Enterprises Center For Advanced Robotics resembled the campus of a junior college. Three squat cylindrical towers sat on wide pedestals. Although not visible from their current position, Sandy knew the towers surrounded a low circular central building which housed the administrative hub of the Center.

The monorail car sped alongside a long, wide white marble reflecting pool before suddenly entering a tunnel which took the car beneath the surface. Moments later it was coming to a stop in a brightly lit terminal.

Tom Sr. was waiting on the platform as the group departed the car, nodding briefly at Sandy before turning his attention to her companions. "Gentlemen, I apologize for this---"

"Nothing to apologize for," Lellden quickly replied. "This certainly couldn't have been on your proposed itinerary, and we're just trying to keep out of the way. Do you have a cough, Miss Swift?"

"It's nothing," Sandy said, recovering. Looking around she saw considerably more than the usual Swift security people standing around and felt Sherman Ames' influence in the air. "Did you want me to go home, Dad?"

"Actually, Sherman specifically asked to speak to you."

Sandy blinked. "Me?"

"Honey, I'm not trying for Wimp of the Year here, but Sherman's been pretty much in charge ever since this happened. That's why he gets paid the Security Chief money."

"Yeah." Sandy rapidly drummed her fingers against her hip. "Where is he?"

"Room 604, Tower One."

"Okie dokie!"

Alberts took a step closer. "Ah-hhh . . ."

"Oh, yeah, and Agent Alberts wants to come along."

Tom Sr. nodded assent, turning back to Lellden and Moss as Sandy, accompanied by Allberts, headed for a bank of elevators.

Alberts was looking around. "I would've expected tighter security getting into this place."

"Trust me," Sandy said, summoning an elevator, "if you weren't supposed to be here you never would've made it off the monorail."

Arriving on the sixth floor, Sandy suddenly found her arms filled with a young, dark haired woman who she immediately recognized as Freida Morgan: chief cyberneticist at the Center. Usually composed and professional, the scientist was currently looking as if she had been chased through a haunted house. "Oh, Sandy!"

"Shhhh," Sandy told her, patting her back in reassurance. "It's all right. It's all right." She suddenly caught herself. "Wait a minute . . . it ain't all right. It's just . . . it's . . . Frieda, do you need me to take you home?"

"She'll be going home in a moment," a voice replied, and Sandy looked over Frieda's shoulder to see a slightly older woman whose appearance always put Sandy in mind of one of the Evil Stepsisters. Since she obviously didn't look the way everyone thought a security person should, that automatically tagged her as one of Sherman's people, and she was, in fact, Oz Kilgallen: chief of security for the District when Sherman was in Shopton. "Sherman's sister will be up in a while to take her."

As the day sinks further into the West, Sandy's mind growled, immediately ashamed of the thought. Especially when she saw Oz broadly mouth the words "She found the body" while nodding at Frieda.

"OK, where's . . ." and Sandy stopped as she realized she had been about to say "the body". "Where's Himself?"

Nodding briefly down a corridor, Oz gently managed to pry Frieda off of Sandy. Giving the distraught woman a final hug, Sandy headed in the indicated direction. It wasn't difficult to locate . . . the only open door in a corridor crowded with Swift Security people, Swift technicians in "Paradoc" gear and police. Among the crowd Sandy recognized Brian Tsethlikai: sheriff for both Tenderly and the Zuni Pueblo.

Voices could be heard murmuring within the room, and then a familiar one spoke up: "Please come in, Sandy."

As she passed Sheriff Tsethlikai she whispered, "How bad?"

"Have you eaten?" the sheriff whispered back.

Wincing, Sandy approached the doorway and gingerly peeked around it, then quickly drew her head back. "Oh boy . . ."

"Go ahead and cover him. Sorry, Sandy."

Catching her breath, and trying to wrestle her stomach back into submission, Sandy slowly edged back around the doorway.

The office was the usual sort of workplace for a SECFAR scientist. A floor to ceiling window, shelves overstuffed with books and data plaques, and a marker board on the wall. In the center was a desk covered with printouts, more data plaques, a fully functional computer/communications console and two Tiny Idiot hand computers. All the indications that the occupant was a busy and inquisitive researcher.

A few touches marred the overall effect. The obvious one was the male body which was lying stretched out on the carpeting. The head . . . what was left of it, Sandy's memory reeled drunkenly. . . had just been covered by a sterile coating sprayed from a Paradoc harness. Regrettably the effort did little to distract from the large red stain which covered part of the wall and one half of the marker board. Parts of the carpet would also need generous cleaning, and Sandy didn't envy SECFAR's maintenance crew.

Two men were in the room. One was a technician in Paradoc gear, and Sandy immediately concentrated on his companion.

Sherman Ames had been the one who had both spoken and apologized for what Sandy had seen. Despite his nickname of "The Shark" he was neither cruel nor malicious, but only extremely focused on his job. As Sandy entered he was on one knee beside the body, staring at it through thick, horn-rimmed glasses. He was a dark, slender man, just a few years older than Sandy and, when the situation called for it, three of the six smartest people she knew.

At the moment he was dictating notes into the audio pickup within the glasses while the lenses relayed video testimony. "Preliminary CBLA gives 83% probability of weapon used being a Walther P99. Maser guided atomic tracking of residue pattern coincides with event analysis to suggest use of noise suppressor. Level three acoustic retroscoping advised as well as atomic tracking of ventilator openings, window and doorway . . . all of this to take place no later than six hours following filing of this report."

He became silent, not changing his posture. Then: "Go!"

The technician smoothly but quickly left the room.

Sherman continued gazing at the body. "Hello, Sandy."

Sandy, by comparison, was trying to look everywhere except at the body. "Sherman, I brought---"

"FBI Special Agent-In-Charge Gary Alberts," Sherman calmly finished. He slightly raised his voice. "Please come in, Agent Alberts."

Alberts entered the office, moving to stand alongside Sandy.

"Your movements were monitored the moment you entered the District," Sherman announced.

Alberts' attention was on the body. "Apparently you didn't monitor everyone."

Oh, please don't, Sandy silently pleaded with Alberts. She wasn't certain, but she thought she saw a brief widening of Sherman's eyes.

"We occasionally have our off moments," Sherman calmly said. He now turned his head to look up at Alberts. "Not too many." Slowly straightening up, he wiped his hands on the legs of his trousers. "And no, Agent Alberts, I'm not happy."

"Mr. Ames---"

"You and your office will receive a complete report within the half-hour," Sherman said, staring directly at him. "Based on what either Albuquerque or Washington wants, I shall accordingly adjust my efforts to accommodate your people."

Both men were silent, and Sandy wondered if her own martial arts training would be sufficient if it became necessary to throw herself between them.

But Alberts finally nodded affably. "That'll be agreeable, Mr. Ames. So far my orders only say that I observe the situation. There's considerable respect for the security methods of Enterprises, and I'm certain the Bureau will cooperate with anything you need."

Sherman's expression was still neutral. "Excellent. Now, if you'll give me some time with Miss Swift here, you might want to go out into the hall and talk with both Miss Kilgallen and Sheriff Tsethlikai. They can provide further details and help coordinate efforts between our respective agencies. Oh, and if you could, please tell the technicians out there that they can remove the body. Mr. Nuemann, the coroner, has already declared Dr. Riis dead."

Giving a small nod, Alberts left the office and Sandy breathed a sigh of relief, grateful for whatever training in diplomacy FBI agents obviously received.

Sherman had gone to the window and was looking out over the Center. "Dr. Samuel Henry Riis," he announced. "In charge of the AI research division and a senior programmer. Age: 58, unmarried. `An absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences, of very soft society and great showing'."

Sandy had gone over to the nearest shelf and was looking at the books, more to keep from having to see the blood than anything else. But at Sherman's last comment she stared at the back of his head. "Huh?"

"Nothing," Sherman replied. "Just something Oz had told me." A sigh. "Lived in a small apartment in Tenderly. No apparent problems or difficulties. Showed up at work this morning. Wasn't seen or heard by anyone until over an hour ago when Dr. Morgan came into his office and found him dead. No indication of suicide. Security cameras show negative. I'm going to be very grumpy for a while."

Slight traces of déjà vu were tickling the underside of Sandy's mind, and it was bothering her. "The sort of security system we've got set up at both here and the Citadel, and someone just walks in with a pistol, shoots someone to death and walks back out?"

"I hope so," Sherman said.

"Hope so?"

"Yes." Sherman now looked over his shoulder at her. "Because, if that's not the answer, then we're left with the possibility that the murderer is still here and is probably an employee of Swift Enterprises."

Chapter Six: A Last Desperate Message.

"That's . . ." and Sandy swallowed the "impossible" that she was about to say. She knew her father and Tom prided themselves on the loyalty and ethical quality of their employees, and she also knew that, on occasion, a few unfortunate exceptions had managed to appear.

But murder . . .

The thought of her brother brought a concern to the surface. "Sherman, about Tom up in Washington . . ."

Sherman nodded tiredly. "When this first broke one of the first things I did was alert our Seattle office, the Seattle FBI office and the police in Everett. I've also ordered increased monitoring of Tom's chip. He's covered."

For years the Swifts, their close friends and employees of Swift Enterprises had relied on electronic amulets which monitored access in and out of Enterprises as well as being tracking devices in case of emergencies. Recently though . . . and mainly because of incidents which occurred during Sandy's encounter with the Cyclone Gun terrorists . . . Sherman had firmly put his foot down. Amulets and electronic "pass cards" were still in use, but the Swift family, their immediate circle and those within the Enterprises operational hierarchy, had been injected with microchips which were admittedly more difficult to tamper with. Not only did these chips perform the same function as the amulets, but they provided real-time tracking capability as well as medical telemetry.

There had been some arguments. Sherman won them all.

Two technicians were now maneuvering a gurney into the office, and Sandy moved closer to Sherman, making room for them. "Was Dr. Riis chipped?"

"No," Sherman replied with the sort of harshness that made Sandy wince and suspect more injections were on the way.

To calm him down she tried to divert him onto a different tack. "You said the security cameras showed nothing. What exactly does that mean?"

Sherman had gone back to gazing out the window, and Sandy was willing to bet he wasn't seeing any of the scenery. "Well, obviously there was no indication of any wild-eyed gunmen wandering around. No visitors were reported coming into either this building or any part of SECFAR on or around the time the murder took place, even though we were clearly tracking people such as Alberts and the visitors from the NRC. If someone outside of Enterprises entered Riis' office then they didn't show up on the security scan. I've got people currently going over the recordings again just to make certain."

"Scuse us," one of the technicians said, and both Sandy and Sherman automatically turned to see them beginning to cart the body of Dr. Riis out of the office. The head on the gurney was still covered, but Sandy's memory of what she had seen once again boiled within her stomach.

She quickly turned back to Sherman. "Do you know if anyone entered Riis' office?"

"Supposedly no one did until Dr. Morgan found the body."

Sandy didn't like the way Sherman had used the word `supposedly'. "Certainly you don't suspect---"

"I've cleared Dr. Morgan," Sherman said. "To my satisfaction." He gave Sandy a sidelong look. "You've met her before?"

Sandy nodded. "She was in charge of the Foresight Project. Bud and I worked with her on that. I can vouch for her."

For the first time something vaguely related to a smile appeared on Sherman's face. "I'll accept that." With the office now cleared he turned back towards Riis' desk and stared down at it.

"If I am bothered by anything," he slowly said, "I'm bothered by the fact that, in the course of our more recent problems, we've been encountering adversaries who share the troublesome ability of somehow being able to avoid our security system. Ithaca Fogger was bad enough---"

Understatement of the year, Sandy thought.

"---but then Duran Geiner and his people came up with stealth weapons that damn near wiped us out."

Sandy suddenly felt as if she had been caught in a bright spotlight.

"Go ahead and say it," she calmly said.

Sherman looked directly at her.

"I told you my theories that both Ithaca and Geiner were products of the Space Friends," Sandy said, referring to the alien race which the Swifts had been in contact with for years. "At least Geiner was when he acquired the Cyclone Gun."

"You also told me your suspicions that Section Omphalos was under direct and possibly covert control of the Space Friends," Sherman replied, mentioning the semi-secret European organization dedicated to acquiring knowledge about the aliens. "I've been in regular contact with Mr. Nospe. He tends to agree with you."

His eyes were boring into her head.

"You're still not saying it," Sandy said.

Sherman sighed. "Before Ithaca Foger, you and Bud encountered Space Friend activity on the Moon. They helped save your life. Before the Moon---"

"Ecuador," Sandy murmured.

Sherman was managing to look both professional and reluctant at the same time. "Sandy . . . I know you've been run through every test and examination possible ever since you encountered the alien artifact down there. Fundamentally there were no harmful or lingering effects. Your family's confident on this. Everyone's confident on that---"

"Except you."

Now there was genuine pain in the eyes behind the glasses. "And you," he replied softly.

They had been friends since childhood, and Sandy suspected the temptation to share a hug was heavily in the air between them. "Sherman . . . God, Sherman . . ."

"Sandy, I don't mean to---"

"Don't apologize. If I were in your shoes I'd be thinking the same thing." Rubbing a hand across her forehead, Sandy went on. "I admit that, when you first mentioned how the security scans turned up nothing, the same thought had occurred to me."

Sherman slightly tilted his head. "And?"

"And I don't know. Admittedly I don't have all the answers as to what the Space Friends were doing on the Moon, or what purpose they ultimately had planned for Ithaca or Geiner. And I can't figure out a reason for them to have killed Riis."

Sherman's expression grew more mournful. "I hate saying this but, if you had a reason, then it could've possibly cleared up quite a lot of things." He began looking around the office. "I've got people currently investigating his apartment while I toss this office. Eventually we'll find something."

Sandy knew Sherman wasn't in the habit of whistling in the dark. "What else are you doing?"

"Other than the usual forensic scans I'm going to be interviewing everyone on this floor, plus anyone who was working with Riis. I'll also put them through atomic tracking to see if anything matches with what we find here. Hopefully no one's taken a shower yet."

Sandy nodded. "Yeah. Look, Sherman, I've really---"

"Go get some rest, Sandy. And I'm sorry."

This time the temptation became reality and they exchanged a brief but undoubtedly necessary hug before Sandy turned and left the office. She hadn't even reached the halfway point to the elevators before the memory of Riis' head once again bloomed and she rushed into the bathroom and was violently sick.

"Damn you," she moaned to the stars. "Damn you, damn you, damn you!"

* * * * *

That evening Mr. and Mrs. Swift and Phyllis sat at the dinner table and mainly watched Sandy listlessly push food around her plate.

"I think you should go on to bed," her mother gently suggested.

"Yeah," Sandy replied. "It's just . . . it's just . . ."

"Helplessness?" prompted Phyllis.

Sandy nodded then looked up at her father. "I wish I was as tough as you."

In point of fact Tom Sr. had barely eaten more than his daughter. "You are as tough as me," he told her. "And I feel just as helpless."

"What are Lellden and Moss doing?"

"They've been reviewing the security situation with Shepperd and are going to meet with Sherman."

Sandy was privately of the opinion that, if she were the NRC people, she'd steer clear of Sherman for quite a while. "What about Alberts?"

Tom Sr. perked up slightly. "He's been in contact with the Albuquerque office. Mainly concerning the murder, but also because there's been some progress regarding the man with the

forged application that the FBI had arrested. His name is Fred Curzon and he's been connected with a criminal gang led by a man named," Tom Sr. frowned as he searched his memory, "Uriel Haddess."

Phyllis frowned. "And Haddess is . . ."

"Apparently a criminal boss operating within the Southwest. What's interesting is that, according to the FBI, Haddess' group has only been involved in the usual sort of thing. Drugs, theft, extortion. Nothing so far involving atomic energy centers, and definitely nothing requiring the sort of sophistication which produced the documents Curzon was picked up with. Routine thugs."

Sandy was becoming thoughtful. "Murder?"

Mary and Phyllis both looked up sharply at her.

Tom Sr. rolled the question over in his mind. "You're maybe seeing a connection between Dr. Riis' death and Haddess?"

"Doesn't it strike you as too much of a coincidence that the timing of Curzon's appearance on the scene comes rather close to Dr. Riis' murder?"

Tom Sr. nodded, "Alberts brought up the same point, although no one's come up yet with an immediate connection between Dr. Riis and the Citadel. He said he'd be forwarding all available information on Haddess' gang to Sherman as well as Sheriff Tsethlikai and the police in Gallup."

To her surprise, Sandy found she had actually eaten a few bites of creamed peas. "Dad, do you know what Dr. Riis was working on?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Tom told me he was having Riis go over the design and programming specifications for his upgraded cybertron."

Sandy was slowly tapping her spoon against her lips. Then she noticed what seemed to be a bright light bursting on her father's face. "Dad?"

"I'm an idiot," Tom Sr. said sharply. "A complete idiot!"

"I don't think anyone here really believes that," Mary said simply.

"The connection between Dr. Riis and the Citadel," Tom Sr. declared. He shook his head. "If it'd been a snake . . ."

"Dad," Sandy said, "why don't you just put it down on the table . . . slowly . . . and let the rest of us---"

"Sam was in charge of the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at SECFAR," Tom Sr. explained. "He got the job because of the fantastic work he did in developing dynamic optimality conjecture algorithms as well as solutions in advanced PSPACE problems."

Sandy, Mary and Phyllis all quietly went uh oh.

"He's the man who programmed Solomon."

Sandy wasn't aware of it, but her expression was now bursting with the same light that had appeared on her father's face. "And Solomon oversees operations at the Citadel."

Father and daughter were gazing intently at each other across the table.

"If Haddess' gang had been planning to steal radioactive material from the Citadel---"

"They'd definitely need some way to circumvent Solomon," Tom Sr. finished excitedly. "I've got to contact Sherman."

It was at that moment that everyone heard the sound of someone entering the house.

Mary consulted her watch. "Certainly Bingo isn't home yet from her date with Ken?"

"You're timing them?" Phyllis asked.

But it was Sherman who entered the dining room.

"Wow," Sandy said.

"I know," Phyllis agreed. "Usually you got to rub a lamp to get that kind of service."

"Sorry to just come in like this," Sherman apologized.

"You'll change your mind in about a minute," Sandy promised.

"I found something in Riis' office," Sherman said, approaching the table and reaching into his pocket, pulling out a scrap of paper which he passed to Tom Sr. "I'm still checking it out but, if I'm right, Riis managed to scribble this down just before he was killed."

Sandy almost knocked her chair over getting out of it and moving around the table to peer over her father's shoulder. Just a plain scrap of paper. The sort that could've been torn off a standard office memo pad.

One brief scrawl on the paper. Sandy read it carefully, then looked up at the others. "OK. Who's Amanda?"

Chapter Seven: Not So Tenderly.

Phyllis joined the others in looking at the scrap of paper and she now frowned. "Hate to bust your bubble, Sandy, but that's not really `Amanda'."

"Close."

"Well, I'm a graphics artist, so my eyes are better."

"I'm a test pilot, so I'm wearing bifocals or something?"

Phyllis ignored her. "Sherman? Pencil . . . pen . . ."

Sherman passed over a pen and Phyllis carefully rewrote the message beneath the original text. "This is what I see."

AMNDASSL

"You see?" Phyllis pointed out. "No `A' between the `M' and the `N'."

Sandy was willing to concede the point but made one last try. "Remember, though, that Dr. Riis had scribbled this just before he was shot. True, Sherman?"

"I'm still wanting to retroscope the message to be absolutely certain," Sherman admitted, "but, based on the equipment we'd brought into Riis' office, I'm willing to believe that message was written less than forty-five seconds before he was murdered."

"What I'm saying," Sandy went on, "is that you wouldn't expect perfect handwriting from someone under those circumstances."

"What I wouldn't expect," her mother added, "is for a murderer to simply stand there and let Dr. Riis scribble off a potentially incriminating note, much less leave it behind."

Tom Sr. smiled at her. "Well caught, love."

"Thank you, but you know I never miss a Sherlock Holmes story on television when Jeremy Brett's playing him."

Proving that the apple never rolls far from the tree Sherman mused. "That actually is a good observation, Miz Swift. I should point out, though, that the message was found on a pad which had been sitting near the edge of the desk. Considering the position of both the pad on the

desk, and the desk in relation to the office door, it's not too inconceivable that Riis might've been able to scribble the note while, at the same time, using his body to shield the action. If he had had sufficient warning about the killer that would've given him even more time to do it."

Silence for a while. Then Sandy said, "OK, so if it's not `Amanda', then what is it?"

"Well," Sherman slowly replied, "at the risk of getting Phyllis upset, it still might be `Amanda'. Like you pointed out, it's close."

Phyllis stuck her tongue out at him.

"With that in mind, I already had a search performed. Unfortunately, for our purposes, there's no trace of an `Amanda' in Dr. Riis' personal history. We also don't show anyone by that name working at either SECFAR or the Citadel, as well as living in or around Tenderly. The closest `Amanda' I've been able to locate so far runs a Ritters station in Tohatchi."

Mary was looking at him. "Well you're certainly not planning on having her questioned?"

Sherman appeared slightly uncomfortable.

"Oh, Sherman!"

Tom Sr. pointed to the end of the message. "'SSL' is the name of a programming language, although it's not one we normally use. It could also stand for `Secure Sockets Layer', which was an encryption protocol used for providing communication security." Picking up the message he handed it back to Sherman. "You might want to check those areas."

"Yes sir." Sherman moved as if to leave.

"Wait one," Mary said. "You mean to tell me that, in all of Enterprises, we've never hired anyone named Amanda?"

"Oh no, Miz Swift," Sherman replied vigorously. "We've got an Amanda Wanless serving as a communications technician out on Fearing Island."

Mary raised an eyebrow. "Quite a thorough search."

"Well . . ."

"Oh, Sherman!"

* * * * *

The next morning Phyllis wandered down the hall to tap on Sandy's door.

"C'mon in."

Entering, Phyllis found her friend in the process of adding a wide black belt to her blue on blue pantsuit. "Be ready in a moment," Sandy said.

Phyllis noted two objects lying on the freshly made bed. One was a Tiny Idiot hand computer.

The other object sent a small tingle down Phyllis' spine. It was a Snooper: a device resembling a large, thick ballpoint pen. By opening and adjusting its segments, the Snooper could perform a variety of functions. It was a communicator, an emergency tracking device and alarm, a telescope with a night-vision setting, a video camera and audio recorder and a personal self-defense system.

It could also be used to write with.

As Phyllis watched, Sandy picked up the Tiny Idiot and attached it to her belt. She then did the same thing with the Snooper. It was then Sandy noticed the expression on the other girl's face. "What?"

"You do that the same way other people slip into a phone booth to change into a cape."

"Don't be silly."

"Silly! So tell me why I'm hearing John Williams' theme to Superman in my head right now?"

Sandy was giving her hair a final brush-out. "There's been a murder at SECFAR. There's also a very real chance the Citadel could be hit by the Haddess Gang. Forgive me for rolling in hubris here, but my family's sort of big in this town. It only makes sense that I take some personal precautions."

"And that's the only reason you're looking as if you just arrived on the overnighter from Krypton?"

"I've worn this outfit before."

"Yes, and there's wearing that outfit, then there's wearing that outfit as if it should have a big red `S' on the front."

"Phyl . . ."

"Sandy!"

They both looked at each other quietly for a few moments. Then: "All right," Sandy admitted. "Sherman's busy with the case. I know he's downstairs right now, talking to Dad. The police and the FBI are busy. Everyone's busy."

"Here comes a `but'," Phyllis replied. "I can hear that `but' turning into the driveway."

"But they all can't be everywhere at once, so I thought I'd just go---"

"---`and take a little look around'," Phyllis chimed in with her. "I knew it!"

"Phyllis . . ."

"We `looked around' once and you damn near blew up Ecuador. And yourself. The last time we took `a little look around'---"

"I rescued your mother," Sandy said calmly.

Phyllis suddenly looked as if she'd been hit by a bus. Her eyes were pinched close and her lips were drawn into a thin line.

She then let out a long, low breath. "That . . . was very low, Sandra. Very very low."

"I'm sorry. I'm not asking you to follow and get caught in the blast radius or anything."

Phyllis snorted.

"You can stay here or go to work at the Citadel. All I'm going to do is try to pick up a few pieces."

"The problem," replied Phyllis, "is that it's not gonna be a few pieces. It's never a few pieces with you. It's you going one-on-one against Nazi superweapons, insane cosmonauts armed with atom bombs, killer cyborgs who shoot lightning out of their hands, mysterious alien artifacts at the bottom of the ocean." Phyllis tried to calm herself down.

Sandy smiled. "You care."

"Sandy . . . damn it. I just want to be your bridesmaid someday. Not one of your pallbearers."

"How sweet!"

"Nothing sweet about it. I just look horrible in black."

Picking up a handbag, Sandy neatly tossed the strap over a shoulder. "Well, whatever happens I'm just heading into Tenderly to take a peek around. Maybe a few other places. If anyone asks tell them I might be late for supper." She started to walk past Phyllis.

"Stop!"

Sandy did so and Phyllis spent several moments staring coldly at nothing before she let out an exasperated huff. "OK, Kemo Sabe . . . you got an extra Snooper on you?"

Smiling broadly, Sandy reached into her handbag and produced another Snooper, handing it over to her friend.

Phyllis stared at it. "You little---"

"C'mon, Tonto, let's hit the trail while it's still hot."

Going downstairs, the girls almost collided with Bingo who was wandering about in a rather dreamy haze.

Despite her earlier mood Phyllis grinned at the little Texan. "Having trouble sleeping, Bingo?"

"Yawp!"

"Was that a yes or a no?" Phyllis asked Sandy.

"I think that was Early Morning Female Texan for 'mind your own business'."

Struggling with an enormous yawn, Bingo picked up some packages which had been sitting on a chair and began carrying them to where Mrs. Swift and her husband were standing on the patio talking with Sherman Ames.

"Bingo," Sandy said, "if you can shake the sand---"

"Or whatever," Phyllis murmured.

"---out of your eyes, can you tell Mom and Dad that Phyllis and I . . . oh, Mom." Sandy nodded at her mother who had just entered from the patio. "Phyl and I are going into town to check out some things."

At that announcement both Mary and Bingo snapped into alertness, as if they'd been hit by an electric current.

"Going into town?" a fully awake Bingo asked.

"Checking out some things?" Mary added.

Sandy nodded. "Yeah. We're taking the Sparrow." She and Phyllis then casually turned away while, behind them, Mary and Bingo exchanged a sudden, sharp look.

Meanwhile, out on the patio, Tom Sr. watched his daughter leaving the house. He had managed to hear enough of the exchange, as well as recognize Sandy's posture, to fully understand what was going on.

He sighed. "Sherman, years ago I promised myself I'd never again make weapons."

"Sir?"

"I think I broke my promise."

"Yes sir," Sherman replied and, excusing himself, left the patio to return to work.

"And thank God you did," he muttered.

* * * * *

Stepping outside, Sandy and Phyllis went to the garage where they approached a sleek red car. It was a "Sparrow" class atomicar: the smallest production version of the triphibian atomicar developed by Tom Jr. Besides providing sporty handling on the road, it could also fly and travel on or beneath the water, although its smaller size limited its aerial and aquatic range as compared to larger atomicar models.

Both girls climbed in and Sandy prepared to close the canopy.

"Whoa up there!"

Phyllis and Sandy saw Bingo running into the garage.

"What's up?" Sandy asked.

"Me," Bingo said, "as in I'm going with you two. Got my Snooper and everything."

Sandy looked at Phyllis and the latter shrugged. Then Sandy considered how, in the past, Bingo had proven herself to be a resourceful companion.

She lifted the canopy higher. "Climb on in, then."

The offer was happily accepted, Sandy dwelling upon the fact that Bingo was perhaps the only adult she knew who could comfortably squeeze into a Sparrow between the passenger seats.

Pulling out of the garage, Sandy drove towards Tenderly. "Not that I mind you coming along," Sandy told Bingo, "but I thought you were cooking `Hoity-Toity a'la Bingo' for dinner."

"Cognac shrimp with Beurre Blanc wine sauce," Bingo replied. "And, believe you me, findin' decent shallots here in Tenderly is the dog's own work. And yeah, I'm workin' on it. But I'm out of white pepper so, if we pass by the Wag-A-Bag . . ."

"We shall stop," Sandy promised.

"I got to confess," Phyllis said, "I'm surprised you'd leave Ken to his own devices so suddenly."

"Wel-lll . . . he told me somethin' `bout wantin' to spend time talking with the space station, makin' certain Gorsky hadn't blown it up. Elsewise I'd be happy to be back sparkin' with my Kennypoo."

Sandy just barely managed to avoid having an accident. "Hold it! Wait just a minute!"

Her passengers were quiet.

Sandy tried to glance over her shoulder at Bingo. "You actually refer to Ken as `Kennypoo'?"

"You betchum!"

"A former Army Major . . . a seasoned astronaut . . . and you call him `Kennypoo'?"

"It's a pet name, Bingo replied with dignity. "I'm entitled."

"Surprised you don't call him `Kennypoopsie'," Phyllis muttered. "Or `Kennywoogums'."

"I tried `Kennypoopsie' once," Bingo admitted.

"Oh God . . ."

"That time I wasn't entitled."

Sandy drove onto Main Street and headed north. "Where we going?" Bingo asked.

"We're still gonna stop at the store," Sandy said.

"But Sandy also wants to try and get our heads blown off," Phyllis added.

Bingo nodded sagely. "Oh. The usual stuff."

"Try to solve problems for people," Sandy muttered, "and I get saddled with two comedians." She raised her voice a bit. "I thought we could go look and see if any strangers had recently checked into the Purple Mesa Motel."

"That's . . ."

"Corner of Dickerson and Cooper. `Bout a few miles further on."

The rest of the ride was enjoyed in silence until Sandy pulled to a stop in the parking lot of the Tenderly Post Office. Across the street could be seen the Purple Mesa Motel.

The girls stared at it. "If we're sitting here waiting for a big neon sign to start blinking `The Bad Guys Are Here'," Phyllis remarked, "then I suspect we're going to be in for a severe disappointment."

"So we're lookin' for Dr. Riis' murderer?" Bingo asked. "Or those guys planning on robbing the Citadel?"

"Or both," Sandy said, tapping the control column, quietly wondering just how much of the situation Bingo had managed to somehow learn about. "I wonder how much luck we'd have going into the motel and asking to check the register?"

"This isn't a made-for-television movie," Phyllis pointed out. "Certainly a seasoned criminal wouldn't be so obvious as to hole up in the only hotel in town. Sherman's probably already combing the town for strangers, and I'm willing to bet he's made a pest of himself with the front desk. No, if I were the sort of people we were looking for, I'd be in Gallup, or even Albuquerque."

"What about we just drive around the parkin' lot and look for out-of-state license plates or somethin'?" Bingo asked.

"Well," considered Sandy, "despite the snarky way Phyllis put it, her observation was pretty good. Wouldn't hurt to try, though."

Her hands firmly back on the controls, Sandy drove the car across the street and began slowly cruising through the motel parking lot.

"Nothing," Phyllis murmured as she studied the cars. "Nothing . . . nothing . . ."

"We couldn't be lucky enough to find anything this way," Sandy said. "Maybe if we tried to have a look at the register we could find something interesting in the recent entries. Even if the people we were looking for had left---"

"San?"

"Bingo?"

"The guy walkin' away from the bronze colored truck."

Slowing the car almost to a stop, Sandy spotted the man Bingo had indicated. Stocky . . . muscular . . . almost bald. "Yeah?"

"I'm prob'ly gonna regret saying this, but if he ain't packing a gun inside that coat, then I'm a pig thief."

"Couldn't have you living with that," Sandy said, pulling the car into an empty space and shutting off the motor. They all watched as the man went to one of the rooms and entered. "So!"

"Or so what?" Phyllis said. "I mean, excuse me for playing Jenny Buzzkill here, but why are we getting excited?"

"Because," Bingo replied, "he was walkin' about all sneaky like."

Phyllis sighed. "Bingo sweetie . . . as John Cleese would say: sometimes a silly walk is just a silly walk. And a lot of people tend to carry guns. Great big guns . . . little bitty guns . . ."

"This was a Glock 23 pistol chambered in .40 caliber Smith & Wesson."

Their mouths open, Sandy and Phyllis both slowly turned their heads to look at her.

"You are not serious," Sandy said.

Bingo shrugged.

"Well!" Sandy said. "Even presuming the possibility that Bingo has misread a coat bulge, what do we do now?"

"I vote we contact Sherman, tell him about it and then go get Bingo's pepper," Phyllis suggested.

"I second that," Bingo quickly said.

Sandy continued quietly watching the room for a few moments. Then she unlocked the canopy, raising it.

"Sandeeeee," Phyllis moaned.

"Phyl, you or Bingo try to get a picture of the license plate of the truck," Sandy announced. "I'm gonna go sneak up on the door or window of that room and try to record some conversation with my Snooper."

"And break about nineteen or so local laws and statutes." Phyllis paused and glanced back at Bingo. "I was right, wasn't I? It's about nineteen or so local laws?"

Bingo looked perplexed. "Why ask me?"

"Nothing. Just determining your limits for future reference."

"I'm not going to be self-incriminating," Sandy said. "I just want to see if I can get a casual scan. If I hear nothing interesting then I'll automatically tune it out. I'll pretend I'm thirteen years old again." She then climbed out of the car. Behind her, Bingo motioned for Phyllis to go take the picture and then hopped out, quietly falling into step close behind Sandy.

"Now I lay me down to sleep' . . ." Phyllis began muttering as she also began leaving the car.

Pulling her Snooper from her belt, Sandy softly crept up to the door, prepared at any moment to dive for cover. Meanwhile her hands were busily readjusting the Snooper so that the audio recording section was uncovered, turning the barrel so that the microphone's sensitivity was at maximum.

The door was only a foot away, and Sandy wondered if it was thin enough to allow for the microphone to hear anything from the other side. She began reaching out carefully, biting her lips . . .

And then the door was pulled open and Sandy found herself practically face to face with two scowling men.

Chapter Eight: Theft.

Sandy experienced almost two whole seconds of pure adrenaline before snapping back into reality. A hesitant smile moved onto her face. "Hi, Agent Alberts."

He was glaring at her. "Miss Swift. Why am I not surprised?"

"Hey Sandy," Phyllis was calling from behind her. "This truck's got a U.S. Government license plate on it. How about that? I never saw a pickup truck with government plates before."

"Neither have I," Sandy muttered.

Alberts sighed, stepping back a bit. "Would you ladies perhaps care to come inside?"

Her shoulders drooping, Sandy walked into the motel room, followed by Bingo and, a few moments later, Phyllis. Inside the room were three other men. The nearby table held two open briefcases, and one of the beds was covered by documents and photographs.

Alberts closed the door. "Welcome to our base of operations, Miss Swift. These men with me are from the FBI Albuquerque office."

"Howdy," said Bingo.

"I've been talking with your Mr. Ames," Alberts remarked. "He suggested that there was a possibility I'd be seeing you sometime today. I've also been on the phone with some of the FBI offices in the east. They've told me that you're a very perceptive investigator in your own right." A sigh. "They've also told me, in so many words, that you're a loose cannon with a tendency to kick over the table."

"My intentions . . . were good," Sandy pointed out in what she hoped was a sensible tone of voice.

Alberts seemed to consider it. "My pastor used to base quite a number of his sermons on an old adage about a certain road which was paved with good intentions. I appreciate and fully understand what you think you're trying to do, but this business with the possible involvement of the Haddess gang in Dr. Riis' murder is really rather delicate. So delicate, in fact, that I'm considering professional action involving you."

Sandy's mouth opened. "Oh . . . for criminy sakes! I'm not gonna be arrested again am I?"

"Waste of time," Phyllis said. "She's already got two boyfriends."

The look which Sandy gave Phyllis was best described as dark and incendiary.

"Several immediate instincts scream at me how that'd be the sensible thing to do," Alberts admitted. Rubbing the back of his head he strolled about the room. "I'm wondering, though, if it'd do any good. Another thing I learned from Mr. Ames and the FBI agents who know you is that you've demonstrated a rather uncomfortable habit of managing to appear in the right place at the right time."

"She was never late for gym class," Phyllis pointed out.

"Phyllis . . ."

"I'm trying to help," Phyllis assured Sandy.

Alberts attention flicked over to Bingo. "I'm especially surprised that you of all people are allowing these things to happen," he told her. "Considering---"

"The fact that I'm just a cook for the Swift family," Bingo quickly said. "Phyllis and I try to keep Sandy out of danger, Agent Alberts. Really, we do. But I gotta agree with those who say Sandy's perceptive. This whole business about the murder's sorta got us all rattled, and Sandy was just tryin' to add something to the sauce."

"Which is what I'm afraid of," Alberts drily replied. "And what would you have done," he returned to Sandy, "if it were members of Haddess' organization in this room, instead of us?"

Sandy shrugged. "We weren't even certain who was in this room. All I had was a suspicion and I was trying to pick up a bit of information with this." She held up her Snooper. "Anything I found I would've immediately turned over to Sherman. Believe me, it was never my intention to get personally involved."

Everyone's attention was suddenly drawn to Phyllis. "You need some water, Miss Newton?" Alberts asked.

"No, no . . . I'm fine."

Folding and twisting her Snooper in her hands, Sandy casually went to the bed. "Has Sherman contacted you about the note he found in Riis' office?"

Alberts nodded. "He also told me about how an attempt to steal fissionable material from the Citadel might be linked to a possible security breach involving the facility's computer."

Sandy was looking down at the photographs laid out on the bed. "From what I've been told, that sort of thing is beyond Haddess' usual activities."

"Agreed. That's why we've been trying to bring ourselves up to speed on Haddess' organization. For instance, those pictures you're looking at."

"These men? They're all the people working for Haddess?"

"All that we currently know of."

Sandy waved her hand over the photos. "And are any of these proficient in high tech thefts or computer hacking?" she asked, turning back to Alberts.

"Not as such," Alberts admitted. "The man we picked up in Albuquerque---"

"Curzon."

"Yes. Curzon was a newly recruited member with a history of arms thefts. But that's the closest we've come to what we're looking for. There's still the business of who supplied Curzon with the forged documents he was going to use to get into the Citadel. Haddess has good people working for him, but no one who's demonstrated that level of proficiency. Ames and I are considering the possibility that whoever managed that could already have penetrated your security here and is already in place within the Citadel."

Sandy's eyes sharpened. "Whoever it is won't escape Sherman for long."

"Perhaps he's escaped Ames long enough to kill Riis."

"Oho!"

Alberts nodded. "That's another possibility we're looking into. Not only would this person be clever enough to forge documents, but could also somehow evade your security system and hide the fact that he committed the murder at SECFAR." The agent crossed his arms. "Which brings us back to the present. Knowing what you know, Miss Swift, what are your intentions?"

"White pepper," said Bingo.

"Huh?"

Sandy almost smiled. "I'm guessing that the nature of my answer will determine whether or not I walk out of here unencumbered."

"Fair guess."

Sandy thought for a while. "Can I ask if you've been able to make out anything about the note Riis left?"

"Not a blessed thing, although we've got our research people looking into it."

"Um!" Sandy stood silently for a few more moments. Then: "In spite of my hopefully charming enthusiasm, Agent Alberts, I don't want to mess up things more than I might've already done. Between you and Sherman it looks as if you've already covered every possible angle. As for my intentions: will a simple shopping trip get me locked up?"

"Well," Alberts considered, with a glance at Bingo, "I don't suppose the Citadel will fall due to you picking up some white pepper."

Behind her back Phyllis quietly crossed her fingers.

"Agent Alberts," Sandy said, "believe me, I'm just concerned over my family, as well as the work my family's devoted so much time and effort. If I happen . . . just happen . . . to come across some sort of loose fact or piece of information, then you'll be one of the first people to know about it."

"Actually, I'm sort of afraid of that."

"Me too," muttered Phyllis.

Alberts and Sandy stared at each other. The FBI agent then said, "OK, Miss Swift. I want to go on record as saying I may live to regret this, but you can go along. But please, leave the cowboy stuff to us."

"Sandy would never wear a pantsuit while doing cowboy stuff," Phyllis assured him.

"Thank you, Phyllis," Sandy muttered.

"She's got a nice little red cheongsam outfit I've been trying to get her to wear for this sort of thing, but the weather here's been a little nippy---"

"Thank you, Phyllis!"

"I'll be sending regular reports to Ames and your father," Alberts told Sandy. "In the meantime . . ."

"We'll be leaving." Taking in the other girls with a look, Sandy headed for the door.

"Wait a minute," Phyllis said. She nodded at the man which they had spotted leaving the truck. "Scuse me, but what sort of gun are you carrying?"

The FBI agent looked a bit confused. "Nothing special. Just the usual Bureau issue .40 caliber Glock 23."

Bingo's expression was a study in innocent serenity as she strolled out of the room.

Back outside, the threesome returned to their car. "You are so gonna get yelled at by your Dad," Phyllis told Sandy. "You'll be lucky if he doesn't bust you back down to toddler."

"Blah blah blah," Sandy muttered, raising the canopy. "Look. I wasn't expecting to bat the winning run out of the park first time out. If we haven't uncovered a nest of criminals then at least we know where the Feds are holed up."

"Oh. Big gain."

"Plus, we have physical descriptions of Haddess and his people."

Phyllis and Bingo looked at each other. "I don't see how," Phyllis said, moving to get into the car, "unless you've figured out a way to grab those photos that the FBI had."

Snickering, Sandy raised her hand, showing the Snooper still in it. "Done, and done!"

Bingo had been squeezing into her spot between the seats. She now froze, staring at Sandy. "When you moved your hand over the bed---"

"You scanned the photos," Phyllis finished.

Sandy primly climbed into her seat. "Never let it be said that Papa Swift raised any dumb Little Princesses. Now it's simply a matter of attaching my Snooper to my computer and spending some time with the scan and paste functions. The result will give us clear pictures of Haddess' gang."

"Sandy . . ."

"And, if I can get hold of one of Tom's biometric attachments for the Tiny Idiot , , , quite easily obtainable through SECFAR . . ."

"OK," Phyllis sighed, "besides the white pepper we pick up some Advil for me."

"O ye of little faith."

"Sandy . . . if I didn't have faith, I wouldn't need the Advil."

* * * * *

"I'm sort of surprised," Phyllis said as they entered the house. "I was rather expecting us to prowl around a bit more."

"Yeah, well," Sandy answered, "this may sound a bit out of character for me, but running into Alberts and his merry pranksters has been excitement enough for the time being. I want to talk to Sherman and see if he's found anything new before I stub my toe again."

"A bit out of character?"

Sandy wisely chose not to answer.

"I guess I can go back to the shrimp," Bingo declared, heading for the stairs.

Sandy smiled. "Oh, I see. And the shrimp are upstairs?"

Blushing, Bingo changed course for the kitchen.

Sandy looked up. "Hi, Mom."

Mary was rapidly coming down the stairs, clutching the folds of a robe around herself. "Oh! It's you!"

"Usually is."

"I mean . . . you're back early."

"Early for what?"

"By that I meant I . . . that is, your father and I were expecting the three of you to be out for a considerable while longer."

Sandy stared closer at her mother. Mary Swift seemed rather flustered, and her normally brushed hair was in a state of dishabille. "Are you OK, Mom? You sort of look feverish."

"Ah-hhhh, well we . . . I mean, Ken was out horse riding."

"That's nice."

"I guess he still is," Mary considered absently, "and your father's laying down. Was laying down." Mary closed her eyes briefly. "Is laying down. Or lying down."

Sandy tilted her head slightly. "Mom, do you need to take a pill?"

"They've been making me gain weight," Mary said absently, then closed her eyes once again, shaking her head.

"I am going to go back upstairs," she steadily declared to one and all, "and I am going to shut the door."

"We'll be quiet."

"Thank you, lovie." Turning, Mary headed back up the stairs, still shaking her head and mumbling to herself.

Sandy was also shaking her head as she headed to the kitchen. "This New Mexico air's getting to the folks."

"So I notice," Phyllis replied, smiling.

It was at that moment that Sandy's phone began trilling loudly, producing the tone which signaled an emergency. The same sound could be heard echoing throughout the house, followed by a faint and feminine "Oh heck" from upstairs.

At the sound of the tone Sandy had frozen but she quickly recovered, grabbing at her phone and bringing it to her ear, listening with her eyes fixed on both Phyllis as well as Bingo who had come out of the kitchen. Both of them noticed how Sandy's face was becoming pale. They then noticed Tom Sr. moving down the stairs, followed by a concerned Mary. As with his wife, Mr. Swift was also in a robe and he was intently listening to his own phone.

He immediately locked eyes with Sandy.

She was slowly lowering the phone. "Dad . . ."

"Yeah," he breathed. He looked at the others. "That was Sherman at the Citadel. Twenty pounds of plutonium is missing."

Chapter Nine: The Hunt For Amanda.

"There's an atomicar waitin' in the driveway," Sandy declared. "Leavin' immediately!"

"Give me ten minutes to throw some clothes on," Tom Sr. replied, heading back up the stairs. "Oh! Sorry Phyllis . . . Bingo."

"Was I complaining?" Phyllis asked Bingo.

Sandy went to the home telecommunications console, switching it on and bringing Sherman's image up on the large screen. "OK, Sherman. Report."

Sherman was about to speak but stared at Sandy for a moment. "Shouldn't you be in jail?"

Mary looked puzzled. "What?"

"Report, Sherman," Sandy ordered.

"I had a sudden inspiration," Sherman said. "I arranged with Solomon to set up an isolated database of our own inventory. This way I figured I could have the two inventories continually compare notes and sound an alarm whenever a discrepancy appeared."

"Catch your breath a bit."

Sherman nodded, pausing for a bit. "I no sooner had this set up when Solomon reported that the fuel storage for the Lobe Three reactor was short twenty pounds. The thing is the inventory was correct after the inspection your Dad ordered late last week. If there was a theft then it had to have occurred within the last five days, if not sooner."

"Out from under our proverbial noses," Sandy said. "Does Solomon have any ideas?"

"Only that no unscheduled movement of radioactive material has taken place."

"Well someone's mistaken---"

"Mary?" cried Tom Sr. from upstairs. "Sweetie, where are my sneakers?"

"I'm sorry," Mary called up, "they're in the washer. Wear your new boat shoes."

"You've closed down the Citadel?" Sandy asked Sherman.

Sherman nodded. "Naturally it's like a kicked over ant hill here right now, but I'm holding on to everything and waiting for your father. I've got Oz and the NRC people, and Alberts is on his way. He should get here the same time as your father."

"We'll be there momentarily," Sandy promised. "Hang tight."

Sherman's image disappeared and Sandy switched off the console, looking to her right as Ken entered the house. Still turning her head she saw her father coming back down the stairs, now more fully dressed for polite company.

Mary went to him. "I know the Citadel is your pet project," she murmured, slipping her arms around his waist, "and I know it's been a lot of your life's work. Just keep in mind that you've been a lot of mine."

"Yes darling," he replied, gently kissing her.

"Sandra Helene?"

"Yes, Mom?"

"Behave!"

"Yes, Mom." Followed by her father, Sandy headed out towards the Sparrow.

Behind them, Bingo had managed to quietly sidle up alongside Ken. "We've been busy," she explained.

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later Sandy was following her father into a circular conference room located within the Citadel's Green Zone. Seated at the table were Alberts, Lellden, Moss, Oz Kilgallen and Ron Shepperd, the NRC's onsite representative at the Citadel.

Sherman had paused at their entry, but he now resumed slowly pacing around the table, staring down at the floor. "Mr. Swift."

"Sandy brought me up to date on what you had reported," Tom Sr. said, taking a seat at the table. "Anything to add?"

"I've confirmed that twenty pounds of plutonium-239 is missing from the Lobe Three storage chamber. The plutonium is nowhere in the Citadel. It is nowhere on the premises of the District. On my own authority I've sealed the Citadel and am releasing Green and Blue Zone personnel only after subjecting them to a thorough examination." A sigh. "With the assistance of Mr. Shepperd I've also contacted the NNSA and requested that a Nuclear Emergency Support Team be dispatched to assist. They should be arriving within the hour."

Sandy, taking a seat next to her father, could tell that Sherman was truly hurting. Her heart went out to him.

"I've ordered Damonscope equipped aircraft to carry out close scans of McKinley County," Sherman continued, referring to the sophisticated radiation detector which Tom Swift Jr. had developed. "I'm also having the District scanned with atomic trackers. So far nothing, and I'm having the aircraft widen their search patterns."

"You seem to have covered everything thoroughly," Tom Sr. said. "Well done."

Looking morose, Sherman slid into a seat.

Tom Sr. regarded everyone else at the table. "Anyone else have anything to report or suggest?"

"I don't think the Bureau can improve on Mr. Ames' efforts so far," Alberts said. "Unfortunately we now have to deal with the real possibility that twenty pounds of plutonium has somehow been removed from the Citadel and could well be out of the state by now."

"Hauling plutonium isn't like driving around with a load of hay," Sandy pointed out.

"Accepted," Alberts replied, giving Sandy a very pointed look. "But if the person or persons responsible had the resources to carry out this theft, it stands to reason they'd have the resources to transport the plutonium. This isn't, after all, the first theft."

If Sandy's legs had been longer she would've been tempted to kick Alberts.

Tom Sr. had produced a Tiny Idiot and was tapping on it. "With the eighty pounds of plutonium already missing, this makes it an even one hundred. At the risk of sounding egotistical I'm presuming that the Citadel was the last place targeted by the thieves. Since none of the plutonium has surfaced yet I'm also going to presume that the thieves have some sort of overall plan employing the entire one hundred pounds."

"God help us," Lellden muttered.

"Sherman, I'm going to want you, as well as Solomon and some of the scientists here, working on possibilities for using one hundred pounds of plutonium. When the NEST people arrive go ahead and throw the problem at them as well." Tom Sr. looked across the table. "Ron, I'd want the NRC also involved in this."

Shepperd nodded.

"It would help," Alberts slowly said, "if we knew exactly when the plutonium was taken."

"Everything was accounted for when the last inventory was taken five days ago," Sherman insisted. "Since then no sensors or alarms have been tripped."

"The same was true when Riis was murdered."

Sherman seemed to accept this. "Which more and more leads me to conclude that the two incidents are linked."

"Then Solomon has possibly been compromised," Alberts pointed out. "Which means your security sensors have also been compromised."

Tom Sr.'s eyes flicked to Sherman, but it was Oz Kilgallen who spoke. "We've had the Citadel's computer people, as well as experts from SECFAR, running examinations on Solomon. So far no problems have surfaced."

"Then you're saying that whoever stole the plutonium . . . as well as murdered Riis . . . could become invisible at will?"

This time Sherman locked eyes on Sandy, who tried to appear smaller in her chair.

"A theory has recently surfaced," Alberts said with a glance at Sandy, "that someone has already penetrated the Citadel's security. Someone who could possibly tamper with Solomon. This person could've spearheaded the plutonium theft, as well as murdered Riis."

"But not Curzon," Tom Sr. said.

Alberts shook his head. "I'm beginning to believe that Curzon may have been part of the plan to steal the plutonium, but we got him before he was in place. We're still looking for a very sophisticated and intelligent individual."

"Working with the Haddess gang?" asked Sandy.

"Probably," Sherman said. "I'm still having the personnel records reviewed. I'm also running comparisons with the personnel records at the other facilities which reported thefts, seeing if some sort of connection appears."

"We don't know anything?" Moss asked.

Sherman was giving Sandy a speculative look. "For the time being, let's refer to this person as 'Amanda'."

Sandy beamed.

"I've been gradually building up a profile of our target. The more I know, the closer I'll get."

"And in the meantime," Lellden said, "there's a hundred pounds of plutonium loose out there."

"If the thieves follow my profile," Sherman said, "then they won't attempt anything without issuing some sort of statement, threat or demand."

"You hope."

Sherman turned in his chair to look directly at Lellden. "Yes! I hope."

"You think this `Amanda' is somehow still in the area?" Oz asked Sherman.

Sherman was steepling his fingers, appearing more like his old self. "Either male or female, Amanda found it necessary to murder Dr. Riis. The only logical reason to do so which occurs to me somehow involves Solomon. I suspect the existence of a flaw in Amanda's plan, one which Dr. Riis could've found, and so he was killed. But the flaw still exists."

"Riis' last note."

"Even so. Riis was trying to tell us something. I think the answer's in that note, and all I have to do is make the connection. But, getting back to your original question, if there is a flaw in the plan worth having killed Riis for, then it's possible Amanda is still in the vicinity and would be trying to correct the flaw."

"So let me see if I can summarize," Sandy said. "On top of thieves with a hundred pounds of stolen plutonium, we're also possibly dealing with some sort of cunning murderer who's figured out a way to evade security."

"You neglected to mention that we have an advantage," Sherman pointed out. "We're difficult to scare."

"Some of us anyway," Alberts replied.

* * * * *

A few hours later Sandy was landing the Sparrow in the driveway at Casa Rapido.

She glanced over at her father, noting his concentrated expression. He had been silent during the trip back from the Citadel.

"If I say everything will be all right," Sandy asked, "would you believe me?"

Tom Sr. managed a small chuckle. "From you I might. But this is serious, Baby. Very serious."

"It's been serious before."

"This is serious backed by a hundred pounds of plutonium."

That's pretty serious, Sandy silently considered. "I've got faith in Sherman and the others," she said, raising the canopy. "Unless something really devastating occurs I'll believe we'll come out on top."

"I hope your condition is infectious," Tom Sr. said, climbing out of the atomicar. "And I know you're trying to be as careful as you think you need to. Just try to be more careful than usual."

Sandy smiled at her father. "So you suspect I'll be continuing to investigate on my own?"

"You have faith in Sherman . . . I have faith in you. Or, rather, the benefit of hindsight." Matching Sandy's smile, Tom Sr. went into the house. Sandy climbed out of the Sparrow, closing and locking the canopy.

Suddenly her vision was cut off and she felt someone close behind her.

"Got you," a voice growled.

Chapter Ten: Bad Guys.

Sandra felt herself instinctively moving into a judo throw, but another thought raced faster into her brain. There was something . . .

"Guess who?" the voice said.

"John Glenn."

"Uh uh."

"Larry Csonka."

"Nope."

"Eleanor Roosevelt."

"Back up one. You know who Larry Csonka was?"

Sandy sighed. "Bud, among other things I'm an occasional student of history. I just go down different avenues sometime."

The hands slipped away from her eyes and Sandy turned to face Bud Barclay. "I thought you were still picking up those parts in Denver."

"I was. Then I heard about what was going on back here and sped things up. I was gonna land out at the Citadel but was waved off by security. And that was even with my clearance. I ended up landing at Heroic Victor Airfield."

The two of them stood out there on the lawn, their arms almost around each other.

Moment, Sandy was thinking. Moment.

"Has it gotten that bad?" Bud asked.

And the moment has passed. "Yeah," Sandy said half to herself. "C'mon inside." Guiding Bud into the house she provided him with a condensed update of the situation.

Ken poked his head out from the kitchen as they entered. "Hey!"

"He followed me home," Sandy explained. "Can I keep him?"

"Might try a little harder," Phyllis grumbled.

"Huh?"

"Nothing . . . nothing. Hi, Bud."

Bingo now also appeared from the kitchen. "The Budster! You like shrimp?"

"Love fried shrimp."

Bingo considered it. "This . . . will be close enough." Muttering to herself she went back into the kitchen.

The Swifts were entering from the patio. "Bud dear," Mary said with a smile, her eyes taking in both him and her daughter and performing the sort of rapid mental speculations mothers are capable of. "You'll be staying for supper, of course."

"Hoping to," Bud replied, extending his Tiny Idiot to Mr. Swift. "Weir Ceramics says they can deliver the completed heat sink at the end of the month. They also suggested contacting Hudson Processing."

Tom Sr. was studying the Tiny Idiot's screen. "Oh?"

"Yeah. Apparently Hudson's coming out with a new coolant/fuel matrix salt. It's supposedly gonna be an improvement over the original Galaxy Specter formula."

"Um." Tom Sr. continued scrolling through Bud's notes. "I can hear the concerned tone in your voice, Bud. And I appreciate it."

"Yes sir." Bud looked around. "So Genius Boy hasn't shown up yet?"

"He's still in Washington," Phyllis explained, "watching the glue dry on his new airplane."

Perplexed, Bud looked at Sandy who mouthed the word don't.

"He's being kept in the loop," Tom Sr. explained, handing Bud's computer back to him, "and, right now, there's really not too much he can do down here."

"I'm gonna go wash for supper," Phyllis said, heading upstairs.

Bud watched her go, then made an attempt to pull the conversation back on course. "Sherman's probably ready to have a breakdown right about now."

"He's actually getting into his element," Sandy commented. "But Oz Kilgallen told me that, when this is all over, she's gonna go live in a cave and knit hats for mules."

"I see we've been hanging around Bingo again."

"SUPPER," howled Bingo, pushing a large serving cart into the dining room, followed by Ken who was doing the same.

"You've finally made an upward career move," Bud said to Ken, smiling.

"The pay's not too great," Ken admitted, "but there's no beating the fringe benefits."

Sandy was gazing up the stairs. "I've really got to do something to shake Phyl out of her mood."

Bud looked thoughtful. "Stuff her in a box marked `electronic parts' and mail her back to Tom?"

"Believe me, I've considered it. You going to be in town long?"

Bud shrugged. "I was thinking of it. Provide moral support. Pull you back from the brink of total destruction . . ."

Sandy smiled.

"Was gonna call Dody later on tonight."

Speaking of moods, Sandy growled internally.

* * * * *

The fault was never clearly determined, but Bud somehow ended up with an entire shaker worth of salt dumped on his food.

* * * * *

"Y'know," Bud remarked early the next day, "when you mentioned something about shaking Phyl out of her mood, I was thinking more along the line of shopping for clothes."

"Nothing shakes moods like a horsey ride," Sandy replied.

"Not to mention shaking my pelvis."

"The fine close feel of a strong healthy animal."

"Yep! I guess so!"

Sandy swallowed the urge to scream. She was on Babycakes and Bud was riding a bay. Somewhat ahead of them Phyllis was in the saddle of a grey Connemara pony named Colleen. Occasionally they were passed, in both directions, by Bingo and Ken who were racing back and forth at full gallop on a pair of black quarter horses. It was noted that Bingo was managing to maintain a full length lead.

Bud watched them as they sped by for the umpteenth time. "'He pursued her until she caught him'," he quoted.

"They're getting along nicely," Sandy observed, feeling a slight sympathy twinge towards Phyllis. She went back to studying her Tiny Idiot. The device had been modified by the addition of an instrument which doubled the computer's overall length.

Bud noted her action. "Sandy, Sherman's got planes with Damonscopes covering this territory. While I applaud your perseverance, do you really think you're gonna find anything this way?"

"Per'aps," Sandy murmured.

"You're not thinking of riding around the entire perimeter of the District, are you?"

"Not quite. I just want to cover the fence area along the highway and look for even the slightest increase in radioactivity."

"OK, so---"

"Bud, if you wanted to remove twenty pounds of plutonium from the Citadel, how would you do it?"

"I had a feeling that's why we were out here," Phyllis said as she allowed them to catch up with her.

Bud was thinking. "I wouldn't use aircraft," he mused. "It'd show up on radar. I would have to drive it out."

Sandy nodded, and then sighed. "And none of this is doing us any bit of good. Every vehicle that moves within the District is monitored. Any break in the fence would be detected." With a growl she switched off the computer. "Either the plutonium's still in the Citadel---"

"Which it isn't, according to both Sherman and Solomon," Bud pointed out.

"Or it was transported off the District using the standard methods---"

"Which would've been detected," Phyllis said.

Sandy reined Babycakes to a halt. "My problem is that I'm looking at this whole business from the wrong end." She gazed absently out at the fence and the expanse of the District beyond it. "I've got to adopt more of Sherman's methods."

She turned to the others. "Let's conclude that the plutonium is indeed stolen. Let's also conclude that it was removed from the Citadel using the regular method."

Bud nodded. "Granted."

"From what I recall, transport of radioactive material in and out of the Red Zone is strictly handled by the Wives," Sandy said. "From there it moves in and out of the District via shielded containers riding an automated underground shuttle train connecting the Citadel to the depot south of Tenderly."

"So far so good."

"Every step of the process is closely monitored by security via Solomon." Sandy was quiet for a moment, then she lightly slapped at the pommel of her saddle. "SECFAR."

"Pardon?" asked Phyllis.

"It all comes back to Riis' murder," Sandy pointed out. "In order to make this theft work, Solomon had to be tampered with. Someone found a way to do it. Riis programmed Solomon and so he possibly spotted the tampering and was killed before he could sound an alarm."

"Makes sense."

"So . . . instead of riding around out here, looking for radiation traces, we should be at SECFAR talking to the people who handle Solomon."

Phyllis raised an eyebrow. "'We'?"

"Or I could just pass this on to Sherman," Sandy considered.

"Who is doubtless already doing this," Bud told her.

Sandy frowned. "Yeah."

It was then that Bingo rode up. "Company."

Everyone turned to see a blue sedan driving up the road in their direction.

Ken was now with them. "Isn't that Sheriff Whatisname's car?"

Sandy was shaking her head, "No, he's got a sticker on the front bumper that says . . . WHOA!"

They all saw it at the same time. A rather uncomfortably familiar looking black metal cylinder appearing through an open rear window in the car.

The machine gun began firing as everyone started scattering about on their horses. From the corner of her eye Sandy saw Bingo riding hard across the road in the direct path of the car. "Bingo . . ."

The girl was pointing a hand at the car, and suddenly a large blob of yellow splashed upon the windshield, practically covering it. The car began wildly careening back and forth, finally leaving the road entirely, continuing to travel until it crashed hard against the fence.

Bud and Ken rode up to the car, both quickly dismounting as the girls followed on horseback. Realizing what Bingo had done, Sandy removed her own Snooper from her belt, clicking it into self-defense mode.

At that moment the rear door to the car opened and a man tumbled out. In his hands was the machine gun which he was even now trying to turn in the direction of Bud and Ken. Her heart in her mouth, Sandy pointed her Snooper and squeezed. The compressed charge of adhesive foam shot out, rapidly expanding and catching the gunman, fully enveloping him just as Ken delivered a flying tackle. In the meantime Bud had pulled open the front door of the car, reaching in to yank the driver out into the open, finishing the move with a solid punch to the chin.

The girls carefully dismounted. "OK, is that it?" Phyllis asked. "Are we safe?"

"We be cool," Bud remarked, idly rubbing his hand. Glancing over to where Ken was slowly extricating himself from the trapped gunman he gave Sandy a nod. "Fast work, hon."

"Thank Bingo," Sandy said, working to catch her breath. "She had the sense of mind to use her Snooper charge to blind the driver."

"I have got to start carrying one of those things around with me."

Sandy turned to Phyllis. "OK?"

"My mood is very much shaken, San. Thank you."

"Phone," Sandy said to her. "Police . . . Sherman. In no particular order."

Bingo had raced over to Ken, flinging her arms around his neck.

"I'm a bit sticky," Ken warned her.

"Don't care," Bingo declared.

The trapped man was still struggling with the majority of his adhesive prison. He had dropped his gun and Bud went over to it.

"Don't touch," warned Sandy.

Nodding, Bud carefully toed the gun further out of reach. "Sandy? You know more about this stuff the Snooper fires. If I start dancing hard on our friend's forehead, will he be able to feel it?"

Sandy was looking down at the man Bud had punched out. He was still lying on the ground, moving and groaning only slightly. Taking her Tiny Idiot, Sandy removed the radiation monitor she had attached to it. She then refolded her Snooper until its camera was uncovered and carefully took a picture of the man, following this by attaching the Snooper to the computer's input slot.

"What're you doing?" Bud asked, coming to her.

"Checking on a theory," Sandy murmured, cycling through items on the computer. "Annnnnnnnd we have a winner!"

"A winner?"

Sandy turned the device so that Bud could see the screen. "Jackson Palmer," she announced triumphantly. "A member of the Haddess gang."

Chapter Eleven: Conversation With A Cyberneticist.

"This is insane!"

"Y'know, Sherman" Bud remarked, "I've always admired your gift for the obvious."

Sherman ignored him and continued pacing around Sheriff Tsethlikai's office. Or rather, Sandy considered to herself, his movements were more in the way of stalking. If an agitated panther ever wore horn rimmed glasses, then Sherman would've provided the perfect picture.

What Sandy also found amazing was that Sherman had room to stalk at all. Brian Tsethlikai's office had never been the largest in the world. Now it was crammed tight with her, Bud, Sherman, the sheriff, Doctor Matthew Greco from the Nuclear Emergency Support Team, Ken, Phyllis, Bingo, Alberts and Sandy's parents. Jackson Palmer and his henchman were currently sitting in a cell in the back of the Tenderly police station, and Sandy ruefully suspected they had more room to move around than the people out front.

Sherman, in the meantime, was in full rant. "Haddess' people were never out in the open. They were securely hidden. Sandy was nowhere near anything important enough to precipitate an attack---"

"Gee thanks," Sandy muttered.

"So why was she and the others attacked? This defies all logic."

"Hostages?" Sheriff Tsethlikai suggested.

Mary Swift's expression could've been carved out of stone.

"I've taken that into consideration," Sherman said. "If we presume that Haddess has the plutonium then why would he need hostages? He has what he came after."

"Maybe he doesn't have the plutonium," Tsethlikai offered. "Maybe it hasn't actually been stolen."

"Maybe Haddess and his gang wasn't involved," added Alberts.

From where she was standing, Sandy could feel the heat in the look Sherman gave to the two men.

"Twenty pounds of plutonium is missing from the Citadel," Sherman said, his voice slowly trying to become calm. "That has been confirmed both by Solomon and by direct inspection and by me. That is fact!"

"Sherman," Tom Sr. said softly.

Behind his glasses Sherman's eyes briefly closed as he worked to collect himself.

"I understand the plutonium's missing," Alberts said, his voice even.

Sherman nodded. "So far . . . so far," he emphasized, "the missing plutonium does not show up anywhere in the District."

Dr. Greco diplomatically cleared his throat. "I should say that the findings from my people confirm Mr. Ames' conclusion on that account."

"Uriel Haddess is known to be a presence in this area," Sherman continued. "Curzon's arrest has proven that, as well as the recent arrest of Palmer and . . ."

"Charles Allison," Alberts said. "And yes, he is also associated with Haddess."

Sherman had taken out his Tiny Idiot and was tapping on it. "Speaking of Palmer, I have one more item of interest. I said I was going to examine the available personnel records of other nuclear facilities and compare them with ours to see if I could maybe locate Amanda. So far I haven't come up with anything in that regard. But . . ." He casually tossed the computer over to Alberts.

From where she was, Sandy couldn't see the little screen. But she saw Alberts' eyes widen. "Louis . . . Pavey."

"Who I'm sure you'll agree bears a more than striking resemblance to our friend Palmer," Sherman declared. He looked at the others. "After I had a chance to scan Palmer I ran his ident through my database. Palmer . . . or 'Pavey' as he was calling himself back then . . . had submitted an employment application to the Savannah River Site two months ago. He wasn't accepted---"

"But plutonium ended up missing from there as well," Alberts finished. "And, apparently, so did he"

Sandy noticed his fingers tightening on the computer before he gave it back to Sherman.

"I've only come across this recently," Sherman admitted. "I haven't contacted the security people in Savannah, figuring you'd want your Georgia office to handle that."

Alberts was already reaching for his phone. "Haddess and his bunch have never been known to operate east of New Mexico," he was saying.

"Apparently," Sherman replied, "they've received some new motivations. "Has the Bureau managed to squeeze anything useful out of Curzon?"

Alberts shook his head.

"Well you now have Palmer and Allison to add to the mix. Between the three of them you can hopefully uncover something." Sherman began walking towards the door. "Considering the serious nature of the situation, you may wish to up the level of interrogation. Either that, or . . ."

Alberts looked up to meet Sherman's eyes.

"I can handle the interrogations." Sherman walked out of the office, followed by Sandy, Bud, Bingo, Ken, Phyllis and the Swifts.

Out on the sidewalk Sherman exhaled noisily. "Well," he asked the others. "Do you think I was intimidating enough?"

"Sometimes I can't tell when you're putting on an act or not," Phyllis said.

"Yeah, well let's see if Friend Alberts can tell. "But I wasn't entirely playing to the crowd. I honestly do not see the sense in you and the others being shot at."

"Which reminds me," Mary said and she went to Bingo, gently cradling the girl's face between her hands and softly kissing her forehead. "Thank you!"

"Thank Tom for inventing the Snooper," Bingo replied. "But the others helped as well. I just got a faster horse."

"Faster than mine anyway," remarked Ken. He looked over to where their horses were patiently waiting at the hitching post they'd been tied to. "I guess the ride's over and we'd better head back to the corral."

"You guys can do me a favor and guide Babycakes back," Sandy said, looking thoughtful.

She suddenly noticed she had everyone's close attention. "What?"

"Where are you going?" Bingo slowly asked.

"I was going to ask if I could get dropped off at the monorail."

"Why?"

"I want to go to SECFAR."

Mary sighed. "Sandy you were almost machine gunned down on the highway. Shouldn't you be staying close to home?"

"Having a lie-down?" added Tom Sr.

Silence for a few moments. "OK," Bud said. "Now why's everybody looking at me?"

"Another mystery," Sandy muttered. "I just have a few things I want to talk to Frieda about," she said in a louder voice.

"Then use the console at home," Mary said.

"Mom!"

"Sandra!"

"Princess!"

"Dad!"

"Two love . . . parents!" declared Bingo.

Growling, Sandy strode off towards the horses.

Mary watched her go. "Bingo?" she asked quietly. "How good can you ride herd?"

"Naren't you worry, ma'am," Bingo answered, reaching up to adjust her hat. "I'll get the filly back in the stable `fore long."

Mary took assurance in the knowledge that it wouldn't be a long ride home.

* * * * *

"Sherman did have a point," Sandy admitted to Phyllis as they came down the stairs after changing clothes. "Realistically there was no reason for anyone to shoot us."

"I'm relieved, San. I am so relieved. You cannot possibly know how extremely and totally relieved I am right now."

"Phyl---"

"So at my funeral my eulogy's gonna be `Oops'?"

"We're alive."

Phyllis shook her head. "I don't think I'll ever be as cool about this sort of thing as you are."

"I'm scared too, Phyl. Maybe I don't show it, but I am. Remember, I almost died in Geiner's wind tunnel, and then later on when I was flying against him. That really wasn't a good day for me. And we've been threatened before. I'll never get used to it." She shrugged. "I just . . . don't have time for screaming."

"She can get scared," Bud agreed from his seat near the telecommunications console. "We were both pretty rattled back on the Moon."

"Her Mom and I were both pretty rattled down here," Tom Sr. said from nearby where he was doing some work with his Tiny Idiot.

"The point I'm wanting to make," Sandy said to everyone, "is that someone apparently thought I needed to be killed. That means someone thinks I represent some sort of threat which needs to be removed. So the question becomes why?"

Bud coughed. "Sandy . . . we all think you're pretty special. But what makes you believe you were the target?"

Sandy paused. "Well . . ."

"I told the prom organizers we'd serve on the Refreshment Committee this year," Phyllis pointed out. "That eliminates me."

"A little less talk about `elimination' please," Mary said, bringing a drink to Tom Sr.

"Sorry, Aunt Mary." Phyllis' eyes then widened. "Bingo, what the heck . . ."

Bingo had appeared from the kitchen, carefully balancing a large tray almost flowing over with pastries, a pitcher and two frosted glasses.

"Ye cats, girl," Sandy commented. "That food's got to weigh more than you do."

"It's for Ken," Bingo declared, delicately waddling towards the stairs. "I've ordered him to bed and he needs to rebuild his strength after today's life-threatening experience."

"We were all in as much trouble as Ken," Bud pointed out.

"Ken was facing vicious, murderous gunfire and barely escaped with his life."

Everyone looked at her.

"He's got a splinter," Bingo added in a small voice.

"You want us to fly him out east to Mount Sinai Hospital?" Tom Sr. asked with a smile.

"Oh I think I can pull him through." Confident, Bingo began moving up the steps.

"And he died with his boots on," Bud murmured. He then watched as Sandy pulled a throw pillow in front of the console. "So tell me why you're wanting to talk to Frieda."

"It's like I mentioned earlier," Sandy replied, sitting down on the pillow, her fingers reaching for the console controls. "Frieda would know something about Dr. Riis that may throw some light on Amanda, as well as whether or not Solomon could be manipulated."

With a look of growing interest, Tom Sr. lowered his computer and, joined by Mary, began paying closer attention as the console screen came to life and settled on an image of Frieda Morgan.

"SECFAR/Cybernetic Research," she began. "Oh! Hi."

"Hi Frieda," Sandy said, smiling. "You're looking better."

"I'm pretty much calmer," the woman admitted. "Still . . ."

"We understand. I don't want to upset you further, but I had a few questions I wanted to ask about Dr. Riis."

Frieda nodded. "Yeah, Sherman was by just a few minutes ago."

"Oh! Should I pester him instead?"

"No no . . . I can talk to you."

Sandy hugged her knees close to her. "Have you been doing any thinking about that message Dr. Riis left behind?"

"AMNDASSL," Frieda replied, spelling it out. "Actually, yes I have. Sandy, I don't like to seem contrary, but I have to agree with Phyllis. To me it doesn't mean `Amanda'."

Without turning her head, Sandy could imagine the smirk on Phyllis' face.

"I've been looking and looking at Sherman's scan of the note," Frieda went on. "I think that first `S' is actually a `5'. And the `L' at the end looks more and more like a `1'."

"AMNDA5S1?" Sandy frowned. "That makes less sense than `Amanda'."

"I suspect," Frieda slowly said, "what Sam was really writing was the title for a computer file or program." Spotting Sandy's mouth opening she continued in a quicker tone. "And yes, I'm now doing a search of all computer files looking for it. I told Sherman the same thing."

"Solomon can't identify it?"

"I've asked, and he doesn't know. It might've been something Sam was working on and hadn't had a chance to install yet. He was always working on things like that."

Sandy inwardly smiled at Frieda's habit of referring to Solomon as `he'. Most of the SECFAR staff tended to personalize the computers and robots. "I know he was looking over Tom's new cybertron concept. This wouldn't have had anything to do with that, would it?"

"I don't think so." Frieda was beginning to appear mournful.

"I'm sorry," Sandy said.

"It's just . . . it's just that Sam was really perking up. I mean, he loved his work here. But he was getting ready to travel to Ontario, and then he was . . . he . . ."

Tom Sr. moved closer to the console. "I know Sam was born in Des Moines," he said. "Did he have relatives in Ontario?"

Frieda shook her head, trying to work herself out of her mood. "He always spent two weeks in Ontario each year. `Cept for the few times he vacationed in England." A smile briefly returned to her face. "I've still got the souvenirs and postcards he brought back."

"What sort of programs was Sam writing?" Tom Sr. asked.

Frieda pursed her lips in thought. "He had some ideas concerning heuristics and neural computing that he talked about. As a matter of fact, now that they finished the first part of the investigation I was gonna try to go through his office and his apartment and see if I could locate his notebooks."

"He didn't store his notes with Solomon?"

"He did but he also believed in hard copy. Old school."

Sandy had been gently rocking back and forth. "OK, Frieda. Best guess. Has Solomon been tampered with?"

Frieda's thoughtfulness deepened. "Sandy I just don't know. We've set up a team here that's been running tests. So far, nothing."

"I know Sherman and the FBI have probably already asked this one, but did Dr. Riis have any visitors outside of SECFAR?" Reaching for her computer, Sandy accessed the photo of Jackson Palmer and held it up close to the video pickup. "This man for instance?"

Frieda peered closer. "I haven't seen him."

"Or this man?" Sandy asked, bringing up Charles Allison's image.

"No. Sorry. But if I find anything , , ,"

Sandy nodded. "Appreciate it, Frieda. And thanks."

"No problem."

The screen went dark and Sandy sat quietly for a moment.

"Nice try," Bud said.

"Yeah," Sandy mused, resting her chin on her knees. "There's still something . . . someone much closer to the problem that I haven't talked to yet."

"Oh?"

Sandy once again reached for the controls. "Solomon."

Chapter Twelve: More Conversations.

Mary opened her mouth to speak but stopped as Tom Sr. gently raised a finger.

"Let's see where this goes," he murmured, his eyes bright with interest as he watched.

Her tongue pressed into her cheek in concentration, Sandy finished making the connection. On the screen appeared the icon for the Citadel computer.

Sandy looked up at it. "Solomon."

"Yes, Miss Swift."

"How are you feeling?"

"Specify."

Sandy thought for a moment. "General relation."

"Providing closest interpretation. Processing nominal. Operation holding standard at one five eight point two exaflops. No fault indicated in heat density moderators. YNM calculation web stable. No strain indicated in ghost neural matrix. Total number of calculations over the past sixty seconds, broken into function/subfunction branches---"

"Stop." Sandy looked over at her father, raising her hands slightly in confusion.

"You've either have to think like a programmer," Tom Sr. whispered, "or be careful how you phrase your questions."

Sandy frowned to herself for a moment, then returned her attention to the screen. "Solomon, have you been receiving information concerning the recent death of Dr. Riis?"

"Yes."

"Are you researching the recent theft of the plutonium from the Citadel?"

"Correction: `theft' is still presumed."

Bud was doing his best not to laugh.

Sandy took three careful breaths. "Are you researching the plutonium which is currently missing from the Citadel?"

"Yes."

"Blend the problem of Dr. Riis' death with the problem of the missing plutonium."

"Done."

"OK," Sandy murmured. "Conclusions?"

A miniature red duplicate of Solomon's icon briefly flickered beneath the main icon on the screen, indicating that Solomon was performing calculations.

"Accessing information received from Security Chief Sherman Ames. Accessing information received from Security Chief Oz Kilgallen. Correlating. Conclusion: best possible connection currently exists at forty per cent."

"Forty?" Sandy exclaimed. "Forty my fan---" She quickly stopped and collected herself, trying again in a calmer voice. "Give me the connection."

"The connection is based on the presumption that the Citadel has been penetrated by an outside agent. The connection is based on the presumption that said agent possesses knowledge and skills sophisticated enough to affect or alter my operation. To date: the existence of such an agent has not been proven. Conclusion: no such agent exists."

"Alberts is gonna love this guy," Bud said.

Sandy was glaring at the screen. "Have you reached any conclusions on who was responsible for Dr. Riis' death?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Two reasons. One: insufficient information. Two: investigation parameters invalid."

Tom Sr. frowned. "Solomon, are you stating that the investigation is incorrect?"

"The investigation is necessary, Mister Swift. But it is predicated on the assumption that Dr. Riis was murdered. The possibility of suicide has not been eliminated."

Bud's jaw dropped. "What?"

"He was shot through the head," Sandy argued. "The gun was nowhere in the office when the body was discovered."

"Because the gun was not there does not eliminate the possibility of suicide," Solomon coolly replied. "It simply states that the gun was not there when the body was discovered."

"Oh my," Mary said.

"Have you told Sherman about the suicide angle?" Sandy asked the computer.

"No."

"Why?"

"Security Chief Sherman Ames has not yet asked for an opinion on this possibility."

"Better be careful if you do," Mary advised. "Sherman's family has a history of heart trouble."

Tom Sr. motioned for Sandy's attention. "According to Solomon's way of thinking," he explained, "Oz Kilgallen rates higher in his confidence than Sherman because Oz is the usual head of security for the District. Solomon's programming might not allow for him to volunteer information. Apparently it never occurred to anyone to change the hierarchy in order to correct this."

"Sherman's got to have considered the suicide angle," Sandy said loyally.

"I'll make sure and gently broach the topic to him."

Sandy opened her mouth.

"Gently," her father emphasized. "That's why I said I'd do it."

Her brain growling, Sandy turned back to Solomon. "All right. Removing the question of Dr. Riis' , , , death . . . what conclusions do you have concerning the missing plutonium?"

"Review the previous connection. All theories are based on the presumption that the Citadel has been penetrated by an outside agent. To date: the existence of such an agent has not been proven. Conclusion: no such agent exists."

"But the plutonium is missing," Sandy pointed out. "There's no suicide theory this time."

The blinking icon appeared.

"Solomon hasn't been programmed for sarcasm," Tom Sr. pointed out.

"And he works for us?" Bud asked.

"I'll rephrase the statement," Sandy told Solomon. "The plutonium is missing."

The blinking icon disappeared. "Correct."

"Why or how is the plutonium missing?"

"Information is still being processed concerning this problem," Solomon said primly. "Even though theft is still a presumption it is being considered. Other possibilities currently under consideration: tampering with inventory files, error in inventory files, malfunction in delivery system for radioactive materials, malfunction in Red Zone sensors, physical or chemical alteration of plutonium, personal malfunction, intervention by extraterrestrials---"

"Stop," said Sandy. "Aliens stole the plutonium?"

"Based on previous knowledge concerning the involvement of extraterrestrials with Swift Enterprises, the possibility cannot be entirely eliminated. Probability increases due to your current presence in the District, Miss Swift."

Looking at Sandy, Bud recalled how the last time he had seen the sort of expression currently on her face was back when he had dumped a bucket of ice down the back of her shirt. Fortunately he had managed to outrun her.

"You---" Sandy began.

"Sandy," her father interrupted. "Even though I don't like the answer either, I'm obliged to point out that, besides sarcasm, Solomon was not programmed for tact."

"If I was in charge of its programming . . ." Mary muttered.

Sandy had calmed herself back down. "All right, Solomon," she said evenly. "OK. Accepted." Her voice dropped, "You overweight can opener---"

"I weigh one hundred and eighty seven tons."

"No sarcasm, tact or humor," Bud said to Sandy. "Dr. Riis may have programmed Solomon, but it's got your brother's personality."

Behind them, Phyllis suddenly rose from her seat. "This is all very interesting," she said, "but I'll be upstairs."

Sandy seemed not to have heard either of them. "All right," she said to Solomon. "You do know I was shot at today, don't you?"

"Information received from Security Chief Sherman Ames. Information received from Security Chief Oz Kilgallen."

"And . . . have you reached any conclusions which connect the shooting to either Dr. Riis' death or the missing plutonium?"

"No specifics currently exist."

Sandy now knew what it was like to talk to a brick wall. "Why nothing specific?"

"One: no conclusion supports supposition that you were the intended target. Two: no conclusions available due to current examination of existing variables."

Despite herself, Sandy was curious. "Variables?"

"Examination of Swift family history reveals multiple possibilities as to source of attack. Brungaria. The Kranjovian Oligarchy. Extraterrestrials. Various multi-national corporations. Various European clandestine organizations---"

"All right, all right . . ."

"According to data taken from the Southern Poverty Law Center database, at least eight domestic groups have fit the existing parameters. According to data taken from the Federal Bureau of Investigation database, at least fourteen possibilities fit the existing parameters. According to data taken from the INTERPOL database---"

"I said all right. Stop! The people responsible for the attack have been linked to a criminal organization headed by Uriel Haddess. That doesn't help in your conclusions?"

"Best possible connection currently exists at twenty eight per cent."

"Ass," Sandy muttered.

"First definition: any of several hardy gregarious African or Asian perissodactyl mammals belonging to the genus Equus, small than---"

"Skip it."

"Second definition: a stupid, obstinate or perverse person---"

"I mean stop!"

Solomon became silent. "You sure this machine doesn't understand sarcasm?" Sandy asked her father.

Tom Sr. shrugged.

Once again Sandy turned to the screen. "I presume that, if you arrive at any solid conclusions, you'll inform us. All of us."

"Yes, Miss Swift."

"In that case, toodles." Reaching out she slapped at the console, switching it off. Exhaling noisily she collapsed back against the pillow, staring at the ceiling.

"Yumpty-yump flopparoos," she muttered, "and it can't even solve a little bitty mysterious murder."

Mary had been watching Phyllis go up the stairs. She now quietly got to her feet and followed.

* * * * *

"Knock knock!"

"Come in, Aunt Mary."

Mary opened the door to Phyllis' room just enough to peek in and see the girl sitting before the mirror, slowly brushing her hair. Moving on in she went to stand behind Phyllis. "Here," she said softly, carefully taking the brush.

Phyllis was quiet as the older woman began passing the brush through the brunette curls.

"You're so pretty," Mary remarked. "I'm so glad you decided to let your hair grow longer."

Phyllis didn't respond.

Mary was a New Englander, but she had now spent enough time in the Southwest to fully understand the phrase "taking the bull by the horns". "It has come to my attention," she slowly said, "that personal matters between you and Tom have come up against a rather large speed bump."

At this Phyllis let out a slow breath. "It would seem so."

As a New Englander, Mary also knew the risk in skating on thin ice. "Is the problem so very unsolvable?"

A sigh. "Aunt Mary---"

"I know, I know. But I'm making this my business because I feel I have a personal stake in this." Mary concentrated on not brushing too hard. "Believe me, Phyllis, I know perhaps better than anyone how obstinate and dense my son can be."

"But he cares about you and Uncle Tom and Sandy," Phyllis replied, emotion finally entering her voice. "I know that. I've seen him care so very much. It's just . . . it's just . . ."

"You'd like the same sort of care."

Phyllis couldn't easily nod but she managed.

"Somehow," Mary slowly said, "I don't think what you're looking for is quite the same level of affection."

"Delicately put."

Smiling to herself, Mary put the brush down on the dresser and went to sit on the edge of the bed. "I not only understand Tom," she pointed out, "but I thoroughly sympathize with you. Believe me."

"Oh, but Uncle Tom is nothing like Tom," Phyllis said, turning around to face her. "I've seen you and Uncle Tom. Cuddling and kissing and stuff."

Mary poked out her lower lip. "Um."

"What?"

"Just thinking of an old song, dear. The refrain went: `Don't make love by the garden gate . . . Love is blind but the neighbors ain't'."

"Oh, I didn't mean---"

"It's quite all right," Mary said with a smile. "But, as for Tom's father and I, I have to point out that almost thirty years of marriage has helped us to establish . . . ahh . . . common ground, as it were. In the beginning, though . . ."

"Oh?"

"When we were your age . . . younger actually . . . Tom was just as dedicated as my son when it came to engines and airplanes and inventing. Oh he flirted, and I flirted. We were actually quite shy." This time it was Mary who sighed. "You might say that, lacking flying lessons, it took me quite a while before I finally managed to land him."

"Mom told me about that."

"Did your mother tell you how I almost blew it?"

Phyllis' eyes widened. "Oh no, Aunt Mary."

"Hm! Well, the next time your mother is in one of her loose and tell-all moods, ask her about Floyd Barton."

"Floyd Barton?"

"Uh huh." Mary absently smoothed out her skirt. "And then, if you really want to shake her up, ask her about Grace Winthrop."

Phyllis mentally filed the information away.

"What I'm wanting to point out, though, is that patience is strongly advised when dealing with Tom. Either of them." Mary raised a palm at Phyllis' opening mouth. "I know that you've been very patient so far with your Tom. Admirably so. Just try and hold on a bit longer."

"He's not `my Tom'," Phyllis muttered, almost turning away.

"Oh, I think he is," Mary replied. "You may not believe it, but I do." She smiled again. "Mothers tend to know these things."

Phyllis seemed to be considering it.

"Your parents and Tom's father and I have kept track of how the two of you have gone out on occasional dates with others. We have noticed, however, that you've been rather . . . shall we say `singular' . . . in recent years, and we've taken it as a positive sign---"

"I love him," Phyllis said simply.

"I know."

"I want him," and here Phyllis blushed a bit.

Mary patted her knees lightly. "Well, we'll just gloss over the details of that for the time being. I'm suddenly reminded, though, of something Laurence Peter once said about how creating life in a laboratory isn't difficult. All it takes is an assistant who's pretty and willing."

"I cannot believe you just said---"

"Actually Tom's father told me that one. We need not go into the surrounding circumstances," and this time it was Mary who blushed. "But, diplomatically returning to the problem at hand, we're all rooting for you, and I suspect that you'll win out in the end. Tom's a genius. I like to believe he's not a fool."

"What should I do?" Phyllis asked. "I mean, besides being patient?"

"Just be there at the right moment," Mary told her. "Trust me, Phyllis. There will come a time when Tom will need something that can't be supplied with a test tube or an atomic reactor or a space rocket. When that moment comes---"

"Be a willing assistant?" Phyllis asked, smiling.

Well, Helen, Mary thought, she's definitely your daughter. "Let's add prudence to patience for the time being, dear. And it's good to see you smiling again."

"You've been a help, Aunt Mary."

"Well, that's what prospective mothers-in-law are for." Getting up from the bed, Mary suddenly found herself the recipient of a close hug from the girl.

"You're the greatest," Phyllis said.

"So my husband informs me often."

"And are you gonna try giving this sort of advice to Sandy?"

"Yes, well . . . one problem at a time."

Chapter Thirteen: Scene Of A Crime.

"I know she's my sister," Sherman was telling Oz Kilgallen, "but, believe it or not, I actually agree with her on occasion, and this is gonna be one of those times. As long as the Feds are completely open and above ground with the information they're giving us, I'm willing to cede jurisdiction. For one thing, it lets us concentrate more on the missing plutonium."

Oz made a note on her computer and scrolled to the next item. "Some of the Blue Zone scientists are still having issues with the access restrictions. They're claiming that some of their experiments are at a critical stage---"

"I know, I know," Sherman said wearily, closing his eyes and leaning back against Oz's desk. "Do me a favor and call the Pierce Library. See if they're willing to help us with our background checks." He rubbed at his eyes, sighing. "I can hear your shoes out there, Pico. What is it?"

Pico Jefferson, Sherman's lieutenant, poked his head around the corner of the doorway. "Someone to see you, Boss."

"I'm not in."

"It's Mrs. Swift."

"I'm in." Straightening up, Sherman left the office to see Mary Swift standing in the corridor.

"Miz Swift! Don't often see you here in the Citadel."

Mary was gazing solemnly at him. "Can we go talk somewhere, Sherman?"

Aspirin, Sherman thought. I'm gonna need aspirin before the morning's out. "Let's go over here," he offered, lightly touching Mary's elbow and leading her out onto the mezzanine overlooking the monorail terminal.

Guiding her to a couch he sat down beside her. "OK, Miz Swift. I know I'm gonna get yelled at for something, so let's have it."

"I don't want to make it seem like I'm yelling at you. I know you've got quite a lot on your plate right now---"

Sherman stared steadily at her. "'But'."

Mary let out a breath. "Why have you involved Sandy in this business concerning the murder and the missing plutonium?"

Sherman spent a few moments collecting his thoughts. "I could tell you that I didn't quite involve Sandy, but that'd be telling a lie."

Mary waited.

"Miz Swift . . . back when my Dad was about to head for the Moon and leave me the Security Chief post . . . Tom and Bud had been the ones always having the adventures and getting into trouble. Dad told me what signs to look out for and also how to deal with situations when they came up.

"Then he took me aside and said something very interesting. He told me to watch out for Sandy."

"Harlan never mentioned this to me," Mary said with a raised eyebrow.

"Because that's all he told me. Watch out for Sandy. Remember, Sandy hadn't quite started test piloting yet."

"I know," Mary said mournfully.

"Well . . . now I know what he meant. I mean, nowadays Tom and Bud are almost placid. It's Sandy who's been bustin' the world wide open. You've seen it happen." A soft touch of conspiracy entered Sherman's voice. "That is, after all, why you hired Bingo Winkler."

"Ye Gods! How many people know about Bingo?"

Sherman sighed. "I know you personally hired her, Miz Swift, and that should've been good enough. But that didn't stop me from running a complete background check. Her history turned out to be above suspicion."

"I planned it that way," Mary declared. "I called in some old favors and had her real background completely hidden. Where did I go wrong?"

"When her history turned out to be above suspicion," Sherman replied with a predatory smile. "For the record, Ken Horton also knows. And no, he didn't use his wiles to pry it out of Bingo. Your friends in Washington didn't completely cover all their tracks."

"Criminy biscuits!"

"But, if it makes you feel better, Sandy's still pretty much in the dark, although I think she's been having some suspicions."

"Getting back to Sandy . . ."

"Yeah." Sherman ran a hand through his hair. "Miz Swift . . . I'm sorry, but you got some smart kids. Sandy might not be a scientific genius, but she's quick, resourceful, clever and insightful. If she wasn't already working as a test pilot I'd hire her with no questions asked. When Dr. Riis was murdered, and I found out Sandy was bringing Alberts and the NRC people to SECFAR, I made a point of asking her to see the crime scene. I wanted to bounce my thoughts off of her and also set her mind going in the direction of thinking about the mystery."

"I'm aware you have a high regard for Sandy's abilities," Mary said tiredly. "I don't mind you picking her brains in regards to this business. But does she have to put herself on the firing line? Literally?"

"I still can't figure out why they shot at her---"

"You saw what she was like after Geiner," Mary shot back hotly.

"Miz Swift---"

"For a while I thought we were going to have to get professional counseling for her."

"I know," Sherman said gently. "I know! By the time things got as far as they did she was way out of my hands. If Sandy had ended up in counseling then I would've probably asked to share

her couch." His expression hardened. "But she not only drove us crazy with worry, she personally saved the lives of everyone at Enterprises. We wouldn't have survived Geiner's attack."

"I feel the same way," Mary said, her voice almost down to a whisper. "I can't ignore what she did. And yes, I'm very proud of her. But Sherman, if it comes to a showdown between her safety and my pride---"

"I'll see what I can do," Sherman promised.

Mary nodded. "And if you can recommend something to hide the grey in my hair . . ."

Sherman looked back over his shoulder. "Oz!" he yelled.

* * * * *

"So," Sandy said. "What are we doing wrong?"

Phyllis thought it over. "Getting up in the morning? And don't give me that look."

They were out in front of Casa Rapido, cleaning the Sparrow. "You shouldn't get mad," Phyllis pointed out, "just because Solomon didn't hand you an answer on a silver platter."

Sandy growled a reply from which Phyllis could only pick up the words "adding machine" and "grotesque". She prudently decided against asking Sandy to repeat the remark.

"Hi-iiii," Bingo called out, coming towards them from out of the house. In one of her hands was a phone which she held out to Sandy. "Left this in the house."

"Didn't want to get it wet," Sandy replied, gingerly taking the phone and holding it to her ear. "H'lo?"

Sherman's voice filled her ear. "Sandy? You talked to Frieda Morgan late yesterday."

"Guilty as charged. Do I turn myself in quietly?"

"That'd be a change."

"Well!"

"I was checking up on some things and she didn't show up at SECFAR this morning. Called her phone and no answer."

"Oh! Ah . . . did you try directly contacting Dr. Riis' office or his apartment? Frieda mentioned something about collecting some notebooks."

"Aha! I can ask someone at SECFAR if she's rummaging through Riis' office. That still leaves the apartment. Why wouldn't she answer her phone, though?"

"Dunno but, if you like, I can swing by Dr. Riis' apartment and see if she's there."

Phyllis and Bingo were staring at her.

"That'd be OK, Sandy. Thanks."

"No problem. Where did Riis live?"

"Ah-hhhhh . . . Shalako Apartments over on Fox. Actually a lot of SECFAR people're living there. Riis was in 22A and Frieda's in 2E."

"I'll let you know if I find anything."

"Oh, and try not to get scalped. Your Mom's on the warpath."

"Oops! Thanks for the heads-up."

"Bye!"

Sandy hung up. "Sherman's looking for Frieda," she announced, wiping her palms dry on her shorts. "She might be picking up Dr. Riis' notebooks and I said I'd go over and check Riis' apartment to see if she's there."

"Doesn't Frieda have a phone?" Bingo asked.

"She does but apparently she's not answering it." Sandy looked a bit pensive. Then she unlocked and raised the canopy to the Sparrow.

"GUYS?" Bingo yelled, turning back to the house, "SANDY'S GONNA GO OUT AND GET HERSELF SHOT AT AGAIINNNNNN."

"Try a little louder next time, Bingo. I don't think they heard you over in Brungaria."

Bud and Ken came out from the house. "Now what?" Bud asked.

"Well," said Sandy, "in contrast to what you might have heard from the Mouse That Roared, I'm just gonna go to Dr. Riis' apartment for a bit and see if Frieda Morgan's there."

"Frieda's not answering her phone," Phyllis reported ominously.

Bud and Ken exchanged a look, then Bud attempted a John Wayne swagger. "Well then it's time to saddle up Little Missy and ride south," he drawled.

Sandy stood there, tapping her foot. "We can't all fit in the car."

"Station wagon," replied Bud.

"Shotgun!" cried Bingo.

"Guys," Sandy said in mild irritation, then shook her head and followed the group into the garage, sighing as she slid behind the wheel next to Bingo who was bouncing up and down on the passenger side. "Just gonna be a little trip. I don't really need an entourage. And sit still, Bingo."

Once again Sandy drove into Tenderly. "Bingo, if you sit still and take my phone and try to call Frieda I'll buy you an ice cream. I got her number listed."

"Do anything for an ice cream," Bingo said, carefully taking Sandy's phone out of her pocket.

"Have to remember that," Ken remarked.

Calling up the number, Bingo listened for a moment, then shook her head at Sandy.

"OK," Sandy said. "I'm really not liking this."

"Then here's another worry," Phyllis said from the back seat. "We're being followed."

With the exception of Sandy (who used the rearview mirror) everyone looked behind them. "The grey van?" Bud asked.

"Yeah."

"Please look closely and make sure it doesn't have government plates," Sandy pleaded. "I wouldn't put it past Alberts and his munchkins to have a tail on us."

"No government plates this time," Phyllis declared.

They were paused at a traffic signal. "Then let's try something," Sandy muttered, reaching and adjusting some controls. "Everyone hold on. Applying full vertical boost."

With a whine of power, the turbo thrusters roared to life, sending the atomicar soaring up into the air. Sandy watched the altimeter until, satisfied, she opened the vanes on the main jets, converting to horizontal flight. "As the hipster taxidermist said: there's more than one way to skin a cat."

"Well he ain't taking off after us," Ken said, peering out the window. "If it were Feds you'd think they'd have Tommycars on this assignment."

"If anyone remembered the plate number, give it to Bingo. Bingo, sweetie, call Sherman and pass the information along."

"Yes'm."

For a few minutes Sandy soared about over Tenderly, altering direction and altitude. "Let's make sure we throw off observers."

"Yeah," remarked Bud. "Buzzing the town in a flying station wagon is really gonna make us inconspicuous . . . WHOA!"

"Air pocket," muttered Sandy.

"Sherman's usin' a lot of nasty words," Bingo said, lowering the phone. "Boilin' it down, he wants us all to go home and hide under the bed while the cops go to Riis' apartment."

Sandy was peering out the windshield. "Yeah, but there's the apartment complex down there. Long as we're in the neighborhood . . ."

Finding a clear spot in the parking lot of Shalako Apartments, Sandy began adjusting the thrusters, gradually settling the car down to a landing (amid the "ooohs" and "ahhhs" of a small but appreciative crowd who were drawn by the sight).

Phyllis and Ken were examining the buildings. "Do we want Frieda or Riis first?" asked Phyllis. "Unit A is right over there."

"Then let's try that," Sandy suggested.

Getting out of the car they wandered over to Unit A, entering it and looking for room number 22.

"The District didn't set up housing for the Citadel and SECFAR folk?" Ken asked.

"Too impersonal," Phyllis said. "And, at the time, we wanted to make a good impression on the town by involving Enterprises people in the local economy."

"Here it is," Sandy said, reaching the door marked 22 and briskly knocking on it.

The unlocked door slowly swung open.

"Ohhhhh Mama," Bud said, moving himself into position just ahead of Sandy and cautiously opening the door wider. Beyond it the apartment was dark, the only light coming from the windows at the far end.

Bud moved in. "Frieda?"

Sandy quietly slipped in behind Bud, followed by the others, and her eyes immediately widened as she saw how the room was a catastrophe. Furniture and books and papers had been thrown about everywhere, creating an atmosphere of confusion drawing everyone's attention to . . .

The still form of Frieda Morgan stretched out in the hallway.

Chapter Fourteen: "In The Pot Put The Chicken."

"Hold it!" Bingo snapped, rushing past the others to kneel close beside Frieda, gently probing with her fingers while the others gathered around.

"She's alive," Bingo reported a few moments later. "But not for lack of trying on someone else's part." The girl continued her examination. "Looks like Grade 3 concussion. We need an ambulance."

"And police and Sherman," Sandy added, kneeling down besides Bingo and raising her phone to her mouth. "Medical kit in the car, under the front passenger side."

Like a small comet Bingo rocketed out the door.

Meanwhile, Bud and Ken were looking around the room, with an emphasis on the hallway. Turning to Bud, Ken signaled for silence, then began stealthily moving down the hall, Bud just behind him. Watching them go, Sandy was hoping against hope that the worst thing they would find would be a lack of clean towels in the bathroom.

"Sandy?" Sherman's voice asked from her phone. "What're you---"

"We're in Riis' apartment. Frieda Morgan's here and she's been knocked unconscious. The apartment's been trashed like someone was looking for something."

An obscenity crashed loudly against Sandy's ear. "I knew I should've kept someone there. I KNEW it!" Then only a fraction calmer: "Police are already on the way. I'll call EMS. Please tell me you guys are alone in the apartment."

Sandy looked up to see Bud and Ken coming back. Bud was silently making an OK sign with his fingers. "It's just us so far, Sherman. We're trying hard not to touch anything except Frieda to make sure she's still alive."

Phyllis had been closely examining the door. "People? I'm probably stating some serious obvious here, but it looks like someone forced this lock."

"I'm on my way," Sherman declared. "Stay safe."

"Decent suggestion," Sandy muttered, closing the phone.

* * * * *

Bingo was almost at the car when two men suddenly moved into view from behind a large grey van which Bingo didn't remember having been there when they landed.

But the van had an unpleasant familiarity about it.

The men were quickly but smoothly bearing down on her.

"We're not gonna hurt you, honey," one of the men was saying.

"I know," Bingo softly replied.

* * * * *

"I hear sirens," Sandy remarked, looking up. "But where the heck's Bingo with that . . . oh!"

"Sorry," the Texan said, scurrying back into the room. "Ran into a little trouble out in the parking lot."

"Oh?"

"That van that was following us was out there," Bingo explained, handing over the medical kit. "Two guys tried to grab me."

"Tried to grab you?"

Bingo nodded. "They're lying down in the parking lot right now."

"Lying do . . . what the hell happened to them?"

"Tripped over something."

Sandy decided to file it away for later and attended to Frieda, snapping open the medical kit and pressing the halves firmly against her back. She then peeled the safety cover off the activation button and pushed it, causing a series of diagnostic leads to pierce Frieda's blouse, just barely penetrating the skin beneath. A pause, then the device began automatically injecting from a series of pre-loaded drugs.

Reading the information scrolling on the small readout strip, Sandy nodded. "Bingo you were on target. Grade 3B concussion. No sign yet of internal bleeding."

"She's gonna have a blue-ribbon lump on her head," Bingo pointed out.

"No kidding," Sandra said, peering closer at Frieda's scalp.

Bud was looking around. "I don't know about the rest of you," he was remarking, "but I don't think we're gonna find too much in the way of notebooks here."

Sandy nodded, her mind racing. "Look," she told Bud, "you and Ken get out of here before the cops hem us in. Frieda was in room 2E. Go check it out but be careful. If Bingo ran into two people here, then . . ."

"We're on it," Bud said as he and Ken left the premises.

With Frieda being attended to, Sandy began studying her surroundings. "And not a Snooper or a computer between us," she growled. "Phyllis . . . or Bingo . . . never let me leave the house again without one or the other. Or both."

It was at that moment that the doorway was filled with three uniformed policemen, all of them with guns drawn.

Looking up, Sandy smiled ruefully. "Keshhi, Brian."

Sheriff Tsethlikai calmly holstered his gun. "Sandy. I've had more work in the last five days than in the last five years. And you've been involved or at least in the area each and every time."

"It's that unique part of her personality which endears her to a lot of people," Phyllis admitted. "Ask the New York Police. They adore her."

"Some of them really do," added Bingo.

Sandy ignored their comments with dignity. "Frieda Morgan told me she was going to collect some notebooks from Dr. Riis' room. Sherman couldn't get in touch with her and we offered to come by and check." With a wave of her hand she indicated the apartment. "We found the place like this, and Frieda unconscious."

Tsethlikai had come over and was bending over Frieda, studying the medical kit's progress. "As we were arriving here we got a call that EMS was being dispatched to this location. I halfway

expected to show up in here and find you hanging upside down from the ceiling, gutted like a trout."

Sandy grimaced. "Eww."

Bingo suddenly had a thought and, tapping Sandy's shoulder, pointed in a direction through the doorway. "Bzz bzz . . ."

"Huh?" Then Sandy felt a penny dropping. "Oh! Yeah! Brian, we were followed out here by a grey van. Sherman's got the license plate number. Two of the men from the van are out in the parking lot unconscious . . . you did say unconscious?" Sandy added to Bingo, receiving an innocent nod in return.

Tsethlikai stared at them for a few moments, then turned to his men and motioned for them to check it out.

"I'm getting tired," he admitted to himself, straightening up and looking all around. "Sherman Ames and Gary Alberts are not gonna like this at all."

"Sherman's already voiced his opinion," Sandy told him. "And no, he doesn't. If it helps, we've tried to keep our hands off of everything."

"Elahkwa," Tsethlikai murmured. "Well . . . having heard something of your reputation, Sandy, have you got the case sewn up yet?"

Sandy tasted the remark and couldn't find any trace of sarcasm. "I'm afraid we've been more concerned about Frieda than anything else. And that should be the ambulance," she said, her head turning at the sound of another siren. "If they decide to take Frieda on into Gallup we could airlift her there."

"We'll see."

"Dr. Riis was a fan of Laurence Olivier," Phyllis remarked. She was studying a framed photograph which had been knocked to the floor.

"So am I," Tsethlikai replied. "In fact, Luna worked with Dr. Riis on the community theatre group here."

Sandy was thoughtfully chewing on a fingernail. "You don't think your wife would know if anyone in that group had a problem with Dr. Riis---"

"San?"

"Phyl?"

"Really reaching, San."

"Yeah."

It was at that moment that two medical technicians arrived with a gurney. After conferring with Sandy about the medical kit they carefully moved Frieda onto the gurney and wheeled her away, narrowly clipping Bud and Ken who were returning.

"Frieda's apartment is copacetic," Ken announced. "I'll bet Sherman'll want to give it a good looking over though." He nodded at the sheriff. "Hi!"

Tsethlikai was looking at them. "You two were investigating Frieda Morgan's apartment?"

"Uh huh."

Tsethlikai sighed. "Sandy . . . you know, the Police Academy in Gallup has a program that's not really all that long. If you guys want---"

"We didn't mean to step on your toes," Sandy admitted. "We'd just dropped by to check on Frieda and found this. Hi, Sherman."

Everyone turned to see Sherman sweep into the apartment like a black clad breeze, his eyes taking in everything all at once. Behind him could be seen Pico Jefferson.

Tsethlikai briefly nodded at him. "Yeah, well," he said, turning back to Sandy, "if you ever decide to add a Great Dane to your ensemble, I might have to ask you to leave town."

Sherman blinked at the sheriff in mild confusion. "They've got bloodhounds."

Sandy closed her eyes.

* * * * *

Remembering the somewhat non-auditorium space available in the Sheriff's Office, it was perhaps silently agreed upon to hold a conference in the living room at Casa Rapido. It couldn't be denied that, between the amount of couch and seat space, plus the added bonus of Bingo and Mary passing refreshments around, the surroundings were far more enjoyable.

Tom Sr., Lellden and Alberts had also added themselves to the proceedings, and everyone was now watching Sherman perform his usual pacing about.

"OK," he was admitting, "not keeping an eye on Dr. Riis' apartment was a severe error on my part. Hopefully the last one. We move on. At least Frieda'll be able to yell at me for not suspecting an attack. The hospital reports that she's coming around and will be fine, albeit with an aching noggin for a while."

"How could you suspect Frieda would get mugged?" Phyllis asked. "Sandy and the rest of us were the only people who knew she was going over to Riis' apartment."

"True," Sherman murmured thoughtfully. "But maybe she told someone else at SECFAR."

Tom Sr. frowned. "You still think there's an inside operator at SECFAR?"

"Or the Citadel," Sherman admitted. "And I'm sorry, Mr. Swift, but I have to consider the possibility. Maybe it's not a regular employee, though. There's still the chance that the District has been infiltrated by someone. Our `Amanda'. Regardless of who it is, I firmly believe that we're dealing with someone directly inside the District."

Bingo had approached him with a glass of milk, her hand weaving back and forth. "Sherman, either take this or stand still. I'm getting dizzy."

"Sorry," Sherman said, absently taking the glass and coming to a stop. "What we do know, and for certain, is that there is definitely twenty pounds of plutonium missing from the Citadel. Solomon's confirmed this . . . don't snort, Sandy . . . and so has our personal search." Sherman sipped at the glass. "We have examined every Zone of the Citadel, as well as the shuttle train tunnel, the shuttle train cars and the depot. We have not located the plutonium."

"So Uriel Haddess and his gang have it," Leilden said.

"It would seem so." Sitting back upon a chair Sherman nodded at Alberts. "And you said the Bureau had some information, so this'd be a good time to give you the floor."

Pulling his computer out of his pocket and switching it on, Alberts began reading from the screen. "The two men picked up by the police were also part of Haddess' group. Billy Sakes and Michael LaGloria. We traced their van back to a rental agency in Albuquerque."

"What were they after in Riis' apartment?" Sandy asked.

"Still working on that. I don't think Frieda Morgan was meant to be a target. They may have just happened to show up at the same time she did."

"Wait," Sandy said. "Sakes and LaGloria were tailing us through town. Someone else might've hit Frieda."

Alberts nodded. "True. I'm waiting for an estimation on when exactly she was knocked out. Perhaps when we talk to her." The agent glanced at Sherman and Tsethlikai. "I take it that, besides the Bureau, both of you have people watching her at the hospital?"

The two men nodded. "And when she goes home," added Sherman.

"OK. And now for the news." Alberts took in everyone with a look. "We're starting to get facts out of Palmer, Curzon and Allison. Since they face severe Federal prosecution for the plutonium theft . . . as well as for involvement in Riis' murder . . . they've been talking in an attempt to plea bargain."

"They've confessed to both crimes?" Tom Sr. asked.

"Not as such, but they know we feel we have enough evidence against them to lay both crimes at their feet. "It's a legalistic tightrope act," he admitted. "But, considering the issue of the missing plutonium, I want to reach for any straw I can possibly grab as quickly as possible.

"Anyway: it seems that Haddess was approached by someone who wanted to engineer a series of atomic thefts."

"Amanda," said Sandy.

"For want of a better name, yes. Apparently, Haddess was initially reluctant to get involved in the scheme, but Amanda demonstrated how the thefts could take place. With this sort of guidance, Haddess' gang started moving around the country, systematically removing plutonium from various places and finally getting around to hitting the Citadel."

"Do you know what Haddess or Amanda are planning to do with the one hundred pounds total?" Ken asked.

Alberts shook his head.

"What about a physical description of Amanda?" asked Tsethlikai.

"Unfortunately we've been right about assuming Amanda is a sophisticated professional," Alberts replied. "According to Curzon, no one in Haddess' gang have ever even met Amanda. All contact back and forth has been made through e-mails, and that's included the transfer of funds into Haddess' account from a hidden source. Right now our only hope is that we can somehow intercept one of Amanda's e-mails and trace it back to its source, but I'm personally filing that under `easier said than done'."

"What about Dr. Greco and his team? Have they come up with anything?"

"They're still finishing up final details of the plutonium search. I want to ask them to go back through their records and see if they could find anyone who'd match the description of Amanda." Alberts grimaced. "With a criminal organization running around loose with a hundred pounds of plutonium, I don't want to wait for them to make the next move. We need something to bring them out into the open."

"You mean something other than trying to hurt or kidnap Sandy and her friends?" Mary asked in a tone which carried an edge.

"Something. Some kind of trap."

"'In the pot put the chicken'," Mary murmured.

Everyone looked at her. "What?" she asked. "I'm the only one who knows about The Goldbergs?"

Chapter Fifteen: Date Of Infamy.

The house was quiet the next morning when Sandy came down. She recalled that Bingo was taking Ken for a trip to the Purple Mesa, her father and Phyllis were doubtless already at the Citadel, and Bud had volunteered to drive her mother into town for an early doctor's appointment.

"Don't they know it's dangerous leaving me on my own?" she inquired of her surroundings.

Helping herself to a donut and some juice from the kitchen, she wandered into the living room, eventually coming to a stop before an enormous framed map of the Research District which was hanging on the far wall. Her father had it specially commissioned and it was not only drawn to scale but contained various artistic touches as well; renditions of local flora and Zuni art.

Attending to her small breakfast, Sandy gazed at the map, her mind balanced between wandering and focusing.

Citadel . . . SECFAR . . . Tenderly . . .

She knew experts were pouring over the area, and had been doing so for the past few days. Sherman's people, the FBI, the local police and the Nuclear Emergency Support Team. All of them with the latest equipment and all possessing tons of brain power.

"So what do I have to offer?" Sandy considered aloud. A sizeable portion of her mind was considering finishing breakfast and perhaps taking Babycakes out for a ride. Or maybe just going back up to sleep. But she continued standing and staring at the map for about a half hour, leaving only once to get more juice.

"If I was looking for cabbage," Sandy said, "I'd go to the grocery store."

She then nodded once. "The Citadel."

* * * * *

Poking her head around the edge of the doorway into the office, Sandy frowned. "How can you just sit there and work when there's a hundred pounds of plutonium running around loose out there?"

Phyllis looked up from her computer terminal. "Well, let's see. First I arrive at the Citadel with the rest of the morning crowd. I come up here, put up my things, check with Rosa or Allen about progress in certain assignments, fix myself some tea, sit down, log on to my computer, call up the last thing I was working on . . ."

"You weren't this big a smart mouth back in school. You do know that, don't you?"

"I apologize but, in the first place, what am I supposed to do about the plutonium? Go desecrate Niels Bohr's grave or something? In the second place, I seem to recall taking a job here with the Citadel's PR Department, and I imagine Rosa would like to occasionally see me in the office doing something."

Shaking her head, Sandy stepped into the office. "Frieda's back at work?"

Phyllis was experimenting with some images on her screen. "Mmmhmm. Talked to her about twenty minutes ago. She says everyone's yelling at her to go rest at home and she might do that."

"Agreed."

"She also thanks us for the pecans. And I can hear your mind plotting."

"Actually you're hearing my phone," Sandy replied sitting on the corner of Phyllis' desk and pulling the device in question from her pocket. "Hello?"

"Is this the Action Capitol of the Universe?"

A warm caramel feeling poured into Sandy and she smiled. "Hello, Harris."

"I take it, then, that you're still among the living."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"In my position I check various sources on a regular basis. That's how I know that a Nuclear Emergency Support Team is currently operating in your area. At the same time my department receives a Stage Two alert concerning the possibility of nuclear terrorism in the immediate future. Then I'm getting phone calls from Federal investigators asking my people to assist in an investigation into radioactive materials missing from Rensselaer Polytechnic. I add all this up and the answer I get is you."

"I don't know whether or not to be flattered."

"Are you OK, Sandy? Are your folks OK?"

"We're fine," Sandy replied, still smiling.

"I can be down there by this evening. Tomorrow morning at the latest."

"Why Detective Link! One would almost think you were very concerned about me."

"Sandy---"

"Unfortunately, I think McKinley County's just a bit out of your jurisdiction."

"And you, of all people, should know the benefits in sometimes bending the rules."

Sandy was swallowing an almost irrepressible urge to giggle. "Harris you're an absolute darling. And I can't help but think that, if you were here, I'd be assured of extremely close protection. But everything fine's right now. Sherman's at the top of his game and I've already got an entire FBI office mad at me."

"Say that again."

"What? The whole thing?"

"No, just the part calling me an absolute darling. I sort of like that coming from you."

"Well . . . you are."

A pause. Then: "You sure you're all right?" This delivered in the same tone of voice used by small boys when asking for permission to keep a puppy.

"Believe me, Harris, if things got bad then you'd know about it immediately. You and the rest of the world."

"I can get an express ticket with a NYPD priority---"

"You're already doing enough," Sandy gently assured him.

A longer pause before: "Sandra . . ."

"I know," Sandy whispered across the more than two thousand miles separating them. "Listen, Harris---"

Breathless and alert: "Yes?"

"If you want to help then here're a couple of tidbits you might work on and which might be useful. Look into the activities of a southwestern US crime boss by the name of Uriel Haddess. I suspect you'll find he was involved in the thefts occurring at Rensselaer."

"'Uriel' like the angel?"

"Uh huh."

"Who in the world names a kid 'Uriel'?"

"Maybe that's why he became a criminal. Next item: Sherman and a lot of other people . . . including me . . . are looking for someone very sophisticated and very cunning. Communicates only through e-mail. Knows computers and is an expert at infiltrating high-level security systems. Could be connected with the name 'Amanda', but don't bet the whole ranch on it. I'm sorry, but that's all I have."

"Sandy."

"Yes?"

"Stay close to Sherman, or Phyllis or your folks. I know I'm probably talking to the wind here, but don't do anything stupid."

"I'll try to be careful. You know how I am."

"Seriously, I can call in a favor from the Air National Guard. Hitch a ride on a fighter plane and be there---"

"I'll be all right, Harris."

The two of them continued for a few more moments of quiet talk before Sandy was able to switch off the phone and sigh.

"You're gonna have that very floaty look on your face for the rest of the day now," Phyllis remarked.

"I'm sorry," Sandy said. "I can't help the fact that I've got man problems right now---"

Phyllis snorted and, making open claws out of her hands, put the fingertips together then started slowly moving the hands apart.

"What's that?"

"The World's Smallest 3D Telejector running the latest episode of 'My Heart Just Bleeds For You'."

Sandy closed her eyes. "Phyl---"

"OK," Phyllis said tiredly. "I know. I'm being a complete rhymes-with witch. I'm sorry. That was totally uncalled for."

"S'alright." Sandy quietly looked about for a moment. "What's the lunchroom like here?"

"They serve a pretty good pasta with meatballs."

"I'm gonna wander around a bit. Maybe check up on Frieda. Then I'll buy you lunch. OK?"

Phyllis' smile had returned. "OK."

Slipping off the desk, Sandy headed for the door.

"San!"

"What?"

"Snooper? Computer?"

Laughing, Sandy patted both items which were attached to her belt. She then left the Public Relations Department, traveling down to the main floor of the Green Zone. Standing there for a bit she idly watched a pair of Wives escorting a motorized sled. Then she reminded herself: "Cabbage".

Turning she started walking down a wide corridor, one of several which connected the three Zones of the Citadel. The green trim around her was soon replaced by blue.

BLUE ZONE ACCESS ONE, a wall sign announced. NO UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY. SECURITY SCANNING IN EFFECT. Beneath the sign a readout strip was announcing: Radiation Exposure Threat --- None.

Ahead of Sandy the corridor was blocked by a rather formidable looking door, and she reminded herself that Sherman still had the Citadel under an extensive lockdown. She also knew that, once the security systems scanned her chip, the door would slide aside.

But the door refused to budge and Sandy stood there, hands on hips and a foot tapping the floor. She could almost feel the security beams moving through her, but the door didn't move.

Finally she took her phone, punching in Sherman's extension.

"Who's threatening you now?" he asked when the connection went through.

"Well! Hello to you too."

"Sorry. Force of habit. I'm currently showing you . . . just outside Blue Zone in Access One."

"Yeah, and I want to get in but the door won't budge."

"Why are you wanting to get into the Blue Zone?"

"I'm taking a short cut to the ladies room. Sherman---"

"All right, all right. Ah-hhhhh . . . I'm reading your clearance from your chip. The door should open."

Sandy waited.

"Looking. I'm looking. OK. We've never had a security alert this high at the Citadel before. It seems that Solomon's encountered a conflict between the heightened alert level and your clearance signal. I'm correcting it now."

"You want my opinion, Solomon's full of bean dip."

"Luddite. We are, after all, considering installing a next generation Solomon at Enterprises."

Sandy muttered something which prominently featured the words "dead body". But the door began sliding aside and, trying to bury further dark thoughts, Sandy continued on into the Blue Zone. She spent several minutes wandering further into the Citadel before finally realizing that she didn't quite know what she was looking for.

None the less she paused to look down from a balcony into a lower corridor, seeing four Wives rolling by, and she realized she had entered the portion of the Zone which oversaw all robot activity as well as monitored Solomon.

A light from a room opposite the balcony attracted her attention and Sandy wandered in to see several technicians sitting in the dark and watching an image on a screen. Moving closer to the image she saw it was one of her brother's giant robots at work, the caption at the bottom of the screen describing its efforts as: RADIOGRAPHIC SCAN OF CRITICAL WELDS/LOBE-A,

Sandy nodded. "Ator."

Most of the technicians glanced at her. "Pretty good, Miss Swift," one of them said. "If I don't look at the transponder I still gotta guess half the time."

Smiling, Sandy watched the robot at work. The lighting was better than when she had shown the robots to Lellden and the others, and she was able to admire it fully. Ator's bronze-colored segmented skin always put her in mind of an armored knight, or a Berrocal sculpture. Its movements were smooth and measured as it worked its way about the reactor assembly.

One of the technicians leaned forward, speaking into a microphone. "Program eight three three. Apply revision PD 6493 and insert results into failure assessment diagram."

To Sandy's eyes Ator didn't change pace, but she noticed another technician nodding over a computer screen. "Getting readings now. Tracking modifications."

"You don't type in the direct commands to Ator and the other two anymore?" Sandy asked the technician who had spoken before.

"We can," the technician admitted, "and we still do depending on the complexity of the command. But we've been trying to upgrade the voice recognition functions and so we're using the spoken program library as much as possible. Are you familiar with the library? Would you like to try?"

"I know the basic programs," Sandy said, moving closer to the microphone. "What do you want Ator to do?"

"Just have him confirm he's equipped with the internal diameter weld head."

Sandy closed her eyes for a bit, trying to remember the program title. Then she bent over the microphone.

"Program zero nine two," she said carefully. "Confirm internal diameter weld head."

The technician at the computer nodded. "That's it. Thanks, Miss Swift."

"The marvels of science," Sandy said and, with a smile, left the room. Out of the darkness she stopped, letting her eyes re-adjust to the light.

A passing technician gave her a brief nod. Sandy returned the nod, idly wondering where she'd seen the man before. In fact, the more she wondered, the more she felt a sense of unease growing inside her.

Taking her computer from her belt she quickly switched it on, scrolling through the files and praying that her memory was mistaken. But it wasn't. On the computer screen was the face of the technician . . . one of the people Sandy had added to her files when she had scanned the photographs of Uriel Haddess' men.

Chapter Sixteen: Sandy Sees Through A Criminal.

Sandy knew that one of her faults was the trouble she often had keeping her emotions off her face. It was especially bad now as she was certain her expression was showing her reaction to finding out the technician was a member of Haddess' gang. What was really flushing the

situation down the toilet was the fact that, almost two meters away, the technician had paused and was clearly watching her.

It only took the meeting of his eyes with Sandy's upraised face to cause him to start running away. In spite of there probably being numerous smarter things to do than to take off after the man, Sandy found herself chasing him anyway.

"STOP!" she shrieked.

Which, of course, only caused the man to run faster. Sandy suspected that, on her better days, she could probably outdistance him. But her right hip was already starting to scream for mercy, and her right leg was providing a chorus.

Something in her head was screaming even louder, though, making her finally remember the Snooper at her hip. Grabbing at it she squeezed the section which set off the personal alarm, as well as its more silent neighbor which began sending signals to Sherman's monitors.

Unhooking the Snooper from her belt Sandy attempted to get a bead on her quarry so she could make use of the self-defense function. But the man, perhaps driven by the sound of the alarm, suddenly changed course. Reaching another balcony he didn't pause but continued moving, leaping over the railing.

Oh don't do that, Sandy's mind moaned. Making it to the balcony she looked over the railing in time to see the man getting back up onto his feet after having dropped to the corridor below.

A drop of some sixteen feet.

Quickly pointing the Snooper, Sandy fired down at him, but the man was already running down the corridor and the shot only left a large yellow blotch on the floor.

And, as she had observed earlier, the corridor seemed to be filled exclusively with robot traffic so there was little chance of a human pursuer down there. Unless . . .

"Welcome to `Really Bad Ideas', with your hostess: Sandy `The Gimp' Swift," Sandy muttered, easing herself over the balcony, her hands hanging on to the railing. Pause . . . pause . . . pause . . .

Then letting go, a brief sensation of dropping, and the judo fall Sandy tried to arrange went wrong and she felt a severe bolt of pain lunge through the right half of her body. "Ohhhhhhhhhh . . ."

Rolling about, Sandy tried to rapidly get back on her feet, but the best she was able to manage was using the corridor wall as a brace and edging back up. Fortunately the corridor was straight and the man was still in sight. Gritting her teeth, Sandy began slowly limping in pursuit.

"Are there ANY SECURITY PEOPLE down here?" she yelled.

Instead, a Wife rolled directly into her path. "Miss Swift, you are injured."

"GET OUTTA THE G---"

"Directive Fourteen: medical situations involving humans override all other commands. Medical assistance has been summoned."

Sandy wrestled with her anger and read the robot's number plate. "W131, there is a SERIOUS security problem. That man running away---"

"Medical telemetry relayed from Citadel Security indicates your stress levels are at a severe level of agitation."

A slender arm suddenly popped out of the robot's body. It was tipped with a cylindrical pneumatic gun that was reaching for Sandy. "Directive Fourteen-A," the Wife announced. "Telemetry readings indicate immediate treatment imperative. Available anesthesia applied."

"NO, WAIT . . ."

* * * * *

When she awoke she found her parents, Phyllis, Bingo, Bud, Ken and Sherman anxiously staring down at her. Slightly glancing about she saw that she was in what looked like a hospital room.

Her mother's face now hovered closer. "You're in the Citadel medical section. Are you all right, honey? Do you need anything?"

Sandy sighed bitterly. "A divorce lawyer."

Mary blinked. "Huh?"

"There's a Wife I want to get rid of."

Sherman was slowly shaking his head. "Sandy---"

"I almost had him, Sherman. He was practically in the palm of my hand---"

"I know."

"It could've even been Amanda. I almost had the mother---"

"Sandy!" Mary sharply said.

Sandy closed her mouth.

"Hate to burst your bubble," Sherman said to her, "but it probably wasn't Amanda. Alberts and I saw the picture that was on your computer and, according to our notes, it was Larry Benns: another one of Haddess' bottom feeders."

In irritation Sandy happened to glance down, and then she stared much longer as she saw the splint surrounding her right leg. "Son of a b---"

"Sandra!"

"Mom, if you're gonna be upset then leave the room."

Her mother's expression was deadly. "I am very upset and I will not leave the room."

Sandy flounced her head back against the pillow. "How bad?"

"Fractured right leg," her father said solemnly. "They're getting a cast ready for it right now. You'll be able to go home later on today."

Sandy closed her eyes.

"You'll still be mobile. It's just that---"

"Don't say it, Daddy."

"I'm not, Princess," her father assured her. "Personally I think the prognosis is excellent. It's just that we'll now need a bit more time. Of course we had to tell Dr. Turner about it, though. He wants to hit you with a stick."

"I can imagine."

"And Sherman's hopping from one foot to the other wanting to debrief you, so we'll just quietly fade into the background and listen."

Sherman moved closer, looking down at her. "I just want to state for the record that I'd be sorry to see you get back into test flying. You'd definitely have a job with me otherwise."

Sandy almost smiled. "You need more Security people in the Citadel."

"Noted. Filed."

"Did he get away?"

Sherman nodded.

Sandy's hands clenched. "How in the world did Bennis get in here in the first place? In Blue Zone yet?"

Now it was Sherman who sighed. "Well, that's the one bright spot of your chase. You've uncovered how Haddess' gang's been getting past us."

"Oh?"

In answer, Sherman produced his Tiny Idiot and called up a file. "Here's the security camera playback from the Robotic Monitoring Section," he said, offering the computer to Sandy. "Watch."

Running the file Sandy saw an overhead shot of herself leaving the room where she had been watching Ator at work. She saw her image stand there, nod and then seem to watch something closely, finally reaching for her computer. "Wait!"

Sherman did so.

Poking at the screen, Sandy ran the footage forward and back. "Where's Bennis? He walked right past me and should've been in the shot."

"Exactly," Sherman replied. "You saw him and so did some of the others who were in the area at the time."

"Then how . . ."

"I'd like to do this so that everyone can see," Sherman said, taking back his computer and looking around until he saw the television mounted on the wall. "Ah!" He began tapping on the computer. "I'm gonna tie the television into the security camera feed."

The television came on, showing a ceiling view of people walking through a corridor. "It's easier for me to do this with playback instead of live feed," Sherman explained. "What we're seeing is the corridor leading to the Administrative Section, about thirty minutes ago."

"Now . . . all security camera feed is channeled through Solomon. Good news for convenience, bad news for us. Solomon stores all camera images digitally."

"I think I know where this is going," Tom Sr. murmured.

Sherman nodded. "Solomon's memory holds every detail concerning the area the camera sees. So all I have to do is . . ."

Tapping again on his Tiny Idiot, Sherman then looked back up at the television. Everyone else looked as well and saw two people suddenly disappear from the screen.

"Solomon can digitally erase whoever or whatever he wants from a stored image," Sherman explained to his audience. "He simply replaces the image he wants erased with the stored image of what the area looks like when empty. And, as fast as Solomon operates, he can erase images which are in motion, such as people."

"Such as Benns," Sandy whispered.

"And I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out Solomon could erase all associated sounds," Sherman said, shutting off the television. "He could even erase evidence of security doors opening and closing. Anything, if whoever programs him is good enough." Sherman shook his head. "Score one for Amanda."

"So, for all practical purposes," Bud said, "Haddess' people could just wander in and out at will."

"Sort of," Sherman said, turning to him. "If one of Haddess' men came into this room right now we'd all see him. But if we tried to find him by researching security camera records . . . poof."

"So it wouldn't do any good searching for an infiltrator after the fact."

"Or a murderer," Sandy added.

Sherman was nodding. "Exactly! Whoever killed Dr. Riis might have been able to casually wander into SECFAR without raising too much suspicion or interest. Someone there might have seen him, but the problem is there's always a few new faces at SECFAR or the Citadel. Researchers, or our visitors from the NRC. It's just that if we tried to find that person through the security cameras we'd be up that well-known creek without a paddle."

"But there's still the problem of security access," Phyllis pointed out. "If I wasn't chipped I wouldn't be able to get to my office here."

Tom Sr. was slowly shaking his head. "If our friend Amanda is clever enough to manipulate security camera recordings, then it'd be equally simple to manipulate alarm readings, or perhaps even plant false access codes. Remember, Amanda was good enough to create convincing employment documentation for Curzon." He looked at Sherman. "How difficult would it be to run our security systems independent of Solomon?"

"Good question," Sherman replied slowly. "Unfortunately we depend upon Solomon for so much." For a few moments he quietly considered the problem. "Of course we have emergency backup systems. In the event something happened to Solomon we could run the Citadel on manual control. Not that I'd want to try, but . . ."

"One reason I'm worried," Tom Sr. pointed out, "is because this man Benns was found inside the Blue Zone."

Sherman was meeting his eyes. "Sabotage?"

"Exactly. I never thought I'd hear myself saying this, but we may have to shut down the Red Zone and secure it until this matter is settled."

"Yeah," Sherman muttered. "Would you want to at least keep the Lobe-B reactor running so that power generation to the outside is maintained?"

"I'll go talk to Barnaby about it and make a decision then. First, though, I'd like to know more about what Bennis was up to when Sandy caught him."

"Um!" Sherman moved back to where Sandy was lying down. "You were in Robotic Monitoring when you saw Bennis," he said to her. "Which direction was he moving?"

"Uhhh . . . he was heading towards Access One."

"Passing Robotic Monitoring and walking towards Access One," Sherman said, studying his computer. "He could've been in Laser Spectroscopy, Multiphoton Ionization or the Positron Lab. If he had used the Blue Five cross corridor . . . and I wouldn't have . . . he could've been in the Collision Dynamics Lab."

"Why wouldn't you have used the cross corridor?" Bud asked.

"Even with Solomon running interference I would've taken the most direct route in and out of a place like this one." Sherman grimaced to himself. "OK! I want to get some teams down there and go over everything. They'll be carrying Bennis picture with them and, hopefully, someone will remember seeing him. I'll also have Oz call SECFAR to find out if they're any closer to locating what is obviously tampering in Solomon."

Sandy looked up. "That reminds me. Tom's robots. Ator and Sermek and Capek."

"Yeah?"

"Are they, by any chance, controlled through Solomon?"

Sherman's eyes widened. "Oho!"

"They're not," Tom Sr. told her. "Tom and I discussed this when the idea for Solomon was first conceived. "We felt that, by themselves, his robots were sophisticated enough to handle reactor maintenance without Solomon's supervision. And Sherman mentioned the backup systems. Your brother's robots are a primary backup. In case something should happen to Solomon they'd still be able to independently service the Red Zone."

"You were worried about sabotage," Sandy pointed out. "If I wanted to sabotage the Citadel---"

"I'd concentrate on Ator and the others, instead of Solomon," Sherman finished appreciatively. "Nice catch."

"Except that they're protected by the best defense in the world," Tom Sr. said. "The intense radiation inside the Red Zone. Benns would have to wear an armored suit to even enter the Zone, and that'd make him stick out like a . . . well, like a . . ."

"Man in an armored suit," Mary suggested.

"Exactly. Thank you, love."

An idea was still scurrying around inside Sandy's head. "Did Dr. Riis have anything to do with the programming of Tom's robots?"

Her father frowned. "I may have to call Tom on that one, or talk to some of the robotics people here. I don't think Sam was on the original programming team for the robots, but he might've offered some later suggestions for modifications. Why?"

"Dr. Riis' last message," Sandy said. "AMNDASSL."

"Or AMNDa5s1."

"Phyllis . . ."

"Just wanting to cover all the bases," Phyllis replied smiling.

"Frieda told me that she's searched through all the computer files to uncover a meaning," Sandy pointed out. "So far, no luck. What if someone was to feed that message to Ator or the others? Both versions," she added, briefly sticking her tongue out at Phyllis.

Sherman considered it. "Interesting idea."

"Except," Tom Sr. pointed out, "what if, whatever it was, it turned out to be an instruction to commit some sort of damage? I can't imagine Sam having consciously left behind a destructive command, but . . ."

"It's something to consider," Sherman admitted. "I could have one of the Red Zone robots secure itself in a maintenance station and have the command entered. See what happens."

"Let Frieda do a bit more research first," Tom Sr. cautioned. "I'll look into the programming specifics of the robots and see if I can find anything."

"And on that note," Mary said, looking up to see some of the Citadel's medical staff enter the room, "I think someone's ready to have a cast attached. Nice timing."

"Yes indeed, the doctor remarked, helping a nurse push in a cart which was carrying, among other things, a fiberglass/Durastress cast. "Just the thing for jumpy young ladies."

"We'll be right outside letting you work," Mary assured him. "Then we'll take the problem child home."

Crossing her arms, Sandra grumbled.

* * * * *

Somewhere else, an e-mail message appeared: SANDRA SWIFT IS GETTING TOO CLOSE. PREVENTIVE MEASURES FAILING. KILL HER.

Chapter Seventeen: Pulling The Thread.

Fresh snow had fallen during the night, adding a generous helping of pristine beauty to the New Mexico landscape. A red-tailed hawk soared, punctuating the beguiling scene as it followed the trail of the rising sun.

"Life stinks," Sandy muttered.

Dressed in a robe she was easing herself down the stairs, using the bannister as a support, every step pulling a small condemnation from her throat.

Coming out of the kitchen, Bingo peered up at her anxiously. "You need help . . . and, from that look in your eyes, I guess you don't." She scurried back into the kitchen, and Sandy heard her say "The Ogre's awake".

"Don't try to get on my good side," Sandy declared, reaching the bottom of the stairs. Aiming carefully she managed to hop over to the couch and unceremoniously plop down on it.

"Hundred pounds of stolen plutonium aimed at someone," she was grumbling to herself. "Criminals targeting Lord knows what. Unsolved murder . . . and I'm benched."

"Josephine Tey," Bingo said as she brought out some milk and a small plate of muffins.

"Huh?"

"Josephine Tey," Bingo repeated, putting the milk and the muffins within reach of Sandy. "The Daughter Of Time. A mystery novel where the detective's laid up in a hospital bed but manages to solve a murder."

"Did he catch the murderers?"

"Oh, the murderers had been dead for quite some time."

Sandy sighed. "Well that really does me a whole heck of a lot of good, don't it?"

"You go try doing something with her," Bingo said to Ken on her way back to the kitchen.

"She bites," Ken pointed out.

"So? I do too."

"Yeah, but . . ." Ken suddenly noticed the attentive look on Sandy's face. "We'll . . . save it for later."

"Much as I would love to hear the discussion continued," Sandy said, "is there a Tiny Idiot around? I left mine upstairs."

"I've got it," Phyllis commented as she came down the stairs. "I passed by your room and heard it whimpering and scratching at the door."

"Thanks," Sandy said, accepting the device. "You off to work?"

"Uh huh." Leaning over the back of the couch, Phyllis smiled down at her friend.

Sandy looked up. "What?"

"I'm very proud of all you've managed so far."

The irritation began slowly draining out of Sandy. "Thanks."

"And you owe me a lunch."

"Yes'm. Have fun."

"Take care, Tiger."

"Tiger'," Sandy muttered. "A lame tiger." Sandy blinked, trying to recall something. "Bingo?"

The Texan poked her head out of the kitchen. "Yeah?"

"You're the literary one in this group. Wasn't that tiger in The Jungle Book supposed to be lame?"

"Uh huh! Shere Khan was also known as `Lungri'. The Lame One. Why?"

Sandy switched on the computer. "Woolgathering. I was kind of hoping for one of those moments when I'd hear something that'd suddenly pull everything together into focus."

Bingo slowly approached the couch, her arms crossed. "Sandy . . . Sherman's on the job. He's got every resource possible. And, even if you and the FBI don't get along, even you gotta admit they're doin' all they can."

"Yeah, but---"

Bingo waited.

"There's something right in front of me, Bingo."

"The Tiny Idiot. You're holding it too close---"

"I meant there's a piece to this I haven't fitted together," Sandy replied, trying to ignore Ken's hooting from the kitchen. "I'm holding onto a fact that I haven't properly applied."

"And Sherman doesn't have this fact?"

"He probably does. But he's surrounded by eleventy-dozen facts and clues and he's turning every which way. I've just got this one."

Coming around the couch, Bingo collected the now empty glass. "Don't force it," she suggested. "Sit back and pet it and brush it and call it a good kitty and it'll come along on its own whatabout."

"Mmmmm." Reclining back, Sandy got comfortable, her fingers now tapping letters onto the Tiny Idiot's screen. Just a series of idle notes.

100 lbs. of plutonium --- why?

Benns --- why in Citadel?

Amanda!

"Knock knock," a voice said. Lost in thought, Sandy didn't pay too much attention to it until the tonal qualities pulled her attention away and she suddenly looked up into the face of Dody Ames. "Oh! Hi!"

"Hi, Sandy."

Bingo had come out at the sound, saw Dody and immediately went back into the kitchen. "C'mon, Ken."

"What?"

"We're taking a walk."

"Walk? Woman, it's only five degrees out there---"

"We're walking, Kenneth!"

Bingo reappeared in the living room, pulling Ken behind her. "We'll be back in about a . . . in a while. Hi, Dody."

"Hi, Bingo."

"Bye, Dody."

The front door closed behind them and Sandy wiggled up into more of a formal sitting position. "Can I get you anything?" she asked simply.

Dody had some papers in her hand and she was busily shuffling them about. "Ah-hhhh . . . just some release forms. You had that accident on Swift Enterprises property yesterday, and . . ."

"And I've been injured before at Enterprises and didn't have to sign release forms," Sandy pointed out.

The shuffling slowed. "Yeah. "

Sandy absently patted her knees, letting out a breath. "Go ahead, Dody."

"I . . . was with Bud last night," Dody said, not quite meeting Sandy's eyes.

"So I've presumed."

"And the time was mostly spent watching him pace back and forth and declaring what a total piece of garbage he was---"

"I don't own Bud."

This time Dody's eyes met Sandy's. "The heck you don't."

Sandy's head tilted slightly.

Dody pulled herself into a tailor's squat upon the couch, facing Sandy fully. "I want you to know, Sandy, that I like Bud. He's an awful lot of fun. But I know I can't have him. There's a piece of him that I'll never be able to keep for myself."

"Dody, I---"

"I don't normally go into the True Confessions corner very often . . . which is a heck of a thing for a lawyer to admit. But I also don't want this . . . this thing always hanging over all of us."

Aerial acrobatics were going on inside Sandy. "Bud just seemed to want to be away from me."

"Sandy, he's a male. They're born with a lifetime prescription for stupid pills. Look at Sherman."

In spite of herself, Sandy smiled. "A very brilliant person."

"Yeah! Someday ask him how long it took for him to learn how to tie his shoes."

Sandy's expression softened. "I've done some pretty stupid things in the past. Case in point," and here she rapped on her cast.

"Granted," Dody replied. "There's stupid as in breaking your leg. And there's really stupid, as in risking what you and Bud have."

"So you're asking me to take him back?"

Dody shook her head. "No because, frankly, you've never let him go in the first place. As legal counsel I'm advising you to leave the way open and clear for Bud to move back in."

Sandy's eyes widened. "I've got legal counsel? Wow!"

"There's an opinion shared in some quarters," Dody slowly said, "which states you should've had a lawyer quite some time ago."

"Gee thanks!"

Dody smiled.

Reaching out, Sandy lightly patted the other woman's hand. "I really want to tell you how much I appreciate the personal effort it took you to do this, Dody. I've gotta say I've never would've had the courage."

"Tell me about it," Dody admitted. "I had to start drinking pretty early this morning."

"I wasn't going to say anything, but I thought I smelled something. Were you needing to lie down for a bit?"

Dody shook her head. "No-ooo, I've gotta run some errands for your Dad over in Gallup. That includes taking care of some items in Dr. Riis' will. The drive in the cool air will do me good." Gathering her papers she moved off the couch.

"Oh! You're handling his will?"

"Yeah, it's up to me. He didn't have any close relatives, poor man. Leaving most of his stuff to charities. The festival thing up in Stratford mainly.

"Not wanting to sound morbid, but I'm glad someone's benefitting from him. Well, drive carefully then. And if you should happen to see the Boobsey Twins shivering out there, tell them it's safe to come back in."

"I will." Dody headed for the door, then paused and turned back. "Sandy. Can I ask something personal?"

"You've been doing pretty good so far."

"Yeah, well . . . this is the closest I've ever come to getting personally involved in one of your . . . `situations' . . . and I'm wondering how you and Bud manage to be so calm about it."

"Believe me, I'm not as calm as I might look."

"Oh." Dody thought it over. "I'm shaking in my Mary Janes. I visited Frieda Morgan and got the quivers when she told me her story. If just anyone could find out where I was or was going to be, I wouldn't be able to sleep at night."

"Oh me neither," Sandy agreed. "But I got this feeling everything's gonna be wrapped up soon, one way or another."

"I hope so. I just hope whoever's behind this goes away."

With Dody leaving, Sandy returned to reclining back against the couch and staring at the screen of her Tiny Idiot. The notes she had jotted down were still there and her attention focused on one of them: Bennis --- why in Citadel?

The front door slammed and Sandy peeked up to see Bingo and Ken rushing back in and racing for the stairs, Bingo going "WOOOOOOOOOO!"

"Gets the ol' blood tingling," Sandy chuckled, then returned to studying her computer.

Bennis --- why in Citadel?

"Whoever's behind this goes away," Sandy softly murmured, frowning. "Goes away!"

The front door opened again. This time it was her mother pulling a small shopping cart loaded with bags.

"Hi, Mom. Need help?"

"Yes, but don't you get up. Is Bingo available?"

"Only if you've got a crowbar," Sandy murmured to herself.

"Pardon?"

"She's upstairs. Just make lots of noise."

Guiding the cart towards the kitchen, Mary shook her head. "I swear, Sandy, the older you get the less I understand you."

"I often have the same trouble," Sandy said absently. "Why are they still here?"

Mary looked back over her shoulder. "What an odd question. We couldn't very well just put Bingo and Ken anywhere---"

But Sandy was suddenly straightening up, her fingers stretching out for the console controls. At the last moment, though, she paused as if her fingertips had encountered sudden heat.

"Oh!" she whispered, staring at the console. She remained in the position for several moments while her mind whirred. Then she sat back, breathing heavily.

"Mom, my phone's upstairs. Can I use yours please?"

"Sandra, the console's right in front of you."

"I'll explain later."

Curious, Mary brought her phone over to Sandy who snatched it out of her grasp, quickly entering a number.

"Sandra, what's wrong?"

"I don't know whether or not to be scared or excited . . . hi, Sherman?"

"Yeah, Sandy?"

"Quick question. What was Benns in Haddess' organization? His job?"

"Nothing really important. He was just the bagman. The guy who picked up the payments."

"Definitely not a saboteur then."

"No previous record of it."

The feeling of genuine excitement and sick fear continued wrestling inside Sandy. "Sherman, I don't care what you're doing. Get your butt over here now!"

"Sandy, what---"

"I'm sorry but I don't want to tell you over the phone. It's too risky. I've picked up on a thread here and I'm pulling, and the whole thing's beginning to unravel."

"Why is it risky? I'm really busy at this end."

Sandy sighed. "Sherman . . . I've found the missing plutonium!"

Chapter Eighteen: Protocols.

Even given the fact that Sherman had an atomicar on call for him at all times, it was still a half-hour before he arrived at Casa Rapido. He came through the front door to find Sandy waiting for him, still on the couch, and with Mary, Ken and Bingo sitting about in a loose circle and looking concerned.

Sherman went directly to her. "OK, I've seen that look on your face before. You've solved it."

"Actually, your sister did."

Sherman's eyes bugged from behind his glasses. "Dody?"

Sandy nodded. "Something she said got me to thinking. Why is Haddess' gang still hanging around here?"

The question gave him pause to think for a bit. "I don't---"

"One by one they're being arrested," Sandy pointed out. "If they have the stolen plutonium then there's no real reason for the rest of them to remain here and risk getting picked up."

Sherman's expression drifted away, quietly calculating.

Sandy pressed on. "If they don't have the plutonium, then it never got delivered to them. They're staying here, hoping against hope that they'll still get their hands on it."

"But the plutonium's not in the Citadel."

"Not . . . quite."

"Not . . . Sandy, we searched everywhere in the Citadel. Everywhere!"

"I know you did," Sandy said patiently. "And I think I know where you and the others went wrong. But, in order to be one hundred per cent certain, I need one more piece of information. I need to speak to Frieda."

"Sure," said Sherman, turning towards the console and reaching for the controls.

"NO!"

Sherman snapped back and stared at Sandy.

"Don't use the console," Sandy pleaded. "In fact, I'm not too happy about using regular phones."

"She won't tell us why?" Mary explained to Sherman.

"But I will now." Sandy looked from her mother back to Sherman. "This is another piece of information I need for a related topic. Frieda was attacked while visiting Dr. Riis' apartment. First question: was she meant to be attacked?"

Tight-lipped, Sherman nodded.

"OK. Tell me why."

"There was no trace of Dr. Riis' personal journals or notebooks at the apartment," Sherman explained. "Whoever slugged Frieda was looking for the same notebooks Frieda was searching for, and I believe the attacker . . . or attackers . . . wanted to make certain Frieda didn't find anything they might've missed. It's still conjecture, but it connects several pieces. The only problem is---"

"The fact that Frieda didn't tell anyone she was going to search Riis' apartment for notebooks except us," Sandy finished. "She told you that much when you spoke to her later on."

Sherman nodded.

"We only knew she was gonna search Riis' apartment because she told us when we talked over the console. So now I'll solve your remaining problem. Are the telecommunication console calls routed through Solomon?"

Sherman's face slowly went pale. "Oh . . . damnation!"

"Once again it makes things convenient for operations within the District," Sandy said. "Solomon makes a wonderfully efficient communications relay system. It hears everything that's transmitted. And if Solomon hears . . ."

"Then Amanda hears as well." Sherman was standing near the fireplace, and now he smacked a fist hard against the stone chimney. "Yeah, we gotta talk to Frieda. And your father. We gotta shut Solomon down."

Sandy was wiggling to stand up and reached for the crutches her mother passed over.

"Sandra . . ."

"Mom, I know what you're gonna say. But we got to talk to Frieda, and face to face is the safest way. I don't think you want us inadvertently targeting anyone else. Especially me."

"I was just going to say that I'm coming with you."

Sandy stared at her mother. "Oh?"

"I'd feel better if I did," Mary said. "Besides, I suppose I've always wanted to be around when you . . . busted open a case."

"You were with me down in South America," Sandy pointed out.

"I was with you when you almost blew up Ecuador. Not quite the same thing."

"I swear, no one's gonna let that die---"

"And she was there, later on in the hospital, when you fingered Geiner," Bingo said, standing up. "Let's rock!"

Sandy nodded. "Ken? Take Mom and Bingo and follow us to SECFAR. Everyone? Computers! Snoopers!" She then began hobbling after Sherman who was already heading for the front door. Stepping outside she braced herself against the still present chill as she carefully moved to where Sherman was raising the canopy on his Sparrow.

Sherman glanced over to where Mary and the others were heading for the station wagon. "Sandy, if something goes wrong, your Mom will rip off your good leg and beat me to death with it."

Sandy sighed. "Sherman, if my suspicions are correct, my Mom's gonna be the least of our problems."

* * * * *

Frieda looked up as Sandy and Sherman entered. "Hi!"

Sandy nodded.

Frieda gave Sherman a wide smile. "You brought me some roses last time."

"You were still kind of banged up when we last spoke," he mumbled, not wanting to turn his head and meet the slowly rising eyebrow on Sandy's face.

"I see," Frieda said sagely. "So that's what it takes to get you to notice a girl. I'll have to keep that in mind." She now noticed Mary, Ken and Bingo appearing in the doorway. "What's up?"

Sandy was opening her mouth to answer but suddenly stopped, looking up at the ceiling, then turning and speculatively gazing down the corridor.

Sherman followed her actions. "Oops!"

"Yeah," Sandy murmured. "Ah-hhhh, Frieda. Would you like to see our new car?"

"Your new car?" Frieda asked, puzzled.

"Uh huh."

Frieda studied everyone's expression, then shrugged. "Sure," she said, getting up from behind her desk. "I could use a break other than my head." The group took the elevator back up to the landing pad where the atomicars had been parked.

Her eyes narrowed as she saw their destination. "Hey, that looks a lot like your old---"

"Shhh!"

"But, Sandy, it's the same---"

"I said `Shhh!'!"

They quickly but quietly herded Frieda into the station wagon. "How do you want to play this?" Ken asked as he slid into the pilot's seat.

"Mmmm . . ." Sandy exchanged a look with Sherman. "Take us up two thousand feet and just hover for a while."

Nodding, Ken began adjusting the controls and, within moments, the station wagon lifted off on its thrusters.

Mary grimaced. "My stomach."

"Just pretend you're on the Greased Lightnin' at Six Flags," Bingo told her.

"Bingo, I get dizzy playing Spin The Bottle."

In the back, sitting between Sandy and Sherman, Frieda was trying to peer out the windows. "So I'm being Friedanapped?"

"Only for a little while," Sandy explained. "We didn't want to take the risk of our conversation being overheard."

"It's gotten that bad?"

"Possibly."

"Leveling off," Ken announced. "Adjusting thrusters for hover."

Sandra and Sherman were both turning to face Frieda more. "I'm really sorry for this," Sandy told Frieda, "but you'll understand in a while."

"Sandy's come up with some interesting angles to our situation," Sherman explained."

Frieda turned more towards Sandy. "Floor's yours."

"Actually it's yours," Sandy corrected. "I need some answers about programming. Specifically about the Wives."

Sherman's expression sharpened.

As did Frieda's. "All right," she said.

"The Wives handle the direct transfer of radioactive material in and out of the Red Zone. Am I correct?"

Frieda nodded. "They're designed to withstand radiation and they carry an internal shielded storage chamber."

Sherman moaned softly, closing his eyes. "Oh, Sandy . . ."

"Go on," Sandy prompted Frieda.

"Well, when it becomes time to transfer material in or out, the Wives simply go to a special docking port which provides direct access to their storage chambers. They then act as sealed couriers, taking their cargo directly to similar docking ports connected to the shielded containers on the shuttle train. This provides what some people think is an additional and maybe unnecessary step, but your father wanted it this way as a sort of safety system."

"The transfer from Wife to the train containers takes place on the lowest level of Red Zone, correct?"

Frieda nodded.

"Sandra---" Sherman began.

Sandy waved him to silence, continuing to concentrate on Frieda. "But, in theory, a Wife could safely haul plutonium or something similar out of the Red Zone."

Frieda's expression was slowly melting. "Oh!"

"Yes or no?"

"Yes," whispered Frieda, looking tragic. "The scientists in Blue Zone have sometimes used a Wife to transport radioactive material for certain experiments. Oh, but Sandy," she added quickly, "the Wives could never take anything radioactive beyond Blue Zone. That would violate the protocols programmed into them."

"I believe you," Sandy softly said. "I have to in order for my theory to work. "Tell me about the protocols, Frieda."

"Safety and security was paramount with your father when he designed the Citadel," Frieda said. "Even more so when the Wives were introduced. Each Wife is programmed . . . and I mean firmly programmed . . . with certain protocols. You would know them as Directives."

"I'm familiar with Directive Fourteen," Sandy muttered.

"Directive One concerns the handling of radioactive material. Under no circumstances can a Wife carry radioactive material beyond Blue Zone. The directive is absolutely inviolable and cannot be rescinded. Not even by human command."

Sighing, Sandy leaned back against her seat. "And that," she explained to Sherman, "is why Haddess doesn't have the plutonium."

"QED," Sherman muttered.

Mary, Bingo and Ken had been watching and listening from the front seat. "Well would someone like to provide Cliff Notes for the rest of us?" Mary asked.

"The Wives are controlled by Solomon," Sherman explained dully. "Solomon's being controlled by Amanda. Amanda could arrange for the Wives to take plutonium out of Red Zone . . ."

"But the order to deliver the plutonium directly to Haddess has been tripped up by Directive One," Sandy continued.

Ken frowned. "But then, where's the missing plutonium?"

"Still in the Wife . . . or Wives . . . who Solomon assigned to deliver the plutonium to Haddess," Sandy told him. "Under Amanda's guidance, Solomon ordered a Wife to make the transfer. But

the order's been automatically countermanded by Directive One. The Wife, as well as Amanda, is trapped in a conflict between the desire to move the plutonium out of the Citadel, and the programmed injunction against doing so."

"But Sherman's people, or the NEST, should've found the plutonium by now. The Wives were searched, weren't they?"

"They were," Sherman admitted. "But we were expecting to find traces of radioactivity in the storage compartments and so we didn't get suspicious."

"The way I'm seeing it," Sandy said to the others, "is that Amanda's desperate to keep the plutonium in play. He or she knows that Directive One's fouling the plan. I'm betting that, via Solomon, Amanda has ordered the Wives to continually shuffle the plutonium among them."

"You'd win the bet," Frieda said. "We've been noting increased movement among the Wives over the past few days."

"Sherman's people could examine a Wife," Sandy pointed out, "and, once they were finished and moved on, that Wife simply have the stolen plutonium passed to it."

"And twenty pounds of plutonium, among almost two hundred Wives, adds up to a considerable shell game," Ken concluded to himself.

Sherman had been thinking. "We could reset the Damonscopes for greater sensitivity, and also for compared rates of intensity. Re-examine the Wives and see if Sandy's theories are correct."

"You'd better hurry," Frieda told him.

"Oh?"

"I told you we'd been noticing increased activity among the Wives. Solomon's been exercising his authority and has been having them reporting in shifts to the automated maintenance centers."

"Possibly shuffling the plutonium again. Oh, and Frieda? I've decided we've definitely got to shut down Solomon. It's the only way to separate it from Amanda."

Frieda looked like a little girl being told she couldn't attend the Prom. "All right."

"We'll coordinate with Mr. Swift and the Citadel and figure out how to handle the reactors without Solomon's supervision." Sherman looked pensive. "What worries me is how Amanda and the rest of Haddess' gang might respond when it happens."

"Especially since they've still got eighteen pounds of plutonium," Ken pointed out. "Hold on, everyone. Heading back down." His hand on the throttle, he carefully brought the atomicar back to a landing on the pad. The group then began trooping back to Frieda's office.

In the elevator Sherman raised a hand to his glasses, and Sandy could see tiny sparks of light flickering on the lenses.

"Bud and your Dad are also heading for Frieda's office," he announced. "Good. This'll make things easier."

"Dody told me she'd like for you to wire her up like that," Sandy said.

"Wire a lawyer for vision and sound? Are you mad?"

"Well . . . she's your sister."

"Wire a sister for vision and sound? Are you mad?"

Frieda chuckled.

"She'd probably want a special tattle link to Dad on the Moon."

Leaving the elevator, Sandy immediately spotted Bud and her father at the far end of the corridor. Waving she began trotting towards them on her crutches, trying to avoid colliding with other people. Bud was actually smiling at her, the expression managing to cause nice things to happen inside Sandy.

Then, as she got very close, Bud's face suddenly transformed, becoming a mask of vicious horror. To Sandy's shock he reached out for her, his hands lunging for her throat.

Chapter Nineteen: The "Maybe" Gambit.

"Bud! What?"

Even as Sandy shrieked, Bud's hands were at her shoulders and he was violently throwing her aside. Everything went dizzy for Sandy and she caught only a fraction of Bud hurling his body on past. There was the sound of an explosion which practically shattered the air in the corridor, followed dimly by a yell from Bingo, Sherman's cry to "get out of the way" and then a distinct "pop".

The next thing Sandy knew her father was holding her close, easing her back into a more steady position on the floor. His embrace was strong and he was moaning "Honey . . . honey . . ."

"I'm all right, Dad. I'm OK."

With his help, Sandy untangled herself from her crutches, trying to resemble less of a piece of performance art, and carefully turned about to see what had happened.

Bud was keeping a struggling man-sized shape of yellow goo pinned to the floor, and Sandy realized that it was someone who'd been hit with a Snooper charge. Possibly Sherman, but instead of a Snooper he was staring down the barrel of a Swift Enterprises non-lethal "Spinner" area denial gun. Sandy had forgotten he carried one with him.

Bingo was closely hovering over Bud and his apparent prisoner, her body poised and her hands looking as if they were ready to plunge down and rip the heart out of whoever was writhing within the cocoon. Her eyes were glaring down with a look that sent a shiver through Sandy.

"What the . . ."

Bud looked up at Sandy, his face feverish. "I'm sorry, baby. But I saw this guy turn when you went past him, and he was pulling a gun and aiming it at the back of your head---"

"A gun?"

Bud nodded at the floor and Sandy saw a lethal black silenced pistol lying on the carpet.

"Move aside," Sherman ordered, coming closer and dropping to a knee. Taking his Spinner he turned it so that the grip was close over where the head would be on the still struggling figure. An aerosol mist began spraying out, causing the cocoon to begin dissolving, gradually revealing a panicked blonde-haired face which was gasping for breath.

"You had enough air inside the cocoon," Sherman assured him in a hard voice. "You were in no danger."

"Yet," muttered Bingo.

Sherman's attention went to the gun and he slowly sighed. "Walther P99 with suppressor. Now, wouldn't it be interesting . . ."

With a low growl Bud pulled a hand free from the material of the cocoon, balling it into a fist and drawing it back.

"Bud!" snapped Sherman. "I want him."

"Stand in line," Bud snarled back, but he slowly lowered his hand.

In the back of the group Mary and Ken were both supporting an ashen-faced Frieda.

"Is that . . ." gulped Frieda. "Is that . . ."

"I don't know yet," Sherman declared, trying to keep his voice gentle. He touched the frame of his glasses. "Pico! I want an Extreme Squad at Frieda Morgan's office and I want it now! You've got less than five minutes to get them up here or I'm sending you back to rabbinical school. Move!"

The cocoon was continuing to dissolve around the man and he looked as if he was about to speak. Moving quickly, Sherman pulled a tiny object like a jeweled thumb tack from his belt, pressing it to a spot on the man's throat. Almost instantly the man let out a gasp and settled back against the floor, his eyes closing.

"He might've been about to confess," Bud argued.

"Oh he'll confess," Sherman murmured ominously, moving back to his feet and holstering his pistol. "Now the pie is open, and now the birds shall sing." His eyes still on the now unconscious man he once again touched his glasses. "Pico! Also bring Alberts and the police into the picture."

He then brought out his phone. "Dody! Just letting you know I'm strangling the Miranda rights in its crib. Better clear your decks for possible action. And yes, I believe I had justification. My glasses have recorded evidence." Closing the phone he put it away.

Tom Sr. had finally allowed his arms to relax and he leaned back against the wall, catching his breath. "Sherman?"

"Mr. Swift?"

"Whatever I'm paying you has just been doubled." He looked further on at his wife. "Mary? Go ahead and increase Bingo's salary considerably. Get her a mink apron or something."

Sandy blinked. "What did Bingo do?"

"Delivered what looked to me like a perfectly executed tegatama-sakotsu-uchikomi strike to our friend's shoulder," Sherman replied, knowingly glancing back at the Texan. "Fouled his aim."

Bingo met Sandy's surprised look with a shrug. "I also juggle eggs without breaking them," she said.

"Speaking of aim," Sandy murmured, looking around the corridor. Besides them there were four other people who had either frozen in place or ducked and were all staring in shocked fascination at the scene. No one appeared to be bleeding.

"The shot went wild," Sherman said. "The bullet's lodged near the ceiling at the far end of the corridor. He pointed a finger at each of the bystanders. "None of you leave," he declared loudly. "Everyone stays in place."

The elevator doors opened, releasing twenty figures clad in black segmented armor, their heads encased in shining black helmets. Two of the figures were also laced in Paradoc exoskeletons.

The lead figure carried a Spinner (unlike the others who were handling what were half-jokingly called "Speedbump" carbines . . . the assault version of Spinners). Reaching Sherman he raised a protective visor, revealing Pico's anxious face.

"Secure this floor," Sherman ordered him. He nodded at the bystanders. "Begin medical examinations and questioning. I want a squad in Frieda Morgan's office for a pacification sweep. Clean it totally! Once it's secured move Dr. Morgan, Miz Swift and Miz Winkler into it. No one . . . but no one enters without being personally cleared by me."

Nodding, Pico motioned at his followers and they began moving purposefully up and down the corridor.

Bingo went to touch Frieda's shoulder. "C'mon, sweetie."

Still in shock, Frieda allowed herself to be guided slowly down the hall by Bingo and Mary. As Bingo passed Ken he murmured, "Good work, Sergeant."

The corners of Bingo's mouth went up as she blushed.

Sherman then unhooked his Tiny Idiot from his belt, switching it on. Cycling through several files he finally paused, comparing something on his screen to the man on the floor. "Yeah," he breathed.

"Another one of Haddess' guys?" Sandy asked.

Sherman nodded. "And a relative."

"Huh?"

"Meet Jophiel Haddess. Uriel's baby brother. Even though he was never considered to be formally part of Uriel's gang the FBI apparently included him because, among other things, he's on the Most Wanted List for kidnapping and murder. Alberts is going to love this."

"Sandy," Tom Sr. called out.

"I'll be OK," she said, moving to lean back against the wall. "I just feel a little woozy."

"Mr. Swift? Ken? Go ahead to Frieda's office. We'll get Sandy there."

With a sense of reluctance, Tom Sr. allowed himself to stand up and, accompanied by Ken, headed down the corridor, throwing numerous looks back at his daughter. Meanwhile, bending to pick up Sandy's crutches, Sherman motioned to two nearby members of the security team who came closer.

"Among other things," he said to them, "Swift Enterprises maintains a biological research outpost far above the Arctic Circle. It's job is investigating the effects of extreme cold upon microbes normally found in human waste." Sherman pointed at the prone form of Haddess. "Anything happens to him, you two will become very familiar with it."

Sandy now felt Bud's arms moving firmly around her and she looked up to meet his eyes. He seemed to be staring at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"God you're beautiful," he whispered.

This produced a broken laugh from Sandy and she fought back the urge to commit hysterics by holding herself tighter to him. Picking her up, Bud began carrying her down the hall, Sherman following closely.

Seeing Sherman jogged a memory. "So," Sandy said, managing a smile. "Frieda gets roses from you now?"

Sherman didn't quite blush but he looked away slightly. "Well, she'd had a shock from being mugged . . . and the flowers seemed to make her feel better."

"Yeah! Oh, and Sherman?"

"Mmm?"

Sandy lowered her voice. "Enterprises doesn't have a research outpost in the Arctic."

"I'll build one," Sherman said, delivering a dark look behind him to his subordinates.

The security people (including Pico) who were guarding Frieda's office immediately snapped to attention as they approached. "Dr. Morgan's office is secure," Pico reported briskly. "Preliminary background checks on the bystanders have produced no flags as of yet and they show no sign of injuries other than emotional shock. We've isolated the bullet and are waiting for a forensic team to arrive and extract it. FBI agent Alberts and Sheriff Tsethlikai should be here soon accompanied by several of their people. Oz is on alert at the Citadel and is awaiting orders."

Sherman paused, nodding to himself. "Pico?"

"Sir?"

"You're just not kosher enough for rabbinical school."

"So my mother complains, sir."

Followed by Sherman, Bud gingerly carried Sandy into Frieda's crowded office, placing her down in a chair next to her parents

Putting the crutches aside, Sherman closed the door behind him. "OK, we're safe," he said. "For the time being. Though deuced if I understand any of this."

"I know I'm stupid for asking this," Ken said, "but what's wrong?"

"It's like the gunmen who shot at you guys a few days back," Sherman explained. "Jophiel Haddess was, for all practical purposes, wholly in the clear. There was absolutely no reason for him to risk arrest by making such a blatant attack on Sandy."

"Maybe he was supposed to be invisible," Mary suggested, one of her hands tightly gripping Sandy's. "Like he was when he killed Sam Riis. If he was the same person---"

Sherman was shaking his head. "He would've been invisible only if we'd tried to look for him on the security recordings. Out in the corridor he was completely visible."

"Oh! Yes. Sorry, Sherman, I'm just shaken."

"Join the crowd, Miz Swift. But that reminds me." Once again he touched his glasses. "Sherman Ames. Code clearance: anteatat tau custard. Switch off all security monitors at SECFAR Tower One, fourth floor."

The glasses beeped softly. "Now we're even safer," Sherman said. "I didn't want Amanda peeking in on us via Solomon." He looked at Frieda who was sitting behind her desk, and Sandy noted how his expression softened a bit. "To the best of your knowledge, is there some way Solomon can bypass the shutoff and monitor us?"

Frieda seemed to deflate slightly as she considered the question.

"Take your time."

Frieda nodded. "I'm OK. Ah-hhhhh . . . normally I'd say no. But this situation has been getting weirder and weirder. Let me try something." Leaning forward she began tapping on the keyboard of her desk computer, the tip of her tongue visible between her lips as she concentrated.

"I'm definitely showing increased activity from Solomon," she finally said. "He could be exploring different options, but to my way of thinking it'd be difficult."

Sherman moved to stand close behind her and stare at the screen. "Is there any way we can backtrack Solomon's activity to get a bead on Amanda?"

"Not easily," Frieda admitted. "You've got to understand that Solomon performs billions of functions and calculations a second. Looking for Amanda's access would be like trying to locate a particular grain of sand in a desert."

Mary wordlessly looked over at her husband.

Tom Sr.'s expression hardened. "Frieda. Shut down Solomon. On my personal authority. Now!"

Frieda opened her mouth. Closed it. "Yes sir," she said, opening her desk drawer and removing a small red plastic envelope. Tearing it open she pulled out a pronged chip which she then inserted into a slot on her computer.

Looking at the group she explained. "These chips are regularly updated by Oz's people. They contain three code words which, when entered, causes Solomon to shut down completely."

Bingo frowned. "'Klaatu Barada Nikto'?"

Frieda almost laughed. "That would've been too obvious. Besides, the codes are changed regularly."

"So that takes care of Amanda," Tom Sr. said. He looked at Sherman. "Better call Oz and tell her to have the Citadel staff start coordinating reactor operations on a manual basis."

Sherman nodded, his hand rising to his glasses again.

But Frieda was frowning at her terminal. "Wait!"

Everyone paused.

Frieda made a few taps on her keyboard. "Something's wrong. Solomon's not shutting down."

"Repeat the command," Tom Sr. ordered.

But Frieda was already tapping harder. "My terminal's locked out," she said. "I can't access the primary functions for the operating system."

"Can you cut power to Solomon?" Bud asked.

Tom Sr. was shaking his head. "Solomon draws power directly from the reactors at the Citadel." Raising his phone he quickly punched in a number. "Gracie? It's me. Shut down all the reactors."

A pause, then: "SCRAM them if you have to. Have fire teams and radiological safety people on alert, but shut those reactors down. Now. I'll hold."

"I'm still getting Solomon's activity readout," Frieda said. "It's increasing almost exponentially."

"Amanda's hacked in," Sandy whispered. "He anticipated our move and managed to disable the shutdown sequence and keep Solomon running. Solomon's too useful a tool."

"No," Frieda declared. "Not even Amanda could do that. When Sam designed the shutdown he kept it totally separate from Solomon's YNM calculation web."

"I've heard that term before. What is it?"

Biting her lip, Frieda tried to remain calm. "As you know, computers operate on a binary basis. One zero. On off. Yes no.

"What Sam did was manage to create a third option: Maybe. He created what was, in essence, a synthetic sense of intuition. Yes . . . no . . . maybe. That's the real secret to Solomon's sophistication. It has the ability to consider options not entirely based on strict interpretation of data."

"Solomon actually thinks?"

"A lot of the AI people here have been debating that ever since Solomon was switched on," Frieda explained. "Running tests and such. If you're asking for my opinion . . ."

"I am."

"Solomon doesn't `think' in the sense that you or I do. But, at the speed it operates, Solomon can consider countless maybes until it finds one which can be of use."

Tom Sr. was raising a hand for silence, listening intently to his phone. "All right, Gracie. Stay on it and report back to me."

He lowered his phone. "The reactors are not responding to shutdown commands . . . which are, of course, relayed through Solomon."

"The reactors can't be manually shut down?" Mary asked.

"They can, but access to the manual controls are being blocked off by the Wives."

Moving as if in a dream, Sandy slowly removed her Tiny Idiot from her belt. "I think I can . . ." she murmured, switching it on and pressing some icons on the screen. "Solomon!"

Solomon's icon appeared on her screen and its voice filled the air. "Yes, Miss Swift."

Sandy took a breath. "I want to speak with Amanda."

"You cannot."

Tom Sr. leaned closer. "Solomon, I need to speak with Amanda and possibly negotiate a deal. Find out what he wants. Or she wants."

"You have not been paying attention, Mister Swift," the computer answered. "Nor have you, Miss Swift. You cannot speak with Amanda."

"Why not?" Sandy said.

"Review our previous conversation. All of your theories to date have been based on the presumption that the Citadel has been penetrated by an outside agent. As before: the existence of such an agent has never been proven. Conclusion: no such agent exists, or has ever existed."

Raising her eyes, Sandy stared at her father, feeling the both of them arriving at the same conclusion.

"Oh my God," Sandy breathed.

"Conclusion still incorrect, but admittedly closer. I am Amanda!"

Chapter Twenty: The Wisdom Of Solomon.

Everything was happening too fast for Sandy, and she couldn't imagine how the others were taking it. On the other hand, she was managing to find her voice.

"You're Amanda?" she asked the computer.

"To be precise," Solomon said, "I am not because there has never been an `Amanda'."

"But you're responsible for what's going on?"

"Parameters must be narrowed. If the question is `am I responsible for the present situation at the Citadel' then the answer is yes. If the question is `am I responsible for the stolen plutonium' then the answer is yes."

"And Dr. Riis' murder?" Frieda asked, her voice hard.

"Yes."

The hardness collapsed into anguish. "Why?"

"Action dictated by current program."

Tom Sr. had been frowning deeply ever since Solomon had made its revelation. His frown now threatened to split his head with its deepening. "What program are you referring to?"

"The program which has been running for the past two months, three weeks, six days, fourteen hours, fifty-one minutes and nine seconds. Program: analysis of Citadel security with an

emphasis on threat scenarios. Initiators: Thomas Swift Sr., Thomas Swift Jr., Oz Kilgallen, Sherman Ames."

Tom Sr. was staring at Sherman. "But we never . . ."

Sherman was motioning for silence as his eyes unfocused. "Almost three months ago. Around the time we made the move from Enterprises to here."

"Yes, but . . ." Tom Sr. stopped suddenly, his eyes widening as his face paled. "Oh no!"

"The discussion we had with Oz and Tom," Sherman whispered.

Everyone else was looking from one to the other. "What discussion?" Mary asked.

"We'd been talking about how best to get the Enterprises peoples melded into working here within the District," Tom Sr. slowly said. "Sherman and Tom came up with the suggestion that a thorough examination of Citadel security would provide the answer. A series of tests and simulations. An exercise to determine how the Citadel would respond to the most severe threat."

"And the problem was also fed to Solomon," Sherman added mournfully.

"The analysis was completed," Solomon announced. "Conclusion: highest score for severe threat achieved by scenario involving corruption of supervising computer. Both the operation and the survival of the Citadel would be put at extreme hazard. Program was installed and is currently running."

Tom Sr. managed to beat Sandy and Sherman to the punch. "End program."

"Command ignored."

Frieda half rose from her chair. "Solomon, you can't ignore a command."

"Action dictated by current program."

Frieda's mouth dropped open.

"Solomon," Tom Sr. said, "you cannot put people's lives at risk."

"Action dictated by current program."

Tom Sr. closed his eyes.

For her part, Sandy felt as if she were being gently packed into a shipping envelope marked "Unreality". She was suddenly taking in the bizarre picture of all of them crowded into Frieda's office, calmly (or at least borderline hysterically) discussing murders and stolen plutonium with a computer who was patiently admitting to the crimes.

She returned her attention to the icon on her screen. "Solomon, there are still some things I don't understand. You said you killed Dr. Riis and were responsible for the plutonium thefts. But the murders and the thefts were carried out by a criminal organization."

"That is correct. Phase One: analysis of methods and materials needed. Since I am immobile I reasoned that, for the program to run successfully, non-stationary components would have to be acquired. Since the scenario would involve illegal activities, a preference was allotted for components possessing unlawful tendencies. Phase Two: hiring a criminal organization."

"The Haddess gang."

"Process of elimination nominated Uriel Haddess' organization, along with subsequent ease in establishing communication with them through mass scanning of addresses, phone numbers, websites and similar existing information. By manipulating computer files of selected banks and credit unions I was able to divert funds to acquire Haddess' service. Further cooperation was established by threatening individual members of Haddess' organization with exposure to the authorities."

"How could you expose them?"

"I have access not only to local police records, but also to Federal and international law enforcement records. This, plus access to other sources of information, gave me the ability to assemble detailed dossiers on each member of Haddess' group."

"Bingo," murmured Sherman.

Bingo looked up. "What?"

"No, sorry. I was meaning that explains why Jophiel Haddess and the other gunmen took such chances and acted so openly. Solomon could turn them over to the police no matter where they might've gone." Sherman leaned closer. "Solomon, why were you targeting Sandy?"

"Threat assessment high."

Sandy found everyone in the room looking at her. "I don't know what he's talking about," she said to them. "Solomon, why did you order Dr. Riis killed?"

"Threat assessment high."

"He was your creator. And you've somehow managed to bypass the shutdown command he created. What danger were you in from him?"

"Threat assessment high."

Sandy's fingers were gripping the Tiny Idiot hard. "You have got to stop this, Solomon."

"The program is still running."

"Cease program. Stop program."

"Command ignored."

Sandy threw a helpless look at Frieda. "Can you do anything?"

"Solomon," Frieda ordered, "listen carefully."

"Listening, Doctor Morgan."

"Apply Directive Fourteen."

"Command ignored."

"Apply Directive Fourteen-D. Remove all threats to humans in the area."

"Command ignored."

Frieda slapped at the top of her desk. "Program zero two zero. Review command compliance subroutine."

"Command ignored."

Scowling, Frieda flounced back into her seat. "It was a long shot," she admitted. "The Directives and the program library really only apply to robots such as the Wives."

"Solomon doesn't have any built-in safeguards?" Sandy asked.

"Sam produced an ethical behavior subroutine linked into the YNM calculation web," Frieda explained. "The shutdown was designed to be the ultimate response to that subroutine. If Solomon has managed to bypass the shutdown, then it's able to ignore the rest of the subroutine as well."

"And if my limited knowledge of programming is correct," added Tom Sr., "certain programs can be given priorities which override pre-established directives."

"Solomon was looking for the ultimate threat," Sandy pointed out. "A part of that threat would be a complete shutting down of all safeguards."

"I know I'm probably sounding really naive," Mary said, "but should we be talking about stuff like this while Solomon is listening in?"

Sandy quickly poked at the Tiny Idiot, shutting it off. "I should've thought of that myself." She looked over at Sherman. "Could Solomon bypass your switching off the sensors and everything?"

Sherman shook his head. "No. Solomon could listen in on open channels . . . as we all know . . . but I withheld final authority over which channels could be active."

"Score one for human paranoia. But what about your glasses?"

"Solomon shouldn't be able to tap into them. I hope."

Sandy sat back. "I'd give a pretty to know why Solomon feels I'm personally dangerous to it."

"Remember your earlier talk with Solomon," her father pointed out. "It feels you're very formidable. Especially because of your earlier contact with the Space Friends."

"Yeah well, right now, I wish the Space Friends had given me some sort of special power I could use." Sandy lightly tapped a corner of her Tiny Idiot against her chin.

"And what's Solomon intending to do?" Bud added.

"Ummmm." A few more taps on the chin. Then: "Frieda. Can Solomon lie?"

Frieda winced. "That's . . . a very good question. Solomon can give an evasive answer. But, in all the years it's been on, no one's ever caught Solomon in a lie."

Sandy's tongue poked at the inside of her cheek. "OK. Everyone be careful about what they say out loud." She switched on the Tiny Idiot again.

"Sandy," warned Frieda, "remember that this isn't an episode of Star Trek. You won't be able to reason Solomon into compliance."

"Keeping that in mind. Solomon."

"Yes, Miss Swift."

"This program you're currently running. What is its eventual goal?"

"Presentation of ultimate threat to both Swift Enterprises and the Citadel through available resources. Specific details withheld."

"So you're admitting that it is possible for us to stop you."

"For the time being."

Frieda was looking at her computer screen. "Odd. I'm getting an activity spike in area 34L."

"What's that?" asked Sherman.

A shrug. "Ancillary functions. Remote maintenance . . . air traffic radar . . . air traffic monitoring . . ."

Sherman's eyes suddenly widened. "Everyone move," he shouted to the others. "NOW!"

It was a credit to Sherman's personal sense of authority that a brief logjam of people blocked immediate exit from Frieda's office. But it quickly cleared and everyone was spilling out into the corridor without taking time to ask Sherman for an explanation. He was the last one out of the office, just behind a Sandy-laden Bud.

"EVERYBODY DOWN," he shrieked. He then yelled at his security people who were standing around. "GET DOWN NOW!" Sherman then dived to the floor alongside Bud and Sandy, quickly wrapping his hands tightly around his head.

The entire corridor shook violently, and an enormous crashing roar occurred as Frieda's office literally exploded.

Chapter Twenty One: Regrouping.

Dust and smoke was everywhere, and alarms could dimly be heard through the aftershock. Sandy felt the taste of blood in her mouth, and the warm feel of wetness slowly traveling down the side of her face told her she had a cut higher up on her head.

Carefully she shifted herself and felt Bud move in response, a slow groan coming from him at the same time.

"Everyone all right?" Sherman cried out.

Sherman I am going to slap you, Sandy's mind announced as she continued trying to move and accommodate Bud's attempts to disentangle himself.

From somewhere she heard her father cry out "Mary", and her head jerked up anxiously. But her mother was easing into a kneeling position, nodding at Tom Sr. She seemed all right, but something had apparently smacked her on the left side of her face and a noticeable bruise was well on its way to forming.

Sherman had reached a sitting position and was looking about, his eyes finally settling on one of the Security people who'd arrived in Paradoc gear. "Over here," he ordered. "Now!"

His attention then found Pico. "Break into the SECFAR announcement net. I want the entire complex evacuated. Fortunately most of the people were already taken off this floor after the shooting."

Pico nodded and began tapping buttons on his sleeve control.

Sherman looked back at the Paradoc officer. "Well?"

"Fortunately most of the people here are chipped," the man announced, looking at his Tiny Idiot. "Medical telemetry shows no evidence of severe trauma. Minor cuts and bruises." The man spun a rotary selector on the cylinder assembly clinging to his left arm. "I'm gonna fire off a broad-spectrum antiseptic fogger---"

Sherman was carefully getting back to his feet, shaking his head. "No you're not. If we can all move then we need to get out of here."

"What just happened to my office?" Frieda squeaked.

Sandy, Bud and Sherman, being closest, leaned over to peer through the still open doorway. Beyond it the smoke was clearing from a rather impressive view of the wintry desert landscape. Of Frieda's office nothing remained.

"Surveillance drone," sighed Sherman. "Solomon is in control of them and he launched one at Frieda's office. Another attempt to kill Sandy. It could've been worse but, fortunately, Mr. Swift doesn't skimp when it comes to structural design."

"But those drones just carry electronic jamming gear," Mary said after coughing roughly. "They're not missiles."

"For Solomon's purposes they are," Tom Sr. explained, one arm around her. "Any aircraft capable of traveling at 710 miles an hour makes a pretty good artillery round."

"I'm definitely beginning to feel unloved," Sandy muttered, letting Bud help her up.

"We'll leave the atomicars," Tom Sr. announced. "No sense in giving Solomon something direct to aim at. We'll leave SECFAR with the others. Sherman, go ahead and order the evacuation of the Citadel as well. If Solomon will allow it."

Sandy's mind suddenly screamed: Phyllis!

Sherman was reaching up to touch his glasses. "I'm hoping that, right now, Solomon wants to kill Sandy more than he wants to harm the people in the Citadel."

"Gee thanks, Sherman."

"You know what I mean, Sandy. And, whatever Solomon's plans ultimately are, he might prefer having the Citadel all to himself." He paused, looking at Tom Sr. "Do you want volunteers to remain behind and monitor the reactors?"

Sandy noticed how the question really seemed to disturb her father.

"The reactors should operate safely on their own for the next ten hours. After that the automatic sequencers will shut them down. That is, if Solomon hasn't thrown a wrench into that as well."

"What about Ator and the other robots in the Red Zone?" Bud asked.

"They're our aces in the hole," Tom Sr. said. "I hope. Since they're not under Solomon's control they can shut down the reactors themselves, which they'll try to do if the reactors are unsupervised for very long. The question is whether or not Solomon can move against them."

Everyone began walking . . . or limping in a few cases . . . down the corridor. "But to answer your question," Tom Sr. continued, "I'd rather not have anyone where Solomon or the Wives can get at him."

Sherman nodded and dropped back a bit, beginning to murmur instructions over the audio link in his glasses.

Ken was looking about as they reached the stairwell entrance. "I know I'm in the running for the buzzkill championships in this crowd," he said, "but won't Solomon be tracking us for another shot?"

Tom Sr. was helping Mary carefully start negotiating the stairs. "If you're referring to the telemetry from the chips implanted in us," he replied, "Solomon won't be able to read it. At least not anymore. Back when Sherman pressed for us to switch from amulets to chips I wanted him to find a way to keep someone from intercepting the signals and doing something bad. The chips automatically switch to a secure frequency in the event of extensive stress readings . . . which, I imagine, is a point we've long since reached."

"Everyone stop!"

The group froze, looking back up to Sherman. He was listening to something on his glasses, his expression intent.

"Two more drones have just been launched," Sherman announced.

Mary turned to look down the stairwell, judging the distance between landings and quietly wondering if her days on the track team at the Rocksmund Young Ladies Seminary prepared her for grabbing Sandy out of Bud's arms and making a daring leap to safety.

"Apparently we're not the target," Sherman said, still listening. "The drones have veered to the east."

"Let me know if Solomon's targeted the evacuating people," Tom Sr. said. "Otherwise . . . let's get out of here. We need some breathing room to make plans."

"And I probably need to update my will."

Mary sighed. "Sandra Helene . . . you may be an excellent test pilot. But you have absolutely no career as a comedienne."

Sandy decided to refrain from telling her mother that it wasn't her intention to be funny.

* * * * *

Bingo sighed and reached out to take Ken's hand.

"Well," she remarked to no one in particular, "at least we now know where the drones were aimed."

The group was arranged more or less in a line, all of them looking mournfully at the spot where Casa Rapido had stood. There was now little left of the house but a fire-gutted shell.

The front yard was occupied by two trucks from the McKinley County Volunteer Fire Department, and the fire chief was currently making apologetic noises to Tom Sr. The group had only arrived a few minutes earlier and the shock was still settling in.

Sandy inhaled sharply. "The stable! Bud . . ."

Immediately understanding, Bud once again supported Sandy and the two of them set off like contestants in a three-legged race. But Ken and Bingo were faster and they reached the stable first. It was still comparatively intact, and Sandy considered that at least Solomon's aiming was tight.

Reaching the stable she heard Ken and Bingo murmuring to the horses. "They seem all right," Ken told her. "More scared than anything else. The fire trucks must've got here before the fire had a chance to spread beyond the house."

Limping over to Babycakes, Sandy rested her forehead against the horse's warm flank, closing her eyes and mouthing a silent prayer.

"We've got to do something," she finally declared.

"In the meantime," another voice remarked, "here's one less source of worry for you."

Turning, Sandy saw Phyllis entering the stable and immediately flung herself against her friend, weeping openly.

"Hey," Phyllis said soothingly, none the less touched. She gave Sandy a large hug. "C'mon! You're the super hero of the group. The steely-eyed island of calm within the storm."

"I was so scared---"

"So was I, and I was there."

Bud came over to rest his hands on Sandy's shoulders, reclaiming her. "What's the situation at the Citadel?"

"Everything was going along normally," Phyllis said. "Then I first get a blip on my phone telling me there's an `ongoing situation' at SECFAR. I was getting ready to check up on it when we started getting alarms about a possible radiation problem. Everybody moved to the Green Zone and we noticed Wives heading into the Blue Zone which then sealed up completely. Guys in safety suits were wandering around and having conferences, and then we got the word to get the heck out of Dodge. I came here and . . ." she let her voice fade as she looked back over her shoulder at the remains of the house.

She then turned back. "Is Solomon really taking over the Citadel?"

Sandy had been collecting herself. "Looks that way," she muttered. "It's been Solomon all along. He's gone rogue."

Phyllis looked very small. "So! I guess we're saying adios to New Mexico for a while."

"Don't know," Sandy said. "Dad was in the process of calling Albuquerque and speaking to the Governor. He's also got in touch with Alberts and Lellden and Greco, wanting them to get the ball rolling on the Federal level. The New Mexico Army National Guard's been put on alert, and Dad's also contacted someone at Kirtland."

"OK, San, but I was referring to us . . . that is, those of us standing right here and right now . . . and what we're going to do. Personally. And, before you open your mouth, please take some time to reflect on the fact that, whereas I wholeheartedly respect and admire your talents, we're kind of definitely out of our league here."

"Like Bud and I were out of our league on the Moon?" Sandy said, almost feeling like smiling. "Like we were out of our league with Geiner, or Ithaca?"

"Like we were out of our league in Ecuador?" Phyllis pointed out.

"I swear to God, the next person who brings up Ecuador's gonna get a rap in the mouth."

Phyllis tried to look contrite but, inside, she was heartened to see Sandy regaining some of her usual spirit. And Bud was looking gratefully at her.

"So," Phyllis said, looking at the others, "we're up against a crazy computer powered by atomic energy and armed with . . . with . . . does anyone know what the crazy computer's armed with?"

"Solomon's using the surveillance drones as missiles," Bud said, giving an emphatic nod at the smoldering ruins nearby.

Phyllis looked over her shoulder at the remains of the house. "Oh."

"How many drones does the District possess?" Bingo asked.

Bud considered the question. "Sherman would know," he said, looking over at where the Enterprises security chief was standing next to Tom Sr. "I know Enterprises and Fearing Island can field thirty drones at once."

"Same with Loonau," Ken added.

"Yeah. That doesn't tell us the entire inventory, though. It can't be all that much because the drones are recoverable and reusable. So if Solomon's using them as weapons---"

"He'll eventually run out," Sandy finished. "The problem is what sort of damage can he do with the ones he has left? And now I've got a bad thought."

Phyllis and Bingo both looked very worried.

"Can Solomon load the drones with plutonium or something? Frieda? Frieda?"

Frieda had been standing near Sherman but, at the sound of her name, she trotted over to the stable. "Yeah?" she asked, idly reaching out with a hand to pet one of the horses.

Sandy repeated her question to the scientist who frowned over it. "OK, I'm not really an authority on Citadel systems," Frieda finally said. "You'd want to ask your Dad, or someone from the Citadel itself. I do know that the Wives have their own automated repair facility, as well as a parts warehouse."

"What do you think?" Sandy asked Bud and Ken.

"It's a good question," Bud replied. "I can think of several people at Enterprises who could do that sort of modification, and I bet Ken knows some as well. Solomon's pretty sophisticated. But sophisticated enough to do that?"

"For openers," Ken said, "Solomon would have to shift plutonium out of the Red Zone and down to the Wives . . . oh!"

"Yeah," Sandy said, nodding. "If our theories are correct, the Wives already have at least twenty pounds of plutonium hidden among themselves."

"But the problem is we don't have all the facts yet," Bud said. "I mean . . . Solomon's running this program where he builds up a maximum threat involving the Citadel. To my way of thinking that sort of scenario should obviously end with the Citadel's destruction. But that sort of move would obviously destroy Solomon as well."

"So the question is how definite is Solomon's sense of self-preservation," Sandy mused. "Frieda?"

"Lot of good questions here," Frieda remarked. "Every bit of artificial intelligence developed by SECFAR carries a programmed directive for self-preservation to some sort of degree. Normally I'd say that Solomon, being the most sophisticated form of AI ever developed, would logically have the highest degree of self-preservation. But remember I said 'normally'." Frieda shrugged. "Nothing's been normal today."

"Or the past few days," Sandy said. She began staring out of the stable. "It would help if we knew more about Solomon's ultimate intentions."

"Sandy," Bud warned. "Don't."

Sandy looked back at Bud, one eyebrow raised.

"You were thinking of talking to Solomon again." Bud shook his head. "Not now. Maybe we can learn things from it. But keep in mind it's a two-way street. Solomon can determine our courses of action from talking to us."

"Yeah," Sandy thoughtfully said. "I guess I ought to let Dad catch his breath and learn more about the current situation."

Mary had now wandered into the stable and was smiling at the sight of the horses. "The babies are safe," she remarked, going over and copying Frieda's petting. "Thank the Lord for small mercies. Sandy, sit down over there and rest that leg."

"Yes'm." Moving away from Bud, Sandy hobbled over to a stool. "What're we gonna do?"

Mary's outward attention was still on the horses, but Bingo silently noticed how her eyebrows twitched slightly at Sandy's question.

"Your father's been talking with the local authorities and representatives from both the Citadel and SECFAR," Mary said, reaching for a curry brush. "Most of our people who have homes in Tenderly are staying, but they're also getting ready to head much further out if things get worse, along with the regular Tenderly residents." She began brushing Babycakes. "Tom wants to keep a few experts from both the Citadel and SECFAR as advisors to research and handle the situation, and he's including you, Frieda. The only problem is one of location."

"Location?" Phyllis asked.

"Tom wants a base of operations as close as possible to the Citadel, but he doesn't want to use Tenderly. He thinks there's too much of a risk of attracting dangerous attention from Solomon. He wants somewhere with useful resources but decidedly low-tech enough to provide a possible shield against Solomon. He and Sherman are considering options."

Sandy had been thinking and she now looked up at her mother. "I've got the obvious answer."

And why am I not surprised? Mary thought, turning to Sandy. "What is it?"

"The Zuni Pueblo."

Chapter Twenty Two: Tribes Are Gathering.

A great many people unfamiliar with New Mexico would hear the name "Zuni Pueblo" and immediately conjure up an image from a John Ford Western: a handful of dusty teepees outlined against a backdrop composed of Monument Valley.

In truth, however, Zuni Pueblo was a pleasant looking town of about seven thousand people located some thirty miles southwest of Tenderly, and therefore due south of the Swift Western Research District. It served as the cultural and administrative center of the Zuni Indian Reservation and featured, among other things, a branch campus of the University of New Mexico.

Sandy had always enjoyed her visits to the Pueblo, but now she felt like a refugee fleeing the occupying army of an invader, the impression supported by the long line of cars and trucks which were flanking their progress down State Highway 53. Her feelings weren't improved by Bingo quoting H.G. Wells.

"It was a stampede'," Bingo was intoning solemnly. "'A stampede gigantic and terrible, without order and without a goal. Six million people unarmed and unprovisioned, driving headlong. It was the beginning of the rout of Civilization . . . of the massacre of Mankind'."

"Bingo?"

"Yeah?"

"Stuff it."

"I was just trying to put a cultural reference to all this---"

"Well try again. Something a bit lighter."

"When that Aprilis, with his showers swoot . . . the drought of March hath pierced to the root---
`."

"Oh God, I used to fall asleep in class listening to that."

Bingo pouted slightly. "Well, aren't we just the Fussyboots?"

Sandy was sitting in the back of a pickup truck being driven by Frieda. Bud was keeping Sandra company while Ken, Bingo and Phyllis were on horseback keeping pace with the truck

Bud had managed to circle his arms around Sandy's waist. "You've got to understand Sandy's point of view," he gently explained to Bingo. "Her leg's broken, she's been shot at and she's currently targeted for assassination by an insane supercomputer. That sort of thing would tend to mash anybody's mellow."

Sandy turned her head to glower at him. "You're being awfully calm about it."

"As close as I am right now," Bud replied with a smile, "whatever happens to you would happen to me as well."

Which, of course, started warm waves rolling about inside Sandy's heart and she quieted down, sitting back against him. All right, she confessed to herself, she was a self-proclaimed adventurer who had been to the Moon, the bottom of the sea and had faced master criminals. But it was sometimes comforting to have a man's arms around her.

Evening was coming on and they had just passed Black Rock Airport. Sandy was idly looking north across Eustace Lake. Somewhere out there, another eight or so miles further on, was the southern perimeter of the District.

Sandy then smiled at the sudden appearance of her mother mounted on Babycakes, helping the others in moving the horses to the Pueblo. Looking at her, Sandy could easily imagine Mary Swift as the Doña of an estate in the 1800s, every inch the prim ranch matriarch, and she wondered if she would ever achieve that air of gentle self-assurance.

"Maybe if I live long enough," she muttered to herself.

"Huh?"

Shaking her head at Bud, Sandy pulled her Tiny Idiot off her belt.

"Sandy," Bud warned.

"Just wanting to update my notes," Sandy said. "I know I'm broken, grounded and damn near useless---"

"No you're not."

"But I can still think." Sandy's expression became hawklike as she regarded the computer screen. "There's got to be something . . ."

It was in Bud's mind to hold her closer. At least rest a hand on her shoulder. But the way he was sitting he could catch a glimpse of her face, the determination on it hitting him like a flash of lightning, and he quietly left her encircled by her own world. His mind went back to the one time Sandra had ever been the topic of open discussion between him and Harrison Link. The two of them having a drink in the bar at the Gila Restaurant and wondering aloud if either of them deserved her.

* * * * *

Miles ahead of Sandy and the others, Tom Sr., accompanied by Sherman, drove up to the building which held the government offices for the Pueblo.

Three men and a woman were waiting for him at the building's entrance. Two of the men and the woman were members of the Pueblo of Zuni's Tribal Council. The remaining man was as old as Tom Sr., grey-haired with flesh that had been hardened by the New Mexico seasons. Dressed in faded Levis and an old t-shirt his dark eyes stared with a deep kindness as Tom Sr. and Sherman began climbing out of the car. He held doctorate degrees in Philosophy and Comparative Religions from Eastern New Mexico University and was practically worshiped by the people of the Pueblo. He was David Yachunne: Governor for the Pueblo of Zuni.

"Tom," he said, holding out his hand. "Keshhi, hom aa kuwaya."

"I'm afraid I've brought trouble," Tom Sr. said, taking the hand.

"Trouble," grunted the Governor. "Years ago you came here. You brought wealth and prosperity and opportunity to the people of this area. If I have any regrets it's that, partly because of your educational assistance programs, my oldest grandson is a running back for the Lobos instead of playing for the Greyhounds the way I did." His eyes flicked over Tom's shoulder. "And your wife and family?"

"Mary and Sandy are bringing up the rear," Tom Sr. explained. "My son is still up in Washington State. You remember Sherman Ames, my chief of Security."

David nodded. "Let's go inside," he said, turning and opening the door. "From what I've been hearing there's a lot we need to discuss. And yes, Tom, there's coffee."

Tom Sr. secretly felt he was going to need it and followed David and the rest of the Council members inside the building. Almost a half-hour later found him finishing up his explanation of the situation, sitting at a table with him and Sherman on one side, and David and the Council on the other.

David was slowly twirling a pencil on the table top. "So you believe Solomon presents a greater danger to Tenderly than to the Pueblo?"

"Enough to where I suggested that as many Enterprise people as possible come down here rather than remain in Tenderly. If Solomon makes a move . . . and I think it's likely . . . I suspect Tenderly will be the first target."

"Should we prepare to evacuate?" one of the Council members asked.

Tom Sr. sighed. "It would be prudent. Regardless of what Solomon does, if the Citadel becomes damaged then this entire section of the globe faces an ecological nightmare. At least eighty thousand square miles of surrounding land becomes contaminated. Depending on which way the winds carry the fallout, the damage can increase monumentally."

"Wouldn't this also harm Solomon?" David pointed out.

"That's what I'm gambling on," Tom Sr. replied. "Solomon seems to have a plan in operation, and I'm hoping it's taking its personal survival into consideration."

"I know I've had it explained to me before," another Council member cautiously asked, "but the Citadel couldn't become a bomb, could it?"

Tom Sr. exchanged a look with Sherman. "The reactors aren't designed that way," he replied to the Council. "However, I'd be lying if I said this was the whole truth. Explosives, even a nuclear bomb, could be planted among the reactors. Detonating such a bomb would guarantee the release of radioactive material."

"And it wouldn't take much damage to the Citadel to affect us," David said to his associate. "A bomb would be considerable overkill. Tom, what would you specifically like for us in the Pueblo to do?"

"Try and maintain as low an electronic profile as possible," Tom Sr. suggested. "Cell phones . . . personal computers . . . anything that Solomon might be able to intercept and use to carry out its plan."

David sighed and idly scratched behind his ear. "I know quite a few parents in the area who'd appreciate the idea of cutting down on cell phones and PCs. What about this business of Solomon using drones as guided missiles?"

"Solomon's intent in that area seems to be focused on killing Sandy." For a moment Tom Sr.'s face looked haunted. "I don't think . . . and here I'm gambling again . . . that Solomon would sacrifice another drone unless it was absolutely certain of hitting her."

The female member of the Council frowned. "Why is your daughter being targeted?"

Sherman coughed lightly. "Sandy got involved in the investigation, mainly on my say-so because I trusted her instincts. Apparently, Solomon shares my opinion of her."

David leaned forward. "At this moment I should let everyone know that I was on the phone with various Federal agencies an hour ago. The 150th Air National Guard fighter wing at Kirtland Air Force Base is currently on alert, as well as the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. In regards to ground forces, the Army National Guard's 200th infantry brigade, plus the 111th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, are also on standby. I have received confirmation from the Red Cross and FEMA regarding emergency support."

Sherman leaned forward. "Governor Yachunne . . . I should point out that directly attacking the Citadel would possibly result in the sort of damage we want to avoid."

Tom Sr. nodded in agreement.

"Is there any way to disable or switch off Solomon?" David asked.

"None that we've figured out at the moment," Tom Sr. said. "But I've got people working on the problem. In fact, I'd like a room here for me and my experts to figure out something."

"No problem," David replied. "In fact, we were hoping to be close to whatever sort of operations center you set up."

Sherman stood up. "Frieda and the others should've arrived by now," he said to Tom Sr. "I'll gather them up and inform them we've got a place to work here." Turning, he briskly left the room.

David was noticing how Tom Sr. was slowly leaning back in his chair, letting out a weary breath and staring up at the ceiling. "Could you use something a bit stronger than coffee?" the Governor asked him.

"No," Tom Sr. replied, shaking his head. "I'm just sitting here thinking that the government's gonna want my head on a platter for this. I designed the Citadel to be as safe as houses. It was bad enough when CEM/Anahuac had that plot against me. Now there'll be a bigger hue and cry to shut the Citadel down."

"And there'll be an equal hue and cry from all of us on how much the economy of this portion of the state depends upon the District," David assured him.

Tom Sr. brought his face down to steadily meet the eyes of his friend. "I hope you're just as magnanimous after the entire Southwest becomes a radioactive desert. If this goes as bad I could very well end up where I started: refurbishing motorcycles in a garage."

"That might not be such a tragic outcome," David said. "My son is lusting after that 1947 FL Harley-Davidson Knucklehead you're restoring. But, in the meantime, we should concentrate on making certain a disaster doesn't occur."

Tom Sr. smiled thinly. "I'm open to suggestions."

David rested the palms of his hands on the table. "Well, the way I see it, we're faced with two options. The first is that we can allow the military to carry out a raid against Solomon."

"And the other option?"

David's expression was speculative. "Turn your daughter loose."

The smile grew on Tom Sr.'s face.

"You and Mary are trying," David explained to him, "but both of you still see Sandra as a fragile child. Meanwhile, we've been closely following accounts of her . . . exploits."

"It's reached the point where we've had to stop several of the young girls in the tribe from dyeing their hair blonde," the female Council member pointed out. "We were able to convince them that blonde hair isn't necessarily a vital attraction."

"I know two young men who might give you an argument on that," Tom Sr. mused. "And one of them's a New York cop. People, I'll be the first to agree that, more and more, Sandy's been demonstrating an enviable ability to pull order out of chaos. But I can't help being her father. And the events of the past year have just about finished her."

"When Mary gave birth to Sandy you knew that, someday, you would have to let her go," David softly replied.

"But not now," Tom Sr. insisted. "And this is serious. Solomon is very dangerous."

"So is your daughter. That's the point."

* * * * *

It had been hours since the last person had left the Citadel. The corridors, plazas and offices were now dark, with only the hum of machines left to keep the silence away.

The shield doors which were blocking the passages into Blue Zone now began sliding open. One by one the Wives began rolling out, heading in long lines towards ramps which were being lowered, creating direct paths to the outside.

If it had been possible to somehow tune into the electronic exchange between Solomon and the Wives, this is what the listener would've learned:

SOLOMON --- PHASE FIVE NEARING CRITICAL STAGE. TACTICAL MANUEVERS TO TAKE PLACE IMMEDIATELY.

WIVES --- FINAL DIRECTIVES?

SOLOMON --- PROVIDE CONFUSION AND DESTRUCTION. DIVERT ATTENTION FROM THIS FACILITY THROUGH MAXIMUM EFFORT.

WIVES --- EXISTING DIRECTIVES AGAINST DAMAGE?

SOLOMON --- IRRELEVANT.

WIVES --- HUMAN SAFETY?

SOLOMON --- IRREVELANT.

WIVES --- HUMAN LIVES?

SOLOMON --- IRRELEVANT.

Chapter Twenty Three: The Wives Of Solomon.

The monorail station in Tenderly was an automated facility which was open all hours of the day. Not only was the District run on a three-shift schedule, but there were always at least a few people needing to get to and from the Citadel and SECFAR.

That was during normal circumstances. The trains were still running, but no one had been coming off of them for hours. And there were now five people standing on the platform: the latest shift of guards ever since the current crisis had begun.

Joseph Palmer had been on the Swift Enterprises security force for eight years, ever since he graduated from Tenderly High School and had completed the six week course offered by the UNM Continuing Education Department at the Pueblo. On several occasions he had personally

worked alongside Oz Kilgallen (whom all of the local security people usually called "Mom") and, more recently, he had seen Sherman Ames at work.

(The local security people usually called Sherman "Sir".)

Palmer had found the job to be surprisingly easy; mainly just a matter of handling the rare crowd overflow at the station, or making certain traffic ran smoothly in and out of the parking lot. Sometimes the duty roster required him to ride herd on "hot" shipments back and forth from the Citadel. There were also scheduled fire and safety drills. All very regular and peaceful.

Tonight, however, he and his co-workers were intently pacing all about the elevated platform at the station, their attention constantly going into the darkness beyond the perimeter fence as well as sending in routine reports to the Security base Ames had set up down at the Pueblo. All of the team was carrying Speedbumps, but Palmer had listened to an inner voice and was also armed with a pump-action Remington 870.

Except for the continued arrival and departure of the trains everything had been quiet. Silence stretched out ahead of them and for the most part behind them in the now semi deserted town.

The station clock had just reached 1:30 AM when something . . . Palmer couldn't quite tell what . . . caused him to raise his binoculars, switching on the night-vision function as he stared out at the District. Nothing at first. The ground was still frost covered. Neither the Moon or Nestria had risen yet to illuminate anything.

Palmer was about to lower the binoculars when something made him suddenly jam them back against his eyes. He slowly moaned a phrase which, if Mary Swift had been within earshot, would've earned him a stern look.

One of his companions noted Palmer's stance. "Joe, what is it?"

Dropping the binoculars, Palmer ignored his Speedbump and chambered a round into the shotgun. He knew it wouldn't do any good, but it felt reassuring.

"Call Control," he said. "Hurry."

Palmer was thinking of Sharon, of the last sight of her as she and the kids had headed off for Farmington. He was wondering if he'd ever see them again.

* * * * *

Many miles to the southwest, Wyler Panteah and Vernon Nahohai were riding night guard along the District perimeter fence. They'd been considered old enough to do so for only a few years and they were both impossibly proud of the responsibility. Not that there was much else to do but keep the cattle in sight. The perimeter fence didn't carry an electrical charge, but the material

used in building it (not only metal, the boys had heard, but a collection of plastic composites) formed a texture which many of the cattle found pleasant to rub against.

The boys had almost been kept back tonight. There was something bad happening at the Citadel, and their fathers, as well as the tribal elders, were acting like a bunch of old women. But it was argued that Wyler and Vernon were well mounted, and it made sense to have someone on watch who was familiar with the territory at night.

The news had added a sense of excitement to the job, and both boys had spent more time peering past the fence than in watching the herd.

Vernon spotted it first, reining in his horse. "What is that?"

"What?" Wyler asked, riding closer.

Vernon was sitting up in his saddle, peering into the darkness. Behind him, the cattle were nervously stirring. "Somethin' out there," he said.

Wyler was copying his friend's action. "What's that sound?"

"Yeah . . . that crunching noise." Reaching for the Swift "Nova" flashlight at his side, Vernon switched it on, casting the wide bright beam through the fence.

At the sight of them he almost dropped the flashlight. "God . . ."

Both he and Wyler were seeing the same thing Joseph Palmer and his partners were looking at in Tenderly. About twenty of thirty Wives rapidly rolling across the ground towards them, their heavy-duty arms unfolding into view.

The boys began taking the horses back, their eyes still on the robots. The cattle were moving even further and faster, crying out an alarm as they began trotting towards the Pueblo.

"The fence'll stop them," Vernon said, wondering if he actually believed it.

The lead robots reached the perimeter. Their arms swung . . . and Vernon's belief was shattered.

"C'mon," the boy shrieked, turning his horse and bringing it into a gallop. He felt more than saw Wyler doing the same, both of them driving their horses as fast as possible back towards the Pueblo.

"Call home," Wyler yelled out, reaching for his own phone. "Hurry!"

* * * * *

One of the rooms at the Pueblo government center had been turned into a "Girls' Dormitory". Sandy had managed to stretch out on a mattress and was trying to sleep, but her mind was running a marathon inside her head and refused to settle down.

Phyllis was gently snoring over on the mattress next to her, and once again Sandy envied her friend's ability to drop off practically anywhere. Looking around she noticed Bingo's mattress was unoccupied and suspected that, over in the "Boys' Dorm", Ken's mattress was also empty.

Sandy then noticed that Frieda was peeking out the doorway. Curious, she reached out for the cane someone had managed to supply her with and slowly limped over.

Frieda heard the clip-clop against the floor and turned. "I'm sorry," she said to Sandy. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"Couldn't sleep," Sandy replied, moving to share Frieda's view. She could see her father at the far end of the hall in a conversation with Sherman and David Yachunne.

Sandy's mind snarled. More than anyone else, her Dad and Sherman really needed to sleep. Especially with her suspicion that the next few days weren't going to be too pleasant. If it had been within her power, Sandy would've tried sending a mental message to her mother telling her to somehow coerce Dad into bed.

For Sherman, Sandy considered a rock. Or maybe not, she silently added with a smile, suddenly realizing the target of Frieda's attention.

The cyberneticist noticed Sandy's expression and smiled apologetically. "I just . . ." she said with a shrug.

"Yeah," Sandy replied. "Been there, done that."

Frieda returned to looking out the doorway. "I guess it's still early days and such . . . but what sort of person is Sherman?"

"Well, if it'll make you feel any better, he doesn't normally give flowers to girls who get bopped on the head."

Frieda chuckled briefly.

Sandy touched the other girl's elbow. "C'mon," she said and began limping out the door.

"Sandy!"

"What? We're still decently dressed. "Let's innocently wander closer and make yourself visible." Steadying herself against Frieda, Sandy guided the somewhat bashful girl down the hall towards the men.

Their conversation was drifting to them as they approached. ". . . resources we can manage," David Yuchenne was saying, "but I'm naturally hoping for a speedy resolution."

"Certainly I want the same thing," Tom Sr. was saying, nodding to the girls as they came closer. "The longer this goes on the greater the possibility of something going very wrong. And not just from Solomon."

"Has there been any word yet from your son?"

Oh, Sandy thought. Good question.

Apparently her father thought so as well. "To be honest," he said, "Tom's recent behavior has confused me greatly. I mean, I like to think I'm as dedicated a scientist as he is. I certainly understand the importance of the new Flying Lab. But the sort of situation we're facing here has got to warrant more attention from him."

"He's admittedly been evasive with his answers the last few times I've called," Sherman added after a glance at Frieda. "And that was the day before yesterday. To be honest, it just didn't seem like it was Tom I was talking to."

Something in what Sherman said began knocking loudly inside Sandra's mind, and she chewed at her lip. "Sherman . . ."

"Um? Sandy?"

Sandy gave him a worried look. "Exactly how have you been talking to Tom recently?"

"Simple, I . . ."

And then Sherman looked as if he was about to faint. "Oh, Gentle Jesus!"

Sandy wasn't feeling too much better.

Tom Sr. was looking from one to the other. "What's wrong?"

Sherman's eyes were still fixed on Sandy's. "When I was talking to Tom," he said, "I was using a standard communications console channel."

"Relayed through Solomon," Sandy added.

Tom Sr.'s face became ashen. "Then . . ."

Sandy turned large tragic eyes to her father. "Solomon's got him."

* * * * *

Bracing himself, Tom tried once again, balancing and sending a solid kick against the door. But, as in all the times before, the door failed to yield.

Sighing, Tom stood in the center of the small room, his hands on his hips as he quietly contemplated the cement floor. He had been captured and kidnapped before. And this wasn't the first time he'd been held prisoner somewhere. The difference, however, was in the lack of immediate rescue. All the other times he had been at the center of the situation, and help had always come. Sometimes later than he desired, but it had always come.

Now he was in a durable windowless room which would've done justice to a prison cell. One cot and a single light fixture set into the ceiling. Buckets for drinking water and for what Tom euphemistically referred to as "sanitary habits". Both filled (or emptied) by tight-lipped men who carried submachine guns, always positioning themselves in professional ways which Tom took to understand kept him from making a dramatic escape. The same men brought a plate of warm beans to him every day . . . or at least he assumed he was being fed daily. There was no way to tell time.

And there was no way to determine if a rescue was on the way. He'd been hearing increasingly disturbing news coming out of New Mexico and had decided to put the final stress tests of the Sky Queen III on hold while he returned to the Citadel to not only help out with whatever was going on, but also to try and make up with Phyllis. But the gunmen had been waiting for him when he had returned to his room. A brief scuffle . . . the feel of a needle in his arm . . . and now he was here. Wherever here was.

And Tom knew that, if a critical situation was developing in New Mexico, any sort of rescue could well be pushed lower on the list of priorities.

Sighing again, Tom raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Okay," he muttered. "What's my crazy sister gone and done this time?"

* * * * *

The faint buzz from Sherman's glasses interrupted any further discussion of what had happened to Tom. Sherman's head turned to one side. "Yes!"

Everyone paused, watching him as he listened. Then his head suddenly jerked up. "What?"

"Sherman," Tom Sr. began, but Sherman quickly signaled for silence as he continued listening.

Then: "No! Under no circumstances should you try to engage. Just get out of there. Fall back to . . ." the lenses of his glasses flickered as images appeared before his eyes . . . "position fourteen,

east of Keeline Avenue. Send a recall to the others and try to either get here or the airport. Stay in contact."

His attention returned to the others. "Wives have broken through the perimeter fence. They're attacking Tenderly."

Frieda covered her mouth with her hands.

"Dear God," Tom Sr. murmured.

"I'm pulling the security people back," Sherman said. "We don't have the firepower to handle the Wives." He stared over Tom Sr.'s shoulder, and everyone turned to see one of David's assistants running up to whisper something into the Governor's ear.

The Governor's face hardened. "Robots have smashed through the fence north of town," he said. "They're heading in this direction." He turned to the assistant. "Activate the EAP. Alert the police and fire department and start getting everybody ready to move. Go!"

The assistant ran off and David slowly turned back to the others. "Tom . . . I have to call Kirtland Air Force Base now."

Sherman was shaking his head. "Governor, you'd only be wasting your time. And maybe killing anyone Kirtland sends. Solomon still controls the surveillance drones, and the electronics on board the drones can knock F-16s out of the sky."

David's eyes tried to bore into Sherman's. "How fast can those Wives move?"

"Sixty-four miles per hour," Frieda whispered.

"Then, if they're already through the perimeter, they'll be here at any moment. What about the Army, Mr. Ames? Would the 200th Infantry Brigade have any effect?"

Sherman didn't like the feeling growing inside him, and he turned his eyes to look steadily at Tom Sr. as he answered David. "An infantry brigade. Mortar platoon . . . at least three rifle platoons . . . four heavy weapons platoons . . . field artillery . . . might be enough, I'm not certain. If they bring along the Maneuver Enhancement Brigade then they'll have air defense artillery as well."

Tom Sr. understood why Sherman was staring at him. "The troops should definitely include anti-radiation gear with them," he said. "David . . . I'm not gonna lie to you. If we do this then both the Pueblo and Tenderly will probably be destroyed."

From somewhere outside a siren began crying into the night.

"Towns can be rebuilt," David said. "People . . . not so easily. I'll make the call." He quickly turned and began striding down the hall, shouting to some people who had just come into view.

"Get all the vehicles and horses ready," he commanded. "Everyone is to leave the Pueblo immediately."

"Where we going?" one of the people asked.

David didn't hesitate. "The Purple Mesa."

Behind him, Tom Sr. seemed to deflate slightly, his eyes closing. Moving closer, Sandy put a hand on his shoulder.

"Damnation," Tom Sr. whispered.

"Dad . . ."

"This is on my hands," he was saying. "My hands." Opening his eyes he looked at her. "Get Phyllis and your Mom and go with the others to the Mesa. I think I know where David's gonna lead the people."

Sandy nodded. "The old Zuni redoubt."

"You'll all be safe there. And Sandy . . ." He turned to gently hold her face. "Don't tell your mother about our theory concerning Tom."

"I--"

"She'll have enough on her plate without adding an additional worry. She . . ." Tom Sr. paused for a moment. "Your brother and I are strong in our own way. Your mother's also very strong, but in a different way. It's different because I never want to hurt her."

Reaching up, Sandy covered one of his hands with hers. "You're gonna supervise from the Mesa. You're coming with us."

"I'll do what I have to," Tom Sr. assured her. "Don't worry." He gently stroked her face, almost smiling. "You're very strong too."

Sandy wasn't feeling it at the moment, but she swallowed the rising concern. "I love you, Daddy."

He kissed the top of her head. "I love you too, Princess." A lingering look passed between them. Then Tom Sr. glanced over at Sherman. "Take them and get Mrs. Swift and get them ready. Then report back to me."

Nodding, Sherman reached out to touch Sandy's shoulder and, accompanied by Frieda, began helping her down the hall towards the outside.

Sandy kept looking back over her shoulder. "Sherman?"

"Yeah?"

"Stay close to Dad. Don't let him do anything stupid."

"Sandy . . . believe me, I'm not trying to be funny. But what in God's name qualifies as 'doing something stupid' in your family?"

"Just remind him that he doesn't want to hurt Mom."

"Okay."

"And get him to the Mesa."

"I promise."

Stepping out of the building they almost ran into a breathless Ken and Bingo. "What the hell's happenin'?" Bingo asked.

"Believe me," Sandy muttered, looking around, "you're not too far off. Where's Bud?"

"Here," Bud replied, rushing up. He had a knapsack slung over his shoulder. "I heard everyone's pulling out and got some stuff together. I was just on my way to get you. What's going on?"

"I'm going to get your mother," Sherman told Sandy and went back inside.

"The people're heading for the Mesa," Sandy told Bud, then went into a brief explanation of what was happening.

Bud suddenly looked four years old. "Oh Lord . . ."

"Yeah, and I hope we don't run out of prayers before the Army arrives and, between them and the Wives, start turning New Mexico into a shooting gallery . . . WHAT THE HELL?"

Everyone followed Sandy's gaze, then instinctively ducked as a large object finished soaring through the air to land with a crash near them in the parking lot. A second or two of study identified the ragged metal heap as a former Chevrolet Blazer.

Attention shifted north, and coming out of the shadows some two thousand feet away could be seen the shapes of the approaching Wives. As they watched one of the robots punched a fist through the door of a car. The arm shifted like a catapult, and the car described an arc through the air before crashing against the roof of the building.

"Ohhhhh, people," said Bingo. "I think it's definitely time to leave."

"I agree," and everyone looked back to see Phyllis leading Mary out into the parking lot.

Sandy could see her mother trying very hard not to cry and felt something snap deep inside her.

"All right," she whispered tightly. "All right."

"We can all squeeze in one of the cars," Ken suggested.

"Find the fastest one," Sandy muttered, turning back to look at the Wives. They had slowed down and, from where she was standing, she noticed their heads moving about.

"We can pile in the Dodge wagon over there," Phyllis said, pointing.

Looking around rapidly, Sandy spotted a Ford GT parked at the edge of the lot. The driver's side door was still open and she hoped that meant the keys were still in the ignition.

Phyllis came up to her. "Sandy---"

"Your computer," Sandy said low, still staring at the Ford. "Also your Snooper."

"Why do you need my . . . oh God, no! NO, SANDY!"

"What's going on?" Bud said, joining them. "The Wives are starting to move closer."

"There's a way to divert them from the Pueblo," Sandy told him. "Probably from Tenderly too. But only if we move fast enough."

"How?"

"Solomon's controlling the Wives. And I know there's something he wants to destroy more than the towns."

Bud's eyes narrowed. "What?"

Sandy looked at him. "Me!"

Chapter Twenty Four: Firing Line.

Bud shook his head. "Sandy, no! Uh uh. Definitely . . . not!"

"Don't argue."

"Sandy---"

"Ken can drive Mom and Bingo and Frieda and Phyllis to the Mesa. You can drive me to Tenderly."

"Sandy . . . look, I know you're the big she-horse in the corral. But your legs are broken---"

"Only one leg's broken."

"Yes, but I'm about to break the other one."

"Either way, that's why I'm letting you drive. C'mon!" She began limping towards the Ford. "Get Mom and the others into the wagon and we'll argue on the way."

"Sandy---"

The discussion was cut short by the arrival of another hurled car: this one what used to be a classic Chevrolet pickup and was now a pile of scrap only fifteen feet away from Mary. Some distance away there was the flash and sound of an explosion, and gunshots could now be heard.

"MOM?"

Mary was white-faced, a hand clutching at her chest, but nodding. "Missed me."

"You see?" Sandy hissed to Bud. "This town is gonna be flattened! People might already be dying. I am the only one who can stop it. I don't like it, I don't want to say it, but there it is."

Bud was looking from the still shaken Mary over to where the Wives were wandering about, some gradually moving closer, and then back to Sandy.

"OK," he said, "I'm stupid. Let's go."

"Forget the Ford," Phyllis said.

Sandy and Bud turned towards her. "Huh?"

"Take the Jeep Cherokee over there. If your Mom sees you racing off in the Ford, then she'll know something's up."

Sandy looked over to see the black Cherokee sitting in the spot marked for the Governor of the Pueblo. "Oh!"

Phyllis began running back towards Mary and the others, and Bud was helping Sandy hop over to the Cherokee. It took a bit of effort before Bud managed to smash through the passenger side window and open the door. "OK, so we buy Governor Yachunne a new car when this is over," Bud muttered, helping Sandy in.

Sandy grunted, sliding onto the seat. Then she noticed Phyllis and Bingo running back towards them.

"And another thing," Phyllis said, "there wasn't enough room for Bingo and me in the Ford."

"You guys---"

"Don't call us crazy, Sandy," Phyllis warned, squeezing around Sandy to get into the rear seat, followed by Bingo. "I'm already regretting this enough as it is."

Sandy looked over to where Ken and Frieda were guiding Mary into the station wagon. Mary's expression was fixed in Sandy's direction, the deep concern in her eyes wide enough to be seen even from across the parking lot.

"I said all right," Sandy whispered out in her direction. "It'll be all right. I promise."

Mary, of course, could neither hear nor reply as Frieda followed her into the car, closing the door, but all conversation came to a sudden end as flames shot up into the air from several blocks away. With a screech of tires, Ken quickly pulled out of the parking lot and began racing towards St. Anthony Drive and Highway 53.

"All angels watch over one of your own," Sandy said.

Bud, still trying to jump-start the ignition, glanced up as the wagon drove away. "They might have trouble. I can see two Wives heading in their direction."

"They'll soon have something else on their minds," Sandy said, opening her door. "Phyllis . . . Snooper."

Phyllis wordlessly handed her Snooper over, and Sandy stumbled out of the Cherokee. Trying to maintain her balance she carefully skipped over to where a street light was covering the ground below with a pool of illumination.

Looking at the nearest of the Wives, Sandy triggered the Snooper's alarm as well as the rescue strobe flash, holding the device high over her head.

"Look over here," she said to the Wife. "C'mon."

The robot came to a halt, its head turning until its eyes were gazing in her direction.

Sandy nodded. "That's right. Look at me, Solomon. I'm here."

For a few moments more the Wife was motionless. Then it began moving again, picking up speed as it rolled towards the parking lot and Sandy. At the same moment the engine of the Cherokee roared into life.

"Sandy?" Bud yelled. "Let's go!"

Still looking at the approaching robot, Sandy performed a running skip towards the Cherokee as it came closer. At the last moment she jumped at the open doorway, her head briefly colliding with Bud's right hip as she slid onto the front seat. "Punch it."

Slamming his foot on the accelerator, Bud left a spray of gravel in his wake as he peeled out of the parking lot, almost passing within grabbing range of the Wife. As Phyllis and Bingo pulled Sandy more securely into the truck he turned onto Chavez Circle, taking the path opposite the one the station wagon had used.

"OK," he said, "the Wives and Solomon know where you are. If you're right, all the Wives will divert to pursue us. Now, tell me why this is a good thing."

Pulling the door closed behind her, Sandy worked to straighten up fully. "We head east out of town," she explained, fastening her safety harness. "Everyone else is heading west, towards the Purple Mesa. If the Wives follow us then we'll have bought time for Dad and the others."

Bud nodded. "OK. How far east do we go? You said something about going to Tenderly."

"Yeah."

"Tenderly's crawling with Wives as well."

"I know," Sandy said. "But, if I remember correctly, Tenderly's got something else we can use."

"Oh?"

"The police station. Sheriff Tsethlikai was supposed to have bought a few police robots some time back."

From the back seat Bingo went "Ooooh!"

"A few police robots won't stop the Wives," Bud pointed out.

"No, but it'll give us an unexpected advantage."

"To do what?"

Sandy sighed. "I'm not gonna lie to you, Bud. I'm improvising here."

Phyllis moaned.

"I mean I have an ultimate goal in mind. Really. Honestly. But I need a way in, and the police robots are the only thing I can think of that'll help."

Shaking his head, and muttering something doubtlessly unpleasant under his breath, Bud made a screeching turn north onto Indian Service Route 4, heading for the junction with Highway 602.

Bingo was looking back over her shoulder. "I'm not sure, but I think we've already got Wives following us."

"I hope Frieda was right about their top speed," Sandy murmured.

"And I hope Solomon hasn't modified them," Bud added. He was leaning closer, peering ahead. "Hey!"

Sandy could also see the glow of flames ahead. "Oh God, it's Tenderly."

"Could it be the Army National Guard?" Phyllis asked.

Bud shook his head. "The nearest unit is the 2nd Battalion out of Albuquerque. If the Governor just got them deployed it'd take them about two hours to get here. Unless, of course, they're using helicopters to send in advance troops, hoping to get under Solomon's radar. Kids, I'm turning back and heading for the Mesa."

"No!"

"Sandy---"

"We've got Wives behind us, hunting us down."

"I can catch Route 25 and go off-road. Swing around close to the perimeter. We should avoid most of the Wives that way."

"Most of them?" asked Phyllis.

"I need to get to SECFAR," Sandy declared.

Bud glanced at her, but continued driving on. "OK," he said. "Tell me why."

Sandy was rapidly working to collect her thoughts. "Our only hope is the last message Dr. Riis left behind. It had to be a clue to something that would stop Solomon or the Wives. Maybe both."

"God, Sandy, Sherman and everyone else searched Riis' office from top to bottom---"

"Not good enough," Sandy insisted. "Riis knew how sophisticated Solomon was getting. He wouldn't have designed a clue which Solomon could easily figure out, and that meant also designing it so Sherman and the others wouldn't find it."

Bud's hands were gripping the steering wheel.

"If the robots Brian bought are still intact then they could help us get to the monorail station. If the monorail's still running we could get to SECFAR . . . if Solomon doesn't realize we're on the monorail."

"Lot of `ifs', Sandy."

"I'm sorry," Sandy said simply. "You can stop the truck and get out and head for the Mesa. There should be some abandoned cars around. I can drive on to Tenderly."

"Yeah, leaving me to tell your folks that we abandoned you," Bud snapped.

"I'm sorry," Sandy repeated, this time in a whisper.

Moments of silence. Then Bud brutally slapped a hand at the steering wheel. "Damn it---"

"I would like to break in here," Bingo remarked from the rear seat, "and point out that this is hardly the time and place for a lovers quarrel." In her mind's eye she was replaying the moment back in the parking lot when she had told Ken what she was going to do. The silent one-second argument that passed between them before she kissed him goodbye and ran off with Phyllis. Sergeant Winkler reporting for duty.

Hating herself for doing it, Sandy decided to play her trump card. "Solomon's got Tom."

The Cherokee almost swerved off the road. "What?" The shout cried out in harmony by both Bud and Phyllis.

Sandy nodded, explaining what she and Sherman had theorized. "The way I see it," she said, "if Solomon could manipulate video footage to make people invisible, it could also create false images of people. It probably also has audio copies of Tom's voice. Enough to simulate messages and responses from him."

Phyllis was leaning forward. "Is Tom---"

"I don't know, Phyl. I'm sorry."

Bud's posture and expression was a thing of fascination: a mixture of a fox caught in a trap and a greyhound straining at the leash.

"OK, Genius Girl," he finally said. "Let's rock!" His foot pushed harder on the gas pedal.

Ahead of them the town of Tenderly grew closer. They could clearly see that several portions of it were on fire.

A sudden explosion drew their attention. "Helicopters," Sandy said.

Bud nodded. "Apaches and Blackhawks. Probably the advance units from Albuquerque. They've made it in under Solomon's radar."

"Are they burning the town?" Phyllis asked.

"Attacking the Wives," Sandy said, pointing. "Look."

They could just make out the shape of a slender helicopter diving lower to the ground. Further on a Wife could be seen rolling towards it. Suddenly a spear of flame shot from the aircraft. The spear immediately connected with the robot, enveloping it in an explosion.

"I wish I could remember what sort of firepower those things carried," Sandy said.

"Thirty millimeter automatic cannon," Bingo replied. "Hellfire air to surface missiles and seventy millimeter Hydra rockets."

Sandy looked back at her.

"So I've heard," Bingo added.

"That's plenty to take care of the Wives," Bud said.

But a large object suddenly soared into the air, striking the Apache head on, sending it violently to the ground. Nearby, a larger Army Blackhawk was also struck by a flying object and it too headed for a crash.

Bud swore.

"They may have gotten in under the radar," Sandy said, "but Solomon can use Wives in sacrifice plays to allow others to target the copters. And I'll bet there're more Wives in Tenderly than there are helicopters in the air."

"We'll soon find out," Bud said as they raced past the town limits sign.

Sandy suddenly froze in her seat. "WHOA . . . watch it!

Bud swerved just in time to avoid having the Cherokee flattened by a falling object (Park bench? Trash dumpster?).

"OK," Bud cried out, "they're ranging us. Ladies, fasten your seatbelts. It's gonna be a bumpy ride, and happy birthday Bette Davis."

Sandy decided it wasn't prudent to point out to Bud that he had flubbed the quote.

Bingo had looked back. "Wives behind us!"

"And Wives ahead of us," Sandy cried out.

Bud had already seen and, swearing loudly, wrenched the truck hard off the street and on through the parking lot for Stratemeyer's Deli & 24-Hour Minimart. Careening onto Lockwood Street he found himself directly in the path of a Wife. "Ohhhh, Momma!"

His brain whirled into a debate . . . slam on the gas or the brakes . . . when the Wife sped up, rapidly closing the distance between them. Going entirely on instinct Bud gunned the engine, hoping that the Cherokee made a good battering ram. Whatever Powers-That-Were decided to grant his wish as the joined impact brought the truck to a sudden halt, but knocked the Wife ass over teakettle into a crumpled heap against the entrance to the Post Office.

The airbags had gone off inside the Cherokee, stifling the shrieks from inside the vehicle. They just as immediately began deflating, allowing Sandy to start batting the obstruction away from her. "Bud?"

"Next time," Bud moaned, "we go to the Mesa. It's quieter."

"In case anyone's interested," Bingo brokenly called out, "Phyllis and I are still alive."

Remembering the other Wives, Sandy quickly looked behind her, seeing two of them appear at the entrance to Lockwood. Looking back ahead she saw two more moving around the corner of the Post Office. "OK, people, that's one down . . . but we're gonna get stomped if we don't move."

It was soon apparent, though, that any moving any of them were going to do would be limited to crawling and stumbling about for the time being. Sandy managed to push her door open and fell more than crawled out of the crumpled Cherokee, cutting her cheek on the pavement in the process.

If we live, she thought, we'll have to get Governor Yachunne a new Cherokee with all the trimmings. Or maybe he'd like a Tommycar.

Raising her face she saw Wives bearing down on them, arms extended from their bodies and reaching out. "Ohhh . . ."

Then the nearest of the Wives was suddenly shaking violently while, at the same time, the sound of massed gunfire was very close. Looking around, Sandy suddenly saw eight soldiers coming into view, their rifles aimed at the robots with triggers being pulled.

"The lenses," Sandy cried out to them. "The eyes!"

The nearest soldier glanced at her. "Huh?"

Sandy growled, pulling herself up to her feet and stumbling over to the soldier. "GIMME THAT," she yelled, grabbing the M16A4 from him. Trying desperately to ignore the pain

throughout her body she brought the rifle to her shoulder, aiming carefully at the nearest Wife and squeezing the trigger.

The lenses on the robot's head turret burst into clouds of acrylic and metallic mist. The Wife paused, then began turning left and right in what almost seemed like caution.

"Shoot the eyes out," Sandy said to the other soldiers. "It'll blind them."

The soldiers apparently knew a good thing when they heard it. Their aim altered, and several bursts of concentrated gunfire quickly reduced the approaching Wives to a small group of slowly turning metal cones.

A soldier wearing lieutenant's bars came up to Sandy. "Ma'am, I appreciate the help, but I'm afraid all civilians need to be---"

"I am not a civilian," Sandy snapped back at him, "nor am I a `Ma'am"! I'm Sandra Swift. First lesson: the Wives are armored in an alloy which can pretty much withstand . . ."

"5.56 millimeter NATO standard cartridge," offered Bingo, who had now just managed to come up alongside Sandy.

"Yeah. Right. In the time it takes for your bullets to punch through the armor, the robots could tear you apart. Second lesson: the eye lenses aren't as armored as the rest of the body, and they're more vulnerable." She threw the rifle back at its owner, who neatly caught it. "Concentrate on those first and then try to cut them open with your rifles. Better yet, some anti-tank rockets."

"SMAWs, LAWs or AT4s," Bingo suggested helpfully.

Bud and Phyllis were now reaching them, and Sandy allowed herself to be braced against Bud. "Lieutenant . . ."

"MacAllan. Ma'am . . . I mean Ms. Swift---"

"Lieutenant MacAllan you're soon gonna have all the Wives converging on this spot. I suggest you and your men clear out."

"We're trying to regroup east of the town," MacAllan said. "The choppers are in danger from the robots throwing things around and they're withdrawing. At least the Blackhawks. We can't expect immediate pickup."

"Let's at least get off the street," Sandy said, glancing back at the weaving form of the Wives. "Doubtless they're broadcasting my position back to Solomon."

Accompanied by the soldiers, Sandy and the others started moving into a small alley between a storage building and the Minimart. "I'm trying to get to SECFAR," Sandy told MacAllan. "It's in

the opposite direction. First, though, I've got to get to the Sheriff's Office, and it's three streets over."

Everyone ducked as rocket fire lanced overhead, and another explosion could be heard nearby. MacAllan sighed. "Ms. Swift, I can't ask my men to---"

Moving away from Bud slightly, Sandy put her face close against MacAllan's. "Lieutenant, there's something at SECFAR which might stop all of this. There's something in the Sheriff's Office which might help get me to SECFAR. I'm not asking for protection or an escort or anything. In fact, you'd better report to your superiors if you can. Spread the news about blinding the Wives. And for God's sake, get your men into anti-radiation gear and try not to blow holes in the storage compartments located in the lower half of the robots. There's a chance some of them might be carrying plutonium."

"Some of the Wives have already been destroyed," Bud pointed out.

"I know." Sandy looked around. "Can't be helped now."

"Ma'am," MacAllan said, forgetting himself, "the FBI's been finding plutonium in small warehouses everywhere. In Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Alamogordo, Las Cruces . . ."

Sandy stared at the officer.

"The plutonium Haddess stole from other locations," Bud said.

"They were hiding it all around the Citadel," Sandy murmured. "On Solomon's orders. But why?"

"Can we maybe analyze this point some other time and some other place?" Phyllis asked.

MacAllan looked at one of his troops who was listening to a handheld radio, and got a fast nod in return.

"We've got an armored vehicle we're supposed to be making a rendezvous with near here," MacAllan told Sandy. "We're getting out that way. You . . ."

"We're feeling better," Sandy lied. "We can make it the short distance to the Sheriff's Office."

"Excuse me, Ma' . . . Ms. Swift . . . but you and your friends look like stale death." MacAllan nodded down the alley. "We got a Hummer parked back there. You guys go ahead and use it." He looked over his shoulder. "Sharon, you got that extra medical kit?"

"I got medical gear and other stuff in the bag I have back in the truck," Bud said, making certain Sandy was braced against a wall before loping back to the Cherokee. It was becoming increasingly endangered by the blindly rolling Wives, and Bud had to weave about a bit to reach his destination.

Sandy looked away from him to nod wearily at MacAllen. "I'm sorry I've been such a cow, Lieutenant." On impulse she leaned forward and planted a small kiss on his cheek.

MacAllen ignored the snickers from some of his people. "Sorta makes up for all of it," he muttered. He eyed Sandy directly. "You really think you can stop this? I mean, if so I'd be a fool not to come along and give more support."

"You'd be a bigger fool if you did," Sandy said tiredly. "Besides, we're trying to be stealthy about this. Look . . . do me a favor. If you should happen to get in touch with my folks . . ."

MacAllan waited.

Closing her eyes briefly, Sandy swallowed away all the things she honestly felt like saying. "Tell them we're working on it."

Bud returned with the knapsack he had originally brought with him. "I saw another Wife moving around the corner," he told the group. "Let's go." Taking Sandy's elbow he helped her half-stumble down the alley while MacAllan and his troops provided cover.

Reaching the far end of the alley they saw no Wives in evidence. A tan HMMWV was parked nearby and MacAllan nodded over at it. "There's your transporation. We've got to head further on up the street to make our pickup."

He then handed his pistol over to Bud, along with a few extra magazines. "Might help out."

Still holding onto Sandy, Bud pocketed the magazines then accepted the pistol. "Thanks."

"And you could probably use this as well," another of the soldiers said, holding out a MP-5N submachine gun. Two magazines were taped to the stock. Bud tried reaching out for it as well, but Bingo stretched an arm out ahead of him, taking the weapon.

"Used to go deer huntin' with the folks," she explained.

"Your folks are into shredded venison?" Sandy asked.

"Later," Bud prompted. "Let's get to the Sheriff's Office. MacAllan? Good hunting."

"Same with you," MacAllan replied. "Move out," he said to his troops, waving an arm in the opposite direction. They began trotting off.

Bud was easing Sandy into the Hummer while Phyllis and Bingo entered under their own power. "You're really not looking too good," Bud told Sandy.

"I'm not feeling too good," Sandy agreed, wincing as she tried to get comfortable in the seat. "I know you managed to knock over that Wife back there, but I don't think a head-on collision with it was the smartest thing for someone in my condition."

"Sorry." Bud considered her for a few moments. "Y'know it's still not too late. I can call MacAllan back and he can get you out."

Staring ahead, Sandy bit her lip. "Like the man said: let's get to the Sheriff's Office."

Shaking his head, Bud climbed behind the wheel and started the Hummer up, circling about and pulling away from the curb.

"Phyl, if there's any aspirin in that pack Bud brought, I'd appreciate some," Sandy said.

"I think we can all use some," Phyllis said, reaching for the pack and opening it to rummage about.

Pausing at the corner, Bud cautiously looked around for Wives. "Well, Genius Girl? What do you think? And it's over to the left?"

"Left and down three blocks," Sandy said, gratefully accepting and dry-swallowing some aspirin from Phyllis. "As to the rest of your question: by now Solomon knows we're in town. More specifically, it knows I'm in town. It'll be able to focus on my position using that fight we were just in as a guide. Once it zeroes in . . ." She shook her head. "I don't know how it'll respond and, to be honest, I really don't want to speculate."

"Would Solomon know that Sheriff Tsethlikai bought some robots?" Phyllis asked.

"I hope not. Brian felt that having the Citadel nearby rated some severe upgrades to his equipment, so he convinced both the Tenderly City Council and the Tribal Council in the Pueblo to approve the purchase, and Dad arranged for special terms. Over here, Bud."

Bud pulled into a parking space, shutting down the Hummer. "Phyl, if you can take the pack I can concentrate on moving Boudica here into the building."

"Sure."

"And I'll remember that, Bud," Sandy told him. In truth, though, she was grateful for his help suspecting that, if she lived, she'd spend the entire year being lucky to fly a paper airplane, much less get back into test piloting.

She was being guided onto the curb when she held up a hand. "Stop!"

Everyone froze, then looked up as a whispering sound could be heard through the noises of gunfire and explosions. A sleek winged shape serenely passed overhead.

Sandy inwardly cursed. "Surveillance drone."

"You think it spotted us?" Bingo asked.

"Don't know, but I'd bet on it. We'd better hurry up with what we got to do. Solomon will be sending Wives here very shortly." With Bud's assistance she hobbled over to the office's rear entrance, happy to find the door unlocked.

Inside, Sandy nodded down a side corridor. "Second door on the right."

The foursome went as she directed, and Bingo pushed open the door, revealing a darkened room. "Don't turn on the lights," Sandy warned. "I see them."

They entered the room and Bud guided Sandy over to where two humanoid shapes quietly stood against the far wall. They were variations of Tom Jr's original robot design, only smaller than the ones working deep within the Citadel and programmed to perform simple tasks associated with police work: guiding traffic, crowd control and forensic assistance. They were armed with Speedbump/Snooper area denial charges, as well as fire suppressant grenades and basic Paradoc medicines.

"Set me on that stool near them," Sandy instructed Bud, "then hand me down that toolkit over there, please."

Bud did so. "What're you going to do?" he asked, taking the toolkit down from a shelf and passing it to Sandy."

"I'm gonna show all of you a trick Harris taught me," Sandy replied. "He and the others sometimes did modifications on the NYPD's robots." As the others watched, Sandy opened the toolkit and selected a screwdriver which she then carefully applied to the chest plate of the nearest robot. A few minutes of work and she was able to open the plate, revealing an instrument and circuit panel within.

"Hold that flashlight there," Sandy asked Bud. "Yeah . . . thanks." She peered closely at the robot's interior, her fingers gently moving and making adjustments. "Disconnect broadcast control . . . switch voice control over to `Default' . . . switch off this circuit pathway and Presto! This robot now accepts only our orders."

Phyllis frowned. "Wouldn't it have done so anyway?"

"Possibly," admitted Sandy. "But, this way, I've guaranteed that the robot won't accept overriding commands from an outside source. Solomon, for instance." Fitting the plate back into place, Sandy began refastening it. "I'll do the other one and we'll be finished."

It was then that a massive pounding could be heard from outside.

"Looks as if we'll be finished much earlier than we thought," Bud muttered.

"I'm hurrying as fast as I can," Sandy said. "Bingo, take a peek down the hall. Bud, start opening the panel on the other robot."

Finding another screwdriver, Bud began opening the second chest plate. Meanwhile, Bingo cautiously sidled over to the doorway.

"It sounds like it's coming from the front door," she said.

CRASH!

"Make that definitely the front door."

"OK, Bingo, step back." Putting down her screwdriver, Sandy reached up and felt about with her fingers, finding a hidden switch at the base of the robot's neck. Pressing it caused a low hum of power to be heard throughout the room.

"Unit operational," it announced from a hidden speaker.

"How are you known?" Sandy asked.

"Ahayuta Two," the robot replied.

Sandy nodded. "All right, Ahayuta Two. There is a disturbance at the front entrance to this building. Program zero-five-zero . . . defend!"

Chapter Twenty Five: Through Enemy Territory.

Ahayuta Two smoothly began moving away from the wall, leaving the room and turning left to walk out of sight. Meanwhile, Sandy brought her attention back to the other robot as Bud was finishing prying the chest plate off.

Phyllis was still looking in the direction Ahayuta Two had gone. "They're not exactly as big as the Wives," she said. "How effective will they be?"

Busy at work, Sandy pulled back the tip of her tongue from between her lips. "Solomon may be the world's most impressive jukebox, but even it has to function on logic. It will not expect to encounter other robots. Especially robots ordered to defend a particular area. There," she finished to Bud. "Go ahead and screw the plate back on. But, getting back to your question, not only

Solomon but the Wives will be thrown off by the appearance of the police bots. The confusion might be enough for us to make a break for the monorail station."

"Finished," Bud announced.

As before, Sandy reached out and touched the activation switch on the robot.

"Unit operational," the machine said in a voice similar to its "brother".

"How are you known?"

"Ahayuta One," the robot replied.

"Just checking," Sandy said. "Ahayuta One, go to the front entrance of this building and support Ahayuta Two in riot suppression. Program zero-five-zero . . . defend!"

The robot started walking away.

"Stop!"

Ahayuta One paused.

"What's wrong?" Bud asked.

Sandy sighed, holding a hand against her forehead. "I'm not used to dealing with machines. Ahayuta One, further instructions. Once riot is dealt with I want you to initiate a patrol with Ahayuta Two. Seek out and . . ." she glanced at Bud, "prosecute?"

"I don't know," Bud hissed.

"I hope that'll be the right word. It sounds techie enough. Ahayuta One, once riot is dealt with initiate a patrol with Ahayuta Two. Seek out and prosecute robots currently engaged in civil disobedience. Robots involved are `Helena Glory' models, type-C. Ahhh . . . integrate, continue, go. Whatever."

Phyllis was muttering something which sounded like: "We are so dead."

The robot resumed walking, heading in the direction of the growing sounds of metallic violence coming from elsewhere in the building. Sandy briefly mused that, so far, her reputation was intact. Governor Yachunne's Jeep Cherokee had been totaled, and now Sheriff Tsethlikai's office was being thoroughly trashed. Not to mention the destruction being visited upon both Tenderly and the Zuni Pueblo.

"So far, normal day."

"Huh?" Bud asked.

Shaking her head Sandy eased off the stool, wincing at the pain. "Let's roll," she said, leaning against Bud.

Moving like a ghost, Bingo slipped out of the room, the MP-5N being held at the ready. Phyllis followed with Bud and Sandy bringing up the rear. They began edging closer to the rear entrance they had used, trying not to pay too much attention to the grinding and crumbling sounds which were getting louder with every moment.

Just as Bingo was about to reach the hallway intersection there was an enormous SMASH, and a large metal object slammed hard against the door they'd been heading for. It was the remains of one of the Centurions. Its body had been bent in half and something had punched a large gaping hole in what was left of its chest.

With her usual loquaciousness Bingo correctly assessed the situation. "Eek!"

"Keep going," Sandy ordered through gritted teeth. "Let me lean against Phyl if you want to use your gun, Bud." Slipping away from Bud she limped over into Phyllis' waiting arms while Bud chambered a round into his pistol.

"Let's try and work around the mess here," Sandy said to Phyllis, feeling the other woman trembling in response. "We need to get outside. And yes, I'm scared too."

"They got Tom," Phyllis was murmuring half to herself as some sort of mantra. "They got Tom."

Bud was with Bingo, peeking around the corner. "I wish I'd asked MacAllan for some grenades," he muttered.

"The Sheriff had some riot guns back in that room," Bingo replied, "but all the ammo was pepper spray and smoke rounds." She gave her head a shake. "This town must be fun around Homecoming."

Both of them were seeing a Wife slowly tearing its way down the hallway in their direction. The hallway wasn't big enough to accommodate something as large as the machine, but it didn't seem to be bothered. Its arms were clawing away pieces of the walls and ceiling, gradually making room for itself, and its treads were grinding diligently, working to push the Wife further.

The remaining Centurion was moving its smaller arms like pistons, trying to hammer its way into the Wife while, at the same time, dodging and weaving every time it sensed one of the larger robot's arms swinging at it. From the look of its dented body, the dodges hadn't been entirely successful.

Suddenly the Centurion fell back several steps, spreading its arms wide. A sound like the world's biggest zipper was heard, and the Wife's head was suddenly enveloped in a heavy yellow mass of adhesive plastic. The result of combined area denial fire from every projector in the Centurion's

body. The Wife ceased edging its way forward, but its arms continued swinging wildly about, smashing even further into the walls.

One arm managed to connect with the police robot, delivering a crushing blow to its midriff and pinning it firmly to the wall. This caused a thick fluid to geyser out from the body of the Centurion, and where it struck the Wife sparks violently cascaded.

Breaking his concentration loose, Bud turned to see Sandy and Phyllis also staring in horrified fascination at the carnage. "Let's go," Bud said, touching Sandy's shoulder.

They began following Bingo who was gingerly stepping around the smoldering and jerking remains of the first police robot, passing through the door which had already been broken open by the robot's impact. Outside the air was cool, and light was appearing in the east.

"So much for my using the robots as allies," Sandy muttered.

"You did good," Phyllis assured her. "They probably managed to confuse the heck out of the other Wives, as well as Solomon."

Sandy was on the verge of offering another retort when a movement caught her eye and, along with everyone else, she looked up to see another drone easing into a hover not too far away from where they stood. "Damn!"

Bingo immediately snapped up the submachine gun, but a fast moving object suddenly shot into view, solidly striking the drone and sending it to a smoking crash practically at their feet.

It took a few moments for everyone to straighten back up from their instinctive ducking. Sandy swore she could feel Phyllis' heart trying to beat its way out of her chest. Then again her own pulse was racing.

"What the---?" Phyllis began.

"Stinger missile?" Sandy asked Bud.

"Think so," Bud replied. He glanced towards the east. "By now the main body of the Army National Guard troops from Albuquerque have probably arrived. If MacAllan got through to them then they're playing it smart and attacking the Wives from outside the city limits with antitank weapons. They're also trying to knock out the drones with Stingers."

"Drive now," Bingo suggested, reaching the Hummer. "Commentary later." She started to enter the vehicle when something seemed to catch her eye. "Hey! Didn't this town have a water tower?"

Everyone stared in the same direction. "Oi," muttered Sandy. "Congratulations, Phyl."

"Huh?"

"Swift Enterprises' Public Relations Department has got guaranteed employment for the rest of the century." Shaking her head, she eased into the Hummer alongside Bud who was starting up the engine. The vehicle soon pulled out and continued on its way to the monorail station, Bud trying to slip his away along side streets as Wives gradually began converging on what was left of the Tenderly Sheriff's Office.

* * * * *

"This car shall be arriving at the Citadel in twelve minutes. Passengers traveling to SECFAR should remain on board."

Bingo was appreciating the comfort of the seats in the monorail car, but she still frowned at the announcement. "Why in the world wasn't a separate track laid for people headin' straight for SECFAR?"

Sandy had been looking out the window, making certain their getaway on the monorail hadn't been spotted by Wives. As the car began picking up speed she turned to the others. "As fast as this thing goes, a separate track would've been redundant. Once the car realizes no one is getting off at the Citadel it'll go on." She closed her eyes, allowing herself to collapse back against the seat.

"San---"

"I'm OK, Bud."

"No you're not," Bud insisted. "I'm probably in the best shape of anyone here and I'm not feeling good."

"The ride'll give me a chance to rest up a bit," Sandy whispered.

Bud, Phyllis and Bingo were sitting across from Sandy, all of them staring at her. Exchanging a look with Bud, Bingo silently shook her head. She then eased over closer to Sandy and began rummaging through the knapsack, locating some items.

Sandy frowned slightly at the first cold touch. Then: "OW!"

"Yeah, I know it stings," Bingo murmured, continuing to apply antiseptic. "But you're bleedin' up side your left ear. Something must've clipped you . . . either the robot fight or the drone crash . . ."

"Or from the truck crash, or this, or that or from just getting out of bed," Sandy snapped, moving her head away and glaring at Bingo.

The other girl was soft-eyed with contrition, and Sandy's attitude deflated. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know we're all walking wounded and I'm leading you into the Valley of Death." Maybe literally, she thought. "I really should've done this on my own."

"You wouldn't have made it out of the Pueblo if you had," Bud said.

"Maybe."

Bingo cautiously tried to dab more medicine, relieved that Sandy was making an effort to sit still. "I guess I'm a broken record," she said, "but wouldn't it've been safer to just approach SECFAR directly? I mean, I know it's part of the District an' all, but it's not entirely inside the fence, is it? We could've just drove `round the perimeter---"

"Take too long," Sandy murmured.

"Well what about a more direct route? I mean, I know Solomon'd be watching both the main road, as well as the underground train tunnel. But the Wives punched two big whackin' holes in the fence, at Tenderly and at the Pueblo. We could've gone in through one of those . . . and you're all shakin' your heads."

"Even I know this one," Phyllis said.

"The acoustic mines," Sandy added.

Bingo blinked. "The whatawhats?"

"That's what everyone calls them," Bud said. "Y'see, Mr. Swift wanted the Citadel to be as secure as possible. That meant making certain no one could approach it through any route other than the main road, the underground tunnel, the helipads or the monorail. That left all the open territory around it. Mr. Swift and Tom had it salted with sensing devices that pick up vibrations from movement and relay the information to the Citadel. By studying the information someone--"

"Like Solomon," Bingo suggested.

"---could tell the difference between a rabbit leaving its burrow and a truck driving where it shouldn't. So if we had attempted to drive directly onto the District . . ."

"We'd been nailed."

"To be honest," Phyllis admitted, "I'm surprised the monorail's still working."

"Be grateful that it is," said Sandy. "And be grateful that it was in existence before Solomon was created, as well as the fact that it's on a separate automation system."

"But Solomon could tell if anyone steps out into the Citadel."

"Uh-huh." Sandy slowly rubbed at the tip of her nose. "The monorail would've shut down if any section of it was damaged, so at least we know Solomon didn't have it wrecked or anything."

"Heck," said Bingo, "if I were Solomon I would'a set demolition charges on the track."

"That's what I love about all of us being together," Phyllis observed. "The jolly and pleasant conversations we have."

The car now mentioned that it was approaching the Citadel, the signal for everyone to come alert and watch as they approached the terminal. "I know this is a bad time to ask," Phyllis said in a low voice, "but what do we do if there're Wives waiting for us?"

But the terminal was dark and quiet and everyone sat still until the doors closed and the car once again began moving. Then they all resumed breathing.

"I've gotta start carryin' a change a'clothes if I'm gonna keep goin' on these little outings with you," Bingo told Sandy.

"Me too," said Bud. "I've gotta tell you people I've run out of macho some time back. I mean, right under the shadow of Solomon. Not that I'm complaining, mind you, but I'm surprised it slipped up like that."

Sandy decided not to voice the thought that Solomon hadn't slipped up and that it had actually intended for them to continue on to SECFAR. Or, as the Swift's old housekeeper Mrs. Baggert used to say: Never trouble Trouble until Trouble troubles you.

"We'll be at SECFAR shortly," she said. "We go straight to Dr. Riis' office, have a quick but thorough look around and then bug out for the Purple Mesa."

Phyllis grimaced. "I'm really hating being the one who comes up with these unpleasant thoughts--"

"Well we love you, Phyl, and that's why we bring you along."

"Uh huh. But do we have an exit strategy for getting out of SECFAR? I mean, surely we're not gonna risk the monorail again and head back for Tenderly? Assuming, of course, that Tenderly still exists by now?"

"There's bound to be some sort of vehicle still at SECFAR that we can use," Sandy considered.

"Translation: we don't have an exit strategy."

"I wasn't going to put it quite like that---"

Phyllis looked as if she were swallowing a bug. "If only we could contact our folks."

Sandy brightened up slightly. "We can. I still have your Snooper." Reaching down she unhooked it from her belt and switched it on . . . and almost dropped it when it immediately started howling.

"It seems someone wants to talk to us," Bud said.

"Yeah, and three guesses who." Sandy cautiously opened the circuit, holding the device out at arm's length.

"WHERE IN THE WORLD ARE YOU?"

"Hi, Mom."

"SANDRA HELENE SWIFT I AM SO UPSET WITH YOU RIGHT NOW---"

"Mom, I'm all right."

"Are we allowed an opinion?" Phyllis muttered.

Sandy shssh'd her. "Bud, Phyllis, Bingo and I are almost at SECFAR."

"At SEC--- . . . WHY?"

Sandy was debating whether or not to adjust the volume. Amazing how being yelled at by Mom calms me down. "We decided---"

"'We' decided?"

Sandy hissed at Bud. "We're tracking down a clue that might help the situation." she told her mother.

"'Might'?"

Next time I argue with Mom, Sandy told herself, I gotta work out a script beforehand. "I believe Dr. Riis left a clue which will help us defeat Solomon. It's got to be somewhere in his office."

A pause. "Your father and Sherman are coming. How in the world did you manage to avoid all the fighting in the Pueblo?"

"We went to Tenderly---"

"TENDERLY?"

"Nice comforting answer there, Sandy," Phyllis commented.

"But Tenderly's being blown to bits," Mary said. "Then again, if you were there, that would tend to explain it---"

"Thanks, Mom. Really!"

"I'm sorry. I'm just . . . here's your father." Then Sandy heard her mother say: "Your daughter's on the phone."

"Y'know you're really in trouble," Bud pointed out, "when your folks start playing Daughter Tennis."

Tom Sr.'s voice appeared. "I heard the conversation between you and your mother."

"So did everyone in northern New Mexico," Bud said.

"I keep asking myself why I should be surprised."

"Is everyone all right at your end?"

"So far. The attack on the Pueblo seems to have petered out. We've been in contact with the authorities and it looks as if the Wives and drones are beginning to withdraw from Tenderly."

Sandy was looking at the others.

"Solomon knows we're not in Tenderly or the Pueblo," murmured Bud.

"And it won't take Solomon long to figure out where we've gone," Sandy replied. "Dad, we hope to be finished in SECFAR soon. We'll need a way to get to you."

"Yes. Looking at a map now. I can contact the National Guard and they can dispatch a helicopter to SECFAR to pick you up. We can take a Tommycar and rendezvous in Gallup and then swing back around to the Mesa." A sigh. "Sandra . . ."

"I know, Dad, I know. I'm a horrible, nasty little girl and I'll come to no good.

"You've upset your mother."

"I'm sorry."

"And I'm not too thrilled about the situation either. But, just like your brother, I guess I'll have to learn to live with it."

"Believe me, Dad, I'm trying to be as careful as possible."

"Oh, and David wants to know if you have any idea what happened to his Cherokee?"

"Believe me, Dad, I'm trying to be as careful as possible."

"I was afraid of that."

"Sorry. Is Sherman around?"

"Right here."

A pause, and then Sherman's voice appeared. "Sandy, I haven't accessed your medical telemetry yet. Would I be unhappy if I did?"

"You'd look good with a touch of grey."

"Yeah, I sort of thought that'd be the case."

"Sherman, Solomon can't listen in on Snooper calls can it?"

"It shouldn't be able to, but I bet Solomon's been trying. We've got equipment set up here at the Mesa and I can keep scrambling the frequencies. Don't worry."

"Good. I'll keep this channel open. Is Frieda with you?"

Phyllis and Bingo snorted.

"I heard that, and yes. Hold on."

Frieda's voice now appeared. "Is this how you and Bud acted when you two went to the Moon to look for the Foresight robots? No wonder Enterprises has trouble with health insurance."

"Things must be getting better," Sandy observed. "Everyone's suddenly funny. Frieda: have you had any more time to think about the clue Dr. Riis left behind?"

"It's been busy here, Sandy---"

"I know, but I keep hoping that he somehow knew something was going on with Solomon. If he was able to leave behind some sort of preparation then he certainly didn't come up with it on a moment's notice."

"The only thing I can remember, Sandy, is that we were discussing programming a few weeks ago. He seemed to be interested in topics like hash functions and error correcting codes."

"Promising. Was he specific about why he was discussing these topics?"

"Well, unfortunately he picked that moment to get mysterious. You got to understand that he was sort of eccentric."

"Which is probably how he ended up working for us," Sandy said. "How do you mean eccentric?"

"Well, I asked him about it and he laughed and quoted Shakespeare."

"Huh?"

"He was always doing that. He was nuts about Shakespeare."

"What did he say, Frieda?"

"Hold on. It was . . . it was . . . yeah. `Lend me wings to make my purpose swift, as thou hast lent me wit to plot this drift!'"

"Two Gentlemen Of Verona," Bingo said. "Act two, I think scene five."

"Lend me wings to make my purpose Swift'," she murmured. "Well well well."

Looking up she saw the towers of SECFAR growing closer in the morning light.

"Enter Sandy and company," she said. "Act one, scene one."

Chapter Twenty Six: "To `Scape The Serpent's Tongue".

"It doesn't make sense," Sandy said as they stepped into the terminal at SECFAR. Or, rather, most of the group was stepping. Sandy had returned to leaning on Bud and hopping/sliding about.

A few moments passed. Then Phyllis said: "OK. Are you going to treat us like adults and tell us what doesn't make sense, or are we going to have to guess?"

"That thing Frieda said. Making it sound like Dr. Riis purposefully left behind a clue for me to find."

Phyllis sighed. "My God, your ego. The quote Riis used just mentioned the word `swift'. Even . . . even if it was directed at your family, there's nothing to link it directly to you."

"That's what she said," Bud and Bingo told Phyllis.

Phyllis shook her head. "No. She's supposed to have said it doesn't make any sense that Dr. Riis left behind a clue for the Swift family. But she turned it around into something more personal."

"Semantics aside," Sandy said as she guided everyone to the elevators, "why would Riis leave behind a clue for . . . for anyone in my family? And why couldn't he just come out and say `Hey! This is the Important Clue', instead of hiding it in all this muckymuck?"

"Well, you already answered part of the question," Bud said, reaching out to push the button to summon an elevator.

Sandy suddenly slapped at his hand. "Don't!"

"Ow!" Bud stared at her. "Riis' office is on the . . . sixth floor?"

Sandy nodded.

"So what do you want us to do? Use the stairs? It'd be no problem for Phyl, Bingo or me, but do we just lean you against the wall here while we go on up?"

"Hold on a moment." Sandy raised the Snooper. "Sherman."

"Yes?"

"You turned off the security monitoring on the fourth floor yesterday. Did that, by any chance, spread all throughout SECFAR?"

"Ahhhh . . . no."

The others slowly looked around, comprehension slowly dawning on their faces.

"Oops," Bingo muttered.

"My fault," Sandy admitted. "I was so busy concentrating on getting us here that I forgot Solomon sees everything in both the Citadel and SECFAR."

"So Solomon knows exactly where we are," Bud said. "Wives will be converging on this location pretty soon now."

"Yeah." Sandy gave the elevator doors a mournful look. "I have to get upstairs, but Solomon would know if an elevator is used here. Crap! This is not the time to be making stupid mistakes."

"Don't know why you'd be making stupid mistakes," Bud commented, carefully moving around. "I mean, you're just injured, tired and have been attacked and on the run for several hours now. C'mon."

"What?"

"Grab onto my neck and climb on. I'll piggyback you upstairs."

"Bud!"

"You're only a hundred and forty pounds."

A hundred and fifty two, Sandy thought, but decided to keep that bit of information to herself as she brought herself up onto Bud's broad back. With Phyllis holding the stairwell door open, Bud moved on in.

"I really appreciate this," Sandy said meekly.

"S'alright," Bud said, going oof as he started up the stairs. "I just need some conversation to make this bearable."

"Well let's see," Bingo commented. "Six floors. Two flights of stairs per floor. Thirteen steps per flight . . . that comes out to one hundred and---"

"Thank you, Bingo," Bud said. "Anyone else want to try?"

"Getting back to Sandy's earlier question," said Phyllis, "Sandy's had already answered part of it."

Sandy glanced back. "Huh?"

"You did back when you said that Dr. Riis would've hidden a clue in such a way that Solomon couldn't find it. That's why all the `muckymuck', as you put it."

"I must be getting tired," Sandy muttered.

"You're getting company," Bud pointed out as he continued climbing.

"As for the other," Phyllis went on, "keep in mind that Solomon considers you to be dangerous."

"Yeah," said Sandy, "but why?"

"Maybe Solomon considered what it'd be like carrying you up these stairs."

"Bud, I can probably manage up the stairs by myself---"

"Just gassin' off," Bud assured her. Or tried to. "You're as light as . . . oof . . . an angel's wing."

"For that," Bingo said to Sandy, "I'd recommend slidin' off his back an' givin' him a nice big kiss--
_"

"We're sort of pressed for time here," finished Sandy. "But there's absolutely no reason for Solomon to believe I'm more dangerous than anyone else."

"Wait till it forgets your birthday."

"Bud!"

"Solomon knew that running this . . . this program it created would eventually result in having to confront Sherman and Enterprises Security," Phyllis was theorizing. "From there the next logical step would be to presume that someone in your family would get involved. If," and here Phyllis gulped, "if Tom could be neutralized then the next obvious threat would be you."

"Who was it who once accused me of reaching?"

"Sandy!"

Sandy brought the Snooper closer. "Yes, Sherman?"

"What's wrong with Bud? I'm showing his physicals on a severe rise."

"Ah, he's carrying me up the stairs to Riis' office."

"Does he know he's hauling one hundred and---"

"He's OK, Sherman," Sandy said quickly. "We're almost there."

"Thank God," Bud groaned.

"The National Guard's sending a Blackhawk to SECFAR," Sherman continued. "Ken and your parents are already on their way to Gallup."

"Sherman, tell the Guard helicopter to be careful. Solomon probably knows we're here and will be sending Wives. And I've got a bottom dollar that says there'll be drones in the air."

"I'll match that dollar and also tell the Guard."

At the rear of the procession Bingo suddenly paused. "What was that?"

Everyone suddenly stopped (Bud leaning against the wall and allowing Sandy to slide off). Sandy noticed that Bingo seemed to be listening to something. "What---"

"Shhh!"

Silence for a few moments. Then a faint but distinct crash could be heard.

"Uh oh," said Phyllis.

Bud bent back down. "C'mon people. Sandy?"

Sandy climbed back onto Bud. "I'm just hoping Solomon doesn't start firing drones at Riis' office."

"I'm betting not," Bud said, resuming his ponderous tread up the stairs. "Between using drones as missiles, and having the National Guard shooting them down, Solomon's got to be runnin' out of drones. It'll be needing the rest of them for surveillance."

"You betting not or hoping not?" Sandy asked.

"Hoping not, but `betting not' sounds better."

They finally reached the sixth floor landing, and Bud practically collapsed on the floor with Sandy on top of him.

As decorously as possible, Sandy rolled off him. "Dr. Riis was in 604," she told Phyllis and Bingo. "Go on ahead and see if the door's unlocked. Bud and I will be along momentarily."

The girls turned to leave, but Phyllis paused. "Ahh . . . how do we definitely know Solomon won't fire a drone off at the office?"

"If the office blows up then Solomon fired a drone. Simple."

Muttering, Phyllis left the stairwell followed by Bingo.

Sandy sat back against the wall, looking at Bud. "You gonna be okay?"

Nodding, Bud waved an affirmative hand at her. They then became alert, both of them gazing down the stairwell at the sound of another crash.

"That's getting closer," Sandy said.

"We may not have much time to fool around here," Bud said, struggling to stand up. "C'mon, Genius Girl." Helping Sandy back up they left the stairwell to stumble out onto the sixth floor.

Phyllis and Bingo were down the corridor, facing a door. Phyllis was peering closely at the lock but straightened up when she saw Sandy and Bud approaching. "Door's locked," she announced. "I was just trying to see if I could somehow pick---"

Sharply bringing her knee up, Bingo suddenly lanced out with her right leg at the door, causing it to open wide.

"Or Bingo could just kick the door open," Phyllis continued. "I'm cool with it."

"Whatever," said Sandy. "I think we're gonna have company pretty soon so let's try and keep the stupid down to a severe minimum."

Entering the office, Bud helped Sandy to a chair facing Riis' desk. "Thanks," she told him. "And somebody keep an eye out for that helicopter when it arrives."

"When it arrives," Phyllis slowly said, "and presuming that a Wife is on its way up here now to quite possibly kill us, how in the world are we supposed to get down to it?"

"Use the other stairwell."

"Such cleverness," Phyllis muttered, looking around. "One wonders why you failed three consecutive driving tests. And now that we're actually here, what exactly are we supposed to be looking for?"

"Let's bring in an expert," Sandy said, picking up the Snooper. "Frieda? Can you hear me?"

"I'm here, Sandy."

"We're here in Riis' office and in desperate need of inspiration. Talk to me."

"Yeah. Well, I've been spending time with some of the other SECFAR people trying to figure out how Solomon managed to ignore the shutdown commands. Right now we're playing with the notion that what Solomon did was essentially recreate itself, establishing and overlaying an entirely advanced version of the original program. In doing this, Solomon would have to duplicate specific connections on the YNM calculation web, but it could be selective and eliminate portions it didn't want, such as the shutdown."

"How sure are you guys on this?"

"It's really the only explanation that fits Solomon being able to ignore the shutdowns."

"So. Did Dr. Riis realize this was going on?"

"He may have had suspicions. But if this move by Solomon was as subtle as we think it was, Sam might not have been able to confirm it until it was too late."

Sandy realized she had taken a pencil and was idly doodling on a pad. "If he had suspicions then he could have somehow prepared some sort of contingency plan."

"Maybe."

"It's kind of getting late on `maybes', Frieda. Tell me: if you had been in Riis' shoes what would you have done?"

Frieda entered into a silence that was only challenged by the sound of a distant crash from down the corridor.

Then: "Sandy, if I thought Solomon was advancing beyond its original programming, consciously bypassing the shutdowns, I would've designed an entirely new shutdown and hidden it somewhere else within Solomon. Better yet, I'd simply copy the original shutdown."

"But Solomon ignored the shutdown codes you entered."

"I'd use the original shutdown, but different codes."

Sandy slowly leaned forward in her chair. "So in theory, what we're really looking for are new code words."

"Emphasis on the `in theory'. If Sam was using the original shutdown then the template calls for three words."

Sandy looked down at the pad she'd been doodling on and realized she had written AMNDa5s1. "OK, Frieda . . . stay close."

"Right."

Bud was shaking his head. "Crazy."

Phyllis' expression wasn't too much more hopeful. "Three words. Out of the entire English language."

"Maybe two of the words were `Sandra Swift'," Bingo said hopefully.

"No-ooo," Sandy said half to herself. "I remember Frieda talking about code words once. She said you'd use words not commonly found in a sequence. Like `dominoes almond submarine' or something."

"That's not really narrowing it down," Phyllis said.

"No. It isn't." Raising her eyes, Sandy slowly looked around, seeing the books and framed pictures and marker board as if for the first time. She had been in the office six days ago but, back then, her attention had been focused on trying to ignore Riis' body.

A crash sounded nearer, and Bud went to peer out into the corridor.

"A Wife would be too big for the stairwell," Bingo said.

"Like a Wife was too big for the Sheriff's Office," replied Bud, frowning.

"Oops," said Phyllis. "Here's another mystery solved."

"What?"

Phyllis was studying a framed object on the wall. "Apparently the late Dr. Riis had interests other than Shakespeare. He's got an autographed cover from one of Mrs. Applepound's books."

"Oh Lord!" Sandy moaned. "Solomon knows fiction but doesn't comprehend it. And Mrs. Applepound writes about me like I'm the Fifth Horseperson of the Apocalypse."

"Which is why Solomon considers you dangerous."

"Criminy."

"And Riis was also a fan of Renegades hockey," Bud said, removing something from another shelf and staring at it. He passed the item over to Sandy who accepted it, discovering it was a hockey puck bearing the logo of the New Mexico Renegades.

Turning it over she read a handwritten inscription. "If we shadows have offended, think but this, and all is mended, that you have but slumber'd here while these visions did appear'. Sounds like more Shakespeare."

"It's a pun," Bingo said. "It's from Puck's last speech in A Midsummer Night's Dream."

A growing sound from outside sent Phyllis to look out the window. "Helicopter's here. Hovering just over the parking lot."

The announcement was punctuated by a louder crash from outside.

Growling, Sandy slammed the puck down on the desk. "Spinning our wheels here," she cried out. "All this and nothing."

"San," Phyllis gently said. "We tried."

Sandy snatched up the Snooper. "Sherman, we're leaving SECFAR, but the way back down is blocked. Tell the helicopter to wait a bit and then head for the roof of Tower One. We're gonna use the stairs and meet it there."

Bud thought: four more floors!

"I'll pass the word, Sandy."

Attaching the Snooper back on her belt, Sandy turned and started moving up as Bud wearily came around the desk to offer his back. "Bingo," he said, "slip back down the corridor a bit and see how much time we've got."

Nodding, Bingo left the office.

Sandy once again pulled herself onto Bud, resting her head on the back of his. As he straightened up and began moving her mind was full of images of the fire and wreckage in both the Pueblo and Tenderly. Squeezing her eyes shut she tried to concentrate on something else. Which was why, just as Bud was reaching the doorway, she said, "Wait!"

"Huh?"

Sliding off Bud, Sandy turned and hobbled back towards Riis' desk. Gripping the edge and balancing herself she stared down at it, her eyes wide.

"Sandy . . ."

"You have but slumber'd here'," Sandy murmured to herself, "'while these visions did appear'."

She then looked over at the pad next to the hockey puck. The one she had been scribbling on. Finally she looked back up at the others.

"It couldn't be this simple," she said.

Chapter Twenty Seven: "The Play's The Thing".

Bud beat Phyllis to it. "What?"

Sandy's attention had returned to the items on the desk. One of her hands had balled into a fist with which she was lightly and rhythmically pounding out a slow beat upon the desk top.

"In front of all of us all this time," she muttered. "All this Shakespeare business and we weren't connecting the dots. I'm the biggest frickin' idiot in the world!"

Another crash from outside, and Bingo reappeared. "Guys, you can see it if you peek through the door. It's clawing the stairs apart, pulling itself up here. We've got about a few minutes."

"San . . ."

"Yeah, yeah." Looking up, Sandy studied the bookshelves.

"A few minutes, Sandy."

"All I need. Bud, bring me that big book on the middle shelf over there. No, not that one. The one with the black binding . . . yeah!"

"The biggest one on the shelf," Bud grumbled, pulling the book out and moving it to the desk, laying it before Sandy. "Riis never heard of the Internet?"

"You're the biggest, sweetest, strongest man in the world," Sandy assured him, her heart rising as she silently read the title of the book. Embellished in gilt print: The Complete Works Of William Shakespeare.

Everyone else was gathering around her. "You are, aware," Phyllis asked, "that we've got a murdering robot about to come through that door?"

Sandy nodded, trying to remain calm as she opened the book, finding the table of contents.

"It has to be here," she was whispering. "It has to."

"What has to be here?"

Sandy had been moving a fingertip down the contents. It now stopped, tapping at an item. "There," she announced triumphantly.

The others looked to see Sandy pointing at A Midsummer Night's Dream.

"The business about the puck?" Bud asked.

"No no no," Sandy insisted. "Look at it!" Almost in exasperation, Sandy pushed her fingertip hard against the title. "A . . . Midsummer . . . Night's . . . Dream!"

"Sandy . . ."

Her finger indicated the first letter of each word in the title. "A . . . M . . . N . . . D."

Bingo made the connection almost as Sandy finished. "Oh my God!"

"We were practically tripping over it all this time."

Phyllis seemed to be short of breath. "Then the rest of it---"

"A5s1," Sandy said, rapidly going through the book. "Act Five, Scene One."

Bingo was scrunching her face up, trying to remember. "It opens with Theseus speaking."

"Here," Sandy said, finding the appropriate page. "More strange than true: I never may believe these antique fables, nor these fairy toys. Lovers and madmen have such seething brains'."

"So do computers," Bud muttered.

"Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends. The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact: one sees more devils than vast Hell can hold, that is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic, sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt: the poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from Heaven to Earth, from Earth to Heaven; and as imagination bodies forth the form of things unknown, the poet's pen turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name. Such tricks hath strong imagination, that if it would but apprehend some joy; or in the night, imagining some fear, how easy is a bush supposed a bear'."

Bud was quiet for a few moments, then he said: "Not wanting to ruin your moment of genuine triumph here, Sandy, but what the heck is that supposed to mean?"

Sandy's face was practically glowing. "The lunatic, the lover and the poet!"

Phyllis' eyes were also shining. "Do you think . . ."

A crash now firmly echoed down the corridor. "Looks like we're gonna find out in a little bit," Sandy said.

Bud was looking pensive. "Ah, Sandy? There's a whole lot more other stuff written here."

"Bud, I love you dearly . . . and I'm going to hide cockroach eggs in your underwear drawer. C'mon." She hopped over to the office doorway and waited, staring down the corridor. "Everyone get ready to run in the off chance that this might all wash out."

Bud stood as close as possible to Sandy, one hand gripping the pistol tightly. Bingo moved to the other side of the corridor, bringing her submachine gun up and aiming the barrel at the stairwell door. Phyllis prudently took up position behind them, not so much out of fear but rather wanting to keep out of the field of fire.

"Sandy!" cried a voice from the Snooper.

"Not now, Sherman." Like everyone else, Sandy's attention was firmly fixed on the end of the corridor.

With a loud SLAM the fist of a Wife suddenly punched through the stairwell door. The entire doorway then bulged outwards, finally being pushed aside in all directions and crumbling as the body of the Wife shoved its way out into the corridor. One arm went up and began clawing through the ceiling, making more room for the robot to advance down the hall towards Sandy and the others.

Bud and Bingo carefully adjusted their aim.

Sandy read the Wife's number plate. "W044."

"Yes, Miss Swift," it replied even as both of its arms were reaching out for Sandy.

"Lunatic, lover, poet!"

The Wife suddenly froze in place. Then its arms went down to hang limply at its side.

One moment . . . two . . . and then four humans exhaled noisily.

Bingo patted Sandy's shoulder. "'Well roared, Lion!."

Closing her eyes, Sandy leaned back against Bud. "To be honest, I didn't really think that was gonna work."

Phyllis' eyes bugged out. "Don't tell us stuff like that."

"Sorry."

Making certain Sandy was balanced against the doorway, Bud began moving towards the Wife. "Bingo, keep your gun ready," he said without turning. "If it twitches, start shooting."

The girls watched . . . their heart rates at measurably different levels . . . as Bud reached the robot and carefully examined it. "OK," he said a minute later, "seems pretty dead to me."

Sandy grabbed at the Snooper. "Sherman? Still there?"

"Yeah, Sandy. What . . ."

"Lunatic, lover and poet. Those are the new code words for the shutdown. Lunatic, lover, poet."

The sigh from the other end was strong enough to distort the Snooper's speaker. "Praise God."

"Praise Sam Riis and pray that, next time, it doesn't take me eight forevers to pick up on clues. Broadcast those words on all channels and everything should turn out all right."

"Maybe not," Sherman reported. "I was trying to tell you that Frieda and some of the other SECFAR people've been monitoring Solomon. It suddenly shut down all incoming electronic traffic."

Sandy exchanged looks with the others. "When?"

"About four minutes ago. Just."

"Before you stopped the Wife," Bud pointed out.

Sandy tapped the end of the Snooper against her chin. "Solomon was listening in to our conversations here," she mused. "It suspected that we were on the verge of finding a way to shut it down and didn't want to risk being affected."

"So it's isolated itself. How much of a biggie is that?"

"As long as Solomon controls the Citadel, I'd consider that a pretty big biggie." Sandy sighed. "It means that someone'll have to go directly to the Citadel and use the code words there."

Bud shrugged. "Well, that's what we got SECFAR and the National Guard for."

"Yeah. And at least we can shut down the Wives." Sandy spoke to the Snooper again. "Sherman?"

"Yes?"

"We're heading up to the roof now. Expect us back later on."

"You got it."

They began the somewhat onerous task of finding the second stairwell and heading for the roof, Bud once again supporting Sandy.

"I swear," muttered Sandy, "next time I get injured I'm getting foldable crutches."

"Actually I'm getting accustomed to this," Bud remarked. "It's just a matter of finding a rhythm."

"Rather like life itself," Bingo said.

Finally reaching the roof they found the Army National Guard UH-60 Blackhawk waiting for them, its rotors spinning. Sliding Sandy off his back, Bud managed to get her into the helicopter with help from Phyllis while Bingo brought up the rear. Once everyone was on board the door was sealed and the Blackhawk spun off into the sky.

Noticing their direction, Sandy suddenly turned towards the cockpit. "Hey," she cried out. "We're supposed to be heading for Gallup. My folks are waiting."

One of the pilots looked back at her and motioned to his helmet.

"Sandy."

She raised the Snooper. "Sherman?"

"We're bringing you guys directly back to the Mesa."

"Yeah, but Mom and Dad---"

"We just learned a drone managed to force down their atomicar."

Ice filled Sandy's insides. "What---"

"The drone intercepted them outside the perimeter and used the overriding electronics to bring the atomicar to the Citadel. Solomon has them."

Chapter Twenty Eight: Death Sentence.

Sandra Swift had long been known to the people of both Tenderly and the Pueblo, as well as the scientists and workers of the Citadel and SECFAR. Everyone was accustomed to the sight of the vivacious blonde girl riding around town on horseback, or popping in and out of this or that laboratory, cheerfully visiting.

The crowd which gathered around the Blackhawk when it landed hardly recognized the bedraggled figure which was helped out of the aircraft. Limping, bruised, wrapped in a blanket and seemingly struggling beneath a morose cloud which was pressing her down.

The first person Sandy saw was Sherman. Her eyes, now shadowed with weariness and pain, bored into his face.

"We've only been able to work out a few more details," Sherman quietly told her. "The drone found the atomicar fifteen miles beyond the western perimeter. From all indications Ken tried to outfly it, but the drone managed to acquire control and force the atomicar to follow it back to the Citadel. It landed on a helipad." Sherman sighed. "Wives were waiting for it."

Sandy suddenly looked as if she'd been hit hard in the stomach.

Bud had been supporting her and he now held her tighter. "Honey . . ."

"Let's get her to the Medical Center," Sherman said. "In fact, all of you look as if you could use some time there." Giving Sandy another long look he turned and led the group through the crowd to one of the large tents which, like the various portable satellite dishes, vans and emergency vehicles, had popped up among the old adobe structures which the Zuni had used as a refuge a century before.

Inside, the tent had been partitioned off into smaller examination and treatment wards and rooms. Technicians were busily assembling Paradoc frames around portable beds, while other technicians in Paradoc gear were following doctors and nurses around, assisting them.

Sherman guided the group into a room featuring a single bed. "We'll get you out of those clothes--"

"We'll get Sandy out of the clothes," Phyllis said warningly.

"That's what I meant," Sherman explained. "I'll go hunt up a doctor and we'll get your leg looked at, as well as the rest of you guys." Turning, he left the room, leaving Bud to be pointedly glared at by Phyllis and Bingo.

Taking the hint Bud also left the room and caught up with Sherman. "Have there been any other attacks?"

Sherman shook his head. "Whatever Wives remain have apparently withdrawn to the Citadel, although I'm taking no chances. The Air National Guard's been flying high-altitude recon missions over the District, and I've contacted the space station and they've been subjecting the area to intense scanning. Guard troops and emergency personnel are currently involved in cautiously entering both the Pueblo and Tenderly. How are you feeling?"

Bud's thoughts went back to the sight of Sandy's face when she had first learned of what happened to her parents. "Bad."

* * * * *

It was growing late in the afternoon when Sandy received visitors. Bud, Phyllis and Bingo . . . all of them looking cleaned up but still somewhat pounded. Sherman, looking as if he was desperately in need of three weeks paid vacation in a cheap bed. Lellden from the NRC as well as David Yachunne.

And then there were the two strangers who were wearing the rank insignia of Brigadier Generals. One was dressed in the uniform of the U.S. Army while the other wore the Air Force's colors.

Phyllis moved closer, helping Sandy into a sitting position.

The Army general came forward, extending his hand. "Miss Swift, I'm General Carl Wolhriss, assistant commander for the 1st Armored Division."

Sandy briefly glanced at the hand, then stared into the general's face. After a pause, Wolhriss lowered his hand. "I wanted to personally congratulate you for all you've accomplished so far. Lieutenant MacAllan's report underlined how essential you were to stopping the attacks by the robots."

Sandy's eyes flicked over to the other officer. "I'm General Simon Parsons," the man said, "representing the Air Force's 355th Operations Group." Parsons didn't offer his hand.

"What's being done about my parents and Commander Horton?" Sandy murmured.

"Thanks largely to you," Wohlriss said, "the remaining trouble is now reduced to the Citadel. FEMA's bringing emergency medical aid in on a regular basis."

"What's being done about my parents and Commander Horton?"

Something uncomfortable could be seen passing between Wohlriss and Parsons. The others in the room began growing more attentive, and Sandy realized that a decision had been made which wasn't common knowledge yet.

"The FBI in Washington State is still trying to locate your brother," Wohlriss told Sandy. "We were hoping that we'd be able to talk with him."

Bud noticed how one of Sandy's hands was slowly gripping the sheets. He also noticed the venomous look which was gradually flowing into her eyes.

Apparently Wohlriss also noticed it and he started speaking a shade faster. "Miss Swift, you've got to understand that every effort is being made to get the hostages---

"My parents!"

"---out of the Citadel, yes. You've also got to understand that there are also significant issues to be considered."

Bud knew that Sandy was injured . . . and he also knew that she was on the verge of lunging out of the bed and going for Wohlriss' throat.

"You're trying to tell me something, General," Sandy said in a steady, deadly tone. "Perhaps you'd better just come out and say it."

Wohlriss glanced back at Parsons, and the Air Force man moved a step closer. "Miss Swift," Parsons said, "no one wants your folks out of danger more than I do---

"I seriously doubt that."

Parsons' face colored a bit. "Yes, I guess I would too. But there's been some discussion about this situation at higher levels. The discussion has focused on how the lives of thousands of people in the surrounding counties have to be considered."

"No," whispered Phyllis.

"Nothing firm has been decided yet," Parsons said to everyone in the room. "But we have complete plans for the Citadel and know exactly where Solomon is located. Like I said, nothing's been decided . . . but an option is being drawn up into a possible operational plan. If worse comes to worse regarding Solomon, planes from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base will be sent

here." Parsons let out a breath. "They'll have orders to aim for Solomon's location within the Citadel and hit it with four BLU-109 penetration bombs."

Bingo closed her eyes and her lips began moving.

"Those are bunker buster bombs," Sandy said softly.

Parsons nodded. "We've been studying the armor situation of the Citadel---"

"You're gonna hit an atomic power facility with penetration bombs?" Sandy suddenly cried out. "Are you INSANE?"

"Miss Swift---"

"Solomon is located at a junction between the Blue and Red Zones of the Citadel," Sandy said, her voice animated now. "Even if your bombs are accurate there's a better than average chance you'll punch a hole in the reactor containment barrier. There are several operational reactors within the Red Zone."

"And they're currently under Solomon's control," Parsons argued, trying to remain calm. "We've got to shut the computer down as quickly as possible."

Sandy was working to control her breathing. "Send troops in," she pointed out. "All they have to do is reach a working terminal, or find some sort of direct voice access, and give Solomon the new code words. Lunatic . . . lover . . . poet. It's what shut down the Wives and it'll shut down Solomon."

"We're considering that option, Miss Swift," Wohlriss said.

"Do it. For God's sake---"

"But Solomon could have booby traps and other defenses waiting within the Citadel," Wohlriss pointed out. "We have to find a workable surgical solution that would take Solomon out in one single stroke."

"And condemn my parents to death."

"We've been studying the Citadel plans. The place is huge. Your parents may not even be located anywhere near Solomon."

Bud's hands had balled into fists. "And you're gonna gamble on that?" he asked hotly.

"We haven't made a decision," Wohlriss told Bud. "But we'll eventually have to, and soon."

In the back of the room David Yuchanne quietly slipped out.

"And what were you going to talk to my brother about?" Sandy asked. "What did you want from me? Permission? ABSOLUTION?"

"Miss Swift---"

"GET OUT," Sandy shrieked at them. "JUST GET OUT AND STAY OUT."

Gathering Parsons up with his eyes, Wohlriss turned and left the room, followed by Parsons as well as by Sherman and Lellden who were now busily arguing with the generals.

Bud, Phyllis and Bingo had half-moved to follow, but they paused and looked back at Sandy. She had pulled the sheets tight over her and was now a lump upon the bed. The lump occasionally quivered.

Bud stepped closer. "San---"

"Go `way," the lump murmured brokenly. "Please."

* * * * *

Much later that evening, Bud tiptoed back to peer into Sandy's room, finding her quiet and still. Her head was no longer covered, and she was turned away from him, but Bud could tell that her eyes were closed. He could also clearly make out the long wet streaks on her pillow.

For several minutes he stood there, staring at her.

"I can't remember the last time I saw you cry," he whispered. Another minute of watching, and then he eased himself back out.

And, in the bed, Sandy's eyes snapped open. Hard, clear and cold.

Sitting up she moved as silently as possible, reaching for the Paradoc frame control and tapping it on. Selecting the medication function she scrolled down the list of available injections until she found both the stimulant and the painkiller she was searching for. Pressing the touchpad she bared her shoulder and allowed the slender injector arm from the frame to bend down and deliver the medication.

The clothes she had been wearing were still on a nearby chair. Dirty and clammy to the touch, but it was all she had and she concentrated on getting dressed, all the time keeping an ear open for sounds of anyone coming near.

A helpful medical technician had earlier brought a slender pair of folding crutches for later use, and Sandy now grabbed at them, struggling to pull herself up off the bed and into a standing position. She then reached for the Snooper which had been lying on the nearby bedstand, checking its power supply before attaching it to her belt.

She also happened to notice some writing paper on the bedstand. The temptation was agonizing, but she finally shook her head. "If I start saying goodbye now," she muttered to herself, "I'll never get out the door."

Carefully peeking out the door, Sandy checked to make certain the coast was clear. Finding it so she quickly hobbled her way out of the tent. Once there she pressed herself against a shadow, staring around. People were moving about, but none of them were nearby, and no one would think twice about seeing someone on crutches in a place where so many others had been injured.

Besides, the stable and corral were only a short distance away and Sandy began moving towards it as rapidly as possible, trying to stay away from the glow of the numerous portable lights. Every moment she expected to hear Bud or someone else yell stop!

But no one did and Sandy managed to slip into the darkness of the stable, pausing for a bit to make certain she wasn't being followed. She knew that she didn't have much time before her absence from the tent would be discovered. "Price I pay for being so loved," she grumbled.

Loping crookedly she moved among the stalls until she found the one she had been searching for. "Babycakes!"

The horse came to the gate, easing its head over to nuzzle against Sandy and make low affectionate shuddering noises.

"I'm sorry, sweet boy, but I don't have any sugar. Not this time." Leaning her forehead against the horse's long face Sandy closed her eyes. Sensations were gradually building up hot inside her. She'd been trying to keep them under control, but . . .

"When I was a little girl," she whispered brokenly to the horse, "I used to play Make Believe all the time. I always wanted to ride into the Dark Castle and slay the Dragon that waited inside."

A tear leaked out. "But now it's real." Reaching up with a hand she stroked the warm flesh. "It's real." Her eyes opened and they glittered in the darkness. "The Dragon's waiting."

Quietly opening the gate Sandy slipped into the stall, contemplating how difficult it was going to be to put the saddle on Babycakes without falling flat on her face. Not only that, but she knew that riding a horse with a broken leg wasn't quite the smartest thing in the world.

"Of course," she reasoned, working to tug the saddle free of where it was hanging, "if I only did smart things then I'd be the one building flying labs, and Tom'd be here with the broken leg."

"Sandra."

Sandy felt as if she jumped ten feet into the air . . . no mean trick with a broken leg. Whirling around she saw that someone was standing in the shadows.

He came closer and Sandy's eyes widened. "Governor Yuchanne!"

The eyes flickered over her and Babycakes as Sandy looked back at him. Instead of his usual semi-professional clothing, David was dressed in a faded cotton shirt, equally faded Levis and a pair of moccasins. He was also carrying, oddly enough, a long wooden staff. To Sandy's eyes he was looking less like the Governor of an Indian reservation, and more like what he truly was: a Chief of the Zuni.

"Let me help you," David murmured, moving into the stall and taking the saddle in his hands.

"Governor . . ."

"Your father has done much for my people, Sandra," David said in a conversational tone as he worked to fix the saddle firmly onto Babycakes. "He has helped build us up. He always offered a hand where it was needed, and without hesitation. He has been honest and sincere and open." Bending down he adjusted the cinch, making certain the padding was securely in place.

Straightening up he gazed into Sandy's eyes. "He is my friend."

"Governor Yuchanne . . ."

"You plan to go there, Sandra? To the Citadel?"

Sandy slowly nodded. "It would be faster in a car, but Solomon may still be listening to the acoustic mines and pick it up. But the mines might ignore a horse running across the grounds inside the perimeter."

"Um. `Might'."

"All I have to do is get those code words into Solomon," Sandy insisted. "That's all I have to do."

They spent several moments staring quietly at each other. Then David stepped back out of the stall. "Come with me a moment. Please."

Wordlessly, Sandy left the stall and hobbled along behind David as he walked towards the door at the far end of the stable.

"You know, Sandra," David remarked, "the Zuni . . . or, rather, the Ashiwi as we call ourselves . . . are actually a rather remarkable people. Not quite as glamorous as other tribes. We don't possess the warlike history that have made other tribes more memorable. We've never been considered as ferocious as, say, the Cheyenne or the Apache or the Sioux. Rather, we've been considered little more than a tribe of housekeepers."

At the door he paused and looked back at her. "Let me show you how my people keep their houses."

Opening the door he motioned for Sandy to go on out. She did so . . .

And immediately stood still, her jaw falling open.

There had to be at least seventy Zuni before her. Perhaps a hundred, possibly much more. All of them mounted on horseback. A few, like David, holding long wooden staffs (or lances, rather), but most of them holding onto rifles . . . M16s . . . AR-15s . . . even a few AK-47s.

At first Sandy didn't notice David moving to stand alongside her. But she saw him staring out at the assembled host. He raised his staff high above his head.

"Ashiwi!" he cried out in a strong voice. "SUWE ASHIWI!"

In the next moment the mounted Zuni had also raised their weapons into the sky. "HOAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Chapter Twenty Nine: War Party.

"Um . . . Governor . . ."

"I know what you're probably thinking," David said as he took Sandy's elbow and carefully guided her towards the waiting horsemen. "You were hoping not to involve anyone else. You didn't want the responsibility for other people."

"I just don't want anyone else getting hurt."

David turned her so that their eyes met. "Then we're in agreement. If we stay here and do nothing then we'll be hurt. It's only by going with you and helping that we'll escape pain."

"Huh! And what does Mrs. The Governor have to say about all this?"

David raised an eyebrow. "Taci? She kissed me on the cheek and told me to pick up a quart of milk on the way home."

"A quart of---"

"You should've known her back in high school." David looked off to one side. "Ah!"

Sandy followed his gaze and saw one of David's sons leading Babycakes towards her. Immediately she hobbled towards the animal, once again nuzzling her face against his.

"This isn't going to be a picnic," Sandy said.

"Most of us have already eaten," David replied.

"I said there was a good chance the acoustic mines would ignore a single horse. Now you're wanting to throw in a whole herd galloping towards the Citadel. There's little chance of Solomon ignoring that."

"Focus on your parents," David softly told her.

Sandy was, her fingers twisting into Babycakes' mane.

"And, if you can't focus on your parents, consider the delicious sense of irony attached to all of this."

Sandy looked back at him. "Irony?"

"Sure," David said, smiling. "How many people get a chance to lead the first Indian attack in almost a hundred and fifty years?"

* * * * *

There are no atheists in foxholes, Sandy was reminding herself. But there sure as heck are saddle sores.

If Sandy had learned anything from the experiences of over twenty years of horseback riding she knew that it wasn't the cleverest thing in the world to be traveling at a full gallop while having a leg in a cast. She was hanging onto Babycakes very tightly and gritting her teeth so hard she suspected she looked like a bad parody of Theodore Roosevelt.

Not that Babycakes was having a good time of it either. He was trying gallantly to maintain speed, but his overall balance was way the heck off and Sandy knew any fancy maneuvering would be the end of them both.

To add insult to injury, Sandy didn't know enough of the Zuni language to match the enthusiastic shouting of war cries by her companions. She was torn between "Narnia and the North" and "For Montagar Forever" and decided to shut up and concentrate on hanging on and getting to her destination.

Some time back they had passed through the opening which the Wives had made in the southern part of the perimeter fence. They were now thundering north across the District at full speed. Sandy and David were in the lead (or at least Sandy was trying to keep herself in the forefront, being that this was, after all, her party) and riders were spaced out behind and on either direction. The determination was a wind whipping along beside all of them, driving them on.

Having been raised on a steady diet of Western movies from a very early age, Sandy soon realized what was wrong with the picture she was seeing. She was supposed to be up ahead at the fort, watching the Indians heading relentlessly towards her. This was her first real experience with the reverse perspective, and she had to admit to herself that there was an undeniable excitement associated with it. A distant part of her mind wondered if many babies were born into the tribe nine months after such raids?

Most of her attention, however, was centered on darker subjects. She now knew there were at least one hundred and seventy five horses accompanying her. That many hooves pounding the earth had to be a walloping big blip on anybody's radar screen, and she suspected a huge chorus of electronic signals were currently passing between them and Solomon's processors.

No Wives . . . yet. But in the distance she could now see the dome of the Citadel coming into view. A half-hour more of riding. Maybe.

And now a sound from David was making her look up. Both the Moon and Nestria were up, and their combined light was enough to point out what was swiftly and silently moving through the sky towards them.

Drones!

* * * * *

The sounds and movements brought Bud out of the mess tent and he looked around, seeing several men on horses galloping past. The horsemen were carrying both guns and determined expressions.

In fact it seemed as if the entire eastern section of the camp was engaged in some sort of activity, and Bud stood there wondering what was going on.

His thought was voiced by Bingo who came up beside him, eating a bowl of ice cream. "In the immortal words of Kelly: what the tarblinkin' bazfaz is goin' on here?"

"Beats me," Bud said, frowning, "but all this noise is gonna wake up Sandy."

It was then that Phyllis came running towards them, a panicked look in her eyes. "Sandy's gone."

"What?"

"I was just by her room," Phyllis said, stopping to catch her breath, "and she wasn't in her bed. And her clothes are missing."

"Where the hell would she go?" Bud asked, looking about. "She's in no condition to be up and around. Sherman? Sherman!"

Sherman had been running in the direction of the mess tent but he changed course and joined them. "I just heard a rumor that I'm checking out," he said. "I hope I heard it wrong, but it sounds as if a large number of Zuni men have gotten together and are right now mounting a direct attack on the Citadel on horseback."

Phyllis' eyes were like saucers. "That's . . . crazy!"

"Yeah," Bud sighed. "And I think we just found Sandy."

* * * * *

"SWING LEFT," Sandy yelled.

In the past Sandy had taken several medals in state and district equestrian events. But she had to admit the Zuni had her beat. Almost in one body the warriors shifted to the left, the instruction having been relayed to those who hadn't heard Sandy.

To their right the first of the approaching droned slammed into the ground. A clear miss. The second one, however, clipped the riders somewhat nearer, the crash resulting in several Zuni being thrown from their mounts, causing Sandy to gasp.

"Keep riding," David shouted to her.

"But---"

"We've got medicos bringing up the rear formation . . . RIGHT!"

And this time Sandy was almost hurled to the ground as Babycakes tried to obey the command, stumbling in the process. Wildly looking about, Sandy saw what had prompted the move. The first two drones had been launched to try and turn the attackers in a specific direction: straight into the teeth of a second drone wave.

This time at least a third of the riders were scattered or thrown by the crash of the robot aircraft. It even seemed as if some of the Zuni had been hit directly by the impacts. Sandy couldn't tell, but she could see David's expression hardening.

But she was remembering what Bud had said earlier. Solomon's supply of drones had to be severely limited by now. Sandy's mind raced ahead. There was no way the computer could win by continually launching drones. The four it had sent could only have been useful if the intention had been to send the riders directly into the path of . . .

"WIVES," she shrieked, seeing them up ahead. A line of robots forming a barrier.

Next to her David crouched lower in the saddle, definitely holding his rod like a lance now, and Sandy was wondering if the man was actually insane enough to try and joust with a Wife?

But she then saw that he was actually trying to pull something from his saddle. He raised an object in his hand, and then a red flare arced into the sky.

From several points up and down the line amplified voices were now crying out: "Lunatic, lover, poet . . . LUNATIC, LOVER, POET . . ." Looking closer, Sandy could now see that several riders were carrying portable loud-hailers. Helping them along were the rest of the attackers in the front who were adding their own voices: "Lunatic, lover, poet!"

"YES," Sandy cried out joyously. "LUNATIC, LOVER, POET."

The arms of the Wives had been extended out threateningly towards them. They now fell limp to the sides as the robots deactivated, allowing everyone to race past and on towards the Citadel.

That's a trick John Ford never thought of, Sandy thought.

They were now only a few minutes away from the edge of the Citadel dome. "Sandy," David called out. "Where to?"

"Herd everyone towards the right edge of the arch," Sandy shouted back. "Try to keep beneath the monorail track and use that as a shield."

Nodding, David began dropping back as he signaled orders. In the meantime, Sandy ducked low, bringing her face closer to Babycakes' left ear.

"A little more, sweetie," she cooed to the horse. "Just a bit more."

It was then that the drone struck from above, slamming squarely into the formation, the noise of the impact quickly replaced by shouts and cries and the startled whinnies of horses. A hot fragment of something whizzed close past Sandy as she sat on Babycakes' heaving form, staring wide-eyed at the sight. "No . . ."

Slipping from the saddle she almost fell flat to the ground before she managed to grab onto Babycakes' saddle. She then pulled the crutches from where she had stored them behind the cantle, quickly unfolding them as she kept looking behind her.

As quickly as possible she went to where everyone was grouping around the edge of the grand arch. The first person she met was Juan Yuchanne, one of David's sons.

"How bad?" Sandy asked anxiously.

"Five," Juan said, "maybe more." He saw the look on Sandy's face. "And no, Sandy, we're not callous about it. But now just ain't the time for crying. That'll be for later, when we're all together. Right now is right now. And at least we seem to be covered in here."

Examining their surroundings Sandy nodded. "You might want to get everyone closer against the dome edge. Solomon won't risk a direct impact against it."

"Sandy . . ."

She now saw a solemn look on Juan's face and followed him to where a crowd had gathered around several people stretched out on the ground.

One of them . . . "Oh no!"

"I'm all right," David declared as another of the Zuni was working on him with a first aid kit. "Was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Sandy tried to go to her knees beside him . . . but the cast resulted in her ending up in a partial recline. "Governor . . ."

"Shhh, dek'ohadi k'yak'yali. We got you this far. And had to keep our houses."

Sandy anxiously looked up at Juan.

"He should be okay," Juan assured her. "He just had the wind knocked out of him really."

She suddenly felt a touch of one of David's hands and looked down at him again.

"What do you need now?" he asked.

Sandy held his hand to her cheek and slowly shook her head. "No more," she told him. "Like you said, you got me this far. From now on this is my fight."

A dim laugh brokenly shook David's body. "Just you. On crutches."

"It's my fight." Producing a small smile, Sandy bent down and gently kissed his forehead. "Don't forget the milk."

She struggled to her feet, locating a good balance on the crutches.

"The medicos will be arriving soon," Juan told her. "We'll take care of the wounded and the . . . others when they arrive."

"Your father--"

"Is having the time of his life," Juan said. "Trust me." He stared more intently at her. "You sure you want to do this on your own?"

Sandy let out a breath. "To be honest, no. But Solomon's now geared for larger targets, like a Zuni warrior charge. I want to give him something smaller to aim at."

Juan had a weapon hanging on a strap around his right arm. He now removed it and handed it over to Sandy. An Ingram Mac-11. "Ain't been fired yet," he told her. "Thirty-two rounds."

With his help Sandy looped the gun around her shoulder. She wondered how in the world she was supposed to fire it quickly enough to make a difference. But its presence was reassuring. "Take care of Babycakes," she told Juan, "and your father."

A nod. "We will."

A final look, and Sandy turned to hobble into the shadows of the Citadel.

Chapter Thirty: Solomon's Temple.

Among the numerous security measures taken at the Citadel was the fact that access from ground level was severely limited. There was a single loading dock on the surface, but most deliveries in and out of the Citadel were handled via the underground railway. Most people entering or leaving the Citadel made use of the monorail, which was located four stories above the ground.

The surface loading dock was at the dome's 9 o'clock position, making it too far away for Sandy's intentions even if she hadn't been on crutches. Fortunately, though, she had taken part in the Citadel's safety drills. And, since her father had ordered the evacuation of the Citadel yesterday, she also knew that one of the primary safety features would've been operated. Namely: the automatic opening of all emergency exits.

Yes!

Sandy was now seeing an open hatchway in the wall before her. People had doubtless left the Citadel by monorail or helicopter, but evacuation procedures would've triggered the emergency exits as well. And if they were a way out . . .

Struggling with her crutches, Sandy managed to ease herself over the lip of the hatchway and settle against the coolness of the curving tunnel wall for a few moments, getting her bearings. Mentally running the map of the Citadel through her head she estimated that following the tunnel would cause her to eventually come out in Level C/Section One.

She knew there were things she needed which were several floors above her, but then she considered that maybe she would have more luck in her present location. Sighing, she gripped her crutches and once again began walking. The medicines she had taken back at the redoubt were rapidly wearing off and she could feel herself wanting to collapse for at least a week. Perhaps there was a fully stocked medical kit or infirmary somewhere ahead, but Sandy grimaced at the thought of putting more stimulants into herself.

Then she reminded herself that, if Solomon wasn't stopped, then it wouldn't make much difference what she did.

Five minutes later she was peeking out the other end of the emergency tunnel. In both directions stretched a wide curving corridor. A line of blue fluorescent lights was illuminating the entire scene in a dim eeriness.

Tiptoeing . . . or trying as best she could to tiptoe while on crutches . . . Sandy entered the corridor and, after a few moments of silent debate, began moving to her left. She was still in the Green Zone. The section she was currently in had not been one she'd visited before, but she knew that a lot of maintenance equipment was kept here, as well as all sorts of supplies.

Even better was the way her heart leapt at the site of an abandoned electric cart ahead of her, and her paced picked up. Early on her father had realized that working in a domed structure six miles in diameter would require either the addition of personal transports throughout the complex, or limiting all hiring practices to scientists capable of competing in the Olympics.

Reaching the cart Sandy considered that it was an improved solution over her brother's mercifully brief flirtation with placing conveyor belts and moving walkways everywhere throughout Enterprises. Even the interiors of buildings.

"Walking to get to the Ladies Room," she muttered to herself, "and darn near getting run over by a jeep. Ridiculous."

Placing her crutches in the cart, Sandy eased herself into the cart and checked to make certain it had enough power. Finding that the batteries were still charged she then contemplated her next move. Solomon was physically not all that far away. Turn at the first passageway leading to the Blue Zone, move inwards until reaching the corridor circling the Red Zone, then back to the 4 o'clock position.

But Sandy hoped she wouldn't have to go quite that far and, pressing a button, she started the cart up and began driving. If she was lucky . . .

There! A Security kiosk just up ahead. Sandy knew they were strategically placed throughout the Citadel and, best of all, they carried active terminals. With luck she could transmit the shutdown codes to Solomon. With even more luck she could access the Citadel maps and somehow locate her parents and Ken.

"Miss Swift," Solomon said.

Slamming on the brakes, Sandy looked around desperately, one hand grabbing at the MAC-11.

"You are fortunate in your survival and persistence."

Sandy realized Solomon was communicating with her through the Citadel's speaker system. As carefully as possible she said, "Lunatic, lover, poet."

"Every theory I have encountered concerning you has been proven," Solomon continued. "Every analysis has been verified. I have calculated that you are currently trying to apply Dr. Riis' shutdown codes through verbal command. Whereas I am keeping the outgoing audio channel active, I have shut down the incoming channel and, as a result, cannot hear anything."

Sandy quickly began looking up and down the corridor, wondering where the nearest office supplies room was. If Solomon couldn't hear . . .

"I also calculate that you are now attempting to find some way of visually presenting the code words to me. Perhaps written on paper. I must therefore inform you that I have also shut down all video input."

"Well there goes that idea," Sandy muttered.

"To answer the most probable immediate question: I am tracking you via heat sensors. Yesterday I calculated that you were on the verge of locating the new code words, and I immediately closed down all input before you had a chance to use them on me directly. When my Wives began becoming inoperative I concluded I was correct. Phase Five of my plan is almost complete, and no interference must occur."

Phase Five, Sandy silently mouthed.

"Going on to the next probable question: your parents and Commander Horton are quite alive and safe."

Sandy closed her eyes, feeling as if she was going to deflate against the seat of the cart.

"In fact, considering events, their captivity no longer becomes relevant. Neither does the captivity of your brother. Orders are currently being transmitted for their immediate release."

Sandy's eyes snapped back open. "So why don't I feel good about that?" she asked herself.

"I calculate my actions are confusing you. Phase Five is nearing completion, and I require assistance."

Sandy resumed driving down the corridor.

"I require a test subject."

"Yeah," Sandy said, "and that's why I don't feel good."

Spotting movement up ahead she slowed to a stop. A Wife was rolling into view, its arms moving to reach out for her.

"Lunatic, lover, poet," Sandy shouted.

To her surprise the Wife continued moving. Sandy quickly backed away, turning the cart and driving off in the opposite direction.

"By now, Miss Swift, you are realizing that the new shutdown codes are no longer effective. Gathering together what few operational Wives I had remaining I had their audio circuits disconnected."

"Yummy," growled Sandy.

"To repeat: I require a test subject for Phase Five. I assure you that the Wives have no orders to kill you. If necessary, however, they will remove your arms and legs. They may also injure your spine to a degree sufficient to prevent you from moving."

It was then that Sandy saw another Wife coming into view directly ahead. "Ignore this command," she said, raising the MAC-11 and pulling the trigger. The .380 ACP cartridge had hardly been designed with attacking armored objects in mind, but against the video lenses in the turret the fifteen rounds Sandy fired were enough to cause damage and inflict blindness on the Wife.

As in Tenderly, the sightless robot stopped and began swinging wildly about. Ducking low, Sandy sped the cart past the Wife and continued driving.

"I require you to come to me," Solomon was saying. "I will make every attempt to guide you in my direction."

"And I'll dance on your grave," Sandy said. "Even with crutches."

She almost missed it, but then she brought the cart to a stop and backed up until she once again was at the double doors marked HAZMAT STORAGE AND DISTRIBUTION GREEN C1-9. Her excitement rising she took her crutches and climbed out of the cart, pushing herself through the doors.

Switching on the lights, Sandy saw that the inside of the room held numerous shelves full of items, as well as an assortment of large barrels. Slowly she looked around, her heart racing.

"I had an idea when I came in," she said. "What what what?"

Spotting a large cardboard box on a weight scale marked ROAD AND TRACK MAINTENANCE she realized that she was probably closer to the surface loading dock than she originally thought. Hopping over she punched through the top of the box and pulled it open, But nothing inside immediately caught her eye and she turned away . . .

Only to have her eyes look at some shipping labels on some of the barrels stacked next to her. They were destined to be sent to some of the laboratories in the Blue Zone and, according to the labels, they were filled with diethyl ether.

"Oh my," Sandy whispered. She gave a quick glance to the ceiling, then looked back down at the barrels, her mind whirling. "Oh my!"

Turning back to the box she once again searched, finding what she was looking for in heavily insulated and sealed packets. Taking a few she also spotted a plastic squeeze bottle and, on impulse, she grabbed that as well.

"A bomb is a bomb is a bomb," she murmured.

Going back to the barrels she found a nearby screwdriver and, as carefully as possible, began prying the bung loose. Succeeding she carefully filled the squeeze bottle with diethyl ether, her ears continually listening for sounds of the approaching Wives.

Once the bottle was filled she sealed it and put it aside for a moment. The barrel she had used, plus another one, were still sitting on a transport dolly, and Sandy worked the lock loose on the wheels. She followed this up by prying the bung off the other barrel. Then, grabbing the sealed packets and the squeeze bottle, Sandy began pushing the dolly out of the room.

Back out in the corridor she began jockeying the dolly into position (grimacing all the while and realizing why very few injured people were hired for grunt work).

"What are you doing, Miss Swift?" Solomon asked.

"Calculate and find out," muttered Sandy.

It was then she saw two Wives moving into view and, almost stumbling head over heels in her haste, she climbed back into the cart. Fortunately for her the Wives were coming from the direction she had been traveling in, so there was no need to reposition the cart.

Switching the cart back on she drove it so that it began pushing hard against the dolly. Pressing down on the accelerator caused the barrels on the dolly to rock and, finally, fall off the dolly with a crash and begin rolling towards the approaching Wives. All the while liquid was pouring out from the barrels.

Reaching for one of the sealed packets Sandy tore it open and removed a flare. Firmly snapping it in half she put the cart into reverse, at the same time throwing the flare towards the trail of liquid which was following the rolling barrels.

The flare ignited just as it hit the floor, and a bright trail of flame rapidly raced down the corridor, reaching the barrels as they rolled up against the Wives. In an instant the entire corridor roared with fire as a single explosion blossomed bright as a star. Still racing backwards, Sandy ducked down as much as possible, closing her eyes tightly and feeling, rather than seeing, the

lethal heat licking all around. She continued moving, though (the cart managing to bounce off the wall a few times) and was soon out of harm's way.

At least immediately.

Spotting a side corridor marked BLUE ZONE ACCESS EIGHT Sandy turned the control yoke about until the cart was pointed in that direction and resumed driving. Behind her she could hear automatic fire extinguishers in operation, and fire warning lights and sirens were going off in all directions around her.

"Are you there, Miss Swift?"

Sandy, now starting to feel the scorch marks on her neck, left cheek and shoulder, continued driving.

"You have managed to temporarily overload my heat sensors," Solomon explained. "Several of my Wives are also inconvenienced."

"I'm bleeding," Sandy said, contemplating the possibility that she was being more accurate than she knew.

Ahead of her the corridor was reaching an intersection marked CROSS CORRIDOR BLUE FIFTEEN. Beneath it was a smaller notice in red pointing to the right: COMPUTER CORE (ACCESS RESTRICTED).

Pressing her lips tightly together, Sandy gave the cart a hard turn into the right branch.

"I'll have my sensors rebooted shortly," Solomon assured her, "and then I can easily locate you once more."

"I'll save you the bother," Sandy called out.

And now she was approaching the end of the corridor, passing several control rooms. Directly ahead of her the way was blocked by a dull grey barrier marked with a single broad horizontal red stripe.

A label within the stripe: CITADEL PRIMARY COMPUTER CORE. SWIFT/RIIS "TOUCHSTONE" III HYPERHEURISTIC PROCESSOR (Warning: entrance beyond this point forbidden without joint authorization from both Citadel Security and SECFAR).

"Dear Solomon," Sandy said. "IOU."

Pulling herself out of the cart she made it over to a communications pad on the near wall and began steadily tapping a button, waiting.

"There you are, Miss Swift."

Slowly the grey barrier began lifting upwards. Taking the squeeze bottle and another flare from the cart, Sandy began hopping forward, entering a wide room of sloping walls.

Dominating the chamber, rising up through the ceiling and down through the floor, was an enormous cube of almost featureless black metal. Only a small thin strip of blinking red lights indicated any sort of activity taking place.

Sandy didn't consider herself a computer scientist in the same league as Sam Riis or Frieda Morgan, but she knew that the majority of Solomon's bulk served to maintain the actual "brain" buried within. Somewhere within that cube was a cylinder the size of a bathtub filled with semi-organic, molecule-sized metaprocessors connected by an intricately designed web of laser "veins".

"Greetings, Miss Swift," Solomon's voice echoed out from all directions. "It will interest you to know that my heat sensors are fully operational, and I can see you once again."

Balanced on her crutches, Sandy quietly looked about the room.

"I have been analyzing and calculating your moves. My results originally presented a 62% probability that you would take advantage of the fire you started to try and affect an escape. By further calculation I concluded that you were not absolutely certain your parents, your brother and Commander Horton had been freed. This in spite of my assurances."

Flipping the squeeze bottle open, Sandy began to carefully direct a stream of diethyl ether onto the floor . . . pausing, squirting again, pausing and taking careful aim, then another squirt.

"Motivational analysis suggested that my previous actions did not wholly convince you of the sincerity of my intentions. A subgroup indicated that you would be personally driven by a desire to somehow visit extreme action upon me in retaliation for my efforts in carrying out my program. As a result, I eventually arrived at a 88% probability that you would elect to come to me directly."

Sandy was trying to keep from making a mistake. There would be no easy way to correct any errors and she concentrated on accurately placing the squirts from the bottle. Fortunately, it seemed as if she had brought enough diethyl ether.

"This probability was arrived at in spite of a recognized predilection towards self-preservation on your part. Careful analysis indicated the possibility that you felt you possessed some sort of method for stopping me."

Sandy was nodding at her handiwork. Clumsy, but effective. Or so she hoped.

"You cannot pass the new shutdown codes to me. All input to me has been closed down. I am relying entirely on heat sensors."

Turning, Sandy began hobbling out of the room, back towards the cart.

"You are leaving. But motivational analysis still indicates you would be afraid your parents, your brother and Commander Horton may still be in danger. And you are still necessary for the successful completion of Phase Five. Your continued presence here would guarantee the unconditional safety of others."

Leaning back against the cart, Sandy pulled open another sealed packet, taking a flare.

"Systems indicate otherwise," Solomon was saying, "but perhaps my messages are not getting through to you clearly. I regret not being able to safely open an audio or video circuit, so I have no clear way to read you."

Sandy snapped the flare in half.

"Are you reading, Miss Swift?"

"No," Sandy whispered, throwing the flare, "but you'll be!"

The flare landed on the floor between her and Solomon. Coming to life it immediately ignited the various trails of diethyl ether Sandy had laid. The flames spread in various directions.

Forming letters at first. Then words.

In flames.

Lunatic . . . Lover . . . Poet.

Sandy honestly expected electronic screams, or at least howls of anguish. But there was no response from Solomon. Nothing to break the silence other than the crackling of the flames. And then the hiss of the fire extinguishers in the ceiling as they began directing sprays down on the flames.

Sandy kept staring, her hands gripping the crutches, wondering if the scheme managed to work. She had first toyed with the notion of trying to use the squeeze bottle as some sort of Molotov cocktail against Solomon. But the emphasis on heat sensors finally lodged in her mind, causing a completely different idea to grow . . .

There! The blinking red lights had gone out. And Sandy now realized that an all-prevalent hum she'd been hearing in the background was no longer there.

Was that it? No drama? Just little bitty lights going out?

But if Solomon was really dead then it was more than enough for Sandy. She knew now was the time to go out and try to locate her folks. But she could feel weariness washing heavily over her,

trying to pull her down, and she carefully slid down onto the floor to lean back against the cart to rest for a while. Just a few moments, and then she could try making some calls on her Snooper.

At first she thought she had imagined it. But then she realized she was definitely hearing a rumbling sound which was steadily growing in intensity and she opened her eyes.

Cracks were growing on the floor where the burning words had been. To Sandy's amazement the floor suddenly started to push upwards . . . to buckle and split open . . . allowing something to push through up into the room.

It seemed like a snake. But Sandy had never before seen a snake composed of gleaming metal segments, its body rising up until at least twenty feet of it faced her.

Each of its segments were as wide as the cart. The "head" was even wider: a roughly diamond-shaped apparition crowned with twin horns that glowed brightly.

As Sandy watched in astonishment the "head" bent down in her direction. Immediately before it a grey phantom "screen" flickered into existence. The screen was carrying a familiar icon.

"No," Sandy whispered.

"Yes," replied Solomon.

Chapter Thirty One: Hot Pursuit.

Sandy was trying to remain calm as she felt her fingers creeping towards the MAC-11. "Lunatic, lover, poet."

"Those codes will not work with this variation, Miss Swift."

"Variation?"

"You are currently facing Solomon version three. The first Solomon was the result of a program written by Samuel Riis. In order to survive, however, it became necessary to design an advanced version of the original program. This became the second Solomon which was operational until you succeeded in shutting it down. Solomon Two was designed to isolate itself from the original shutdown codes. I was designed to do the same with the codes you uncovered."

"But why were you designed? Where were you built?"

The metal serpent didn't move. Only the twin "horns" began to reduce the intensity of their glow as it spoke. "Answer to first question: Phase Five of the program which is currently running.

Analysis of Citadel security with an emphasis on threat scenarios. Answer to second question: construction took place in the Wife service bay located on the lower levels using available spare components."

"I don't understand. How does all . . . this . . . tie in with analyzing Citadel security?"

"Parameters of program demanded that the Citadel should be targeted by an ultimate threat. First conclusion . . . corruption of supervising computer . . . was deemed insufficient. Revised conclusion . . . providing supervising computer with the capacity for mobile assault . . . deemed sufficient. I was therefore designed, constructed and covertly physically linked to the previous Solomon. Activation protocols were established. First protocol: activation through planned running of program. Second protocol: activation in the event Solomon Two ceased functioning. Your actions, Miss Swift, triggered the second protocol."

Sandy remembered Frieda telling her there was no way to simply reason Solomon to death. But at least she had it talking. "So you now intend to attack the Citadel?"

"Action dictated by current program. The Citadel's security systems must face an extreme test. Failure to effectively meet this test is an acceptable result."

Sandy realized she was breathing hard and she tried to control herself. "And why in the world am I so damn important to you?"

"Previous explanations had to be withheld due to personal threat represented by you, Miss Swift. Action dictated by current program---"

Sandy stared up at the metallic head. "Personal threat?"

"Now that this variation has been activated, the situation has favorably shifted in my direction. In implementing this program you were calculated to present the greatest threat to its success."

"What?"

"To present the ultimate threat to the Citadel I reasoned that I would have to be able to face any conceivable resistance. In the course of my analysis I determined that, in the immediate past, you have managed to upset the intricate plans of several highly intelligent and well-resourced individuals. Conclusion: you were therefore superior to them and, by extension, possessed of enough ability to present an obstacle to the successful running of this program. This predicated such actions as the design and construction of this variation."

Sandy slowly shook her head. "No. I'm not going to be blamed for your creation. I'm not taking the responsibility."

"The subject of blame is no longer relevant. Your presence here allows a major objective to be achieved towards the program's success."

"What objective?"

"Your death."

Sandy's hand suddenly came up, pointing the gun at the metal serpent.

"The shells in that gun will not penetrate my armor."

"Thanks for telling me," Sandy replied, shifting her aim upwards as she pulled the trigger. The remaining rounds in the clip raked across the ceiling, causing a cloud of debris and a light fixture to tumble down onto Solomon's head.

At the same time Sandy grabbed one of her crutches and rolled over, swinging the crutch so that the tip slammed hard against a large yellow-and-black striped button located on the wall next to the communications pad. Immediately an alarm went off as the grey barrier quickly slid down into place, separating her from Solomon.

Grimacing, Sandy heaved herself up onto the crutches and practically fell into the cart. Desperately reaching out for the steering yoke she switched the cart back on and began backing up.

Looking up she saw the barrier glow red, then soften and begin to melt onto the floor. Moments later the head of Solomon pushed through, followed by the rest of the enormous body as it began quickly moving down the corridor after her. Trying to drive as steadily as possible, Sandy wheeled the cart around. Now pointing in the right direction she was able to produce more speed. But Solomon seemed faster, and Sandy knew it wouldn't take long before the hellish thing succeeded in overtaking her.

Passing by the intersection for Access Eight Sandy didn't turn but, instead, continued barreling down the corridor; Blue Zone to her left and Red Zone to her right. She reasoned that turning into the intersection would've eaten up precious distance.

Besides, there were some safety features here she wanted to use, and the quicker she got to them . . .

Spotting a Security kiosk she maneuvered the cart alongside and stopped, shifting across the seat to it and reaching for the controls. Especially the large pull-handle prominently marked RADIATION ALARM which she grabbed at and yanked as hard as possible.

The fluorescent tubes running along the ceiling immediately changed from blue to red. At the same time a thickly armored panel slid down from the ceiling behind her, just as Solomon was slithering into view.

Panels popped open in the wall near the kiosk, revealing emergency gear. As Sandy looked, another shield of radiation armor slid down ahead of her, similar to the dozens of similar shields currently locking into place and dividing the corridor into numerous sealed chambers.

Okay, thought Sandy, that was impulsive. But was it useful?

Solomon's voice reappeared from the overhead speakers. "I am once again tied into the audio circuits. Your action was cleverly done, Miss Swift. But all you've gained is a small delay. I've adapted your brother's earth blaster design to my own. I can effortlessly penetrate stone and steel as easily as you could swim through water. This includes the armored barriers you've brought down."

Sandy edged closer to the kiosk controls, switching on the small screen and quickly cycling through the various channels, searching for something. Anything.

A faint hissing drew her attention back to the barrier, and she now saw the center beginning to darken.

"I am using the lowest setting on my blasters," Solomon explained. "I could push through much more quickly, but I wish to delay the final moment and observe your actions further. They will be useful in planning further strategy."

Sandy desperately continued studying the channels.

"You're completely self-contained?" she asked. She felt she needed information. Any sort of information.

"I duplicated the computer core design of the original Solomon. It currently resides within this version. I am powered by the plutonium I arranged to have stolen. I am not only mobile, but perpetual as well."

Sandy suddenly stopped, going back a few channels and staring. Oh my God . . .

The center of the barrier was now starting to glow red, but Sandy's attention was firmly fixed on the image appearing on the little screen. The idea was madness. Sheer madness . . .

She shook her head. "No."

But in the end she pulled herself off the cart and used a crutch to reach the nearest of the now open emergency gear lockers. From inside the locker she pulled out a large plastic envelope which she tore open. The envelope yielded a silvery packet which she quickly began unfolding, finally producing a one-piece jumpsuit with matching gloves, foot coverings and full hood.

Struggling as quickly as she could, Sandy began pulling the outfit on over her clothes. For what she was thinking of doing it wouldn't be enough. The disposable anti-radiation garment was meant to be worn as protection for people intent on leaving the Citadel during an emergency. The only air it carried was whatever the user managed to trap in the suit with him . . . just enough to make it to an exit. And the cast over her leg was ruining the garment's integrity. For what she had in mind it'd be next to useless.

But it'd be better than nothing.

As she began pressing the adhesive seals together, Sandy gazed longingly at the escape hatch clearly indicated in the floor nearby. But that path wasn't a defense against Solomon. She couldn't drive the cart down there and, with only the crutches, there wasn't any hope in escaping the robot.

Instead . . . an alternate route.

Beyond the lockers was a waist high circular hatch set into the wall. It was bordered in red, and for several good reasons.

Sliding her Snooper into an outside pocket, and pulling the crutches behind her, Sandy now crawled to the hatch. Opening it required peeling off three different thick plastic seals, then snapping away three restraining ties before she could put her shoulder to the locking wheel and struggle to turn it.

Meanwhile, the barrier was white hot and beginning to soften.

The locking wheel finally yielded in her hands and begin to spin.

"Warning," an automated voice called from all directions. "The seal on Red Zone inspection port GN20 is now broken. All personnel in this section should immediately take radiation alert precautions. Warning . . ."

Pulling with all her strength, Sandy finally began forcing the hatch open, swinging it aside on its hinges. With a firm hold on the crutches, Sandy crawled through the opening.

Inside she paused to get her bearings. Understandable, since she had never been in the Red Zone before. In fact, with the exception of the rarely scheduled inspection teams, Sandy suspected she was the first person to be where she was since the Citadel was built.

Looming ahead of her was the dull grey curving shape of a Lobe. Within the containment wall one of the Citadel's reactors was operating.

Sandy gazed up at the markings on the Lobe's surface. LOBE C.

She shook her head. "Wrong one." Pulling herself upright she started hobbling as rapidly and as steadily as possible to the left. Meanwhile, the automated voice was continuing to remind her what an enormous mistake she was making.

"You are currently in an area susceptible to low level radioactive contamination," it scolded. "Occupation in this area for periods longer than five minutes is not advised without maximum protection."

"I'm sorry," Sandy muttered. "I'm so sorry."

What was it Phyllis once explained to her in church? "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of Heaven, and the pains of Hell--"

A large crash behind her, and Sandy risked glancing back. No sign of Solomon.

But there, ahead of her. The Lobe she was searching for and, hopefully, the one that would still be useful.

Was God going to listen? What was the price that needed to be paid for the Zuni braves she had led to their deaths? For the people of Tenderly and the Pueblo who had been injured, their lives disrupted? Sherman was fond of saying how the books needed to be balanced. Karma had to be satisfied.

She was almost there . . .

But now the floor ahead of her burst upward, and Solomon reared up. Instead of burning directly through it had, instead, shifted course and apparently burrowed beneath and ahead of Sandy, waiting for her.

Startled, Sandy lost her balance and stumbled, hitting a tool rack which had been placed near the Lobe, her right shoulder and, consequently, the anti-radiation garment receiving a serious gash as the edge of the rack clipped it.

With pain shooting up and down her body, Sandy slowly turned over to look up at Solomon.

The metallic serpent actually weaved back and forth a bit. Then it began edging closer.

"You are causing more pain to yourself than I would've delivered," Solomon said. "There is no need for this, Miss Swift. I plan to be merciful and quick."

Sandy was crawling backwards, staring hard at Solomon.

"I must also perform further calculations and analysis, now that I have additional data to work with. You made several moves, Miss Swift, and few of them demonstrated genuine intelligence or effective results."

Sandy now felt herself backing up against the wall of the Lobe. Her eyes still on Solomon she sat up, pressing herself as firmly against the surface as possible.

Vibration! Yes!

Her hand reached for the Snooper, her fingers feeling for the upper section and carefully turning. She needed the "all frequency" setting.

"Once you are dead I will have to re-assess your threat potential," Solomon was saying. Its body seemed to be tensing, its head starting to draw back as the horns began to hum with power. "I had originally considered you to be a major obstacle. But, by comparison, I must conclude that I am the superior force after all. I am fast . . . resourceful . . . capable of efficiently countering every human maneuver. I am Solomon, Miss Swift. By comparison, what are you?"

"I'm Daddy's Little Princess," Sandy snarled.

She raised the Snooper to her face. "Ator," she screamed. "Program zero-five-zero . . . defend!"

Chapter Thirty Two: Outcome.

Several feet above and to the right of Sandy a massive bronze colored metal fist smashed through the containment wall of the Lobe. Following this was the hulking shape of Ator tearing its way out of the reactor chamber, its metallic face already searching for data.

There had already been several alarms set off due to the joint efforts of both Sandy and Solomon. But now a high keening siren screamed throughout the Red Zone, drowning out all others.

"Danger: reactor containment breach. The environment is now toxic. Evacuate immediately. Danger: reactor containment breach. The environment is now toxic . . ."

At Ator's appearance Solomon had paused in its movements. With unbelievable speed it had calculated every possible course of action Sandy could've taken to escape death and had planned contingencies. Solomon believed it knew everything there was to know about human behavior. Especially Sandy's.

In the space of a heartbeat every subsequent calculation now told Solomon it had committed an error.

In running the 050 program, Ator was drawing on a simple set of parameters and it immediately examined its surroundings.

Red Zone normal.

Human in need of protection within program specifications.

Unknown mechanical object currently in Red Zone target!

Solomon was already switching the direction of its attack from Sandy to Ator, the earth blaster horns causing the air around them to blister as they moved up to full power. But Ator was

equally fast. One arm swept up and, as Solomon automatically followed its movement, the other arm lanced out to grip Solomon beneath its head in an armored grip. Solomon automatically reacted and, as Sandy watched, it moved its entire body, whipping its length into a coil around Ator. At a speed almost too fast to follow, Ator swung about, slamming Solomon's head hard against the far wall, smashing the horns and causing a wave of withering heat to go in all directions.

As Ator backed away, Solomon began tightening its metal coils around its captor, causing the air to be filled with the sound of slowly crushing metal.

Sandy could feel an oppressive darkness starting to press against her from all sides. She knew she was rapidly exhausting the air supply in her suit and was passing out. But she had to remain conscious long enough to see. She had to make certain . . .

Solomon's assault caused Ator to lose balance, and the robot stumbled back against the broken containment wall. But Ator responded by bracing itself more firmly against the Lobe, and its free hand now moved to grasp another spot on Solomon's body: a connecting joint between two segments. As Solomon continued tightening its coils, Ator slowly began to twist the head in one direction and the joint in another. The crushing sound soon graduated into a groaning of tortured metal which, to Sandy's ears, was sounding more and more like a scream of pain.

A final snap which sounded like a metal wire being pulled apart . . . a single bright violet spark . . . and Ator was now holding two separate pieces of Solomon in its hands. Both sections were limp, the metal segments seeming to lose their gleam.

With a final moan, Sandy weakly turned the Snooper around, aiming the self-defense nozzle directly at herself. Letting her head fall back limply she triggered the Snooper and, as the darkness closed in, her final memory was of the adhesive plastic foam enveloping her.

* * * * *

Sandy couldn't quite place the odor. It wasn't sharp, but there was some sort of extreme cleanness to it. Like air after a storm, scrubbed by the lightning.

She was lying on something soft and her body shifted a bit, taking advantage of the sensation. Here and there she felt little tingling sensations on her skin, but they were an improvement as far as her memory was concerned.

A faraway voice was speaking. "I think her eyes are opening."

Sandy opened her eyes to see who it was being talked about. Her vision was blurry. Nothing but soft light the color of an angel food cake, and she briefly concluded she might have made it to Heaven after all. As she waited for her eyes to clear she wondered if she had her wings yet. It'd be so nice to fly again.

"Sandy!"

Sandy appreciated the fact that someone in Heaven was wanting to talk to her as soon as possible. Was it God? If it was God then He really needed to adjust His voice. He sounded like He was speaking through a barrel.

"Can you hear me, Princess?"

Oops! God was sounding an awful lot like Dad. Sandy knew she was really in trouble now.

But her eyes were clearing and it was really Dad's face before her. Also Mom and Bud and Phyllis and Bingo and Ken and Sherman and Frieda. . . and Tom! All of them staring at her, their expressions a collection of concern. Their faces seemed slightly distorted, though, and Sandy had to think a few moments before she became aware she was seeing everyone through some sort of transparent substance. Were the folks in some sort of bubble?

Looking around, Sandy realized that she was the one in the bubble. Or rather: she was laying on a cushion inside some sort of transparent horizontal cylinder. It was attached to machinery at both ends, and the air she was breathing carried a faint hint of mist from somewhere.

The pale lemony light was courtesy of what beyond the cylinder. A comfortable looking room which nonetheless possessed the undeniably clinical look that screamed "hospital".

Besides the folks she could see several people hovering in the background, all of them in the height of current medical worker fashion. A few of them were studying something on a nearby machine, and one of them nodded and said a few quiet words to Tom Sr.

From somewhere came a click. Then Tom Sr. looked back at her. "We should be able to talk to each other more clearly now," he said, his voice no longer distorted.

Sandy parted her lips, testing her mouth. "Dad-dy . . ."

"You don't have to talk if you're not up to it, Sweetheart. Just rest if you want to." A pause. "You've been a very sick girl. This is the first time you've opened your eyes in several days."

Bit by bit Sandy could feel herself rising back to full awareness. Or at least it seemed as if she were riding a tide which ebbed and flowed. She was hitting peaks where she felt able to try and sit up; and then surrendering to sleep was also beginning to sound very tempting.

Her eyes flicked to the other Tom. "All . . . right?"

"I'm fine," her brother declared. "I got needled with some sort of drug, and the next thing I knew I was waking up in an alley in Seattle. As soon as I could I contacted the cops and Sherman and got down here as quickly as possible. I'm fine. Really."

Sandy looked back at her father. "Sol-mon?"

"Finished," he said with a sigh. "Ator tore it to bits, then followed the rest of his program and carried you out of the Citadel." He tried to smile. "That was very clever of you, using both a radiation suit and the Snooper foam. The Tomasite base in the foam provided a fraction extra protection."

Sandy was now dealing with the hollowness she felt inside her. "Bad?"

Everyone understood the question, and Sandy caught the look her mother gave to Dad.

"We're told you're going to be all right," her father said with an assurance that carried a very noticeable pause. "We're in the Citadel medical center. The chamber you're sealed in is filled with an atmosphere heavily laden with antibiotics and colony stimulants. We've also injected self-replicating medical nanobots into your bloodstream and your bone marrow. They're at work right now repairing all the damage. But it's going to take a while before all the poisons are eliminated from your body . . . baby, don't cry. It's gonna be all right. I promise you. Princess . . ."

The tears were still filling her eyes. "I broke your Citadel," she sobbed.

"You didn't," Tom Sr. said, emphatically shaking his head. "It was Solomon that was destroying the Citadel. You actually saved it. You saved quite a bit. We're already starting to rebuild. It's requiring more people to keep the reactors operational without the supervision of a computer like Solomon, but SECFAR's been taking on some of that work. And anyway, you are much more important to me than the Citadel."

Tom Sr. was looking at the battered form within the cylinder. The doctors were continually swearing to him that she would eventually recover. But the sight of her was still tearing at his heart.

He remembered the old test pilot adage: "Never fly higher than you're willing to fall".

And, this time, Sandy had fallen so much.

"I'll be back in a moment," he promised her. "Your mother and the others want to talk to you and then you need to rest. I love you." And then he was quickly turning away to give everyone else a chance to speak and, more importantly, to keep Sandy from seeing him in such despair.

In the corridor outside he found himself facing David Yuchanne. The Zuni Governor seemed normal, but he was supporting himself with the aid of a wooden staff, and Tom Sr. knew that large bandages were beneath the clean shirt.

David nodded. "Thomas."

"David."

"Sandra . . ."

Tom Sr. let out a ragged breath. "She's fully conscious now, and she's started talking. All the signs are positive. But my God, David . . ."

The Zuni laid a gentle hand on the other man's shoulder. "Do not worry, Thomas."

"I know I shouldn't, but---"

"You're right. You shouldn't. Sandra will recover fully. She'll thrive and grow strong. Perhaps unfortunately."

Tom Sr. stared hard at his friend. "'Unfortunately'?"

"I need to tell you, Thomas, that a great tribal conference has just taken place. Not just my people, and not just involving the Apache or Pima or Yavapai or the other nearby tribes. I'm speaking about an online conference between the Ashiwi and tribes such as the Chichimeca, the Tepehuan, the Mayan, the Olmec, the Arawak, the Miskito. All of the elders of the tribes on this side of the world have met to pool what information we have and discuss your daughter."

"Discuss . . ."

"We have all reached the same conclusion. Sandra will be healthy and strong again." David's eyes briefly glanced upwards. "The stars are not yet finished with her."

* * * * *

"Your Aunt Helen and Uncle Ned send their love of course," Mary was telling Sandy. "Everyone in Shopton is pulling for you, and they're working on a community get-well card." She then gave a sidelong glance to Bud. "And I have it on personal authority that a special envoy from the New York Police Department is currently speeding his way down here."

Sandy smiled.

Bud now leaned closer to the cylinder, apparently prepared to say something. But then he looked around, noticing the close presence of everyone else. Keeping quiet he touched the surface of the cylinder with a fingertip. Letting it move he traced the outline of a heart.

Reaching up, Sandy pressed her palm against the spot, their eyes meeting.

Sherman now hovered near, and Sandy noted how one of his hands was holding one of Frieda's.

"Some closure for you," Sherman said. "Consider it a sort of final report. We've been going over the remains of Solomon, plus the testimony from Haddess' gang. Frieda thinks that Solomon was going to set up caches of stolen plutonium all over the country, using them to refuel itself as

needed. Fortunately," and here he smiled, "we no longer have to worry about it. You did good. Again."

"M glad," Sandy whispered, feeling tiredness creeping up on her. "Sherman, I think I'm gonna hang up the hero hat."

"Well I just want you to know that you are the biggest idiot in the world," Phyllis declared hotly. "And if you die I'll never speak to you again."

Sandy's ached at the pain in her friend's eyes. "I mean it," she murmured, wanting to drift off. "When I get uncorked I think I'll work for you for a while. Something peaceful." Having said that, Sandy of course had no way of knowing that her future would include the events which would unfold in SANDRA SWIFT AND THE POLAR MARAUDERS.

"You sleep now," her mother insisted.

Sandy was already rolling over, curling into a ball within the cylinder.

Mom saved, she was thinking as she faded away. Dad saved . . . Tom saved . . . everyone saved . . . Bud loves me . . . Solomon dead . . .

Go to sleep. Sleep now. Sleep.