

Chapter One: Distress Call.

"I'm certain that the Mark-IIb jetmarine can handle your laboratory specifications," Phyllis Newton was assuring her audience as they walked through the passageway. "One hundred ninety-eight feet in length . . . eighteen point six feet in diameter . . . average cruising speed of forty five knots on the surface and seventy two knots submerged."

"We've been impressed with what we've seen during this demonstration trip," Dr. Ellis Binns replied. "There's really no reason to gild the lily. Howard and I are certain that all we have to do is apply slight modifications to our lab designs in order to outfit a ship like this for the University's purposes."

Next to him Dr. Howard Coleman . . . also of McGill University in Montreal . . . nodded in agreement.

"Then we can finalize the sale?" Phyllis asked.

"I'm certain we can," Dr. Binns said. "We just have a few additional questions which we were waiting until we arrived at this point to ask."

"Then let's continue forward," Phyllis said, "and we'll talk."

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Here the sky above was deep cobalt blue, punctuated by the lighter sapphire and turquoise of the more porous masses which allowed the ghost of sunlight to drift through. Below there was no ground to be seen; only the velvet deepening into darkness. Beautiful . . . fascinating, but also holding the power to frighten.

There was no good reason for anyone to be traveling here. It wasn't a world made for humans. But humans still came.

"I've drifted, silver-sailed, on seas of dream'," Sandra Swift softly murmured. "'Hearing afar the bells of Elfland chiming'."

Making a small adjustment on the helm she once again felt grateful that Bingo had introduced her to the poetry of Robert Service. Service had certainly never come as far north as they were now, but his words and his spirit seemed sufficient for the surroundings. According to the instruments, Carlopa Lady was currently cruising at forty knots some one hundred and twelve feet beneath the Arctic ice. A considerable distance from Service's beloved Yukon, but still an environment he might have resonated with.

It had been seventeen hours since Carlopa Lady had slipped beneath the sea ice at Baffin Bay, and just over two days since departing from the seaport at Fearing Island. So far the trip had been

peaceful, and hopefully would turn out to be profitable as well; two conditions which she certainly desired.

Ahead of her the blue waters of the Arctic glimmered through the transparent nose of the jetmarine's observation deck, and Sandy quietly mulled over her next move. The option of continuing west towards the Bering Sea had been discussed, but Sandy privately felt such an extension to the trip would hardly be necessary now. Phyllis seemed to be outdoing herself with her sales pitch.

As if to punctuate the thought, Phyllis' voice was now becoming more and more evident from the corridor behind Sandy. ". . . an opportunity here to fully demonstrate the sort of work your University could do with this vehicle. Not only with your laboratory proposals, but up forward on the bridge."

Glancing over her shoulder, Sandy smiled at the brunette form of her best friend as she led the two scientists onto the bridge. Phyllis was a major part of the marketing and public relations hierarchy for Swift Enterprises, and she felt that a personal touch was an occasional aspect of the job. Case in point.

Giving Sandy a bright nod, Phyllis guided her audience past the helm and on forward to the observation deck. It amused Sandy to note that, as many times as the two men had gazed out from the nose during the sales trip, they always treated the view as if seeing it for the first time.

"Incredible," Dr. Coleman murmured.

"Now, in answer to your questions," Phyllis began, "I want to demonstrate how research work can be easily carried out here.

"For instance: some people have made the comment that the jetmarine's signature transparent nose is just a meaningless frippery. Consider that, after descending several feet below water, any sort of ordinary window or porthole becomes useless because of darkness. A jetmarine is, of course, equipped with exterior lighting, but in some undersea work such lighting could create problems."

Coleman, a research deep-sea ichthyologist and fisheries scientist, nodded in agreement. "Oh, definitely."

"The transparent material of the jetmarine nose, however, is composed of a Swift Enterprises invention known as SmartGlas," Phyllis continued. "Allow me to demonstrate."

Turning, she touched her fingertips to the SmartGlas. Immediately several icons glowed gently upon it. Touching one caused a selected square area of the nose to gradually brighten.

Phyllis indicated it with a wave of her hand. "One of the features of SmartGlas is its built-in image intensification feature. Regardless of the depth we could adjust the entire viewing surface of the nose to where the surroundings would seem bright as day."

Touching other icons caused additional images to flicker upon the inner surface of the nose. "As you can see, anyone working here in the nose can pull up displays concerning water temperature, chemical composition . . . accessing any sort of information pulled in by the jetmarine's sensors. Touch sensitive computer keyboards can also be brought up which can allow more detailed work."

"This would certainly enable us to work in close proximity to the bridge," Dr. Binns pointed out. He then nodded in Sandy's direction. "But wouldn't that also get us in the way of whoever's driving the sub?"

"Not in the least," Phyllis replied with a smile. "As you can see, Sandy's sitting behind what looks like an ordinary heads-up display. But, more than that, it's a pane of SmartGlas which can block out the image of whoever or whatever happens to be standing in its way. You've probably noticed how Sandy can turn the helm controls about on a pedestal. If necessary she can 'see' outside the jetmarine no matter where she looks simply by using the SmartGlas' interface with the jetmarine's sensors. They feed a real-time image of the surroundings to her controls."

From the helm Sandy beguiled the scientists with a sunny smile. The two men responded with matching expressions as Phyllis quietly watched over the entire scene. For all practical purposes, Binns and Coleman saw nothing more than a willowy blue-eyed girl in her twenties. They had no way of really knowing that Sandy's hair was currently short not because of fashion, but because it had only been less than two months since she had been released from intensive medical care. Sandy had, in fact, been undergoing almost a year's worth of detoxification and cellular regeneration treatments, trying to repair the radiation damage she had taken as a result of battling a rogue computer, and her usual long blonde hair had been an early casualty which she was gradually trying to recover from.

Better than most people, Phyllis knew that Sandy had been in dangerous spots before. And certainly the battle with the Solomon super-computer had been the most well-publicized of Sandy's recent exploits. But not too many knew how much Sandy had been hurt by the last adventure. Despite assurances that she was being restored to full health, things had been touch and go for a while. In fact, Sandy was still carrying medical nanobots inside both her bloodstream and bone marrow; the microscopic machines working diligently to remove the final traces of radiation poisoning.

But, more than physical trauma, Phyllis had been finding herself becoming more concerned about other things. Solomon had failed in its attempt to kill Sandy's body . . . but it had damn well succeeded in smashing her friend's spirit. On the surface, Sandy was still vivacious, still seemed happy and content. Even more so now that she was out of the hospital and involving herself in things like the jetmarine trip beneath the Arctic. But there was something missing. A vital part of Sandy. A spark . . . the intense curiosity and drive that had pushed her to extreme risks in locations as distant as the Moon, or piloting a Mach three vehicle across the Nevada desert. That spark had been missing for some time now.

Phyllis silently reminded herself that Sandy had declared she was going to hang up "the hero hat" and assist in marketing for a while. And, in the beginning, it provided a sense of relief to have Sandy puttering about in comparatively safe surroundings. But, as the months went by, the situation was becoming more and more scary. Worrisome. Phyllis never thought she would see the day when the current circumstances would bother her, but Sandy was becoming . . . well . . . docile.

An unsettling concept.

"One more question, Miss Newton."

Phyllis snapped back to the here and now. "Yes?"

"The sensors in the jetmarine are rather sophisticated," Dr. Coleman said. "With that in mind, why do you still include what seems to be an old-fashioned periscope?" He nodded over to where a thick metal pole stretched from floor to ceiling just behind Sandy's helm position and in the center of the bridge.

"It does seem a bit out of place," Phyllis agreed, following Coleman's gaze. "But it's more than just a periscope. It also incorporates an electronic scanner which can provide sharp digital images to our monitor screens, as well as to the surface of the SmartGlas nose here. The periscope mast is where we also keep our communications array. As a matter of fact, now would be a good opportunity to demonstrate our ability to surface in Arctic conditions and establish communications. Sandy?"

Pursing her lips, Sandy peered thoughtfully at her instruments. "Well . . . I don't show any trace of a nearby polynya. But some of the pack ice above is relatively thin. And you wanted a demonstration. Let's go ahead and try here."

Nodding, Phyllis touched a nearby intercom button. "Bingo? We're gonna surface. Better batten down things at your end."

"OK," replied a clear soprano voice from a speaker. "Thank'ee for the warning."

"We should be all right here," Phyllis assured the scientists. "Sandy's usually a smooth hand at this sort of thing."

"I really appreciate the 'usually'," Sandy remarked as she concentrated on the controls. She began touching buttons. "Adjusting buoyancy. Rising. One hundred feet . . . ninety . . . eighty . . . seventy . . ."

Phyllis noticed that, in spite of the smoothness of the ascent, both Drs. Binns and Coleman were noticeably bracing themselves.

Well, Phyllis quietly had to admit that she was firmly positioned against a bulkhead.

"Fifty," Sandy intoned. She touched another switch. "Engaging oscillator field."

"The sail of the jetmarine is not only armored," Phyllis explained to the scientists, "but it can also generate a directional sonic field. The vibrations assist in smashing up the ice, making it easier to surface in areas such as this. We shouldn't feel anything."

"Twenty . . . fifteen . . . ten . . . five . . ."

CRUNCH!

"Then again," Phyllis murmured.

"Actually," Dr. Binns replied, "that was nicely undramatic."

"Thank you," Sandy said. "Extending periscope and communication mast."

The metal pole began hissing as it rose, revealing a combination eyepiece and small instrument panel. Meanwhile, looking out the transparent nose, everyone could see the underside of the pack ice looming just above them.

At the same time a trim, black-haired girl appeared on the bridge. Belinda-Glory Winkler . . . more commonly known as "Bingo" . . . was a consistent companion to both Sandy and Phyllis; having added herself to the Arctic trip not only as cook, but as self-described "chaperone". "Seein' as how there's two unattached men gonna be sharin' close quarters with two unattached females," she had pointed out. Considering the obvious separation between the "male" and "female" quarters on Carlopa Lady . . . plus the professional attitude of all on board . . . it had been concluded that Bingo had spoken half in jest. At least. But admittedly her cooking was superior to what anyone else on the trip could have provided, and Phyllis silently concluded that Bingo's delicacies had put the scientists in a mood more convivial to purchasing.

"We there yet?" the girl now chirped.

"See for yourself," Sandy said, nodding over at the periscope.

Going to it, Bingo pulled down the handles, putting her face closer to the eyepiece. She slowly began turning the periscope about.

"Woooo," she exclaimed. "Ice . . . ice . . . and guess what?"

"More ice?" Phyllis offered.

"Awwww, you guessed."

"What's the maximum thickness of ice you can break through?" Dr. Coleman asked.

Phyllis considered the question. "Well, a similar jetmarine . . . Shopton Princess . . . managed to break through twelve feet of ice on an Arctic run some two years ago. But we usually don't recommend that sort of thing unless in extreme emergencies."

"Hey," Sandy said.

"What?"

"Well, I was trying to establish a link with Enterprises, but they're initiating contact."

"Huh!"

"I'm putting it on speaker," Sandy said, flipping a switch.

A male voice now could be heard from the speaker. "PSNS Carlopa Lady, this is Fearing Island Traffic Control. Do you copy? PSNS Carlopa Lady, this is Fearing Island Traffic Control. Do you copy? PSNS Carlopa Lady . . ."

"Obviously been trying to get in touch with us for a while," Sandy remarked, taking the microphone. "Fearing Island Traffic Control, this is Carlopa Lady. We've just surfaced. Over."

The repetitive message paused, then the voice came back with a slightly different tone. "OK, Carlopa Lady, we're reading you. We're currently tracking your present position as being latitude 84 degrees, 28 minutes, 27 seconds by longitude minus 92 degrees, 6 minutes and 34 seconds. Confirm?"

Sandy glanced at her navigation instruments. "That's confirmed, Traffic Control."

"Thank God. We've had a situation going on for some time now, and we estimated that you might be the closest available---"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down and explain."

"Five hours ago a civilian aircraft was spotted flying across the Arctic. It's gone down on the ice pack, and we estimate it did so within five miles of your current position."

Bingo immediately pressed her eyes back against the periscope and once again began looking around.

Sandy's expression had become more intent. "An obvious question, Traffic Control, but I'm assuming you want us to attempt a rescue."

"Yes! CFB Trenton has scrambled rescue aircraft, but they're having to deal with a storm front in their area, and their estimated time of arrival at the crash site is another two hours. Can you assist?"

Phyllis suspected that she was the only one who noticed how Sandy seemed to be breathing a bit harder. The grip tightening on the microphone.

"OK," Sandy finally declared. "We'll try."

Chapter Two: Walk On The Ice.

Bingo pulled away from the periscope eyepiece. "No sign of any crash. Unless, of course, the plane was maybe painted white . . ."

"Radar," Sandy declared, touching several areas of her SmartGlas display. She nodded at Phyllis who led the scientists back into the nose where a large radar display was forming.

"Also beginning transponder scan. Phyl? I'm setting up a fifteen-mile search radius for the radar."

"Got it," Phyllis replied, gazing at the image before them. Meanwhile, Bingo had left the periscope to look over Sandy's shoulder at the image on the helm display.

Phyllis suddenly leaned forward a bit. "Wait! Sandy, back up---"

"I see it," Sandy said. "Focusing . . . focusing . . . yeah. Metallic mass bearing two three nine degrees. Distance: two point two miles."

"Anything indicating a transponder?"

Sandy was shifting images about on her display. "Checking now." She studied the display, biting her lower lip. "Oh . . . Lord, I think this is it. I'm picking up an intermittent broadcast on 406 MHz." Sandy raised stricken eyes to her friend. "It's very faint. The beacon might've been damaged in the crash."

"Might be how come the Canadians couldn't get an exact fix," Bingo suggested.

"Yeah." Sandy was drumming her fingers on her console as everyone else watched.

Phyllis finally broke the silence. "Well?"

"Just figuring out what to do," Sandy murmured, staring off at nothing.

Over her head Phyllis and Bingo exchanged a look.

Sandy eventually nodded. "Yeah . . . OK. We should be through the ice enough to where we can deploy a Fat Man suit. I should be able to reach the wreck with it."

"You don't want to try and surface closer?" Dr. Coleman asked.

Sandy was shaking her head as she got up from her seat. "This looks like the thinnest ice in the area. I don't want to risk leaving this spot and being unable to surface at the crash site. The Fat Man is insulated and can handle the outside environment."

"Just you and one Fat Man?" Bingo asked.

"Yeah."

"Reason I ask is because we're carryin' two."

Sandy had been heading aft but she now paused and looked back at the group. "Yeah, but . . . I was thinking you guys shouldn't leave the jetmarine."

Phyllis choked a bit. "Oh, and you can? You're the driver for this buggy."

"You could pilot the jetmarine in your sleep---"

Raising a hand, Dr. Binns stepped closer. "If I could break in here. Sandra, I haven't had any experience with a Fat Man. But I've spent a total of sixteen months on the ice assisting with the operation of Canadian drift stations."

Sandy stared at him, her eyes narrowing.

"The Fat Men can be slaved to one another," Phyllis pointed out. "And I'd feel better if you had someone else on the ice with you."

Sandy's expression reached a decision. "OK, Dr. Binns. Congratulations! You've just won yourself a trip in a Fat Man. C'mon."

With Binns just behind her, Sandy led the group off the bridge, stopping between two floor-to-ceiling hatchways. "The Fat Men are stored in silos on the port and starboard side," she explained to Binns. "You'll take the starboard suit."

Pressing a button she caused the starboard hatchway to slide aside. Within was the curving rear surface of one of the powered suits which was designed to allow a single operator to work in all sorts of environments.

The rear hatch was open and Binns was peering into the snug interior.

"Just slide in," Sandy instructed, "and let your legs go down into the control harness. Don't worry about getting your arms into the sleeves yet. There's a headset you can put on which'll allow you to talk and listen to the rest of us."

Quietly wondering if he was making an enormous mistake, Binns grasped the overhead bar and leaped in through the suit hatch feet first, the rest of him following into the egg-shaped contraption. Once he was fully inside the suit hatch slid into place, sealing itself.

Closing the starboard hatch, Sandy turned around and opened its neighbor. "Track us on radar," she said to Phyllis and the others. "I'll send telemetry and stuff."

Phyllis nodded and Sandy slid into her own suit, feeling it seal shut behind her as she faced the large circular viewport. Around her the Fat Man was powering up and instruments were coming to life.

Slipping a headset on, she touched a switch above the viewport. "Dr. Binns? You still with me?"

"Ah . . . yes."

"Nothing to worry about. Honest." Sandy pressed another switch. "I've just slaved your suit to mine. It'll now follow my movements. Just sit back and enjoy the ride. Don't worry about falling over; the Fat Men have good gyros."

"Thanks."

"In a moment the upper hatch will open and the support frame holding your suit will bring you outside. I'll already be there and we'll start heading for the crash."

"I really appreciate you bringing me along, Sandy."

"Not as much as I do," Sandy muttered. Putting her hands on the control sticks before her she pressed a trigger. "Heading out," she announced.

Above her light began streaming down as the portside ventral hatch opened. This was followed by a hiss of hydraulics as the support frame began rising, lifting the Fat Man up onto the deck of Carlopa Lady.

Peering out through the viewport, Sandy could see the seemingly endless expanse of the polar ice pack stretching before her. It wasn't quite as blinding white as she feared it would be, and she noticed a long ominous line of grey in the sky to her right. "Kids, I'm seeing what looks like bad weather to the south."

"Yeah," Bingo's voice reported. "That's probably the same storm which has delayed the Canadians from reaching here. Looks as if it'll be hitting us in . . . less than an hour."

Sandy glanced down at her instruments. Outside temperature: minus fifty degrees Centigrade. Barometer starting to fall.

Better hit the trail, girl.

Unfolding the Fat Man's articulated legs, Sandy began carefully stepping off the deck of the jetmarine and gingerly onto the ice. Even though the suit was originally designed to be used underwater, she didn't feel it'd be prudent to fall through and have to swim her way back to the surface. Embarrassing.

Safely on the ice she turned to see Dr. Binns' Fat Man leaving the frame and turning to follow her lead.

"Still there, Dr. Binns?"

"Still here, although I'm beginning to understand how a puppet feels. Is that a storm heading this way?"

"Yes. I'm going to have to try hurrying, so the ride might get a bit bumpy."

"I'll hang on."

Sandy carefully positioned herself until her suit was aimed in the direction of the crash. Then she began moving her legs in the control harness, and the Fat Man's legs responded in kind, causing the suit to start moving briskly over the ice.

"Wow!" Binns replied.

Checking the small radar, Sandy noted that the other suit was keeping pace with her.

"You're not worried about breaking through the ice?"

Sandy privately wished Binns hadn't raised that subject. "These suits aren't really all that heavy," she replied, mentally crossing her fingers. "My sensors are also keeping track of the thickness of the ice ahead of us, and I'll get an alert if we approach a thin patch. I also want to get to the wreck and hopefully back before the storm hits, so I'm starting out at a speed of five miles an hour," Sandy now took a breath, "and now I'm opening it up to fifteen miles an hour. Hang on."

Staring straight ahead she gradually applied forward movement on the control sticks. Beneath her she began feeling the increased pounding of the legs as the suit started running faster.

It was probably only her imagination, but she thought she could feel the ice crunching with each step she took. Mindful of her companion she directed the slave circuit to move Binns' suit so that it wasn't totally mimicking her path, giving him fresh ice to run on.

"We've got good tracking on you, Sandy," Phyllis said in her ear. "But what's your speed going to do to the suit's batteries?"

"I think we're well within the limit," Sandy replied, "but thanks for reminding me."

"Some further news. CFB Trenton's scrambled a Super Hercules and two helijets to the crash site, with another Hercules being sent from CFB Greenwood to act as aerial tanker for the return trip. We've relayed our coordinates to the rescue planes and they should reach our area in . . . three and one-half hours, presuming they can keep from getting swatted by the storm that's between them and us."

"Thanks . . . oh!"

"What's wrong?"

"I believe . . . yes! I've spotted the wreck."

Ahead of her Sandy was making out a rough line of glittering metal. From the looks of it the plane had been perhaps seventy or eighty feet in length.

Sandy realized that all the descriptions for the plane would have to be rendered in past tense. A seasoned pilot, she knew a bad crash when she saw one, and she was definitely seeing one now. The cockpit section was still intact . . . just barely. The rest of the hull, the wings, the tail section . . . all of it resembled modern industrial art more than it did a working flying machine.

"Oh God," Binns' breathed.

Sandy was inclined to agree. Still approaching the wreck she continued studying it with a practiced eye. To her it seemed as if the plane had skimmed in low and fast, then came down hard, finally skidding to a halt a considerable distance from where it hit. She could see the heavy gouge which the plane had left in the ice.

"Sandy?"

Phyllis' voice snapped her back to attention. "Oh. Yes. I'm switching on the exterior cameras. Can you see?"

"Yes," Phyllis finally replied in a small voice, "and I wish I couldn't."

Walking the suit almost to the hull, Sandy began peering through her viewport, examining the ruin. "Looks like it had two turbofan engines. In fact . . . yeah! Phyllis, this is, or was, a Carrier Pigeon Special. One of ours."

"Ohhhhh . . ."

"Dr. Binns, I'm going to unslave your suit so I can check out things more closely. You can turn around if you wish and, if you feel comfortable, try a few steps. I've also got your outside cameras recording everything. Feel free to sing out if you spot something."

"Not that much to spot, Sandra."

Sandy wasn't able to argue and she moved over to where the cockpit was. Ice was piled up high against the forward end, the cockpit windows were shattered and the port side had crumpled from the impact of the crash. Seeing it, Sandy felt a sick feeling beginning to grow inside her.

"Sandy, if this plane was carrying passengers there doesn't seem to be a trace of them."

"The plane was a Carrier Pigeon Special," Sandy explained, hearing her voice turning hoarse in her ear. "They're marketed as medium cargo carriers. There probably wouldn't be passengers." Please God, she silently added.

She was now directly behind the cockpit section and prepared to unfold the Fat Man's arms. Before that, though, she touched a switch.

"Sandy?" Phyllis asked. "You've shut off your cameras."

"I know," Sandy murmured, sliding her arms into the control sleeves. Deploying the arms she reached out for what remained of the entrance into the cockpit. With the metal hand she grasped the door as gently as possible and pulled it open.

"Oh!"

"Sandy?"

Sandy had squeezed her eyes shut. "Give me a moment, Phyl. Please."

She spent some time concentrating on steadying her breathing, feeling hot sweat beading on her forehead. As carefully as she could she shut the doorway to the cockpit. "Phyl?"

"Yeah?"

"No survivors."

"You sure?"

"Believe me, I am very sure. "I'll . . . resume taking pictures. But you might want to just look through the cameras on Dr. Binns' suit for a while."

"Oh dear . . ."

"And I won't be in the mood for lunch, Bingo."

"I sorta figgered that," Bingo replied. "You gonna need somethin' when you get back?"

"I might." A seasoned test pilot, Sandy had seen her fair share of aircraft crashes. Some of them had been very bad. For all her experience she had never grown used to the sight of what a crash could do to a living person.

"Sandy?"

It took a few moments for her to reply. "Dr. Binns?"

"I've found what looks like the cargo the plane was carrying. Several large drums, but some of them apparently smashed open and the contents are all over the ice back here."

Sandy needed a distraction. What's more, she needed a touch of cold air. Reaching down her left side she pulled the suit's emergency pack free from its container. Opening the pack she removed a large plastic envelope which contained a Swift electronic hydrolung.

It wasn't Sandy's intention to go swimming. But she knew the protective bodysuit which was part of the hydrolung would provide protection against the outside climate. Sitting the Fat Man down on the ice she wriggled free of the control harness, then began slipping the bodysuit over her, carefully fastening the seals.

Once secure she tested the built-in communicator. "OK, kids, I'm gonna go out for a bit and look closely at this cargo Dr. Binns found."

"Sandy---"

"I'm insulated, Phyl. And it shouldn't take more than a minute or so. I know we're racing the clock here." Getting ready, Sandy opened the Fat Man's hatch.

In spite of the insulating qualities of the hydrolung bodysuit she felt the sharp bite of the outside cold. She knew the suit wouldn't provide total protection . . . and certainly not for long . . . but the icy air worked to clear Sandy's mind.

Reaching back she pulled herself out of the Fat Man and stood on the ice. Over to her left she could see the other Fat Man, and was close enough to make out the concerned look on Binns' face.

She waved at him. "I'm OK for the time being."

In answer, Binns' turned his suit slightly. Following the movement, Sandy spotted what she had missed before. The central section of the airframe had been neatly split into two halves down the middle. There wasn't much left to the further half, but the nearer remains were still fairly much intact. Enough, in fact, to have provided a windbreak for the items which Sandy could now see.

As Binns had described, the cargo section of the plane had been carrying metal drums on a series of pallets. Each drum was taller than Sandy.

Several of the drums in what had been the forward section of the compartment had apparently taken the brunt of the crash and had burst open. Everything around them . . . including the surrounding ice . . . seemed to be covered in some sort of black substance.

Walking forward, Sandy knelt down to take a closer look. The substance turned out to be nothing but black metallic pellets. Each pellet was slightly smaller than a child's marble.

Frowning, Sandy reached down and filled a hand with the pellets. They had a definite weight to them. What's more, they shone dully in the sunlight.

"Any idea what they are?" Binns asked.

Sandy slowly shook her head. "No. Dr. Binns, you're facing in the right direction. On the upper right hand side console, above your viewport, there should be a button marked DMNSCP."

"Ahhhh . . . I see it."

"Go ahead and press it, please." Sandy waited a few moments, staring thoughtfully at the spilled mass of pellets.

"Sandy, an indicator lit up above the button. But it seems to be reading negative."

"OK. You just scanned the immediate area . . . including these pellets . . . with a Damonscope radiation analyzer. If this stuff was radioactive then there'd be some alarms."

"I'm relieved there were none."

"Not half as much as I am."

"Beg pardon?"

"Nothing." Rising up slightly, Sandy frowned at the storm front. "We'd better get back to Carlopa Lady. I'm going to take the emergency beacon from my Fat Man's kit and attach it to the wreck. That'll help the rescue planes home in on this place." She hefted the handful of pellets she was still holding. "And I'm taking samples of this stuff back home."

"Do you think it's safe?"

"A heck of a lot safer than unanswered questions."

Chapter Three: Rendezvous At Sea.

Seven hours later Carlopa Lady appeared in Baffin Bay, at the Smith Sound. If she had so chosen, Sandy could've remained underwater, deploying the surface buoy to make contact with Fearing Island or anyone else, or at least getting close enough so that the communications mast could break the surface. But she wanted to make certain all messages would come in loud and clear. Apparently the others on the jetmarine were of a like mind as they gathered around her on the bridge when Carlopa Lady rose from the water.

"Fearing Island Traffic Control, this is PSNS Carlopa Lady. We've surfaced and are heading back for base. Estimate twenty-four hours before arrival."

"Roger that, Carlopa Lady. Good to hear from you again. I have new instructions for you. Prepare to copy."

"Uh oh," muttered Phyllis.

"Don't take it that negatively," Sandy suggested.

"Sorry. Force of habit."

Sandy couldn't really find it in her heart to argue with Phyllis. "Traffic Control I'm prepared to copy. Go ahead."

"Proceed to coordinates 68 degrees, 2 minutes, 27 seconds by minus 59 degrees, 19 minutes, 34 seconds."

Entering the data into the navigation computer, Sandy noted that the destination was clearly in the Davis Strait. "I copy, Traffic Control. Ah-hhh, can I know why we're being sent there?"

"You'll be making a rendezvous with Sky Queen III at that location. Tom wants to take you and your passengers on board and is bringing another jetmarine crew to bring Carlopa Lady back here."

Phyllis squealed happily.

Sandy couldn't help smiling in response. "Understood, Traffic Control. We'll be at the rendezvous point in twelve hours."

"Confirmed, Carlopa Lady."

Phyllis was barely managing to avoid hitting her head on the ceiling as she hopped up and down.

"Just letting you know," Sandy told Binns and Coleman, "the jetmarine purchase package does not ordinarily include delivery of significant others via supersonic aircraft. You're seeing a special circumstance here."

"I just spent six months in a leak-y boat'," Phyllis sang to herself. "Lucky just to keep a-float!"

"Musical accompaniment by love struck sales reps are also not normally included in the package," Sandy added to the scientists.

"We understand her enthusiasm, though," Coleman said with a smile. "And, to be honest, I wouldn't mind a chance to ride aboard your brother's Flying Lab."

"Yes, well, I suspect the ride has more to do with the crashed airplane than with Tom pining for my friend here."

"A girl can dream," Phyllis replied.

Bingo seemed to be counting on her fingers. "That flyin' hot rod of Tom's could reach us in less than twelve hours."

"Yes, well, knowing Tom he's probably sticking repelatrions on something. It's an obsessive habit with him," she added to the scientists. "I just hope this new arrangement, as well as everything else that's happened, hasn't upset your decision about buying a jetmarine."

Phyllis suddenly stopped bouncing.

The scientists exchanged a look. "On the contrary," Binns said to Sandy and the others. "If anything else, all we've seen has convinced us that McGill University definitely needs a vehicle like this." He looked from Sandy to Phyllis, then back to Sandy. "We have twelve hours before your brother arrives?"

"Mmmm . . . pretty much."

"Then, if you can put us in contact with the University, we can finalize the deal and arrange payment and delivery terms."

Sandy, Phyllis and Bingo all exhaled at once. "Then," Phyllis said with a pleased expression, "if you gentleman will accompany me to my office." She turned to leave the bridge. "Oh, and Bingo? If we could have some coffee?"

"Better go with her," Sandy suggested to Bingo. "Keep her from drooling all over the contract."

* * * * *

Although the Davis Strait was infamous for its rough tides, Carlopa Lady surfaced into a calm early morning sea. The sky above was clear, having been washed clean by the same storm front which had caused so much concern earlier during the trip to the crash site.

"He's nothing if not punctual," Sandy announced half to herself as she stared at her radar display. "Spotting a very large aircraft on approach. Releasing sea anchor . . . switching on tracking beacon."

Everyone was on the bridge, their luggage packed and ready.

"We're going to start getting this stuff up on deck and watch Tom set down," Phyllis told Sandy, heading for the ladder which was located behind the periscope and which led up into the sail.

Sandy nodded. "I'll be up there as well, as soon as I secure everything."

Exiting through the small hatch atop the sail, Phyllis waited as Bingo and the scientists passed the luggage up to her. Once she had the bags secured to the deck she moved aside, allowing Coleman, Binns and then Bingo to climb up.

As Sandy was poking her head up through the hatch everyone was looking up towards the source of a gradually growing thunder.

"Ohhhhh," Dr. Coleman exclaimed.

His reaction was understandable. The Sky Queen . . . the third version of Tom Swift Jr.'s Flying Lab . . . was a collection of superlatives as it dominated the sky above the comparatively tiny jetmarine. Almost 350 feet long and 90 feet high. Its wingspan was currently in subsonic flight mode, spreading out to its full 325 feet.

As the aircraft grew closer, the people on the Carlopa Lady's deck could both see and hear the results of the four enormous vertical thrusters on the ocean surface around them. The plane continued gradually descending down upon them, and Sandy found herself amused as she noticed the growing apprehension on the faces of the scientists.

"Don't worry," she called out to them, having to raise her voice as Sky Queen dropped lower. "This is done all the time. The Sky Queen has good ventral radar for making vertical landings."

As they continued watching, the plane slowed to a hover, its wingtips beginning to droop down. At the same time, large flotation bags appeared below the nose and tail, both inflating rapidly. The center section of the aircraft began opening, revealing a well-lit cargo bay.

"If we were in a Mark-I jetmarine, the Sky Queen could take us fully inside," Sandy explained to Binns and Coleman. "As it is, once the plane settles down over us, we can more easily board as well as allow the new crew to transfer here."

In spite of the giant plane's overwhelming bulk, the Sky Queen finally settled as lightly as a feather above and around them, floating on its wingtips as well as on the floatation bags. The roar of the lifters began throttling down to a muted rumbling.

From the bay two men were riding a platform which was lowering down on a metal arm. They hopped off when the platform was level with Carlopa Lady's deck, identifying themselves as employees of Swift Ocean Systems who'd been assigned the job of taking the jetmarine back to its anchorage on Fearing Island. Sandy went over a brief checklist with them before taking her travel bag and joining the others on the platform.

It began rising up into the Flying Lab, and now they were close enough to hear the announcements over the plane's PA system. "Cargo bay will be secured and takeoff procedures commenced once jetmarine has submerged and is safely underway. Water replenishment for Zoology Section salt-water aquariums may proceed. Refer to schedule C for chemical balance menu . . ."

"Usual quiet morning on the Flying Lab," Sandy commented.

Her audience was a study in various levels of attention. At the far end of the scale was Phyllis who was gazing raptly upwards. Following her gaze, Sandy saw her brother casually leaning against a balcony railing and smiling down at them (or, Sandy suspected, concentrating on Phyllis, with the rest of them being caught in the fallout). A few years older than her, Tom Swift Jr. was a lean, blue-eyed individual waging a one-man battle to keep short blonde hair in style.

Of course, Sandy ruefully admitted, brushing at her own painfully short hair, I should talk.

The platform became level with the balcony, stopping near Tom who began strolling over to greet the newcomers. His progress, however, became interrupted by a collision with Phyllis.

"Mmmmm," Tom finally managed to murmur to her, once the personal preambles had been concluded. "My baby manage to sell a jetmarine?"

"Yes!" Phyllis lightly toyed with the top of Tom's shirt. "I'm thinking a personal discussion concerning the bonus situation is called for."

"You are definitely on my schedule," Tom assured her with a squeeze. He gazed past her shoulder. "Dr. Coleman . . . Dr. Binns . . . I appreciate your business."

"I appreciate your close relationship with your sales staff," Coleman replied with a crooked smile. "And a jetmarine such as the Carlopa Lady is what we require. Our deep sea biology department wants to increase its ability to be on the ocean bottom in order to expand ongoing research into chemosynthetic production in microorganisms, so we'll definitely need space for an onboard chemical lab, as well as the specimen collection package Miss Newton mentioned."

Tom nodded. "Easily handled. And, of course, your representatives will be invited to closely observe construction and outfitting of your jetmarine at our shipyard in Mamaroneck."

"Thank you."

"Not that I don't appreciate the pickup, Tom," Sandy said, "but you didn't fly all the way out here just to hug Phyllis."

"Yes he did," argued Phyllis, her head resting on Tom's shoulder.

"Partially true," Tom replied. "But the main reason is that all of you have a date in Gatineau, Quebec."

"What in the world's in Gatineau, Quebec?"

"The Transportation Safety Board of Canada. They want to hold a hearing concerning the plane crash."

"Oh."

"Once we're airborne we should arrive in thirty minutes. Plenty of time."

"Can you maybe make it a bit longer?" Sandy asked.

Tom's eyes narrowed a bit. "You can take that up with the pilot. But how come?"

"I figure you might want some time to look over this." Sandy held out a small cloth bag. "This was some of the cargo the crashed plane was carrying."

Reaching around Phyllis, Tom accepted the bag. "Feels heavy."

"Just a point of curiosity," Sandy told him, "but I'd like to know what was worth flying over the Arctic for."

"Mmmm, good point." Hefting the bag a bit, Tom reached a decision. "Go on up to the flight deck and tell the pilot to add at least another fifteen minutes to our schedule. Meanwhile, I'll be upstairs with this. Doctors? You can be shown to our passenger lounge if you'd like to freshen up and contact the University."

"Thank you, Mr. Swift."

Hand in hand, Tom and Phyllis wandered away.

"Close relationship with the sales staff?" Sandy asked Coleman. "You're a diplomat."

"That, and I've also been married thirty years."

"Ah! Bingo? Could you take our guests up to the lounge while I go fuss with the pilot?"

Bingo snickered. "Speakin' of diplomacy . . ."

"An ugly job but someone's got to do it." Giving Bingo and the scientists a wave, Sandy left the cargo bay and headed forward and upward to the Sky Queen's flight deck. Entering the compartment she found the pilot sitting at the controls.

Coming up from behind, and as carefully as possible, Sandy bent close and planted a kiss on the pilot's neck. The pilot obliged by turning his head, and both people put the world aside for a few moments.

Bud Barclay . . . Senior astronaut for Swift Enterprises, Tom's best friend (and Sandy's considerably closer friend) . . . smiled up at the girl. "So! Enjoying submarine work?"

"Well," Sandy said, easing into the co-pilot's chair, "it occurred to me that the gentle rocking of a water craft while on the surface might produce an advantage in certain situations. But we can discuss that sort of thing later."

Bud's expression drifted into seriousness. "I saw the crash footage you took."

Sandy gazed down at the deck. "Yeah."

"I really wished I'd been there for you."

A sigh. "I thought maybe someday I could get used to seeing things like that, but---"

"You never get used to things like that," Bud gently assured her. "Deep down you know that. You wouldn't be you if that sort of thing didn't cause an upset."

"Yep," Sandy replied, looking around.

Bud watched her for a moment, then reached over to touch her knee. "Anyway, I'm glad to have my sunshine back and within reach."

A small rose of happiness bloomed on Sandy's face. "Well, thankfully Tom gave me an excuse to rush up here and fling myself passionately into your arms."

Bud considered it. "Don't recall us following that script exactly, but the presented result was nice. What does Genius Boy need?"

"Some extra time figured into getting to Gatineau."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Sandy sighed. "Against all reason I brought something back from the crash site for him to look at. A little mystery."

Bud wasn't the sort of person who believed in ghosts. But past experience had taught him what usually happened when Sandy encountered a "little mystery" and, deep inside, he suddenly felt haunted.

* * * * *

Once the Sky Queen was on its way to Quebec, Sandy went looking for Tom. She found him in the Chemistry Lab, along with Phyllis and Bingo.

Tom was busy studying a readout from the spectroscope, and Sandy patiently waited until he leaned back. "Well?"

Tom sighed. "I've performed several tests on the samples you've brought back. Atomic weight: 55.845 . . . melts at 1,538 degrees Centigrade . . . electronegativity: 1.83 on the Pauling Scale . . . rates a four on the Mohs Hardness Scale."

Sandy considered it. "Sounds interesting."

"It's iron."

"Huh? What?"

"Iron." Taking the cloth bag, Tom removed one of the pellets from within and passed it over to her.

Sandy stared down at it. "You're saying this is iron mixed with some sort of unknown substance."

"No, I'm saying it's iron."

"It's some form of exotic iron, like from a meteorite or something."

"No, it's iron."

Sandy rolled the pellet back and forth on her palm. "It's iron that's been exposed to some sort of process or radiation---"

"IT'S IRON," Phyllis and Bingo shouted in unison.

Sandy was staring back at them blankly. "Tom, that's insane . . . and don't say `no, it's iron'. That plane had to be carrying three tons of this stuff."

Her brother shrugged. "I'll take your word for it---"

"So you're saying two people got killed hauling a cargo of iron over the Arctic?"

"Sandy . . . I didn't make the flight plan or picked the cargo---"

"I know, I know." Sandy was staring at the pellet, holding it between two fingertips. "It just doesn't make sense."

"True," Tom admitted. "Maybe the crash team that reached the site after you left will have information that'll clear this whole thing up."

Bingo tilted her head. "You a gamblin' man, Tom?"

Tom considered it. "Yeah, you're right. Our sort of luck I give it a week before we're strafed by aliens."

Chapter Four: Many Questions, Few Answers.

Bud was tempted to set the Sky Queen down at Gatineau-Ottawa Executive Airport until Sandy slapped his wrist and, between her and Tom, explained to Bud that the much larger Ottawa MacDonald Cartier Airport would be a better choice.

"It's further away, though," Bud argued.

"Only sixteen miles between it and where we want to go," Sandy told him. "Don't be lazy."

"We could hover over Ottawa and take a `copter down . . ."

Sandy firmly pointed at the controls. "Land!"

"Yes'm."

In the interim, Dr. Binns and Coleman confirmed that their presence was also required at the hearing, so they were also on the flight deck as the giant aircraft gently settled down between the main terminal and runway 14-32.

"Very smooth job, Flying Lab," the control tower reported. "Nicely done. Welcome to Ottawa."

"Thank you, tower," Tom replied into his headset. "We're pleased to be here."

"Aircraft is secure," Bud announced.

"Flying Lab, we've been advised that Customs is expediting your entry into the country. Transportation has already been dispatched to take your party to the Transportation Safety Board headquarters."

"Must be them there," Bingo announced, pointing. Everyone else looked to see a limousine leaving the terminal to drive towards the plane.

"So we can leave the atomicar in the hangar and go in that," Tom mused. "I think we can all fit."

Phyllis was eyeing the approaching car. "Bingo and I can stay here if you'd like."

"I guess I can too," Bud added. "I wasn't really involved with the crash."

"So that'd make a party of four," Tom said. "That'll work. Phyl? You or anyone else got the log entries and telemetry recordings from Carlopa Lady, in case the review board wants them?"

Phyllis handed over both a memory chip and a kiss on the cheek. "Be careful."

"What's to worry?"

"You're right," Sandy replied. "We're just helping an investigation into the fatal crash of an airplane that was carrying three tons of iron for no good reason. Happens all the time."

"You're going to ride me about that iron, aren't you?" Tom asked.

Sandy shrugged. "Possibly."

"Yeah, well . . . oh! Phyl. Something you people can do while we're out. The plane was one of our Carrier Pigeons. Sandy and Dr. Binns took extensive footage. Go through it and find the registration number and try to track down who purchased the plane. I know the Canadians will have already started doing that," Tom quickly added, seeing Sandy's mouth start to open, "but let's see what we get at our end. If you find anything while we're out, feel free to pass the information along."

Heading downstairs, Tom, Sandy and the scientists trooped down the access ramp and over to where the limo was waiting, entering through the rear door which was being held open by the drivers.

"I'm really sorry you gentlemen are being involved in this," Tom said to the scientists as the car began moving.

"Not at all," Dr. Coleman replied. "To tell the truth, we're more than a little curious ourselves as to what the plane crash is all about."

"Umm." Tom glanced over at his sister. "And nothing's occurred to you yet?"

Sandy looked over at him blankly. "Tom, if I had an answer I'd sell it on the internet. We need the cash."

Tom became silent as the limo carried them north, eventually crossing the Booth Street Bridge over the Ottawa River, entering Gatineau and, soon afterwards, pulling into the parking garage at 200 Promenade de Portage.

"I haven't noticed any press around" Coleman said as they stepped out of the car.

"M'sieu Le Directeur and the rest of his staff are handling this as a tragic yet routine air crash," one of the drivers explained. "The press will receive a news release once more information is acquired."

Traveling up to the fourth floor, the group was met by another man. "Ah . . . messieurs et mademoiselle. I am Donald Lallaloui: aide personnel to Le Directeur. We're so pleased that you've managed to arrive. The review board is already sitting, and the air rescue officers from Trenton have also just arrived."

With an air of reined urgency Lallaloui guided them down a corridor and on into what seemed to be a small auditorium. They were brought to one end of a long table they were then asked to take seats alongside three men wearing the uniform of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Facing them were three older men sitting behind a smaller table. They'd been whispering amongst themselves but, at the arrival of Tom and the others, they straightened up, remaining silent until Lallaloui took a position perpendicular to them behind a small bank of recording equipment.

The center of the three men then cleared his throat. "This review board of the Canadian Transportation Accident Investigation and Safety Board is in session. To my right is Graham Milberry: Member of the Board in charge of matters concerning the Arctic. To my left is Bernard Soames: Member of the Board and overseer of investigations. I am William Feuille: Director of the Board representing the Honorable Dr. Joanne Trinacis, the Agency Executive. Donald Lallaloui is present and is acting as recording secretary.

"This board is in session to review the available details concerning the recent aircraft crash in the Arctic and to determine what further action, if any, should be taken." Feuille opened a folder and consulted its contents. "For this purpose we have asked the following people to deliver testimony. From the 424th Transport and Rescue Squadron, stationed at CFB Trenton, we have Second Lieutenant Jules Tomlienne, Lieutenant Arthur DuSalle and Captain Gary Macktis. These three men were with the RCAF search and rescue team which is still in the process of directly examining the crash site.

"From the Ocean Sciences Department of McGill University in Montreal we have . . . Doctor Howard Coleman and Doctor Ellis Binns. These men were present on board the private submarine Carlopa Lady when the crash was first examined.

"Finally we have Tom Swift Jr., the noted scientist. He is accompanied by Miss Sandra Swift who was in command of Carlopa Lady and, along with Dr. Binns, was the first to actually examine the crash site." Feuille looked up at a motion, "Yes, Miss Swift?"

"Point of accuracy, Director Feuille, but Phyllis Newton was actually in command of our vehicle. I was simply acting as helmsman."

Feuille stared at her for a moment, then made a notation in his folder. "Excuse me then, Miss Swift. Perhaps it's the influence of past press, but I was under the impression you were in charge. Was Miss . . . Newton directly involved in initially examining the crash?"

"No sir, she remained on board Carlopa Lady."

With that matter settled, the inquiry began. Along with the others, Tom and Sandy listened carefully as the RCAF officers described their findings.

Soames asked Captain Macktis if a determination had been made of the cause of the crash. "Not as yet," Macktis answered. "We are still in the process of transferring the remains of the aircraft back to our base. There, our people will study the remains in closer detail, assisted by members of NRC Aerospace."

"Any theories?"

Macktis shook his head. "None as of yet, sir."

"Ummm." Soames' eyes went to the other end of the table. "Mister Swift. I understand that the crashed plane was manufactured by your company."

"Yes sir," Tom replied. "To be precise: a Carrier Pigeon Special model V."

"You are familiar with the type of plane, of course?"

"Yes sir."

"And both you and Miss Swift have had experience in flying this particular model?"

Tom and Sandy exchanged looks. "I . . . think Sandy has had more hours in one than I have," Tom said to Soames while Sandy nodded. "But it is a model commonly used by our transport division and has been a moderate success in terms of sales."

"This Board will, of course, request a copy of the plane's safety record for appending to this inquiry," Feuille remarked.

"Has this model of plane demonstrated any problems before?" Soames asked Tom.

Tom frowned in memory. "Not so much problems as much as we had initially planned to use SE-210 turbofan engines with the design, but after further tests we had decided to upgrade to the SE-225."

"How long has this particular model been in production?"

"Four years now. Excuse me, please," Tom added as a soft chirping came from his pocket. Reaching into it he removed his phone, bringing it to his ear. "Yes?"

He listened for a moment, lifting a hand to try and stem the slight irritation on the faces of the Board members. Then: "Thanks, Phyllis."

Tom pocketed his phone. "That was Phyllis Newton back at the Sky Queen," he explained to the Board. "I had them look into our company records concerning the ownership of the crashed airplane."

"Ah!" Feuille exclaimed, looking again into his folder. "Aircraft C-G779, registered as being owned by . . . Lux Transport of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario."

"That confirms with our records then."

Feuille nodded. "We're still trying to contact someone in the company."

"Do you know anything about the flight plan which was filed?" Tom asked.

Feuille murmured to Soames who nodded at Tom. "According to Transport Canada's representative at Sault Ste. Marie Airport, the plane had filed a plan to travel to Grise Fiord on Ellesmere Island," Soames explained.

Sandy and Tom frowned at each other. "They overshoot by . . . at least 600 miles," Sandy pointed out to Soames.

"Ye-es. I have a note here that the plane occasionally took on aerial photography work of the surrounding Arctic area. We are still looking into that."

Tom felt a nudge from Sandy against his ankle and he cleared his throat. "Was Lux Transport in the habit of sending iron to Grise Fiord?"

"We were admittedly curious about that as well," Captain Macktis remarked. He looked at Tom. "Were you able to confirm that the cargo of the plane was simple iron?"

Tom nodded. "I've carried out analysis on board the Flying Lab and can supply evidence if needed."

"Excellent," Feuille murmured. "But, as to the question, we have no idea as to why such a cargo was being shipped north. We'll be contacting the Nunavut government officials and making

inquiries. When we finally manage to contact Lux Transport we'll also determine where and from whom the cargo was purchased. I can tell you now that this sort of situation is not usual."

"Do tell," Sandy muttered.

"Was there any evidence that the plane might have been the victim of something along the nature of an onboard explosion, such as a bomb?" Soames asked Macktis.

Macktis looked down the table at Sandy, and both of them quietly shook their heads. "We found no such evidence, sir," Macktis told Feuille. "North Bay Air Traffic Control reported that the plane was clearly on radar until it began descending to what was originally thought was its approach to Grise Fiord. When it slipped below the radar it must have pushed on beyond Ellesmere."

"I've heard of low altitude aerial photography," Sandy whispered to Tom, "but not in a transport jet like a Carrier Pigeon."

"Yeah," Tom whispered back. "This is starting to smell worse."

The Board members quietly consulted among themselves, and then Milberry now spoke. "Dr. Binns and Dr. Coleman. Both of you are authorities in ocean research, true?"

The scientists nodded.

"Between the two of you, and also based on what you might have heard from others in your department, are you aware of anything in that region of the Arctic which might have contributed to the crash? I realize this is a long shot in terms of this inquiry . . ."

"To our knowledge, nothing in that area would cause a plane to crash," Dr. Binns said.

"Mr. Swift?" Milberry asked. "Do you agree?"

Tom thought it over. "I haven't come across anything before."

Milberry seemed satisfied by this.

The next hour of questions dealt with technical issues concerning contact and examination of the wreck, with the worst part for Sandy being obliged to sit and narrate the footage taken by the Fat Men suits.

Feuille finally closed his folder and nodded at Lallaoui. "I believe our business here is concluded. If any further answers or information is needed we will, of course, be in touch with any or all of you gentlemen. And lady. Pending further investigation this Board is now closed."

"And that," Tom said when they were back out in the corridor, "is that."

"And we're just gonna roll over and play dead for that?" Sandy asked him.

Tom shrugged. "The Canadians have got to make their call on this. It's in their backyard. Unless, of course, someone else is of a mind to make further inquiries." He looked at Sandy.

She looked away and Tom turned to the scientists. "Montreal's a hop away," he told them. "We can have you back on the campus in style if you'd like."

"If you don't mind the slight detour," Dr. Binns said.

"Hardly. From here we'll be home before we get a chance to work up a sweat."

They were all walking back towards the elevators. "I frankly still feel mystified by the crash," Coleman admitted.

"Join the club," Tom muttered, watching Sandy's back as she picked up her pace, walking ahead of the group.

"Is Swift Enterprises going to look into this further?"

"I don't know," sighed Tom. "Right now we've got other battles to fight."

Chapter Five: Rising Storms.

It was a few hours later, in fact, before the Sky Queen was swooping down over Shopton, New York. Tom and Bud were at the controls, and Tom brought the plane in a long, sweeping curve over Lake Carlopa as he made his approach to the Swift Enterprises complex. "Home Sweet Home, girls."

Coming up behind him, Sandy rested a hand on his shoulder, her other hand on Bud's and quietly kept her thoughts to herself as she stared at their destination. Yes, it was still Swift Enterprises . . . still the same scientific research complex hugging the southwestern shore of the lake. Parts of it even shinier and more advanced thanks to the recent construction work.

Reconstruction work, Sandy quietly reminded herself. So much had been rebuilt. Swift Enterprises had been upgraded. Improved.

And she knew it could all still die on the operating table.

She felt her fingers start to tighten and she quickly moved them away from hopefully unsuspecting shoulders. Tom's tone was light, but he also knew that the times were currently bad.

A year ago Sandy had almost lost her life in a battle with the rogue computer intelligence Solomon. She had won, and Solomon had been destroyed, but the price had been high. Swift Enterprises had suffered millions of dollars in damage to two of its facilities in the area. Two New Mexico communities had been all but destroyed. Forty-eight people had been killed.

And, only a couple of months before that, Enterprises itself had sustained major damage at the hands of European criminals in control of sophisticated aerial weapons. Sandy had also been involved.

So it was that her eyes were wide, her expression dark as she watched Enterprises growing closer. Her body had healed. Was continually getting better in fact.

But there was still something coiled deep inside her that kept whispering My Fault . . . All My Fault.

* * * * *

Hovering on thrusters over the new landing pad, Tom retracted and folded the Flying Lab's wings until the plane was able to fit within the perimeter of the new landing pad. He then settled the enormous vehicle down to a landing.

A small group of people were waiting at the safety line as the plane powered down. Tom Swift Sr. was slightly smaller in height than his son, not quite as muscular and had recently taken to regarding the world from behind wire-rim glasses. But he was still a hardy individual: a self-made scientist and engineer of the first water.

He was currently holding hands with a woman who, except for her smaller height, and the eyes which were brown instead of blue, could've almost passed as a twin for Sandy. But Mary Swift was also somewhat older: having made it through thirty years of marriage with Tom Sr., as well as bearing him two children who often drove her to distraction as they zoomed off to all corners of the world, and beyond.

To their right stood a pair of dark haired young people who shared enough looks to identify them as siblings. Sherman Ames was the chief of Enterprises security, and a stranger would've been forgiven for thinking that he was just standing there and quietly watching the Sky Queen land. In truth, though, he was never "off duty" but, even while seeming to be standing still, was continually receiving information through the large horn-rimmed glasses which were practically a trademark.

His sister, Dody, needed no trademarks and rather thought her brother something of an occasional show-off. A graduate of Columbia Law School, she was one of the highlights of the

Swift Enterprises Legal Department and, because of the close relationship between her family and the Swifts, often served as the Department's direct contact with them.

The Sky Queen's crew left the plane and Sandy made it first to her parents, her arms outstretched. "Your fuzzy daughter's home again," she declared, gathering them both into a hug.

"Hello, Fuzzy Daughter," Tom Sr. said, working to return the hug.

"I should suggest that to Mrs. Applepound for her books," Sandy said. "She could change the titles from `The Adventures Of Sandra Swift' to `The Adventures Of Fuzzy Swift: Human Bathroom Brush'."

"It's starting to grow back," Tom Sr. remarked, rubbing a hand over Sandy's bristly scalp. "Just give it a while."

"It actually makes you look rather . . . striking," her mother added.

"Yeah," Sandy agreed. "Like a blonde bowling ball."

"You could wear a wig," Mary gently suggested.

"Sure . . . outfitted by Tom and Sherman with the latest surveillance gear, satellite communications system, automatic rebreather." But Sandy was smiling.

Tom Sr. was looking over Sandy's shoulder at the others. "I understand we'll be launching a new jetmarine soon," he said to Phyllis.

"The first payment's already in the bank," Phyllis said. "Victory dance!" she then shouted, and immediately started an impromptu step dancing routine side by side with Bingo.

"We heard from your parents," Mary told Phyllis. "They're on their way back from Athens and will be here tomorrow."

"Good. I don't think I could've taken an empty house for very long."

Sandy had allowed the hug to come to an end. "Thanks, by the way," she told her parents.

"You're welcome," Mary replied. "What did we do now?"

"You didn't start the conversation with `what the blankety-blank did Fuzzy stumble into up in the Arctic'?"

Tom Sr. sighed. "Well. Now that you've brought the subject up . . ."

"We've had the news from Canada," Sherman remarked as he came closer, his arms crossed. "The Canadian authorities have, in fact, already made requests for further information." He

shrugged. "Nothing serious. Just routine stuff concerning the Carrier Pigeon Special, as well as information on any other dealings we've had in the Arctic."

"Just my usual proclivity for finding trouble where I least expect it," Sandy said.

She noticed everyone looking seriously at her. "And, now that I've rained on the homecoming---"

"It's not that," Mary told her. "We just don't want you to be gloomy after having been away for a while. I've been working to have a nice celebration supper waiting for all of you."

"Then I shall try to be more cheerful," Sandy assured her mother.

"I made tunnel-of-fudge cake."

"Then I shall definitely try to be more cheerful."

Bud's expression became predatory. "You made tunnel-of-fudge cake?" he asked Mrs. Swift, his voice becoming breathy.

"Oh right," Tom said, laughing. "Like you weren't going to be invited to supper anyway."

"And it's why I made two," Mary responded.

They were all walking away from the landing pad as the Sky Queen was being lowered into its underground hangar. "Can you guys run on ahead?" Sandy asked the others. "I feel all schlumpy and would really like a shower."

"You can't wait until getting home?" Mary asked curiously.

"Believe me, Mom, you people don't want to be in a closed car with me right now. I'll be home soon." Smiling and waving, she jogged off towards the flight prep building.

Phyllis, meanwhile, had sidled up alongside Dody. "Well?" she murmured.

"I'm just glad you're back," Dody replied in an equally low tone. "Mr. Swift wants a situation update tomorrow, and I'd really like for you to handle the presentation."

Phyllis sighed. "Dammit, Dody---"

"I know! And I'm sorry. But Mr. Swift isn't going to listen to me or the rest of the legal staff. There are issues that have to be faced and things that need to be said, and it's gonna be better if they come from someone whose opinion he respects."

Phyllis looked over to where Tom Sr. was chatting with his son. "Then it's war?"

"Yeah, and he absolutely has to lose."

* * * * *

Reaching the flight prep building, Sandy walked past the shower facilities and on into an adjoining building bearing the label PHYSICAL CONDITIONING. In the locker room she changed into an exercise top and gym shorts, putting her feet into padded slippers.

Moments later she peeked into an exercise room, switching the lights on. Finding it empty she stepped in, heading for the white wall on the left. The entire surface of the wall was covered with a layer of semi-flexible white plastic.

A pair of boxing gloves hung on a nearby rack and Sandy quietly put them on, her expression becoming more and more dark. She finally faced the wall, beginning to lightly dance from one foot to the other.

A gloved fist suddenly slammed out, striking the wall hard. Again, then again, and then several punches thrown from the other fist. She then began whirling, delivering a series of taekwondo kicks against the wall before returning to punching. All the time her face twisted more and more into a snarl, her teeth bared as her strikes grew harder. Her breathing becoming increasingly intense . . . almost growling.

On the other side of the door, hidden in the shadows of the corridor, Bingo quietly watched for a few moments more. Then she silently slipped away.

* * * * *

The next day found Tom Sr. and his son entering the top floor of the Administration Building at Enterprises. This was where the Swifts not only kept their offices, but their design laboratories as well.

"I've almost completed the third series of tests on the new cybertron," Tom was telling his father. "Right now the main question is finding the best way to demonstrate its capabilities to the public."

"Well," Tom Sr. replied, "that's what we have a Marketing and Public Relations Department for. Including," he added with a smile, "your girlfriend. I'd think this'd be an excellent subject to discuss with Phyllis." Raising his personal Tiny Idiot hand computer, Tom Sr. frowned at the screen. "As for me, I'm afraid the Legal Department has scheduled their latest wrestling match."

"Oh?"

Tom Sr. nodded. "Want to listen in?"

"Might not hurt."

Walking along the corridor the two men soon came to the Conference Room. Entering it they saw that the room was empty except for Dody Ames . . . and Phyllis.

Both women were wearing severe expressions, and the two Toms stood there for a moment, staring at them.

"So," Tom Sr. finally said. "Not just Legal, but Marketing and Public Relations as well."

"I'm afraid so, Uncle Tom," Phyllis said softly.

"'Afraid so'?"

"Yes. Dody and I have had our two departments working together on this problem for quite some time now, and we have to make you face our conclusions."

"Phyllis---"

"Namely: that you're in danger of completely losing Swift Enterprises if drastic steps aren't taken."

Chapter Six: Swift Not-So-Enterprising.

Tom Sr. sighed, moving to take a chair at the table. "Phyllis, I know how serious the situation is--"

"And to be honest, Uncle Tom, not too much has been done about it," Phyllis replied in what seemed to her in a rush. There! She'd said it out loud. The man who'd stood as godfather to her . . . not to mention the father of the man she was in love with . . . and she had practically accused him of incompetence.

Next to her, Dody felt the tension. "Steady," she whispered.

Across the table, Tom Sr. gazed evenly at her. "OK," he finally said. "I promised myself I'd attend this update of our current situation. The two of you obviously feel I've been treating this with rose-colored gloves. So. Let's hear all of it."

Taking a deep breath, Phyllis pulled out her Tiny Idiot, switching it on and selecting the requested file. "In a nutshell, we need money. Lots of it."

An eyebrow lifted on Tom Sr.'s face. "And this is news?"

"This isn't like we're financing the American space program," Dody spoke up. "We're also facing problems due to some very bad situations. At the top of the list are the possible forty-eight wrongful death suits, a third of which have already been served. If there's a silver lining around this cloud, and a surprising one at that, it's in the fact that all the suits haven't been served."

Tom Sr. gently folded his hands together on the table. "Girls, I never wanted to give the impression I was being blasé about the deaths that occurred due to Solomon. Far from it. I'm not happy about what occurred in New Mexico. But, in the first place, it could've been worse. Much worse."

"Granted," Dody reluctantly admitted.

"In the second place . . . and, once again, forgive me if I appear to sound callous, because I'm not . . . but I don't believe we'll see the rest of the suits you're expecting."

Dody and Phyllis looked at each other. "You have some inside information we don't know about?" Phyllis asked.

"Actually I do. A good many of those unfortunate deaths which occurred were among the Zuni tribe. I have had personal assurance from David Yuchanne that the tribe will not pursue legal action against us."

Dody's face darkened. "Mr. Swift, I have considerable respect and admiration for Governor Yuchanne. But---"

"But David says the deaths occurred mainly as part of the tribe's efforts to defend itself against Solomon. He believes that we were not directly responsible for Solomon and, to his way of thinking, Solomon and Solomon alone was the enemy."

Dody and Phyllis again looked at each other. "I don't want to completely sweep away our responsibilities," Dody slowly said. "No matter what the Governor says."

"Nor do I," Tom Sr. agreed. "David and I have been negotiating an aid package for the Pueblo. If any lawsuits among his people should occur, he says he will arrange for the most amicable terms."

"And you're willing to gamble Enterprises' future on this?"

"I've gambled before, Dody. And no, I don't like it. But sometimes it's the only game I have."

Tom Sr. silently decided not to tell Dody that there were other reasons for the Zuni tribe's willingness to work with Enterprises. Uppermost among them the fact that the Zuni considered Sandy to be just shy of the Deity because of her actions on their behalf against Solomon. Along

with that was the fact that practically all the tribes in the Western Hemisphere were becoming united in a belief that Sandy would eventually become very important to them.

He remembered one of the last things David Yuchanne had told him in New Mexico. "The stars are not yet finished with her."

But Dody was waiting. "To your way of thinking," he asked her, "what are the exact legal arguments we're dealing with?"

"Well." Dody consulted her Tiny Idiot. "We have two things in our favor. The first is that we dealt with the crisis while it was happening, which makes us look good in the eyes of the court. Of course that doesn't stop people from suing, but it's something. The second thing is that, in order to win a wrongful death suit against us, a jury would have to be convinced that we . . . that is, Swift Enterprises . . . were criminally negligent in building Solomon."

Tom Sr. and his son now looked at one another. "Solomon was not consciously designed to develop the advance capabilities it did and run amok," Tom Jr. told the girls. "It was meant to be a sophisticated supervising system for the Western Research District."

"Granted. Can you convince a jury of that?"

"In words of one syllable?" added Phyllis.

"I believe I can," Tom slowly said.

Dody bit her lower lip. "I know I'm really gonna sound horrible here . . . but we'd raise our defense ante considerably if we were able to distance ourselves from the responsibility of developing Solomon---"

"I am not going to drag Sam Riis' name through the mud," Tom Sr. sharply said.

"Yeah," Dody sighed, touching off an item on her computer. "I'm just pointing out that a severe case of criminal negligence on our part can still be made, if it can be proved that we were responsible for Solomon and its programming. Consider." She started ticking items off on one hand. "We built the computer. We programmed the computer. We arranged for a 'stress test' . . . perhaps inadvertently . . . which was supposed to see how well it could operate under its intended parameters. And forgive me for not being a computer scientist. Keep in mind that any attorney prosecuting us won't be one either. An unintended action occurred as a result of this test which led to deaths and damages. Even with Governor Yuchanne's assurances we could still be held very liable here."

Tom was frowning. "Dody, we were responsible for the operation of the original Solomon program."

"Tom---"

"No, no, no. Let me finish. Solomon reprogrammed itself. What we had to fight against was not the original computer, but an unprecedented and totally unexpected advance version. The final version . . . the one Sandy fought . . . we've been calling `Solomon version 3.0'.

"As an analogy: let's say I purchase a puppy. Based on everything that is known concerning the puppy's breed, I should have reasonable expectations on how the dog will behave. But the dog contracts an illness . . . rabies maybe . . . and its behavior changes radically. I might be liable for any injuries the dog causes, but can I be legally held liable for the dog having changed?"

Dody thought it over. "Slim."

Tom Sr. now spoke again. "OK, let me bring up something. The recent disaster at Tomari in Japan. No criminal intent was ever proven. The reactor safety systems acted as they were supposed to do, but the disaster still happened because of the earthquake, the height of the seawall, etc. etc. The backup systems were never designed to handle a flooding, and things went wrong because of what was essentially an act of God. Liability still hasn't been thrown in the laps of the reactor designers."

Dody winced slightly. "I would be very reluctant," she said, "to use an `Act of God' defense in this situation."

"OK, try this. We survived both Nestria and the Tashkent Catastrophe."

Dody threw Phyllis a helpless look.

Phyllis began nervously toying with her computer. "Uncle Tom . . . it's like this. Times have unfortunately changed since Nestria and Tashkent. Science and scientists are no longer held in as high esteem as they once were in this country. If you and Tom were stars of a reality television series . . . or professional basketball players . . . the public would be cheering you both through the marketplace and there'd be no trouble. But now . . ."

Tom Sr. sat back in his chair and was silent for a while.

"OK, Phyllis," he finally said. "Point taken."

"We're going to need a lot of money for Enterprises to survive," Phyllis said. "An awful lot of money. And we've got to start raising it now!"

"I have a feeling," Tom Sr. said, "that the next part of this conversation is going to be interesting. What do you suggest?"

Phyllis felt very cold, suspecting that she could end up dying as an old maid. "Well . . . for openers, Dad has asked me to tell you he's willing to take the Construction Company public---"

"No."

Phyllis paused. Went on. "We could guarantee that we maintain a substantial majority of the stock and, therefore, voting control---"

"No, Phyllis. Tell your father I'm really touched by the offer, but that'd put us on a really slippery slope."

Her lips tight, Phyllis ticked the item off her computer screen and went to the next one. "Sell some of our holdings."

Tom Sr. automatically opened his mouth, but then closed it to think for a moment. Then opened his mouth again. "For instance?"

"Well . . . let's get it out of the way and risk getting my face slapped. The Barton-VI turbine engine?"

Tom Sr. leaned over the table, pressing his clasped hands against his mouth as he thought.

"You'll notice Dad's not slapping your face off," Tom pointed out to Phyllis.

Proving that God answers prayers, Phyllis silently thought.

"I'm not overjoyed at the idea," Tom Sr. finally said. "But I won't throw it out either. Go ahead and explore the possibility."

"Would you consider selling off the Home Appliances division of Swift Electronics?"

"Mmmmmm . . . same thing. Go ahead and explore."

"I'm also throwing this out to you as well, Tom. Is there any way we can increase commercial involvement in SwiftSpace?"

"Several African and Asian broadcasters have expressed an interest in setting up shop in the space station," Tom slowly replied.

"I'd be so much more than happy to encourage them on your behalf."

Tom nodded. "I'll get the particulars to you as soon as possible."

"Thanks. What about mining franchises on the Moon? Or undersea?"

Tom exhaled noisily. "We'd have to clear it through the other operators on the Moon, as well as UNIDO for the undersea franchises. I'll look into it and let you know."

"Anything else?" his father asked.

"One more possibility," Phyllis said, mentally crossing her fingers. As casually as she could manage she said: "Enterprises could accept Defense Department contracts---"

"No, Phyllis!"

"Uncle Tom---"

"I said NO, Phyllis."

"And I'm saying we have to consider it," Phyllis snapped, standing up and throwing her computer hard down on the table, glaring at Tom Sr. "We need a great deal of money and that, like it or not, is where the money is!"

Both of them were frozen in their positions, while Tom and Dody silently wished they could slip away.

Tom Sr. was the first to try and calm down. "Phyllis, I spent too much of my life designing weapons. I have too much blood on my hands already---"

"I'm not asking you to build H-bombs or anything like that," Phyllis said. "You know me better. But I've been talking with both Cole Shannon and General Johnson, and both of them said Washington could respond very positively to the idea of Swift Enterprises contributing to the defense effort. Please hear me out," she continued quickly, seeing another argument forming on Tom Sr.'s face. "Not only would accepting such contracts bring in much needed capital, but we would also be currying some potentially important support in Washington. We'd need this sort of support if things went against us in court."

Tom Sr.'s expression was that of a man trying to bottle up rising pressure. His voice was tight. "That'd be a fine memorial to the people in New Mexico who died because of Solomon."

Phyllis was silent for several seconds. Then she snatched up her computer and began walking towards the door. "All right, Uncle Tom. Let me know when you want to hold the funeral for Swift Enterprises. C'mon, Dody."

"Phyllis!"

Phyllis stopped at the door, not turning around.

Tom Sr. turned to stare at her back. "I understand that you're only suggesting this because you care for Enterprises as much as I do. I just don't want to cross that line again."

Phyllis wanted to either slam a fist against the door or cry. She couldn't make up her mind.

"I might be willing to sacrifice Enterprises for my principles. Even if it meant alienating myself from Tom."

"Dad---" began Tom.

"There are alternatives to weapons," Phyllis murmured to the door.

"OK," Tom Sr. conceded. "I owe you a fair hearing."

Phyllis slowly turned to face him, hoping the wetness in her eyes wasn't visible.

"Paradoc medical harnesses hardened for battlefields," she said. "Medical nanobots geared for trauma cases." Her eyes moved to Tom. "Your Flying Lab."

Tom's eyes widened. "Huh?"

"I've been checking around," Phyllis told him. "The Air Force is in the market for a plane to replace the C-17 Globemaster III. Think of how they'd respond to a giant transport aircraft which is not only supersonic, but possessing VTOL capability? Heck, the Marine Corps would roll over and play dead for a plane like that."

Tom considered it. "Well---"

"And, if the idea of military applications is still upsetting, consider commercial aviation. We could compete with Airbus if we could offer the airlines a supersonic VTOL passenger carrier. Boeing would throw money at us left and right for a chance to participate in that deal."

Tom Sr. was quickly losing his obstinate pose. "A commercial version of the Flying Lab would be worth looking into," he told Tom.

"Certainly would," Tom murmured back.

Phyllis was watching them both. "Well, if one or both of you decide to come to your senses, get in touch with me. You know where my office is." Turning she pushed through the door and out into the corridor.

Behind her, Dody rushed to catch up. "Phyl . . ."

"God," Phyllis was moaning. "God, God, God . . ."

"You managed it. You did it."

"Yeah but, did I do any good?"

Dody looked back. "Tom isn't following you."

"Good."

"Good?"

Reaching the elevator, Phyllis punched at the button. "I'm not really in the mood for company while I get drunk."

"Phyllis you never drank that hard before."

"Well, I'm going to now."

Chapter Seven: Stir Until Ready.

To give her credit, Phyllis didn't get entirely drunk. But it would be fair to report that her steps were a shade unsteady when she peeked into her office late in the afternoon.

Mrs. Thelim, who generally served as ringmaster for the Marketing and Public Relations Division of Enterprises during the times when Phyllis was absent, paused in her work to peer at Phyllis. "Miss Newton? Is everything all right?"

"Tom or his father haven't been in here with toolkits or anything?" Phyllis asked in a rather loud whisper.

After a moment or so of thought, Mrs. Thelim shook her head. "Were you expecting them?"

"Actually I've been expecting booby-traps."

"Huh?"

Phyllis waved a hand at her. "Forget it. But if either of the Mr. Swifts should call, tell them I've run off to Belarus and am opening up a donut shop in Minsk." Trying not to stumble she continued on into her office, firmly closing the door behind her.

"Peace and quiet," she muttered to herself. "If I can just survive this day I can SHRIEK!"

"Sorry," Dody Ames replied. She was sitting on the floor, scrunched against a corner.

Phyllis was clutching at her chest, balancing herself against a corner of her desk. "You have scared the almighty daylights out of me."

"I've been sort of hiding here."

"Didn't you sort of think this would sort of be one of the first places they would sort of look?" Phyllis asked. "Presuming, of course, that we're both talking about the same two men."

Dody shrugged. "I panicked. What can I say? Besides, I wanted some solitude to do computer work." She slightly waved her Tiny Idiot at Phyllis. "I should've gone with you instead."

Phyllis went around her desk to sit in her chair. "Ummmm."

"Where'd you go?"

"The Shopton Pagoda."

Dody was frowning closely at her. "You don't look too inebriated. Did you drink a lot?"

"Well . . . I know I had at least one of those drinks with the little umbrella in it."

"Oh?"

Phyllis nodded. "I accidentally swallowed the umbrella."

Both women were quiet for a while. Then: "Did we really accomplish something today?" Dody asked.

Phyllis exhaled. "Yeah. I probably threw my love life out the window forever."

"Phyllis . . ."

"There were moments when Tom looked as if I'd slapped him in the face."

"Phyllis, I respect Mr. Swift Sr. a lot. Lots and lots. But Tom, on the other hand, seems to sometime have his feet more on the ground than his father. I'm certain he was listening to your comments and suggestions very objectively."

"Yeah," Phyllis replied dully. "When he ends up marrying some Pakistani kumquat with a pretty giggle and skin like melted butter, I'll be in the back of the church objectively crying my eyes out."

"He ends up marrying what?"

"Or someone named `Irene'. Don't ask me why, but Tom always struck me as the sort of person who'd marry a girl named `Irene'."

Dody shook her head. Both women then looked towards the door as a knock was heard.

"Come in, shooting," Phyllis muttered. "I don't care. It's those damn Danny Dunn books he had as a kid," she added to Dody. "I know he had a thing for Irene Miller. For a while I was wearing my hair in a ponytail."

"And, as I recall, looked rather nice," Sherman said, entering the office. He spotted his sister on the floor. "Typical."

Dody stuck her tongue out at him.

Phyllis was glaring at him. "Don't push us, Sherman. Dody and I have been singlehandedly trying to save Enterprises from legal and financial ruin."

Sherman casually perched on a corner of her desk, picking up a brochure which Phyllis had been working on and leafing through it. "Accomplish anything?"

"Yeah," said Dody. "Phyllis has become a drunken neurotic."

"Ummm, and what about you?"

"I haven't been drinking." Dody absently ran a hand through her hair. "Someone remind me why I gave up smoking."

"Dad asked you to," Sherman pointed out.

"I guess. How come you got to have a rebellious teenager phase and I didn't?"

"Born first. I was the test bed for you." Sherman put the brochure down. "But seriously, ladies and Dody, was anything positive accomplished?"

Phyllis sighed, leaning back in her chair and rubbing her forehead. "Nothing that one point five billion dollars wouldn't cure. You got one point five billion dollars?"

Behind his glasses Sherman's eyes widened a fraction. "It's gonna cost that much?"

"Very rough estimate, according to the people in Accounting who, even as we speak, are plotting an escape to Panama." A sigh. "Besides handling the possible death suits, that amount would take care of finishing up repairs here as well as in Nevada."

Sherman thought it over. "Any immediate plans?"

"Aunt Mary and Bingo are having a bake sale next week."

"In other news," Dody added, "Phyllis wasn't pulled apart by wild horses after she made the suggestion to Mr. Swift about defense contracts."

"Wow!"

"Yeah. The question is: would it be enough and will it be in time?"

Everyone retreated into their private thoughts for a while. Then Sherman raised his head, glancing around. "Speaking of ladies, where's Madam Curious?"

"Huh?"

"Sandy. I haven't seen her all day."

"Why should you?" Phyllis asked. "She's still barred from test flights, she just got back from a trip under the Arctic, she's at home and she's resting. Watching television or doing a crossword puzzle or something."

Sherman looked from Phyllis to his sister and back to Phyllis. "So it's still the same old same old?"

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. I . . . just thought that maybe the business with the plane crash would've relit her pilot light or something. She seemed interested in the details."

"You weren't with us in Canada. Every time it was even lightly suggested that Sandy get involved she'd change the subject, or go do something else or ignore us."

"It's a mystery," Sherman declared. "It used to take a heck of a lot less than this to get Sandy going."

"She's had enough catastrophe in her life," Dody gently told him.

"I guess, but . . ." Slipping off the desk he began pacing about. "Lord knows I was scared for Sandy after the business with Solomon. When she said she was gonna take things much more peacefully I was relieved. Then. Now, I don't know. It's almost like Sandy scares me more now than she did before."

"I know what you mean," Dody said. "I've seen her at home, looking like that scene in Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country. The one where Nimoy's just lying in bed and staring at the ceiling." She looked at Phyllis. "You remember?"

"I saw the movie with Tom," Phyllis said.

"Then you remember the scene."

"Actually, no."

"You don't remember the scene?"

"I saw the movie with Tom."

Dody blinked. "Oh!"

"Trying to steer back on subject here," Sherman said, "has anyone discussed the possibility of mild catatonia?"

"Has anyone discussed the possibility that Sandy might just be tired?" Dody replied. "Stop trying to diagnose."

"Sherman she spent practically a year in isolation wards breathing regenerative gases and being rebuilt by nanobots," Phyllis patiently pointed out. "Bud and her folks and I have seen her spend entire days doing nothing but crying."

"I know," Sherman replied sharply. "I just . . . I'm . . ."

"Worried about her? Because we are."

"I don't know why I'm worried," Sherman said. "She's healthier than she's been in a while. She just---"

"Needs her mind healed as well as her body," Dody said softly.

Sherman nodded. "And if anyone needs to be diagnosed it's me. I know Sandy used to get into serious scrapes all the time, and damn near ended up dead. She absolutely drove me nuts. But, as bizarre as it sounds, that's the Sandy I know, and the Sandy I want."

Phyllis sighed. "Me too," she admitted. "God help me."

* * * * *

After several more hours involved in what amounted to nothing but makework, Phyllis decided the coast was clear and left the office, closing the door and walking towards the elevators . . .

And directly into Tom.

"Oh!"

He stood there, staring solemnly at her.

Phyllis returned the look, feeling her heart trying to drop between her toes. "Tom, look . . . I know the things I said this morning---"

"Were rough, brutal and radical," Tom replied.

Phyllis stood there, trying not to shiver.

"But that doesn't mean you weren't right," he added calmly.

"Oh, Tom . . ."

"And that doesn't mean I've stopped caring about you." Moving a hand out from behind his back he presented Phyllis with a single cabbage rose.

"Oh my! Oh!"

"Had sort of a hard time finding this," Tom admitted. "Local florist doesn't really carry them. They're sort of rare around here."

Phyllis was pressing the blossom to her face.

"Then again . . . so are you."

Her eyes rose to meet his over the petals. With a small smile, Tom turned and walked off.

Phyllis stood there with the rose, watching him. Her mind went: no kiss?

But, then again, there was the old saying about half a loaf.

* * * * *

Reaching home, Phyllis noted that her parents hadn't come in yet. She reasoned that her mother was still spending the day with Aunt Mary. Which was just as well. Phyllis knew the topic of discussion would be the meeting she and Dody had with Tom and Uncle Tom, and she wasn't quite in the mood to rehash that drama right this instant.

Instead she trotted up the steps, deciding to bathe and change before supper. But, as she approached her room, her nose began picking up an odor. A rather rich odor . . . and one which had become familiar within the last hour.

Curious, Phyllis opened the door to her room, and paused.

Cabbage roses everywhere. In vases, in bowls and strewn loosely about. Occupying every inch of space on the desk, dresser, shelves, windowsill. Everywhere. The fragrance of the blooms danced around Phyllis, gathering her in.

She slowly entered the room, approaching the little table which had been prominently placed in her path. As with everywhere else the table held a gigantic bouquet of roses in an exquisite turquoise vase.

A folded white card was clearly displayed in front of the vase. Smiling, Phyllis picked it up, unfolding it. Her smile slowly grew as she read the message within.

"Silly," she murmured happily. "Why are men so silly?"

* * * * *

Having said goodnight to Helen Newton, Mary Swift went upstairs to peek into Sandy's room.

The lighting was dim enough to not even matter. On the bed Sandy was a pale shape dressed in a robe, stretched out with her back to the door.

Working to get a smile on her face, Mary tiptoed into the room. "Sandy?"

A pause, then Sandy moved onto her back, turning her face towards her mother.

Mary sat on the edge of the bed. "Your Aunt Helen said hello."

"I know," Sandy whispered. "I'm sorry. I guess I should've come downstairs."

Reaching out, Mary took her daughter's hand. Stroked it mildly. "Would you like something to eat?"

Sandy seemed to think it over. "I'm just not hungry right now, Mom."

"Well . . . you just got back from a big trip and probably need some more rest." Mary patted the hand. "Bingo or I will have some breakfast for you tomorrow."

A small nod of the head.

"Aunt Helen and I were planning on going to Binghamton this weekend to see the new show at the ART Gallery. Would you like to come?"

A shrug.

"Well, just let me know. OK?"

"Mom?"

"Darling heart?"

Sandy was trying to find words. "I'm sorry I'm . . ."

Something was squeezing Mary's heart. Hard. "You're coming along," she said in an assuring tone. "Sometimes, though, even you can't be as fast as you'd like." She gazed through the dimness into the face of her youngest child for a while.

Then: "rest now." Getting up from the bed, Mary began leaving the room. As she moved her eyes glanced at the table, spotting the deluxe 1/48 scale model kit of the Hulse "Cirrus" high altitude research jet which Sandy's father had bought for her a week ago.

The box hadn't been opened and seemed to be pushed to the far side of the table.

Out in the hall, Mary quietly closed the door behind her. Then her hands reached out and tightly gripped the balcony railing. For several moments she stood there, her eyes squeezed tightly shut, her lips pressed firmly together, her body silently trembling.

Inside the room, Sandy once again turned away from the door. Her eyes wide open she stared into the darkness. Moments passed. Long minutes.

Then a frown slowly moved onto her face.

Her lips parted and a single whisper appeared.

"Iron?"

Chapter Twelve: Appropriate Gift.

BRUNGARIA: Socialist technocracy formed when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Status as a nation not yet fully recognized on an international level (see "outlaw states"). Actual borders in dispute as of this writing but occupies the extreme northern area of the Sakha region in Siberia. Estimated population: 1,551,012 (projected from 2001 International Red Cross survey). Capital: Tiksi . . .

Kliment Brun (1889 1937) was murdered on orders from Stalin on the basis of his seminal work "Interpretations on the Theories of Saint-Simon" . . .

---Pierce Library/Political Section---

"It's all making some sort of sense now," Sandy said, still looking at the map. "Russia maintains its trade embargos against Brungaria, which ends up having to search elsewhere for raw materials."

"You, of all people, must certainly sympathize with the Russians position concerning Brungaria," Milberry said

Sandy raised her eyes to his.

Across the table, Polzin and Kondor caught her look. "And yet," Polzin softly remarked to Milberry, "it was Miss Swift who confirmed the claim of the Brungarians reaching the Moon first. Adding legitimacy, as it were, to the separatists."

Sandy sighed. "Look! Let's get one thing straight here. I didn't support Ykaterina Rotzog's claim out of a sense of outraged justice, international pride or even because I happen to like space travel. My main concern was the future of twenty-six kids who were born on the Moon and who were damn near probably going to get steamrollered in the rush to capitalize on what Bud Barclay and I discovered."

"Excuse me," Polzin said. "My intention was to point out to our Canadian colleague that your personal position regarding the Brungarian separatists was hardly set in stone."

Sandy decided to let it drop and allowed her feathers to slowly unruffled. "I recall hearing how Darya Lagounov went with hat in hand to China to try and secure some sort of trade agreement," she said, returning her attention to the map. "But no one in Beijing would meet with her."

Kondor nodded. "Lagounov and her people are becoming desperate. They're even putting through a claim stating that, on the basis of what you and Mister Barclay had . . . discovered . . . Brungaria should be allowed a portion of the Moon's mineral wealth."

Sandy chewed on a fingernail. "And you're certain about these secret flights heading into Brungaria?"

"We've become more so in recent days."

Sandy looked up at him. "Oh?"

Kondor glanced at Milberry.

"We've managed to study the information found in the flight data recorder and cockpit voice recorder of the plane which had crashed," Milberry explained to Sandy. "The pilots in the plane didn't exactly come out and say they were clandestinely carrying a load of iron to Brungaria. In fact they spoke in American English and, for the most part, their conversation seemed normal . . . up to the time of the crash."

"What caused the crash?"

"The last parts of the conversation dealt with the pilots being concerned about their fuel. It seems as if they had to consume a lot of it to deal with the storm that was in the area. They didn't have enough to return to Sault Ste. Marie, or even Grise Fiord. They exhausted their fuel searching for a particular landing spot but couldn't find it. A crash landing was attempted, but . . ."

"Good pilots," Sandy murmured. "But not good enough."

"In the course of the pilots dialogue," Kondor said, "they kept mentioning how they were searching for `Novym Zaftra'." At Sandy's questioning look he went on. "That used to be a name associated with the K-214 . . . one of the five nuclear submarines which the Brungarians managed to acquire. You would perhaps be more familiar with it by its NATO identification as a Papa-class."

Sandy seemed lost in thought and the others patiently waited.

"So the plane crash was clearly due to pilot error," she finally said.

Milberry nodded. "Yes."

"I'd like official documentation to that effect, plus transcripts of the information received from both the cockpit voice recorder and the flight data recorder," Sandy said briskly, straightening up. "It'll help Swift Enterprises' position in this matter."

"Why . . . of course."

Rubbing her hands together slightly, Sandy smiled at the men. "Well! That's that. Gentlemen, my thanks."

Polzin, Milberry and Kondor looked at each other.

"Miss Swift?" Polzin asked.

"I came here to find out about the plane crash," Sandy explained. "I'm satisfied as to the explanation. My thanks." She took in Phyllis and Bingo with her eyes. "Ready?"

Polzin raised a hand slightly. "Miss Swift. Excuse me, but . . ."

Sandy had begun turning towards the door, but now looked back. "Yes?"

"Is that all?"

Sandy blinked. "I don't understand."

Polzin seemed confused. "But all this," he said, indicating the map on the table. "The Brungarians. Our investigation into the iron smuggling."

Sandy nodded. "Yes, and you and the Canadians seem to have a lot of nice juicy information to work with. I'm sure it'll turn out OK." She smiled again.

Phyllis was frowning at her. "Sandy . . ."

"You mean to say you're not the least bit interested?" Milberry asked.

Sandy considered it. "Well . . . I'll certainly stay in Ottawa long enough to see if Director Feuille still needs me, although I feel you've already got enough for the Board to make a conclusion. I'll wait for the transcripts and stuff, but after that . . ." She shrugged.

Phyllis tried again. "Sandy . . ."

Polzin looked at the others before turning back to Sandy. "Miss Swift, I feel a little awkward now. I mean, I don't know how to exactly phrase this . . ."

"You need some sort of testimony from me?" Sandy asked. "I really don't know what more I could offer, but---"

"I suppose we were expecting some help that was a bit more, I don't know, direct."

"Oh, of course," Sandy said. "That'll be no problem."

Polzin seemed relieved.

"I have some contacts with the State Department, and it'll be no trouble at all to put you in touch with the people there---"

"Miss Swift---"

"Sandy!"

"What?" she snapped at Phyllis. "Am I on fire? Do I have a wart somewhere? What is it?"

Phyllis stared at her then grabbed at her hand. "C'mere you," she muttered, pulling Sandy to a far corner of the room, with Bingo following. "Excuse us for a moment," she called out to Milberry and the Russians.

Reaching the corner, Sandy shook her hand loose. "What the hell's the matter with you?" she asked Phyllis.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Phyllis hissed back. "We got Brungarians sneaking around up the wazoo here, and you're just gonna walk out and go home?"

Sandy sighed. "Phyl . . . OK, look. I appreciate the fact that the Brungarians are up to something sneaky. Big surprise, by the way. But what's all that got to do with the price of figs in Phoenicia?"

Phyllis pressed her face closer to Sandy's. "They . . . want . . . you . . . to . . . help!"

"Tough . . . noogies!"

Bingo lightly touched Sandy's elbow. "We know you're still tryin' to get back on the horse---"

"Oh Bingo, please---"

"I'm just sayin' this might be the chance you're lookin' for," Bingo said emphatically. "You gotta make the attempt. Get your num yahoodie, get your num yahoodie, get your num yahoodie!"

Sandy and Phyllis stared at her. "Bingo, just what the heck are you talking about?" Sandy asked.

"That's Dennis Quaid in Innerspace."

Phyllis groaned softly. "And you're mispronouncing it," she said. "It's the August Title of the Lotus Sutra and it really goes `Namu myoho renge kyo'. Or `Na mo miao fa lien hua ching' if you want to get fancy and use the official Chinese pronunciation."

Now Sandy and Bingo were staring at Phyllis.

"Tom explained it to me," Phyllis told them.

"When he wasn't holding your hand," Sandy said.

Something ferocious was peering out from behind Phyllis' eyes. "Pull my chain just a little more, Sandy. Here's the chain. Go ahead. Pull it."

"Guys," Bingo whispered, glancing back to where the men were watching them. "Let's try and get back to civil here."

"And sane," Sandy added.

"Yeah," Phyllis said, wearily rubbing at her forehead. "Look . . . Sandy . . . I'm sorry for letting things fly off the handle."

"Me too. Are you really insisting that I let myself get wrapped up in this thing?"

"I know," Phyllis said. "I mean, I can't believe I'm actually saying this . . . but I honestly feel you should try and get to the bottom of this Brungarian business. If anything else, it'll help you with your bruised mojo."

"Phyl, we're talking the Brungarians here. That's Brungarians! The big guys . . . the A-list . . . the top of the heap. Bud doesn't even sneer at them."

"And you were the one who, just a while back, was getting a lot of mileage out of being ominous and intimidating. Claiming that a lot of people are scared of you."

Sandy nodded. "Yeah, and I'm one of them."

"I understand that you're scared," Phyllis said. "Scared is good. Scared is healthy. You want to be careful and not automatically throw yourself in front of atomic bombs, or jump into rocket cars, or face terrorists or insane supercomputers. No one's asking you to do that here."

"Then what do you want, Phyl?"

"Couldn't you just help out? I'm not saying take over the entire freaking investigation here. Just get your toes wet a little."

"Phyl---"

"Please."

Sandy stared hard at Phyllis, her mind trying to work up a counter-argument. Any sort of counter-argument. She realized she was tapping a foot on the floor and stopped it.

"You know I love you and Bingo like sisters."

Phyllis and Bingo nodded.

Sandy remained quiet for a bit longer. Then she sighed in exasperation and walked back to the table.

Polzin spoke first. "Miss Swift, as to your State Department, we would rather this remained strictly a Russian and Canadian operation---"

"Admiral Kondor!"

"Miss Swift?" Kondor replied.

Sandy was staring at the map again. "How many ships do you have working this investigation?"

Silence for a moment. Then: "Eight squadrons of submarines patrolling the Beaufort, Chukchi, East Siberian and Laptev Seas. Plus support aircraft."

"Considering what I know about the capabilities of your submarines, you could probably benefit from a more sophisticated sensor platform in the ocean."

"Ummm . . . yes."

Sandy looked up at Kondor. "Who's in charge of your investigation? The officer directly commanding the squadrons?"

"That would be Mischa Matveev: captain of the K-440 Sudostroy."

"How soon can he reach . . . this point?" With a finger Sandy indicated a spot on the map where the Kara Sea touched the Arctic Circle.

Kondor considered it. "Considering the information in his last report, he should be able to get there in forty-eight hours. Why?"

"We were discussing appropriate gifts," Sandy said, straightening up. "In three days I'll be there in a jetmarine. Phyllis? Bingo?" Turning on her heel, Sandy walked out of the room.

Chapter Thirteen: Undersea Shadow.

Two hours to travel from Ottawa to Fearing Island, with Sandy spending most of the time talking and arguing with her family and Sherman Ames (and Phyllis and Bingo silently making note of the fact that Sandy didn't use the video link).

Two more hours at Fearing Island preparing and outfitting the jetmarine Mary Nestor.

Now it was three days later, and Mary Nestor's periscope and communications mast were poking up through the surface of the ocean some eighteen miles south of the icepack near Franz Joseph Land.

Releasing an enormous yawn Sandy padded out of her cabin, making her way to the bridge as she secured the sash around her robe. Phyllis was nowhere to be seen, but Bingo was sitting at the helm.

"Bu'dn," Sandy heard Bingo murmuring. "Bu'dn bu'dn."

"I think we can only `bu'dn just so much," Sandy said, smiling as she came up. "But if you'd wanted to it would've been all right if you circled around a bit."

"Didn't want to fool `round that much," Bingo said, turning slightly. "An' it's good to see you smilin'."

Reaching out, Sandy ruffled the Texan's black hair. "I don't suppose I have to explain to you that I've been having these . . . moods."

"We understand," Bingo said.

"Yes, well, I would've felt better if you hadn't made that reply so quickly." Sandy's eyes automatically went over the instruments, assuring herself that the jetmarine's cybertron pilot had maintained Mary Nestor's position throughout the night. "Did you put coffee on?"

"Uh huh? You want me to bring you a cup? You want brioche? Toast?"

"I'll get it." Giving the view through the nose a glance, Sandy turned back towards the corridor.

"Sandy."

Sandy paused. "Um?"

Bingo was looking a little nervous. "You're not mad at us because we tried to keep you from seein' all those nasty things people were sayin' `bout you while you were in the hospital? We thought you didn't know `bout us doin' that."

Leaning a bit against the doorway Sandy sighed. "I was an invalid, Bingo. That doesn't mean I was an idiot. Or blind."

Bingo looked as if she were four years old.

"And yeah," Sandy went on, "a lot of what they said was mean and nasty. The only problem with it, though, is that they might've been right." She resumed heading towards the galley.

* * * * *

"So where are they?" Phyllis remarked. Hands on her hips she was in the forward section, dividing her attention between the view through the nose and the enhanced sonar display currently on the SmartGlas surface.

"They're tryin' to follow the precise location Sandy provided," Bingo answered. She was sitting tailor-fashion in the extreme forward end of the nose. "Sandy points at a spot on the map and says `be there'.

"Thank you, Bingo," Sandy muttered from the helm.

"Russian captain's probably screamin' at his crew to find us."

Phyllis turned towards Sandy. "And when the Russians find us?"

Sandy shrugged. "We've got better sensors. Not only sonar and radar, but lidar, atomic tracking . . . the works. We link up with the Russians, help them find the Brungarians, turn `round and go home. Simple. I thought you were all hot for me to jump into this."

"I am. To be honest, I'm happy to see you doing this. I'd just like for it to be done." Phyllis stared more closely. "What're you doing?"

Sandy was in a relaxed pose, leaning back in the chair with her heels propped up on the helm. She was gazing at an object she was holding between two fingers, and Phyllis recognized it as one of the iron pellets Sandy had taken from the Arctic crash site.

"Problem?" Phyllis asked, taking a few steps closer.

Sandy lightly waved the pellet at her. "This doesn't strike you as strange?"

Phyllis considered it. "Well . . . let's see. It's a little iron doodad, part of a giant load of iron doodads which was found in a wrecked airplane out on the polar ice." She nodded. "Yeah, I guess that'd sort of bug me."

"Sarcasm aside, and despite what we learned in Ottawa, there's still a lot of questions that haven't been answered."

Phyllis was mentally crossing her fingers. The "new Sandy" would've placidly ignored the mystery. This was starting to sound a lot more like the "old Sandy". "For instance?"

"Kondor says the Brungarians have been smuggling iron for three years," Sandy said. "Now . . . a Carrier Pigeon has a cargo capacity of six thousand pounds. For the moment let's presume the smugglers were managing one flight a month, and were using either the Carrier Pigeon or a similar plane. In three years that's only one hundred and eight tons of iron

Bingo had now turned to pay more attention to the conversation. "Mebbe they were doin' more than one flight a month," she said. "Or usin' bigger planes."

A sudden beeping was heard throughout the bridge. "Showtime!" Sandy announced, placing her feet on the deck and looking at the sonar display on her screen. "Showing two readings approaching, with one of them heading for the surface near us. Computer is identifying them as Yasen-class submarines. Annnnnnd now we're picking up a signal." Sandy reached for the microphone. "PSNS Mary Nestor responding."

A thickly accented female voice came over the speaker. "Mary Nestor, this is the Russian submarine Sudostroy. Captain Matveev commanding. I am the translator: Petty Officer First Class Galina Sokoloff."

"Hi, Galina. I'm Sandra Swift."

A pause. "Hello, Captain Swift."

"Galina, are you the only one on the bridge who understands English?"

"Ah . . . yes."

"Then let's cut the crapola. I'm Sandy."

Another pause. Then the voice returned, now carrying a whisper of lightness. "Consider the crapola cut . . . Sandy. Captain Matveev sends his greetings."

"Is he just being formal or is he really sincere about the greetings?"

"Ummm, he had issues at first. But after some private meetings with Admiral Kondor he seems to have come around. And he's now starting to give me suspicious looks."

"OK, we'll get back to business. Assure Captain Matveev that my mission here is just to assist in searching for Brungarian submarines. He's in overall command."

"I like her," Phyllis commented.

"Me too," Bingo said.

Galina soon came back. "All right, Sandy. Here's what he wants. We need to start moving east, towards the Laptev Sea. From your current position please assume a course of 22 degrees and proceed to north of Severnaya Zemlya. Beyond that you need to follow a course east along the Arctic Circle. Can you maintain a depth of five hundred fathoms?"

"Ah-hhh, yes. How're we going to communicate while submerged, Galina?"

"Are you equipped to transmit and receive ultrasonic signals?"

"Uh-huh."

"We are also equipped with a transducer and receiver. It won't be much---"

"But it'll be enough." Sandy studied her sonar display. "Galina I'm currently showing two submarines, and I'm guessing Sudostroy is the closest."

"Yes. The other submarine is the Pechora, commanded by Captain Simoneit who is engaged to my sister. He doesn't deserve her."

"Noted and logged," Sandy said, trying hard not to laugh over the open microphone (while Phyllis and Bingo didn't bother trying). "With Captain Matveev's permission I'll go ahead and get started."

"Thank you, Sandy."

"You're welcome, Galina. Mary Nestor out." Sandy hung up the microphone. "How'd you like to be a female on a Russian submarine?"

"It'd be . . . crowded," Phyllis remarked.

Sandy was entering commands into the controls. "Can one of you lower the periscope? Thanks. Setting course . . . setting speed and depth . . . and we're on our way." Sandy considered her instruments thoughtfully. "Kondor told us the Brungarians have five nuclear submarines, and Tom said four of them were Papa-class boats and the fifth was an old Delta III." She entered more instructions. "Since the Russians aren't using those types of subs anymore, and since Tom was nice enough to upload all the available signatures for those boats, all we have to do is hunt until we pick up the particular readings."

Phyllis had lowered the periscope. "A thought."

"OK."

"Back to our earlier conversation. Bingo? The Brungarians wouldn't use larger planes for smuggling. The Russians and Canadians would've spotted something like that much easier."

"Oh," Bingo considered. "Yeah."

"But you do see the point I was making," Sandy said to Phyllis. "Using planes like the Brungarians are doing is a hellaciously inefficient way to haul iron."

Phyllis was absently holding onto the periscope pole and she nodded. "Yeah. I mean, why do it that way? Why not . . . oh, I don't know . . . simply buy a tramp steamer, sail it to Brungaria and cut it up for scrap? Much more iron that way, and all in one trip."

"Mebbe they're doin' that as well," Bingo suggested.

"Then why're they using the furshlugginer planes?" Sandy argued.

Phyllis and Bingo shrugged.

Sandy had returned to staring intently at the iron pellet. "There's something we're not seeing here," she said. "An important piece of information that we're not considering, and I bet it's right in front of me."

"Mebbe we're askin' the wrong question," Bingo said.

The others looked at her. "We're all agreein' that it don't make sense for the Brungarians to be haulin' iron this way," Bingo continued. "Mebbe we need to look at this from the other end and ask ourselves what possible reason or purpose there'd be in doin' it like this."

Phyllis considered it. "Attractive." She looked at Sandy. "And you've already considered this, haven't you?"

Sandy looked up. "Um?"

"That's why, when we were flying out to Fearing, you asked Tom to look into the source of the iron."

"Yeah," Sandy slowly replied. "I figure maybe it wouldn't hurt if we knew who was manufacturing little iron pellets, and why." She sighed. "I don't know. Sometimes I just wish I was as clever as the two of you think I am."

Bingo snorted. "You been doin' pretty good so far."

Sandy grimaced. "Yeah. Maybe. But none of you have realized just how much I've been winging it in the past. Going on instinct." She turned back to her controls as a new beeping was heard.

"What's up now?" Phyllis asked.

Sandy was studying the sonar display. "Interesting," she murmured.

"What?"

"Sensors show Sudostroy and Pechora behind us and following. Two Russian submarines, just like Galina said."

"Uh huh."

"So someone please tell me why I'm now seeing a third submarine one hundred and twelve fathoms below us?"

Chapter Fourteen: Cold War.

Phyllis and Bingo gathered around the helm. "I'm tryin' hard not to say you're kiddin'," Bingo said to Sandy, "'cause I know you wouldn't kid about something like that."

Sandy pointed at the sonar display. "There it is." She read the information adjoining the display. "Seems to be single-screw, traveling at . . . fifty knots."

"Could it be the Brungarians already?" Phyllis asked.

"We can't be that lucky," Sandy replied. And that really bothers me."

"Oh?"

"If it's one of the Brungarian subs then it's the biggest coincidence that's ever happened." Sandy sighed. "The only other possibility is that it's Russian and, according to Matveev, there're only supposed to be two Russian subs in the area." She looked at Phyllis. "Who's hiding . . . or who's withholding information?"

"Maybe it's a Brungarian sub that's been following the Russians all this time," Phyllis said, "and we just happened to pick it up."

"Maybe," Sandy muttered. Reaching up she poked at the communications control and took the microphone. "Mary Nestor to Sudostroy, please come in."

"Yes, Sandy?"

"Hi again, Galina. Question: are your instruments currently picking up anything at . . . twenty or so fathoms below us?"

An exchange of Russian voices were heard in the background. Then: "We thought there was something for a moment, Sandy. But we're not reading anything but you and Pechora. We're checking our recordings now."

"Wait one," Sandy replied, snapping off the microphone, her eyes fixed on the display. "How bad is Russian sonar?" she wondered aloud.

"How good's ours?" Phyllis replied.

"The reason we've got this gig," Sandy pointed out, "is because Tom builds better equipment than most other . . . people. What the hell?"

As they watched, the faint image on the sonar display became even fainter, then vanished entirely.

"No," Sandy whispered, adjusting the controls. "It's still got to be there."

"A stealth boat?" Bingo asked.

"Then why wasn't it continually stealthy? Why were we seeing it briefly?" Sandy continued dialing around. "Sweeping the area below us with the laser."

But after almost a minute of scanning with both normal sonar and the laser, Sandy sat back, exhaling irritably. "Fat rat!"

"Gave us the slip?"

Sandy was returning the sonar controls back to their usual settings. "Someone's very fast and very maneuverable. They must've realized they'd been spotted and scooted out of range. But the subs that the Brungarians are using wouldn't have that capability."

"You sure?" Phyllis asked. "It wouldn't be the first time we got technologically snookered by the Brungarians."

Sandy chewed on a fingernail. "True . . . true. Oops!" She grabbed at the microphone again. "Still there, Galina? Sorry `bout that."

"That's OK," Galina replied. "Our technicians have reported that we may have experienced an episode of receiver distortion due to low propagation loss through a deep sound channel. I'm not a technician, I speak English."

"Doing a good job of it," Sandy assured her. "We're checking things out at our end but, in the meantime, we'll continue. Mary Nestor out." She hung up the microphone.

She then noticed Phyllis and Bingo looking at her solemnly. "It could've been a whale," she said to them. "A bowhead, or a big beluga."

Phyllis crossed her arms. "A whale? With a single screw reading?"

"Whatever it was it wasn't matching any known submarine patterns."

"A jetmarine which someone purchased---"

"Phyl!"

"All right," Phyllis said, a little crossly. "Go ahead and be enigmatic." Turning she went forward into the jetmarine's nose.

Bingo looked from one to the other. "I'll . . . go see about starting lunch," she said, turning to go to the galley.

* * * * *

Two days of searching turned up nothing other than Bingo observing that they'd soon need to stop for groceries.

Still under the ice pack, Mary Nestor was now in the Chukchi Sea, escorting its Russian companions east some one hundred seventy miles north of Wrangel Island. Eyebrows on the jetmarine were initially raised at why the subs seemed to be giving Brungaria a wide berth, but Admiral Kondor (via Sudostroy) had relayed a message stating that there was strong evidence

Brungarian subs were using sophisticated technology to tap the oilfields along Alaska's North Slope.

"Kind of makes sense," Sandy mused. "If we want to catch mice we go where the cheese is."

"But if the Brungarians are robbing Alaska oil," Bingo asked, "then how come the Russians and the Canadians don't tell our government?"

Taking a break from the helm, Sandy was stretched out on a towel in the nose. Bingo sat nearby, working on some needlepoint.

"There's been a lot about this which hasn't seemed on the up and up," Sandy said, rolling on her side to look at Bingo. "Maybe it boils down to simple Russian paranoia."

"And Canadian paranoia?" Phyllis asked from the helm.

"Yeah, I know." Sandy sat up. "But admittedly the Prudhoe Bay area would make a nice staging area for the Brungarians to go on to where they could intercept the smuggling planes." She frowned to herself.

Phyllis noticed her expression. "What?"

"Something," Sandy muttered. "I don't know." Absently she stared up at the nose where a map of the immediate area dominated the SmartGlas. "How soon before we can contact home again?"

"Right now we're . . . fourteen miles north of the edge of the ice pack," Phyllis said after looking at the instruments. "If you don't want to use the oscillator to break through the ice above us I'm sure our friends won't mind a slight detour. Need me to make a course change?"

"Um!" Sandy hugged her knees. "It's just---"

Everyone suddenly froze as a beeping was heard.

"San?" Phyllis asked.

But Sandy and Bingo were already standing up, and Sandy was sweeping her hand across the SmartGlas, removing the map and replacing it with a copy of the sonar display.

"Got something," she announced. "Readings indicate titanium hull . . . just over three hundred and fifty feet in length . . . speed: thirty-two knots but rising. It's a Papa-class boat!"

"Got one," Bingo breathed.

"Bearing eighty-one point three two degrees . . . range: eight thousand three feet. Phyl, you recording all this?"

Phyllis was nodding. Sandy moved to the helm to reach over Phyllis' shoulder and make contact with the Sudostroy. "Hello?" she said into the microphone. "Anyone there?"

Galina's voice was excited. "Sandy, we've just picked up the submarine---"

"So we're both looking at it. Great." Sandy motioned for Phyllis to switch places and she slid behind the helm. "Locking in laser tracking. It's not gonna get away this time."

"So we've concluded that it's not a whale?" Phyllis smirked.

Sandy waved her away. "Sudostroy I'm collecting information which definitely identifies the submarine as a Papa-class. All you people have to do is prove beyond a doubt that no one other than the Brungarians could have a Papa-class in this area---"

"We can provide that proof. Captain Matveev wishes to know if you would be willing to transmit not only the information you've collected, but could make a personal deposition right now which could be used for our preliminary hearings?"

Covering the microphone with a hand, Sandy frowned up at the others. "Would that be binding in court?"

Phyllis and Bingo shrugged.

"Next time I bring Dody with me." Sandy uncovered the microphone, her eyes returning to the sonar readings. "Ah-hhhh, Sudostroy. I can transmit a statement over to you, as well as a complete telemetry record and data packet from Mary Nestor. That will have everything."

"Thank you. We've got our recorders running and can receive when you're ready."

"They probably need this in case the Brungarian sub gets away," Bingo pointed out. "I bet you get called to testify later on down the line."

Sandy nodded, pressing switches on the communications panel. "Starting upload of telemetry to Sudostroy."

Phyllis, in the meantime, was looking at the sonar display in the nose. "Looks like the Brungarian might be moving off," she said.

"She'll have a hard time outrunning us and the Russians," Sandy replied, clearing her throat. She then brought the microphone to her lips. "This is Sandra Swift delivering testimony from on board the PSNS Mary Nestor. Currently I am at . . . latitude 73 degrees, 1 minute and 21.3312 degrees north by longitude 173 degrees, 19 minutes and 13.1232 degrees west. Note time and date reading. I am tracking a Papa-class submarine on a current bearing of . . . forty-two degrees . . . and traveling at a speed of forty-eight knots and climbing. Sudostroy, you copy?"

"Yes, Sandy, and thanks."

"Sudostroy and Pechora are both speeding up," Phyllis said. "Sudostroy's coming up directly astern. Nine thousand feet and closing."

"I guess we just tag along," Sandy said. "Take sensor readings."

"They wouldn't try and torpedo the Brungarians, are they?"

Sandy considered it. "They'd want the Brungarians alive and the submarine intact as further proof. They're probably going to pursue it and force it to surface and surrender or something." She frowned. "Still . . ."

Phyllis and Bingo watched her, waiting.

"Bingo? Go pull three hydrolungs from the airlock storage."

"You think it's gonna get that bad?" Phyllis asked as Bingo left the bridge.

"I think I'll start falling back," Sandy told her. "I hope I'm right, and this isn't going to turn into a shooting match. But, just in case, and in case the Brungarians decide they don't like us . . ."

Bingo hurried back with three of the packages which held hydrolung kits, passing two of them out to the others. Taking her hands off the controls, Sandy quickly opened her package and began climbing into the bodysuit. Trying to keep an eye on the displays she began fastening the density control onto the waist belt.

She was putting the underwater jet pack where she could quickly get her hands on it when Phyllis suddenly shrieked. "Sandy!"

"What?"

"They're opening their torpedo tubes! They're gonna fire!"

Sandy looked back at her displays. "The Brungarians?"

"The Russians!"

Sandy could now see the computer's interpretation of the acoustic signal. "Dammit, they're crazy. They need the evidence---"

"Oh my God!"

But Sandy had seen it too. The Sudostroy launching a single torpedo. And there was no mistaking the projected track.

Its target was Mary Nestor.

With one hand Sandy was struggling to pull the flexible breathing helmet over her head while her other hand was reaching for the countermeasure controls. The point defense repelatrns would possibly work . . . if they could be brought to full power.

But Sudostroy had fired from a range of less than six thousand feet. Sandy knew there was no time even as it was running out.

The impact which slammed against the jetmarine confirmed it.

Then the sudden cold . . .

Then the darkness.

Chapter Fifteen: Mobilis In Mobili.

The darkness shifted a bit, and Sandy squirmed beneath the sheet. At least the air seemed more comfortable this time. The antibiotics often left an astringent odor which made getting back to sleep difficult. If the air was softer then Sandy guessed it was getting close to time for Dr. Pritchard and his team to move her for another nanobot infusion. That would be followed by another bone marrow biopsy . . .

Her eyes snapped wide open. "What?"

She wasn't in the hospital back at the Citadel. That was a long time ago. She had been in Mary Nestor . . .

The torpedo. The impact.

Quickly sitting up in bed Sandy found herself facing Phyllis who was dragging herself up from a prone position on a similar bed. They were on opposite sides of a snug room. No window . . . a door on the wall to Sandy's left. The walls were colored in a gentle pearl-grey, with darker grey carpeting covering the floor. Light came from a recessed panel in the ceiling.

Sandy and Phyllis were sitting on the lower halves of two bunk beds. At the foot of each bed a simple desk and chair separated the bunks from the wall which held the door.

A soft moan from the upper bunk caused Sandy to lean forward and look up. A familiar smooth leg briefly appeared, then it was pulled back to be eventually replaced by Bingo's face as she stared about in drowsy confusion. "Wh-what . . ."

Sandy considered the question valid, if perhaps lacking in detail. But Phyllis managed to raise an even more important issue. "Our clothes," she croaked out.

It now dawned on Sandy that none of them were dressed in the clothes they had been wearing when the torpedo had hit Mary Nestor. The hydrolungs had also vanished. Instead, the girls were dressed in loose-fitting pastel blue jumpsuits made of some sort of thin material.

Peering closely at Phyllis, Sandy noticed a symbol was neatly stenciled on the left breast of her jumpsuit and, looking down, she saw that her own suit was similarly marked. At first glance it seemed to be a stylized version of da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" concept. On closer examination, though, she saw that the "man" was, in fact, a serenely smiling black haired woman. As with da Vinci's design the woman had the requisite four arms, but there were only two legs. She was covered in some sort of robe and wore a small crown on her head. The circle surrounding the figure was made up of words written in delicate lines, loops and hooks.

Bingo's legs now swung about to hang near Sandy.

"Are we . . . dead?" the Texan whispered softly.

Phyllis was now looking around the room. "Well, if this is the Afterlife, I'm a little disappointed. I thought it'd look nicer." She fingered her jumpsuit. "I also thought that Heaven would have more fashionable and better-fitting clothes."

Sandy was managing to find her own voice. "I'm gonna go ahead and presume we're still alive. I mean, if I'm dead, then where're my wings and halo? And I'll give the both of you just five seconds to get those expressions off your faces."

Bingo lightly hopped down, and Sandy now noticed they were all barefoot. But the temperature was comfortable.

Everyone continued staring around. "This obviously ain't Mary Nestor," Bingo said.

Sandy agreed. "No real telling where we are. However," and she looked pointedly over at the door, which featured an ordinary looking handle.

Bingo was closely tracing the outer circle of her suit's symbol with a finger. "Sanskrit," she murmured.

Sandy raised an eyebrow. "Can you read it?"

A shake of the head. "I just know it when I see it."

Sandy sighed. "OK," she said, carefully getting up from the bed. "Let's take the bull by the horns here." She began moving towards the door. Bingo was quicker, though, reaching it ahead of

Sandy who couldn't help but notice how the girl's body tensed as if expecting to find something nasty on the other side.

Admittedly, Sandy sympathized with her.

Opening the door a bit, Bingo peeked through. She then opened it wider. "Coast is clear," she announced. "C'mon."

Following her, the girls stepped out into a narrow corridor which gently curved away to either side. A few doors similar to the one they had walked through could also be seen.

Sandy paused. "Feel that?"

Phyllis nodded. "An engine?"

"Yeah. We must be on a ship or something."

"Hm, I'd rather not dwell on what 'something' could turn out to be, so I hope you're right about this being a ship. Could it be the Russians?"

"I don't think they would've rescued us immediately after torpedoing us," Sandy replied grimly, her face set in stern lines.

"Yeah," said Bingo. "What the heck happened?"

"Believe me," Sandy told her, "I'd dearly love a good explanation. But, on the face of it, it looks as if the Russians wanted to kill us. Until I can choke the truth out of someone that's the story I'm sticking with."

"Hey!"

Sandy and Bingo turned to see Phyllis quickly motioning at them from further on down the corridor. "You guys gotta see this," she said.

They followed Phyllis around the corridor's curve, reaching a door at the end. Phyllis had apparently cracked it open a bit and she now stood aside, indicating that they should peek through to what was beyond. Curious, Sandy and Bingo moved closer to have a look.

Their mouths fell open in perfect unison.

"Holy . . ." Sandy began.

". . . Magoo!" Bingo finished.

As if hypnotized they opened the door wider, stepping through the entrance so that they could confirm what their eyes were trying to tell them.

Stretching before them was an enormous and sumptuously outfitted salon. On either side the walls curved upwards above a floor which was carpeted in the same dark grey, only much richer.

Halfway up the walls the chamber was divided into two sections by a mezzanine. On the lower section the walls were covered by framed works of art and maps. Down the center stretched a line of glass display cases, the nearest of which held an impressive collection of shells. Other cases in the line were aquariums where the movements of fish and other living things were noticed. In a few locations the line was punctuated by tables holding a collection of scientific instruments. Beyond the far end of the line could be seen an enormous globe of the world and beyond that, what seemed to be an elegant dining chamber. In pride of place at the center of the line sparkled a gaily splashing fountain which looked as if it had been formed from some sort of gigantic clam shell.

The walls of the chamber's upper section was dominated by shelves filled with books. Circular staircases allowed access to the mezzanine which, in term, would allow a person to casually browse among the shelves.

On either side of the fountain the walls were dominated by two enormous circular convex viewports stretching from floor to ceiling, the transparent panels seemingly held in place by metal ribs which gave each port the appearance of a giant eye. A semi-circle of couches formed comfortable-looking viewing areas before each port.

Sandy was remembering the first time she had attended a Renaissance Festival. Back then she literally did not know which way to look first. It was a feeling she was experiencing once more.

"OK it's official," she softly said. "If this is Heaven then it's Tom's idea of it. They messed up and we got put in the wrong Heaven. Figures."

A touch on her elbow and she turned to see Phyllis nod to their left. In all her fascination Sandy had overlooked the opulent pipe organ which dominated the near wall between the door they had passed through, and a companion door on the other side. It also stretched from floor to ceiling and was intricately inlaid in coral and Mother-of-pearl.

"And I'll bet it's in tune," Phyllis whispered.

An excited hiss from Bingo and they looked to see that she had gone on ahead to the nearest of the viewports. Joining her they stared out and saw the endless field of blue-white ice above, and the darker blue of water in all other directions beyond.

Sandy nodded. "So we're still under the Arctic. And this is obviously a submarine. And definitely not one of the Russians. For that matter, I don't think it's Brungarian either."

Phyllis looked at her. "Oh, Sandy . . . your leaps of deduction just floor me."

"Sucks to you."

"Guys?"

They turned to see Bingo nodding down at one of the nearby display cases. Moving closer they saw that the case held a large model of . . . something. At first glance it appeared to be a submarine. But it was a submarine crusted with bronze plates and rivets. Jagged spines and ribs followed the hull, giving the vehicle the overall look of some sort of sleek sea beast. The look was further accented by the wide fishlike tail at the rear, plus what seemed to be a pilot house on the forward dorsal end. The pilot house featured slightly smaller twin versions of the salon's viewports, their position apparently meant to serve as eyes for the "creature".

At the center, on either side, scaled-down versions of the salon's viewports were clearly visible.

Phyllis stared at the model, then slowly looked all around her.

Sandy's eyes continued to examine the model.

Bingo was watching her. "You're thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

"Yeah," Sandy breathed. "That looks . . . very familiar."

"But---"

"I know," Sandy said. "Dad and Tom and Uncle Ned used to talk about it all the time. Especially when Tom was first designing the jetmarine. But this . . . I mean it can't be . . ."

"This is getting weirder by the moment," Phyllis remarked.

"Then perhaps I can help clear up the mystery," a new voice said.

The girls looked up.

He had appeared through a doorway beyond the dining area and was now standing there, smiling at them. A tall, slender man dressed in a simple white tunic and matching trousers. His skin held a faint mahogany hue and his sincere smile was framed by a small black beard and matching hair. Above the smile a pair of black eyes was regarding them with delight.

"I am so glad to see that all of you are up and conscious," he continued, casually walking to them. "I felt there would be no harmful side-effects to the anesthetics which were used on all of you, and I had estimated that you would be awake by now." His eyes now searched the faces of the girls. "There is no pain? All of you are feeling fine?"

Sandy felt herself being figuratively pushed forward onto the stage. "We . . . seem to be OK," she murmured. "Mister . . . Mister . . ."

"Ah, but of course," the man said. "Introductions. Please pardon me, but I'm not usually found in social situations. I believe I am safe in presuming that you are Miss Sandra Swift. Which would make your companions Miss Belinda-Glory Winkler, and Miss Phyllis Newton." The man's smiled widened slightly. "And as for myself, I am Leo Czardos, and I welcome you on board the Saraswati."

Chapter Sixteen: Obituary.

"And now that you are all awake," Czardos continued, snapping his fingers once.

Two men, also dressed in white tunics, quickly entered the room. Both of them were pushing carts laden with dishes, and the men began smoothly setting them out on the table, along with five place settings. All in complete silence.

"A meal is in order," Czardos suggested, indicating the table with a wave of his arm. "After your ordeal I expect the three of you need a chance to build your strength. And it will give us all a chance to talk and attend to the questions I'm sure you're wanting to ask."

Bingo was the first to reach the table, and she raised the lid on one of the covered dishes. "Ooooo . . ."

"Please indulge, ladies," Czardos said. "Here we have dum bhindi, which is a dish of fried okra stuffed with seasoned potatoes. Over here is kofta: ground beef cooked with onions and spices. A spinach and tomato pakora over there, some bread . . . and iced lemon sharbat to drink. Not too tart, of course. I didn't want to shock your senses so soon after your recent experiences."

Bingo immediately began filling a plate. "I haven't had Indian in so long . . ."

Phyllis and Sandy more cautiously joined her, with Phyllis' practiced eye noting that the china was genuine Royal Copenhagen, the plates bearing the same symbol they wore on their jumpsuits. She couldn't quite place the source of either the flatware or the crystal glasses, but she silently doubted that they came from a Dollar General.

The girls took seats, with Czardos sitting at the head of the table.

Sandy noticed the remaining place setting. "We seem to be missing someone."

"John should be along in a moment," Czardos said, unfolding his napkin. "He had some work to finish up . . . ah! Speak of the devil."

"Sorry," said the man who was now rushing into the room and heading for the table. "One of the few times we have visitors . . . and especially three charming ladies . . . so naturally I show up late." He nodded at the girls. "Miss Swift . . . Miss Newton . . . Miss Winkler. Welcome."

Czardos indicated the newcomer with a nod. "Ladies, my close friend and fellow researcher: Dr. John Symmes."

Sandy studied the newcomer as he began serving himself, seeing a man who possessed the build of a marionette: all tousled blonde hair and gangling limbs. He also had the widest mouth she had ever seen on a person and, from watching him begin to eat, suspected he was one of those rare and interesting creatures who could consume an entire grocery store and never gain an ounce.

"Did you find what you were looking for, John?" Czardos asked.

Symmes nodded, pouring himself a glass of sharbat. "I may want to go back over map reference 8G-44. The sulfide readings were very suspicious." He looked at the girls. "Of course I'll understand if we're . . . delayed."

"Quite," Czardos said. "You might be interested to know," he said to Sandy, "that John's been making rather extensive use of one of your brother's atomic trackers, as well as other instruments. By profession he's a planetary geologist so, for obscure reasons, he's spent a lot of time searching beneath the polar ice cap."

"It's here," Symmes declared. "I know my theory will bear out."

"John's been saying that for . . . three years now, John?"

Symmes shrugged.

"But my faith in him is unflagging. Besides, he plays an excellent game of chess."

"And you, Mister Czardos," Sandy said. "What exactly are you?"

Czardos shrugged. "Just a simple marine biologist of no great distinction."

"Graduated with honors from Cochin University of Science and Technology," Symmes said. "Class of 1998. Don't be modest, Leo."

"They gave me that degree because they wanted my father's funding for the new laboratory," Czardos gently insisted.

"And of course it had nothing whatsoever to do with your groundbreaking paper on the dynamics of sustainable habitat conservation within the Bay of Bengal," Symmes added.

Now it was Czardos who shrugged. "A minor thing."

Symmes grunted.

"I really dislike ruining pleasant table conversation," Sandy slowly said, "but I'm afraid---"

"Yes," Czardos ruefully agreed. "I suppose your digestion would be much improved if your questions were attended to."

"For openers, you immediately knew who my friends and I were."

Czardos chuckled. "Not all that amazing a feat, I'm afraid. The influence of Swift Enterprises is indeed truly global, if not further. But the presence of one of its jetmarines beneath the polar ice is still cause for curiosity. Especially when it's accompanied by Russians. Besides," and here his eyes took in all three of the girls, "it is said that Miss Newton and Miss Winkler are never far away from the company of Sandra Swift. And, these days, where Sandra Swift moves, the eyes of the world tend to follow."

Sandy's eyes narrowed. "You weren't, by any chance, near Franz Josef Land a few days ago?"

Symmes barked a laugh. "Told you," he said to Czardos.

Czardos scratched at his beard, looking a bit sheepish. "Yes, that was us. Saraswati is rather adept at hiding from the sort of sensing devices found on conventional submarines. Your jetmarine, on the other hand . . ."

"So you've been following us since then?"

Czardos' expression grew serious. "Yes."

"Then you saw what happened," Sandy said, leaning forward in Czardos' direction, her hands gripping the edge of the table.

Czardos nodded. "We observed the entire incident. You and the Russians were closing in on the Brungarian submarine. The lead Russian submarine fired upon you, destroying your vessel."

"And then?"

"The Russians continued pursuing the Brungarian sub."

Sandy's frown deepened. "But the Russians didn't fire on the Brungarians?"

Czardos shook his head.

"Where did they go?"

"We saw them heading in what seemed to be a gradual turn to the north. I'm afraid we weren't paying too much attention. Rather, we were hurriedly moving to pick up the three of you." Czardos slowly exhaled. "I must say all of you were quite fortunate. To tell the truth we were expecting to find three corpses. Even if you had managed to survive the destruction of your boat, you would have all been dead in less than a minute from the surrounding ocean."

"Fortunately, Tom's jetmarines employ stronger construction materials than conventional seacraft," Sandy said, glancing at Phyllis and Bingo. "As for our survival afterwards . . . we had been getting into hydrolungs. Admittedly they wouldn't have protected us for very long in the Arctic . . ."

"But they kept you three alive long enough for us to reach you," Czardos considered half to himself.

"How long has it been---"

"You were torpedoed fourteen hours ago," Czardos replied. "We monitored your respective conditions, keeping the three of you moderately sedated while we employed what medical skills we had to insure your health. You in particular were an interesting case, Miss Swift. Our instruments detected the nanobots working in your body."

Sandy nodded. "I bet most of them have burned out by now."

Phyllis now raised her hand. "Excuse me," she said timidly. "I'm of course grateful for being rescued. But I've just got to know. What the heck happened to our clothes?"

Sandy and Bingo looked back at Czardos. Symmes had an elbow on the table and was leaning his face into a palm, smiling maliciously. "Yes, Leo," he said. "I'm waiting to hear how you're going to explain that."

Czardos' face was rather flushed. "I assure you ladies, the medical severity of the situation warranted a rapid response. And I promise you we were as discreet as possible---"

Phyllis raised her hand again. "Stop! Let's just go ahead and table the subject for the time being."

Czardos looked extremely embarrassed. "You will all be issued more appropriate clothing when opportunity permits."

"Y'know," Bingo muttered, "in some counties in Texas this'd be grounds for common law marriage."

"Let it drop, Bingo."

"kay!"

"So where are we now?" Sandy asked Czardos.

In answer Czardos glanced over at the nearest wall. Following his look Sandy noticed a small panel of instruments.

"We are still in the Chukchi Sea," Czardos said. "We've moved just south of the ice pack. Right now we are on a course of 272 degrees, traveling at forty-one knots. We will shortly be passing between Wrangel Island and the Chukotka Peninsula."

"I've got to contact my folks," Sandy declared, "and I've got to know what's going on. Can we surface and make contact with Enterprises?"

In answer, Czardos locked eyes with Symmes. For a moment the two men silently stared at one another.

"Nobility, Leo," Symmes softly said. "We both knew this could happen if you brought them aboard."

"Yes," Czardos agreed, a hint of reluctance in his voice. "You are, of course, quite correct." He rose from the table. "Ladies? If you'll accompany me?"

With Symmes bringing up the rear, Czardos led the girls out of the salon and forward into a corridor. "I hope you'll excuse my reticence," Czardos said to them. "It is my sincere wish, of course, to help the three of you. But you must understand that, for the longest time, I have struggled to keep the existence of Saraswati hidden from the outside world."

"And failing miserably in some cases," Symmes remarked.

"I'll certainly do my utmost to keep you out of this situation," Sandy assured Czardos. "But I hope you understand my position."

"Oh quite!"

They now entered a roughly hexagonal-shaped room which contained, in its center, a circular stairway leading up. The left and right sides of the room held arrays of instrument panels, both of them crewed by a pair of men.

Going to the left control alcove, Czardos leaned close to the men who were at the station. "Prepare to transmit and receive once we surface," he murmured.

He then went to the circular stairway and called up. "Mr. Grace!"

"Yes sir," a voice drifted from above.

"Surface. Give us fifteen degrees up angle."

"Fifteen degrees up angle . . . surfacing."

Around them the almost inaudible tone of the engines changed as the room experienced a gentle tilt.

Sandy looked around. "This is quite an elegant boat you have, Mr. Czardos."

From a corner of the room Symmes peeked over at Czardos, a slight smirk on his face.

Czardos was leaning back against the stairway. "You may be interested in learning that we monitored transmissions to and from the Russian subs."

Sandy looked back at him. "And?"

"Very unusual," Czardos admitted. "While the lead Russian submarine was speaking with you it was also speaking extensively with its companion. We also detected extreme low frequency traffic emanating from another location. Considering the nature of those transmissions we concluded that the messages must have originated from a point within Russia."

"Could you tell what was being said?"

Czardos shook his head. "Naturally the ELF messages were very short and seemed to be nothing more than a few words in some sort of code. The submarine which fired upon you spent a great deal of time emphasizing to its partner that it was operating under specific orders."

"Matveev was ordered to fire on us," Bingo murmured.

"But why?" Sandy asked her. "And on whose authority?"

The light which was coming down from the stairway suddenly became brighter.

Surfaced!" came the call from above. "Maintaining original course and speed."

"Communication systems on line," one of the men in the left alcove announced. "Beginning downloads."

"Scopes clear," a man from the other side of the room said. "No aircraft or other vessels in the area."

Nodding, Czardos turned to Sandy. "Very well, Miss Swift," he said. "Your call."

Sandy was about to speak when one of the communications men turned slightly, one hand holding a receiver to his ear. "Sir, download library has an item tagged three hours ago," he said to Czardos. "Its content has tripped some of our markers. I think you should hear this."

"Proceed."

Flipping a switch, the crewman brought a speaker to life.

" , , , further updates in the news that Sandra Swift . . . test pilot and member of the celebrated Swift family . . . has recently been killed while on an exploration mission in the Arctic Ocean," a voice from the speaker announced.

"The HELL?" Sandy cried out.

"According to reports just coming out from Russia, Miss Swift and two companions lost their lives when a Brungarian submarine fired upon their vessel," the voice was continuing. "Miss Swift had in fact positively identified the Brungarian submarine just moments before it launched the torpedo which caused the Swift vessel to sink with all hands. Further details are still being solicited from officials in Russia and we will keep you posted.

"Repeating the top story, there have been no further updates . . ."

"Turn it off," Czardos said suddenly, his eyes on Sandy.

Sandy stood there, her face white, her eyes large as saucers, her mouth hanging open as her breathing was becoming more and more audible.

"They . . . " she moaned softly, her body trembling. "They . . . they . . ."

Phyllis and Bingo didn't look much calmer.

"John," Czardos instructed. "My medical kit---"

"No," Sandy suddenly replied, her voice rough as a saw blade. She was staring blindly ahead. "We got to . . . got to . . ."

"We got to call Tom and the others," Phyllis cried out. "Sandy, my folks. My God, my Dad's heart! If they think we're dead---"

"I can establish direct satellite contact with Enterprises," Czardos said. "You can all be talking to your families and the world in a few moments---"

"NO!"

The sharp command had suddenly come from Sandy, and everyone in the room was looking at her. She was still wide-eyed and pale, but the trembling had stopped. Her hands were clenching into fists at her sides, and something of a calculating expression was fighting for possession of her face.

She slowly shook her head. "No," she repeated, this time in a normal voice. "For the time being we remain dead."

Chapter Seventeen: Messages From Home.

She had the attention of everyone in the room.

Phyllis, Bingo and Czardos all delivered variations on "What?" Symmes, meanwhile, smiled to himself.

Sandy was slowly moving about the room, staring at nothing in particular. "There are moments when I really hate my life," she said, "and this is one of them. We've got to do two things, and they need to be done desperately, quickly and sneaky. First: we need to get in touch with my folks and privately . . . that's privately . . . let them know that we're still alive. We also need to tell them that, until I tell them otherwise, they're not to contradict the official report about our deaths."

"How come?" Bingo asked.

"Someone's gone to enormous lengths to try and kill us and put the blame on the Brungarians," Sandy replied, idly holding onto the stairway. "My list of suspects is rather short and, if I want to narrow it down even more, I think it'd be better to let whoever's behind this think they've succeeded. At least for the time being."

Czardos' frown deepened a bit. "Are your families good enough actors to keep their obvious relief from showing?"

"I hope so," Sandy said, "for Brungaria's sake."

"Oh?"

Sandy sighed. "My father is a peaceable, calm and loving man, except when his family and friends are threatened or attacked. If he truly believes we were killed by Brungarians, then there's no telling what he might do. Especially if my brother helps out. Dad's not the type to use nuclear weapons or anything of that sort, but I'd feel better if I pulled the plug on the feelings I suspect he's experiencing at the moment." She looked over at the communication center. "What's the most private and secure two way channel you can set up?"

Czardos considered it. "If I know the address of the receiver, I can transmit and receive tight beam text messages."

Sandy nodded. "I can provide an address. Please set it up."

Czardos once again leaned close to the communications technicians. "Open channel 44 blue." His eyes studied a readout. "Miss Swift, I'm going to bounce this off of one of your company's satellites. Will that be sufficient?"

"Yes."

One of the technicians looked up at Czardos and nodded. "All right," Czardos said to Sandy, stepping aside. "You may use the keyboard here."

Moving past Czardos, Sandy squeezed in between the technicians and rested her fingers on an alphanumeric keyboard. In front of her was a waiting monitor screen.

Rapidly she began typing: SSW@SWIFNET TO FOLLOWING. Sandy entered the addresses of the member of both her family and the Newtons then typed: FUZZY DAUGHTER TO HOMEPLATE. WE'RE ALIVE! "Hope someone's home and watching the console," she murmured, mentally calculating the time needed for the message to bounce through space to home, figuring in the fact that someone would have to answer the console on the other side, then cry out in panicked relief . . .

After almost a minute a message appeared: NEED CONFIRMATION.

Sandy growled. ORBIT/335.

Another pause. Then: MESSAGE FROM BUD. WHAT HAPPENED AROUND 10:45 PM BEHIND THE NUMBER TWO MOORING AT THE SHOPTON YACHT CLUB FIVE WEEKS AGO?

Sandy's face widened and her mouth formed an O. "Thousands of questions to ask me, and Bud has to pick that one?"

"Apparently it's supposed to be a question only you and he would know the answer to," Czardos said.

"Yeah, well . . . well . . ." Reaching a decision Sandy looked at the others. "All of you go `way. Shoo! Turn around."

Phyllis suddenly leaned over to Bingo and whispered into her ear. Bingo giggled.

"That goes double for the two of you. Turn around and don't look."

"How's that hand holding now?" smirked Phyllis as she primly turned about.

Her face reddening, Sandy turned back to the keyboard, typing as fast as she could and holding herself in a way she hoped was shielding the monitor from everyone else (although even the two technicians had politely turned aside). Once the message had been transmitted she just as quickly erased it from the screen.

She suddenly moaned. "I hope my folks aren't watching at the other end."

A reply appeared. SANDY WHAT'S HAPPENED? WHERE ARE YOU?

WHO?

DAD. OTHERS ARE LOGGED IN.

IN A HIDDEN PLACE RIGHT NOW. WE'RE SAFE.

WE CAN COME GET YOU----

Sandy's finger drummed repeatedly on the BREAK button. Then she typed: MUST NOT TELL ANYONE ELSE WE'RE ALIVE FOR THE TIME BEING. SITUATION CRITICAL.

There was no immediate answer. "What wouldn't you give to be hearing the arguing going on at the other end?" Phyllis asked Sandy.

"No kidding," Sandy muttered.

OK. EXPLAIN.

Sandy's fingers danced about the keyboard. HERE ARE THE FACTS. BRUNGARIANS INNOCENT REPEAT INNOCENT. RUSSIANS FIRED TORPEDO AND DESTROYED MARY NESTOR

More silence.

"This is so weird," Bingo said. "Can't hear what's bein' said back at home, but I just know someone's cussin'."

THEN WHERE ARE YOU?

Conscious of Czardos watching her, Sandy once again leaned over the keyboard. WITH A FRIEND.

"Thank you, Miss Swift," Czardos murmured.

WE'RE SAFE, Sandy typed. TRYING TO LEARN MORE.

YOU CERTAIN YOU DON'T NEED TO BE PICKED UP?

"Bet you a donut that was Bud," Phyllis said.

"Sucker bet," Bingo answered.

NO, Sandy typed, BUT NEED TO TELL ALL OF YOU SOMETHINGS. BE CAREFUL OF MILBERRY IN CANADA AND KONDOR IN RUSSIA. LALLAOUI IN CANADA CAN BE A RELIABLE CONTACT. TOM ARE YOU THERE?

After a pause: YES FUZZY.

Sandy almost smiled. INVESTIGATE LUX CLOSELY AND SOONEST.

ALREADY HAVE, the screen replied. INTERESTING RESULT. NO ONE FROM LUX FOUND OR ARRESTED, BUT OWNER OF LUX HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED. IN COUNTRY UNDER FALSE IDENTITY. ACTUALLY PYOTR KOZLOV FORMERLY WITH KOROLEV DESIGN BUREAU. EXPERT IN MIRV DISPERSAL DESIGN.

"Oh . . . my," Sandy murmured.

KOZLOV MAY ALSO BE LINKED TO IRON PELLET PRODUCTION. STILL CHECKING.

BE CAREFUL, Sandy typed.

LOOK WHOS TALKING.

A crewman at the opposite side of the room suddenly turned away from his instruments. "Sir," he said to Czardos, "I'm showing focused electron beams coming from space."

"I'll handle this," Sandy sighed, turning back to the keyboard. OK STOP WITH SEARCHING FOR US. WE'RE FINE. "It's probably Ken Horton up on the space station, looking for his sweetheart."

Bingo dimpled. "Awwww . . ."

Something occurred to Sandy. "Mr. Czardos, Phyllis and Bingo and me are implanted with security chips which broadcast our locations. Will Saraswati's hull shield the transmissions?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Sherman won't give up," Phyllis said.

Sandy agreed. "Between him and Tom they'll eventually locate us. But we've got a while yet." She read the new message on the screen: STATE DEPARTMENT PRESSURING FOR DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE AGAINST BRUNGARIA. SITUATION COULD ESCALATE.

"And that's what I was worried about." HOLD OR STALL ANY AND ALL ACTION UNTIL I FIND OUT MORE. WILL CONTACT AGAIN SHORTLY VIA THIS CHANNEL.

WE'RE WORRIED.

"Like I'm not?" Sandy muttered. ME TOO. She smiled as a thought occurred to her and continued typing. AND PHYLLIS IS MADLY IN LOVE WITH YOU AND DESIRES YOUR HOT KISSES.

"Sandy!"

"Well you are," Bingo pointed out to Phyllis.

FEELING MUTUAL.

OK THEN. SIGNING OFF FOR THE TIME BEING. KEEP CHANNEL OPEN. LOVE ALL OF YOU. BYE. "Thank you, Mr. Czardos."

"You're quite welcome." He was eyeing her carefully. "For reasons too extensively obscure to go into at the moment I've tried to live as prudent a life as possible---"

Symmes groaned.

"---so I suspect I may regret knowing the answer to this question. What exactly would you like from me and Saraswati, Miss Swift?"

Sandy had once again returned to the stairway and was holding onto it, idly swinging back and forth while she looked thoughtful. "Things could get very ugly very soon," she considered. "Apparently someone in Russia ordered our deaths in order to precipitate an international incident, with Brungaria as the target."

"To what end?" Czardos asked.

"I'll probably know the answer to that," Sandy said, "when I figure out why a Russian expert in multiple missile warheads is busy running an iron pellet smuggling ring." She looked over at Czardos. "I don't want to impose or put you at risk. How much help are you willing to offer?"

Czardos and Symmes exchanged a glance. "If you'll allow me to play Devil's Advocate for a moment," he slowly replied, "it would be rather easy to arrange a rendezvous with your family. Then all of you would be safely at home and doubtless still able to direct your inquiries."

"And Tom would find out about you and Saraswati," Sandy pointed out. "Not that he wouldn't do handsprings when he sees this submarine, but I sort of feel honor bound to help you maintain your privacy."

"I appreciate that. I also appreciate that you're here . . . now . . . and therefore closer to the answers you're searching for. So let me ask you this: what would you require of me?"

"I have a destination in mind," Sandy said. "Severomorsk."

"In Murmansk Oblast." Czardos thought for a moment. "About forty six hundred kilometers thereabouts. At maximum safe speed Saraswati could get there in . . . thirty-two hours."

"Thank you," Sandy murmured. Moving past Czardos she headed back down the corridor towards the salon.

The others followed and, when they entered the salon, they found Sandy pouring herself another glass of sharbat.

"The hospitality of Saraswati is, of course, yours and your companions to enjoy," Czardos assured her. "And I must confess I'm also curious as to the meanings behind all of this."

"Be careful," Phyllis advised. "It's addictive."

"I also find myself agreeing with Leo," Symmes remarked. "And I'm a bigger caution freak than he is."

"Doctor Symmes," Sandy suddenly said, turning to him. "I just remembered something that's been nagging me ever since we met. Why do I keep thinking I should know your name from somewhere?"

Czardos burst out laughing. Ruefully smiling, Symmes reached into a pocket of his trousers and passed what looked like money to him.

"Excuse us," Czardos said to Sandy, "but John and I had a bet going, and I just won. I said his name would eventually be recognized."

"Well I don't know it," Phyllis said, with Bingo nodding in agreement.

"John Symmes," Sandy murmured, staring closely at the man. "John . . . Symmes." Her face suddenly brightened and she snapped her fingers. "Yes! John Cleve Symmes Jr.! The hollow earth guy."

"The what?" Bingo asked.

"Tom used to talk about Symmes a lot back when he was working on his atomic earth blaster," Sandy explained to her friends, "and also on the Core Cannon. Symmes was an American soldier who came up with a theory in the early 1800s stating that the world was hollow."

"My great-great-great-great grandfather," Symmes admitted, looking almost sheepish.

"Oh! I didn't know . . ."

"Understandable. Whereas many of us pursued scientific careers, none of us have as yet managed to achieve a reputation with a similar . . . fantastic theory."

"Your time will come," Czardos assured him.

"Hmph!"

"My brother searched for your ancestor's original documents," Sandy said. "He had to fall back on material written by someone else---"

"Reynolds' book," Symmes said. "And your brother wouldn't have found any papers. They've been hidden in the private family archives all this time."

Sandy was shaking her head. "A hidden submarine and the descendant of John Symmes Jr. My brother would be drooling if he were here."

"Leo and I would be flattered. We've both admired his work for years. In fact, when your brother visited Vishnapur some time back---"

"I'll see that more comfortable quarters are arranged for you," Czardos quickly said. "And the three of you are still owed more fashionable garments." Giving Symmes a glance he left the salon.

"Something wrong?" Sandy asked.

"No," Symmes said. "That was just Leo's subtle way of telling me to shut my big fat mouth. Leo doesn't mean to be mysterious." Pausing for a moment, Symmes went on. "Then again . . ."

"Well maybe my question can be answered," Phyllis said. "What's in Severomorsk?"

"Among other things," Sandy replied calmly, "the headquarters of the Russian Northern Fleet . . . and Admiral Kondor." She tossed down the sharbat.

Chapter Eighteen: From Russia With Suspicion.

Sandy assured everyone that, in spite of her announcement, it wasn't her intention to have Czardos literally take her to the very doorstep of Severomorsk. "Although," she considered, "I admit there's a sort of perverse attraction to the idea of me wandering through a city in northern Russia, dressed in a trenchcoat and wearing dark glasses."

"Don't forget the scarf around your head," Bingo said.

"Oh! Yeah! Good catch, Bingo." Sandy then explained that she wanted to try and contact Kondor via radio and asked Czardos if that would be feasible. Czardos shrugged, replying that the equipment he had on board Saraswati could doubtless contact the headquarters of the Russian Northern Fleet from their current location.

"Yeah," Sandy agreed. "But I want to give us room to maneuver. Whatever the hell's going on, there might still be Russian subs in this area. If what I think is going to happen when I contact Kondor happens, then we don't want those subs in our lap."

Czardos considered a map on the salon wall.

"Barents Sea," Symmes suggested.

Czardos slowly nodded. "True. We can contact Severomorsk from there easily. And the Russians might already suspect the area around Franz Josef Land, considering our earlier contretemps in that location. It might be to our advantage if we give them an additional reason to be curious." He turned to Sandy. "Sufficient?"

Hands on hips Sandy studied the map. "Yeah. That'll work. Now . . . and regrettably raising an indelicate issue . . . but where's the young ladies room?"

"Ah! Just down the corridor where you awakened. First door on your right." Czardos watched her leave the salon, then looked at the others. "My word. This is all starting to become rather exciting."

Phyllis and Bingo rolled their eyes.

* * * * *

Sandy calmly entered the bathroom, closing the door as quietly as possible.

She then turned towards the sink, her hands reaching out to grip the edges. There was a mirror about the sink but she didn't raise her face to it. Instead her body began shaking, her hands tightening on the sink's edge as she became wracked by violent shudders. Her knees trembled, gave way, and she finally ended up kneeling on the floor of the room in the darkness, shuddering and producing sharp little mewling whispers.

* * * * *

True to his word, Czardos managed to find more durable clothing for the girls, and Sandy, Phyllis and Bingo were now arrayed in blue slacks, matching button-down shirts and deck shoes. With everyone feeling much more comfortable, Czardos gave the girls a guided tour of Saraswati. He pointed out that his personal quarters were at the extreme forward end of the boat, while Symmes had his room and laboratory in the corridor between the control room and the salon. Symmes' quarters were also opposite the galley. The rest of the crew (all six of them) had their quarters beyond the salon.

"You and Dr. Symmes and only six others?" Phyllis asked.

"Automation helps," Czardos pointed out. "In the old days it took much more people---"

Symmes coughed discreetly.

They were taken up into the pilot house: a snug chamber where three crewmen (including Mr. Grace: Czardos' Executive Officer) held court. Two of them were handing controls located before the large viewing ports.

Stepping carefully near them, Sandy lightly fingered the flange of one of the viewing ports. "Mr. Czardos, I admit I'm curious. It's usually not considered wise to put windows on a submarine. Having a joint like this in the hull makes a potentially vulnerable spot. Nowadays our own jetmarines start out as a solid shell of transparent atomeron VI. We simply go inside and paint whatever shouldn't be visible. But you've got these big ports here and down in the salon."

"You're very observant, Miss Swift, and quite correct. In the beginning it wasn't so much of a concern. Contrary to . . . certain accounts," and here he glanced at Symmes, "Saraswati was not designed for depths where ocean pressure would've been a problem. Since then, however, I have taken advantage of certain advanced methods and materials."

"My brother would desperately enjoy talking with you."

Czardos smiled thinly. "No doubt."

Bingo was looking around. "No periscope? And how do you see when submerged deep?"

"The position of the pilot house allows it to serve as a sort of periscope," Czardos told her. "As for the question of obscured vision, Saraswati not only employs a system of powerful lamps but makes use of other innovations such as laser scanning beams."

Beyond the salon (which not only served as a dining room for Czardos and Symmes, but as a mess and entertainment center for the crew), the girls were shown the crew quarters (including a larger "utility room" which was being outfitted into a more spacious apartment for them), a passageway to a deck hatch and, at the far aft end, the engine room. Entering it, Sandy noted that Saraswati's power source was nuclear, but the reactor was not a design she immediately recognized and she silently put the question away for the time being.

Czardos then showed how the lower deck of Saraswati held mostly storage compartments, machinery for maintaining the environment and recycling both water and air, as well as banks of emergency batteries. Also of interest on the lower deck was the "diving room" which allowed ventral access in and out of the submarine. "It was through here that the three of you were brought on board," Czardos explained.

"All in all," Sandy remarked as they returned to the salon, "a tidy little craft."

"It suits my purpose," Czardos admitted, although he seemed pleased at the remark.

"And your home port?" Sandy asked innocently. "Or is that an enormous secret? I just find it amazing that something like this has managed to remain hidden for so long."

"Saraswati originally enjoyed a base in the South Pacific," Czardos replied, indicating for Sandy and the other to make themselves comfortable before one of the huge ports in the salon. "Circumstances, however, obliged an ancestor of mine to seek a new harborage. For a while we were able to make use of facilities on the island of Sriharikota, which admittedly pleased my family. Certain . . . shall we say `political niceties' . . . unfortunately resulted in Saraswati having to be moved. We are now making use of a new home base."

"Oh for God's sake, Leo," Symmes said wearily. "Why don't you just---"

Czardos made a fierce chopping motion with his hand.

"Well then, make up your mind or something," Symmes growled.

"You mentioned an ancestor having to move Saraswati," Phyllis said to Czardos. "Just how old is she?"

"Yeah, Leo," Symmes chimed in. "Go ahead and dance around that one."

"I mean . . . whoever built Saraswati was obviously inspired by Nemo's Nautilus," Phyllis pointed out. "Or at least by what was known about it."

"My brother once considered an expedition to the Norwegian Sea to try and find the remains of the Nautilus," Sandy said to Czardos. "He not only studied Arronax's diary, but also the report produced by the Colfax Commission in 1869. He thought it was interesting that so many of the world's most sophisticated submarines and deep sea vehicles had searched for the Nautilus, but had never found any traces of it."

"A genuine mystery," Symmes murmured, his eyes on Czardos.

Czardos slowly leaned back into the couch, his eyes gazing out the viewport. "Members of my family have possessed a long fascination with Captain Nemo and what happened in the late 1860s," he slowly said. "Something to do with his Indian heritage, I suppose. Saraswati is a result of that fascination. As for keeping it hidden . . ." he shrugged. "Let us just say that there are certain people who would be uncomfortable with the idea of my family roaming around the oceans in a submarine."

"A noted marine biologist with his own submarine?" Sandy asked, smiling. "I would think that'd be a natural."

"Yes, well . . ." Czardos idly rubbed at a cheek. "Notoriety is not necessarily a thing to be desired. You of all people, Miss Swift, should appreciate that."

Sandy grunted. "Touche!"

* * * * *

Almost a day later Saraswati surfaced within sight of Northbrook Island in Franz Josef Land.

In the communications bay Czardos turned to Sandy. "We have our arrays deployed and we're now tuning in to the official Russian naval radio channel."

Sandy thought for a moment. "OK, first things first. You'd better have an exit strategy ready. I'll try and make this as short as possible so getting a fix on us would be difficult, but no sense in taking chances."

Czardos went and climbed halfway up the stairs to the pilot house. "Mr. Grace! Plot a course six degrees north. Best possible speed and depth. Rig for silent running and be prepared to execute on my signal."

"Yes sir!"

"All right, Miss Swift."

Sandy sighed. "Mr. Czardos I'm probably on the verge of propagating a major disaster. Admittedly par for the course for me. Go ahead and call me Sandy."

"Certainly, if you'll condescend to calling me Leo."

"Condition noted. Accepted."

Symmes made a slight noise.

"Oh, and you too . . . John. Ah-hhhhh, is there anyone here who speaks Russian? You think I would've picked up more of the language by now, but . . ."

"Mr. Zolnerowich serves as our translator in this area," Czardos replied, nodding at one of the men sitting in the communications bay. "He'll be able to help you out."

"Good. Well, let's get this started."

Sandy moved closer to Zolnerowich, watching him work. "Tuning into official Russian radio traffic," the man said to her. "I know the command frequencies for . . . ah! Yes! Here we are." He looked up at Sandy. "Go ahead and speak. I shall automatically translate what you say as well as any replies which come through."

Sandy took a deep breath. Slowly released it. "This is Sandra Swift calling Admiral Jascha Kondor of the Russian Northern Fleet," she said, with Zolnerowich echoing her words into Russian. "I am broadcasting from a secure location."

"We hope," Bingo muttered.

"My companions and I are very much alive."

An agitated female voice suddenly began chattering from a speaker, and Zolnerowich listened. "We're being told that we are on an official frequency and should cease transmitting," he said.

Sandy looked back towards Czardos. "Will others be hearing this transmission?"

"They would have to be tuned into the specific frequency."

"Would make for an interesting line-up." She turned back to the radio. "Repeat: this is Sandra Swift calling Admiral Jascha Kondor of the Russian Northern Fleet. Phyllis Newton, Belinda-Glory Winkler and myself have survived the torpedoing of our vessel in the Chukchi Sea and we are very much alive."

The crewman in the bay next to Zolnerowich was looking at some indicators. "Radio traffic shows a severe increase," he announced.

"This thing's better than a spy trawler," Bingo commented.

Zolnerowich had been listening closely to his earphone and he now looked up. "I've been hearing background voices. They mentioned scrambles at Severomorsk and Monchegorsk."

"Those will be Sukhois launched from the 1st Air-Space Defense Brigade and the 6964th airbase," Czardos said. He turned to the men on the other side of the room. "Is radar showing any planes in the area?"

"None yet, sir."

"There'll be a Russian AWACS in the area somewhere," Czardos mused as he turned back. "Probably already getting orders to look for us."

"Then let's get out of here," Sandy said to him. Patting Zolnerowich on the shoulder she made a slicing motion across her throat with the other hand.

"Mr. Grace," Czardos called up to the pilot house. "Go!"

The air carried a distant whine as Sariswati began responding to commands. Czardos came down from the stairs, seeming tired. "I think tonight is definitely a cocktails with dinner night."

"I do appreciate all of this," Sandy told him. "I just hope I haven't gotten you into too much trouble with the Russians."

"Ho boy," Symmes said.

"That is John's way of saying we've played cat and mouse with the Russians before," Czardos said to Sandy as the group strolled back to the salon. "We've been operating in these waters for quite some time now, and outmaneuvering the local Navy has become part and parcel of the deal."

Entering the salon everyone began moving back to the nearest of the viewport lounging areas.

"Do I start mixing drinks now?" Symmes asked the others, "or should we wait for dinner?"

Phyllis slumped down upon the couch and exhaled noisily. "I'm good either way."

"You might want to get drunk as soon as possible," Sandy remarked.

Phyllis eyes her suspiciously. "Why?"

"It involves our next move." Sandy gently lowered herself onto the couch alongside Phyllis.

Czardos was accepting a glass from Symmes. "I must confess to sharing Phyllis' curiosity," he said. "We've managed to stir up quite a hornet's nest back there, but I admit to not seeing anything in the way of immediate results."

"I wanted the hornet's nest shaken," Sandy explained. "Or, putting it another way, I want to shake a certain tree and see what falls out. There'll be Russians after us now, and I suspect the ones who tried to kill us will be leading the pack. Besides those planes which were scrambled, I'm willing to bet messages are being sent out now to the entire Northern Fleet."

"So we've now got every Russian in the Arctic hunting for us," Phyllis said to Sandy.

"True, and all we have to do is survive until we find some answers."

"That may be difficult," Czardos said, sitting down near the girls. "It's one thing to dodge the occasional Russian sub, surface ship or Beriev A-50. But now we're talking about possibly the entire Northern Fleet. Not to mention considerable assets from the Russian Air Force."

"And eventually they'd find us," Sandy agreed. "It just depends on how good a chess player Kondor is."

"So you suspect him?"

"Kondor is behind all of this, or he knows who is. Either way, I want him to know I'm coming."

Czardos silently considered the problem for a moment. "Admittedly I've never had an opportunity to personally find out," he said. "But I hear that the Admiral is a rather good chess player."

Sandy slowly nodded. "Yeah, well . . . I'm a pretty fair chess player too."

"I've seen that look before," Phyllis said to Czardos. "Our appetites for dinner are about to be ruined."

"We've stirred the waters," Sandy pointed out. "Literally. Kondor and the Russian military now know we're alive and they'll be searching for us. Logically we should be running for someplace safe. An American port. Maybe one in Canada."

"A rendezvous with your brother," Czardos pointed out.

Sandy nodded again. "True. Another possibility. What I'm getting at is that the Russians will be moving to block our possible exits and intercept us. I expect submarines and surface ships to be covering the Bering Strait, the Norwegian Sea and all points in between. They'll also have aircraft watching for Tom, and I'll bet a pretty they're moving people into position to watch both Shopton and Fearing Island."

Symmes was frowning deeply. "So what do we do?"

"We counter the logical assumption with a completely illogical move and make for the only totally safe hiding place remaining to us."

"Which is . . ."

"The last place on Earth anyone would think I'd head for. The absolute last place!"

Phyllis and Bingo's faces both slowly melted into despair. "Oh no . . ."

"Oh yes," Sandy nodded, serenely sitting back against the couch. "Leo? Set course for Brungaria."

Chapter Nineteen: Sandy Comes In From The Cold.

And, naturally, it wasn't quite as simple as all that. But, as Sandy pointed out to the others, it was either Brungaria or the Russian military.

Even Phyllis finally agreed, albeit with the notion that accepting Sandy's way out of a mess was certainly a lot easier when it was Sandy who made the mess in the first place.

"Be fair," Bingo gently admonished when Phyllis privately expressed the thought to her back in their room. "Sandy didn't create this problem. And all of us were praying and pushing for her to get back in the saddle."

"I know, but . . ."

"C'mon." Bingo slapped her on the elbow. "Grit those teeth! You a member of Sandra Swift's All-Girl Ninja Team or not?"

Phyllis sighed. "Consider my teeth gritted."

Meanwhile Sandy, Czardos and Symmes were looking over navigation charts in the salon. "Considering the current state of affairs---"

"Delicately put, Leo," Symmes commented.

Czardos ignored him. "The Brungarian Navy has probably withdrawn to establish defensive positions well within the Laptev Sea. This will probably include its submarines as well."

Sandy was leaning over the table, closely studying a map which depicted in detail the Laptev Sea as well as the extreme northern Sakha area of Siberia which was claimed by Brungaria. "I wish I knew if the Russians had sunk that Papa we found."

Czardos considered it. "If the sub was the one I'm thinking it was, then I know its Captain quite well. Evgeniy's practically turned outrunning Russian subs into an art form." He brought a finger to the map. "We can approach Brungaria by way of the southern coast of Novaya Sibir, then turning south and continuing straight towards Tiksi."

Sandy looked up at him. "I know you're good at evading the Russians. Are you equally good at avoiding trouble with the Brungarians?"

"Oh quite," Czardos said easily. "In fact, we've spent more time in Brungarian waters than in Russian."

Sandy continued staring at him, as did Symmes who was quietly regarding Czardos through frowning eyes.

"All right, Leo," Sandy said. "What are you not telling me?"

Czardos glanced over at Symmes.

The other man shrugged. "Your call, Leo."

"Was afraid of that." Czardos stared down at the map for a moment, thinking to himself. He then seemed to reach a decision. "You had asked earlier about Saraswati's new home port, Sandy. Actually it is here." Czardos' finger moved on the map. "Zhokhov Island."

"Practically within spitting distance of Brungaria," Sandy noted.

"Yes."

"And the Brungarians don't mind?"

"Normally you'd think they would," Czardos admitted. "But I've managed to enter into a sort of mutually beneficial arrangement with my . . . landlords. They allow me to make use of the northern part of the island as a base, and I occasionally run errands for them with Saraswati."

For several long moments there was silence.

"Like haul iron pellets?" Sandy gently asked, her eyes boring into his.

"I know what you're thinking, Sandy. And no, it's nothing like that. I haven't been in contact with the Central Council in Tiksi in some time, but I suspect they're just as mystified about this entire affair as we are. I carry out surveillance on the Russians for the Brungarians From time to time I also lend support to their undersea research projects."

Sandy sighed, her head dropping.

"It was you who suggested going to Brungaria," Czardos pointed out. "Not I."

"Yeah," Sandy muttered, returning her attention to the map. "Wait a minute, though. Isn't Zhokhov Island permanently icebound?"

"It is," Czardos agreed. "Normally it wouldn't be considered for any sort of base. But the Soviet Union tried to build an enormous weapon system there in the early 1960s, and the Brungarians have made use of the abandoned facilities. They've established a submarine base beneath the ice on the southern part of the island, while I have a similar but smaller facility on the north part."

"A hidden Brungarian sub base," Sandy breathed.

Czardos nodded. "Yes. And now you know considerably more than anyone else from your country."

Sandy chewed on a knuckle, trying to wrestle her thoughts to the ground and hold them there. "So you can get me directly to Tiksi without any problems?"

"Most assuredly. We can surface at their port in oh . . . eight hours."

"Good. That will give enough time for you to thoroughly brief me on who to meet and what to do once we arrive." Straightening up Sandy bent her body around a bit, grimacing. "And now I need to go bathe, as well as dig up the others who're even now no doubt contemplating knocking me on the head and hiding me in a closet until they find some way to get home." She began walking towards the far end of the salon.

Czardos watched her go. "I'm worried you no longer trust me as much as you used to, Sandy."

"That's not it," Sandy replied, turning around. "If you're actually a Brungarian---"

"Which I'm not."

"---then you've had plenty of opportunities to hurt me and the others. In fact you could've let us drown. Heck, right now I'm actually heading for the Brungarians, even though I'm still not certain what I'm gonna do once we get there." Sandy's eyes narrowed at Czardos. "One thing I've observed about what I sometimes laughingly tend to refer to as my `adventures', and that's this remarkable ability I seem to have for finding allies in places where I least expect them. You might just be the ally I'm looking for here, Leo."

"I sincerely hope so."

Sandy shook her head. "Don't be. You might end up having been hurt less if you'd let us drown." Turning away she left the room.

Czardos watched her go. He then noticed Symmes' eyes on him. "Don't start with me, John."

"She could be right," Symmes replied quietly. He had somehow acquired a glass of whisky and he now drank it down. "You've worked for so long to achieve all this---"

"John!"

"---and now you risk throwing it all away. Not only our comfortable arrangement with Brungaria, but maybe even Saraswati as well."

"I would really be worried," Czardos replied testily, "except I happen to know you're just as fond and as concerned for Sandy as I am."

"So if we're so fond and concerned we take her and her friends safely back home to her family and be done with it. You know we can do it."

"Just wash our hands."

"We've done so before."

Czardos stared at him. "I've seen you in all sorts of moods," he said. "But never this selfish."

"I've never been this scared before." Symmes went and poured himself another drink.

"Hmph!" Czardos began rolling up the charts. "Besides having all sorts of moods you also possess many admirable qualities. One of them is the ability to be an interesting drunk."

"Leo . . ."

"Don't you think I'm scared?" Czardos shot back. "When we managed to identify them after pulling them out of the ocean I was terrified. Yes! You and I and the whole world know her reputation. We both know her history."

He leaned closer, his eyes hot. "Yes, John, her history. Believe me, I look at Sandy and I can see all the deaths and the destruction. But you know what else I see?" He pointed a finger in the direction Sandy had taken. "I see a little girl who, time and time again, has put herself between certain death and the things she loves. Without hesitation. She's beautiful, John . . . and she's not beautiful because she spends countless hours in front of a mirror with cosmetics and chemical trickery. She's beautiful because she's good and brave. And that's why you're drunk and why we're both scared. Not because we could get hurt or lose everything we've worked for, but because Sandy is reminding us of something we both used to have and lost so long ago. That's the reason I let her practically walk all over me and give orders, and if you're uncomfortable with it, John Symmes, well . . ." His voice dropped to a mutter as he looked away. "I can put you out in the skiff somewhere and you can get to safety."

Symmes murmured something.

"What?"

"I said it'd be cold in the skiff."

Czardos smiled as he tucked the charts under his arm. "You're a good man, John."

"Yeah. Flipping idiots usually are. But you're right."

"About what?"

"Those big pretty blue eyes of hers. They can really mess a guy up." Symmes shook his head. "I mean, I think about the man Sandy'll marry and I can't make up my mind whether to offer congratulations or condolences."

* * * * *

It was dark when Saraswati surfaced among the ice floes a few miles from the port facilities at Tiksi.

On board the submarine the pilot house was crowded, what with the presence of not only its duty crew, but Sandy, Phyllis, Bingo, Czardos and Symmes.

Sandy was gazing out through one of the ports. "Just my ideal of a perfect harbor setting. Ice . . . heavy snowfall . . . the temperature at minus twenty-one degrees Centigrade. Picturesque!"

"You've never been to Brungaria before?" Czardos asked.

Everyone looked at him.

"You're right," Czardos admitted. "What was I thinking? My compliments to the Portmaster," he said to Mr. Grace, "and please tell him we'd like our usual mooring." He then indicated the stairs. "Ladies?"

The girls descended into the control room, with Czardos and Symmes following. "We usually announce our intention to arrive in Tiksi much further in advance," Czardos was saying. "Given the present situation, though, I felt it necessary to make our appearance more spontaneous this time."

"You mad, impetuous boy," Symmes muttered.

"They usually send a boat for us," Czardos continued. "It will take us to the Port Authority and, from there, we can continue on into the city."

"Right," murmured Sandy, thinking to herself. "Ah-hhhh . . . Leo, you and I had better make this initial trip in."

Czardos nodded. "Sensible."

Phyllis and Bingo both seemed to suddenly come down with mild fits of coughing.

"Let me do this first," Sandy told them. "Anyway, it's cold and nasty out there, and you guys can stay warm in here and nosh on something while I try to offer beads to the natives."

"Excuse me for being Miss Buttinski," Phyllis said. "But wasn't someone supposed to be contacting her worried family on a regular basis?"

Sandy shrugged. "So contact them. You know how to type. Right now, though, I wouldn't mention anything about Brungaria or the Russian Navy or . . . really anything else for that matter."

"And what," Phyllis asked with exaggerated slowness, "am I supposed to talk about?"

"Be creative."

Phyllis turned her head away, muttering under her breath.

Czardos had stepped away. He now came back with two parkas. "Here," he said, offering the smaller one to Sandy. "We'll leave via the forward hatch. Oh, and you might want these," he added, holding out some objects in his hand. "You still had them on you when we picked you up."

Sandy squealed at the sight of her Tiny Idiot and Snooper, grabbing at them. "Do they still work?" she asked herself loudly, switching on the computer and scrolling through several screens. "Tom usually has a mania for durability."

She then pulled at the barrel of the Snooper, examining its internal systems and loads, and everyone watching her silently noted how it looked as if she were checking the action on a pistol.

"In the immortal words of Sweeney Todd: `At last, my arm is complete again'." Placing the items into pockets on either side of her, Sandy smiled and began wriggling into her parka.

"In the immortal words of my Aunt Lucerne," Bingo murmured, "she's happier than a pig in a new waller."

"Your aunt really didn't say that, did she?" Phyllis asked.

"One o' her cleaner remarks."

Sandy now beamed at Czardos. "Ready . . . oh! Wait! Won't we need to take Mr. Zolnerowich along to translate for us?"

Czardos looked sheepish. "I actually do speak some Russian, Sandy. Certainly not as fluent as Mr. Zolnerowich . . ." He saw the way Sandy's eyebrows were raising. "All right, Sandy. Yell at me . . . hit me . . . beat me . . ."

"He'd probably love that," Symmes muttered.

Giving Symmes a dark look, Czardos turned and led Sandy towards the entrance to his quarters. Just as he reached the door he turned left, facing a ladder set into the wall. He began climbing up towards a circular hatch set into the deckhead, turning the wheel to unlock it and then pushing it up, admitting a blast of cold air to enter the chamber.

"Woo," Bingo cried out at the feel of the icy blast. "Sandy, you be careful," she said, turning to head back up to the pilot house.

"Ditto," Phyllis said, following.

Czardos had climbed through the hatch and he now reached an arm back down to help Sandy out. Sandy followed him, shivering in spite of the parka as she carefully made her way to the deck. She helped Czardos close the hatch, noting that they were standing under one of the curved jagged ribs which arced down to join with Saraswati's prow.

Behind her was the pilot house, and Sandy turned to wave cheerfully at Bingo and Phyllis as they watched her from inside.

She then looked around, squinting against the snow filled wind. "My God," she said. "The weather."

Czardos nodded. "Snows twenty two days out of the month at this part of the year. Average monthly sunlight in this season is only fifty hours."

"What the hell kind of people choose to live here?"

"You've met them," Czardos told her, trying to raise his voice above the wind. "Your brother has met them. Brungarians, Sandy. They're criminals . . . terrorists . . . traitors. Whatever the world wishes to call them and make of them. But they're also dedicated scientists. Very dedicated. Practically fanatics. This is the world they prefer."

Sandy studied his expression. "You admire them."

"No, Sandy. I understand them. There's a difference."

They now noticed a motorized dinghy quickly moving near the Saraswati. It was being handled by a man in a black rubberized suit who quickly motioned them into the boat. Sandy and Czardos obeyed, carefully climbing in and settling down on the benches as the boat put about and chugged back to the shore, heading for a group of well-lit docks.

One of the docks held a crowd of ten men, all of them in thick overcoats. They were standing there, watching as the boat approached and nudged its way alongside the dock. As with the driver there was no sound, no voices from anyone in the group as first Sandy, and then Czardos, climbed out of the boat and up a long wooden ladder which stretched from the icy water on up to the dock.

Once on the dock Sandy faced the ten men. They were spread out in a row before her.

"Talkative bunch," she muttered to Czardos as he came up alongside her.

"Probably wondering what in the world I'm doing here unannounced," Czardos said. "As a rule Brungarians aren't world renowned for their glittering sense of humor. Don't worry, though. When I explain who you are they'll probably welcome us with open arms."

In one motion the ten men produced machine guns which they leveled at Sandy and Czardos.

"Or not," Czardos muttered.

Chapter Twenty: An Admirable Idea.

Sandy slowly raised her hands above her head. "Ya polon lyubvi k'tebe!"

Some of the men holding guns gave her curious looks.

"You just told them you were so full of love for them," Czardos said.

Sandy's jaw dropped open. "That's what that means?"

"Yes."

"I swear I'm so gonna strangle Bud . . ."

A man in a long black greatcoat now eased past the line of gunmen and stared at Sandy and Czardos. "Dabro pozhalovat, Czardos." His eyes flicked over at Sandy. "Kto ona?"

Czardos gave Sandy a mild nod. "Eto gavarit Sandra Swift."

If Czardos had released a rabid mountain lion upon the dock the effect of his words couldn't have caused any more shock. The man in the greatcoat stared openly at Sandy as if she'd suddenly sprouted antlers, and the gunmen behind him immediately focused the barrels of their weapons on her.

Sandy was lowering her hands. "I take it you told them I really wasn't full of love."

Czardos shrugged. Meanwhile the man in the greatcoat was rapidly speaking into a device on his wrist, his eyes never leaving Sandy. Within moments the roar of an engine could be heard, and a small utility vehicle drove up to the dock. The gunmen parted to create a path to the vehicle, and both Sandy and Czardos were quickly motioned to go to it. Following Czardos' lead Sandy obeyed, and they were accompanied by four of the gunmen who crowded into the vehicle along with them. The vehicle then turned about and began racing down a street leading into the city beyond.

Czardos was nodding. "This is good," he murmured.

Sandy was staring at the guns. "It is?"

"Yes. We're being driven to wherever it is we're going. Now if a helicopter had been sent for us it might've meant Brungaria's military prison, which is some six hundred kilometers to the south. Too far to drive."

"Maybe they're taking us somewhere to be shot."

Czardos shook his head. "I'm much too valuable an asset to the Brungarians to be shot."

I wasn't thinking about you, idiot, Sandy thought.

"Besides," Czardos continued, "the Brungarians wouldn't shoot anyone outright. Especially considering the present situation. They'd want to thoroughly question us, find out how much we know and what sort of answers we could provide."

"Oh!"

"And then they'd shoot us."

"Oh."

Tiksi seemed to be a snowbound collection of residential blocks and warehouses possessing all the charm of a meat locker on an aircraft carrier. The streets were barely lit, and Sandy noticed how the few people she saw on the sidewalks not only made use of flashlights but of guide ropes strung along the walls of the buildings.

The vehicle they were in made a sudden sharp turn, entering a parking garage. Almost immediately it came to a stop in a marked space located within a pool of bright light from above. A circle of armed men then came from the shadows, surrounding the vehicle, and orders were sharply barked.

"They want us to get out," Czardos said.

"Thank you, Leo. I sort of picked up on that."

Wriggling out of the vehicle, Sandy and Czardos were guided to a nearby elevator. Accompanied by two of their armed escorts they were then whisked upwards into whatever building they were in. Then a short quick walk down a corridor and, finally, practically pushed through a door (Sandy being privately relieved to note it wasn't marked "101").

Beyond the door was a room which put Sandy in mind of one of her high school classrooms. Desks and chairs were arranged before the place where a blackboard or marker board normally would have been . . . only instead of that there was a large video screen. At the moment it was showing different images of Sandy, who realized she was seeing press images of her.

The room held several people, many of them wearing military uniforms, and they silently watched Sandy as she slowly walked towards the screen.

One of the uniformed men glared in exasperation at Czardos. "Ya skhazshu po teby s'ume, Czardos," he said with a wave of his hand at Sandy. "Yonny panimayu tebia!"

A balding man in civilian clothing was sitting in the dimness at the rear of the room. He now sighed, leaning closer. "Considering the nature of our . . . guest," he slowly said, "perhaps we should all try and speak English for her benefit."

The exasperated man swung around to face the other. "Umina plokhas Angliski."

"Then perhaps it's time you took the trouble to learn," the other man said, a faint edge in his words. He rose and calmly moved between the desks until he was more in the light. "I never thought the day would come when I'd find myself saying something like this," he said as he approached, "but welcome to Brungaria, Sandra Swift."

Sandy dipped her head in a nod.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the man continued. "I am Timofey Petrov: Minister of Security, Brungarian Liberation Central Council."

Sandy concentrated on peeling off her parka as a means of hiding the shiver she felt moving through her. She had, of course, heard of Petrov. The High Executioner of Brungaria, second only to Darya Lagounov on the Central Council. "Minister Petrov," she murmured.

"And my congratulations on your resurrection," Petrov said in the same tone of voice he might have used to discuss a grocery shopping list. Turning, he sat down at an unoccupied desk. "Even though it means my country apparently failed to murder you. At least according to official sources."

"It was the Russians who tried to kill me and my friends," Sandy said.

An eyebrow lifted on Petrov's face. "Indeed! The same Russians who, even now, continue to accuse us of this crime." He nodded past Sandy towards the screen, and Sandy turned. She saw that the pictures of her had been replaced by an electronic map of the northern Siberian coast. Colored markers were slowly drifting about upon it.

"In the past twenty-four hours elements of the Russian Northern Fleet have taken up position easily within striking range of Brungaria," Petrov explained. "Russian Tu-160 bombers have been launched and are in holding patterns along our western and southern borders. Several . . . personal sources . . . have privately informed me that the Russian Strategic Missile Troops are preparing RSD-14 missiles for launch."

Sandy stepped closer to the screen.

"Governments throughout the world have been condemning us for the attack upon you, as well as your presumed death," Petrov softly continued. "International sanctions are being suggested to the United Nations from all corners of the globe. Interestingly enough, though, the American State Department has begun toning back its rhetoric. Even more interesting, your family has become strangely quiet."

Sandy continued staring at the screen for a few moments. Then she turned to Petrov. "The Brungarian submarine which the Russians said carried out the attack. Is it all right?"

Petrov took a moment to reply. "Captain Grechko has managed to privately contact us and report that the Unshackled Intellect is safe for the moment. He is currently hiding at the bottom of the Laptev Sea, waiting for a chance to run the Russian blockade and return home. Why have you and your friends not returned to the safety of your family?"

"I wanted some questions answered," Sandy replied.

"What a coincidence," Petrov slowly said. "So do we."

"Then perhaps we could combine what we know and figure this business out."

Another man in a uniform sputtered. "Sandra Swift . . . aiding Brungaria?"

"Miss Swift allow me to present General Grigori Kuznetsov," Petrov said with a nod in the man's direction. "Minister of Defense, Brungarian Liberation Central Council. And yes," he continued, his voice rising slightly, "the idea of Sandra Swift . . . of any Swift in fact . . . coming to our rescue is eminently laughable. But before we blindly throw away a potential opportunity let me remind all of you of two very conspicuous points. First: it is because of Sandra Swift that Brungaria enjoys the prestige of being the first nation to reach the Moon. It is a fact that she could have kept well hidden, and with understandable justification."

Petrov now turned his eyes back to Sandy. "Second: the first question she asked was in regards to the safety of Captain Grechko and his crew. Hardly the sort of thing I'd expect from a raving enemy."

"I'm not claiming to be an angel," Sandy replied. "But someone is trying to pull something, and they wanted to involve me. Maybe indirectly, but they still wanted to involve me. It's not the sort of thing I like."

"Neither do we," Petrov admitted, "and perhaps far less than you do, for obvious reasons."

Sandy snorted. "You ever found yourself drowning in the Arctic Ocean?"

"Hm! Point," conceded Petrov. He looked up at her again. "We intercepted part of the broadcast you made to the Russians from Saraswati. I'm curious as to why you simply didn't make a public appearance somewhere and defuse this situation, immediately turning world opinion against the Russians?"

"Who says I won't?" Sandy replied. "I can still do that. But I was hoping to produce a response from the Russians. A response that would explain what the heck's going on, and who's behind it."

"In the meantime leaving Brungaria with a knife at its throat."

"You already had enemies before this started," Sandy pointed out. "I just want to find the one who also doesn't care if I'm dead."

Petrov and Sandy stared at each other for several moments. "We seem to still have some time," Petrov finally considered with a glance at the screen. "Tell us what you know, Miss Swift."

Sandy quickly informed the Brungarians of the events which had occurred, pausing only to answer questions (sometimes assisted by Czardos) and making use of the electronic map to indicate the moves she had made up to the present. Her audience, she noted, paid attention with gradually increasing interest.

"It is obvious," Kuznetsov said when Sandy finally finished. "A plot engineered against us by the Russians. Miss Swift was simply a convenient pawn."

Sandy personally felt she was more of a bishop, or a knight. Maybe even a queen. She decided to refrain from pursuing the issue.

"But are we certain it is the Russians?" Petrov countered. "There is, after all, the involvement of the Canadians. Perhaps the Russians are also being used as pawns."

"What reasons would the Canadians have to plot against us?" another man asked.

"As Miss Swift so accurately reminded us," Petrov replied, "we have no lack of enemies in the world. We are also not in a position to make any wrong moves. Above all we must be certain of all the facts. This odd business of smuggled iron, for instance."

Kuznetsov shrugged. "A diversion."

"A rather complex and peculiar one . . . no, Grigori Alexandrovich, I think there is much more here than is immediately visible."

"What about this person my brother found out about?" Sandy said. "This . . . Kozlov?"

Petrov looked towards Kuznetsov who was frowning. "I know Mirov tried to recruit Dr. Kozlov," the Defense Minister said, "but he was unsuccessful."

Petrov turned towards another civilian, the only other woman in the room besides Sandy. "Faina?"

The woman slowly removed her glasses and began polishing them with a handkerchief. "Kozlov was an authority on designing dispersal patterns for missile warheads. Very interesting work. He had been assigned to Plesetsk and that had been his last reported position as of several years ago."

"And now, according to your brother," Petrov said, turning back to Sandy, "Kozlov is busy manufacturing little iron pellets and arranging for their transport across the Arctic." He slowly blew his cheeks out. "Confusing. Interesting, but confusing."

"I could contact some of my people in the United States," the woman suggested, with a pointed glance in Sandy's direction. "Perhaps they could learn more about Kozlov."

"And perhaps, in spite of your people's proficiency, the American government will discover them snooping about," Petrov countered. "Not necessarily the sort of thing we need at this time."

"I have an alternate suggestion," Sandy said.

She had the attention of the room. "Look into the problem from the other end. Everyone's been saying these iron shipments have been ending up here. In Brungaria. Even I was thinking the same thing. Certainly you people have some sort of idea where they're really going."

Everyone was looking around at everyone else. Then a man wearing a different sort of uniform from Kuznetsov sighed and said, "Khatanga."

Sandy looked at him. "Whatawhat?"

"A Russian community to the west of us," Petrov explained. "Perhaps the nearest to our border. I remember the report now. Over the years we've been noting increased submarine activity entering the Khatanga River. There hadn't been any explanation for it. Khatanga has no military bases, and only minor port facilities. So far we concluded that the Russians might have been using Khatanga as a location to monitor us."

"Increased submarine activity," Sandy mused. "Submarines which may have been meeting planes in the Arctic." She looked over at Czardos.

"Oh boy," muttered Czardos.

"Leo . . ."

"All right," Czardos said, raising his hands. "All right. After all, I'm pretty certain Saraswati can go in and out of the Khatanga River without being spotted, as well as run the Russian blockade."

Petrov had been following the exchange. "Am I correct in assuming you are willing to assist us in this matter, Miss Swift?"

Sandy tapped at her nose. "I've learned to follow where this leads," she said. "Right now it's pointing towards Khatanga."

"It may be dangerous."

"I think she's heard that one before," Czardos murmured.

"What I was going to say," Petrov continued, "was that we have our own agents which could go to Khatanga---"

"And risk being discovered, just like they could be discovered in America," Sandy replied. "Like you said, Minister Petrov, Brungaria can't take a chance like that."

Petrov gave his associates a long sweeping look.

"An unprecedented opportunity," he finally said to Sandy. "I am normally not the sort of person who puts stock in Providence. But putting stock in Sandra Swift . . . admittedly there is an element to the idea which I find irresistible."

"Now you know why I divorced you," the woman named Raina remarked.

Petrov ignored her. "If you are intent on doing this, then the least I can offer is some support from our own resources. Our Navy can produce something of a diversion that will allow Saraswati to more successfully run the blockade."

Czardos nodded. "Thank you."

"We of course know your frequency, Leo, and we'll monitor it for news." Petrov thought for a moment. "If we're going to involve the Navy then we may need . . ."

He suddenly looked over at the man who had first mentioned Khatanga and spoke several sentences of Russian to him. The man seemed to accept whatever was said and nodded brightly, moving to his feet.

He faced Sandy and began speaking.

"Raise your right hand," Czardos said to Sandy.

Curious, Sandy did so. The uniformed man then began solemnly intoning something to Sandy.

"Say `da'," Czardos said.

Sandy shrugged. "Da."

At that the man seemed extremely cheerful and, to Sandy's surprise, he quickly came to her and briskly planted kisses on both cheeks, taking her hand and pumping it up and down vigorously.

Petrov had a rather interesting smile on his face. "A day which will doubtless live forever in Brungarian history," he remarked to himself. He then stood up. "Leo, you and Miss Swift will be returned to Saraswati. All things considered I suspect you'll want to leave as quickly as possible."

"No doubt," Czardos said.

"Miss Swift," Petrov said, offering his hand. "Good luck."

"Past experience has taught me never to ignore luck," Sandy replied, shaking the hand. "We'll be in contact."

She and Czardos were escorted back out towards the elevator. Sandy glanced at Czardos, noting the expression on his face. "I'm sorry."

"Please don't apologize," Czardos said. "I agreed to help you out, and I'm still interested in seeing what the solution to this whole thing is . . . if we ever manage to find out."

"Yeah." Something then occurred to Sandy. "Oh, and what was that business back there with me holding my hand up and the guy speaking Russian and me saying `Da'?"

"Ah!" Czardos now produced a quirky smile. "Yes! That business. The man who was talking was Admiral Yudenich. He's in charge of the entire Brungarian Navy."

"Oh."

"Petrov figured that you'd personally need some sort of authority in case you somehow found yourself in a situation where you'd have to give orders to the Brungarians. You just went through a formality to make certain any orders you gave would be legally binding."

Sandy considered it. "Makes sense, I guess. But it sounded like I was taking an oath."

"Oh you were."

"Huh?"

"Yes. Oh, and by the way, congratulations."

"Congratulations?"

Czardos nodded. "You are now an Admiral in the Brungarian Liberation Navy."

Chapter Twenty-One: Infiltration.

On the trip back to Saraswati Czardos had been mumbling into a personal communicator. Sandy had watched him and presumed he was issuing orders regarding their departure.

But when they once again descended into the submarine, and entered the salon, Sandy realized some other information had been passed. Bingo had been sitting down but, upon spotting Sandy, she immediately stood, assuming a rigid posture, her eyes locked straight ahead and her hand executing a letter-perfect salute.

"Ten-HUT," she exclaimed. "Admiral on deck!"

Sandy's expression was considerably less than radiant. "Funny, Bingo. So funny."

There was perhaps the ghost of a smile on the Texan's face, but she continued in all seriousness. "Ma'am, the crewman expects her salute to be returned per regulations."

The slow gesture made by Sandy was one which would hardly have satisfied the conditions set forth in the Army Regulations Manual, but it was one which soldiers of any nation (and a great number of civilians) would have immediately recognized. In the meantime Czardos, Phyllis and Symmes were chuckling.

"Every time I think you couldn't outdo yourself you manage to," Phyllis said, shaking her head. "An officer in the Brungarian military."

"Just a formality," Sandy muttered, going to where a large coffee percolator bubbled near the dining table. "One of those things which make sense on paper . . ."

"I seem to recall a tradition," Bingo mused, "where a newly promoted officer buys the bar."

"Actually the first good idea I've heard in a while," Sandy said, stirring her coffee. "Maybe when we finally get home we can go to that place Phyllis went to---"

"The Shopton Pagoda."

"Yeah . . . that." The mention of Shopton pulled open a gaping chasm inside Sandy's spirit as she suddenly felt a great yearning ache for home. She wanted her bedroom . . . her blankets . . . the feel of her mother's arms . . .

"San?"

Sandy realized she had been standing still with her eyes squeezed shut. "M'alright," she said, quickly drinking at her coffee.

Czardos gave the others a look. "I'll go give order for our departure," he said and left the salon, followed by Symmes who gave Sandy a rather penetrating glance.

Sighing, Sandy went over to the viewport couches, plopping down upon them.

"Busy girl," Phyllis remarked, perching on the couch.

"As usual."

"Have you thought about maybe calling home?"

"Ummm. Did you?"

"I told them we were still all right," Phyllis said. "And that was all. I think your Mom's gonna end up as bald as you are."

Sandy smiled ruefully, moving a hand across the blonde fuzz on her scalp. "Well, doubtless they've got a lot more to chew over now."

"Oh?"

"The Brungarians were rather taken by surprise by my appearance."

"Yeah," Bingo said, sitting down near Sandy. "We wanna hear `bout that."

"Oh you will. First off, it occurred to me that, the moment I stepped outside of Saraswati, my security chip could once again be picked up by Sherman's scanners."

Phyllis' eyebrows lifted. "Oho!"

"O yes. So by now the gang at home probably know where we are and are no doubt bouncing off the walls."

"You really oughta bring them into the picture," Bingo pointed out.

"Eventually," Sandy told her, rummaging around in her pocket. "But, in the second place, the Brungarians were so knocked over by having me in their country that they didn't bother to search me. Which explains how I was able to surreptitiously switch on the recording function of this." She took her hand from her pocket, holding up her Snooper.

"Whoa-ohhhhhh!"

Sandy nodded. "A complete recording of a meeting between myself and members of the Brungarian Liberation Central Council. I managed to transmit it back home via satellite on the way back here."

Phyllis and Bingo were both gazing wide-eyed at the Snooper.

"Wait'll we dig up some popcorn," Bingo said. "Then we wanna hear this."

* * * * *

It was nine hours later when the jagged pilot house and upperworks of Saraswati surfaced above the water in a channel between a large island and the shoreline.

In the rear of the pilot house Sandy and Czardos were bent over a small chart screen. "We're currently in the Khatanga Gulf," Czardos was explaining, "between the mainland and the southern tip of Bolshoy Begichev Island. The mouth of the Khatanga River is here, just a little ways further, and Khatanga itself is another three hundred or so kilometers upriver . . . here."

He was frowning and Sandy noticed the look. "What's wrong?"

"Well, Little Admiral---"

Sandy made a face.

"---I just can't see supply submarines of any sort regularly going up and down the river. I mean, they could possibly make it. We could. But surface ships would be a much more sensible choice for hauling things like iron pellets."

"And yet the Brungarians have distinctly noted increased submarine activity."

"Yes."

Sandy studied the map for a moment. "Leo, what's this spot here? This mark on the nearby peninsula?"

Working the controls, Czardos expanded the screen, reading the information that appeared. "Ah! Nordvik. I'd heard it was somewhere around here."

"Nordvik?"

"A former Soviet Union penal colony. Abandoned in the 1950's."

Sandy was gazing at the map thoughtfully. "Now that'd be an easy spot for submarines to reach." She looked up, staring out through the pilot house viewports. "Let's see, it's . . ."

"Twenty-five kilometers west of us."

"Mmmmmmm . . . Leo, let's go ahead and move closer to it."

"Certainly. Mr. Grace? Come to a heading of 270 . . . standard speed."

"Yes sir."

"Meanwhile," Sandy said, heading for the stairs, "I've got an idea that might save us some time. I'd like another private communications channel opened. This time I'm giving you the address of our space station."

Czardos was following her. "Oh?"

"I'm presuming that there are limits to the sophistication of Saraswati's sensors," Sandy said as she descended to the control room. "Putting it another way: you can't scan Nordvik from your current position."

"Saraswati is a research vessel," Czardos admitted slowly. "But yes, our instruments usually require that we get somewhat closer."

"And, even if you could do the job I'd like," Sandy pointed out, "I wouldn't want to risk us being detected by whoever might be watching."

"The inclusive limits of your prudence is commendable," Czardos said as he moved past her and began murmuring instructions to the communications crew.

Cupping her hands, Sandy called down the corridor. "BinGOHHHHHHH! We're calling your boyfriend."

A galloping sound was immediately heard from the direction of the salon. "Wait . . . wait . . ."

"In case Ken Horton wants to ask a security question involving the flavor of Bingo's lipstick or something," Sandy explained to Czardos.

Czardos smiled. "There is something to be said for having ladies on a submarine." He nodded at the keyboard. "All yours."

"Thanks," Sandy said, moving to it as Bingo burst into the room, followed by Phyllis. ORBIT/335. KEN? IT'S FUZZY.

A pause. Then the screen responded with: ASK THE SERGEANT HOW MANY JUMPS?

"Huh?"

"Twenty-six," Bingo replied.

Sandy stared at her, then turned back to the keyboard and entered the information.

A new message appeared on the screen. SANDY YOU'RE DRIVING YOUR FOLKS N*U*T*Z WITH YOUR LATEST NEWS. HOLD AND I'LL CONNECT.

NONONONO. I NEED YOU AND THE STATION.

Another pause. Then: WHAT DO YOU NEED?

Sandy looked at a note she had jotted down. SCAN 74.0181 N X 111.469 E. LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU FIND.

WAIT ONE.

Sandy straightened up. "I give it twenty minutes tops for this to get passed to Sherman, and then him and everyone else knows or thinks they know where we are."

"The station can probably track Saraswati's transmissions," Phyllis pointed out.

"Yeah . . . oh! That was quick."

CLUSTER OF HEAT SIGNATURES. FOCUSED IMAGING WITH ONBOARD MEGASCOPE INDICATES SEVERAL OCCUPIED STRUCTURES AND VEHICLES IN USE OR RECENTLY USED.

Sandy looked at Czardos. "Abandoned in the 1950's?"

"Apparently," Czardos replied, "there is a measurable difference between the recorded accounts and the actual facts."

"Apparently. Bingo? Come over here and make kissyface or something on the keyboard with Ken. Thank him profusely for the help. Oooh!" she added as Bingo rushed by her. "If I didn't let her do that," she said to Czardos, "there'd be a mutiny."

Phyllis was leaning against the hatchway, her arms crossed. "If I ask what's gonna happen next," she inquired of Sandy, "would I really regret knowing the answer?"

"Maybe," Sandy said, absently chewing on a fingernail. "Reports of increased submarine traffic in an area not normally known for it . . . activity on a site long thought abandoned . . . Leo! Is there some sort of auxiliary craft on Saraswati? Something that could reach the shore of Nordvik? Preferably quietly?"

Czardos was cautiously staring at her. "We have a skiff attached to the hull," he said. "It can carry up to four people and is narrow enough to avoid detection. Especially in these waters."

Sandy nodded. "Good. I want to go to Nordvik."

Everyone looked as if they were about to speak. Noisily.

Bingo beat the others to the punch. "I'm going," she declared.

Sandy turned to her. "Bingo it's---"

"I'm going, Sandy." The little Texan's expression was adamant. "Or you're not."

Sandy spent several moments silently reading the determination in the girl's eyes. Then she sighed. "OK . . . Sergeant."

* * * * *

Over an hour later Saraswati was anchored half a mile off the coastline. In the distance could be heard faint sounds of machinery, and an occasional light winked from among some large dark shapes just beyond the shore.

Four people were silently moving inland from a beached aluminum skiff. From head to toe they were dressed in form-fitting black suits.

Staying close to Czardos . . . and with a Saraswati crewmember bringing up the rear . . . Sandy found herself being impressed by two things. The first was that Saraswati's equipment included insulated wetsuits which also featured night vision eyepieces, giving their group a rather comforting stealthy appearance.

The second was the way Bingo was carefully and silently slipping across the ground ahead of them. A stiff wind was blowing . . . there was a considerable amount of sleet in the air . . . and yet Sandy noted how Bingo seemed to expertly move across the wet rocky terrain. Once again she reminded herself that the little cook possessed hidden depths.

The group was gradually creeping closer and closer to the largest of several prefabricated metal buildings which were looming just ahead of them in the darkness. There was no security fence, and damn all in the way of guards, but Czardos had pointed out to Sandy that this section of Russian coastline was noted for its fiercely inhospitable climate. Not for nothing had it been originally chosen as the site for a penal colony. In such a place not only would the prisoners have frozen to death, but guards as well. As it were, Sandy felt that even the insulation in their suits wouldn't keep them very warm for much longer.

Reaching the building they covered by a shed which was attached to it. From somewhere could be heard not only machinery, but faint voices.

A touch on her shoulder, and Sandy turned to see Czardos pointing at something. Sandy looked and saw several flatbed trucks driving in the direction of the other side of the building. The trucks were carrying crates, and Sandy looked in the direction they had come and noticed a poorly marked road which led off towards a single light hanging from a pole in the distance. Beneath the light a dock laden with crates could be seen.

Sandy looked around, then up. She immediately saw light glowing from a shuttered window halfway up the side of the building. If she climbed up on the shed . . .

Motioning to Czardos and Bingo, Sandy indicated what she wanted to do. They understood and, making a platform with their linked arms, allowed Sandy to clamber up and pull herself onto the sloping roof of the shed.

Pausing she glanced back. The skiff wasn't visible, and there was no way anyone could see Saraswati. Their escape plan was secure.

Presuming we escape, Sandy mentally added.

Carefully she began pulling herself up the slick surface of the shed roof, grateful for the grip of the boots she was wearing. When she reached the wall she began cautiously shimmying her body against it, slowly rising until her face was finally on a level with the window.

Pressing her eyes to the shutters she was able to see into the building. The scene before her was illuminated by lights which tinged everything with a reddish hue broken by occasional flashes from welding torches. It was a combination warehouse, machine shop and factory floor. Crates were being unloaded and their contents carefully stacked. Forklifts and cranes were hauling items about and men were busy at work benches with a bewildering array of instruments and tools.

Dominating the large open space were three rows of objects, each one the size of an automobile. The rows stretched out of sight, so Sandy was unable to determine the exact number of objects. But she had been involved in planes, aeronautics and space travel long enough to easily recognize the objects for what they were.

The nose cones of rockets . . . or perhaps even the warheads of missiles.

As she continued watching she saw a man in a one-piece worksuit moving among the men. From the way the men seemed to listen to him, or immediately respond to whatever it was he said, it became evident to Sandy that she was possibly staring at the leader of whoever these people were. He possessed a slight build, was bearded, wore glasses and seemed to be in his sixties or older.

Sandy saw him lead two workmen over to the nearest of the nose cones and indicate something to them, expressing some sort of idea or command he wanted carried out.

"Hello, Dr. Kozlov," she murmured.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Conversation With A Planetary Geologist.

Opening a sealed pouch on her suit Sandy removed her Snooper, adjusting it into its digital camera configuration. As quickly as possible she began taking numerous pictures of the nose cones (warheads?), the workmen, the tools they were using and, especially, the man she suspected was Kozlov. As she worked she could feel the growing apprehension from the others waiting below. Or maybe she was simply projecting her own concerns onto the situation.

Eventually she felt she had enough and gave the Snooper a hard twist, transmitting the contents of its memory chip up to where one of the Swiftsats could transfer it to the space station, or directly to Shopton. Her job then over, Sandy returned the Snooper to the pouch, making certain it was firmly closed. Then she carefully turned, sat upon the roof of the shed and slid down, dropping off the edge to land on her feet among the others.

Pointing emphatically in the direction of the shoreline she hoped her meaning was clear. Fortunately her message seemed to have gotten clearly across as the others immediately began heading for the skiff. Sandy fell into step with them, her mind focused on what the reaction would be to the images once they were seen by her family.

And all the time, while scrambling across the rocky ground towards the waiting skiff, she kept expecting the impact of a rifle bullet between her shoulder blades. Sandy privately felt it would've been the most understandable thing yet in this whole business.

* * * * *

Anyone who has served on board a submarine will explain how time goes differently from the way it passes for everyone else. Day and night is usually at the whim of the commanding officer,

and the movement of sun and stars is replaced by the official schedule. Throw in the long hours of night which occasionally visit the extreme northern latitudes, and the issue is further clouded.

Sitting in Saraswati's salon, Sandy had no real idea of what day it was. She wondered how long had it been since Mary Nestor had been torpedoed? Of course it would've been a simple matter to look at the instruments near the dining table, or go to the bridge. But somehow the notion of being removed from the hours seemed more real than anything else at the moment.

Saraswati was currently sitting on the bottom of the Khatanga Gulf. Everyone else was presumably asleep and Sandy had the entire salon to herself. She had turned off the lights so that she could open one of the viewports and was sitting in the dark, accompanied by a large brandy, quietly staring out into the black waters. At their depth there was obviously nothing to see, although something would flit by every so often. Sandy found herself idly wondering what type of fish were in the Arctic and became determined to look up the answer . . . or perhaps ask Czardos.

A movement, and Sandy looked up to see Symmes approaching.

"I'm sorry," the man said softly. "I thought I'd be the only one up."

Sandy shook her head. "Couldn't sleep."

Symmes had a habit of delivering gentle enigmatic smiles, and he now produced another one for Sandy's benefit. Going over to the dining area he silently fixed himself a drink. He then brought it back over to the viewport lounge, settling onto a section of the couch close enough to Sandy for low conversation, but far enough for decorum's sake.

"It's usually my habit to be here at this time and privately enjoy a cigar," he said, producing a Churchill from inside his suit. He peered at Sandy. "Of course if you'd rather . . ."

Sandy gave him a small smile. "Go ahead," she murmured. "I don't think it will kill me. Besides, I believe there's something of a precedence, considering our surroundings."

Symmes nodded gratefully and occupied himself for several moments with preparing and lighting his cigar. He looked over at her again. "Interesting."

"Oh?"

"The look on your face," Symmes said, relaxing back against the couch. "For a moment I had the feeling you were going to ask me for one."

Sandy smiled again. "I'm gone, but not quite that far gone."

"Um." Symmes started gazing out through the port. "Frankly, I was expecting a more vigorous reply from your family by now. Or from the government."

Sandy once again mentally went over the brief text conversation with Tom and Sherman (and Bud) after she and the others had returned to Saraswati. "They appreciate that this situation has to be handled carefully," she pointed out. "Everything could go so wrong so quickly and the chance of a diplomatic nightmare is hanging over everyone's head." She sighed. "On the one hand they'd rather I was out of this area and safely home. On the other hand I'm the only source of available information short of sending in fleets and troops and lawyers. I'm the safest risk." Her voice dropped. "As usual."

"I would feel that the pictures you sent, plus the results of increased satellite surveillance, would be enough to justify a more aggressive posture." Symmes shrugged. "But, then again, I'm just a planetary geologist. It's been years since I've even voted in an election."

Sandy was pleased by the chance to move the conversation elsewhere. "Exactly what are you looking for here, John?"

Symmes exhaled noisily. "A meteorite crashed in the Arctic Ocean some centuries ago. I've been studying historical and seismological records and am tracking it down, with Leo's gracious help."

"Um. Sounds like something my brother would be doing."

"Don't look shocked but I've been occasionally tempted to contact him. Your brother would certainly be of enormous value. But, of course, Leo and I struggle to keep Saraswati's presence a secret."

"And I've been risking that secrecy left and right," Sandy said. "I'm surprised Leo's been so accepting of my presence."

Symmes shrugged. "Well, Leo's that sort of person," he said, smoking his cigar. "And, in your particular case, you and your friends have benefitted from Leo's overall state of mind. You might not have noticed it, but he's been preoccupied for a while now."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. He's supposed to get married next year."

"Oh!" Then Sandy quickly replayed the comment in her head. "Wait a moment. `Supposed' to get married?"

Symmes nodded.

"Should I pry into how that works?" Sandy slowly asked.

"It's . . . complicated," Symmes told her. "Even though this is the 21st Century there are still places in the world where customs hold the people in an iron grip. You see, Leo's family is rather prominent in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh."

"So he is Indian," Sandy said. "I've noticed his coloration, as well as the Sanskrit motif here and there, and of course Saraswati's name.

"Very Indian," Symmes said. "Leo's directly descended from the Sultan Fateh Ali Tipu. His family were Rajahs back when Bundelkhand was a kingdom."

"But his name. I mean . . . `Czardos'?"

"I said it was complicated," Symmes admitted. "The way it worked out, Leo's uncle was supposed to get the titles, estates, blah blah blah blah. That left Leo's mother free to marry outside of her race. Leo's father was Alperen Czardos: a diplomat to India."

"Ohhhhh."

"Then Leo's uncle died in an accident. He hadn't produced any kids, and so Leo got bumped up in the hierarchy. He's at the age now where he formally inherits the whole ball of wax."

"Including, apparently, a wife."

"From one of the other important families in the area. The contracts and everything have been arranged for decades."

Sandy thought it over for a bit. "Does Leo love her?"

"I've met Shweta a couple of times. She's a nice girl."

Sandy stared at him.

"Yeah." Symmes sighed. "Leo . . . is the sort of man who would make a good husband for any woman he marries. Even one who he's only seen three times in his life and has barely had a chance to talk to, much less be alone with. But Leo was expecting to be left alone from the business of being in charge of the family. He was perfectly happy with the idea of spending his life roaming around in Saraswati and carrying out research. By this time next year he's supposed to be married and have at least one little Leo thoroughly on the way."

"I would think," Sandy said, "that the Indian government would appreciate something like Saraswati and would happily subsidize its use and Leo's research."

"You would think," Symmes agreed. "Unfortunately, relations between Leo's people and New Delhi aren't the happiest in the world. His family is prominent within the current separatist movement in Uttar Pradash."

"Oops!"

"'Oops' indeed. And then, of course, there are other skeletons in Leo's closet to consider."

"Oh?"

"Sandy! I know you're more intelligent than that. Surely you've had your suspicions about Leo's background . . . and Saraswati's."

"Admittedly I had wondered---"

"Why do you think Leo's fought so hard to keep Saraswati's existence a secret? Certainly not just so he could enjoy the world's most fabulous bachelor apartment?"

Sandy looked around the dim salon. "So this is . . ."

"Not the original," Symmes assured her. "At least not quite. There's obviously been extensive reworking and upgrading over the years. But the basic concept remains. And no, Sandy, your brother will never find Nemo's Nautilus. At least not in the place he thinks it is. But now you understand why Leo won't allow Saraswati to fall into government hands." He produced another of his enigmatic smiles. "Call it a family tradition."

"Incredible. But, what happens to you after Leo marries? What happens to Saraswati?"

"A good question. Leo's mentioned his hope that he can make permanent use of Zhokhov Island as a base and keep Saraswati moored there. As for me?" A sigh. "I hope to find my meteorite before the happy day comes. Then I help Leo get through the wedding, maybe catch the bouquet or something and then . . . who knows?"

Sandy had ideas as to that account but decided to keep them private for the time being. "No wife for you?" she asked, smiling.

"Not as such. Leo can be resigned to marriage, but I'm the last of the die-hard single men and am quite content to be so."

"Hmph," Sandy said ruefully. "I know a few like that."

"I doubt it."

"Oh?"

"I have no doubt your circle of acquaintances includes many men," Symmes told her. "But I also believe any man who knows you would be permanently cured of thoughts of bachelorhood."

"Why thank you, John. That's sweet."

"It's the truth," Symmes said. "Of course I only know of you and your family the same way most others do. But being around you the past days has been an intriguing experience. Your family loves you, Sandy. So do your friends."

Sandy turned her face back out to the port, her expression falling. "I know."

"But do they know? Do they know how much you've been struggling with what you've been through in recent times?"

"They should," Sandy said in a low voice.

"Do they know the mental extremes you've gone through to try and keep yourself sane?"

"Possibly."

"Do they know you're addicted to amphetamines?"

Sandy stared back at him, her eyes wide.

"What is it, Sandy?" Symmes asked calmly. "Methamphetamines? Five milligrams? Maybe more?"

"How in God's name---"

"Leo may be just a marine biologist, but he's also a darn good jackleg doctor and can read a symptom. As for myself?" Here Symmes looked away briefly. "Well let's just say that, back in my college days, I had . . . issues."

"John---"

"The thing that's been puzzling both Leo and myself is where in the world you're getting them from? You've been extremely careful about raiding our own medicinal stock, but not quite careful enough. Word of advice, Sandy: never swipe from someone else's medicine cabinet. And the amount that's turned up missing wouldn't be enough to help you, even though you've doubtless become very good at hiding practically all of the outward major symptoms from your family and friends."

Sandy stared quietly at Symmes for several long moments. Then she reached into her pocket and pulled out her Snooper. Snapping it in half she carefully extracted a thin tube which she then passed over to Symmes.

Accepting the tube, Symmes shook several tiny white pills from it into the palm of his hand. He frowned at them. "I don't recognize---"

"You won't," Sandy told him dully. "Technically it's an amphetamine; a custom made dextrorotatory phenethylamine derivative developed by the pharmacologists at the hospital I was in. When I was undergoing therapy I was suffering from, among other things, treatment resistant depression. That drug was specially formulated for me."

"They certainly would've been monitoring you---"

"They were monitoring the wrong things. The drug did everything it was supposed to. But there was an additional side effect. It took me a while and some personal research, but I eventually figured out what was happening. I mentioned the security chip implanted within me?"

Symmes nodded.

"The chip is partially organic and allows the security people at Enterprises to track my location. It also provides medical telemetry. In order to do that it has to be sensitive to my condition and it constantly probes me via electrical impulses.

"The drug I take somehow has an effect upon the chip. It responds to the drug by sending impulses which, in turn, releases increased levels of dopamine into my system."

"Positively enhancing your mood," Symmes muttered.

"But not accurately or consistently," Sandy said to him. "I experience these mood swings . . . sometimes depressive, sometimes violent, sometimes euphoric . . . but there's no control."

"But it's the dopamine that's managing to keep you going." Symmes closed his hand around the pills. "Sandy . . ."

Sandy was beginning to feel herself trembling. "I've been needing to get out of this . . . this . . . condition . . ."

"Please, I've heard all the excuses," Symmes said to her sharply. "I've come up with a lot of them myself. You were hurt . . . damaged . . . and desperately looking for a way to get back to normal. You could've told your doctors or your family, but you stumbled upon this method of fooling them, and fooling yourself as well. This thing, this mystery came along and you thought that if you could solve it you'd overcome everything. Dammit, Sandy . . ."

"It's working so far," Sandy said, feeling tears rising.

"Listen to yourself now. You're brave, resourceful, cunning . . . and you're holding yourself together with spit and baling wire. Like you said, it's worked so far. But you're heading for a collapse, and God help everyone around you when it happens."

Her head was in her hands now and her shoulders were shaking. Symmes could hear the gulping and the sobs.

"Tell me about New Mexico," he softly said.

"Already told it to people," Sandy blubbered.

"Tell me."

Her head rose, and Symmes could now see the confidence and self-control stripped away from her face. Now it was the battered little girl huddling in a corner.

"I thought I was clever," Sandy said brokenly, staring at nothing. "I thought I could upstage everybody and be the big hero. But the clues were right in front of me and I didn't see them until it was too late."

"You were up against a sophisticated supercomputer," Symmes pointed out. "Solomon could literally outthink you. There was no way you could've been prepared."

"I could've been smarter, dammit," Sandy shrieked. The anger then evaporated as quickly as it had come, leaving the hollow agony once again. "People ended up hurt because of me. People . . ." Her mouth tried to work around the words. "People died because of me."

"Because of Solomon," Symmes countered.

Sandy was slowly shaking her head, looking as if she were trying to push his remarks away with both hands. "So many people . . ."

"Dead," agreed Symmes. "Yes. And you think you woke up in the morning chuckling about how much blood you'd spill. Yes, Sandy, I'll agree with you. You have to face the people who died because of your actions."

He stood up and looked down at her. "But hold on to this. How many people would those Cyclone Gun terrorists have killed if you hadn't stopped them? How many people would Solomon have killed if it had gotten loose?"

Sandy moaned, and Symmes placed a hand on her shoulder. "Leo and I will help you, Sandy. We'll also keep your secret safe. But there's a price."

She turned a tear-streaked face up to him.

"You've got to stop mourning all the people who died . . . and start rejoicing about all the people you saved!"

Chapter Twenty-Three: Capture.

Zolnerowich leaned away from the console. "Ready, Miss Swift."

Moving closer, Sandy reached for the keyboard. ANYBODY HOME?

The reply came almost immediately. BABY R U OK?

Sandy's heart jumped. Mom! I'M OK, she typed back, mentally crossing her fingers. WHY ARE YOU MINDING THE BURNERS?

EVERYBODY HERE JUST TAKING TURNS. CALLING THEM NOW.

Stop, Sandy commanded herself, feeling a slow tidal rise of emotions and loneliness within her. Everything she wanted was on the other side of the communication. She ached for the sound of her mother's voice but also knew what her reaction might be if she heard it.

Working to keep her face composed Sandy looked at Czardos. "I don't suppose we're secure enough to risk an audio channel?"

The look he returned to her carried volumes. "We're locked in to your satellite," he said. "This method allows us to use our tightest beam. I'm sorry, Sandy, but the Russians might still be scanning for us."

Sandy nodded dully, turning back to the screen. A new message was appearing. WERE ALL HERE BUT IM GOING TYPE.

She could feel her mother's arm and trembled. WHAT NEWS?

STATEDEP MAKING CAUTIOUS INROADS 2 RUSSIANS BUT THEY HAVE TO B CAREFUL.

"Dammit," Sandy breathed.

Behind her Phyllis sighed. "As much as I agree with your sentiment, San, I can also understand the government's position. The United States can't officially acknowledge our presence here, no matter what the Russians or even the Brungarians are doing. You're my closest friend, San, and I love you . . . but right now you're also a diplomatic nightmare."

Sandy had been drumming her fingers on the console. She now resumed typing. WHAT HAPPENS IF SITUATION BLOWS UP?

U RUN HOME AS QUICK AS POSSIBLE.

"Miz Swift's always been a smart woman," Bingo observed.

"Smarter than her daughter," Sandy muttered. DOES EVERYONE UNDERSTAND HOW SERIOUS THIS CAN GET?

THATS 4 GOVTS TO HANDLE NOT U!

Sandy was fighting to ignore the thoughts twisting inside her head. ADVISE.

STATION N SATS CAN MONITOR. U DONE ENOUGH. COME HOME.

Sandy quietly stared at the screen for a few moments. Finally: DO ALL OF YOU AGREE?

A few more moments, and Sandy could easily imagine her parents, Tom, Bud and Sherman perhaps arguing among themselves.

Then: YES.

Something occurred to Sandy. MOM WHY DIDN'T YOU ASK ME A SECURITY QUESTION LIKE EVERYONE ELSE?

The answer came back, this time without Mary Swift's keyboard shorthand. I KNOW YOU, SANDRA. EVEN IF YOU WERE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE UNIVERSE I WOULD STILL KNOW MY BABY GIRL.

Something squeezed hard at Sandy's heart and she shut her eyes, fighting back tears.

"Tell her," Phyllis said softly. "While you have this chance."

Her fingers shaking, Sandy touched the keys. I LOVE YOU MOM.

WE ALL LOVE YOU DARLING. COME HOME.

Sandy's breathing became easier. PLANNING IT NOW. WILL CONTACT YOU LATER. PLEASE KEEP CLOSE. BYE. She quickly backed away from the console. "Close connection."

Czardos nodded. "Securing communications array," Zolnerowich announced.

Her shoulders slumping, Sandy went to lean against the stairway, wrapping her thoughts around her. Eventually, though, she realized the surrounding quiet and noticed everyone patiently looking at her. Waiting.

"I've endangered you and Saraswati enough, Leo," Sandy said to Czardos.

"Sandy---"

"Prepare to leave the area as soon as safely possible. We'll send the Brungarians all we've learned, and then you can drop us off at Alaska or something." Turning, she left the bridge. When she reached the salon she didn't stop but kept on, going back to where a circular stairwell led up to the main hatchway. Grabbing at a parka she went up.

Sunlight as pale as a ghost barely illuminated the deck of Saraswati as Sandy emerged onto the hull. She stood there, hands jammed in her pockets, gazing in the general direction of the Russian coast while a small work detail busied themselves in preparation for the submarine's eventual diving.

After a few moments she sensed others behind her. "And what am I supposed to do?" she loudly said to the air.

"No one expects you to do anything else," Phyllis replied. "You've done so much already."

Sandy turned to see Phyllis, Bingo, Czardos and Symmes standing in a line near the hatch. "The Russians are constructing missiles for some reason," she said to them. "It can't be for anything good. Those missiles are gonna be launched, and no government in the world is gonna be able to stop all of them fast enough."

"Whereas we're here now," Phyllis said. "Is that what you're saying?"

"But what are we supposed to do?" Sandy asked hotly. "More to the point: what am I supposed to do?" She waved an arm out over the water. "Out there they're not worried about what the Russians are doing. They're more concerned with the idea that Sandra Swift's at the center of yet another potential catastrophe. And I am! More risk," she said to Phyllis, her voice rising. "More ruin. More deaths."

"And possibly more people saved," Symmes quietly replied.

At that moment Sandy could've cheerfully thrown him into the icy water.

"You're right, of course," Symmes continued. "No one should really expect you to do anything. We can leave, get away. And then, when the Russians do whatever they intend to do with the missiles, your hands at least will be clean."

"The Brungarians will be informed," Sandy declared. "They'll know what to do."

Symmes nodded. "Yes. Unfortunately, they will."

"What in God's name do you want from me?" Sandy screamed.

"Just your confidence that what you're doing is the best decision," Czardos now said. "Your assurance that, if you had an idea on what else could be done, you would let all of us know."

"Leo---"

"We'll support whatever decision you make, Sandy. We believe in you."

Sandy felt her temples throbbing. "I just don't want any of you involved," she murmured. "I don't want that responsibility."

Silence on the deck.

"We'll be submerging in about ten or so minutes," Czardos said. "Once this detail finishes its work." He slowly turned back towards the hatch, but then he paused and looked back. "The real curse of having friends, Sandy, is the possibility that they'll willingly follow you all the way to Hell."

"A real friend wouldn't ask that of others," Sandy replied.

"A real friend wouldn't care." Followed by the others . . . each of them giving Sandy a long concerned look . . . Czardos descended down into Saraswati.

Turning away, Sandy slowly carried herself and her thoughts along the deck. The wind rose, trying to bite into her through the parka, and she found herself relishing its attempt to do so. Something . . . anything to distract her.

She then began noticing the work detail. They were between her and the docked skiff, checking on something which was secured in a compartment beneath a hatch. Sandy noticed that a few more hatches were in the hull.

"You keep equipment in these compartments?"

The workmen looked up and smiled. "Yes, Miss," one of them said. "Some special equipment that's only needed when we're on the surface. Take that hatch you're standing on for instance."

Sandy looked down at her feet.

"Got a high-performance ultralight helicopter stored there. Can be assembled in moments and flown away. Mister Czardos' grandfather purchased it from Hiller back in the 1960s and had it modified. We keep its fuel tanks filled and ready in case we need some emergency reconnaissance or something."

Sandy slowly looked up, her expression innocent. "Oh really?"

* * * * *

Five minutes later half of Sandy was reflecting that she was going to be so yelled at when Phyllis and the others realized what she had done.

The other half was laughing as she skimmed low over the water, flying towards Nordvik.

* * * * *

She clutched the parka tighter around her as she crept closer to the complex of buildings. A snow storm was beginning to make itself known and the parka helped, but it wasn't as thoroughly protective as the black suit she had worn on her first visit. With luck, though, Sandy felt she'd be within the cover of the nearest building in a few minutes.

Somewhere behind her waited the helicopter, hidden a fifth of a mile away behind a low hump of stone. During the last moments of the flight, while swinging wide around the complex, Sandy had found herself wrestling against a fierce wind. She had prevailed, however, managing a good enough landing without being greeted by either searchlights or (more importantly) gunfire.

She had decided to approach the complex from the other side, which meant furtively following what she supposed was meant to serve as a road along the rocky surface. At least there had been markers pounded into the ground, so Sandy presumed they were there to indicate a direction for trucks to travel.

Part of her was silently considering the notion that, at this very moment, Sherman was screaming at his tracking screens as he saw transmissions from her security chip showing her creeping around the location of a former Soviet Union penal colony. No doubt attempts were being made to get in touch with Saraswati, and Sandy didn't envy Phyllis if she were in a position to make contact.

Sandy also dwelled on the notion that Czardos and others were, even now, rapidly heading across the water towards her, either with the skiff or with Saraswati (unless they stricken by a bout of common sense and decided to submerge and sneak away). Sandy briefly held a mental image of Bingo standing in the skiff, like Washington crossing the Delaware, and she actually giggled.

Ahead of her now was a building which was markedly smaller than its larger neighbors. There were no large openings, no flashes of welding torches but, rather, a row of lights along an upper floor. The whole arrangement shouted Administration to her, and Sandy picked up her pace, trying to remain unseen and silently praying that no one would suddenly be possessed of a yen to gaze out at the darkening snowy landscape.

Reaching the side of the building, Sandy crouched for a moment by the only existing door, looking around. Satisfied that she wasn't being chased she straightened up and, tensing herself, pushed the door open, following it inside. She told herself that she wasn't expected to be here and, if she simply acted casual enough, everyone would immediately presume she was one of the workers here. That would be good for a few seconds . . .

But she found herself in a changing room with rows of parkas on either side. Suddenly inspired, Sandy shrugged off her Saraswati gear, exchanging it for one of the more utilitarian local parkas. She then continued on through the room.

Beyond was a small reception office; desk and chair on one side and closed door ahead of her. No one seemed to be on duty and Sandy silently thanked the Deity for watching her back.

She started cautiously moving towards the opposite door, but her attention was drawn to a large framed map on the wall near the desk. Going to it Sandy peered closely. As near as she could tell it definitely seemed to be a detailed diagram of the entire complex, and she bit her lower lip as she tried to figure out where to go to either learn much more about what was going on and, if necessary, cause an extreme amount of mayhem.

"This is the point where not knowing how to read Russian is turning around and biting me," she muttered.

"Then perhaps I could be of service," a new voice said.

Or, rather, an old one. With a sigh, Sandy slowly turned around.

"Admiral Kondor," she said. "What a surprise!"

Chapter Twenty-Four: Ironclad Scheme.

Sandy could not conceive of how a man as large as Kondor could move quietly enough to suddenly appear behind her. But there he was, flanked by two other men. All three of them were dressed in dark grey jumpsuits, and the other men were carrying machine guns which were now pointed directly at her.

Kondor was slowly nodding at her, his hands behind his back.

"You not only justify your reputation," he rumbled, "but you also exceed it."

"You can thank your Captain Matveev for being such a poor shot," Sandy replied. Her eyes narrowed. "And on your orders as well."

"Matveev will be dealt with," Kondor said. "Eventually. Right now, of course, I still have need of him."

"Facing a deadline?"

Kondor grunted. "Of sorts. Of course, if I were in your current position, I would not be blithely using words such as 'deadline'."

Sandy shrugged. "Force of habit."

"Indeed." Keeping his eyes on Sandy, Kondor barked a series of orders to his associates. "And now, if you'll accompany us back outside?"

Sandy's mind was filling with thoughts of a short walk onto the frozen ground, followed by a burst of machine gun fire. "Surely you realize by now that others heard the broadcast I made earlier. It's common knowledge that I not only survived your attack, but that the Brungarians weren't responsible."

"No matter. The other countries are still fidgeting towards making any sort of decisive response. As to your survival," and here his eyes glittered, "it's a detail which can easily be attended to." Stepping aside he indicated the way out of the building. "And now? If you please?"

Trying to feel calmer than she knew she looked, Sandy slowly allowed herself to move past Kondor's enormous frame. As she stepped between the guards it entered her mind to try and use some of the moves she had learned from Sherman Ames. But something told her she would have better luck out in the open.

Outside the wind had increased and sleet was now falling. Sandy pulled her parka tighter around her.

"This way, Miss Swift," Kondor ordered, indicating the nearest of the larger buildings with a slight wave of his hand. Sandy saw that the destination was one of those lit by the flashes of work crews and the sounds of machinery. Hardly the place one would expect for an execution, and she decided to cooperate.

"I won't insult you by hedging about concerning your inevitable fate," Kondor said, his voice rising above the wind as they walked. "But, before we attend to that matter, I wish to learn just what's happening. Especially the means by which you arrived here."

Sandy shrugged again, thrusting her hands into her pockets. "Just wait a little while," she called back. "You'll soon have visitors who'll be more than happy to supply answers." Her mind whirled, wondering if it would be Saraswati or Tom who came to a much desired rescue, and quietly despairing that the arrival of one or the other, or both, would mean family and friends in harm's way.

"For your sake I hope you're mistaken. That would mean that your immediate usefulness is at an end."

"It's no good, Admiral Kondor," Sandy told him. "Too many people know about you here."

"And as I said: it's much too late. Observe."

They had reached the entrance of the building. Ahead of Sandy were rows of missiles sitting on transport cradles. Their warheads looked very familiar, and she realized she had seen them before.

Kondor had come to stand beside her, the guards remaining just behind.

"Bulavas," he commented.

"Gesundheit."

Kondor didn't smile. "RSM-56 SLBM's. Each capable of carrying a payload of 3600 kilograms. All of them modified---"

"By the good Dr. Kozlov," Sandy finished.

Kondor grunted. "I keep reminding myself that you have a reputation for intelligence and resourcefulness. Congratulations. And you're correct. With his assistance I now have eighty such missiles. Within the hour they will be loaded onto four submarines which are even now arriving at this location."

Saraswati, Sandy thought anxiously. God, if Phyllis and the others were already on their way here . . .

After the missiles are loaded it will take ten or so hours for the submarines to reach their assigned position close to Brungaria," Kondor said. "At that point they will then be launched."

Keep him talking, Sandy's mind shouted. "Certainly you don't need to be so close to launch a missile attack on Brungaria."

She saw a slow smile appear on Kondor's face. "True," he admitted. "But whoever said I was going to launch them at Brungaria?"

Sandy frowned, her mind spinning. "Eighty missiles with nuclear warheads . . . launched from Russian submarines . . . and you're not aiming them at Brungaria."

Kondor's smile widened. "And who said the missiles carried nuclear warheads?" He nodded again. "Go on, Miss Swift. It is a pleasure to speak with an intelligent woman. Even for a short while."

The spinning in Sandy's head suddenly stopped, and her mouth dropped open. "Oh my God . . ."

Kondor waited.

"Military radars all over the world will see nothing but missiles being launched from Brungaria!"

"Quite," Kondor replied affably.

"You want to instigate a global retaliation against Brungaria."

"Very good, Miss Swift. And quite right. But you still only have a small part of the overall plan. The missiles will indeed be launched. They'll indeed be tracked by military forces throughout the world. But minutes after they leave the submarines the missiles will be intercepted and destroyed."

Think, Sandy yelled at herself. Think! "You said the missiles weren't armed with nuclear warheads."

"Yes."

"If you just wanted to start a war against Brungaria you wouldn't need so many missiles. One or two would be enough."

"Very perspicacious."

There was something different in Kondor's voice. It still sounded the same. But Sandy's ears were now picking up an odd inflection. Something different from the way he had sounded in Canada.

Kondor now turned and walked over to where some workmen were handling a group of steel barrels. At orders from him the workmen stepped back, acknowledging the command in their own voices. Reaching the nearest barrel he opened it. "One of the missiles is still being loaded," he commented, reaching in. He then returned to Sandy and held out his hand, opening it. "Perhaps you recognize these."

Sandy looked and saw he was holding a handful of . . .

"The iron pellets," she murmured.

"Specifically designed by Dr. Kozlov," Kondor explained, "as was the dispersal devices carried in the warhead of each missile. He also devised the precise trajectories by which the warheads would carry their loads to their intended destination."

Sandy quickly calculated. "You're going to deliver . . . two hundred and eighty-eight metric tons of little iron pellets . . ." She stared up at the huge man. "To where? And why?"

Kondor hefted the pellets. "You have unwittingly played such an integral part of my plan, Miss Swift, that I feel you deserve to learn the full story. After all," he added casually, "there are doubts you'll have an opportunity to repeat it elsewhere." He strolled back to the barrel and returned the pellets, shouting orders to the workmen who, once again, repeated them.

He then beckoned to Sandy to join him at a nearby work table. Moving to it, Sandy saw a map of Russia.

"I do not have to tell you how much of an irritant Brungaria has been to Russia," Kondor explained to Sandy. "And certainly your brother would agree with the sentiment. We have tried all sorts of methods for dealing with the separatists. Negotiation . . . embargos . . . international pressure. And yet Brungaria still exists."

"So now you're going to try military action," Sandy said, staring at the map. "Perhaps annihilation."

"I do not think it will ultimately come to that," Kondor said. "Despite the feelings held against Brungaria, the world will be reluctant to resort to an armed course of action. Yes, they will face evidence of an attack launched by Brungaria. An attack which will seemingly fail. The separatists will, of course, deny having launched the attack. But it will be Brungaria's word against world opinion, and it will provide sufficient cause for the United Nations to approve of Russia taking aggressive action against them."

"And this has all been your scheme, Admiral Jascha Kondor?"

"Mine . . . and my immediate superiors."

Sandy slowly sighed. "The only problem is that Moscow would never approve such a plan." She slowly raised her face to meet his. "But, then again, Moscow has no idea this is happening."

A thick eyebrow rose on Kondor's face. "Oh?"

"I've been told I have a pretty good ear," Sandy said. "Admittedly I don't speak or read Russian as well as I suppose I should. But I can recognize a Kranjovian accent when I hear one."

The other eyebrow on Kondor's face joined its twin.

"You're a Kranjovian agent, Admiral Jascha Kondor. So are probably all of the workers here. Maybe Kozlov as well. Maybe Matveev."

"Speculation, Miss Swift."

"Maybe," Sandy replied. "And maybe Kranjovia has devoted time and effort to placing key people within the Russian military. I don't deny you have a history in the Russian Navy. But, then again, both the Brungarians and the Kranjovians started out as Russians. The Brungarians all managed to move to their state. Can the same be said for your people?"

Kondor slowly folded his arms. "An interesting theory. Perhaps even true. But why would Kranjovia carry out such a scheme?"

"Because it fits the way Kranjovia operates. Taking a hand out from her pocket Sandy began touching the map. "Here, and here! Brungaria in the northeast . . . Kranjovia in the southwest. Operating independently they've been dangerous. But not enough to ultimately pose a

significant threat to Russia. But together . . ." Sandy slammed her palm down hard on the center of the map. "Together both nations could combine their resources. Working in close cooperation they'd have the capability to dictate terms to Moscow." She looked up expectantly.

Kondor stared silently at her for several moments, his eyes icy.

"Well played," he eventually rumbled.

"Yeah. So tell me I'm wrong."

"Actually," Kondor said, "you've reasoned it out. And that is why the Oligarchy cannot afford to have Brungaria damaged by military action. We need the technology and military assets which Brungaria possesses. With Brungaria under control of the Oligarchy we obtain a position of severe dominance in relation to Russia, and probably throughout the rest of the hemisphere as well."

Sandy was glaring at him. "And what about you?" she asked. "What do you ultimately get out of this?"

"That should be obvious, Miss Swift. If Russia can eventually be brought under the influence of an expanded Kranjovia, then it will need new leadership."

Sandy nodded. "Admiral Jascha Kondor . . . Oligarch of Russia."

"A suitable solution, one would think."

Sandy was looking around. "But the missiles. The iron . . ."

"As I explained," Kondor replied, "we need an intact Brungaria. But, for our purposes, Brungaria suffers from a lack of clear water access to its ports. Even with submarines we will still require immediate available passage for our ships if we wish to establish firm control."

Leaning over, Kondor traced a rough circle above the Brungarian shoreline. "Nuclear weapons could, of course, handle the ice. But we cannot risk damage or contamination. So the missiles will serve two important functions. First, of course, they will strengthen world opinion against Brungaria. Second . . . and more importantly, they will deliver their cargo of iron pellets to an area equivalent to seven hundred thousand square kilometers of Arctic ice.

"Kozlov and scientists within the Oligarchy have calculated that a thin layer of dark material spread out upon the surface of the ice will be sufficient to significantly accelerate the liberation of gas vapors. This, in turn, will thicken the atmosphere above the Arctic. There will be a retention of heat which will further accelerate the liberation of volatiles from the ice. The result--"

"A portion of the Arctic will melt," Sandy breathed. She stared back at Kondor. "Are you out of your mind? You're risking the creation of an environmental catastrophe on a global scale."

"Perhaps I have greater faith in our scientists than you."

"You're insane!"

Kondor lightly shrugged. "By this time tomorrow, we shall see."

"Ocean levels could rise throughout the entire north. You'd risk flooding not only a significant part of Brungaria, but Russia and other countries as well."

"And if you're correct," Kondor said, "then the blame will still fall on Brungaria. Perhaps even Russia, if worse comes to worse. Kranjovia on the other hand . . ."

Sandy tried to keep herself steady. Tried to hold onto her thoughts. "But the iron smuggling," she said. "Kozlov was only able to send one hundred and eight tons."

"We were originally producing and smuggling the iron pellets out of Russia," Kondor told her. "In the beginning. But the Russian government, being what it is, eventually came close to uncovering our efforts. Kozlov was obliged to move his operation elsewhere."

Sandy grunted. "Never swipe from someone else's medicine cabinet," she muttered.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing," Sandy said, shaking her head.

"It was, I have to confess, an act of desperation," Kondor said. "But it enabled us to gain the support of the Canadian government in casting further suspicion on Brungaria. And, as an added bonus, it led to the happy accident which brought Sandra Swift into the picture. The sister of the famous Tom Swift whose feelings concerning Brungaria are well documented. Your involvement in all of this assisted us far beyond our wildest dreams."

Sandy glared at Kondor. "And when the world learns about this plan, Jascha Kondor, it'll fall on you like a ton of bricks."

"True . . . if the world learned of it. But obviously they have no way of finding out."

"Huh! Are you willing to bet on that?"

"Useless bravado, Miss Swift. I hold all the cards."

"Except for one ace." Sandy now removed her other hand from her pocket, revealing her Snooper. "Care to make an additional statement to the world, Admiral Jascha Kondor?"

Kondor lunged at her but Sandy quickly stepped back, giving the Snooper a single firm twist.

"Burst transmission," she announced. "Your entire presentation is now being transmitted to my brother. And then . . ."

Kondor struck out at her, knocking the Snooper from her hand. He then slammed a boot down upon the device, thoroughly crushing it beneath his heel.

"Too late," Sandy declared. "They'll hear it in all countries. America . . . Brungaria . . . Russia . . ."

Kondor's face was twisting into an angered mask. "No," he said. "You're lying. You can't possibly be swift enough."

"Wrong answer," Sandy snarled.

Chapter Twenty-Five: All Cats Are Grey.

Throughout her talk with Kondor Sandy had made as casual and as careful a study as possible of her surroundings. The building's interior was filled with workmen operating machinery and pushing carts and dollies about, and the only people who had guns were the two guards who had accompanied Kondor.

So her first move was to keep Kondor's bulk between her and the guards, buying a moment of time from their brief hesitation to open fire. Whirling like a ballet dancer she then dived beneath the table, taking advantage of its cover to lunge for a scooter board which had been left near a partially assembled diesel engine sitting on a maintenance stand. The impact of her landing caused the board to begin quickly rolling, carrying her towards the rows of missiles.

Behind her she heard Kondor shouting orders. What pleased her, however, was the lack of another sound: that of machine gun fire. Yes, boys, she told herself. Never immediately start shooting in a room filled with missiles. Rolling off the scooter board she shimmied beneath one of the missiles then rapidly crawled hopefully out of sight of pursuit.

An alarm siren was now ringing throughout the building, and Sandy reached a position to where she could see that the entrance was being sealed shut. What was worse was the sight of Kondor producing a pistol from inside his uniform. Even far worse was the appearance of several more armed guards.

Watching them, Sandy mentally repeated the mantra about no one being stupid enough to discharge a firearm in a warehouse full of missiles. But she reasoned her opponents wouldn't have to worry about it if they got their hands on her.

And besides, Kondor looked quite angry.

Turning, Sandy slipped away deeper into the forest of missiles.

* * * * *

On Saraswati's bridge a technician looked up from his board. "Sonar registers four separate signatures," he announced. "According to the computer they're Borei-class submarines."

"That . . . can't be good," Phyllis said.

"Nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines," Bingo murmured. "Russian."

"And I was right."

Czardos was slowly stroking his beard. "Our anechoic armor and echo field should help keep us off their sensors," he said. "Especially if they're currently busy trying to navigate this channel. Mr. Grace," he called up to the pilot house. "Rig for silent running. Release thermocline initiators." He then turned to the girls. "Those submarines are apparently connected with the warheads at Nordvik."

"I'm so gonna hate asking this," Phyllis said, "but what are we gonna do?"

"Vex and confuse our opponents," Czardos remarked. "See if we can strike a lick on behalf of the good guys."

"He always talks like this when he skips a meal," Symmes commented.

"John's upset because we seem to have finally zeroed in on his precious meteorite," Czardos explained, "and now he's worried he may not live long enough to enjoy his triumph. Meat and potatoes before dessert, John. Certainly your mother taught you that."

"The only thing my mother taught me was to always wear clean underwear in case I was in an accident," Symmes retorted. "Which reminds me, do I have time to change?"

"TMI," muttered Bingo. Then louder: "Mr. Leo how do you keep Saraswati stealthy in all this mess? Those Russian subs out there've got to be spottin' you."

"You should ask Sandy's brother," Czardos replied, studying the instruments in the sensor alcove.

"Oh?"

Czardos nodded. "Saraswati carries custom modified versions of the Silentenna developed by Tom Swift Jr. It works just as well against sonar as the original Silentenna did against sonic booms. A bit tricky, but elegant. Distance to the nearest Russian sub?" he asked one of the technicians.

"Eleven kilometers."

Czardos was quietly thoughtful for a moment. Then he sighed and looked up the stairs towards the pilot house. "Mr. Grace."

"Sir!"

"Come about to a heading of seven two degrees."

"Sir!"

Another sigh. "And prepare for ramming speed."

Silence throughout the bridge. Turning, Czardos noticed all eyes looking at him.

"Yes, well . . ." He shrugged. "I've always wanted to say that."

"And what about Sandy?" Phyllis insisted.

"We're going to do what we can against the submarines here," Czardos told her. "As for Sandy, well . . . based on the short time I've personally known her, as well as what I know about her background . . . I have no doubt she's handling the situation in her own signature manner."

Phyllis and Bingo moaned.

* * * * *

In the Arbat District of Moscow the members of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation were gathered in the central communications room of the Ministry of Defence. All of them were listening to a particularly absorbing conversation.

Vyacheslav Fyodorov, General of the Army and Chief of the General Staff, delivered the first opinion. "Chto za huy?"

His attention then turned to the rather nervous Chief of Communications. "Where is this transmission coming from?"

"We've pinpointed the source as being from central New York State in the United States," the chief quickly replied. "Perhaps the community of Shopton."

"Swift Enterprises," Fyodorov breathed.

"General, the message is being broadcast all over the world. We cannot guarantee the accuracy--
_"

"I know Kondor's voice," Fyodorov said. "I've heard it often enough." His eyes moved around the room, settling on one man. "Yuri Vasilievich. Where is Admiral Kondor?"

Vice Admiral Yuri Pletnyov, in command of the Russian Navy, mentally felt a wall at his back. His voice tightened. "I have been informed that Admiral Kondor and his staff are involved in a special conference in Severomorsk."

"Find out," Fyodorov asked in a tone like buttered silk. He slowly turned about, seeing all the men in the room as if for the first time. "I'm hearing Kondor's undeniable voice," he said, his voice growing louder. "I'm hearing what the rest of the world is hearing . . . that our country, and its military, is controlled at the top by Kranjovian agents!"

A remarkably courageous junior officer ventured an opinion. "Perhaps it is a clever forgery, General. A trick--"

"Listen to that other voice," Fyodorov shot back, pointing a finger at the speaker from where the transmission was being heard. "Anyone else and I would possibly agree. But that is Sandra Swift. Sandra . . . Swift! We all heard that earlier broadcast made from the Arctic. She announced that she had not been killed by the Brungarians. That broadcast was directed at Admiral Kondor. Now I'm hearing of this . . . this treachery!"

He once again turned to Pletnyov who had been busily dispatching his subordinates to carry out orders. "I want the current location of all ships under Kondor's command. I want it confirmed, and I want it now!"

A prudent part of Pletnyov's mind decided that this was the time for personal action and he moved to a nearby communication console.

An aide now rushed up and pushed a slip of paper into Fyodorov's hand. Everyone watched as it was read.

"The Eighth Directorate and the Main Intelligence Directorate have been engaged in an enviable burst of cooperation," Fyodorov commented. "It seems that, in the course of verifying the contents of this transmission, they have just uncovered an unusual amount of activity at Nordvik."

One of the others frowned. "But . . . Nordvik has been abandoned for years."

Fyodorov continued staring at the paper. Then he slowly closed his fist around it, crumpling it. "Major General Vishnevetsky . . . order planes from the airbases nearest to Nordvik to overfly that location. I want hard information as soon as possible. General Galich . . ."

An officer snapped to attention.

"Activate the Spetsnav. I want at least two companies of your troops at Nordvik." Fyodorov's face now slowly lifted, his eyes meeting those of an aide. "And prepare my aircraft."

* * * * *

The guard slowly circled about one end of a missile storage magazine, his submachine gun at the ready. He had been personally instructed by Admiral Kondor that the girl was not to be killed on sight, but brought back to the Admiral for final determination. The missiles themselves were not to be risked. Not with the submarines arriving on schedule.

As far as he was concerned the guard felt the whole situation was being blown out of proportion. Everyone was acting as if this Amerikanitz female was some sort of super weapon. The guard had seen Admiral Kondor in action, and he knew where the real power was . . .

His ears picked up the sudden sound and the guard immediately snapped about, his gun automatically pointing at . . .

The shoe which had hit the floor.

Even as the guard was thinking chyort voz'mi he knew it was too late. Sandy dropped upon him from the loading platform where she'd been hiding, immediately knocking him flat. Quickly twining her hands into a single fist Sandy struck the guard again, rendering him into a gently breathing and rather dimly conscious lump.

"Good boy," she whispered, lightly patting his cheek.

Keeping her ears and eyes open for the approach of Kondor's guards she quickly dragged her prize into the cover of the storage magazine. She had long ago disposed of her parka and decided she needed much more.

"Tell you a story," she murmured to the unconscious guard as she began removing his jumpsuit. "A school teacher tells the members of her new class to deliver five hundred word presentations on how they spent their summer vacations. One of the students . . . a boy . . . finds it's his turn and he goes to the front of the classroom. He faces his classmates and begins reading."

She continued stripping off the jumpsuit. "'One day', he began, 'I realized my cat was missing, and I decided to go look for it. I went and stood on the front porch, and I began calling for my

cat. I went here kitty kitty kitty kitty . . . here kitty kitty kitty kitty . . . here kitty kitty kitty kitty . . . here kitty kitty kitty kitty . . ."

Finally having removed the jumpsuit Sandy rapidly began pulling it on herself, trying to adjust it to her frame as much as possible. She then took the man's dark grey cap and, finally, the submachine gun he had been carrying, checking to make certain that the magazine was full.

A final cautious look around, and then she eased out from beneath the storage magazine and started moving towards the nearest wall in the building.

A low giggle escaped her lips.

"Here kitty kitty kitty kitty . . ."

Chapter Twenty-Six: Deliveries.

Kondor faced the commanders of his guards. "I am aware of the size of this building," he hissed. "I am also aware that it is filled to capacity with missiles, technicians and your men. She, on the other hand, is just one woman. Find her. I want to begin loading the missiles within the next half hour."

One of the technicians now ran up and murmured something to him. The commanders could see the thick, broad face turning suddenly red.

"SHTO?"

One of the Admiral's enormous arms started moving and, for a moment, it was thought that the technician would be struck dead. But Kondor worked to bring himself back under control. "I will be there in a moment," he told the technician through gritted teeth. "Remain in contact." He turned back to the commanders. "The loading of the missiles will be delayed. It seems the Alexandr Belyshev has collided with something while trying to surface, and has sustained damage."

As everyone watched, Kondor slowly walked to the table where he had described his plan to Sandy. A pause. Then he brought a fist down hard upon the table, smashing it into two halves.

He turned back to them. "Captain Vainshtok."

One of the commanders stiffened. "Admiral."

"Take your men outside and station them around the building. Cover all the doors and vents and make certain she does not try to escape."

The officer quickly went to carry out the order, and Kondor prowled closer to the remaining commanders. "She is doing this," he said half to himself. "I do not know how it's possible, but she is doing this."

One of the other guards had rushed up to murmur to his superior officer.

Kondor watched the exchange. "Well, Captain Fetisov?"

Fetisov had become pale, but he summoned up the nerve to report. "One of the guards has been found unconscious near missile rack A. His uniform and his weapon are missing."

To everyone's immediate relief they remained alive as Kondor became thoughtful. Calculating. He began looking around him, his eyes searching.

Suddenly he noticed Vainshtok's guards some twenty or so meters away. All of them heading for the outside. One of them . . . the guard lagging a bit at the end . . . "Fetisov, Kudrin!"

"Admiral."

"Use your guns. Shoot Vainshtok's men."

"Admiral?"

"And if I am wrong," Kondor breathed, bringing his own pistol up, "they are only guards."

But at the last moment the guard at the end swung his own weapon up in their direction.

Or rather, swung her weapon up. The guard's cap fell off, and Kondor found himself facing Sandy, as well as the business end of the submachine gun she carried. His finger tightened on the trigger . . .

As Sandy also fired. Between them a large pressurized fire extinguisher on a dolly suddenly burst open, filling the immediate air with a thick cloud of white vapor. Kondor managed to get off a shot, but he knew it had gone wild.

And as he stormed through the haze he saw that Sandy had disappeared.

* * * * *

"Tom thinks his way out of messes like this," Sandy muttered. "I end up in a firefight."

Realizing that her ploy to slip outside wasn't going to work, Sandy took advantage of the cloud she had created by shooting the fire extinguisher, scurrying back among the missiles and dodging several of the guards who were still momentarily confused by the shooting. One of the guards managed to get too close and Sandy executed a passable flying tackle, sending him back into one of his fellows and tumbling with him onto the floor. Even better, the guard looked as if he was wearing what seemed to be two grenades on his belt, and Sandy successfully grabbed at one while passing.

Her destination was a semi-secluded staircase which hugged the far wall and led to what seemed to be a long observation gallery or perhaps an office for the missile assembly facility. Ducking low, Sandy slipped behind the nearest of the storage magazines, letting a large heaping amount of panic provide her with momentum. Other than Kondor's shot he hadn't heard (or, more importantly, felt) anything in the way of return fire, and she presumed that either Kondor still wanted her alive or (much more likely) everyone was still concerned about the missiles.

And, since she was now dressed as one of the guards, it was also possible that greater than usual care was being taken about shooting at people.

C'mon people, she silently sent her thoughts out. I've been out in the open for quite a while now. My chip's transmitting. All of you heard the broadcast. A little HELP would be appreciated.

Sandy of course realized that, if Tom and the others were indeed coming to the rescue, it would still take time before they arrived. And God alone only knew what was going on with Saraswati.

From all around she could hear the sounds of the guards moving, and she reasoned that it wouldn't take long for them to eventually hem her in.

"So what sort of mischief can I do now?" she whispered. Looking around she saw nothing in the way of immediately available mayhem. Then she looked up and saw a long metal cylinder suspended from a ceiling crane. Apparently, when the fighting broke out, the cylinder had been in the process of being moved elsewhere within the facility.

"That'll do," Sandy said and took careful aim with her gun. Holding down the trigger she sent a sustained burst which soon snapped the crane cable, sending the cylinder falling down squarely within the center of the stacks of missiles.

From where Sandy was positioned she could see the cylinder break open, releasing a large pile of white powder. The crash was apparently enough to draw the attention of the guards and, with their shouts in her ears, Sandy resumed heading for the stairs, finally reaching the bottom. She felt that a better move would've been to try and shoot out some of the lights, but hindsight had always been 20/20.

As she crouched against the stairs, tensing herself for a dash upwards, she remembered the grenade she now carried and reasoned it would serve as an additional diversion. Hefting it in her hand she began moving up the stairs. The grenade was the color and shape of a miniature

espresso machine and was topped by a large gold pin. Trying to lose herself within the shadows of the wall Sandy worked the pin loose, and then she threw it as hard as she could, sending it sailing through the air to where she saw it would land about where the cylinder had spilled its white powder.

When she had reached the halfway point of the stairs she felt several uncomfortable thoughts drop into place.

Solid fuel missiles . . .

Assembly facility . . .

White powder . . .

Being a test pilot, and occasional astronaut, Sandy knew enough about rocketry to realize she might have made a serious mistake. And, as the Russian-made RG-60DZ smoke-incendiary grenade exploded within the pile of ammonium perchlorate, Sandy knew she was right.

The resulting blast sent two storage magazines of missiles jumping into the air, only to fall back down and shatter into scrap upon the floor. It was also enough to knock people off their feet, throwing them back towards the walls, and it almost flattened Sandy as she grabbed at the stair railing, just managing to catch it but cutting her hand in the process. The shockwave not only knocked out the lights but had punched a hole in the ceiling, sending a good deal of the force upwards and causing additional metal to cascade down onto the floor.

Yeah, Sandy thought. That worked.

A fire was rapidly spreading across the floor of the building, and Sandy turned to rush up the stairs as best as possible. Ahead of her was the door to the gallery. A presumed place of safety.

She had almost reached the door when a shots pounded loudly near her head, almost causing her to fall over the railing.

"SOOKA!"

Kondor. He was standing near the flames which were spreading in his direction, ravenous hatred bleeding from the expression he now threw up at Sandy. A broad shadow painted in bronze and grey by the fire.

From where he stood he could clearly make out Sandy high above the flames, the flickers catching bright points within her eyes. She was solemnly gazing down at him.

With a growl Kondor raised his pistol, pulling the trigger. But the hammer clicked on an empty chamber and he threw the weapon away while Sandy pounded on the door, finally forcing it open.

Inside the gallery was practically sparse. Only a few desks . . . chairs . . . a large and rather heavy looking shelf . . . the dancing shadows caused by the fire below. Nothing in the way of something which Sandy called immediately useful. She knew the flames would eventually spread upwards and she'd have to leave. Perhaps if she pushed the shelf closer to the wall and maybe tried to make some sort of opening in the ceiling . . .

She went over to the long sloping row of windows, peering out to see how bad the fire was now.

Oh!

The gallery was held above the floor of the facility by several metal I-beams. The flames were now circling around them, as well as having reached the bottom of the stairs.

Kondor was steadily climbing up one of the I-beams towards her. His feet were bare and they, along with his hands, gripped at the metal, allowing him to climb like a gorilla. Every muscle in his body seemed to bulge with effort, and to Sandy's eyes he looked much larger than before.

Watching him Sandy remembered the gun at her side, and her fingers now reached for it. He was directly below, and it would be so easy . . .

But something else in Sandy's mind shouted Escape! Turning she rushed to the shelf and, putting her shoulder to it, began pushing. But the shelf was much heavier and more solidly built than it looked, and Sandy's efforts were useless.

A crash, and Sandy turned to see Kondor climbing into the gallery through a smashed window. Something in her now moved her hand to reach for the gun, pulling it up. But Kondor was faster and he snatched at a chair with one enormous hand. The chair was half as large as he was, but he threw it as easily as a baseball at Sandy, striking her squarely and causing her to cry out, the gun knocked free from her hands.

Backing away, Sandy rubbed at her aching arm, staring at Kondor. He was gazing out at the flames, but then brought his eyes back to her.

"It took years to plan this operation," he breathed at her, his voice ragged with emotion. "The finest minds of the Oligarchy. All the plotting and careful maneuvering . . . and one American brat ruins it all."

"I tend to upset people," Sandy remarked. "Apologies."

Kondor began moving towards her. Slowly. Purposefully. "I may yet redeem a small part of myself when I present the Prime Oligarch with the heart I intend to rip from your body."

Collecting her breath Sandy worked to focus on all she had learned from Sherman Ames, settling her body into a taekwondo fighting stance. But he was coming at her like a tidal wave . . .

At the last moment she fainted with a palm strike, her body smoothly swiveling to deliver a front snap kick. It connected, and Sandy felt as if she had tried to kick her way through a mountain. Kondor didn't even have the good grace to say "ouch". Instead he reached for her, but Sandy managed to dip and whirl away and his hand connected with empty air.

Aiming for the jugular and collar bones, Sandy attempted a series of knifehand strikes, but was batted away by a blow from the Russian. She crashed back hard against a desk. Kondor loomed over her but she managed to slip like an eel beneath the desk, just barely escaping his fist as it crashed down through the desk and reached for her.

Moving away, trying to keep distance between him and her, Sandy wondered just what the hell Kondor was. She had thought before that he was one of the biggest men she had ever seen. But here he seemed bigger . . . preternaturally strong. And he was obviously in the mood for murder.

Crouching low she allowed Kondor to get closer before she suddenly jumped . . . not at him but at a nearby chair which she used to launch herself into a leap which carried her just over Kondor's right shoulder. As she tumbled past she brought her clenched hand down hard on the back of his head, having the satisfaction of finally hearing a grunt of pain. But she just as quickly echoed it as Kondor managed to swat her away like a fly, sending her against the wall.

In a moment he was almost on her, but Sandy lunged out with a side thrusting kick. Kondor's hand was fast, however, and he grabbed her ankle, using it to throw her halfway down the length of the room where she crumpled into a heap.

When she looked up, Kondor was walking towards her, his hands slowly clenching and unclenching at his side.

"There must be something about the Slavic people you have a problem with," he said.

"It's the Ugly American in me," Sandy breathed. "I'm a poor tourist."

"A problem you'll soon be rid of," Kondor said. "A problem the both of us will soon be rid of." He started reaching for her as Sandy tensed.

And then the air was split by the scream of jet engines thundering overhead. Both Sandy and Kondor looked up.

"I think we're about to have company," Sandy commented.

With a howl Kondor turned back towards Sandy. But then the entire building was rocked by a series of explosions, this time originating from outside. At the same time the gallery was shredded by cannon fire from the Ka-50s which were in support of General Galich's Spetsnaz troops.

Miraculously neither Sandy or Kondor were hit by the shells. But the attack was violent enough to cause the heavy shelf to tilt completely over and fall, catching Kondor and pinning him

thoroughly to the ground. He groaned and struggled, his muscles straining to the fullest, but the shelf refused to move.

As Sandy began to get up her hand encountered a familiar item: the submachine gun. Quickly getting to her feet she leveled the weapon directly at Kondor.

The huge man stopped struggling and stared at the gun, and then at her. Sandy could no longer hear the flames, the jet planes or the approaching helicopters. Instead, her ears were filled with the sound of her breathing, and her heartbeat.

Kondor's expression was one of guarded calm.

"In the event of something like this happening," he said evenly, "I was ordered to deliver a special message to you."

Sandy waited, trying not to reveal the thing which was clawing its way up through her mind. The barrel of the gun was pointed directly and steadily at Kondor's head.

Kondor's mouth opened.

"Stay tuned!"

Sandy was outwardly calm, but she was inwardly swallowing the grotesque shock she was feeling. The message the Space Friends had given her on the Moon. The last words Ithaca Foger had spoken to her.

The shock within her was rapidly forming into something which felt like ice. Or perhaps Sandy was starting to feel the cold air drifting into the damaged building. Raising the gun she quietly turned away.

Kondor was watching her. "You're not going to kill me?"

Sandy was walking to the nearest of the desks. She shook her head. "That's not my job." Searching through the drawers she finally found a pad of paper and a pencil and jotted down a quick note. Tearing it free from the pad she folded it, then she walked back to Kondor and dropped it on the floor nearby.

Her eyes were tender and calm as she met his. "Goodbye, Admiral."

As Kondor watched she walked away again, this time climbing up onto a desk and pushing at a section of the ceiling which had been ripped apart by the cannon fire. The section easily moved away and Sandy crept up through the resulting hole, vanishing from sight.

Kondor resumed pushing and straining against the shelf, trying to budge it off of him. He was still struggling as the hiss of fire extinguishers could be heard, and the distant voices came closer. Eventually several men in dark uniforms entered.

Among them was General Fyodorov.

Kondor saw him and stopped trying to free himself. "General . . ."

Fyodorov gave no sign of hearing or even noticing Kondor. He did, however, spot the note on the floor and calmly bent down to pick it up and unfold it. Everyone waited as his eyes read the short note.

His eyes then finally regarded Kondor, staying on him as his hand slowly closed tight around the note.

"Major Yershov."

One of the officers stepped forward. "General."

Fyodorov slowly turned and began walking away. "Please tidy up this office," he murmured.

Yershov turned his attention to Kondor as he began unslinging his machine gun, drawing back the bolt.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Gift Of A Rock.

Sandy had been told that she had been given the finest hotel room in Tiksi. If she had heard correctly then she knew why Brungaria wasn't highly rated among the world's vacation spots. Not that the room wasn't comfortable. She had a bed, a table, some chairs. Even a cheery fire burning in a fireplace. As far as the quality of furnishings went, however, she'd been in more elegant housing for low-income college freshmen.

But she'd been told she wouldn't be here very long. As Petrov had explained, Sandy had been invited to privately meet with "a very high-ranking government official".

And now there was a soft knock on the door. Sandy turned away from the window and waited.

The elderly woman who entered could've easily passed for a spinsterish school teacher in a dozen countries and had, in fact, started out teaching arithmetic to third graders. The lined face now looked up at Sandy, the gentle blue eyes peering from behind thin metal spectacles. She was simply dressed in a plum-colored outfit, looking for all the world as if she were stepping out to visit a friend in a retirement home. The image was flawed, however, by the briefcase she carried instead of a purse, not to mention the group of armed guards who waited in the hallway outside.

Darya Lagounov: First Scientist of Brungaria,

The old woman dipped her head in a nod. "Miss Swift."

Sandy returned the nod. "Dr. Lagounov."

"If you'll excuse me," Lagounov murmured, moving over to a chair. "I love my country," she said, sitting down. "Unfortunately, however, its climate and my arthritis tend to have frequent and severe disagreements."

Sandy silently waited for her guest to become as comfortable as possible, and then she took the chair on the opposite end of the table. Both of them then regarded each other quietly for a few moments.

"I do not know how to do this," Lagounov finally admitted. "I find myself in a situation that, months ago, I would have called incredible, if not outright improbable."

"Believe me," Sandy replied, "this is as amazing to me as it is to you."

Lagounov grunted. "As to that I have my doubts. I feel I have lived quite an adventurous life. But if even half of what I've heard about you is true, then your experiences leave me in the pale."

"I'm sorry," Sandy said, instinctively glancing around. "Would you like some refreshment? I don't have anything here, but I'm certain . . ."

The woman slowly lifted a palm. "Do not concern yourself. The hotel vodka is, at best, digestible. Its coffee should be outlawed throughout all civilized nations. I did not want ceremony, Miss Swift, or any complicated gestures. This is between you and I."

Sandy waited.

"What am I to do with you, Miss Swift? You are the sister of perhaps our greatest and most enduring opponent. But then you assist us in our claim that Brungaria was the first nation to reach the Moon. And now you practically single-handedly rescue my country from annihilation, or at the very least from foreign domination."

"I could simply tell you that I'm selfish, and was acting out of sheer self-preservation."

Lagounov slowly shook her head. "A selfish person would've run home to safety much earlier. A selfish person would have never confronted Kondor alone. And a selfish person would never have voluntarily returned here to thoroughly explain what had happened."

Sandy shrugged. "Then maybe I'm just stupid."

"Hmph. Don't fish for compliments, Miss Swift. It didn't work with my students, it will not work for you."

"It's my intention to go home, Dr. Lagounov. Believe me. But, before I did, I just wanted to make certain all loose ends were tied up. Considering this location, and the overall situation, I didn't want to worry about a catastrophe occurring the moment my back was turned."

Lagounov nodded. "Admirable. And prudent. But that still leaves me with my original problem. What do I do with you? Brungaria finds itself indebted to you, and I am the sort of person who prefers my books balanced."

Sandy steadily returned the woman's gaze. "I don't plan to hold this over your head. Or Brungaria's."

"Nonetheless," Lagounov replied, pulling her briefcase up onto the table. Opening it she removed a single sheet of paper which she showed to Sandy. The paper was covered with Cyrillic words which, even to Sandy's eyes, spelled out "legalese".

"This is an official document which was drafted and signed by the Central Council years ago," Lagounov told her. "I won't bother you with the minutiae, but I wanted you to be aware of its contents. This is the original standing order for the death of your brother in particular, and your family in general, should any opportunity present itself."

Sandy's eyes bored into Lagounov's. The woman carefully folded the paper once, then twice, and then tossed it into the fireplace.

"I am not going to insult you by declaring eternal friendship between Brungaria and the Swifts," Lagounov said as she watched the paper burn. "Too much exists between us to reasonably expect such a thing. But I wished to impress upon you that my country pays its debts. Whether you or your family believe it or not, the Swifts now enjoy the support and protection of Brungaria and may call upon it at any time."

Sandy let out a faint snort. "I appreciate this, Doctor. But I hope you appreciate that this is not the sort of thing I can expect to openly advertise."

"Of course. The world in general would never understand. Certainly those in your government would find it difficult. What is important to me, however, is that you understand. And, speaking of things which you probably won't openly advertise . . ."

As Sandy watched, Lagounov removed a small flat leather box from the briefcase, pushing it across the table to her. Carefully opening the box, Sandy gazed down at the medal located within.

"A simple decoration when compared to those offered by other nations," Lagounov admitted. "But the Brungarian Liberation Order of Excellence is not lightly granted. Not even all the members of the Central Council possess one."

Sandy gently lifted the medal up from the velvet interior of the box. "Thank you," she said simply.

"And of course," Lagounov added, "you are still an Admiral in the Brungarian Liberation Navy. Obviously no one expects you to be able to regularly make use of the Naval Base Exchange . . . but there is a pension for when you retire. And an assigned parking space."

Sandy almost felt like laughing.

Lagounov spotted something of her mood. "I believe you and I share an equal love for irony, Miss Swift. Please take some advice from an old woman and cherish it. You'll find it'll serve you in good stead in the long run." Closing the briefcase she began rising from her chair. "And now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

"One moment, Dr. Lagounov."

The woman was at the door, but she stopped and looked back, waiting.

"All throughout this business there's been the occasional reference to chess moves," Sandy said. "You yourself happen to be a recognized Grand Master in Brungaria, as well as a Senior International Master globally. That's been on my mind since I left Russia, and I've been doing some careful thinking. Kondor and the Kranjovians had spent quite a bit of time cooking up this scheme to take control of Brungaria."

Lagounov remained silent.

"I've recently learned that you've been involved in secret negotiations with Moscow to establish not only a treaty, but trade relations as well. Kondor, however, was using his position within the Russian military to steadfastly oppose such a move. He had, in fact, been in charge of the hardline Russian faction against Brungaria, and was the primary obstacle standing in the way of a peaceful settlement." Sandy tilted her head slightly. "It would've obviously been to your advantage to have Kondor removed. The problem was how to do so without openly implicating Brungaria."

"Indeed," Lagounov murmured. "It was quite an interesting problem." She gave Sandy a slight nod. "Have a pleasant voyage home, Miss Swift."

* * * * *

Phyllis, Bingo, Czardos and Symmes were waiting for her in the lobby of the Transients Building near the docks.

Producing a smile, Sandy reached out for Czardos' hand. "I really wish you didn't feel it was necessary to run off like this," she said. "Tom would absolutely love to meet you personally. You too, John."

"And I'd like very much to meet your brother," Czardos replied, shaking Sandy's hand. "But I still want to keep Saraswati secret. For a while longer at least. John and I are returning to Zhokhov Island. We'll be there when your brother arrives to pick you up."

His expression was asking an unspoken question. "Don't worry," Sandy assured him. "We'll just tell Tom and the others that we had help from a `special friend'. And I hardly think the Brungarians will spill the beans."

"Thank you."

"What will happen now? With you and Saraswati?"

Czardos sighed. "The only firm commitment I have at present is to eventually go home and . . . get married."

"Can I ask a favor?"

"Name it."

"Or maybe it's more of a question. I'm not really up on your wedding customs, but could your fiancée use some bridesmaids?"

"Ooooo," Bingo said. "I've always wanted to wear a sari."

"I'm certain Shweta would love it," Czardos said, smiling. "In any case, I was going to offer wedding invitations to the three of you."

Releasing Czardos' hand Sandy moved into a close hug with him.

"A final gift," Czardos murmured, carefully passing a small packet to Sandy. "These are measured doses of a special cyproheptadine mixture, along with instructions. They should help in developing your amphetamine withdrawal therapy."

"Thank you," Sandy whispered.

"But contact your doctor as soon as possible when you get home. And for God's sake have that damned chip taken out of you."

"I plan to," Sandy assured him solemnly. "But you know it may not be just the amphetamines, or the chip."

Czardos nodded. "So you've explained."

"All this time I've been meeting people who've apparently been under the influence of the Space Friends. I guess deep down I've been avoiding facing the idea that I might be under their control as well. That might explain why my moods have been so unpredictable."

"Then make certain you tell your family," Czardos insisted. "You don't have to fight this battle alone, Sandy."

"But I don't want others to be hurt."

"Sandra . . . they're your family. Your friends. You might be surprised at how much they would willingly share your pain. Let them help."

"I will."

"Promise me . . . Little Admiral."

A smile tried to reach Sandy's face. "I promise."

Symmes now came forward. "What Leo said goes double for me," he said and gave Sandy a quick hug. His eyes flicked past her. "Have you told Phyllis yet?"

Sandy giggled. "Not yet. Going to, though." She moved back a bit to stare at him. "But you're certain about this? I mean . . . all your work."

"All I really needed was just some core samples," Symmes assured her. "Besides, I couldn't fit the whole damn thing onto Saraswati. It was enough of a headache as it was just getting it here. Your brother can haul it a lot easier in his Flying Lab." He gently touched the tip of her nose. "And Phyllis can probably make a lot more use of it."

"Probably," Sandy admitted. "I'll watch for any papers you might publish."

Symmes rubbed at his hair. "Yeah, I may have to break cover for that. Should be interesting." He looked over at Leo. "And we still have to speak to Customs and the Portmaster, so we'd better be getting out to the sub."

Czardos nodded. "Sandy? Phyllis? Bingo? It's been . . . interesting."

Phyllis snickered, shaking hands with him. "At least you're honest and didn't say it was `fun'." Along with Bingo she then also shook hands with Symmes. The two men then walked off.

Symmes noticed how his friend took several glances back. "Leo?"

"Just thinking."

"A paisa . . ."

Leo sighed. "John, you know I'm going to go ahead and marry Shweta. I'm actually receptive to the idea and feel she'll make a good wife."

"She may pick up your socks," Symmes agreed.

"True." Czardos sent another glance behind him. "It's just . . . it's just that I can't help thinking that, if I'd only put some effort into it, I might've ended up with a Queen."

* * * * *

A sizeable crowd, including photographers from the Tiksi Zaftra, were braving a new ice storm as the Sky Queen III slowly settled down onto the airport landing field. Despite the potential optimism of such an unprecedented event, Sandy couldn't help but notice the MiG-35s which ominously roared overhead.

Oh well, she silently concluded. Baby steps.

"And what were you and John talking about back there when he asked if you'd told me yet?" Phyllis asked Sandy as they waited with the crowd.

"Ahhhh yes," Sandy smiled. "John's graciously given you a gift."

Phyllis' eyebrows rose. "A gift?"

"Uh huh."

"To me?"

"Well, maybe to you and Dody specifically. Maybe to others as well. We'll have to see."

Phyllis considered it. "I'm almost afraid to ask what it is."

"John's giving you his meteorite."

Phyllis looked as if a bus had bumped up against her. "His what?"

"The meteorite. The one John found."

"I know all about the meteorite, Sandy. Remember? We were all on Saraswati when the silly thing got dug up and hauled on nets back here with the help of all those trawlers."

"Yeah."

"And he's giving it to me?"

"The whole shootin' match," Sandy said. "Minus some core samples which John needed for his research." She briefly nodded over her shoulder. "It's waiting for you back in the warehouse. We can carry it home on Sky Queen. Might have to cut it up some, of course. Maybe even make more than one trip, or arrange something with the Brungarians, but---"

"Sandy . . . I like John. I appreciate the offer. But what the hell am I gonna do with a great big freaking space rock that weighs---"

"Three hundred ninety four point eight five one five short tons," Sandy said. "Fair question, that."

"I don't need a paperweight."

"John and Leo and I considered that. We were more concerned with what you do need."

"Huh?"

"Ummmm." Sandy's eyes were still on Sky Queen. "Have you checked the market prices on precious metals recently? Today, for instance?"

"Sandy, you know perfectly good and well I haven't had time to read---"

"When you do," Sandy continued, "you might pay particular attention to the going rate for iridium."

Phyllis stopped. "Iridium?"

"Uh huh. And, when you do, consider that the `big freaking space rock' that John gave you is almost one hundred per cent pure iridium." Sandy shrugged mildly. "Of course there'll be the usual supply and demand bugbear. Controlling distribution and what have you so the market don't fall down and go boom. And we might have to cut the Brungarians a piece of the action. But it should go a long way towards putting a considerable dent into the financial crisis at Enterprises." She glanced at Phyllis. "And pick your tongue up off the ground. It'll freeze in this weather."

A pair of familiar faces had disembarked from the Sky Queen, and Sandy now rushed out to meet them.

Her brother was smiling. "Hey, Fuzzy!"

"Bout time you showed up," Sandy called out to him as she practically floated into Bud's arms. "About time you showed up too," she whispered to him, moving closer.

"You always knew where to find me," Bud said, his arms tightening around her.

"Mmmmm." Sandy then moved back a bit, lightly whacking his chest with the palm of her hand. "And I shouldn't even be talking to you. Not after all the embarrassment you've caused."

Bud was perplexed. "What embarrassment?"

"All this time you've been telling me `ya polon lyubvi k'tebe'. You never said anything about it meaning you're so full of love for me."

Bud was gazing into her eyes, softly drawing a thumb across her cheek.

"Did I lie?" he murmured.

"Ohhhhhhhh . . . come here, you."

Tom silently stood by, occupying himself with watching Phyllis and Bingo strolling across the airfield towards him. By the time Phyllis was close enough for a welcoming kiss, Sandy and Bud were allowing some space to appear between them.

"If you can breathe now," Tom said, handing a phone out to his sister, "someone would like to talk to you."

Accepting the phone, Sandy held it to her ear. "Hello?"

A familiar matronly sigh came out of the device. "So I take it you're all right."

"Mom!" Sandy let several warm tingles rush through her. "Yes, I'm all right," she said, neglecting to add particulars such as but I almost drowned in the Arctic Ocean, been recruited by the Brungarian Navy, just barely averted a world war, fought for my life against a murderous Kranjovian agent and am probably under the direct control of space aliens.

"I'm glad to hear it," Mary breathed. "With all that we've heard happening at your end of the world I should've guessed you'd somehow manage to pull yourself together."

"With a little help from my friends," Sandy replied, smiling at Phyllis and Bingo. And Leo and John she silently added.

"You sound like you've been through a lot. As usual."

"As usual. But, to tell the truth, I'm in a mood to relax for a bit." Sandy told her mother this, unaware of the adventures she'd soon be experiencing while on the road in SANDRA SWIFT AND THE HOUSE ON WHEELS II.

"But you're all right, honey? You're OK?"

"I'm fine, Mother. I'm coming home."