

# **Sandra Swift & The House on Wheels II (or: Return to the Mountain of Mystery)**

## **Chapter One: Missing Brain.**

It seemed to be a dream pausing for effect. A smooth metal shape forty-two feet long, thirteen feet high and eight feet wide looking for all the world like a large bullet, or a missile lying on its side. Sleek . . . its pale grey finish gleaming in the overhead lights as it relaxed on seven wheels upon the test bed in Building 14 (Automotive Systems Research) of the Swift Enterprises complex. The only breaks in the otherwise apparently seamless upper surface came from wide curving viewports at the pointed forward end, as well as slightly smaller windows further back.

Her hands on her hips, Mary Swift was giving the object an overall examination.

"I don't like it," she concluded.

Tom Swift Sr. was crouched down by the rear right wheel, examining part of the suspension system which he had helped design. But he heard his wife's remark and smiled up at her. "Why, Mary! All these years and I've been laboring under the impression that the House on Wheels was your favorite among my inventions."

"Well," Mary slowly considered, "I'll admit that the original version was very nice. Of course you have to understand that a lot of my opinion was because of its first full-fledged run."

"I won't argue," Tom Sr. agreed, straightening up and brushing his hands on his sides as he went over to her. "The first official run was rather memorable." He slipped his arms around her waist. "A lot of that was probably due to the research assistant I had with me at the time."

Mary dimpled, a rosy blush blooming on her face.

"I'd say a lot of the initial testing went rather well that first night," Tom Sr. murmured to her. "Parked on the shore of Oneida Lake."

"Glad I managed to be helpful," Mary whispered as she went on tiptoes, moving into the kiss.

Watching them from nearby, Sandra Swift smiled as the years seemed to melt away from her parents. Without moving her head too much she could see the original House on Wheels quietly sitting in a place of honor not too far away from its newer version. Thirty years old it was still quite operational, and every once in a while her mother and father would pack it full of food and disappear for a week. When they returned her mother would be glowing, her eyes sparkling for days while her father hummed and smiled through his work.

Sandy noted that her brother had also heard his mother's statement, but Tom Swift Jr. patiently waited for some distance to appear between his parents before voicing a question. "What's wrong with the HOW2, Mom?"

Mary was still gazing dreamily into her husband's eyes. "You hear something?" she said.

"I think it's your eldest child," Tom Sr. replied.

"Refresh my memory: why did we have children?"

"Mmmmm, your kisses were sweeter than wine?"

Mary thought it over. "Good answer," she replied. "It's not that I dislike the idea of the House on Wheels," she addressed her son in a more audible voice, turning to him. "But your design seems rather . . . I don't know. Clinical."

"It was Le Corbusier who described a house as a machine for living in."

"Is he on the payroll?"

"He died in 1965," Tom Sr. pointed out.

"No coaching," Mary gently told him.

Tom was smiling. "Well, seeing as how this is the informal unveiling, maybe there's still hope." Looking about, he motioned for the others in the group to gather around. Bud Barclay . . . Tom's best friend . . . sidled his stocky frame close alongside Sandy, with Sandy finding no complaint about the physical contact.

Over near the nose of the new House on Wheels Phyllis Newton had been pointing out some items to two people, but now she moved towards Tom Jr. A doe-eyed girl with a wealth of brunette ringlets reaching down her back, she was one of the leaders within Swift Enterprises' Marketing and Public Relations Division. She was also Sandy's chum, but there was sufficient evidence to suggest that she held closer allegiances to Sandy's brother (a situation Sandy minded not at all . . . and neither, she suspected, did Tom).

Phyllis' audience had included Belinda-Glory Winkler: a five foot four black haired wisp of Texas female who responded to the name "Bingo" and who served as the Swift family cook, as well as a frequent companion to Sandy and Phyllis. Her recent attention, however, had been monopolized by the presence of the other member of Phyllis' group: Kenneth Horton. As with Bingo he was black-haired and from Texas, but there the resemblance came to a halt as he was almost six feet tall. He was the commander of the space station which Swift Enterprises maintained some 22,300 miles above the Earth. As he and Bingo tended to prefer each other's company, the girl was usually his constant shadow during his visits.

Tom was now beginning his description. "The HOW2's body is a shell composed of thin layers of atomeron and tessellated osmiridium coated with an outer layer of Tomasite. The layers have been treated with self-replicating nanites possessing tunable photo-mimetic qualities which allow for adjustments in the overall color scheme. The entire hull was organically generated using the same technique developed for constructing the `Photon'---"

Crossing her arms, Phyllis sighed. "Is any of this going to be in the sales brochure?"

Tom blinked at her. "It's important."

Phyllis slowly shook her head, and Tom's shoulders slumped slightly. "Okay," he said, resuming his earlier pose. "The HOW2 is a class-A recreational vehicle driven by a Barton-VI-D turbine engine producing 550 horsepower." He gave Phyllis an expectant look.

"Getting better."

"Motive and internal power for the HOW2 is provided by an integrated four year core featuring a Mighty Mite atomic battery operating in tandem with twin Swift solar batteries. If necessary, a Barton `Antaeus' auxiliary diesel can also provide power and propulsion and I can hear your foot tapping over there, Phyllis."

"I'm sorry. You're trying, but I'd never hire you to work on the sales floor."

"Um!" Tom paused then began again. "As designed, the basic HOW2 provides comfortable living and sleeping space for four adults. Various floor plan options allow for additional sleeping space as well as other customizable features." Once again he glanced over at Phyllis.

"I'm giving you an A minus," Phyllis told him.

Tom nodded. "Well, with that in mind, and to further appease Mom, let's take a look at the interior." Touching a hidden control caused an opening to appear in the hull, one section rising up while

the smaller lower section provided a ramp. Stepping aside, Tom smiled at his mother, indicating that she should enter first.

Mary did so, pausing briefly as she looked around. "Ooooo . . ."

She was standing in a comfortable-looking living room, complete with entertainment center. To her immediate right was a small dinette space with two chairs, as well as an oval shaped opening leading to the driver's compartment. Beyond the living room on her left was a larger dining area across from a snug but seemingly fully equipped kitchen. On the other side of the kitchen could be seen a corridor which Mary presumed led to the bathroom and bedroom.

"Now this is more like it," she said half to herself.

"Porcelain tile and neo-Carrera Tomasite counter tops," Tom was pointing out as he entered behind her. "We'll be offering five different interior fabrics and paneling arrangements for customers."

"Mmmm, yes. I see Phyllis' hand in this."

Sandy had stepped into the vehicle and was peering about. "Tom? Phyl? Dad? Not that I'm complaining too much to any of you, but aren't the eating accommodations sort of cock-eyed?"

"What do you mean?" Tom asked.

"The little bitty table there, near the front," Sandy replied nodding at the dinette, "and then the dining space near the kitchen. If you end up feeding more than four people then two of them are going to be somewhat separated."

"Ah," Tom replied, "but there's reason at work here. That small table up front also serves as an auxiliary driver's station."

He had the attention of not only Sandy, but his mother, Bud, Bingo and Ken.

"Say what?" Bingo asked.

"The forward section of the HOW2 is actually a small atomicar that can detach from the main body of the vehicle and operate independently. The main section of the HOW2 can still be driven about although, obviously, it doesn't handle as efficiently on its own."

Ken was slowly nodding. "That explains the power arrangement. The Mighty Mite is in the atomicar, and the solar batteries are back here with us."

"Exactly."

Bud had gone forward and was examining the driver's compartment. He now looked back. "So the entire HOW2 isn't an atomicar?"

"Not as such," Tom admitted, "although that might be in the works later on. Did you notice the large flaps covering the wheels outside?"

"Yeah."

"The main body of the HOW2 can't fly. But, with the wheels retracted and the flaps closed, it can travel on water, reaching a top speed of sixty-three knots." With Phyllis still within earshot Tom silently decided not to mention that, when sealed, and with the internal life support system operating, the HOW2 could also protect its passengers from lethal radiation as well as chemical and biological hazards.

He then noticed his mother. "Mom? Can I help you with something?"

Mary Swift had gone down the corridor during Tom's explanation about the atomicar. She had reappeared, shifting a bit to let Ken and Bingo pass by her, and was intently peering about the cabinets and kitchen drawers. At Tom's question she looked at him. "Okay. I give up. Where is it?"

"Where's what?" Tom replied.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," Mary said patiently. "The laboratory. Where is it?"

"What laboratory?"

"Every time you build a vehicle you stick a laboratory on it or in it." Mary waved a hand about. "I've been all through the HOW2. Not a test tube or an oscilloscope in sight."

Tom was smiling now. "No lab space on the HOW2, Mom. Honest. It's just an upgrade of the recreation vehicle Dad originally developed."

"No specimen cages? No wind tunnels?"

"Not a one."

Mary slowly leaned forward, giving Tom a suspicious look. "Okay. Who are you and what did you do with my son?"

Sandy and Bingo burst out laughing.

"Tom does try to think about the average person on the street," Tom Sr. assured his wife. "Or, actually, the average person driving on the street. The HOW2 is not only meant to be much more comfortable than other recreational vehicles currently on the market, but more sophisticated as well. But the sophistications aren't designed to be beyond understanding."

His son nodded. "Take the guidance system, for instance. I'm using the HOW2 as the test bed for the Cybertron-II. With it, the driver of the HOW2 can simply enter a destination into the computer, and the vehicle can automatically take itself there, allowing the driver and passengers to enjoy the comforts within."

"So you've managed to finish your new cybertron in time?" Mary asked him.

"Mmmhmm." Tom knelt down on to the floor. "All of the HOW2's systems are state of the art, but they don't need constant handling or attention. They're all conveniently out of sight." Pulling aside a piece of carpeting, Tom revealed a small metal panel. "The cybertron is located here for easy access and maintenance. See?"

He slid the panel aside . . . and paused.

So did the others as they all looked to see an obviously empty compartment.

## **Chapter Two: Ghost in the Machine.**

Within ten minutes everyone was re-arranged into a loose circle within the HOW2's living room, sitting around the compartment which had held the Cybertron-II. Sandy felt that, considering the surroundings and the décor, the whole scene was sort of a bizarre echo of a classic Victorian drawing-room mystery.

The illusion was made complete by the presence of the dark waspish figure who was currently bent low over the compartment. Sherman Ames was the chief of security at Enterprises; a situation which doubtless went far to explaining the intense frown he was wearing. He was whispering softly, and an outsider would've been forgiven to think that Sherman was simply

vocalizing personal theories. But in truth he was murmuring instructions to the audio pickups within the thick horn-rim glasses he wore. More than an affectation or a visual aid, the glasses helped keep him in constant electronic contact with Enterprises security system.

With a sigh he now stood up.

Here it comes, Sandy thought to herself. He'll now point to one of us and announce: "Lady Fundament, you are the murderer!" Lady Fundament gasps, then pulls out a small revolver . . .

"I was about eight minutes away from leaving for an extended vacation in New Mexico," Sherman announced.

Everyone in the room knew better than to apologize out loud.

He was still scowling at the compartment, his hands on his hips. "Tom, the HOW2 has three doors, correct? The door I came in through and the two doors up forward on the driver and passenger side."

Tom nodded. "There's also an emergency hatch through the roof which is practically above you. If you want to work on it a bit you can also burrow in through the outside cargo compartments."

"Ummm." Sherman rubbed at his cheek. "I'm probably going to regret knowing the answer to this, but was the HOW2 locked?"

Sandy noticed how Tom was working on an answer.

Sherman nodded sullenly. "Yeah . . ."

"Sherman . . . the HOW2's a prototype. It was locked on the test bed and this building is secure. The outside of the building is monitored as is Enterprises. The fact that the Cybertron-II was installed wasn't announced."

"I'm not going to complain," Sherman declared, but then he paused. "No . . . wait! I'm going to complain. Ever since I've taken over the job of security for this place it's been break-ins, aerial attacks, cyborgs . . . all sorts of grief. I've been getting ulcers trying to find a working solution. I

allowed for the removal of the internal tracking chips from all of you because of Sandy's recent contretemps . . ."

Sandy quietly tried to make herself less visible.

". . . and none of it is apparently doing any good." Sherman exhaled noisily. "Okay. Rant over."

"We're not blaming you, Sherman," Tom Sr. said.

Sherman lifted a hand. "Post mortem later. Work now. Tom? Have you noticed anything else missing from the HOW2?"

"I can quickly run a power-up," Tom said. "See if anything doesn't boot."

Sherman nodded and Tom moved away from Phyllis to go to where Bud and Sandy were sitting at the dinette. "'Scuse me," he murmured, touching the surface of the dinette and causing softly glowing lights to appear.

"Am I correct in assuming," Sherman said to Tom's back, "that the new cybertron is the most sophisticated piece of electronics on the HOW2?"

"Yeah." A few moments, then Tom turned to look at Sherman. "Everything else on the HOW2 is copacetic. We could practically drive it away right now. It's just that, without the cybertron, there's no automatic pilot."

Sherman looked thoughtful. "Let's say, for sake of argument, that I stole the cybertron with the intent of selling it."

Tom shook his head. "If you wanted to steal the advanced concepts which were incorporated into the cybertron you'd be better off trying to grab the existing plans which are here, as well as at SECFAR. Many of the components within the cybertron are the result of DNA nanotechnology. Trying to get the advancements out of it would be like trying to steal a particular eyelash with a steam shovel."

"Nice metaphor. So . . . I can't easily sell it, or steal and copy its innards. Can the cybertron be used for anything else?"



"The missing cybertron is particularly tuned for controlling the HOW2," Tom explained. "Other than that you're stuck with a metal baseball. Now admittedly you could hook it up to a power source, but then it'd register on every Swiftsat in space. Not to mention on board the space station. Heck, even receivers on the Moon and Nestria could pick up its signals. Its position would be instantly revealed."

"So why steal it?" Phyllis asked.

"A very good question," Sherman mused as he gazed off at nothing. "A very palpable mystery."

Phyllis, Bingo, Bud and Mary were all watching Sandy, and they all noticed how her concentration was growing. Deep in Mary's mind a voice went uh oh.

"This is the part which really gets me down," Sherman was commenting, "but I'm left with bad news and worse news. The bad news is the possibility that the cybertron was taken by a very sophisticated thief."

"I'll go ahead and take you off the hook," Tom said to him. "The worse news is that someone here in Enterprises took it."

Sherman nodded. "Either way we're skunked. And yes, I've sent orders to have the security videos reviewed. They may tell us something interesting. Especially in light of another development."

"Oh?"

"Fingerprints." With the toe of a shoe, Sherman nudged the cybertron compartment. "Whoever took the cybertron left fingerprints behind. Disturbingly convenient."

Next to Sandy, Bud's eyes widened. "That's . . ."

"So weird," Sherman finished. "Yeah. I've also had my people who're working outside do scans of the HOW2 hull, performing systematic eliminations of all of your fingerprints. It'll be interesting if we find another set belonging to our . . . oh!"

Everyone waited as Sherman listened to something on his glasses. "Pico's Lonely Hearts Club Band's just found something

on the security videos he thinks we should see." He moved to the small control console inset into the coffee table. "Does that screen handle like a standard telecommunications console?"

"Yeah," Tom said.

Sherman began tapping on the console. "Pico's relaying a fragment of a recording which is eighteen hours old." He looked up at the large screen which was a part of the entertainment center, and everyone else followed suit.

The screen came on, producing an image of the HOW2 which had been taken by an overhead camera. As everybody watched, a slender figure approached the passenger side of the vehicle, fumbling at the door. As it swung upwards the figure looked directly up at the camera, and Sherman froze the image, zooming in.

A woman, dressed in the working uniform of a Swift Enterprises technician. Studying the image Sandy first thought she was looking at an albino; the skin was so pale as to almost be transparent. And there was hardly any color in the straight, short-cropped hair atop the head. But the piercing blue of the eyes could easily be seen, as well as the slightly sardonic look the woman wore on her face.

"She looks sort of like a ghost," Bingo murmured, voicing the thought which was in the mind of several others in the room. And Sandy resisted the urge to moan. Several times in the past she had come up against "ghosts". All her experiences had two things in common. First: there had always been a very firm non-supernatural reason behind the "ghosts".

Second: the "ghosts" had always led to Serious Trouble.

The image unfroze, and everyone watched as the woman entered the HOW2. Sherman fast-forwarded the transmission until the woman reappeared, slipping out of the HOW2 and closing the door. In her left hand could clearly be seen the glint of a metal object.

The woman then moved out of camera range. "Pico," Sherman said to the air. "Why am I not seeing her on any other cameras?"

He listened for a few moments, then sighed. "Okay. Keep looking. Also try to find a match of that person in our

records. With those sort of looks she should be easy to track down." His voice lowered and he murmured: "I hope."

"She obviously wanted to be seen," Ken Horton spoke up.

"And that's what scares me the most," Sherman declared, moving the relayed image back to where he could gaze at the intruder again. "I'd really feel better if our interesting intruder had worked harder to be inconspicuous."

He continued studying the thief for several moments more, then nodded to himself. "Okay! Apparently I'm calling Frieda and telling her I'll be unavoidably delayed."

Everyone winced.

"I'm going to be in my office," he declared, "starting some balls rolling. Tom . . . Mister Swift . . . I'll have a report for you as soon as we learn more. Ah-hhh, Tom? I'll want the transmission specs for the cybertron."

"Sure."

"Ken? Ken. Contact the people on the space station and have them start monitoring for the cybertron, just in case. Might as well pass this along to Swiftbase and Little Luna. Have I forgotten anything?"

There was a significantly solid pause in the air, and then Sherman turned to meet a crooked smile on Sandy's face. "Anything?"

"I'm flattered by your confidence," Sandy told him. "But no rabbits out of the hat as of yet."

"Yeah. Well. Okay." Sherman nodded to himself, then walked on out of the HOW2, murmuring to his glasses.

Mary noticed the slumped shoulders on her son. "It'll be all right," she assured him. "Sherman will fix everything."

"I believe you," Tom replied. "It's just that I've never liked having to suspect one of our employees of theft."

"Was she even an employee?" his father asked. "I don't remember ever seeing her before. And I think I would've noticed."

"Me too," Tom agreed. "And why the cybertron? If I was going to steal from Enterprises I could think of a lot of things easier to take that'd be more lucrative."

"Do us all a favor and don't advertise them," Bud said, quietly pleased that the remark managed to put a small smile on Tom's face.

"And on top of everything else," Tom said, "this delays the test run of the HOW2."

They were all walking out of the vehicle. "We can still run it without the cybertron," Bud pointed out to Tom.

"Yeah, but I wanted to test both the HOW2 and the new cybertron at the same time."

"Just as well," Phyllis said. "Allow me to put a silver lining around this dark cloud and point out that at least I've now got more time to develop a marketing scheme for the HOW2."

"I thought you had it already nailed down," Mary said to her.

"Some," Phyllis admitted, "but it just wasn't coming together. I think the HOW2 can be a very successful addition to our automotive market, but it'll take a special approach. A very special approach."

Sandy was staring at her. "I've seen that look on your face before. You've already got an idea."

"Mmmhmm."

"So can we have a hint?"

"A promotional scheme involving the HOW2. All I need to make it work is one important item."

"Oh?"

Phyllis nodded brightly. "A wedding!"

## Chapter Three: Wedding Belle.

Everyone was suddenly looking at Tom.

"What's the matter?" Phyllis asked him. "Trip on something?"

"I'm okay," Tom assured her, regaining his balance. "What do you mean by a wedding?"

"A wedding," Phyllis replied simply.

Tom stared at her.

Phyllis sighed. "According to Webster's, 'Wedding' is a noun. 'The act or ceremony of becoming married'."

"1968 New World College Edition," Bingo added. "Page 1656. Bottom of column two."

Everyone now slowly turned to look at her.

"You know the location of 'wedding' in an old dictionary?" Ken asked.

Bingo smiled sweetly at him.

"Are you clear on the concept now?" Phyllis asked Tom.

"I know what 'wedding' means," Tom told her.

Phyllis responded with a mutter which, to Sandy's ears, sounded a lot like "Fooled me."

"What I don't understand," Tom continued, "is why you need a wedding to promote the HOW2?"

Phyllis crossed her arms. "Something about weddings you don't like?"

"I . . . ah . . . well . . ."

"Is it me?" Tom Sr. asked, "or is there a sudden chill in the air?"

Mary poked him gently in the side.

Phyllis apparently decided to let Tom off the hook. "It's the perfect promotion," she explained, becoming more enthusiastic. "To demonstrate the comforts and luxury and ease of traveling in a HOW2 we build a complete honeymoon package around it and offer it to a prospective couple as a prize in a nationwide drawing. They test drive the HOW2---"

"Among other things," Bud muttered.

"---and will receive the first production model off the assembly line, designed and decorated to their specifications."

"How sweet," Mary declared.

"You have to admit it's all rather romantic," Phyllis said dreamily, now gazing at Tom with great cooing eyes. "A happily married newlywed couple, driving off to their new life together in the House on Wheels. And you can't deny there's a historical precedence involved."

"True," Mary said, smiling up at her husband.

Looking at Tom, Sandy suddenly found herself reminded of the firing squad scene from Kubrick's Paths of Glory.

"I even have a name for the promotion," Phyllis said, caught up in her vision. "I'll call it `Maiden Flight'."

"That sort of makes it sound like it's all for the benefit of the bride," Bud commented. "What does the groom get?"

"Cannot believe you just said that," Sandy told him.

"It'd be a perfect opportunity for a young couple," Phyllis purred at Tom, leaning a bit closer to him.

"I . . . rather agree," Tom admitted. "In fact, keep me posted on your progress. In the meantime I'd better get Sherman the information he asked for." Turning he walked off.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oversell," Sandy said.

Phyllis' shoulders slumped.

"And I cannot believe you've become so desperate as to put on that little performance out there."

Accompanied by Bingo, the girls were entering Sandy's office within the Administration Building. Sandy gave a nod to Lisa Kuttner, her secretary, before closing the door and moving to her desk. Besides a window which offered an excellent view of the Enterprises grounds, the walls of the office were covered with pictures and photos of Swift aircraft. A model of Tom's newest Flying Lab occupied one corner of Sandy's desk.

Phyllis had flounced herself down onto the sofa. "I'm completely sincere about Maiden Flight," she argued.

"Oh I believe you," Sandy assured her. "But your timing was way off. What with the theft of the Cybertron-II Tom had a perfect excuse to run for the hills."

"Yeah. Guess."

Sandy was idly leafing through the items in her IN basket, as well as glancing at the mail in her computer. Bingo, in the meantime, had perched herself on a corner of the desk.

"Are you really that anxious to be married?" Sandy finally asked.

"It'd . . . I don't know." Phyllis shrugged. "It'd be nice." She looked up at her friend. "Certainly the subject of marriage has occurred to you when thinking about Bud."

Sandy sighed. "Well---"

"And you," Phyllis said to Bingo. "What about you and Ken, Miss Dictionary?"

Bingo rubbed at the back of her head. "Yeah. Point."

"I don't feel like I'm wanting to rush into anything," Phyllis told them. "I don't feel as if clocks are ticking or anything. It's just that I . . . love the man."

"And he loves you," Sandy said. "But you've got to admit that marriage is a big commitment. Tom understands this, and you know what a perfectionist and a stickler for detail he can be on occasion."

Phyllis sighed. "It's just that when Tom and I and Uncle Tom got started on the HOW2 project there was obviously a lot of nostalgia regarding the original House on Wheels and what happened between your Mom and your Dad during its development. Your Dad got all smiley and reminiscient and that sort of slopped over onto Tom and there were moments when he got rather . . ."

Sandy and Bingo found they were both paying closer attention.

"Cuddly," Phyllis finished. "I thought that maybe the project was putting certain thoughts into his mind, and I guess I was hoping . . ."

"Well you definitely put the thoughts into his mind," Sandy agreed. "But maybe instead of all this showmanship . . . or showgirlship in your case . . . you should just flat put the cards on the table."

"I've already frightened him off," Phyllis pointed out. "I don't want to terrify him completely."

Sandy smiled.

Bingo clasped her hands around a knee. "'Scuse a really nosy question," she said to Phyllis, "but have you and Tom . . ."

Sandy could almost hear the gate crashing shut behind Phyllis' expression.

"Have Tom and I what?" Phyllis asked Bingo, a hint of frost in her words.

"Ah-hhhhhh . . . discussed joint checking accounts?"

Sandy was unable to hide a laugh.



"Oh ha ha at you," Phyllis retorted. She leaned back fully against the sofa. "About the only advantage of our Arctic trip was that Sherman had to remove the tracking chips from us. We've all got more privacy now."

"Mmmmm, it wasn't the only advantage," Sandy replied, "but I won't argue the point." She was considering how, eight months ago she, Phyllis and Bingo had returned from an adventure beneath the polar ice. Since then things had been peaceful, and Sandy's life had undergone gradual improvement. The injuries she had suffered from the previous few years had practically vanished. Her physical condition had improved, and her blonde hair had grown back to where she now wore it in a pageboy cut. Even better, she had recently been allowed to return to full flight status as the senior test pilot for Enterprises; advantageous since the civil version of Tom's Flying Lab was currently under development. With her twenty-seventh birthday approaching, Sandy felt she had few complaints.

Of course the blessings had come accompanied by price tags. The adventure in the far north had forced Sandy to face her addiction to amphetamines. Since then, however, she had undergone medical treatment and was a fixture at a local support group. Her addiction had been aggravated by the presence of the security tracking chip which Sherman had placed inside each member of the Swift family and their closest associates, and it was that situation which precipitated their removal.

The only shadow left was one which sometimes caused her to toss about at night. Years earlier Sandy had encountered an alien artifact while in South America. Subsequent events had caused suspicions to rise more and more in her mind, and now she was positive she was somehow being influenced by the intelligence which had sent the artifact.

Since returning from the Arctic, Sandy had submitted to extensive mental and neurological examinations. She'd even gone so far as to spend time at both Johns Hopkins Hospital and the Mayo Clinic. The doctors and scientists there hadn't found anything, but it was agreed that they were dealing with a technology so advanced as to avoid detection.

Tom and her father had been in contact with the aliens . . . the "Space Friends" . . . for years, and some very pointed questions had been sent over the communications link which the Swifts used to communicate with the mysterious creatures. So

far, though, the Space Friends had been evasive in their answers.

Sandy shook her head, driving away the thoughts. Not now.

"Say," Bingo chirped. "That reminds me. Leo and Shweta are getting married soon."

"That's right," Sandy said, suddenly smiling as she remembered the most recent e-mail from Leo Czardos, featuring a picture of both himself and his rather shy looking fiancée. "We need to get our ducks in order if we're still gonna fly out to India."

"But there's the answer," Bingo went on. "We can let Leo and Shweta have the HOW2 for their honeymoon."

Despite her earlier gloom over the way Tom had acted, Phyllis smiled ruefully. "Bingo . . . Shweta's going to be the Rani of Bundelkhand. I think she and Leo will be doing better on their honeymoon than driving around in a recreational vehicle. Even one as nice as the HOW2."

"Got to admit," Sandy said, looking through a brochure, "that'd be a heck of a promo for the HOW2."

"True," Phyllis admitted. "And we've still got to figure out what sort of presents we're going to get Leo and Shweta."

"I thought we were gonna sing at the wedding," Bingo said.

"Yeah, but what?"

"I was gonna suggest 'I Knew the Bride When She Used to Rock and Roll'."

Sandy was opening her mouth to reply when her intercom buzzed. She tapped the response plate, "Yes?"

"Sandy!"

"Sherman. How lovely to hear your voice."

Sherman paused only a fraction. "Can you come down to Security?"

"Oooo, how bold! What would Bud say? Or Frieda?"

"Sandy---"

"Okay, okay. I'll be there in a moment. What's up?"

"We may have located the Cybertron-II."

## **Chapter Four: Surprise Call.**

The look Mary Swift was giving Sherman could best be described as "severe".

"Did you have to do it?" she asked him.

Sherman shrugged.

"Did you absolutely have to involve Sandy in this?"

Visitors to Swift Enterprises sometimes wondered why a place as obviously vital as the Security Section seemed so cramped. There were times when Sherman himself gave thought to the subject.

He now realized that maybe he unconsciously felt close quarters was the best way to keep as many people as possible out of his hair. Case in point: the narrow instrument-filled corridor which Bingo unofficially referred to as "World Watch One". An entire long wall lined with monitors, electronic maps, scopes and various other means for observing and tracking particular items or people. It could comfortably hold eleven people sitting at their monitoring stations as well as three supervisors.

With the addition of both Toms, Bud, Ken and Mary, Sherman felt he could be forgiven for feeling a bit cramped.

"I just felt Sandy . . . would want to be in on this latest development concerning the theft," Sherman said, turning away.

"Sherman Theodore Corvus Ames . . . look at me when you're lying!"

Tom Sr. gently laid a hand on her shoulder. "Mary---"

"All right," Sherman said, turning back to look at her. "I'm sorry, Aunt Mary. Really. Yeah, I've got ulterior motives working here."

"You've also got a small army of highly trained security professionals working here," Mary pointed out. "You've got links to police agencies, the FBI---"

"And you've got Sandy." Sherman raised a hand to try and stem a renewed outburst. "Hear me out. Please. Tom . . . and Uncle Tom . . . they're both brilliant scientists." Here he nodded at the two male Swifts. "Bud and Ken . . ."

"Uh oh," Bud muttered.

"Both smart. Both are resourceful. The people I've got working for me here? They're wonderful. Highly trained. Dedicated. You're not exactly a moron yourself, Aunt Mary."

"Many thanks," Mary replied drily.

"Sandy," Sherman went on emphatically. "Sandy is in a class by herself. We had this conversation before, you and I, back in New Mexico. Sandy has a genuine talent for insights and can reach conclusions that all of us could easily miss. She's proven that time and time again."

Bud and Ken were both silently remembering New Mexico, and Sandy uncovering a vital clue while a murdering robot was bearing down on them.

"Yeah," Bud murmured.

That earned him a sharp look from Mary. "Don't you start. And wasn't New Mexico enough?" she continued to Sherman. "Wasn't Russia and Brungaria enough?"

"Wasn't it enough that she came back from the Arctic with her head clearer, in better mental shape than she'd been for some time?" Sherman argued back. "And let's think about what happened for a moment. Sandy practically single-handedly managed to defuse a tense international situation. She quite probably prevented a global war." Sherman's eyes shifted slightly. "Tom? I stand aside to no one in my admiration for your genius. But how do you think you would've done if you'd been up there instead of Sandy?"

"Yeah," Tom sighed. "Mom? I'm sorry, but I'm with Sherman on this."

"Me too," Bud added.

"Throw me in," Ken chimed.

Mary was ready to continue the fight, but she felt a slight pressure on her shoulder and looked up into her husband's eyes.

"Face it, honey," he told her gently. "We did a good job with her."

"Thank you," Sandy softly said, and everyone turned to see her standing in the doorway, smiling, Phyllis and Bingo just behind her.

She entered the room, pausing just long enough to give her mother a firm hug. Then she turned to Sherman. "So! What's up?"

Relieved at having the tense discussion deflated (or at least tabled for the time being), Sherman allowed himself to relax slightly. "According to the video fragment Pico showed us, the theft occurred eighteen hours ago. I've had everyone here going back and examining all the security scans for

that time period. So far our interesting intruder hasn't appeared on any of the other video recordings." He lifted a finger as Sandy opened her mouth. "Yes, I'm considering the possibility our friend might still be hiding somewhere on the grounds. We're continuing to examine footage, and Pico's currently organizing additional patrols.

"In the meantime, we've just stumbled across something interesting that we're currently trying to lock down. In fact we almost missed it and might have if we hadn't been looking for anything unusual in that particular time period."

"What was it?" Sandy asked.

"A burst of directed energy lasting one and one-third seconds. We're still studying the scan, but it almost seems like a radio transmission of some sort."

"Directed in one location? Not sent up to a satellite?"

"I said we were looking for anything unusual, and this pretty much fills the bill. Bette's been narrowing the focus and we're about to determine a fix . . . ah!"

A female technician was nodding into her viewer. "Coordinates are starting to come through."

"Now we won't be able to get an exact fix," Sherman explained to the group, "but if we can get something along the way of a bearing that might help." He went to the technician and peered over her shoulder. "Here we go. Fifty five degrees . . . forty seven minutes . . . forty three seconds."

Tom Sr. had gone over to an electronic map display and was carefully tracing out the direction.

Sandy watched him, her eyes following the line he was making.

Bud was doing the same thing. "San? Wasn't that airfield Geiner used---"

"Further south, love." She smiled a bit. "You should remember that, seeing how you flew to my rescue."

"Yeah, well, my mind was on other things besides geography at the time."

Sandy continued to study the map. "Sherman? If you're expecting an answer to jump full-grown like Athena out of my head, I'm afraid you've picked a bad day."

Sherman shrugged. "True, but it's still early. To be honest, I'm surprised we've got this much."

"No you're not."

The eyes Sherman turned on Sandy were large and questioning behind the glasses. "Oh?"

"Sherman . . . first we've got video footage of the thief. Then we've got fingerprints. Now we've got a signal, possibly sent by the thief, which is practically giving us a direction to Lord knows what. If you're not thinking what I'm thinking then maybe you're right and I ought to take over your job and let you relocate to New Mexico so you could rub belly buttons with Freida."

"Gracefully put," muttered Phyllis.

"But Sandy's right," Sherman said, crossing his arms and moving closer to the map. "If there's a consistent element in this weirdness it's that we're being handed obvious pointers. It's as if the thief is directly challenging us."

Sandy had been quietly watching her mother. Mary was staring at the map, a frown growing on her face. As Sandy watched, she went over to Tom Sr. and whispered into his ear. Her husband whispered something back, giving Mary a look which seemed to Sandy to suggest an attempt at being reassuring.

Filing it away for later she returned her attention to Sherman. "What about the fingerprints?"

Sherman sighed. "Speaking of weirdness . . . the good news is that we've made a positive identification on the prints."

"You're next statement's going to be interesting."

"Yeah." Reaching for his belt, Sherman unclipped his Tiny Idiot: a hand held personal computer manufactured by Swift Enterprises. Tapping on the screen he passed the device over to Sandy. "The bad news is that the prints belong to this person."

Taking the computer Sandy looked at the screen, seeing an image of a slightly heavysset woman in her mid-Forties. Russet hair . . . green eyes . . . "Sherman, this isn't the woman from the video."

"Thank you, Sandy. I sort of noticed that. Forty minutes ago I finally traced her through EUROPOL. She was Sophronia Sanna, a resident of Larissa in Greece."

Sandy looked up at Sherman. "Was?"

According to EUROPOL she died in an airline crash three years ago."

"Oh . . . my!"

She handed the computer back to Sherman. "So. Let me see if I can summarize this. The Cybertron-II was stolen eighteen hours ago by a slender pale woman who doesn't mind being videotaped by a security camera, sends electronic signals which point in a specific direction and has the fingerprints of a dead woman. Have I got all the salient points?"

Sherman considered it. "Mmmm . . . yeah."

Bud suspected that, if Sandy possessed a tail, she'd be wagging it. He prudently decided to keep his observation (as well as the associated mental images) to himself.

"At least it ain't little iron pellets this time," Bingo considered.

Phyllis nodded. "Got that right."

"I guess you're following up on this Sanna woman," Sandy asked Sherman.

"Oh yeah. I hope to get some further information sometime soon."

Sandy looked around at the others. "And she isn't an Enterprises employee? I mean, I'd be surprised if she were, but---"

Tom was shaking his head. "I showed the video to Gordon and the others in Automotive. They've never seen her before."

"Our first run through the employee records has drawn a blank," Sherman added.

Sandy's mind was filled with memories of the person she'd seen leaving the HOW2 with the Cybertron-II, as well as the face of the apparently deceased Sophronia Sanna. Meanwhile her eyes were staring at the map and the line her father had traced from Shopton . . .

And then she realized everyone was looking at her. "What?"

"Ask Sherman," her mother said, a bit grumpily.

"No," Tom Sr. told her. "Be fair. Sherman just wanted to pick Sandy's brains about this theft, and that's what he did. Sandy offered her own thoughts and conclusions, that's all."

"That's not all," Mary replied. "Sherman would like Sandy to get more involved in this business."

"Mom," Sandy said, "I appreciate your concern. Really. But c'mon. You've got to admit that, in spite of all the strangeness, there isn't that much to go on or get involved in. How much trouble could I possibly get into?"

It was the first time Sandy had witnessed synchronized eye rolling. "Oh come on, people."

"Sorry," Phyllis told her. "Force of habit."

Sandy nodded. "Uh huh. Well maybe it doesn't seem so unusual to me that I'd want to help Tom recover his dingus. And, if there's anything in my power I can offer in the way of assistance, then doesn't it only seem right that I'd want to do it?"

Her hands on her hips she slowly moved towards the monitor consoles, her face gradually entering the shadows, lit only by the faint glow from the scopes.

"Perhaps Sherman's right," she said darkly to no one in particular. "Maybe I should follow his lead and be more active in this affair. It can be

argued that I've been idle for too long. Perhaps it's time the world heard from Sandra Swift again."

Pausing for a moment she then turned to see the expressions on everyone's face.

Mary sighed. "Please don't do that."

Sandy giggled. "Sorry. Couldn't resist. But if there's something I could do . . ."

"I can keep you posted with updates," Sherman said. "You get any ideas you can send them down to me."

"I'd especially like to know more about this woman who died in the air crash. Something tells me she'll be a definite lead."

"Maybe," Sherman considered. "All I know is that some sort of attempt is being made to point us in a specific direction. But whoever is doing this isn't making the clues easy enough. This whole business keeps sinking deeper and deeper into strangeness . . . yes Tom? What is it?"

Tom's phone had rung and he had answered it. He still had the device pressed against his ear and was now giving everyone in the room a perplexed look.

"The person I'm talking with on the phone is asking me if I want to come by and pick up the Cybertron-II?"

## **Chapter Five: "That Stupid Mountain!"**

Tom was suddenly the center of attention.

Sherman immediately sprang into action. "What?"

"The woman on the phone is asking me if I want to come get the Cybertron-II."

This time Sherman managed to be a bit more effectual. "Scan," he snapped to the technicians at their stations. "Channel lock on Tom's phone. Record and track."

"She says her name is `Sylvia Fagus'," Tom told him.

Sherman pointed to the technician at the far end of the room, and she promptly bent over her keyboard, entering items into the computer.

From a speaker on one of the nearer consoles a female voice now appeared. "From the hesitation and the background noises I can only presume that this call is now being monitored and traced."



Motioning for everyone else to keep quiet, Sherman now pointed at Tom.

"Ahhh . . . yes," Tom admitted to the phone.

"Oh please don't feel you have to apologize, Mr. Swift. It is something I fully anticipated. Believe me I want to assist in seeing that your property is returned to you with as little fuss as possible. And, while it's on my mind, allow me to extend my greetings to your Mr. Ames, as well as the others who're currently listening in."

Sandy wasn't certain, but she thought she could hear Sherman's teeth grinding.

"Did you steal my cybertron, Ms. Fagus?" Tom slowly asked.

"All in good time," the voice replied in a tone which made Sandy think of Margaret Hamilton in The Wizard of Oz. "And it's `Mrs. Fagus', dear."

"Sorry," Tom murmured.

"Not at all. But my original inquiry still stands. You obviously would like your machine returned to you. And I certainly don't want to be in possession of stolen material. What's needed now is as effortless a means to render a return."

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to just come to Enterprises and return the Cybertron-II to me?"

A sigh. "I mentioned how I would like this to happen with a minimum of fuss. Simply bringing back your machine would complicate matters. There'd be accusations, tiresome suspicions . . . all sorts of needless entanglements. My way, by comparison, would be much less painful, and perhaps mutually beneficial."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "You want payment, is that it?"

"Nothing so dreary. Your Cybertron-II is clearly yours, and I am more than willing to personally place it into your hands with no obligation whatsoever. But there are some matters which I wish to discuss with you. Some of it involves how your machine ended up in my possession in the first place. Certainly you'd want to know more about that, and your attention to that explanation will serve as payment enough."

"You pique my curiosity, Mrs. Fagus."

"Which was my intention. And now . . . seeing as how Mr. Ames has doubtless gathered enough information to not only determine my whereabouts, but to make life somewhat more interesting for the rest of you . . . I'll bid you goodbye for the time being."

"Wait," Tom said. "How do I find you?"

A delighted laugh came from the speaker. "Do not worry, Mr. Swift. I will find you!"

"She hung up," Tom told Sherman.

Sherman turned to his people. "Anything?"

"Still backtracking the signal," one of the technicians reported. "Interpolation narrowing."

"Voiceprint analysis?"

"No matches yet," another technician said, "Acoustic geography suggest eighteen per cent probability of voice alteration."

"Anything on Sylvia Fagus?"

"One thousand, six hundred and forty-four matches on `Fagus' in the current database. Narrowing."

"Um." Calming a bit, Sherman turned back to the group. "Okay, so this'll take a while. Hopefully no more than an hour before results start showing up. Unless, of course, anyone knows a Sylvia Fagus and would like to `fess up."

"Could be an alias," Ken suggested.

Sherman tried not to look too pained. "Please. Don't tell Grandpa Ames how to suck eggs. Although, if we were getting the woman's real name, it'd be par for the course as far as this caper's gone."

"For the record," Tom said, pocketing his phone, "the name doesn't immediately ring a bell."

"Um! Anyone else?" His eyes looked over his guests. "Aunt Mary? You're frowning."

"It was a definite New England accent," Mary slowly said half to herself.

"So, with the sort of luck we seem to have, that means we're probably dealing with a Guatemalan muffler salesman by the name of `Percy'." Sherman sighed.

Tom Sr. cleared his throat slightly. "Tell you what, people. If we're going to pace the floor over this let's go upstairs so Sherman can flog his crew without us looking over his shoulder."

This earned him a grateful look from Sherman and, accompanied by the others, Tom Sr. left the area and went to the top floor of the Administration Building. By unspoken agreement everyone trooped to the conference room.

Reaching it they found two people waiting for them. One was a slightly greying man with a wide friendly face who looked up and smiled as the group entered.

"There you are," remarked his companion: a woman with the build of a ballerina whose hair, although shorter (and bearing some silver) was the same color as Phyllis'. In fact the resemblance between the two was punctuated as Phyllis said "Momsie!" and approached the older woman, her arms outstretched for a hug which she duly delivered. This followed by a cheery "Popski" as she repeated the action with the man.

"I'm sorry we missed out on the unveiling," Ned Newton said to Tom Sr. and the others. "We got delayed."

"My fault I'm afraid," Helen Newton added sheepishly. "But we came here and found everyone jumping about like there was some sort of emergency. What's wrong?"

"Plenty," Phyllis said, giving her parents a condensed version of events while everyone found chairs and settled at the large circular table. "Sherman should be coming up with stuff soon, so . . ."

Ned peered across the table at his godson. "Tom? You certain this Fagus woman, whoever she is, can't steal details from the Cybertron-II? Or at least tamper with it somehow?" Being in charge of the Swift Construction Company . . . and therefore the man who would oversee mass production of both the Cybertron-II and the HOW2 . . . the question was delivered out of more than ordinary concern.

Tom shook his head. "Like I told the others, stealing the secrets would be easier if the original plans were snatched. But Sherman's already checked computer security both here and at SECFAR and, so far, there's been no evidence of anyone breaking into the files."

"He personally checked with SECFAR?" Helen asked, smiling.

"Oh yes." Tom returned her smile. "He was quite thorough."

Helen snickered.

Sandy now spoke up. "I might be talking through my hat here . . . if I had a hat . . . but I don't think this is about the Cybertron-II." Seeing everyone's look she quickly continued. "Oh I mean yes, the Cybertron-II was definitely stolen. There's no question of it. But all this other stuff is giving me weird vibes."

Phyllis and Bingo glanced at each other. Eight months earlier Sandy had been getting "vibes" about a mysterious shipment of iron pellets which had been found in an airplane that had crashed in the Arctic. Her unyielding curiosity eventually involved the three of them in what Phyllis, in her more generous moments, tended to describe as "an interesting experience".

From the look on his face, Sandy's brother seemed inclined to believe. "Yeah, this is sounding like more than just a simple purse snatching," Tom remarked. "Not only are you and Sherman getting brain mileage out of this, but it's starting to intrigue me as well."

Helen, Bingo and Tom Sr. noticed how the comment seemed to cause Mary to visibly age.

A soft beeping from the small control console near Tom Sr. interrupted further discussion and he pressed the button which opened the video link for the conference room. Everyone turned to the large wall screen to see Sherman's face appear.

"Showtime," Sandy murmured.

"Okay," Sherman said. "This sort of took less time than I thought it would."

"Good work," Tom Sr. told him.

Sherman shook his head. "Don't thank me, Uncle Tom. Remember how I said we kept getting pointers regarding all of this? Like whoever took the Cybertron-II was leaving little clues for our benefit?"

"Yes."

"It suddenly occurred to me to apply that condition to Friend Fagus' phone call. We'd been narrowing down the possible sources of the call and, just for grins, I had the munchkins enter the coordinates of all the phone towers located near the bearing we'd determined earlier. Guess what?"

"You found a tower directly on the bearing."

Sherman nodded. "And not really that far away from us, either. Up in the Adirondacks, as a matter of fact. Northeast of us at a distance of . . ." here he glanced down, "two hundred and twenty nine point eight eight seven miles. Here. I'll punch it up for you."

His image disappeared to be replaced by a display of northeastern New York State. A blinking circle appeared around . . .

"I KNEW IT!"

Everyone else at the table jumped slightly, and Tom Sr. was staring wide-eyed at his wife. "Mary?"

Mary Swift was halfway out of her chair, her palms flat on the table as she glared up at the screen. "It's that stupid mountain again. I knew it!"

"Mary, like I told you downstairs, it's probably a coincidence---"

"My hiney!"

Now Sandy's eyes were wide. "Mom!"

Mary sat back down hard, resting her forehead on her hands and breathing irritably as Helen reached over to slip an arm around her shoulder. Meanwhile, Sandy curiously took a closer look at the screen, reading the information that had appeared beneath the blinking circle: HIGH PEAKS WILDERNESS AREA/SECTION FIVE/DISMAL MOUNTAIN.

Ned and Helen Newton were also staring at the map.

"Oh boy," Ned murmured. "Here we go again."

Bingo had been staring around the table. "Okay," she said. "Somethin's goin on here which I obviously don't know `bout."

"Make room in the boat," Sandy told her. "I'm as much in the dark as you are."

Her father was giving her an apologetic look. "Sorry. It's just that Dismal Mountain has a sort of . . . complicated connection . . . with your mother and I."

Mary laughed mirthlessly.

"In retrospect," Tom Sr. went on, "I guess I shouldn't be too surprised. As it turns out, the last time we got involved with Dismal Mountain was back when I developed the original House on Wheels."

"Whoa!" Tom exclaimed.

Tom Sr. nodded. "Back then there was a smuggling ring operating out of an abandoned mansion up on Dismal Mountain. Local thugs led by an Englishman. What's interesting was that they were concentrating on high tech scientific items. What was even more interesting was that they ended up grabbing the first House on Wheels. Ned and I went to Dismal Mountain and we sort of . . . straightened things out."

Ned Newton smiled gently at his friend, mostly from memories. "Oh yeah! Hardly any trouble at all."

Mary snorted.

"Anyway," Tom Sr. continued with a glance at his wife, "your mother experienced some disconcerting moments during the whole thing."

"Putting it mildly," Mary muttered.

"Oho!" Sandy said.

Everyone looked at her. "That's why you and Mom never took Tom and me up to the Adirondacks," she said. "I used to wonder."

"It's beautiful country up there," Tom Sr. admitted.

"It stinks," Mary threw in.

Realization had been slowly dawning on Tom's face. "A high tech smuggling ring?" he asked his father. "Operating on Dismal Mountain?"

"I know what you're thinking," Tom Sr. replied. "But the ring was broken up and arrested. Cunningham was extradited back to England, and Floyd Barton---"

Mary moaned.

"Tom," Helen admonished. "You promised you'd never mention his name again."

Tom Sr. looked contrite. "I'm sorry," he said to Mary. "I didn't mean---"

"It's all right," Mary sighed, leaning back into her chair. "Dirty laundry doesn't get washed until it's pulled out. And we're all family here."

"I guess," Tom agreed. "But anyway," he went on to Tom, "The developed section of Dismal Mountain was sold to the Department of Defense twenty-four years ago for use as a radar station."

"Would've made a better bombing range."

"All right." Tom Sr. reached out for his wife's hand. "I know," he told her, staring directly into her eyes. "I understand. But I was there then, and I'm here now."

Mary softened. "Oh Tom . . ."

"Okay," Sandy said while her mother worked to scoot her chair closer to her father, "Dismal Mountain got mixed up with the first House on Wheels, and now it's happening again with the new one. Or a part of it anyway. Is anyone besides me weirded out?"

Everyone except Tom Sr. and Mary (who were, admittedly, out of the discussion for a few moments) raised their hands.

"Count me in on that as well," Sherman's voice added. "And, in spite of what Uncle Tom said, I'm going to add checks on the members of that smuggling ring to my growing list of investigations. Which leaves what to do now with Friend Fagus' offer."

"Simple," Mary replied (having come up for air). "Pick up the phone. Call the police."

"Aunt Mary---"

"Police! Phone! Now!"

A brief silence. "And what do I tell the police, Aunt Mary? That they should climb all over Dismal Mountain?"

"Start a forest fire. Make an earthquake." Mary looked at her son. "Tom? Who were those people who were creating the earthquakes? Do you still have their number?"

"I think what Sherman wants," Tom Sr. calmly suggested, "is more of an effective bit of information which to give the police. Sherman? When you pass this to the authorities make a suggestion that they should concentrate on the town of Chesterport."

"Chesterport," Sherman murmured. "That's . . . on Lake Champlain."

"It's the closest inhabited area to Dismal Mountain. Quite a bit of action happened there the first time."

Ned coughed.

"I'll get on it, Uncle Tom. Thanks."

Bingo had been watching Sandy, and she now nudged Phyllis with her foot.

"I see it," Phyllis whispered. She raised her voice. "San?"

Sandy looked at her. "Um?"

"The last time I saw a look like that on your face, Lucille Ball was thinking of making extra money by getting a job at a candy factory."

"It's . . . nothing."

"Sandy, on your scale of measurement the sinking of Atlantis was 'nothing'."

"Okay," Sandy said and leaned forward to rest her elbows on the table. "Sherman's going to pass on what he's learned to the cops," she said to everyone. "They're going to work out a scheme to check up on the information and, both possibly and eventually, wrap up this entire situation."

Several nods.

"So!" Sandy looked at her father. "Dad? Didn't you immediately go to the police when your House on Wheels was snatched?"

Mary inhaled sharply.

"Careful," Ned warned.

"I see it coming," Tom Sr. assured him. "It wasn't quite that simple, Princess," he said to Sandy. "There were . . . complications."

Both Mary and Helen closed their eyes, moaning softly.

"You just blew it," Mary told Tom Sr.

"And there're complications involved here as well," Sandy pointed out. "This Mrs. Fagus person seems to have made a reasonably peaceful offer. And she made it sound as if she has information that Tom could be interested in."

Tom Sr. was wearing the expression of a baby mongoose who had just spotted a cobra. "Go on."

"If she suddenly feels as if she's surrounded by police, then wouldn't that queer the deal?"

"She sounded like the sort of person who'd be expecting the police to show up," Bud pointed out to her. "She might already be prepared for that."

"A point," Sandy said with a nod. "She could well be prepared for the police. On the other hand, though, she claims to be ready to reveal herself to Tom and hand over the Cybertron-II."

Tom was smiling at his sister. "I admit you're sending an interesting little chill down my spine," he told her. "Keep going."

"We oblige her."

Mary now looked like a female baby mongoose who had spotted the same snake. "Young Lady, are you seriously suggesting your brother go alone to Chesterport and hand himself over to this mystery woman?"

"Of course not, Mom," Sandy assured her. "I'd never suggest doing anything dangerous." She sat back and waited for the groans and resulting expressions to die down.

"Then at the risk of unleashing a disaster of Biblical proportions," Mary slowly asked, "what exactly are you proposing?"

"Simple. Tom goes to Chesterport."

Tom Sr. quietly concluded he never thought his wife's eyes could bug out the way they were doing now.

"But," Sandy added, "he doesn't go alone."

A small shadow of relief passed over Mary's face. "I get it. He takes along a battalion of Sherman's most brutal street toughs."

"Does Sherman have a battalion of street toughs?" Ken whispered to Bingo.

Bingo shrugged.

"If Mrs. Fagus is prepared for the police, then she'd also be prepared for anything Sherman could send," Sandy explained. She shook her head, smiling a bit. "If I'm reading you and Dad correctly, there seems to have been a conscious effort being made to invoke the original House on Wheels situation. So! Let's play that card. Let's send Tom to Chesterport in the HOW2."

"Alone?" Mary asked.

"Oh my, no. There's enough room in the HOW2 for all of us."

## **Chapter Six: "Station Wagon Full of Fritos, Coke and Twinkies, Stale Doritos!"**

"It's not that I don't appreciate the method in Sandy's madness," Sherman was telling Tom. "But this idea of the ten of you running up to Chesterport . . ."

"It's a family holiday," Tom replied, accepting a box from Bud and turning to slide it into one of the HOW2's storage compartments. "A road trip."

"The entire Enterprises hierarchy putting itself in possible harm," Sherman went on. "Even for one of Sandy's ideas this is insane."



Closing the door on the compartment, Tom turned to Sherman. "Look. Your concern is noted and appreciated. But, as you pointed out, there's method at work here. Taking the HOW2 we remain highly visible. No one's gonna move covertly against us when all eyes will be watching. And it's not as if we're traveling to some isolated location or distant planet. This is Chesterport, for pity's sake. Chesterport! Essex County. How dangerous can that be?"

"I got poison ivy in North Elba once. Tom . . . I don't like the idea of all of you together in one location. Forget covertly. One hand held rocket and Swift Enterprises is decapitated."

"In that case, we could've been nuked back at Thanksgiving."

Sherman pressed on. "But who's in charge while you guys are gone?"

"This'll be an overnighter at best. A few days. Enterprises can toddle along without us for that long. We'll remain in touch. And Dad left instructions with your sister."

"That's supposed to reassure me?"

"Dody already has power of attorney," Tom said with a shrug. He thought for a moment. "Ken's ordered his people in the space station to monitor us, and we'll have satellite tracking as well. I guess I could've arranged for Lucy or Greg to take the Sky Queen and overfly Chesterport from high altitude."

Sherman opened his mouth. Closed it.

Tom noticed it. "Go ahead."

"I've already ordered two Omnicopters to be outfitted with sensor pods. They'll be shadowing the HOW2 and carrying out overflights."

"Then we're all set."

Shaking his head, Sherman passed a large pill to Tom and moved off.

Inside the HOW2 Bingo was at the galley, using a Tiny Idiot to tick off a list of provisions.

"Got all the basic food groups here," she was murmuring to herself. "Got the onion dip group, got the potato chip group, got the chicken wings group . . ."

Phyllis sidled up alongside her. "Are we fully stocked for beverages?"

"Oh yeah," Bingo replied with a nod. "Coffee . . . soda . . . tea . . . fresh filters in the water recycler."

Phyllis paused and tried again. "Are We Fully Stocked For Beverages?"

Bingo's voice lowered. "Six cases of beer. Wine coolers. Jack Daniels." She looked over her shoulder. "And don't tell Mr. S, but I made a side trip to the house and swiped a bottle of his Glenfiddich."

Phyllis briefly raised both thumbs.

Her mother now passed by with an overnight bag. "This is going to be such fun," she said, smiling. "I've always wanted to be part of Sandy's All-Girl Ninja Team."

"We ought to have t-shirts made," Bingo replied. "And this time we've even packed our boyfriends. I mean, how equipped is that?"

"We're missing an advertising opportunity here, though," Phyllis mused. "Should have something painted on the side of the HOW2."

Bingo ticked off another item on her computer. "Pacific Tech."

"Huh?"

"Wrong," Ken commented, strolling past.

Bingo looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Ken paused at the door. "The bus Ann Robinson was driving left Pacific Tech, but it was labeled `Southbridge'."

He walked on out of the HOW2, and Phyllis noticed that Bingo's breathing was rather pronounced. "You okay?"

"He got me on a science-fiction movie trivia point," Bingo replied, gazing longingly in the direction Ken had gone. "I want to have his babies."

"So? You've always wanted that."

"I'm waxin' romantically. Hush!"

Helen, meanwhile, had reached the rear of the HOW2 where Mary and Tom Sr. were carefully storing the luggage. "Doesn't this all remind you of something?" Helen asked Mary.

Mary smiled at her friend. "You mean Seminary field trips? All of us from Mrs. Perkman's class piled into one bus?"

Helen nodded. "Maybe we ought to sing the old songs."

"With the kids on board?"

"Mmmm, you may have a point." Helen's voice suddenly took on a higher, lightly screeching tone. "'Miss Nestor . . . Miss Morton . . . that is not how that verse ends, young ladies! I want the both of you to move to the front of this bus right now!'"

Meanwhile, Sandy was in the forward section of the HOW2, looking over the controls.

Bud came to her. "We're sealing everything up back there, kiddo. And the natives are getting restless. Want to start?"

"Just a moment," Sherman said, coming up to them. He held out his hand, revealing pills similar to the one he had given Tom (and everyone else). "One for each of you. Take it."

Sandy gingerly accepted one. "Ye cats, Sherman. Do we swallow this or try to bat it out of the park."

"Just swallow."

Sandy managed to gulp hers down while Bud did the same.

Watching them, Sherman nodded in satisfaction. "I feel better now."

"I feel ten pounds heavier," Bud said. "What was that?"

"The security amulets had problems," Sherman explained, "and the tracking chips turned out to be worse. This isn't a permanent solution, but at least I'll sleep better for the next few days. The pills are actually short duration radio transmitters. Tom helped design them."

"That explains the bad taste," Sandy muttered.

"When the pill starts to dissolve it'll begin broadcasting signals that I'll be able to track," Sherman went on. "It'll only last for a few days, which should be enough."

"Putting this as delicately as possible," Sandy said, "but they might not even last that long."

"Tom designed the outer coating of the pill so that it produces a mild digestible adhesive which activates when exposed to the fluids in your stomach." Sherman smiled thinly. "They'll stay in you long enough."

"Sounds like something Mrs. Applepound would think up for one of her books," Bud said.

"Please," Sandy told him. "One disaster at a time."

"Have a safe journey, you two." Still smiling, Sherman strolled off.

Bud fitted himself into the seat alongside Sandy. "I think he enjoyed doing that."

Sandy nodded and looked back over her shoulder into the interior of the HOW2. "Settle in, people. We're leaving."

"'Hundred bottles of beer on the wall'," sang a familiar female Texan voice. "'Hundred bottles of beer. Take one down---mmffff!"

Sandy couldn't clearly see, but she silently hoped that the interruption was due to Bingo being smothered by the rest of the group. Her hand began moving over the controls. "Atomic batteries to power."

"Turbines to speed," replied Bud.

Sandy put her hands on the steering column. "Let's roll, Kato."

\* \* \* \* \*

Given its size, the HOW2 was a remarkably smooth ride as Sandy and Bud drove out of Shopton north towards Interstate 90. During the initial phase of the trip Sandy gave Bud chances to take over the driving, the both of them working to get a feel for the large vehicle.

"This isn't half bad," Bud commented. "Hugs the road and you don't even notice the bulk while maneuvering. Your Dad has the chops when it comes to suspension systems. Once we get the Cybertron-II back this should really be a heck of a machine." He glanced over at Sandy. "We going to open her up more on the interstate?"

"Maybe," Sandy considered, looking at the map display between them. "We'll make Chesterport in . . . five hours. I figure once we clear Oneida we'll merge onto 365 East, then eventually go onto New York 8 and that'll get us there."

A movement from behind, and Helen Newton was kneeling down in the doorway, making herself comfortable between them.

"Phyllis is brainstorming her Maiden Flight project with everyone else," she announced. "And refreshments will soon be served. As designated hostess for this bus did you want me to bring you two anything?"

"Something fizzy," Sandy said.

"If that was some Orange Crush I saw being loaded," Bud said, "I'll take one of those."

Helen nodded, gazing out through the forward viewports. "So this is what it feels like," she murmured.

Sandy gave the older woman a small glance. "Aunt Helen?"

"Rolling along into adventure with you. Ned and I always noticed how exhilarated Phyllis seems whenever she comes home after one of your exploits. I must confess I've envied her a little."

Sandy smiled. "Well . . . hopefully we won't be torpedoed, or shot at, or chased by killer robots."

"Mmmm, thank you love. I'd appreciate that." A pause. "Even your mother is starting to get into the spirit of this."

Bud was shaking his head slightly.

"I was really surprised at the way she reacted about Chesterport and Dismal Mountain," Sandy said.

Helen was still staring ahead. "Well . . . you can honestly split your mother's life into Before and After Chesterport. It was a real significant moment for her."

"That whole business was when her and Dad got engaged, right?"

"Oh yes! Finally!" The expression on Helen's face became contemplative. "This whole business has obviously put your Mom and I into a sort of nostalgic mood. We're not just going back to Chesterport, we're heading back into time."

"Mom's never told me much about the Seminary," Sandy said.

"Well, a lot of the stories aren't worth repeating," Helen admitted. "Especially in polite company. If you're really curious I guess you could check police records or something. Sometimes, though, I can't help but think about how strange it was that Mary and I became such close friends."

"Oh?"

"Your mother, Sandra, was the Princess of the Rocksmoond Young Ladies Seminary; whereas I . . . was not the Princess."

Bud chuckled.

"She was the prim and well-brought up lady, and I was only half a step out of Juvenile Hall. I spent four years trying to get your mother into trouble, and she spent four years trying to keep me out of it. As a result we ended up thicker than thieves. Sort of developing a happy medium between ourselves, you might say. She became my very best friend, and she still is.

"And then your father shows up. He has Ned in tow, and then . . . oh my!"

"Mad passionate romance?"

"Well . . . Ned and me anyway. As for your mother, she and your father were definitely attracted to each other from the beginning. Don't get me wrong. But she suddenly becomes more shy and innocent and 'ladylike', and your father and her began this long dance around the subject of love and, of course, marriage."

"That sort of has a familiar ring to it," Sandy told Bud.

"I was just thinking that," Bud agreed.

"Mary and Tom were driving Ned and me absolutely nuts. We didn't know what to do about it. Then your father built the first House on Wheels, and that began the process which tipped the bucket over. Everything ended up coming out in a big rush and, the next thing we knew, your folks were in the Union Church getting married."

"And then you and Uncle Ned."

Helen's smile became interesting. "True. At the time it seemed a reasonable idea. 'Sides . . . I couldn't very well take a stab at playing the Respectable Housewife without Mary having paved the way ahead and being able to offer advice."

"Not to mention later on advising how to have a baby."

"Ummm." Helen was quiet for a while.

Then: "Sandy did your mother ever tell you we were both on the track team at the Seminary?"

"I knew she was in track, but didn't know you were too."

"Yes, well . . . I always ended up being faster than her."

"I don't understand."

"Of course not, dear. Watch the road."

## **Chapter Seven: Summons**

After driving through Trenton, and on through Adirondack Park, Sandy and Bud elected to let others try their hand at driving the HOW2 while they joined the "party". Sandy had been in recreational vehicles before (including the HOW2's predecessor), but even she was impressed at how steady the interior seemed.

Bingo demonstrated to Sandy how she was able to use the HOW2's kitchen with hardly any trouble at all. "Of course I'd prefer much more facilities," she privately admitted, "but this is a lot nicer than the galleys Tom put into the jetmarines and seacopters."

"Yeah, Tom sometimes needs to be reminded to include a kitchen in the first place," Sandy said. "What really worries us is the possibility that he'll someday invent a vehicle and forget to install a bathroom." She glanced over to where both Tom and her father were at the HOW2 controls. "Thank God for Phyllis' increasing influence in his design work."

"They do make a good team," Bingo said.

"That they do. You know Phyllis has been wanting to go back and do retro work on some of Tom's earlier inventions. Sort of make them more attractive to the buying public."

"I'd . . . hate to have that job."

"It's a headache," Sandy agreed. "Take Tom's Polar-Ray Dynasphere, for instance."

Bingo frowned. "That dingus that sort of looks like a big flyin' wishbone?"

Sandy nodded. "Despite all Tom's notions concerning its uses, he's only built the original. Phyllis has argued that it's because Tom's never been able to clearly explain to the public what it does. The name certainly doesn't help, even when it's called the Dyna Ranger."

"I don't think I've even seen it since joinin' up with you guys."

"You would have if you had a chance to spend more time out on Fearing Island. For instance, like when we were heading for the Arctic a while back. We were kind of rushed then. Tom's got it parked out on one end of the island, at a sort of display park for his larger inventions. The regulars on Fearing refer to the place as the Dyna Shore."

Silence for a few moments while Bingo stared up at Sandy.

Then: "You're really spendin' too much time around Bud, y'know."

Smiling, Sandy moved off.

Phyllis, in the meantime, was leaving the bathroom when she found Tom waiting for her just outside. "Oh! Aren't you driving with Uncle Tom? Or did you need the potty?"

"Your Mom's replaced me at the wheel," Tom told her, "and I was waiting for you." Lightly touching Phyllis' shoulder he guided her a bit further away from the others, Phyllis' heart racing as she found herself following him just slightly into the bedroom.

"I know you think I'm all the time running away from the notion of marriage," Tom quietly said to her.

"You weren't . . . contributing much to the Maiden Flight talk," Phyllis pointed out.

Tom nodded. "You're right. I wasn't. And you're also right that I do run away from marriage."

Phyllis' eyes widened. "Oh, Tom . . ."

"My parents got it working so right," Tom said. "So do your folks. I look at them and I keep wondering if I could ever be as decent to you as Uncle Ned is to your mother, or as my Dad is to Mom."

"Tom . . ."

He was staring intently at her, his fingers lightly touching her cheek. "I also worry about whether or not you understand just how much I love you, Phyllis. I worry whether or not I also scare you sometimes with knowing how much I want to possess you and have you for my very own."

They were much closer now. "You do a nice job of it sometimes," Phyllis whispered, her heart thumping hard inside her.

"I . . . just want it to be perfect with us."

"You do a nice job of that too," Phyllis assured him, her lips parting.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Occupied," Bingo told Ken as was going by.

Ken stopped. "The bathroom?"

"Just give it a few moments before goin' on back there."

"But . . ."

"A few moments, Kenneth."

\* \* \* \* \*

In was Bingo and Ken, in fact, who drove the HOW2 up New York 22 North into the southern end of Chesterport. Lake Champlain glittered to their right while, to their left, forests stretched away towards the easternmost point of the Adirondack High Peaks region.

"Everyone seems to be starin' at us," Bingo said to the others.

"Well," Ken replied, "we are in a large, sleek and rather silent silver vehicle. Either we're a UFO or a giant armor-plated weevil."

"If that's a reflection on Phyllis and mine's design work---," Tom began.

"No no no . . . you and Phyllis do good work together."

Sandy couldn't help but notice the blush appearing on Phyllis' face.

"Any ideas where we're parking?"

Tom Sr. was peering out one of the windows. "Ken? Go over in that big parking lot coming up to your right on the next block."

Nodding, Ken carefully steered the HOW2 into the lot, bringing it to a stop. "Shutting down engines." He and Bingo then opened their respective doors while Tom opened the main one, lowering the small access ramp.

Everyone began filing out, looking around. "Corner of Thelma and Louise," Tom Sr. commented. "Practically in the center of town."

"Kinda looks small for a rich person's getaway," Bingo said. "We got plenty of towns like this back in Texas on Interstate 10 `tween San Antonio and Dallas. More trees, though."

"The rich sort of like their getaways to seem small and exclusive," Tom Sr. explained. "This is where several members of the New York `Old Money' set have their homes. If you go up the road a bit you'll see the yacht basin. It's possible to get to the St, Lawrence River and the Atlantic River. Tom? Sandy?"

"Dad?"



Tom Sr. was pointing. "See that place over there? That's where I proposed to your mother thirty years ago."

"You mean where the Kahuna Burger stand is?"

"Well . . . obviously there's been developments since then." Tom Sr. noticed that Mary was staring in a particular direction and he followed her gaze towards a high forested peak rising above the trees to the west.

Sandy also saw where her mother was looking. "That's it? Dismal Mountain?"

Mary nodded.

Bingo was peering at it, her hands shading her eyes. "Was sorta expectin' dark clouds and a large flaming eye."

"I thought you said there was a radar station there now," Mary asked her husband.

"Could be," Tom Sr. said, squinting. "Of course, the installation might not be easy to see from here." He looked further up. "Tom? Would we be able to spot Sherman's Omicopters?"

"Was wondering the same thing myself," Tom replied, gazing at the skies. "Sherman said he was going to try and be unobtrusive."

A small crowd of curious people was starting to drift closer to the HOW2.

"So what's the op?" Phyllis asked Sandy. "I mean, we're here now."

Tom overheard her. "Our mysterious hostess said all we had to do was come here and she'd get in touch."

"Presuming, of course, that we followed the right clues," Sandy pointed out.

"I think we did," her brother replied, "and so do you."

Sandy nodded, strolling away from the HOW2 and studying the surroundings. Her father, in the meantime, had slipped an arm around her mother and was whispering something into her ear. Sandy was happy to see her mother giggle in response.

Bud had followed and his hand now reached out for hers. "At any case," he said, "it's a nice place to be out with you."

"Is that," Sandy agreed. She gave another glance at her parents. "And it's good Dad's managing to shake Mom out of her mood."

Phyllis and Tom were standing nearby, also holding hands. "I suppose your Mom's sort of torn between the bad stuff that happened here before and the fact that this is where Uncle Tom proposed," she pointed out.

"True. But who was this `Floyd Barton' character anyway?"

"Shhhh," Helen said, strolling closer. "That's not a name you casually throw about."

Sandy lowered her voice. "Yeah, but who was he?"

Helen sighed. "He was a rascal."

"A rascal?"

"Well . . . that's how your mother referred to him. You know how she is about language. My own description of him would get my mouth washed out with soap in some quarters. Let's just delicately say that Floyd was attempting to beat your father's time with Mary and leave it at that."

"He sounds like a creep."

"He would, but that'd be insulting honest creeps."

Sandy shook her head. "I just can't imagine Mom getting involved with guys other than Dad. Especially someone like that. I mean, you'd never find me dating anyone like Floyd Barton."

Phyllis made a loud sneeze which sounded like "Ferd Acton".

Sandy sighed. "All right . . . one time."

"Yes," Phyllis replied. "With a guy named `Ferd'."

"It wasn't much of a date, Phyllis."

"You let a guy named Ferd put his hands on you. I could never figure that out. What the heck were you thinking?"

"I was helping Tom out . . ." Sandy suddenly remembered she was holding hands with Bud and looked up to see the interested look on his face.

"Go on," Bud prompted with a smile. "I want to hear more about how you were helping Tom."

"Bud . . ."

It was then that she noticed Ken and Bingo coming closer. They had wandered off a bit further from the others and were now returning, their hands also linked but gently perplexed looks on their faces.

Ken locked eyes with Tom. "Something strange just happened. Maybe important. We don't know."

"What?" Tom asked.

"We were lookin' into the shop window back over there," Bingo said, nodding over her shoulder. "All of a sudden this woman comes up and asks us if we came in what she called `the big silver bug'---"

Tom muttered something.

Phyllis squeezed his hand. "Let it go, love."

"We said `yeah'," Bingo was continuing, "'an he asks if we're interested in doin' some shoppin'."

Tom frowned. "Shopping?"

Ken nodded. "We didn't really say yes until he said he had a special baseball to give away."

Light dawned on the faces of both Tom and Sandy.

"A special baseball?" Sandy asked.

"Yeah."

Tom was staring over Ken's shoulder. "Where is he?"

"He slipped off but gave Bingo and me this card," Ken said, passing a small white rectangle to Tom. Leaning closer, Sandy saw that it was an ordinary business card.

SERAF LAW FIRM  
(Sylvia Fagus --- Branch Representative)  
"Crede quod habes, et habes"

Tom slowly exhaled. "Yeah! Here we go."

Phyllis was also reading the card, frowning slightly. "'Crede quod . . ."

"'Believe that you have it, and you do'," Bingo explained.

Turning the card over, Tom saw a neatly printed address. "That . . . must be that office building over there," he said, looking at a modest three story structure two blocks down.

"Okay," he decided. "You guys go back to Dad and the others and get in touch with Sherman. Bring everyone up to date. Meanwhile, I've got an appointment with a lawyer." He started to move off, but slightly lost his balance. "Phyllis, let go."

Phyllis' eyes were sharp and her grip tightened. "No . . . way."

"She's speaking for the rest of us," Sandy declared. "You're gonna have backup or Phyl's gonna sit on you. Admittedly a possible win-win situation for Phyl . . ."

Tom saw several determined faces looking at him and sighed. "Okay. Ken . . . Bingo . . . Aunt Helen. Go get Dad and the others and catch back up. The rest of us are heading on." Turning (and with Phyllis firmly attached), Tom began walking towards the building, the others following.

Reaching the building they entered and stood there, looking around. Spotting a directory Sandy went to it. "Here we go. Seraf Law Firm . . . room 5."

"Seems quiet and innocent enough," Bud said.

With Tom still leading the way the group moved down a short hallway until they reached a frosted glass door marked with both the number 5 and "Seraf Law Firm". All very ordinary.

Giving the others a look, Tom opened the door and they began entering a small and cheerfully lit reception room.

Behind a desk sat a smartly dressed young woman possessing the sort of physical appearance usually guaranteed to generate immediate notice from males. Tom and Bud were apparently not immune to the effect.

The woman looked up and smiled, regarding the visitors through large, round glasses. "May I help you?"

Tom took a step closer (with Phyllis' hand closing even more on his). "I believe I have an appointment with Mrs. Fagus? I'm Tom Swift Jr."

"Oh certainly," the woman chirped, reaching for her intercom. But, at that moment, the door to the inner office opened and another woman appeared. Although not as immediately eye-catching as the receptionist she was, nonetheless, rather handsome in appearance. Seemingly in her late thirties, trim and possessed of platinum-blond hair and blue eyes which sparkled kindly at the newcomers.

"Mr. Swift," she said pleasantly, smiling. "At last." Her eyes moved over the others and paused. "And you must be Phyllis Newton."

"Why . . . yes," Phyllis replied.

The woman nodded. "I thought as much. Obviously most of your looks come from your no-doubt beautiful mother, but I can clearly see traces of your father in you."

Phyllis stared questioningly at the woman. "Did . . . do I know you?"

"Oh not personally, dear. But I was almost your mother."

## **Chapter Eight: Enter the Angel**

Phyllis' lightning-like mind immediately produced an answer. "Huh?"

The woman's smile grew. "Perhaps your parents never spoke of me. But, then again, we haven't really been correctly introduced . . . oh!"

The door to the office had opened, admitting Tom Sr., Mary, Ned, Helen, Ken and Bingo. With the whole crowd assembled the room was now a bit crowded.

The expressions on the faces of Tom Sr., Mary and Ned became smacked with astonishment as they saw the woman.

"Oh . . ." Ned began.

Mary's comment was slower, but more informative. "Is it . . . is it . . . Grace?"

The woman nodded brightly.

"Oh my God," Mary breathed. "Grace! After all these years."

"The bad penny finally returns," Grace replied.

"It's been twenty years."

"I know."

Tom was looking from one to the other. "Okay," he called out. "Everyone please stop. You," he said to the woman. "You're not Sylvia Fagus?"

The woman looked slightly sheepish. "Well, in a way I am. `Sylvia Fagus' is actually a sort of professional name I use. My actual name is Grace Slater, but the last time Ned and your parents met me I was Grace Winthrop."

"My cousin," Mary explained to her son. "Her family lives here in Chesterport."

Helen's mouth had slowly opened. "You're Grace Winthrop?"

"I was. And you must be Helen Newton."

"Still am."

Sandy wondered if she was the only one who noticed how Helen was now slightly maneuvering herself between Ned and Grace.

If Grace had noticed it she made no mention. Instead she smiled softly at Ned. "Hello again, Ned."

Ned's mouth opened, closed, opened again. "Hi."

"Oh, and I'm forgetting myself," Grace continued. She indicated the receptionist. "This is Pert Buxomity, my personal assistant."

Sudden silence in the room. Bud in particular struggled to keep his mouth shut, suspecting that he risked serious injury by voicing the comment which had immediately appeared in his head.

By comparison, Sandy wasn't so reserved. "You're kidding," she said to the younger woman. "That's really your name?"

Pert Buxomity smiled a trifle sadly. "'Fraid so."

"You must've given your folks almighty Hell for that."

Pert seemed thoughtful. "Well . . . to be honest . . . at my birth they really had no way of knowing how I'd develop."

And now Ken and Tom were also fighting for self-control over their mouths.

"I think we'd all be more comfortable back in my office," Grace suggested, turning to lead the crowd. "After all, we have considerable matters to discuss."

Following her, the group entered a simply furnished office containing only a modest desk and a few chairs. Tom took one of them, and Mary sat down next to him while Grace took the chair behind her desk, allowing everyone else to lounge against the walls.

"Excuse me a moment," Mary said to Tom. She looked over at Grace. "What happened with you? Twenty years ago we'd heard you had married . . ."

"To James Slater over in Montpelier," Grace explained. "He was someone I met after another . . . possible arrangement . . . fell through."

Ned felt the glance she directed at him and tried to make himself appear smaller.

"I could never get any further news about you," Mary said. "Then again," she reflected, "I've had something of a sensitive spot about this place."

"Oh I don't doubt it," Grace replied. She smiled at Sandy and Tom. "I was practically with your parents when your father proposed. As I recall, he took your mother into the old House on Wheels and they sat on the---"

"Couch," Mary broke in, her husband nodding vigorously.

"Mmmm." Grace thoughtfully rubbed a finger at her nose. "All right. That'll do, I guess. I wasn't really in on the moment of proposal you understand. But I saw them when they came back out and, from the looks on their faces, it was clear what had gone on."

Between her parents, and Uncle Ned, Sandy felt she hadn't seen so many red faces in one place before.

Pert Buxomity had briefly vanished, but she had now returned and was passing cups of coffee out to all present.

"Miss . . . Mrs. Slater---" Tom began.

"Aunt Grace," the woman gently corrected.

Tom nodded, accepting some coffee from Pert. "Please excuse me, but . . ."

"Of course," Grace said primly. "To business." Opening a drawer in her desk she carefully removed a cloth-wrapped object. "As promised," she said, placing the object on the desk and unfolding the cloth, revealing a shiny metal sphere the size of a baseball.

Sandy thought Tom was going to climb onto the desk the way he reached for the object. "I take it . . ."

"The Cybertron-II," Tom said, carefully examining the sphere.

"Feel free to apply any tests you wish," Grace told him. "You'll find there's been no tampering."

"Oh I believe you," Tom murmured, turning the device over and over. "There's no way to access the interior of the Cybertron-II without causing a small disaster. It'd be like cutting open a golf ball . . . making a bigger mess than what you started out with."

"Not . . . wanting to impugn you, Grace," Tom Sr. said apologetically. "Tom? Could the programming have been accessed?"

"You'd need the contacts to access the mechanism, such as what's in the HOW2," Tom replied.

"Believe me," Grace told them, "I want to assure you that, as far as myself and my associates are concerned, your Cybertron-II has not been disturbed."

Sandy took a sip from her own cup and decided to step into the discussion. "So! Aunt Grace. If you didn't steal the Cybertron-II . . ."

"Then who did?" Grace replied. She sighed. "Now that is a very interesting question. And one which my people so desperately want to figure out."

She folded her hands on the desk before her. "As you may have already presumed, this isn't a law office, and I'm not an attorney named Sylvia Fagus. This is only a visible front which supports a much more private organization."

"What organization?" Sandy asked.

"In time," Grace replied softly. "Several days ago my organization received a request from, shall we say, another interest. These people were wanting assistance in carrying out a particular sort of search. That, in itself, was not an unusual request to make as far as we were concerned. As I suppose you'll eventually learn, we receive these sort of things rather often. What was unusual, though, was that these people were wanting to enlist the help of Swift Enterprises."

She had the full attention of everyone in the room.

"Then why weren't we contacted directly?" Tom asked.

"We weren't quite certain," Grace said slowly, "but there was the impression that direct contact between our . . . clients . . . and Enterprises would have been somewhat problematical. But they were adamant about wanting your help. We of course offered to act as go-betweens, but they felt they needed something to firmly establish not only the seriousness of their request, but to insure your interest and bring you here."

"The theft of the Cybertron-II," Sandy said.

Grace smiled at Mary. "Oh I like her," she said. "And yes, dear, you're correct," she continued to Sandy. "A few mornings later I entered my office to find the Cybertron-II on my desk accompanied by a note explaining what had occurred, and that my people were to broker the involvement of Enterprises in this matter."

"And you have no idea who these people are?"

Another sigh. "No. They only explained that they would know if Enterprises accepted the deal and would be in a position to monitor progress."

Sandy looked around at the others, seeing shadowed expressions on the faces of her brother and her father. "And what's the nature of this search?" she asked Grace.

"That is particularly interesting. We were given the details and, naturally, we've been checking them out for ourselves. So far, though, we've been unable to make any immediate headway." Her eyes met Tom's. "As I explained earlier, my organization is not committing you to any course of action. Our main concern was to return the cybertron. However, we felt obligated to provide you with the entire story."

Tom gave a look to his father. "Admittedly I'm curious," he said, turning back to Grace, "and I suppose there's no harm in listening further."

Grace quietly studied him for several moments. Then she looked over at Pert Buxomity.

"Your decision," the other woman said.

Grace nodded. "Quite." She lightly patted the surface of the desk and rose from the seat. "Very well. In order to make a specific point our mysterious clients stole the Cybertron-II. To make a similar point I think the next step is to take something of a small journey. It would be easier, I feel, if we all traveled in your new vehicle."

"All right," Tom agreed with just a whisper of reluctance. "Where are we going?"

"Oh I'm certain you'll find it educational," Grace said. "We're going to the Angel."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well this is much roomier and nicer than the original House on Wheels," Grace later commented. "Thank you dear," she added, taking a small glass of wine from Bingo.

They were traveling west from Chesterport, heading into the forest. Ken and Bud were at the controls as everyone relaxed in the living room.

"We'll soon be coming to a small road on the right," Grace called out to them. "It's marked `Private Property Seraf Law Firm'. Please take it."



Sandy softly groaned.

"What's wrong?" Mary asked.

Sandy was shaking her head. "'Seraf'. The Angel."

Grace grinned at her.

"But `Sylvia Fagus'?"

"Your Sherman Ames would've eventually figured it out," Grace told her. "Or perhaps not. He would, after all, require a very definite clue. It may probably occur to you shortly." Leaning back against the couch she let her eyes rest on Ned.

"You're looking rather nice, Ned," she said shyly.

"So are you," Ned replied before he realized Helen was still standing rather close to him.

Grace laughed. "Flatterer. I'm a wrinkled old woman now."

"The wrinkles don't show . . . ow!"

"Sorry," muttered Helen. "And how is Mr. Slater," she asked Grace in a noticeably louder tone of voice.

A shadow passed over Grace's face. "He died three years ago."

Murmuring to herself, Helen looked away.

"Please don't apologize," Grace told her. A smile reappeared. "After all, if I were married to Ned . . ."

"We're going to Dismal Mountain," Mary suddenly said.

Sandy silently sent thanks to her mother.

Grace nodded. "That's where my people have their base. Actually, it's something of a branch annex."

Something about the remark caused both her and Pert Buxomity to laugh.

Turning off the main road the HOW2 began traveling up a smaller trail that showed only the briefest acquaintance with paving.

"Aunt Grace?" Bud called out. "There's a locked gate coming up."

"It'll open," Grace said, the fingers of one hand moving to touch a brooch she wore at her throat. And, as the HOW2 drew closer to the gate it automatically swung wide, allowing the vehicle to pass.

No one missed noticing that it also closed again behind them. The HOW2 continued moving, heading higher and higher among the trees up the side of the mountain.

Light seemed to dawn on Tom Sr.'s face. "This is the road to Cunningham's old hideout," he said. "That old mansion he used."

"And which we use," Grace said. "Just park near the front, dears," she added to Bud and Ken.

With everyone looking through the windows the HOW2 eventually reached a position near the summit of the mountain. The road suddenly widened, and a large rambling wreck of a house was now visible. Mainly hidden by the trees it was a two story pile of wood and masonry which had obviously seen better days.

The HOW2 pulled up alongside the dilapidated wide front porch and came to a halt. "Well," Ken commented, "for better or worse, we're here."

Phyllis frowned out a window. "Doesn't look like much has gone on here."

"Which is the way we prefer it," Grace said, standing up. "The people I work for purchased this entire property ten years ago, and we rather prefer our anonymity."

The doors opened and both Grace and Pert led the group outside.

Sandy was standing close to her father as he murmured to Tom. "Sherman should still be tracking us. And his Omnicopters can't be far away."

Tom quietly nodded agreement.

Grace didn't hesitate but briskly stepped up onto the porch, pushing the door open and stepping on in. The others followed, and Sandy found herself standing in a large dark and worn out entry foyer liberally decorated in what seemed to her to be Early Colonial Mold with a trim of rat droppings.

Ned was looking around. "Second verse . . . same as the first."

"I know," Tom Sr. agreed. "Boy is this bringing back the memories." He looked over at Grace. "Cutting you some slack for euphemism, Grace, but this place doesn't really look all that angelic."

Grace smirked. "Perhaps this will improve your opinion." Walking to the far side of the foyer she gently touched a brick set into a corner of an enormous fireplace. The fireplace soundlessly slid aside, revealing a smooth metal corridor.

"In we go," Grace said, smiling and entering the corridor.

Ken touched Tom Sr.'s sleeve. "You want me to stay with the HOW2 and contact Sherman?"

"Well," Tom Sr. said, giving Grace's departing figure a long look. "She is Mary's cousin." He looked over at his wife. "What do you think?"

"Yes, Ned," Helen spoke up, turning to her husband. "And what do you think?"

"Let's just go," Sandy said, "and Devil take the hindmost."

"Wish someone besides you would say that," Phyllis muttered.

The group entered the corridor (noting how the fireplace slid back into place behind them). They walked for about a minute, their steps taking them down a gentle incline.

Tom was looking around. "We're going into the mountain."

Ahead of them Grace and Pert had reached a wide metal panel, and it now obediently opened. There was light ahead, and cooler air, and sounds. Curiously, everyone followed.

Beyond the door they paused.

"Oh my," Helen said.

They were standing in a large circular metal chamber lit by banks of fluorescent lighting. In its center a thick metal post rose from floor to ceiling. The rest of the floor was sectioned off into cubicles where people were busily engaged in some sort of work. Nearer to them, electric carts ran on a rubberized track which circled the outer perimeter of the room, and the entrance to a large service elevator could be seen nearby.

From somewhere a female voice was speaking. "Acquisitions transfer on schedule. Consult reception notes D. A test of medium wave frequency shifts is announced for 1530 hours. Electrical maintenance crews please submit readiness reports to Miss Colby . . ."

It was Sandy who quietly noticed that all the workers in the room were female.

One of the workers had, in fact, been quietly conferring with Grace and Pert, and Grace now walked back to the group. "Everything's okay. We'll go to the conference gallery where we can have a nice talk."

"We'll talk now," Mary declared, going up to her.

Both women stared at each other.

"This place," Tom Sr. suddenly said. "This is the radar station the Air Force set up years ago."

Grace nodded at him. "Purchased lock, stock and fully equipped defensive radar system."

Tom goggled at her. "The Air Force let you people take over a fully operational radar system?"

Her eyes twinkling, Grace smiled and turned away, accompanied by Pert. The others followed. "We made a rather handsome deal with the Defense Department," Grace explained as she walked. "At least that's how it was explained to me when I joined. We're on the second floor of a four story facility hidden within the mountain."

Sandy suddenly found herself staring at a nearby work cubicle. A woman was inside, bent over a computer screen. But Sandy's attention had been drawn to something else in the cubicle. A symbol consisting of an oval which surrounded the stylized image of a tree. A particular sort of tree.

Sandy knew that symbol. So did many people within Enterprises, as well as throughout the world, and she poked at her father, nodding at it.

Mary also saw it and froze. "Grace!"

Grace stopped and turned. "Um?"

Mary was staring wide-eyed at her. "You're a Pierce Librarian!"

"Was wondering when you'd catch on," Grace said. "This entire facility . . . the Angel . . . is a monitoring station staffed and operated by the Pierce Library in Austin, Texas."

She resumed walking. "And a further note for Sherman Ames. If he reverses the name `Sylvia Fagus' he'd come up with a corruption of *Fagus sylvatica* . . . the European beech tree. This way."

The group reached an elevator which opened at a command from Grace. Once they had all managed to squeeze in the door shut and the elevator began moving upwards.

Mary was still staring at her cousin. "But you . . . the Library . . . how . . ."

Grace sighed. "After James died I was rather without an anchor. Needing something. The Library came along and recruited me to serve as the public front for the Angel. Simple, although I guess it really isn't."

The elevator opened, allowing everyone to enter a gently curving gallery which held a conference table and chairs. A sloping bank of windows looked out over the chamber they'd just left.

Grace indicated that everyone find seats. "I know," she was saying as she settled into a chair. "Hundreds of questions. But I hope this helps prove that my people certainly aren't without their own impressive resources."

Tom Sr. was staring steadily at her. "Should I ask why the Library needs a radar station?"

"Ask away," shrugged Grace. "But it should be obvious. Swift Enterprises has certainly made use of its account with the Library for years. And we've been more than happy to help. But, if you know anything about the Library, you should recognize that interest is a two way street." Her face lost some of its brightness. "It's not my intention to disturb any of you, but for years the Library's interest in Enterprises has been rather . . . extensive. You and your son, Tom, have managed to cut quite a wide path in regards to the scientific and technological development of this country, not to mention the world." Her eyes shifted a bit. "As for you, Sandra, well . . ."

Sandy kept the good grace not to answer.

"We know the Library's managed to slip people into key positions within governments and industries," Tom said to her. "So far, though, they haven't managed to infiltrate Enterprises."

Grace's eyes lowered a bit.

"I said so far, though, they haven't---"

"In any case," Grace said, "the Library long ago decided that it would be helpful to be able to keep Enterprises under . . . shall we say . . . friendly monitoring. With this in mind the Angel was established."

Tom's look sharpened. "The Library has a reputation for buying and selling information."

"And it also has a reputation for assisting people who need information," Grace replied a bit sharply.

Mary touched her son's arm. "Tom . . ."

"I said `friendly monitoring'," Grace emphasized, her voice returning to its usual cheer. "I swear to you now, Tom, that the Library has never sold Swift scientific secrets. You should be familiar with the original charter of the Library. Its purpose is the stockpiling and protection of books, and we operate an information brokerage as a means of financing this mission. But we don't operate blindly, and we don't do anything that we feel could contribute to war or harm. Any information we collect on Enterprises is meant only for our own personal use."

"What sort of use?" Tom asked.

"For openers, assisting you and your family when needs arise. Ask Sherman Ames. See what he thinks about the help we've given Enterprises in the past?"

"People," Tom Sr. said, "let's table the dilemma for the time being. If Grace and the Library wanted to keep us in the dark I don't think we'd be allowed here now."

"Thank you, Tom," Grace said to him.

"Don't be so quick," Tom Sr. told her. "This isn't over yet, Grace. It's only postponed."

Grace nodded. "Accepted. And now, back to our original topic of discussion. By revealing my connection to the Library it was my intention to demonstrate that the unknown group of clients which contacted us . . . and who stole the Cybtertron-II . . . were themselves genuinely resourceful and involved in something serious." She gave Tom a nod. "You have your cybertron back, and you now know the location of a secret Pierce Library facility. If you wish, all of you can leave and drive off."

Everyone else glanced at each other.

Tom looked back at Grace. "I won't speak for the others, but I'll stay."

Nods bobbed around the table.

Grace folded her hands before her. "I'm now going to tell all of you a story. It deals with a major scientific discovery which was made over fifty years ago. A discovery which was a secret, and which has since become a mystery. Among other things it involves espionage, murder . . . and James Dean."

## **Chapter Nine: Along Came a Spyder . . .**

"How many of you," Grace asked, "are familiar with Dr. Jeffrey Sowilo?"

Both Toms immediately spoke up, saying "Yes", and Ken raised his hand.

"A mathematician and computer scientist," Tom Sr. explained to the others generally, and to Grace in particular. "Studied directly under Turing. Was a member of Tom Sharpless' team back when ENIAC was built in 1946. Worked at IBM, Bell Labs and the University of Chicago."

"You'd call him brilliant, then?"

The Toms glanced at each other. "Oh yes," Tom Sr. said. "He was radical, but brilliant and incredibly far-thinking. I remember one person who described him as being to computer science what Jackson Pollock was to art."

"Do you recall what happened to him?" Grace asked.

"Mmmmm, yes. He disappeared in 1955 and was presumed dead. As I recall, there was a matter involving an acquaintance of his . . . "

"Bergman," Tom spoke up. "Gabriel Bergman."

"That's the name. Bergman was under investigation for the disappearance and possible murder of Sowilo but was eventually cleared due to lack of evidence."

Grace nodded serenely. "Exactly. Now, since you're doing so well, what do you know about what people felt was his greatest discovery?"

Tom Sr. sighed. "Oh yeah."

His son nodded in agreement. "The Unzip Key."

Helen was wearing a gently concerned expression. "Why do I get this feeling we're soon going to be hearing words of more than one syllable?"

"It gets a little deep, Aunt Helen," Tom told her.

"Color me surprised."

"But I'll try to keep it clear. Above all, Sowilo was a researcher into algorithms."

"Tom . . ."

"Trust me. Algorithms are procedures for performing calculations. Computer programmers essentially work with algorithms. Still with me?"

"Hanging on," Phyllis said drily.

"Sowilo was stretching the field of algorithm development; doing pioneer work into what we refer to today as things such as `super-recursive algorithms' and `integer factorization'. Before you all jump on me let me just say that Sowilo was trying to develop what we would call a quantum computer."

Bud was frowning. "I heard that term a couple of times while at SECFAR."

"Me too," Phyllis added.

"Not surprisingly, Sowilo's considered sort of a demi-god at SECFAR. But, to continue, Sowilo was supposedly on the verge of creating a master super-algorithm; a quantum cryptographic system. If successful, he would have established the groundwork for developing a computer program which could, conceivably, establish full unlimited access into any existing computer system, regardless of how complex it was, or how sophisticated its programs were encrypted. He called this work the Unzip Key."

"But he disappeared before the work was completed," Tom Sr. added.

Grace was shaking her head. "No, Tom. The Unzip Key exists."

Once again she had everyone's full attention.

Tom Sr. was staring openly at her. "What?"

"Here's where I think I should continue the discussion," Grace replied. "According to the information which the Library has managed to acquire . . . and I'll go into more detail on that later . . . Sowilo supposedly perfected the Unzip Key in 1954."

"But . . ."

Grace gently lifted a finger. "Please, Tom. Let me continue. Remember that, in 1954, computers were comparatively primitive. Transistors were still in their infancy, and the integrated circuit would not be developed for another few years. By developing the Unzip Key, Sowilo was essentially trying to use electricity on a stone axe. You were going to ask why there was no public announcement concerning the Key."

Tom Sr. nodded.

"Sowilo was anticipating the time when computer technology would catch up with his programming work. Unfortunately, in the early 1950s, he couldn't raise any significant support or financial backing for his research. At least, not in this country."

Sitting quietly, Sandy could mentally feel the approach of an express train on the tracks in her head.

"There were, however, other countries which expressed an interest. Japan in particular. After World War II, Japan began an extensive effort towards developing a modern industrial base, and that included computers. The Pioneer Corporation, Sanyo, Toshiba . . . all of these corporations were diligently working to move Japan as far ahead in technology as possible. They even went so far as to shop around for foreign discoveries that they felt could aid their plans, even on a long-range basis. Rather like China and Brungaria are doing today.

"A group of Japanese computer industry planners learned of Sowilo's work and quietly contacted him. They offered clandestine financial backing and support. In return they wanted the Unzip Key when it was completed. Sowilo agreed and, with this help, he was able to finish developing the Key."

"If the U.S. government had found out . . ." Tom began.

"Which they did," Grace said. "You mentioned Gabriel Bergman. He was, as you referred to him, an acquaintance. Not quite a friend. At the time he knew Sowilo he was a rising and rather ambitious executive in a growing chemical firm. Bergman learned of the Unzip Key and, although not a scientist, he realized the business potential of what Sowilo had developed. To him the idea of Sowilo's discovery going to the Japanese was horrible, and not just because it denied him a crack at the possible profits. Bergman confronted Sowilo, threatening to go to the authorities with what he knew. It was a threat he eventually carried out."

The train was growing nearer in Sandy's head.

"In a panic, Sowilo contacted his Japanese associates and a plan was quickly made. Sowilo was to take his existing notes and rendezvous with agents at a predetermined location in Salinas, California. From there, he would be taken on to San Francisco where he could be smuggled out of the country and on to Japan.

"Sowilo left Los Angeles early in the morning of September 30, 1955. He took as many side roads and such that he could manage, hoping to avoid being followed either by Bergman or the Federal agents he felt were on his trail. Unfortunately for him, however, his car broke down at what was then California Route 466. A place called Blackwells Corner."

Sandy heard Bud slowly go "Uh oh."

Everyone looked at him. He was staring through slitted eyes at Grace.

"Blackwells Corner?" he asked. "On September 30, 1955?"

Grace nodded. "From all existing evidence, Sowilo was stranded there and had no means of contacting the agents who were waiting for him in Salinas. Obviously he was very desperate to make the rendezvous. Then luck



. . . a rather tragic sort of luck . . . appeared in the form of someone who drove up in a fast car."

Bud closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Yes, Bud," Grace agreed. "Around five o'clock that afternoon James Dean showed up at Blackwells Corner, accompanied by a mechanic named Rolf Wütherich. They were stopping at a place in Blackwells Corner to have some coffee and meet up with a group of fellow automobile enthusiasts. They were all going to travel up to Salinas to compete in a sports car race."

The mental train hit Sandy. "Oh my God! You mean . . ."

"Sowilo overheard Dean and the others and, somehow, managed to convince Dean to give him a lift to Salinas. Given that Dean was driving a car---"

"Porsche 550 Spyder," Bud murmured.

"A car that was obviously not built for many passengers . . . and given that Dean already had Wütherich riding along with him . . . we can only speculate as to what possessed Dean to allow Sowilo to somehow squeeze in with them. They continued on to Salinas and the rest . . . quite obviously . . . was history."

Frowns were all around the table and Phyllis spoke up. "So wasn't that when James Dean . . ."

"At 5:45 PM Dean's car collided with another vehicle. Dean was seriously injured and soon died later on. And, according to what we've learned, Sowilo also died."

Silence for several moments.

Then: "Wait a minute," Sandy said. "Maybe I'm not the James Dean fan Bud is, but I do know his death was thoroughly investigated and documented. There was no mention made of a third person in Dean's car."

"And Wütherich survived his injuries," Bud pointed out. "He would've known."

"And very probably did," Grace agreed. "But, as I said, by that time the government was aware of Sowilo's defection, as well as the reality of what the Unzip Key represented. A massive cover up operation was mounted, with Wütherich placed under severe pressure to keep Sowilo's presence secret."

"I think I know the reason," Sandy said. "But why?"

"Bergman had apparently convinced the government that possession of the Unzip Key was of vital importance," Grace explained. "The government not only wanted to gain possession of the Key, but they also wanted to locate and uncover the Japanese effort to take Sowilo out of the country. To accomplish this they decided to hide the facts of Sowilo's death for as long as possible. Their efforts, however, failed to produce any results. As near as could be determined, the Japanese agents managed to slip away without compromising their operation."

"And the government never found the Unzip Key," Tom said. He looked around at the others. "If they had then we'd certainly know about it by now."

Grace nodded. "It was believed that the notes Sowilo had with him were lost in the crash, although we've been given evidence that an Army Intelligence team was sent to thoroughly search the area for the notes, as well as the remains of Dean's car. The notes were never found, and the secret of the Unzip Key supposedly died with Sowilo. For all intents and purposes the affair was closed."

"But not finished," Sandy prompted.

"Not until recently," Grace replied. "Remember how Bergman was officially under investigation for Sowilo's disappearance. There was even talk of a murder charge. The charges were dropped but, in the interim, Bergman was thoroughly investigated. This makes more sense when you realize that Bergman was one of the first people who managed to arrive at the crash site."

"The government believed that Bergman found the notes."

"Yes. Even after the investigation was closed Bergman remained under suspicion until his death in 1965."

"I remember hearing about that from some of the scientists at SECFAR," Tom remarked. "When Bergman died he made some sort of odd comment."

Grace almost smiled. "Do you remember what it was, Tom?"

Tom shook his head.

"Bergman's last words were: 'Pi are not square, pi are round. Gingerbread are square'."

Bingo's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"It's something of a joke," Tom explained to her. "In mathematics Pi R square."

Bingo gave him a tired look. "I know that, Tom."

"Sorry. It's a sort of math geek joke." He looked back at Grace. "So you're saying that Bergman actually had the notes on the Unzip Key?"

"I'm not saying," Grace declared, "and neither is the Pierce Library. Here is where we now get into the more personal part of the story. A week ago the Library was contacted by someone claiming to represent a group who was searching for the Unzip Key. They claimed to have evidence that not only did Bergman find and take Sowilo's notes, but that he had hidden the Unzip Key."

"How did they contact you?" Tom Sr. asked.

"The same way most everyone else contacts the Library," Grace explained. "As you know, we maintain both a website and a 1-800 number that

people can use to submit questions or problems. Depending on the nature of the problem it is then sent to whatever Section within the Library can best handle it."

"And you don't know the identity of this group?"

"No. However, they provided enough information to convince the Library to place a rather high priority on the problem. According to the evidence they gave us, they had managed . . . and we weren't told how . . . to acquire evidence that proved to their satisfaction that Bergman had the Key."

"Wait a minute," Ned said. "If Bergman had the Unzip Key in 1955, why didn't he make use of it himself?"

"The Library asked the same question," Grace replied. "Their answer made some sort of sense. Remember that Bergman himself wasn't a scientist or a computer programmer. He had perhaps the most valuable computer science discovery ever made, but he lacked the knowledge to apply it. If he had tried to privately research it, or find some way to apply it, the government would've immediately known he possessed it. Apparently, to his way of thinking, the only course of action was to keep it hidden."

She had been leaning forward slightly throughout the relating of her tale. Now she sat back in her chair. "And that, my darlings, is where we stand now."

Everyone exchanged looks.

"Well," Ken said, "I guess it's my turn." He looked across the table at Grace. "Where is the Unzip Key supposed to be? I mean, if Bergman hid it . . ."

"The group that contacted us supplied additional details," Grace replied. "They said that, according to the information they had managed to acquire on Bergman, he had supplied a means by which the Key could be located. A series of clues which he carefully scattered across the country."

"Oh no," Sandy moaned.

"Oh yes," Grace agreed. "It's that sort of arrangement. Of course we were initially skeptical. But an investigation by our people in Japan has very recently uncovered corroborating evidence. Apparently, both in 1959 and 1962, Bergman had tried to contact the same corporate figures who had originally funded Sowilo's research. He intimated that he had the Unzip Key and that it could only be located by deciphering a series of clues which he himself had devised."

"And we don't know where the clues are," Sandy said. It wasn't a question.

"We don't," Grace told her, "although the Library has an independent research team at work trying to figure it out, as well as trying to figure out who this group is who's searching for the Key."

"It isn't the Japanese that Bergman contacted?"

"The last report I received from Austin suggests . . . not."

"It isn't the Library . . . covering its efforts by inventing a mysterious other group?"

"Sandy!" both Mary and Ned exclaimed.

Grace shook her head. "No Ned . . . Mary . . . if I were in Sandy's position I would suspect the exact same thing. I'm afraid that, no matter how much I've revealed, and even with the return of Tom's cybertron, the Library is not going to be entirely trusted." She looked at Sandy. "You and I fully understand each other, sweetheart."

"All right," Helen said. "I'm still trying to play catch up here. This group who contacted the Library. They know Bergman hid this Unzip Key thing, but they don't have the clues as to its whereabouts. The Library is also independently searching as well. Am I correct?"

"I don't want to lie," Grace slowly replied. "The Library feels that it would perhaps be best if it possessed the Unzip Key, rather than this somewhat furtive group that's brought the matter to our attention."

Sandy had never stopped staring at Grace. "And this group specifically asked for Swift Enterprises' help in finding the Unzip Key. They stole the Cybertron-II and left it with you as a means of proving just how serious they are."

"Yes."

"So here's the big question. Why does this group feel that Enterprises can find the Key? I mean, yes we have brilliant people and computer scientists and such, but---"

Grace was looking slightly reluctant. "But they feel that Enterprises possesses a special resource which, according to them, has repeatedly proved very efficient in solving problems of this sort."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You."

## **Chapter Ten: Aunt Grace's Favorite Niece.**

Sandy had been hoping to keep her expression calm and "professional". She failed. "Come again?"

"I know it seems rather bizarre," Grace agreed. "But, so far, nothing about this business has been normal."

"These people specifically requested Sandy?" Mary asked. "By name?"

Grace nodded. "They said that Swift Enterprises had a reputation for taking on and solving difficult problems of a scientific nature. Then they made the specific comment that Sandy was a very competent investigator with a publicly proven track record."

"A very visible and noisy track record," Sandy muttered, still staring at Grace. "These clients of yours. Are they after an investigation or a demolition job?"

"Sandy, these aren't exactly the Library's clients. They . . . Sandy!"

Sandy had gotten up from her chair, moving past Pert Buxomity (who had been silently standing nearby all during the discussion) and going around the table to stand at the windows in the gallery with her arms crossed, staring out at the room below.

"Sandy, the Library doesn't formally recognize these people as clients," Grace steadily said to her back. "Keep in mind that we're not obliging you or anyone else at Swift Enterprises to become involved. I've only told all you this because the Library felt all of you had a right to know."

"It's too suspicious," Mary declared. "I'm surprised at you, Grace."

"Mary . . ." Grace began, and stopped. Then collected herself and tried again. "I certainly don't want to put you or any of your kids at risk. Believe me. But I will say that, on one point, I agree with these mysterious friends of ours. Sandy does enjoy a rather obvious reputation for facing and overcoming rather . . . shall we say . . . 'unusual' situations."

There was a collection of small coughs from around the table, most noticeably from Phyllis and Bingo.

"In fact, and I suppose this might not mean much, but there's actually been some talk within the higher levels of the Library of recruiting Sandy."

At this Sandy turned from the window, giving Grace a mildly surprised look.

"Don't look modest, Sandy," Grace told her. "Or, better yet, tell me the opinion your family and friends, and especially Sherman Ames, have concerning your talents."

Sandy didn't reply but slowly turned back to the window.

Grace once again addressed everyone in the room. "Speaking for myself, I would say all of you are free and clear to go back to Shopton. In fact, it'd be the sensible idea. The Library can continue its own research into the whereabouts of the Unzip Key. But this business of these people specifically wanting Sandy's help is an unanswered question, and the Library dislikes unanswered questions."

"If these people want Sandy so much," Tom Sr. declared, "then they could contact her directly. Or at least any of us."

Grace spread her hands slightly. "Tom, I agree. So does the Library. And Mary. I agree with you. It's all suspicious. But these people say they want to remain anonymous. They say that, if Sandy takes on this . . . this 'assignment' . . . then they'll be in a position to observe and monitor her progress."

"And move in when Sandy finds the Key."

Despite himself, Bud smiled as he noted how Tom Sr. had said "when", rather than "if".

"As I said," Grace continued. "It'd be the sensible thing if all of you just went back to Shopton. I'll of course provide you with all the information we have concerning this business. You'll obviously want to look over this in more detail yourselves."

Everyone was exchanging solemn looks.

Sandy didn't turn from the window, but she now spoke. "I'm surprised the Library didn't try to trace the whereabouts and identities of these people."

"Don't be," Grace told her. "We did."

Sandy seemed to be waiting.

"Their communications with us were made over our 1-800 number," Grace explained. "Their calls, not ours. And yes, we did initiate traces. Each of the calls came from a different public pay phone in the United States. A rather neat trick, considering the dwindling number of such phones."

Tom Sr. and Mary looked at each other.

"Very methodical," Tom Sr. said. "Very carefully planned."

"Too mysterious," Mary replied.

"Aunt Grace," Sandy said.

Grace turned to her. "Yes, dear?"

Sandy was still staring out the window. "Along with all the information you'll be giving us, I'd like what the Library has managed to find out about Gabriel Bergman. Biography . . . friends, acquaintances, fellow workers . . . even a psychological profile if you should happen to have one."

Bud, Phyllis, Bingo and Tom were faintly shaking their heads

Mary was staring at her daughter's back. "Sandy!"

"I'm not promising anything," Sandy added, turning to look at Grace. "But the Library isn't the only one who doesn't like unanswered questions."

A glow of fondness arose on Grace's face.

"You know you're my favorite niece," she said.

Mary's expression was considerably darker.

\* \* \* \* \*

They all traveled back to Chesterport in the HOW2, with Tom contacting Sherman, bringing him up to date on the situation.

"Oh, and Aunt Grace . . ."

Grace had been involved in a rather heated discussion with Tom Sr. and Mary, and she now turned with a bit of relief at the interruption. "Yes, Tom dear?"

"Do you know anything about this person?" Passing over his Tiny Idiot, Tom showed her a picture of the pale thief breaking into the HOW2.

Studying it, Grace shook her head. "I'm afraid not. She looks rather striking, though." She offered the computer to Pert Buxomity who also studied the image for some time, her lips pursed.

"No," she finally said with a shake of her head.

Meanwhile, Sandy was in the HOW2 bedroom, reclined upon the bed with her own Tiny Idiot and quietly studying the initial batch of information which Grace had given them. Looking up she saw her parents in the doorway.

She smiled tiredly at them. "Here it comes."

Mary went to sit on the bed near her daughter, while Tom Sr. leaned back against the dresser.

"Baby . . ." Mary began softly.

"Mom, I know." Sighing, Sandy reached out to touch her mother's hand. "And yeah, surprisingly enough, I do want to talk about this."

Mary patted her hand. "Go ahead."

Putting down the computer, Sandy sighed. "Mom . . . am I an adventurer?"

Mary sent a look back to her husband.

"I would think you, of all people, would be in the best position to decide that," Tom Sr. calmly remarked to Sandy.

"I know," Sandy replied. She looked away slightly, questions moving behind her eyes. "I . . . I tell myself I'm just a test pilot."

Tom Sr. snorted. "'Just' a test pilot."

"Yeah." Sandy now smiled a bit. "But I mean I tell myself all I ever wanted to do was become a valuable member of the Enterprises team."

"You are."

"But what about this other stuff? Getting Bud and myself lost on the Moon? Locating and fighting insane terrorists and renegade Russians?" Her voice caught for just a moment. "Going up against robots and computers? Do I really want to put myself in this sort of trouble all the time? Deep down am I that reckless?"

Tom Sr. was opening his mouth.

Mary beat him to it. "Honey . . . all your darling father wanted to do was design and build aircraft and invent machines and explore new places. And I believed him. But he kept finding serious trouble in the course of his work."

Tom Sr. gently laid a hand on his wife's shoulder.

"And then there's your brother," Mary continued. "Also wanting to be an inventor and a scientist. Exploring space and all sorts of places. I'm sure he never intends to get into trouble, but he does." Mary sighed. "And now, God help me, it looks like you're in the same situation here."

Faint wetness was glistening in Sandy's eyes.

"Your father, your brother and you. All of you basically just want to do good. Unfortunately, I guess that means facing trouble along the way. Even serious risk." Mary squeezed her hand. "And no, I don't like it. Not one bit."

"Mom---"

"But I think that, even more, I'd like it a lot less if you turned your back on a chance to do good. Part of the reason I love your father so much is that he's never been afraid to do what he felt was the right thing. And we raised you and Tom to want the same. Sandra . . . I'll continue to worry and fret whenever you go out and do these things you get involved in. It's my job. But I'll also be very proud of you."

Sandy moved to put her arms close around Mary.

"Just be careful," Mary whispered to her. "Please be very careful."

Sandy vigorously nodded into her mother's shoulder.

"Besides," Tom Sr. commented, "your mother looks really nice with greying hair."

"You're really a big help, Tom. And you look good with grey hair too."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was evening by the time they returned Grace and Pert Buxomity to the office in Chesterport.



"All of you could, of course, stay overnight at the house," Grace assured both Tom Sr. and Mary (her glance also including Ned). "We've got so much to catch up on."

"Oh we'll be catching up," Mary said, perhaps rather drily. "But we'd better head on back home before we're kidnapped by Sherman's people."

Grace considered it. "Yes, and I suppose Pert and I should send a full report to Austin. The Library will carry out Sandy's requests and send the information along on Enterprises' account, and doubtless it'll also be monitoring Sandy's progress and passing along any further news." Impulsively she gave Mary and Tom Sr. a hug. She then followed this up by giving Ned a hug which, to certain eyes, seemed a bit longer and closer than the other ones.

Bingo noticed a look on Phyllis' face. "Problem?"

"I don't know," Phyllis replied, watching the farewells. "It's just sort of weird, seeing one of Daddy's old girlfriends."

"Yeah, and think about how your Mama feels."

"Let's not," Helen said in passing as she headed for the HOW2.

Mary had overheard her and she now smiled. "Jealous, Helen? You?"

"Mary . . ."

"And this, mind you," Mary said to Bingo and Phyllis, "from the same girl who loudly and firmly insisted on offering personal assistance to that busload of basketball players from Corning Community College when we found them stranded in the snow after attending the playoffs in Syracuse."

"They were cold," Helen replied with dignity.

Mary smirked. "Oh yes, and I recall you had your own unique ideas on providing warmth. Mrs. Perkman was scandalized."

"Tall athletic boys get rather cold rather quickly," Helen said. "It's a known scientific fact. As for Mrs. Perkman, she was a dried-up old--"

"I didn't know you went in for jocks," Phyllis said to her mother.

"Of course. Why do you think I married your father?"

"Daddy was a jock?"

"Certainly was," Ned replied as he approached. "I was famous for running the one hundred meter sidekick."

"Funny," Tom Sr. said. "So funny."

"And I was faithful after I got married," Helen insisted.

"You certainly were," Ned remarked, moving up behind Helen and slipping his arms around her waist. "And rather appreciated." He carefully turned her around so he could look into her eyes.

"Besides," he murmured, "you'll note who I'm going home with right now."

"You . . ." Helen said in exasperation, then flung her own arms around him.

"Going to be a longer trip than I thought," Mary commented. "If we're all going to smooch then why not get started home and do that sort of thing in the HOW2"

"Goody," Bingo chirped, reaching out for Ken's hand. "C'mon, Handsome."

It was decided that Tom and Phyllis would drive the HOW2 home, especially as Tom had carefully inserted the Cybertron-II into its assigned compartment and wanted to run some tests on the trip back to Shopton. With Bingo going to prepare dinner in the kitchen (assisted closely by Ken), the vehicle began heading back west.

Sandy was relaxing on the couch, still going over the information Grace had supplied.

Bud came to sit near her. "So what's the decision?"

"Still working on one," Sandy remarked absently, her attention mostly focused on her reading (but very much conscious of Bud's hand on her knee).

"Well, if you're interested in my opinion . . ."

"Always am."

"You're about to go look for a hidden algorithm pretty soon."

"Mmmmm. Well? At least you've got to admit there's a rather comforting angle to all of this."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I mean, Bergman's been dead for years. How much of a threat could he be?"

Bud sighed. "Now I'm wondering how I'd look with grey hair."

"Distinguished. Don't worry."

## Chapter Eleven: Road Trip!

"You are nuts!" Sherman Ames declared.

Sandy smiled at him. "You're cute when you shout."

"Nuts!" Sherman repeated. "You're a coconut . . . a bag of peanuts . . . a Macadamia nut . . . a pistachio . . ."

"Stop when you get to filbert," Sandy told him. "I rather like those."

Midnight at Swift Enterprises, but Sherman wasn't letting anyone go home. With an expression that brooked no argument he had everyone assemble in the main conference room for a thorough questioning, which soon devolved into Sherman walking around the wide table and ranting at Sandy.

"The Pierce Library," Sherman now said. "That's the Pierce Library--"

"We know this part," Tom was saying to him.

"Not only reveals it has a secret base which specifically monitors us," Sherman was continuing, "but gets us all mixed in with some cockamamie scheme involving a hidden programming dingus." He exhaled noisily. "And you people are comfortable with this clandestine activity by the Library?" he asked everyone assembled.

Tom Sr. cleared his throat. "I admit I'm not totally happy with the situation. But you of all people should know how much help the Library's been in the past."

Sherman nodded tiredly.

"All right, Sherman," Sandy said. "I've made my decision to get involved, and you've acknowledged that I'm a lunatic for doing so."

"Sandy---"

"---so let's now get to business and discuss this like rational people."

Sherman stared at her for several moments, his hands on his hips.

Then: "All right," he said in a calmer tone of voice. "At least I'm happy that the radio pills I gave all of you worked fine, although your signals disappeared when you went into Dismal Mountain. But we still had a good fix on the HOW2 and I could've landed the Omnicopters on a moment's notice. Now, Sandy . . . if you're going to go ahead with this then I may revive the security amulet system or something. I don't want to risk any more implants. In any case I plan to track you through the wazoo."

Sandy blinked. "I never had my wazoo tracked before. Sounds interesting."

"I think I've got something I can adapt for you, Sherman," Tom told him. "Check with me tomorrow." He glanced at the wall clock. "Or, actually, later on today."

Sherman nodded, his eyes on Sandy. "You're still studying this Unzip Key thing. From what all of you have said, there's blessed little to go on. What do you plan to do?"

Sandy looked speculative. "Well, I have a few ideas. Rough notions, actually. It'll all hinge on the information the Library gives me concerning Bergman. And that's something else, Sherman. I know it's short notice, but I'd like anything you and your people could personally dig up on Bergman."

Sherman rubbed the back of his head. "You're right. It'll be short notice."

"Call Freida at SECFAR," Sandy told him, smiling. "In any case, I want a different set of information I can compare to what the Library sends."

"Okay. But let's not forget this other group. The one that wants you to find the Unzip Key. They'll be watching any move you make and, frankly, that upsets me more than the Library."

"Agreed. As I see it, the trick is to either move as secretly as possible, or move so openly that it'd be difficult for someone to sneak up on me. Especially if this someone wants to remain hidden."

"Mmmmm, and you've already got an idea, don't you?"

"Sure. I take the HOW2."

Phyllis snapped to attention. "Wait! Whoa Nelly!"

"What's wrong now?"

"Sandy, I need the HOW2 for the Maiden Flight project. I already started the ball rolling before we left for Chesterport."

"And I need something visible and mobile that I can use as a base of operations."

"Take the Sky Queen."

"Something visible and mobile that can fit into most parking spaces."

"Oh. Still . . ."

"Phyl . . . you're obviously not going to have a winner in the Maiden Flight contest right off the bat. So, in the course of poking around, I take the HOW2 on a demonstration tour. Maybe even photo shoots that you could use in your scheme."

Phyllis was thinking it over. "Yeah. But, darn it, I need to do my work here."

Bud was regarding his fingertips. "Have I mentioned how I'm a reasonably talented photographer?"

"Yeah," Phyllis agreed. "There's that."

Sandy smiled at Bud. "So I'm not doing this alone then?"

"Lady, you're not setting one inch anywhere by yourself while this is going on," Bud told her, steadily meeting her eyes. "Consider me invited."

"Oh super!"

"Y'know," Mary slowly said, "a lot of the problems, including all this hoopla concerning finding a nice newly married couple for the HOW2, would be solved if Certain People decided to tie the knot."

Sandy and Bud were trying very hard not to look in Mary's direction.

"Just commenting, you understand."

Sandy demurely looked down. "Yes."

Sharing a glance with Phyllis, Tom stood up. "Well we've all got a lot to do before Sandy finalizes anything," he said. "And that includes getting some sleep."

"Good idea," Bingo said, yawning and linking her arm around Ken's.

"In our own beds."

Both Bingo and Phyllis muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," Bingo replied. In an undertone she said something which, to Sandy's hearing, sounded an awful lot like "buzzkill".

People began filing out of the conference room, but Sandy remained where she was, quietly motioning for Sherman to remain behind.

He did so. "Yes?"

"I wanted to talk privately with you a bit," Sandy quietly told him. "After all, out of all of us you've had the most contact with the Library."

"Mmmm. I thought that might be it."

"I've had a suspicion ever since going to Dismal Mountain and, despite all that Aunt Grace told me, I can't shake it. Sherman, could the Library actually be this unknown group that's after the Unzip Key?"

Sherman nodded half to himself. "Yeah. I like the way your paranoia goes." He thought for a moment. "Sandy . . . the Pierce Library is useful and benevolent in the same way a tame crocodile tied up in your front lawn would be."

"I was afraid of that."

"Yes they're helpful. And yes, they've worked wonders for us before. But you've always got to remember that, ultimately, the only side the Library is truly on is theirs."

"But Aunt Grace is a Librarian. Wouldn't that mean something in our favor?"

Sherman gave a small shrug. "According to what she said, she was recruited by the Library three years ago after her husband died. Now yes ... she seems to be a favored relative. But if I were part of Library Command in Austin, and if I wanted to establish an annex like the Angel, I'd consciously looking for someone like Grace. Someone close and personal who could be used to allay our concerns." He saw the look in Sandy's eyes. "The Library is always thinking several steps ahead, Sandy. In fact, if I were possessed of a more devious nature, I personally wouldn't put it past the Library to have assassinated Grace's husband in the first place as a means of not only freeing her up, but of putting her into an emotional state where she'd be susceptible to recruiting."

"Oh Sherman . . ."

"Just speculation on my part," Sherman assured her. "But the Library is capable of using deception and even blackmail to achieve its aims. A lot of politicians and such in this country would like to see the Library closed down. But, over the years, the Library's managed to collect quite a bit of skeletons which were hidden in people's closets. The Librarians wouldn't hesitate to use them if they thought the Library was threatened."

"So you're saying . . ."

"Take advantage of anything they offer," Sherman said. "Just make certain you have an exit strategy."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Someone's up earlier than expected," Mary commented as she helped Bingo set out plates for lunch.

Sandy nodded, continuing to skip down the stairs. "Got a lot to do. Things to pack. Further plans to make. Places to go."

Tom Sr. glanced up from The Times crossword puzzle. "Sounds as if you've already worked out quite a bit."

"Some," Sandy admitted, sitting down at the table.

"Hands," ordered Bingo.

Sandy waggled her scrubbed palms at her.

"Bud left a message asking you to call the moment you got up," Tom Sr. commented, trying to figure out an eight letter word, starting with `B', ending with `S' and meaning `was a robber'.

"Finding it hard to believe you're considering going somewhere without the All-Girl Ninja Team," Mary said, taking her seat.

Sandy reached for some toast. "Yeah, well . . . Phyllis is frantic about the Maiden Flight thing, as well as trying to land Tom." She shrugged. "Possibly both. As for Our Miss Winkler here . . ."

"Ken's not down here very often," Bingo said in a small voice, blushing.

"No need to apologize."

Mary was lightly seasoning her eggs. "So where are you thinking of heading first?" she asked Sandy.

"Well . . . I kept wondering about it last night while going to sleep. Obviously, given the overall lack of clues, the only real solution left seems to be to adopt an old police investigation technique and visit the scene of the crime."

"Sowilo's home?"

Sandy shook her head. "Useless. His apartment building was torn down in 1963. Besides, I was thinking about the real scene of the crime." She bit into her toast. "Cholame."

"Pardon? And don't talk while you're eating."

Sandy swallowed. "Cholame. In California." She poured herself some milk. "The place where James Dean crashed."

## **Chapter Twelve: Westward!**

"Cholame," Bud was muttering. "That's . . ."

"Two thousand seven hundred and fifteen miles," Tom pointed out, "according to the Cybertron-II. Estimated time of journey: forty-four hours. That's presuming non-stop travel."

They were both sitting in the forward section of the HOW2, and Tom was demonstrating the Cybertron-II functions to Bud.

"Forty-four hours," Bud said. "We could take one of the jets or something and be there in five hours. At the most."

"I see," Tom replied, studying the instrument panel. "So you're not interested in spending at least two days alone with Sandy?"

Bud blinked thoughtfully. "On second thought, I'm suddenly feeling really positive about this mission."

"Thought so." Tom began easing himself out of the passenger seat. "And speaking of my sister, I'd better go see about nailing her down for the cybertron briefing and other things."

Bud nodded, continuing to go over the instruments.

A shadow appeared and he looked up. "Hi, Mr. Swift."

Tom Sr. nodded. "Bud." He peered into the driver's compartment. "Got to admit this rides really smoother than my House on Wheels."

"Well, that new suspension system you developed is a honey."

"Mmmm. All set to go?"

"Sure am."

Tom Sr. continued gazing over the instrument panel. "You know, you and Sandy are going to be spending rather a lot of time closely together during this trip."

"Don't worry, sir. Sandy and I can handle anything that comes along."

"Oh I know. I know." The older man became quiet for a while.

Then: "Bud? I ever show you my electric rifle?"

Bud turned to look at him curiously. "Sure. I got one, remember? Shoot it fairly often at the range."

Tom Sr. slowly turned his eyes to steadily meet Bud's. "I ever show you my electric shotgun?"

Bud felt the sudden urge to swallow. He did. "Message received at this end, sir."

Tom Sr. gave Bud a smile and gently patted his shoulder. "Have a nice trip."

"Yes sir!"

Nearby, Phyllis was showing Sandy a list. "Now if you guys are taking Interstate 80 west for the most part you'll be hitting Cleveland, Chicago, Denver and Las Vegas. All very nice spots for showing off the HOW2 and getting some pictures." Phyllis frowned slightly. "Cholame is smack between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Were you guys gonna bounce in either of those two directions?"

Sandy was dividing her attention between supervising a download into her Tiny Idiot and listening to Phyllis and, at the moment, she privately had her own notion of something she wanted to bounce. "It depends on what we find in Cholame."



"You and Bud should at least go visit Bud's parents," Mary pointed out.

This is why kids leave home, Sandy thought. "Mom! Bud and I are running an investigation."

"Just for a few hours---"

"Mom---"

"'Scuse me a moment," Tom said, pressing himself into the group. "Got a couple of things to give you before you leave," he told Sandy.

Despite her growing exasperation, Sandy was curious as Tom offered two packages. Accepting the first she was surprised when she opened the little box to find what seemed to be a small bottle of cologne. "Oh!"

"Smell it first," Tom suggested.

Carefully opening the bottle Sandy sniffed. "Mm. Sort of reminds me of 'Emerald Evening'."

Mary, Phyllis and the others were staring questioningly at Tom. "Not that I disapprove," Mary was saying, "but you've never given Sandy cologne before."

"He's never given me any," Phyllis pointed out.

"This is a special sort of cologne," Tom pointed out. "If Frank Zappa hadn't already beaten me to it, I'd call it 'Grand Wazoo'. It's a sort of 'radio liquid' I'd been working off and on with."

"The tracking device," Sandy realized.

Tom nodded. "It's a liquid cathode that reacts to your body chemistry, emitting a radio signal that, while very weak, can be picked up by the receivers on the Swiftsats and at the space station. Ken's already left instructions to have the 'sats tuned to the particular frequency."

"It's nice," Sandy said, "but Sherman could've just given Bud and me amulets."

"Yeah, well," Tom shrugged, "my way's much more fun."

"Is Bud supposed to wear this?"

Phyllis snickered.

"I gave Bud some radio emitting after shave," Tom explained.

"I'm going to wake up in the middle of the night with that remark running through my head," Mary commented.

Tom now offered the second package, and when Sandy opened it she went "Oooooooo!"

"Latest model," Tom told her. "Upgraded and designed especially for you."

Sandy found herself holding a metal cylinder just longer than her hand, and as thick as two fingers. It was a Snooper: a device which was the descendant to a group of mechanical pencils which Tom had outfitted with special features years ago. Since then it had evolved from three mechanical pencils to two objects the size of fountain pens, and then to its current more formidable shape. Among its features was a two-way communicator, a telescope with night vision function, a digital camera with video capacity, an emergency homing device and a personal and non-lethal self-defense system.

"You've upgraded it?" Sandy asked, testing the feel of the Snooper.

"Details are downloaded into your computer," Tom replied. "Basically you've got greater range and battery life. If the radio cologne pans out you'll have that to give your location."

"Thank you." Reaching down, Sandy removed her old Snooper from the slender holster she had sewn into her belt, and slipped the new model in. "Now I feel packed."

"Good," Tom told her. "I wanted to brief you on the Cybertron-II."

Sandy sighed. "Tom, I appreciate your genius and all. But I hope you'll appreciate my not wanting to rely entirely on the new cybertron."

"But you guys could travel nonstop with it," Tom pointed out as they all walked back to where Bud was waiting. "You wouldn't have to stop."

"Well, we were gonna spend the night near Omaha. Presuming we ever get started."

Bingo had been standing near the edge of the group and she suddenly thrust her fist high into the air. "Just remember that the capital of Nebraska is Lincoln!"

"Kentucky Fried Movie," Ken commented from just behind her.

Bingo turned to stare at him. "Okay. It's official. I'm giving you a houseful of babies."

Ken shrugged, smiling a bit.

Bud was watching from the driver's seat. "We going or what?"

"We're going," Sandy said, climbing in alongside him. Looking up she saw the faces of her brother, her parents, Uncle Ned and Aunt Helen, Phyllis, Ken, Bingo and Sherman. All of them were starting to open their mouths.

"It's all been said," Sandy quickly told them. "We're going to be careful, we're going to stay in touch and we love all of you."

The group managed a combined exhale.

Sandy crooked a finger at Bingo and the little Texan came closer. "You've restocked the pantry?" Sandy asked.

"Took care of it first thing this morning."

Sandy's voice dropped to a whisper. "We've still got the booze?"

"All on board," Bingo murmured.

"Then let's boogie," Sandy declared loudly. She and Bud reached up, pulling their hatches closed. Everyone stepped back a bit as, with a low hum of power, the HOW2 began moving away, heading for the front gate of Swift Enterprises.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I didn't think your father would ever make that sort of comment to me," Bud was saying to Sandy as they were passing through Bath.

"Well . . ."

"I mean, all that time you and I were trapped together on the Moon. Your folks never raised a fuss about that."

"Not to you," Sandy gently pointed out.

Bud looked at her. "Uh oh."

"It wasn't serious," Sandy assured him. "It's just that, when we all got back home, Mom and Dad sat down privately with me in my bedroom and asked some Very Personal Questions."

"Ohhhh . . ."

"They like you, Bud. You know that."

"Yeah, I know."

"But they're also my parents. I assured them that you were a perfect gentleman with me while we were on the Moon. And I know you're not the sort of person who'd take advantage of me in a situation like this trip."

Bud was quiet.

"I said, you're not the sort of person---"

"I heard. Just making this turn."

Sandy chuckled. "Just teasing you, darling."

"That might turn out to be pleasant." Bud was silent for a moment.

Then: "This is a really smooth ride."

"It is," Sandy agreed.

"Can actually drive it with one hand," Bud observed.

"That's so."

A few more moments, then Bud reached out with his free hand to take one of hers.

And the HOW2 moved further west.

\* \* \* \* \*

They paused in Toledo, Cleveland, Chicago and Des Moines long enough to stretch their legs and take some pictures. The HOW2 was a definite attention-getter and, at their stops, Sandy and Bud found themselves spending a few moments giving impromptu talks (which included mention of Phyllis' Maiden Flight project).

Nineteen hours after leaving Shopton found them approaching Council Bluffs and the Missouri River.

"I can still switch the cybertron on," Bud told Sandy. "We could program it to stop in Denver if we want to take more pictures."

Sandy sighed. "We might want to sleep. I hate to do this to Phyllis, but her promotional pictures aren't really my highest priority right now."

"So we stop here or cross through Omaha first?"

In answer, Sandy began touching the tracking screen located between her and Bud, cycling more and more detail of the area.

Bud watched her. "You've used cybertrons before, San. What exactly is your worry with this one?"

"I think we can stop near this Wehrspann Lake southwest of Omaha," Sandy murmured. "But," she added in a louder voice, "in answer to your question: yes, I know cybertrons are wonderful, and this one can handle the driving safely and efficiently. It's just . . . it's just that my personal experiences with artificial intelligences haven't been too good."

"Ohhhh," Bud slowly breathed. "You know that didn't even occur to me. And I bet that didn't occur to Tom either."

"Just don't tell him about it," Sandy asked. "Please. It's something I've got to work out for myself." She stared out at the darkness which had grown around them, watching the HOW2's headlights illuminating the road ahead. "Tell you what. I'll go fix us some supper and then we can stop and plan. I want to spend time reading more of the Bergman notes the Library and Sherman collected." She began unbuckling her seatbelt.

Bud was watching her. "Sandy."

"Um?"

"I'm not going to let anything get you," he told her. "Not ever."

Sandy gazed at him solemnly. "Bud?"

"Yes?"

"Put the cybertron on for a few minutes."

## Chapter Thirteen: Cholame.

"Phyllis was right," Sandy remarked. "I am spoiled by air travel."

"Told you," Bud replied.

Two days after leaving Shopton, and it was four in the afternoon as the HOW2 finally pulled into Cholame. Looking out through the windshield Sandy found their destination to be simply pleasant, if rather uncluttered. A series of low rolling hills and prairie-like ground that put her in mind of the trips she'd made to New Mexico and Texas. There were trees, to be sure. A thin stand of them scattered around their destination.

On official records, Cholame was an "unincorporated community". Sandy could see that this translated as meaning a single building . . . a roadside eatery actually . . . closely hugging State Route 41 and just southwest of the junction with Route 46. Looking at it Sandy was mentally remembering all those songs Chow Winkler used to listen to which described small towns that could be walked through in a matter of moments. Seeing Cholame was giving Sandy a clear idea where such songs were written.

If pressed for the truth, though, neither Sandy or Bud had much reason to complain about the trip so far. Sandy especially had been reminded of why it was so much nicer to have Bud with her on such excursions. Phyllis and Bingo were certainly good and stalwart friends, but they weren't the type to exchange close embraces (and equally close kisses) en passant while trading off driving duties. And, whereas Sandy usually found cooking to be an onerous chore, there was something admittedly pleasant about working in the HOW2 kitchen while a pair of male arms were holding one closely from behind (as well as having rather personal comments murmured into one's ear).

But now they were finally here, and now it was time to concentrate on the job at hand.

Shutting down the HOW2, Sandy opened her hatch, studying the sign of the establishment whose parking lot they had entered. "The Rabbit Ranch Inn."

"And James Dean Memorial Museum," Bud added, opening his own hatch. "At the risk of seeming obvious, this must be the place. Did you need me to contact the folks and let them know we've arrived unharmed?"

"Mmmm, go ahead. I'll scout around a bit." With a thought occurring to her, Sandy first went back into the HOW2 and located the radio cologne, applying a few strategic dabs before heading outside.

In the meantime Bud had radioed Shopton, bringing everyone up to date on their progress. For the benefit of maintaining familial peace he emphasized that he and Sandy had traded off driving (thus forestalling speculation of the two of them being unoccupied in the HOW2 under less than legally connubial conditions). In return he received encouraging messages from everyone, as well as a promise from Sherman for more updates to Sandy's computer.

Stepping out of the HOW2 he saw Sandy walking back from the direction of the Rabbit Ranch Inn, enjoying an ice cream cone. "Wait a minute!"

Sandy stopped.

"That's perfect," Bud said, raising his camera. "Move a little closer to the HOW2."

Perplexed, Sandy did so.

"That's it," Bud declared. He began moving about, changing position as he snapped off picture after picture. "That's just what Phyllis and I are looking for. The demure young bride with an ice cream cone. A touch of newly married innocence. That's it. That's it. Give me bridal innocence (click). Give me that newlywed uncertainty and anticipation (click). C'mon! A bit more anticipation (click click). Let's see some of the undiscovered territory in those appealing blue eyes (click click). A hint of untapped passion (click). Yeah! Give it to me! Give it to me!"

"I'm sorely tempted," Sandy said drily. "Bud . . . I'm standing in a parking lot in Cholame. This is about all the untapped passion you're going to get."

"Hmmm. Could you maybe put your hair in pigtails?"

"Dear Diary," Sandy muttered. "My boyfriend is demented."

"Can I at least have some of your ice cream?"

With a smile Sandy passed the cone to him. "You've got to see the inside of that place," she said with a nod at the Inn. "They've got an entire wall covered with tributes to James Dean."

"Yeah, and look over here." Licking at the cone he led Sandy to where a china-sumac tree grew near the roadside.

"Oh my. This is rather nice."

Bud nodded agreement. The tree was growing within a neatly maintained square of raked stones bordered by a low stone wall. Within the square the trunk of the tree was surrounded by a modernistic stainless steel sculpture bearing the name JAMES DEAN, as well as the dates and hours of his birth and death.

"We're actually less than a mile away from where the crash occurred," Bud explained to Sandy. "I remember reading about this. If I recall correctly, this tree is known as a Tree of Heaven. The entire memorial was erected in 1977 by a Japanese businessman who happened to be a big fan of Dean."

He noticed Sandy suddenly looking as if someone had hit her "Pause" button. "What's wrong?"

"A Japanese businessman put this up?" Sandy slowly asked.

"Yeah, he . . . ohhhhhhh."

Sandy nodded. "Uh huh."

"But you don't think . . ."

"I don't know." Sandy slowly walked around the memorial, studying it carefully. She suddenly leaned forward, spotting some additional words on the sculpture. "'What is essential is invisible to the eye'."

"Yeah. That was added there by one of Dean's friends. It's supposed to be a line that Dean liked from Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince*."

Sandy pursed her lips. "Interesting," she murmured thoughtfully. Her arms crossed she circled the tree a few more times, committing every detail to memory.

Bud watched her. "Well, Madame Curious?"

Sandy made a single soft clucking sound. "I don't know. I guess I just thought there'd be an immediate epiphany or something when we got here. I mean, this seemed to be the logical place to look." She nodded at the tree. "Especially with this here."

"Yeah. Say, that place have anything to drink?"

"Plenty."

They began strolling to the Inn. "I think you had a good idea," Bud said to Sandy. "But maybe we're still in the wrong place. Dean was buried in Fairmount, Indiana. Maybe we should try there."

Sandy sighed. "Nice idea, but it's too obvious. I've been spending the trip out here studying everything that the Library and Sherman could dig up on Gabriel Bergman."

They entered the Inn, and Bud paused. "Wow!"

Sandy smiled a bit. "Told you."

For the most part the interior of the Rabbit Ranch Inn resembled any of numerous independently owned truck stops and roadside restaurants found throughout the country. Wooden floor . . . booths and tables . . . ceiling fans . . . Formica-topped counter as well as a checkout counter which dispensed ready-to-eat items, bottled drinks and gifts.

The left wall, however, was an astonishment to Bud's eyes. An apparently endless collection of photographs, small wreaths, sheets of paper, drawings and cards attached from floor to ceiling and stretching to the far end of the room. In place of honor was a large oil painting of James Dean.

Sandy nodded at the wall. "Been looking over some of it while getting the ice cream. It's really something. Apparently this establishment has arranged all this material in chronological order. You can see up there where the years are marked."

"Doesn't look as if appreciation has dimmed any."

Settling into a booth they gave a waitress their drink orders. "What I was going to say," Sandy told Bud, "was that I've been studying Bergman. The way he thinks."

Bud nodded. "I noticed you glued to your computer screen. Bergman wouldn't hide a clue at Dean's grave?"

Sandy shook her head. "I don't get that feeling. According to Bergman's biography he was particularly fond of puzzles."

"Uh oh."

"Yeah." Sandy nodded thanks as the waitress delivered their sodas. "He enjoyed word games and had an extensive collection of mystery novels at his home in Westchester."

"Westchester? I thought he lived in Los Angeles."

Sandy shook her head. "His family estate was in Westchester. For the most part he lived there and, after Dean's death, he returned there. The company that he worked for had opened up a facility in Los Angeles, and Bergman was sent to handle it."

Taking his drink, Bud moved from the booth to wander over to the wall. "What sort of company was it?" he asked, beginning to look over the memorial messages.

"Commercial chemicals," Sandy replied, turning towards him. "Inks, dyes, solvents, adhesives. That sort of thing."

"Smart enough to run something like that, but not smart enough to work out the Unzip Key for himself."

Sandy shook her head, getting up to go join Bud at the far wall. "Bergman wasn't smart in the way that Tom or Dad is, but he was very very devious. There also seems to be a touch of the show-off in his character. To my way of thinking, when Bergman realized he was dying he felt it no longer mattered that he had the Unzip Key. What mattered to him, though, was that people would eventually learn that he had it. Even more, he wanted to make a game out of this. He wanted to demonstrate to everyone just how clever he was."

Bud glanced at her. "And the Library found all this out?"



"Yeah. From the way Sherman explained it to me, the Library's usual method is to carefully research any and all available records. This includes doctor visits, police tickets . . . anything they could lay their hands on. They also interviewed everyone who knew or might have known Bergman." Sandy studied some of the drawings on the wall. "Leaving a clue at Dean's grave wouldn't fit with Bergman's methods. It's too neat. Bergman wants to make us sweat."

They were slowly moving down the wall. "Good grief," Sandy muttered. "A sixty-page piece of fan fiction about James Dean." She gingerly lifted several of the pages on the binder-clipped collection, reading ahead. "Okay . . . now that's just going beyond being a fan here."

Bud saw what she was reading. "Oooh, yeah."

They moved on. "What about this group that's searching for the Unzip Key?" Bud asked. "Has anything else been found on them?"

"Not according to Sherman," Sandy replied.

"What gets me is they asked for you specifically. Now I agree you're brilliant. But doesn't any of this strike you as a little creepy?"

Sandy had paused to stare at an item, frowning at it. "All ego aside, yes it does. If these people were so desperate to keep the Unzip Key for themselves then why would they bring in outsiders? If I were in their shoes then I certainly wouldn't tell the Pierce Library about it, let alone drag me into this."

"True."

"And there's something else."

"Oh?"

Sandy nodded. "Something I haven't even told Sherman yet, but which occurred to me during the trip out here. This other group contacted the Library for help in getting the Unzip Key right?"

"Yeah."

"They contacted the Library. Not the Angel."

Bud looked at her. "But the Cybertron-II was returned to your Aunt Grace."

"Yes, but would the Library have gone to the trouble of establishing a secret facility within Dismal Mountain if they were going to reveal its location to everyone?"

Bud thought it over. "But the Library had set Grace up with her 'Sylvia Fagus' law office. That was an established front. This other group might've been told about it if they mentioned that they had stolen the Cybertron-II. The Library would've let them use Grace's office as the drop point, which they did."

Sandy smiled. "Well thought, Watson. But consider this. Our pale thief who stole the cybertron. Remember we managed to figure out the Library's involvement in all this because she transmitted a signal directly to Dismal Mountain."

Bud considered it. "Ohhh . . ."

"Yeah. Sherman will probably figure that out before long. I'll be contacting him anyway. There's something else I need."

"What?"

"Something we've forgotten in all this hubbub. Our mysterious thief went to a lot of trouble to leave fingerprints behind."

"Oh yeah," Bud recalled. "From a dead woman."

"Sophronia Sanna," Sandy said. "A Greek woman who died in an air crash. I think about and can't get away from the idea that there was something significant which we're overlooking. Next chance I get I'm sending Sherman a note to look further in that direction."

"Which brings me to the next question. Where do we go from here?"

Sandy seemed a bit mournful. "Yeah." She went back to studying the item on the memorial wall that had captured her interest. Shaking her head she moved on. "I guess we stay here for a bit and wait for further facts from Sherman and the Library. Consolidate that and come up with our next move."

"Do we take your Mom's suggestion and pop up to my folks?"

Sandy considered it. "Maybe. I wouldn't mind seeing them."

"And they'd certainly like to see you, love."

Sandy couldn't help but smile and turned back to him. "You have a rather nice habit of waxing romantic when we're out together, Mister Barclay."

"Well . . . being in the HOW2 with you does tend to turn my fancies towards thoughts of a decidedly domestic nature."

Sandy stepped closer. "Tell me more."

Bud was raising a hand to touch her cheek, but stopped as a cloud suddenly seemed to pass over Sandy's face. "Honey?"

Her expression sharpening, Sandy moved past him and went back to the item on the memorial wall she had been examining a few moments before. She stared at it closely.

"I will be . . . damned," she whispered.

## Chapter Fourteen: "Pi Are Round . . ."

Curious, Bud went to stand close to Sandy and stare at the item in question. Even though he hadn't given it the same level of attention which Sandy was currently offering, it had initially drawn his eye as well.

For one thing, whereas practically all of the items on the memorial board were square or rectangular sheets of paper or cards or photographs or some such, this particular addition to the board was round. Someone had cut a neat circle out of a piece of ordinary ruled paper. On it had been drawn faint curving lines which were lightly decorated with triangles.

Over all this the following lines had been handwritten:

The winds you follow do not end here  
But finish, rather, upon a high tier.  
When reaching this place you must not miss  
The part beneath where four lips kiss.  
When blessed with success you then must go  
To your next destination with what you know.  
Once there your path will be much more unfurled.  
Sending you east  
To see the world.

Bud noticed that whoever had written the poem hadn't been too neat in his work. The lines were unevenly spaced down the paper. What was worse, the author had used a pen, and a rather obvious ink spot separated the third and fourth lines.

"What in the world does that have to do with James Dean?" he asked.

"Oh you found it."

Bud turned to see that the waitress had come up behind them. "I'd been looking at that for years, ever since I started working here," she said. "So have a lot of other people. It just don't seem to make much sense, but it's sort of interesting. In a weird way, of course."

Turning back, Bud noticed that Sandy was regarding the poem with an entranced look on her face.

"Sandy?"

"Pi are not square," Sandy was murmuring. "Pi are round. Gingerbread are square."

"Huh?"

Her eyes were still on the poem. "Bud, you remember back when we were fighting Solomon?"

Bud snorted. "A lot more than I'd really care to."

"Well, right now, I'm getting the same feeling I had when I finally figured out the Shakespeare clue." She firmly smacked her hip with the palm of a hand. "Right here in plain sight all this time," she declared in a louder voice, "and no one's seen it."

"What the heck are you talking about?"

"Look at the poem, Bud."

"Sandy, I've read the poem. Whoever wrote it's no Emily Dickinson---"

"No no no! Don't read the poem . . . look at it!"

Bud once again examined the round piece of paper, trying to find what Sandy was obviously seeing and that he was missing.

After a few moments he decided to give up. "San . . ."

"Look," Sandy insisted, pointing at the paper. "Look at how the lines are spaced. See? Three lines . . . then a space . . . then one line . . . another space . . . four lines . . . space . . . then the final line. And then there's the big spot put in the space between lines three and four."

But Bud's mind was rapidly catching up and his mouth fell open. "Son of a---"

"Yeah!"

And now Bud was tracing down the poem with a finger. "Three point one four one. The opening of Pi!"

"Bergman's last words," Sandy was saying breathlessly. "They were the trigger to begin the sequence. Otherwise this is just a meaningless poem. Look. Those last two lines. If I'd been writing the poem I would've put all that on one line. But Bergman needed to break it up in order to carry out the sequence correctly." Her finger followed the shape of the paper. "Pi are round!"

"Sandy---"

"This has to be it," Sandy said. She looked up towards the ceiling. "See? This is in the space for items from 1965. The year Bergman died." Pulling her Snooper from her belt she opened its camera function and carefully took a picture of the poem.

Re-reading the poem, Bud felt his spirits sinking. He hadn't been expecting a glowing sign to appear proclaiming This Way to the Unzip Key . . . but the lines weren't causing any of his brain cells to immediately fire up. By comparison, though, Sandy obviously had caught some sort of scent. She was animated, practically glowing.

"C'mon," Sandy said, heading for the checkout counter to pay for the drinks.

Bud fell into step. "Where we going?"

"Back to the HOW2. We need to brainstorm this." Together they left the Rabbit Ranch Inn.

Behind them, a man had been sitting at a table, peaceably eating an early dinner of fried chicken. As Sandy and Bud left, however, he pulled out a phone and, dialing a number, began quietly murmuring into it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Entering the HOW2, Sandy immediately downloaded the image from her Snooper into the vehicle's computer, then brought it up on the large screen in the living room.

"Right," she said, staring at it. "Now we figure it out."

Thirty-two seconds passed.

"I notice we're still here," Bud commented.

Sandy sighed. "Okay, so it's not immediate. Have to admit, though, for a moment there I was really riding high."

Bud sat on the couch, his eyes on the screen. "'The winds we follow'. Were we actually following winds?"

Sandy shrugged, taking a step closer to the screen.

"And `four lips kiss'. Admittedly I've got some ideas on what that might mean, but I'd risk getting slapped if I mentioned them out loud. Has it occurred to you that maybe we've somehow missed finding a step that would make this clearer to understand?"

"Please don't go there." Sandy was softly tapping a finger against her chin. "Something," she whispered, reading the words over again in her mind.

"I have a something," Bud suggested. "We pass this on to the folks. Maybe to the Library as well. Let's get all the other . . ."

"Maybe in a bit," Sandy said. Then she realized Bud's voice had faded and looked back at him. "Bud?"

He was wearing a peculiar look on his face and was leaning forward, staring closer at the image on the screen.

"Now why didn't I . . ." he muttered.

"What is it?"

"This time I think it's you who's reading instead of looking," Bud slowly told her. He nodded at the screen. "Forget the poem for a moment. Those lines in the background."

Sandy turned back to the screen. "Yeah?"

"Think about it. Doesn't all that look a bit familiar?"

"I guess. Sort of. But---"

"No but about it." Getting up from the couch, Bud moved to stand alongside Sandy. "C'mon, you're a pilot. Heck, by now you've probably got more hours than I do. Haven't you seen lines like that hundreds of times before? With those little triangles? Maybe more neatly drawn, but still---"

Sandy inhaled sharply. "It's a weather map!"

"That's what I'm thinking," Bud agreed. He pointed at several parts on the image. "Streamlines. Those triangles could indicate shower indicators. And those little dots scattered there, and there. Rain indicators. There's the connection with the `winds' we're following."

"Oh." Sandy bit at her lower lip. "I guess NOAA or someplace has detailed weather records for 1965. That is if we're meant to compare those lines to an existing weather pattern from back then." She suddenly shook her head. "But that's crazy. That's too complicated even for Bergman. No. We're needing something else."

"We started with a mathematical clue," Bud said.

"And now we've got a meteorological one," Sandy replied. "'The winds we follow do not end here but finish, rather, upon a high tier'. Tier, tier, tier . . ."

"Shelf," Bud suggested. "Platform. Ahhhh . . . table."

"A high tier," Sandy murmured. "A high place where the winds go and undergo a change. And ultimately point us further east."

"No big revelation. We certainly can't go much further west." Bud thought for a moment. "A high place. Maybe it's referring to the Santa Ana Mountains, and the way they affect the winds coming in off the Pacific."

"I think you're on the right track," Sandy said, leaning over to quickly kiss Bud's cheek. "And now's the time we called in an expert." Moving back to the coffee table she began tapping on the keypad which was part of the communications console controls.

"You think Tom could figure it out?"

"Possibly, but I'm trying someone else first."

A phone connection icon now appeared on the screen.

"Swift Enterprises airfield," a voice announced. "Aerography Office. Gannet speaking."

"Henry? It's Sandy."

"Hey, Sunshine! I thought you and Bud were out west."

"We still are."

"Hang on and I can patch you through to your folks---"

"I need to talk to you, Henry. Got a question."

"Sure. Go ahead."

"We're looking for information on a place . . . very probably out west, and quite possibly in the Southwest . . . where incoming winds undergo a change and maybe begin heading east."

The voice snorted. "Ask me something hard."

"What, that was easy?"

"You're thinking of the Colorado Plateau. It's a natural stabilizing point for weather systems which then go east. A lot of the snow and rain which falls on the central United States comes off of this."

"Finishing on a high tier," Bud murmured. "Booyah!"

Sandy was about to jump into the air. "Henry, I love you!"

"Heh! I'll pass that on to my wife. I take it that helped."

"Yes! Thank you, and feel free to pass this along to Tom and Sherman and the others. We'll be in touch later on."

"Sure thing. Take care."

Switching off the connection, Sandy's fingers began moving across the adjacent keyboard. "If I know Tom he's programmed complete geographical data into this thing . . . ah!"

On the big screen the image of the poem faded, to be replaced by a physical map of the western United States. Within this map a large uneven area became highlighted. Sandy and Bud saw that it overlapped into Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico.

Alongside the map several lines of data scrolled into place.

Bud's spirits sank. "One hundred and thirty thousand square miles," he grumbled. "Marvelous."

"Don't feel blue," Sandy said, studying the map. "We're further along than I thought we'd be. Huh! The Citadel's within the southeast portion of the Plateau. I learn something every day. But that still leaves us with `four lips kiss'."

Bud looked thoughtful. "Maybe it's a place name within the area. You know. One of those names you find in Westerns, like `Kidney Stone Pass' or `Ain't My Fault' or the `Will You Be Mine'."

Touching a button, Sandy replaced the physical map with a political one. "I guess we could ask the Cybertron-II. I mean, if it was able to plot a course here to Cholame then it should have something weird like `Four Lips Kiss' in its database."

"I hope so. I mean, look at all that area. We've got southeast Utah, northeast Arizona, northwest New Mexico and southwest Colorado to find Four Lips Kiss . . ."

He suddenly shut his mouth. For several long moments both he and Sandy stood and stared at the screen.

Then: "Are you thinking . . ."

"Quite possibly," Sandy replied.

She headed for the driver's compartment. "C'mon, let's move. If we drive all night we can be there by sometime tomorrow morning."

## **Chapter Fifteen: 1,807 Feet**

"There it is," Bud said.

"I see it," Sandy replied, turning the HOW2 left off of US-160 East and onto New Mexico Highway 597. Several minutes earlier they had crossed into New Mexico from Arizona, and Sandy was now pointing the HOW2 back towards a meeting with the border.

With several borders, in fact. New Mexico Highway 597 was less than a mile long, and it led to a very specific destination.

It soon came into view, the road looping back into itself. Within the loop was a low square granite platform surrounding a granite disk. Embedded within the center of the disk was a smaller bronze disk confirming the fact that the location was where the borders of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah met. The geographical quadripoint known as Four Corners.

Stopping to pay an admission (the young man giving the HOW2, as well as its driver, a rather interested look), Sandy guided the vehicle to one of the parking slots located around the platform. Attendance today was light . . . only eight other cars in sight, and the people strolling about the monument paused briefly to watch the HOW2 move closer. Some even took pictures.

Setting the brake, Sandy climbed out, with Bud doing likewise from the opposite side. Closing the hatches they stood there for a moment, simply looking around. Although attractive, the monument itself was rather sparse. There was little else to see except several benches, state flags fluttering from poles and a handful of booths selling souvenirs, crafts and food.

"Well," Sandy said.

"Well," Bud added.



They strolled onto the monument, their eyes taking in the markings which indicated the areas belonging to the four states.

"I can search Colorado and Utah," Bud offered, "while you do the same with Arizona and New Mexico."

Ignoring the attempt at humor, Sandy continued walking about, her eyes searching both the monument and the surroundings.

Bud was doing the same. "Well . . . it's a beautiful morning. And I've got to confess I've always wanted to see this place. Y'know, the Citadel isn't really that far away. Wonder why we didn't come up here during the time we were spending down there?"

No answer.

"Sandy . . ."

"I know," she said tiredly. "I know."

"There isn't anything here."

"I'm beginning to believe it." Walking back towards Bud, Sandy indicated a brochure which had been given to her when she paid the admission fee. "According to this the monument was completely rebuilt in 1992, and again in 2010."

"So if Bergman had left anything here . . ."

"But where could Bergman have left something?" Sandy asked. "It's like putting a clown's nose on George Washington at Mount Rushmore."

"'The part beneath where four lips kiss'," Bud quoted, looking down.

"Bergman couldn't have disturbed a national monument just to bury something," Sandy countered. "And, even if he was somehow able to, whatever he buried would've been disturbed during the rebuildings." She shook her head. "No. We're either overlooking something . . ."

Bud gazed at her steadily. "Or we guessed wrong and we're in the wrong place."

Sandy let out an irritated breath, one foot tapping on the granite.

"No," she decided. "No, this is where we're supposed to be. But . . ."

She pulled her Snooper from her belt, twisting it into its communicator function and raising it to her lips. "Sandy to home . . . Sandy to home . . . Sandy to home . . ."

"I'm up," Tom's voice replied, and Bud moved closer to listen better. "How're you two making out with the information you got from Hank Gannet?"

"Not too hot," Sandy said and explained where they were and what the situation was.

To their surprise, Tom burst out laughing.

"You guys," he finally managed to say. "I can't make up my mind whether or not to be impressed with Bergman or not too impressed with the both of you. You're in the wrong place."

Sandy and Bud looked at each other quizzically. "Tom, we're at Four Corners."

"You're at the monument, but you're not at Four Corners."

Sandy stared at the Snooper, looking as if she expected it to grow wings and fly away. "Once again, Tom. Slowly."

"It's been something of a bugbear for decades," Tom explained. "The people who originally surveyed the site back in the late 1800s didn't have methods and tools as sophisticated as we have now. According to more accurate contemporary readings, Four Corners is actually located . . . wait a minute. Let me check real quick. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, here it is. Four Corners is actually one thousand eight hundred and seven feet to the west of where you're standing."

Sandy and Bud automatically looked to the west.

"Well," Sandy muttered, "as Sister Winkler would say: `Cut my legs off and call me Stumpy'."

"Rather than open up a lot of cans of worms," Tom went on, "it was decided to let sleeping monuments lie and just legally accept its location as the de jure Four Corners."

"Thanks, Tom," Sandy sighed. "Are the others there?"

"Not at the moment, and I was about to walk out the door myself, but we're all following your progress. You guys still doing okay? You getting Sherman's downloads?"

"Yeah. Tell everybody we'll look around a bit here and make a progress call later. Thanks again."

"If you're going to do what I think you're going to do, use your Snooper link to access the Cybertron-II. Find the exact location you want to go and upload it into the Snooper. Then switch the homing beacon setting to channel B and it'll guide you to the spot. Happy motoring."

Sandy twisted the Snooper off. "'Happy motoring' my behind!"

"So," Bud said. "I guess this means Bergman's a genius again." Once more he peered to the west. "About two thousand feet. A nice stretch of the legs. And I believe your Dad packed a shovel with the HOW2 equipment."

A brief search of the outer storage compartments soon confirmed Bud's belief as he located a folding camp shovel. Meanwhile, Sandy was in the HOW2, using the Cybertron-II to carefully measure out one thousand eight hundred and seven feet west from Four Corners Monument and loading the information into her Snooper. Thus equipped (along with two water bottles),

the two began walking west, listening to a faint and steady beeping from the Snooper.

They hadn't taken five steps beyond the outer border of the monument area when they noticed two men casually sauntering towards them. "What now?" Bud wondered.

"Well," Sandy replied, "understand that this is just a guess on my part. But, from their looks, I suspect they're Navajos. The reason I'm saying this is because the land west of the monument belongs to the Navajo Nation. Now . . . if I were a Navajo, and I saw two white people carrying a shovel onto my property, I'd be naturally inclined to ask questions."

"Mmmm," Bud murmured. "Nice point."

They waited for the men to catch up with them. As they approached Sandy nodded pleasantly, struggling to pull words from her memory. "Yá'át'ééh abini! Haa'iilá ñt'é?"

The men returned polite nods, and one of them asked: "Diné bizaadish dinit's'a'?"

"Actually I've reached the limits of my Navajo," Sandy admitted. "I'm much more comfortable with Ashiwi."

The men nodded affably. "Fair enough," the one who'd spoken replied. "We're part of the staff that maintains the monument grounds. Visitors are allowed to stroll about within reason, but we were curious as to why you have a shovel."

"Completely understandable," Sandy said. "I guess we should've asked around first. My friend and I are looking for something a thousand feet to the west of here."

The men looked at each other. "What exactly are you looking for, Miss Swift?"

"Well, we're sort of . . . wait! How in the world did you know who I was?"

The men now smiled faintly and the other one spoke. "Pardon my French, but there just aren't that many blonde white girls with great legs who admit to knowing Ashiwi." He nodded back towards the monument. "Plus the two of you show up in a fantastic looking vehicle like that. Plus your picture's been in the tribal newspaper quite a lot."

Sandy knew the circumstances behind the last fact and swallowed the feeling which was trying to build inside her. "Well," she said, giving Bud a glance, "I guess this makes things easier. Mr. Barclay and I are on something of an assignment, and we're following a lead to a particular location in order to recover an object that's possibly buried there."

Once again the men looked at each other. "Miss Swift," the first man said, "seeing how it's you, let me explain a few things. There's a standing order among the tribes to pretty much give you a free hand in anything you want to do. Gaagii and I will report your presence here to the elders in

Window Rock, as well as what you and your friend are up to. We're not to interfere . . ."

"And I promise you that Bud and I aren't planning anything harmful," Sandy assured them, mentally crossing her fingers. "A man buried something out here back in 1965, and Bud and I hope to dig it up."

"Can we ask what this thing is, Miss Swift?" the second man asked.

"That's the problem," Sandy said. "We really don't know. But we suspect it'll be some sort of document."

Bud now spoke up. "Y'know, you could come with us. All we really want is to look at what we find, and possibly take photos. You could come along and supervise."

Another look between the men. "Works for us," the first man said. "I'm Niyol Emerson, and my friend here is Gaagli Caddell."

The new foursome set out. "Do either of you know if anyone else has been out here recently to look for something?" Sandy asked.

"Not to my knowledge," Caddell replied. "Should we be on the lookout for others?"

"Maybe. Some people are supposedly monitoring out progress in this . . . investigation . . . and they might want to jump the gun if they feel we're getting too far ahead."

"We'll pass this news out to Window Rock and request further directives."

After about twenty minutes of walking (part of it including a careful climb up the steep slope of a cliff almost twice their height), the tone of Sandy's Snooper suddenly changed and everyone came to a stop in a dry creekbed. "We're here," Sandy announced.

"And here's where I make myself useful," Bud said, unfolding the shovel.

He began digging and Caddell looked around. "If you were worrying about anyone else being here," he said, "I wouldn't bother. This place hasn't been disturbed in some time."

"And fortunately," Bud said as he worked, "this is firm but fairly diggable hot, choking, filthy, irritable dirt."

"I could take over," Sandy timidly offered.

"As appealing as the idea of you covered in a thin layer of sweat is, I think I can handle the rest of this," Bud offered. He suddenly paused. "Besides, I think this is it."

Everyone bent down and, with a bit of combined handwork, they quickly uncovered a leather bound cylinder the size of a human forearm.

Bud quietly noticed the light in Sandy's eyes as she reached for it, and everyone stood up as she fumbled at the bindings which held one end of the cylinder closed. It took a few moments but she finally pried the object open and, before Bud could voice a warning about traps or similar potential nastiness, she had thrust her hand inside. "Aha!"

The others waited as, with a triumphant expression, Sandy removed a rolled piece of paper. Straightening it out she began quietly reading to herself.

In thirty seconds her face fell into irritation. "Peas and carrots!"

"I take it . . ." Bud began.

In answer Sandy silently thrust the paper at him and, with a sinking feeling, Bud took it and began reading:

The Child is dreaming, but he will know  
The next direction for you to go.  
He watches the Sun without pause or sway,  
His finger following day by day.  
Waiting for you upon the land  
`Twixt the highway of kings and a place oh so Grand.  
By the river, by the gateway, among the thyme  
Decide your fate within this rhyme.  
Once there you will find how easy it can be  
Because, Dear Traveler, you now have the key.

"It's official," Sandy muttered. "I hate Bergman!"

## **Chapter Sixteen: Clues and Love and Everything Else.**

"Still not much of a poet," Bud remarked.

Caddell and Emerson were in a position where they could slightly lean over and also read the document.

"You guys came all the way out here for this?" Emerson asked.  
Wrong thing to ask, Bud thought, seeing the look on Sandy's face.

Fortunately his eye was attracted to the last line in the poem. "'Because, Dear Traveler, you now have the key'," he read aloud. He looked up at Sandy. "We have a key?"

Curiously, Sandy peered into the cylinder. "Wait. Here's something." Reaching back in she removed a small envelope. Putting the cylinder under her arm she carefully tore open a corner of the envelope and looked in. "Oho!"

As the others watched she shook the content of the envelope into her hand. A tiny metal key attached to an ordinary dull metal chain.

"Well you're right," offered Bud. "That's something."

Sandy began moving the chain over her head and down to her neck but suddenly paused. "Oh!" She looked at Caddell and Emerson. "Guys, I'll scan the poem and leave it and the cylinder with you. But I've got to take this key."

The men glanced at each other. "I guess that's all right," Caddell told Sandy. "We were not supposed to interfere. We'll pass on a description of the key to Window Rock."

Sandy nodded. "And, if anyone in your group can shed any light on this poem, then please feel free to jump in."

"Sure. Do we just contact Enterprises if we learn something?"

Sandy sighed. "That, or log onto `www Sandy is a total loser dot com'." Pushing past them she began walking back towards the monument, the leather cylinder idly swinging from her hand.

Bud was watching her go. "Thanks," he said to Caddell and Emerson. "I'll make sure Sandy hands the items over before we leave. In the meantime, though, I'd better start trying to comfort a blonde." He set off after her.

For a moment Caddell and Emerson watched him moving to catch up with Sandy.

"Nice work if you can get it," Emerson said.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well?" Sandy demanded.

Bud paused. "I've just set the cybertron to drive the HOW2 to Shiprock. It's a town in New Mexico about forty or so minutes away."

Sandy was stretched out on the couch, a damp cloth on her forehead. She shook her head slightly. "Not you, dear. Sorry I snapped. I was talking to them." She nodded over at the big screen and Bud saw the images of Tom, Sherman, Tom Sr. and Mary.

Both Tom and Sherman seemed to be studying something. "This is a puzzler," Tom remarked.

"Thank you, Tom," Sandy said irritably. "I wasn't quite sure."

"Sandy---"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. It's just that we broke the clue in Cholame, and I guess that had me riding pretty high."

"I'm certain that this is meant to be broken," Tom said. "It's just going to take some time. These lines are obviously meant to indicate a specific place . . . it's just a matter of deciphering the clues."

"You two have been doing an incredible job so far," Tom Sr. added.

"Yeah, and I can hear Bergman laughing at me," Sandy replied. "He sounds like Frank Gorshin from the old Batman television series."

"Maybe I can make you feel better," Sherman now told her. "Or maybe not. It involves another mystery."

Bud winced, but Sandy turned her face to peer curiously at the screen.

"That was a good idea of yours to get me to look further into Sophronia Sanna's death, even though it seems to just get us deeper."

Sandy's expression sharpened.

"Sanna was on a flight from Athens to Tehran when it went down in the Kaçkar Mountains region of Turkey," Sherman went on. "Sort of a remote location. Turkish officials made it to the crash site long before Red Cross or Red Crescent teams could arrive."

"I don't feel any deeper, Sherman."

"Wait a bit. Both the Pierce Library and my people have been able to dig up extensive background information on the passengers and flight crew who were on the plane. On everyone, that is---"

"Except Sophronia Sanna," Sandy finished. "Why should I feel surprised? But her body was found in the wreckage, right?"

"Admittedly in several rather unpleasant pieces," Sherman said, "but yes."

Sandy slowly moved into a sitting position on the couch. "And yet, a few years later, her fingerprints show up on the HOW2." She let out a long, slow breath. "Okay. Now it feels deeper. Why does this stuff always happen to me?"

Sherman looked as if he were trying not to smile. "I don't know, but this is a very definite avenue of investigation. If our thief is indeed part of this group that's searching the Unzip Key, then there has to be a reason so much trouble was put into leaving a dead woman's fingerprints behind. And a particular dead woman at that."

Bud now noticed that the "scrambler" icon was blinking on the screen. "You guys still suspect the Library," he said to both Sherman and Sandy.

"Let's say we're just wanting to keep our cards close to our chest," Sandy told him. She looked back at the screen. "Sherman, keep working on it. And let us know if anything occurs to you about the latest poem."

Sherman nodded. "How much should I tell the Library?"

"Oh . . . I'll leave it up to you. It might be interesting to hear their ideas. Besides, they've got better cryptographers than we do."

"Matter of opinion."

Sandy smiled a bit. "Oh, and before I forget, how closely are you watching us?"

Sherman glanced at something offscreen. "The HOW2 is under surveillance from both the space station and the Swiftsats," he told Sandy. I've also got Omnicopters and cycloplanes working regular patrols. You're no more than five minutes away from aerial assistance if you need it."

Sandy nodded. "I just wanted to know so Bud and I don't accidentally punch any of your agents out. Make certain they're also watching for the opposition . . . or the Library, which may or may not amount to the same thing."

"Will do."

"I guess we'll layover in . . . Shiprock?"

Bud nodded. "We'll layover in Shiprock for a while," Sandy continued to the others. "At least until we figure out where to go with this. Thanks, guys."

A chorus of "love you's" came from the screen before the image was replaced by the scan of the most recent poem.

Leaning forward, her elbows on her knees and her folded hands supporting her face, Sandy silently gazed hard at the screen, intently studying the poem. Bud stood there, quietly watching her for several moments, then turned to go check on the cybertron's progress.

\* \* \* \* \*

The HOW2 obediently delivered them to Shiprock whereupon Bud resumed control of the vehicle, driving about until he spotted a roadside park just northeast of the San Juan River. Pulling into a parking space alongside some trees he shut down the HOW2, setting the brake. It was getting into late afternoon.

Heading back into the living room he noticed Sandy in the kitchen, moodily poking at some items being mixed into a bowl.

"Found some shrimp," she said, not looking up. "Thought I'd try to make shrimp salad or something. Not very hungry myself but we need to eat. We got crackers and chips."

Bud walked closer.

"I'm sorry I haven't been better company," Sandy said.



"That could apply to me as well," Bud replied. "I just think I know your moods by now, and I know you're feeling frustrated by all this. I've just been waiting to see if you'd manage to work yourself out of it."

"Yeah." Sandy began spooning sour cream into the bowl. "I guess I'm really mad at myself for being so egotistical. I mean breaking the Cholame clue, only to end up hamstrung on this new one." She shook her head. "I thought I was really being a genius."

"San---"

"And I thought I cured myself of arrogance a long time ago."

Moving closer, Bud reached out to touch her left hand. At first Sandy didn't respond, and then her hand moved to clasp his. Another moment, and then she was close in his arms.

"I can live with failure," Sandy said to his chest. "But not just now, dammit."

"You haven't failed," Bud gently insisted. "And I don't think your problem is arrogance as much as it is impatience. You shouldn't be expecting an answer to just fall out of the sky. This'll take work, and you did the right thing by bringing Tom and the others in on the discussion. Heck, we've even got the Navajo Nation working on our side now. Something will pop up."

Sandy looked up at him, and Bud responded to an unspoken signal, bending down to kiss her.

"Let me find an avocado," Sandy told him, "and we'll eat."

Bud allowed her to move away and, an hour later, he and Sandy were casually settled on either side of the small dining table. "And you are a genius," Bud told her, moving some of the salad onto a saucer. "You're just not as methodical as Tom or your father. You're a genius in the way a test pilot needs to be. Instinctive."

"You're trying your best," Sandy said, giving Bud a small smile, "and thank you." She ate at some chips. "Bergman is just a very calculating person. I know he intended to make it possible to find the Unzip Key. At the same time, though, he wants credit for being a mastermind." She poured more beer into a glass.

"Speaking of keys," Bud said, nodding at her throat.

"You know I haven't even bothered to look at it since we found it." Sandy pulled at the chain, bringing the key up to where she could look more closely. "No wonder we're not getting anywhere. This is too small to be an airport or bus station locker key. Maybe too small for a footlocker."

"Kind of puts me in mind of a diary key."

Sandy gave him a small glower. "Bud . . . if this leads to a diary full of Bergman's poetry, I swear I'll enter a convent." She returned her attention to the key. "No markings or numbers or mystic symbols."

"But it's something, Sister Sandra."

"Um . . . yeah." Sandy's attention seemed to be focusing on something else as she idly turned the key back and forth between her fingers.

"He wouldn't," she murmured. "Or would he?"

Reaching for more salad, Bud peered at her, waiting.

Sandy motioned at him with the key. "We didn't find the Cholame clue until we applied Bergman's last words. That was the key. This time we've actually got a key. Literally. Does Bergman mean for it to be used, or is this just a very broad hint?"

"You want my opinion?"

"Please."

Bud finished his own beer. "We sleep on it. We let it, and us, rest for a while. You've let this drive you into an irritated headache, and I like the fact that you seem to be calmer and more collected now. Even better if I can take some credit for it. Let it go for a bit, honey. Please."

Sandy considered it. "Yeah." She looked around. "What time has it gotten to be . . . ah! Sevenish."

"This is rather good salad by the way."

Sandy idly nodded, seeming preoccupied,

"What's wrong now?"

"Nothing really wrong," Sandy murmured, still gazing off into space. "Just a question that's hopping around in my head."

"Oh?"

"The sleeping arrangements."

"Oh! Yeah!"

Ever since leaving Shopton, Bud and Sandy had made very limited use of the Cybertron-II, choosing instead to keep the HOW2 on manual. In the initial rush to reach Cholame, and then Four Corners, they had taken turns sleeping; one them using the bed while the other was up forward driving.

Now however they were facing a night of not being on the move. Both of them.

Having surfed in his younger days, Bud knew a serious wave when it approached. "I can take the couch," he said, perhaps a bit too quickly.

"Bud . . ."

"It's a big couch, Sandy. Either Tom or Phyllis or your father appreciates comfortable furniture."

"I could take the couch," Sandy gently insisted, "and you could have the bed. Let's be fair."

"I am, and you need the rest more than I do."

"Bud---"

"Sandy---"

They stopped, their eyes locked on each other.

"Of course you know what we're really arguing about," Sandy softly said with a smile.

Bud nodded and their hands reached out to meet across the table.

"Of course," Sandy went on, "maybe you'd simply prefer better company. That Pert Buxomity for instance."

"San---"

"Talk about someone who obviously doesn't have to worry about drowning. Yes, dear?"

"I hardly noticed her."

"Hm! If your eyes are that bad I'd better have you taken off the pilot roster."

"Sandy---"

"I'm teasing, love."

Bud was studying her face. "Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Love me?"

Sandy was steadily returning his gaze. "So much," she whispered to him. "So very much."

They quietly sat there, squeezing at each other's hands.

"I'll take first crack at the bath," Sandy told him. "Then I guess I'll call it a night. Get a fresh start in the morning."

"Good idea."

Getting up from the table, Sandy went on back towards the bathroom while Bud rummaged through the hallway closet for additional blankets and a pillow to spread out upon the couch, mentally filing a note to have Tom look into fold-out beds as a standard feature for the HOW2 living room. Of course there were floor designs which allowed for extra beds, but they were currently in the basic HOW2.

Not that he had lied to Sandy. The couch was genuinely comfortable .

Bud paused, turning his head slightly and listening to the sounds of water splashing in a nearby tub.

"Speaking of teasing," he muttered.

He suddenly punched buttons on the coffee table, accessing the list of recorded video media and studying the titles, trying to decide on something he could watch which would help him drop off to sleep. Of course he could also finish off the rest of the shrimp salad, or read something.

And now he heard Sandy's voice faintly singing. More splashing.

A sigh. "Okay, Sandy," he said to himself. "Stop it."

He suddenly wondered if he could access his personal email account via the HOW2's computer. There were a few letters he could attend to . . .

More singing.

"Stop it, Sandy."

There was no way for her to hear him. "Memo to Tom," Bud said. "More soundproofing in the HOW2 bathroom."

Shaking his head, Bud touched a button that caused shutters to close over the HOW2's windows and windshield. Then (making certain the coast was still clear) he dressed down to his underclothes and, dimming the lights, slipped under the sheets on the couch, making himself comfortable. Fortunately the singing from the bathroom had stopped.

Picking up a Tiny Idiot, Bud explored various files. He soon located Jack Kerouac's On the Road, a book which Bingo had recommended. Settling himself he began reading.

But only for a moment as his eye suddenly caught a movement from the hallway. Sandy had appeared, half of her peeking out at him from around the corner. In the dim light Bud could make out just a hint of sky blue crinkle silk chiffon, freshly brushed blonde hair and one large, luminous inquiring eye.

"Come cuddle a bit?" she asked.

Up to now a major thought in Bud's head was the accuracy of Tom Sr.'s aim when shooting a gun. But some undefinable element in Sandy's voice was causing the thought to race away at high speed and dwindle to nothing, and Bud found himself leaving the couch and going to her.

They held each other tightly in the corridor, kissing deeply, both of them beginning to notice a definite breathlessness in the other.

"Are , , ," Sandy began, then gulped and tried again. "Are you going to be okay on the couch?"

Bud wrestled a small bit with the word "Yes", getting it out.

Sandy also seemed to be wrestling over something. "It's just that . . . it's a really big wide bed back there, Bud."

"San---"

"Just letting you know," Sandy replied rapidly.

Another kiss which took quite a bit of time before completing.

"You're so sweet," Bud was whispering to her, drowning in the blue eyes. "You know that I love you."

Sandy nodded.

"And you know how I feel about you . . . how I guess you and I feel about each other AND WHAT THE HELL IS IT NOW?"

The last was yelled in the direction of the door where a persistent knocking had suddenly commenced. Sandy could feel Bud's muscles tightening ominously, could almost swear she could hear his teeth grind. Then he was moving away from her and striding (stomping actually) towards the door, Sandy quickly following in his wake.

Unlocking the door, Bud caused it to open, and Sandy watched as it admitted . . .

"Lord I thought I'd never find you guys," Bingo chirped as she stepped in, carrying two large shopping bags and wearing a backpack. "Brought along some extra groceries, seein' as how y'all might be runnin' out of essentials. This place's in the middle of nowhere, y'know that? Got as far as Farmington then had to hitchhike in a lettuce truck. Hadn't done that in years. Hitchhiked, that is. Just lemme get the groceries put up here. Oh, you guys already ate?" Bingo looked at Sandy. "Lordy, girl, get some clothes on. You gonna freeze." She then looked at Bud. "'smatter with you? Bit into a rotten egg or somethin'?"

## **Chapter Seventeen: Next Move!**

Bud slept on the couch.

Sandy slept on the bed.

Bingo had brought a sleeping bag along and snoozed on the bedroom floor just inside the doorway.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day Bingo finished loading the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher before going to join Sandy on the couch to continue the conversation they had just started. She almost collided against a rather ominously silent Bud who purposefully marched past on his way to the driver's compartment.

Looking over her shoulder, Bingo watched the set of Bud's back. "So!" she calmly asked Sandy. "Just how bad was my timing last night?"

Sandy sighed ruefully. "Truth? I don't think Tom could build anything that would deliver that sort of pinpoint accuracy. Let's just say, as delicately as possible, that if you had timed your arrival a few moments earlier or later the results would've been monumentally different."

"Oops!"

"Umm."

"I'm sorry, Sandy."

"Yeah." Sandy idly looked out the window. "Well, as they say, God watches over idiots, little girls and bigger girls named Sandy. I guess, all things being equal, it was for the best."

"Bud's gonna kill me, ain't he?"

"Probably first chance he gets," Sandy admitted. She gave Bingo a more direct look. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but did my folks send you down here to chaperone?"

"No," Bingo replied, looking morose. "They may not even know I'm gone yet."

"Oh?"

The little Texan nodded. "Ken and I had a fight."

"Oh Bingo, no!"

"Yep. I was sayin' that I should be with you guys helpin' out, and Ken was sayin' that you had enough help with Bud along, plus you were in constant touch. I said more stuff . . . and Ken said more stuff . . . and we ended up sayin' a few things to each other that I guess we shouldn't have." She sighed.

"Bingo . . . honey, you know Ken just wants to spend as much time with you as possible."

"I know. But I'm part of the All-Girl Ninja Team. I'm needed here."

"And I appreciate your loyalty and your abilities. But there're lots more important things than getting involved in this sort of stuff."

Bingo was looking down.

"Surprised Phyllis didn't come along."

Bingo almost smiled. "She's been pretty secure on Tom's lap the past few days, whisperin' into his ear." She blinked. "At least it looks like she's whisperin' into his ear. Sorta hard to tell."

"So how did you get down here?"

"Deadheaded on a Swift transport headin' for Phoenix. Once there I used my Snooper to contact one of the planes Sherman's got watchin' over you guys. Rode with it as far as Farmington."

"How come you didn't have it drop you off here directly?"

"The pilot said he was under orders not to break cover near you guys unless asked to do so."

"Oh." Sandy thought it over. "I guess when we make the next report home we can let everyone know you're here with us."

"I guess," Bingo said reluctantly. Sandy lightly patted the girl's knee, then went over to get herself something to drink from the icebox. "You want anything?" she asked Bingo

"No I'm good." Bingo was looking across the room to where the Four Corners poem was up on the screen. "So you guys just gotta solve all of that to get to where you want t'go next?"

"That's the general idea."

Bingo was reading the poem, a finger slowly curling a strand of her black hair. "Well . . . as I see it, the key words are in that seventh line. 'River' and 'gateway'."

Sandy reminded herself that, in spite of her Lone Star State folksiness, Bingo was the most literary minded person she knew next to her mother. "Why do you say that?"

"The most general part of the description. All the other location qualifiers are more immediate."

"Oh."

"So we're needin' a gateway with a river."

Her head still in the icebox, Sandy nodded. "But no telling what sort of gate and what sort of river."

"Yeah, but the use of 'gateway's' gotta be significant here. Obvious. Meant to mean somethin' particular. That's why I thought you guys would be on your way to St. Louis by now."

Thud!

Bingo looked to see Sandy standing up by the open icebox. She had just dropped a bottle of vegetable juice on the floor and was staring back at Bingo with an expression as if she'd been stuck by lightning.

"What . . . did . . . you . . . say?"

"Gateway," Bingo replied, a bit meekly. "Gateway to the West. The Gateway Arch which is in St. Louis, which is on the Mississippi River." Bingo suddenly frowned. "Wait. That's wrong, ain't it? Bergman died in 1965. That Arch weren't even started then, was it?"

Sandy felt she was having trouble trying to breathe. "It was started in . . . started in . . . ohhhh." Rushing over to the coffee table she grabbed her Tiny Idiot and began quickly searching online files. "Omigod!"

"What?"

"Construction on the Arch began in 1963." Sandy turned towards the drivers compartment. "Bud? BUUUUUUUUUUD?"

Bud's concerned face looked back at them. "What?"

"Cybertron," Sandy ordered. "St. Louis! Now!"

His eyebrows raised, Bud immediately turned back to the controls. A few moments later the faint sound of power began appearing throughout the HOW2 as it prepared to move.

Sandy, in the meantime, had taken Bingo's head by the ears and leaned forward to plant a large kiss on her lips. "MMMMmmmmmmmm . . . thank you!"

"You're welcome," a rather pink-faced Bingo replied. "I just reckoned you'uns had already guessed St. Louis."

"I'uns should've," Sandy declared, sitting back on the couch and putting her hands to her head. "I keep thinking I've gotten into Bergman's mind and I still can't figure him out."

"Well, he's a man. They think differently."

"Umm."

"Okay," Bud said, coming into the living room, "we're motoring. Estimated time of arrival is twenty hours, which puts us into St. Louis around four o'clock tomorrow morning." He stared at the girls, his expression considerably harder when it rested on Bingo. "Now will someone explain what's going on?"

Bingo decided to remain quiet and as much in the background as possible while Sandy excitedly explained their discovery.

Bud slowly nodded to himself. "Okay, I sort of like that. Makes sense. Only now we've got to find the sleeping kid in a thyme garden. Not to mention this `Grand' place and a "Highway of Kings'. I don't want to shoot you ladies down. Especially not you, San---"

Bingo muttered something under her breath.

"---and admittedly I haven't been in St. Louis all that often, so I'm not an expert. But I sure don't remember a `Highway of Kings' being there."



"Well," Sandy pointed out, "we do have twenty hours in which to research further." Using the keypad she accessed the HOW2's geographical memory. On the big screen the poem was replaced with a map of St. Louis.

Bud sat down next to Sandy, slipping an arm behind her. "I'm guessing it wouldn't exactly be at the Gateway Arch. We just went through that business back at Four Corners."

Sandy nodded. "The Arch was still under construction when Bergman died. He wouldn't risk his clue by placing it there."

"Maybe you can do a search on thyme gardens in St. Louis," Bingo suggested.

Bud opened his mouth . . . closed it.

"That might not be so crazy an idea," Sandy replied, staring closely at the map, her fingers at the controls and causing the map to move about. "Bergman would've picked a fairly locatable spot. I mean, how many famous thyme gardens can there be in St. Louis?"

"If I was right about St. Louis," Bingo pointed out.

"It sounds good to me," Sandy assured her. "Good enough . . . oh wait. Back up. Zooming in." Touching a button she caused a section of the map to expand.

"Look in the middle," Sandy pointed out. "That road right there. North Grand Boulevard. Just over a mile west from the Arch."

Bud pressed out his lower lip. "Yeah, and it's a big road. Who knows how many thyme gardens there might be alongside it?"

"Surrender monkey," Bingo muttered.

"I heard that, Winkler."

"Kids," Sandy said, silently considering the idea of sending both Bud and Bingo to go sit in the corner. She continued exploring around the map. "'Twixt the Highway of Kings and a place oh so Grand'. `Twixt . . . `twixt . . . hey!"

"I see it," Bud said. "Oh, that dirty little---"

"Kingshighway Boulevard," Sandy said triumphantly. "Brothers and sisters, I think we've got game again!"

Bud squeezed Sandy's shoulder. "So somewhere between those two roads . . ."

"Up and down," Sandy murmured, scrolling the map. "Up and down . . . up and down . . . wait. What's that?"

"Move in," Bud said. "Ah-hhhh, that's Forest Park. But it's on the wrong side of Kingshighway."

"Okay." Sandy moved the map a bit more. "Oh! Here we go. Tower Grove Park---"

"And the Missouri Botanical Gardens," Bud finished. "Oh yeah!"

Bingo was working with a Tiny Idiot, her fingertips rapidly tapping on the little display. "Here we go. Missouri Botanical Gardens." Her eyes went over the information. "Seventy-nine acres . . . founded in 1859 . . . and it features a rather extensive herb garden." She looked up at the others.

Bud nodded. "I'll go see if I can safely squeeze a bit more speed out of the HOW2. But we still got to locate the sleeping kid who's watching the sun."

"Half a loaf, my darling," Sandy told him, closing her eyes. "And Bingo?"

"Yes'm?"

"Thank you. Sometime today I'd like you to contact Ken and patch things up."

Bingo considered it. "Wel-llll . . ."

"Oh for God's sake, girl. Put your pride in your pocket for a bit. You really don't want to be mad at Ken over something like this, do you? Not to mention vice-versa?"

"Ummmm."

Rubbing at her forehead, Sandy opened her eyes and got up from the couch to recover the vegetable juice she had dropped. Picking it up off the floor she wandered closer to the screen, staring at the map of St. Louis before shaking her head and returning to the couch.

Bingo caught the shake of the head. "Something's wrong."

"Yeah," Sandy said, twisting the bottle open. "We have been running around together a lot, haven't we? I was reminding myself that it's not just Bergman in this scheme. There's the Library, of course. And there's still that group that's originally responsible for starting this whole mess."

Bingo gave her a small encouraging nod.

"Sometimes it's been subtle . . . and sometimes it's been really really overt . . . but I can't help thinking that we've been maneuvered into taking this course of action. Enterprises in general, and me in particular."

"A lot of us think you're the best person for this sort of thing. And your Aunt Grace certainly agreed."

"Thanks, but that doesn't make me feel any easier about it. I keep rolling it over in my head, and there's something about the way all this is playing out. The brushstrokes are really familiar."

"In what way?"

Sandy sighed. "It's not something I can definitely put my finger on yet. But I suspect that, when I do, I'm not gonna like what I'm touching." She drank from the bottle.

## **Chapter Eighteen: A Date with the Dreaming Child.**

"You realize, of course," Bud was saying, "that Bergman technically should've mentioned how our destination was between Tower Garden Avenue and Alfred Avenue?"

Sandy groaned. "Please."

"Don't be such a downer," Bingo added.

Bud shrugged. "Just pointing out."

They had arrived in St. Louis at ten minutes after four o'clock that morning. It had taken another half hour of manual piloting before Sandy maneuvered the HOW2 into the Shaw Boulevard parking lot for the Missouri Botanical Garden . . . only to learn that the Garden grounds wouldn't be open for another four and one-half hours.

"Pastafazool!" Sandy grumped as they stood at the locked gates. "What good is a botanical garden that isn't open twenty-four hours a day?" She peered closely through the gates, making out part of the Climatron.

"Actually," Bingo slowly told her, "the wall surrounding the Garden is fairly low in some places."

"Yeah," Sandy sighed. "But let's not muddy the waters more than usual."

"You think the Bad Guys are going to care about a few measly rules?" Bud asked.

"'Course not," Sandy said. "That's why they're the Bad Guys. But they're needing us to birddog the next clue, so they're biding their time."

Looking around they located a donut shop a few blocks west of the Garden and bided their time.

"So what's the plan for when the Garden opens?" Bud asked.

"Simple," Sandy replied. "We grab the first park employee we find, pin him against a wall and get him to tell us where there's a sleeping kid who looks at the Sun."

"Dreaming child," Bingo corrected.

"Oh big difference, Bingo," Bud said.

Sandy shook her head. "No, Bingo's right. "Let's remember that Bergman meant for his clues to be taken literally. He wouldn't have used the words `dreaming' or `child' if he didn't have an exact reason. We're clicking along now and don't need to slip up at this point."

At nine o'clock they promptly presented themselves at the entrance gates just as the Garden was opening for the day.

"Y'know," Bingo said, looking around as they strolled in, "a pity we're in such a wall-eyed hurry to find this thingy and move on. This looks like a real pretty place to spend the day."

"Is that," Sandy agreed, knowing that Bingo's ebullience was also due to an extensive (and mostly private) conversation she'd had with Ken Horton during the trip. The gentle smile on the girl's face was announcing far more than simple appreciation of the currently picturesque surroundings.

Spotting what looked like a park guide they wandered over. "Excuse me," Sandy said.

The man had been adjusting an awning on a booth, but turned to smile at them. "Yes?"

"This might sound unusual . . . but my friends and I are looking for a dreaming child in a thyme garden. If that makes any sense."

The man nodded. "Oh sure. You're following the Sundial Trail aren't you?"

Sandy's mouth made an O.

"Sundial," Bingo breathed. "Kiss mah---"

"The Child Sundial's over . . . that way," the man said, pointing off towards the South. "Keep going past the Climatron, past the Mausoleum, you'll find the Herb Garden in the Victorian District next to the Tower Grove House. The Child Sundial's in a big bed of creeping thyme."

Bud smiled at the man while trying to pull a still-gobsmacked Sandy and Bingo along with him. "Thanks!"

"Oh, no problem."

"Sundial!" Sandy declared as they began walking quickly down the path.

"'He watches the Sun without pause or sway'," Bingo quoted. "'His finger following day by day'. Right there in front of us. It's Shakespeare in New Mexico all over again."

"Hopefully not."

Almost jogging through the park, the trio soon reached their destination. "There it is," Bud pointed out. "The St. Louis Herb Society Garden."

Sandy felt as if her heart was trying to jump out of her body as she stepped up to the wrought iron fence surrounding the symmetrically laid out

garden, passing through the open gate. "Spread out," she told the others. "Remember, we're looking for thyme."

Bingo wandered off, suspecting that if she said "Thyme is on our side" she would probably end up buried among the yarrow or lemon verbena or whatnot.

"I'm a cook," she reminded herself. "I know what thyme looks like."

But it was Bud who soon called out, waving for Sandy and Bingo to join him. Rushing over they found him standing at the edge of one of the carefully maintained beds. In its center was a one foot high sculpture of a young boy apparently daydreaming upon a circular base almost two feet in diameter. He had been shaped so that one of his hands was holding onto the gnomon of the dial which formed the base.

Everyone stood and stared.

"Well," Sandy finally said. "One of us is gonna have to make a move."

"You've got the key," Bud pointed out.

"True." Glancing about to make certain they had at least a modicum of solitude, Sandy gingerly stepped into the thyme, kneeling down near the statue. She began feeling around it with her fingers.

Bingo was studying her computer. "In case anyone's interested, the sculpture was installed here back in 1965."

"Find out by who and we'll pass the name on to Sherman," Sandy told her as she continued exploring. "Might turn out useful."

Bud crouched low, watching her. "Anything?"

"It's practically been fifty years," Sandy muttered back. "By now the keyhole could've been covered over . . . no, wait. Something here by the right foot." Rubbing hard with a finger she managed to reveal a small opening in the metal.

As Bud and Bingo watched, their own excitement rising, Sandy unlooped the key from around her neck, then carefully fitted it into the opening, turning it. Her efforts were rewarded by a single metallic click . . . more of a cough as some hidden mechanism cleared its throat after decades of inactivity.

Grasping the statue, Sandy began gently pushing, then pulling . . . then she learned that the entire statue and base creaked aside on metal hinges which had practically frozen solid, their squeal crying throughout the Garden (causing Bingo to anxiously look around).

Bud watched Sandy as she let out a slow breath and reached into the circular space which had been hidden by the statue. A second, and then she was pulling out a single rolled piece of paper.

"Time, once again, for Poetry Hour," Bud remarked.

Sandy was starting to unroll the paper. "We'd better extract ourselves before doing that," Bud suggested. "Or do you want the park cops finding us bent over a vandalized statue?"

"Yeah," Sandy said reluctantly. "You're right." Thrusting the paper into her belt she began moving the statue back into place. They then started to leave the Herb Garden.

Passing through the gate Sandy took a careful look about, then pulled the paper from her belt, unrolling it. "Yeah. Here we go again."

She began reading out loud:

So far you have managed to beat all the odds.  
Now travel to the hall of the Northern Gods.  
Past the tower which silently stands guard.  
Search and seek, though the trail be hard.  
The final clue for making you rich  
Has been entrusted to a very fine witch.  
But the witch lies still, so calm your fears.  
A Sad Lady keeps watch o'er her with frozen tears.  
The most difficult part still lies ahead  
So remember carefully all that's been read.  
The prize you desire is with the fairest of all,  
But you will never find it without the number to call

"Jeez-O-Pete," Bingo muttered.

"To quote the Prophet," Sandy replied, "Hoo boy! When the heck did we suddenly arrive at Fairy Tale Time?"

"Refresh my memory. Bergman didn't die of senility or anything like that, did he?"

"What's this on the other side?" Bud suddenly asked.

Turning the paper over, Sandy saw that the poem had been written on a page torn from a calendar. September 1965.

"Wasn't that when Bergman died?"

Sandy nodded, still looking at the page. The squares on the calendar were mostly blank. But circles had been drawn around the days 3, 6 and 9, with 9 possessing two circles.

"Am I the only one whose head is hurting?" she asked.

"I think we'll all be needing aspirin," Bud agreed.

But when they walked out of the Garden gates Bingo suddenly froze. "Guys?"

Sandy and Bud had also spotted the two men standing near the HOW2. The way they were examining the vehicle was providing sufficient cause for

suspicion. Even more so was their reaction to discovering they were being watched: ducking into a waiting car and driving off.

"Go," shouted Sandy, breaking into a run and reaching for her computer. Tapping an icon on the screen caused the forward hatches on the HOW2 to open, as well as the main door. By the time Bud and Sandy swung into the drivers compartment (with Bingo ducking in through the main door), the HOW2 was already humming with power.

Pulling down her hatch, Sandy grabbed at the controls and began taking the HOW2 in pursuit of the other vehicle. She had tried to keep her eyes on it, seeing it heading east on Shaw Boulevard.

"Combine LIDAR, radar and forward video," she ordered Bud. "Try and get a clear scan of that car. Especially the license plate."

Bud knew there were moments for calmly reasoning with Sandy . . . and that this wasn't one of them. As Sandy piloted the HOW2 onto Shaw Boulevard Bud began operating the manual controls for the sensor package.

"Bingo?" Sandy called back, "you still with us?"

"Hangin' on."

Bud was shaking his head. "Sandy I've lost them. They must've been a good six blocks ahead of us." He glanced down at the map screen between them. "I'm guessing they turned north on Grand to try and make Interstate 44."

Instead of being irritated at the news, Bud noticed that Sandy seemed to be breathing calmly. A rather ominous sort of calm. Her sudden checking of the surrounding road didn't bring reassurance.

"Bingo!"

Bingo poked her head into the compartment. "Yeah?"

"Go to the dinette and strap yourself in."

"Huh?"

"You're about to take the wheel."

Bingo quickly moved to obey.

Bud was staring at Sandy. "What are you about to do?"

She was touching controls on the overhead console. "Prepare to disengage atomicar."

"San---"

Behind them a metal panel slid across the entranceway into the HOW2, sealing it off.

"Main docking clamps released," Sandy announced. "HOW2 positive control transferred to auxiliary . . . umbilicals retracted . . ."

"San!"

"Launch!"

Less than five hundred feet from the western edge of Compton Hill Reservoir Park the forward section of the HOW2 separated from the main body of the vehicle, picking up speed.

In the cockpit, Sandy pulled hard on a lever. "Vertical thrust engaged. Going airborne."

To the shocked eyes of the joggers and dog-walkers in the park, the atomocar quickly lifted into the air, barely missing the tops of the trees as it soared into the sky, its wheels retracting and flaps closing over them.

Sitting alongside Sandy, Bud found himself reflecting that not only did doctors make the worst patients, but pilots made the worst passengers. "Sandy . . ."

She was guiding the atomocar in a shallow curve, taking it nearer to Interstate 44. "I know I'm crazy," she told him, her voice shaking a bit. "Maybe those guys were just interested in the HOW2. But they drove off just a bit too quickly for my peace of mind."

Remembering something, Bud slipped on his headset. "Bingo?"

"I'm okay," the Texan replied. "Just got honked at a lot. It's handlin' pretty good, and I've got fair visibility, but I'm gettin' off the road for the time being. Doublin' back an' headin' for the parkin' lot for the Mental Health Association which, all things considered, ain't too shabby a choice."

Bud nodded.

"There they are," Sandy cried out. "I think."

Looking out the windshield Bud noticed they were flying over where Interstate 44 merged with Interstate 55, turning north.

He tried to see where Sandy was looking. "That might be them. You talking about that blue Fusion?"

"Yeah."

"They're driving fast enough. Might've spotted us. I'll bet a nickel they're gonna cross the bridge into Illinois."

"My thought as well."

Bud glanced at her. "You know we could call the police for help. Or contact one of Sherman's watchdogs."

Sandy shook her head. "I don't want to stop them."

"You don't want to . . . ohhhhhhhh!"



Sandy nodded. "I want to see where they go."

Gaining a bit more altitude they kept their eyes on the progress of the blue car. A part of Bud's mind considered that, in the past half-hour, he and Sandy had doubtless violated several local and state road and air traffic laws. But he admitted that Sandy's plan was interesting and worth following.

True to his guess, the car went over the Poplar Street Bridge east into Illinois. Sandy waited until she saw the car leave the Interstate and head south onto Mississippi Avenue just beyond the bridge before sending the atomicar into pursuit (following the impulse of some imp within her to swoop beneath the Gateway Arch). Losing altitude, Sandy noticed that the car had come to a stop at the edge of what seemed to be some sort of industrial facility. Extending the wheels, Sandy used the atomicar's lifters to carefully bring her and Bud in for a landing within a few feet of their objective.

The car was empty, but twenty feet away there was a dusty looking shack with a door that was slightly ajar. Sandy and Bud quietly sat and stared at it for a few moments before Sandy cracked open her hatch.

"Radio cologne," Bud warned.

Sighing, Sandy reached for the little bottle, opening it and splashing some on her. She then pushed her hatch open while Bud did the same on his side.

"You got a Snooper?" Sandy asked Bud, her eyes still on the shack.

"Back at the HOW2."

Sandy figured now wasn't the time for a lecture, and pulled her own Snooper from her belt, adjusting the device into its self-defense setting. Her and Bud then began slowly walking towards the shack, both of them ready to duck or dive aside at the slightest evidence of movement. There was nothing though, not even a stray sound from within the shack.

Reaching the door, Sandy nodded at Bud and positioned herself, steadily pointing the Snooper. As quietly as he could manage, Bud edged alongside the door, then put his hand on it and pushed it open, preparing to dive in low so as to draw the fire of anyone who might've been waiting inside (and providing a better target for Sandy).

No reaction, though, and Bud finally peeked inside. This was followed by a longer look and he motioned for Sandy to come closer. Joining Bud at the doorway, Sandy followed him in.

There was no one inside the shack. Nothing except dust, an old wooden table in the center, and two objects the size of lunchboxes. One at either end of the shack. At the far end was another door.

From the ceiling above the table a long piece of twine hung down. At the end of the twine, at eye level, someone had taped a sealed legal-size envelope, and it was slowly twirling about.

Curious, Sandy approached the table, her hand reaching out for the envelope. At that moment there was the sound of a car engine.

Bud spun around to look out the door they had come through. "They're driving off," he said. "They must've snuck out the back way while we were coming in through the front."

Sandy continued touching the envelope, turning it so she could read what was written on the surface.

WELCOME, SANDRA SWIFT.

Her hand automatically pulled the envelope loose from the twine even as she was moving to grab at Bud and push him towards the door. "GET OUT! GET OUT NOW!"

Both of them rushed outside, running for the atomicar. At the last moment some instinct caused them both to fall flat to the ground.

Less than a moment later the shack behind them exploded.

## **Chapter Nineteen: The Flowing Hair Dollar.**

Human nature being what it was, an unscheduled explosion at ten-thirty in the morning had a tendency to attract attention. Within fifteen minutes vehicles from the East St. Louis Police and Fire Departments had converged upon the area, closely followed by two ambulances. Police helicopters from St. Louis also passed over the spot. But, in spite of reasonable expectations of catastrophic tragedy, all they found beside the remains of the blasted shack was the atomicar and Bud sitting on the ground next to a rather morose-looking Sandy. Neither of them were injured except for some cuts and bruises, as well as gradually fading deafness.

With no immediate blood in sight the wheels of bureaucracy began spinning and, an hour later, official vehicles from the governments of St. Louis and East St. Louis had arrived on the scene, accompanied by the main body of the HOW2 with a worried Bingo at the controls.

Her concern gratefully faded when she saw that Sandy and Bud were relatively unharmed. "Well," she remarked to Sandy, coming up, "it's been said before, but it bears repeatin'. It's pretty easy to tell where you've been."

"Thank you, Bingo," Sandy said dully. "Thank you so very much."

Bingo decided to keep further witticisms unsaid for the time being.

A well-dressed man and woman now moved within the circle of officials and approached. "I'm Franklin Bonner," the man said.

"The Honorable Mayor of East St. Louis," Sandy replied, tiredly looking up at him. Her eyes shifted to the woman. "Which would make you Melody Purvis, the equally honorable Mayor of St. Louis."

The woman hesitantly nodded. "And you're Sandra Swift."

"Thank you, we're fine," Sandy told her.

Bud lightly nudged his knee against her.

"I know that came out rather callous," Purvis admitted. "It's just that, when we learned it was you---"

"You and Mayor Bonner automatically considered ordering a mass evacuation of the entire Greater St. Louis area. Mrs. Mayor I'm used to it by now. I even have trouble cashing checks these days." Sandy sighed. "Would it make any difference if I told you it really wasn't the intention of Mister Barclay and myself to be almost blown to bits?"

The mayors looked at each other. "I'd be inclined to give the both of you the benefit of the doubt," Bonner said. "And especially in light of some very recent phone calls we've received which explained your presence in our cities."

"My family?"

"Them . . . and some others."

From the tone of Bonner's voice Sandy suspected the Pierce Library had been at work behind the scenes.

"In the best of all possible worlds," Sandy slowly said, "I would suppose that my friends and I would be free to go. However . . ."

"However," Purvis said, "considering all that's happened . . . not just what happened here, but also an unauthorized Tommycar flight over a metropolitan airspace . . . there are a lot of explanations I think we're entitled to."

Sandy thought for a moment. Then, with a groan, she rose to her feet, followed by Bud. "Perhaps we'd all feel better if the surroundings were a bit more private. Could we discuss the situation in the House on Wheels?"

The mayors glanced back at the HOW2. "That'd be preferable," Purvis said with a small scent of relief in her words.

Sandy nodded. "Bud? Could you reconnect the atomicar with the HOW2 while I have a talk with Their Honors?"

"Sure."

With Bingo following, Sandy led Purvis and Bonner into the HOW2. "Please make yourselves comfortable," Sandy told them.

The mayors arranged themselves on the couch while Sandy took one of the chairs at the dinette and Bingo remained close by. "How much do you already know?" Sandy asked her visitors.

"First there was an announcement a few days ago that Swift Enterprises was organizing a honeymoon contest to promote the new House on Wheels," Bonner replied. "We've already had a few local television spots broadcast locally. Then the HOW2 prototype goes west on a promotional tour." Bonner seemed to resist the urge to look around him. "I have to admit I didn't really follow the details too closely."

Sandy nodded, feeling sore all over. "Mister Bonner . . . Mrs. Purvis . . . my companions and I are not only promoting the HOW2, we're also engaged in something of an investigation regarding a missing intellectual property."

Bonner frowned. "And the search led you here?"

"We believe the item we're looking for is somewhere much further east," Sandy assured him, silently deciding not to go into details. "We were following a lead which brought us to this place."

A series of soft thumps and whines from the forward end announced the atomicar docking with the HOW2, a fact confirmed when, moments later, the panel which had sealed off the forward passageway reopened to admit Bud.

Sandy gave him a weak smile. "As for the explosion," she continued to the mayors, "your investigators will, I suspect, find that the source was two small bombs which were left behind in the shack."

"Whoever you were following was trying to kill you?"

"Perhaps," Sandy replied guardedly.

The mayors exchanged looks which Sandy interpreted as meaning she was firmly off the Christmas Card list for both city governments.

It was Melody Purvis who resumed the conversation. "Unlike what a lot of other people might say, Miss Swift, my colleague and I feel you're a sensible person. Sensible people do not go around actually wanting to risk getting killed."

Here cines the "but", Sandy thought, waiting.

"If you're dealing with people with a known history of violence," Purvis continued, "I feel . . . and I believe Mayor Bonner would agree . . . that we'd like to know more about them so we can be prepared."

Sandy rubbed at her face, wincing a bit as she touched the scrapes on one cheek. "Mrs. Purvis, first of all you're correct. I wasn't expecting to run up against this sort of thing. Second, and even more unfortunately, I have absolutely no idea who's behind this." Sandy tried to keep from crossing her fingers, hiding the fact that she had just lied to the two politicians. "I firmly believe that what Mister Barclay, Miss Winkler and I are seeking is not located here but is elsewhere."

"Where?" Purvis asked.

"That's another problem," Sandy told her. "Right now we don't know. We've found some information but need to interpret it before heading to our destination."

Another look between the mayors, and Sandy suspected she was also off the list for Valentine's Day cards.

Bonner picked up the ball. "Miss Swift, we've been very recently contacted by . . . higher authorities . . . in both Springfield and Jefferson City."

State government and the Pierce Library, Sandy mentally translated.

"We've been advised to offer every possible assistance---"

"But the both of you would sleep better at nights," Sandy finished, "if my friends and I got the hell out of Dodge. Or at least Greater St. Louis."

Bonner gave an embarrassed smile.

"It's okay," Sandy assured him. "If I were in your position I'd be wanting the same thing. As soon as we get cleaned up we'll be putting a bit of distance between us and your respective cities. Not only will it keep our opponents on their toes, but it'll keep them from hopefully getting a steady bead on us."

A weight seemed to rise off the shoulders of the mayors. "Melody and I appreciate this, Miss Swift," Bonner said. "In return we were instructed not to hinder your progress any more than necessary."

"The sooner the better," muttered Sandy.

"What?"

Sandy shook her head and, rising from her chair, went over to thank the two visitors for their consideration and cooperation. Closing pleasantries were exchanged and, eventually, the mayors were guided on out of the HOW2.

When the door closed Sandy leaned her head against it, closing her eyes.

She sensed Bud coming up close behind her. "You sure you don't need to see a doctor, honey---"

"I'm fine," she snapped. And immediately regretted it. She turned to Bud. "Baby, I'm sorry. I don't mean to bite you." She attempted a smile. "At least not yet."

Bud carefully placed his hands on her hips. "It's okay. We've had a really rough morning."

"Yeah," Bingo agreed, looking at the both of them. "And I'm goin' to get the medical kit and try to improve on what the EMTs did."

"It's not medical or physical," Sandy tried to reassure her. "Really. It's just that I'm so very mad right now."

"I don't blame you," Bud said. "I never learned to like it when someone's tried to kill me. Personally I like it a lot less when someone tries to kill you."

Sandy was shaking her head. "The intention wasn't to kill us with those bombs."

"Huh! Could've fooled me."

"That was just a love tap," Sandy explained. "Getting our chains yanked. Not wanting to put you or others down, but he always had more of an opinion of my survival capabilities. No, he won't kill us. At least not yet, and at least not me. He still needs me to locate the Unzip Key. Afterwards, however, the rules may change."

Bud had been frowning, and now it deepened. "'He'?"

Bingo sucked in a breath, her eyes wide. "You know who the mystery guys are. Or is."

"Yeah," Sandy said, feeling anger rising inside her. "That envelope that was in the shack. I didn't tell the mayors what I found in it because, to be honest, it's not their worry. It's mine."

"Who---" Bud began

Sandy was already reaching into a pocket. "I was right, Bingo," she said, her voice sharpening. "There was something familiar about the brushstrokes of this entire business. And, like any good artist, he's signed his work!"

Pulling her hand from her pocket she showed Bud and Bingo a single object. A large coin possessing a dull silver sheen. On its surface was the profile of a beautiful woman with long flowing hair. Around the edge of the coin was a ring of stars with the word "Liberty" at the top, and "1795" at the bottom.

"I should feel flattered," Sandy said, her face darkening, her breath coming hard. "Take a look at the world's most expensive calling card. After our last meeting I did a little research into the field of numismatics. Curiosity, mainly. This is a 'Flowing Hair Dollar', the first dollar coin ever minted in the United States. If it's genuine . . . and I've got every reason to believe it is . . . this could fetch me over seven million dollars on the collector's market."

Bingo's expression expanded into wide eyes and an open mouth. "Oh no . . . ."

Bud's face wasn't too much of an improvement. "Sandy . . ."

"The face of our mystery man," Sandy declared. "Sun Ohm Erato!"

## Chapter Twenty: Sandy Starts Putting Things Together.

Three and a half years earlier Sandy had been involved in an attempt by Swift Enterprises to break the land speed record. They were competing against a Mexican multinational corporation whose CEO was a reclusive figure known as Sun Ohm Erato.

Throughout the course of the adventure it eventually became clear that Enterprises had been subtly maneuvered into a complex scheme with the ultimate aim of destroying the Swift space station. It had also been learned that Sun Ohm Erato was, in reality, an agent of the Kranjovian Oligarchy. Not only an agent, but the chief scientist in charge of developing new technologies and weapons for Kranjovia.

Bud knew he was hoping against hope, but he couldn't help it. "Are you sure?"

"It makes the best possible sense," Sandy replied, slamming the coin down hard on the dinette. "Ohhhh. You know that nice warm chocolate creamy feeling you get when pieces finally fall into place? I got that now, along with a great big headache."

"Get comfortable," Bingo told Sandy, "and I'll bring some aspirin. And it's getting' on near lunchtime so you probably can use some food."

"That's not a bad idea actually," Sandy remarked, going over to the table. "I'm in the mood for some soup if you've got it."

"As the mem'sahib requests," Bingo answered, salaaming. "Bud? You hungry?"

"I guess I should eat as well. Anything you bring'll be fine."

Nodding, Bingo retrieved the medical kit from storage, then brought Sandy two aspirin and some water before busying herself in the kitchen.

Swallowing the aspirin, Sandy regarded the top of the table thoughtfully for a moment or so. "Bud?"

"Bubblelicious?"

"Can you do me a favor?"

Bingo turned from the stove. "Wait just one hot little minute here." She stared at Sandy. "He calls you `Bubblelicious'?"

Sandy calmly returned Bingo's look. "Any kind of soup you make would be nice."

Shaking her head and muttering, Bingo turned back to her work.

Bud hadn't even attempted a glance in Bingo's direction. "What's the favor?" he asked Sandy.

"Go to the living room and start setting up a call with home. I've got a feeling I'm going to need to speak to a lot of people."

Nodding, Bud left the table to go to the screen controls.

Bingo was pouring oil into a small skillet to cook up some chicken while, at the same time, heating broth on an adjacent burner. "Do I really want to know your pet names for Bud?" she remarked loudly to Sandy.

"No," replied Bud. "You don't. Anyone in particular at home you want to talk to?" he added to Sandy.

Sandy nodded. "Sherman. I want to smack him in the mouth."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sherman, you slug!"

From the screen Sherman looked perplexed. "What'd I do now?"

"This is really good soup," Sandy said to Bingo. "Lots of noodles." She continued to the couch, taking her bowl with her. "As for you," she said to Sherman, "you told me you had aerial support for us."

"I did! I do!"

"Bud and I were just about blown up by bombs a few hours ago. What happened to our watchdogs?"

"Wait! Whoa!" Sherman leaned closer to the screen. "What bombs? What blown up?"

"Are you still tracking us?"

"Yeah." Sherman glanced offscreen. "You guys are still in . . . East St. Louis. About two thousand feet from the river, within sight of the Gateway Arch. Now what the heck's going on?"

Collecting some patience, Sandy began explaining all that happened to them during the morning. Meanwhile her parents, accompanied by Tom and Phyllis, had made an appearance and were anxiously peering over Sherman's shoulders.

Sherman sighed. "Sandy, my people were instructed to come when they received a call for help. I guess we should've been monitoring the area news and police bands more closely, and I apologize. But you guys didn't call. I know that's a poor excuse---"

"And the explosion wasn't really all that big," Bud pointed out to Sandy. "Okay, I mean it was big enough to tear up the shack, and it probably would've killed us if we hadn't raced out of there. But, considering where the blast happened, most people would've written it off as some kind of industrial thing."



Sherman's face was almost filling the screen. "Do you guys need to be brought in?"

Sandy slowly ate some more soup, collecting her thoughts. "I . . . don't know," she finally said. "We're still picking ourselves up and getting our thoughts together."

Tom Sr.'s face moved into view. "As much as I enjoy knowing an answer, I don't like this idea of the Kranjovians being involved."

"You think I do?" Sandy replied. "What with all that happened in the Arctic a while back, my star isn't exactly on the rise as far as the Kranjovians are concerned."

"You think they're out for revenge?"

Sandy thought it over. "I don't think that's exactly it. Which brings me to something else I want. Sherman? Can you contact Aunt Grace? Contact the Angel?"

Sherman nodded. "I'm pretty certain I can. Why?"

"Because, even though I'm forgiving you for what happened with our protective surveillance, there are still some things I don't think you can do as immediately as I'd like. Such as setting up a conference call with the Kranjovian Oligarchy."

\* \* \* \* \*

A half-hour later found Sandy and the others sitting on the couch and staring at two images on the big screen. Sherman and the others at Shopton were on the left, while Grace Slater's face was on the right.

Grace was glancing down at some notes. "Okay, Sandy," she said. "The Library's established a direct link between the HOW2 and Navsegda Adin. You can open the link anytime you wish."

Sandy nodded. "One more thing. I want all of you to be able to listen in and watch, but please leave the talking to me."

The request was answered by nods which, to Sandy's eyes, looked rather reluctant. Moving the opinion away she touched a button on the coffee table. The two images on the screen shifted, reducing in size enough to allow a third image to start appearing.

When it cleared Sandy found herself staring into a face of a man with a considerable Tartar look to him. The man wasn't smiling.

"Sandra Swift," he said, his voice carrying just a touch of accent. "I am Orry Moe Moses . . . Third within the Kranjovian Oligarchy."

Sandy's eyebrows lifted. At best she had expected to be speaking to a relatively minor functionary within the Kranjovian government. But the Third within the Oligarchy . . . Sandy knew that was the equivalent to the American Secretary of State.

She nodded at the man. "I'm flattered, Excellency."

The expression on the man's face remained fixed. "You understate your importance. After all, it was you who turned world opinion against the Oligarchy after bringing us to our knees eight months ago. Obviously, if you have a desire to speak with us, we are obligated to listen."

Next to Sandy, Bud lowered his head. "No," he whispered, "this isn't gonna be easy."

Sandy was inclined to agree. "In that case let's try and make this as direct and as mutually informative as possible," she said to Orry Moe Moses. "Tell me about Sun Ohm Erato."

This time the expression broke a bit, one eyebrow rising. "I see," Orry Moe Moses slowly replied. "And what would you like to know?"

"Excellency I think you and I both have a fairly good idea of what needs to be discussed. A few years ago Sun Ohm Erato headed a project to destroy my brother's space station. It was never quite determined how involved the Oligarchy was in the plot. All we know is that Sun Ohm Erato dropped out of sight afterwards. Even CEM/Anahuac, the corporation which he used as a front for your government's research division, apparently entered private receivership."

Orry Moe Moses seemed to consider Sandy's words, and Sandy had the impression he wanted to look and speak with someone sitting close by.

"In spite of Sun Ohm Erato's past accomplishments, the Oligarchy disavowed him after he had failed in his attempt against the Swift space station," he explained. "Sun Ohm Erato was banished from Kranjovia."

Sandy very much wondered how Sun Ohm Erato would've been treated had he succeeded in destroying the space station. She decided to file the question away for later. "What happened to him afterwards?"

"We knew he needed immediate laboratory space to continue his biod research. When he didn't return to Mexico and CEM/Anahuac we conducted a search and eventually picked up evidence he was trying to find a hiding place somewhere in Turkey."

Sandy frowned. "Biod?"

"Admittedly one of Sun Ohm Erato's more interesting projects. He was able to prove how, by using a combination of steroids and radiation treatments, the strength and endurance of human beings could be radically increased."

Sandy's frown deepened. "And it really worked?"

"He demonstrated his progress with three prototypes he developed. The first was a fully formed adult he began modifying several decades ago. A volunteer. When it proved successful he managed to acquire two orphaned infants . . . by means we were never able to determine . . . and began working on an accelerated process. There were obvious problems involving their growth, but the results were undeniably impressive."

Something clicked within Sandy's memory. "I think I've seen them," she said. "Sun Ohm Erato's two servants."

Orry Moe Moses nodded. "Actually, you've seen all three of Sun Ohm Erato's biods. In point of fact, you recently managed to help dispose of the earlier model."

"I managed . . ."

And then Sandy's mind went back to the Arctic eight months ago. To her battle with a rather large and impossibly strong human.

"Kondor," she breathed. "Jascha Kondor was the first biod."

"Sun Ohm Erato presented him to us as an example of what he could accomplish with proper support," Orry Moe Moses explained. "An army of biods for the Oligarchy. We were intrigued and managed to make use of Kondor by inserting him into the Russian Navy. But, even after the success Sun Ohm Erato enjoyed with his accelerated process, there were those among us who were reluctant to have this research continued."

"You said Sun Ohm Erato went to Turkey."

"We couldn't confirm it. However, a few months after his banishment, representatives from the Turkish government approached us asking for information. They were very specific, as if wanting details which could be used to track him down. We investigated further and learned that the Turkish government had created a team of assassins to hunt down and eliminate Sun Ohm Erato. Not arrest, you understand, or even deport, but to kill."

"Ummm." Sandy thought for a while.

Then: "May I offer a theory?"

"I would, of course, be interested in hearing it," Orry Moe Moses replied.

As hard as she could, Sandy couldn't detect any sarcasm in the statement. "Sun Ohm Erato is apparently on the run and is being hunted."

Orry Moe Moses nodded. "That is our conclusion as well. We've speculated that he still possesses useful resources, but they're extremely limited."

"He's looking for the Unzip Key, and please don't insult me by denying you know what it is."

No answer from the Kranjovian.

"If Sun Ohm Erato was able to locate the Unzip Key it would be quite a coup for him," Sandy went on. "Possibly even enough to convince the Oligarchy to welcome him back with open arms."

Orry Moe Moses remained silent.

"It would be even better," Sandy said to him, "if Sun Ohm Erato could offer the Oligarchy something it might desire even more than the Unzip Key."

"Interesting. And what would that be?"

"My death."

## **Chapter Twenty-One: The Weeping Giant.**

It just so happened that, at the moment Sandy made her last comment, Bud had been watching the Enterprises group. It was because of this he saw Mary Swift's reaction, and Sandy's father laying a firm hand on his wife's shoulder to keep her from trying to dive out at them through the screen.

Sandy, in the meantime, was steadily waiting for Orry Moe Moses' reply.

When the Kranjovian replied his words were careful. "You have been direct and open with me, Miss Swift. Therefore I shall repay you with the same courtesy. After the obvious failure of our plan to gain control of Brungaria there was considerable discussion given to having you assassinated."

By now Mary was visibly squirming.

"Out of intense personal curiosity," Sandy asked, "may I inquire as to what's held you back?"

"You asked me not to insult you," Orry Moe Moses replied. "Please don't insult me. The details of our failure were thoroughly revealed and globally documented. What do you think would have happened if, so soon after your victory over us, you ended up being killed? Where would the blame have so obviously gone?" Orry Moe Moses slowly shook his head. "No, Miss Swift. As far as my country is concerned, your life is sacred."

"At least for the time being," Sandy murmured.

"Who can say? After all, Brungaria now holds you in high esteem. You possess a rather interesting talent for accomplishing if not the impossible, then at least the inconceivable."

Sandy nodded half to herself. "Well. I guess that takes care of Kranjovia then. But that still leaves Sun Ohm Erato."

"If Sun Ohm Erato has indeed engineered this plot to acquire the Unzip Key then I assure you he is acting totally without the support of the Oligarchy. I wish that could minimize the situation as far as you were concerned, Miss Swift. As you've pointed out, Sun Ohm Erato is hunted. He is desperate. That means he is quite possibly very dangerous."

"He needs me alive to locate the Key."

"True. But what of your friends?"

It took an effort for Sandy to keep from looking at Bud or Bingo. Her eyes did manage a flicker towards her family. "As desperate as he might be, I'm betting he understands what will happen if he hurts my family or friends."

Orry Moe Moses seemed to accept the answer. "You are aware that, for obvious reasons, Kranjovia cannot become personally involved in something which is taking place on American soil. As far as we are concerned, Miss Swift, we must all hope that you can cover your bets."

"At least we've talked," Sandy told him. "And you've managed to be helpful."

"And we will monitor the situation from our end to the best of abilities."

Sandy paused with a comment at the tip of her mind, then decided to go ahead. "If I should happen to meet Sun Ohm Erato, what are your preferences?"

Orry Moe Moses spent several quiet moments calmly gazing out at Sandy.

Then: "Give him our regards, Miss Swift." His image faded from the screen.

Sandy sat back hard against the couch. "Woooooooo!"

"Sandra Helene Swift!" her mother snapped out. "You are aging me rapidly."

"I'm sorry, Mom, but I had to try and find out what the Kranjovian involvement in this mess was."

"And you trust them?" Grace asked.

"I think Orry Moe Moses was right. If I get killed, and if there's any hint that the Kranjovians were involved, Navsegda Adin would be a parking lot within the hour."

Bud coughed. "Here's where I play Devil's Advocate. If Sun Ohm Erato manages to kill you, then Kranjovia can honestly claim its hands are clean."

Sherman was frowning. "You're thinking that maybe the Oligarchy has maneuvered Sun Ohm Erato into acting as a rogue agent? Knowing he'd go against Sandy?"

"If he could deliver the Unzip Key then it'd be a pretty sweet scam."

Sandy motioned for attention. "I don't want to interrupt Familial Paranoia Club, but I'm really wanting to avoid considering more trouble than we already have right now. I mean . . . and apologies, Aunt Grace . . . but it's bad enough we've got this business with the Unzip Key and the Pierce Library."

Now I'm also facing Sun Ohm Erato and possibly Turkish assassins as well. I swear, one more thing---"

Sandy suddenly froze, her mouth half open.

"Oh . . . my!" she murmured.

"What is it?" Mary asked.

"Orry Moe Moses said that Turkish assassins began hunting for Sun Ohm Erato shortly after his banishment," Sandy explained. "That had to have been just over three years ago. Sherman, refresh my memory. Where and when did Sophronia Sanna die in the air crash?"

Bingo, Mary and Tom let out low moans.

"Three years ago," Sherman said, his voice sharpening. "In the Kaçkar Mountains in Turkey."

"And there she was until her fingerprints ended up being left by the thief who stole the Cybertron-II." Sandy shook her head. "Okay, it's official. One more twist in this business and I'm gonna drive the HOW2 into the Atlantic and spend the rest of my life fishing for alewives."

"I got a great chowder recipe for smoked alewife," Bingo offered.

"Sherman . . . Aunt Grace . . . push your ongoing searches into Sophronia Sanna. I got a feeling we're going to wanting an answer to this as soon as possible."

"If it's not getting too personal," Mary asked, "what will you be doing in the meantime?"

Sandy considered it. "Well, first I'll be scanning over a copy of the latest literary triumph from the late Mr. Bergman for your reading and hopefully clue-solving pleasure. Then, since I still feel the quivering of civic authorities all around us, we'll be moving to a more isolated location to consider our next move."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh my guy is a real high step-per," Bingo sang, merrily bouncing up and down in the driver's seat as she drove the HOW2 east on US-50. "Ginger, with salt and pep-per. He's a fancy stepper when he dan-ces . . . go and see him as he kippers and PRAN-ces."

"Someone's happy," Bud remarked, looking back at her as he went to sit next to Sandy.

She was gazing at the St. Louis poem, muttering to herself, but softened as Bud carefully eased her close against him.

"Baby, I'm worried," he murmured to her.

"Well then, kiss me before we start discussing your worry."

Bud complied, then complied even longer and more deeply, their embrace tightening upon the couch.

"Eldon Hazlet State Recreation Area," Bingo called out from the front. "About ten miles ahead, north of Carlyle. How's that sound? And it looks like some serious rain's showing up."

"I swear I am so gonna lynch that girl---"

"Shhhhh," Sandy replied to Bud, pressing a finger to his lips. "She means well." Her voice raised. "That sounds fine, Bingo. Go ahead."

"Thank'ee!"

Bud was touching Sandy's face. "Y'know, your Mom's not the only one you're driving crazy," he whispered.

"It's mutual," Sandy whispered back. "Where were we?"

His lips were close to her ear. "Where would you like us to be?"

Several suggestions quickly entered Sandy's mind. The best immediate answer she could produce, however, was to enter into another nicely extended kiss, the both of them dwelling upon the notion they'd be arriving at a campground shortly.

Settling for the least problematical item on her mental list, Sandy eventually relaxed her head upon Bud's chest. "Now. Tell Mama this worry of yours."

"That explosion earlier."

"Well . . . yeah. It worried me too."

"I mean, if Sun Ohm Erato meant to get our attention, why is he breaking cover now? He's obviously tracking us."

Sandy found that most of her concentration was on the nearness of Bud, but she still managed to formulate an answer. "If you had asked me that question before I'd talked with Orry Moe Moses then you would've been dipping into a dry well. But now that I know what I know, I think it might have something to do with the Turkish assassins. If they're still on Sun Ohm Erato's trail . . . and obviously we don't know that for certain . . . then our friend with the coins might think they're closing in and he's getting nervous."

"No matter how secret he's been, this business of starting the search for the Unzip Key had to ruin his cover?"

Sandy nodded, using the gesture to snuggle closer.

Bud silently resolved to try and get more nods out of her. "But what does he

intend for us to do about it? What's it to us if Sun Ohm Erato flips, flops or is whacked by dacoits?"

"Now that is a very good question. I could spend the rest of my life with a clear conscience if I decided to just up and abandon the hunt for the Unzip Key. I originally agreed to this mainly out of curiosity over who wanted me to lookfor it. Now I know. End of mystery."

"Mmmm. So why don't we go home and let Sun Ohm Erato dangle in the wind?"

Sandy sighed. "Because, my dearest love . . . whose hand is right now pressing nicely against my very happy thigh . . . no, no, no. Don't move it. I'm having trouble concentrating as it is."

"Anyway . . . there's still the reality of someone who's able to break into Enterprises and rob us blind. She may be working for Sun Ohm Erato. She may be somehow connected to these Turkish assassins. Riddles from Bergman aside, that is the real question I want answered. And, unless I'm convinced otherwise, I feel she's linked with the hunt for the Unzip Key."

They felt the HOW2 starting to slow and make a turn. At the same time there was a bright flash of lightning from outside the window, followed a moment later by a rumble of thunder.

"Movin' through Carlyle," Bingo announced. "We'll be reachin the Eldon Hazlet State Recreation Area in a jif. Hey! They got a big ol' lake and everything."

"Great," Bud muttered. "You got someplace to jump now."

"Bud," Sandy gently admonished as they adjusted themselves back up into sitting positions on the couch. Sandy went forward to peer over Bingo's shoulder.

"Oh yeah," Bud said as he stared out one of the windows. "It's about ready to come down big time."

Sandy agreed, watching as Bingo maneuvered the HOW2 up to the park entrance and alongside a large cabin which a sign identified as the park's Administration Center. As the rain began pelting down, a uniformed man trotted out, and Bingo raised her hatch slightly to talk with him. After a minute or so, and after Bingo passed some money to the man, she closed the hatch shut and continued driving on.

"We going in?" Bud asked, coming up.

Sandy nodded. "Normally we'd need to reserve a campsite in advance. But Bingo pointed out that we needed to get out of the weather. Plus we weren't requiring either electrical hookups or water, so the man let us pay the basic fee and come on in."

"I'll find us a nice spot near the lake," Bingo explained.

"I'll go ahead and close up the windows," Bud replied. "It's getting dark and I suspect we won't be playing volleyball outside."

"I can get supper started," Sandy offered.



Bingo nodded, concentrating on the driving. "The Frito Pie's on the bottom shelf of the icebox. Y'can start that heatin'."

With domesticity on the rise, Bingo soon settled the HOW2 in a parking slot within sight of the glistening surface of Lake Carlyle. Powering down the engines, Bingo lowered the barriers over the windshields before unbuckling and moving back to join the others.

"Don't know `bout you," she said, "but I feel like milk tonight. Ooh!" she added, jumping slightly as a loud crash of thunder slammed outside.

Bud noticed her. "You're not one of those girls who gets skittish and dives into someone else's bed during a bad thunderstorm, are you?"

"Depends on the company," Bingo replied blandly.

Sandy smiled, poking buttons on the microwave. "We'll be eating in about . . . forty-five minutes," she said. "And milk sounds like a very good idea. What do we do after supper? Presuming, of course, that we're not studying the latest clue? Watch a movie?"

"Got a deck of cards," Bingo suggested. "We can play Abilene Tattletale. Jacks, threes and sixes are wild, Queen of Spades automatically kills the game and highest King has to tell about the first person he or she ever kissed. If you're holding a five you can have the lights turned out while you tell the story."

"Well that's one vote for movies," Bud said.

Bingo stuck her tongue out at him. Then everyone suddenly stood still as a high painful moan came from outside. They listened and, for several moments, all that could be heard was the steady drumming of the rain on the HOW2. Then there was another long despairing wail, and this was accompanied by the faint sound of something slowly shuffling about outside.

Sandy was the first one to try and speak. "What the . . ."

"I agree," Bingo whispered. "Sounds like something's hurt out there. A rather big something."

"Pretty near the door," Bud added. Going to a side table next to the couch he reached into a drawer, removing both a Snooper and a flashlight, then picking up Sandy's Snooper and tossing it over to her. "Bingo? Get the lights."

Bingo went to the controls to switch off the lights. Watching her Sandy noticed that, from someplace among her clothes, Bingo had managed to produce two short black batons.

The inside of the HOW2 suddenly went dark.

From near the doorway Bud spoke. "Okay. I'm gonna crack open the door some and---"

Another moan from outside.

"---probably regret all of this. Get ready."

Sandy felt herself tensing. Then the door opened, and the sound of the rain grew louder, some of it spraying in. A flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the doorway just as Bud switched on the flashlight and rushed out. Trying not to shout out his name, Sandy quickly followed, only slightly managing to beat Bingo outside.

The rain was pounding down hard on Sandy and she and Bingo remained close to the door while Bud stood a ways further out, swinging the flashlight here and there and becoming thoroughly soaked.

"Could've sworn it was somewhere close by," he said. "I mean there're big prints here in the mud and . . . Whoa Mohammed!"

Sandy and Bingo saw it too. A large shambling object, seven feet tall, slowly moving towards them from out of the darkness. As it entered the light from Bud's flashlight several things became apparent. First, it was human . . . albeit a very large and formidable looking human. Second, it was dressed in a simple dark tunic which, along with its owner, was very drenched. Third, the eyes of the person were wide and sorrowful, barely visible through a mat of long, unkempt hair.

Fifth, the person was female.

The giant shuffled closer, slowly regarding Sandy, Bud and Bingo. Then, standing there in the rain, she suddenly burst into tears, crying as though her heart would break.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two: The Storm Orphan.**

Bud found that all he was able to do was just stand there and be rained on as he kept the flashlight shining on the newcomer. Thugs, gunmen, high-speed chases, spacecraft mishaps . . . he had an immediate and usually effective reaction to situations like that.

A seven foot tall woman with the build of a NFL offensive lineman, bawling her eyes out, was something he recognized as being beyond his experience.

But Sandy's reaction was even more of a surprise. As he watched she suddenly began moving towards the giant. "Sandy---"

She ignored them, carefully reaching out with her hands to the giant.

"Sestina?" Sandy called. "Sestina?"

The giant had covered her face with her enormous hands, her body still shaking with sobs. But Sandy's voice caused the fingers to part and the eyes to peer through.

"It's me, Sestina," Sandy said reassuringly, one hand reaching to pet an elbow. "It's me. See?"

The giant now seemed to peer more closely through the rain. Her crying started to reduce to whimpers and gulps.

Sandy let her touch on the elbow become firmer. "C'mon baby," she cooed. "Let's get in out of the rain. Let's go get dry. C'mon . . . thaaaaat's it." She started guiding the large woman towards the HOW2.

Bud tried again. "Sandy---"

"We got to get in out of the rain," Sandy said to him. "Everything'll make more sense when we're inside and dry."

Bud wasn't certain but he thought he had heard an "I hope" at the end.

By turning the giant sideways they were able to ease her mass through the doorway and on into the HOW2. Fortunately the living room contained the highest part of the HOW2's ceiling, so there was enough space for the newcomer to stand there, looking rather apprehensive as the others piled in behind her.

Sandy closed the door. "Lights."

They were switched on and, if everyone wasn't yet immediately dry, at least matters were more easily seen (and not being rained on). Bud and Bingo were staring at the giant who was quietly returning their attention, her eyes wide and the tip of a forefinger in her mouth.

Bingo suddenly noticed the pools of water everyone was leaving on the floor. "Lordy," she muttered, heading back to the hall closet for towels.

Sandy had also noticed the water. "Yeah," she said ruefully. "Now we'll see if Tom's Edenweb fiber lives up to Phyllis' advertising hype."

A faint high keening sound was coming from the giant.

"Shhh," Sandy said, going over to once again deliver comforting pats. "It's okay, honey. We're all going to get dry and warm. Just sit down here and be comfortable."

"Wait a minute," Bingo cried out, coming back with a double armful of towels. Sandy grabbed some and, together, they spread them out upon the floor, making a cushion for the giant to finally plump down upon.

The rest of the towels were passed among themselves.

Bud gratefully began wiping himself off as best as he could. "Sandy?"

"Umm?"

With a rather pointed nod, Bud indicated their visitor.

"It's Sestina," Sandy explained.

"Oh that's a big help, San---"

Sandy sighed. "Sestina was one of the two servants who was with Sun Ohm Erato back when I was in his jet plane years ago. She's one of the baby biods Orry Moe Moses mentioned."

Bud and Bingo both stared openly at Sandy.

"You mean we got one of Sun Ohm Erato's people in here with us?" Bud asked in a high strained whisper?

Sestina whimpered.

"I don't think it's like that," Sandy told him. "But if Sestina's here, then the others might . . ."

She went and squatted alongside the woman. "Sestina? Honey? Did Sun Ohm Erato send you here?"

Seeming to think for a moment, Sestina sadly shook her head.

"Is he nearby?"

A slow movement of the shoulders.

"Can't she talk?" Bingo asked.

"I never heard her or Tiresias . . . that's the other one . . . say a single word when I was there. Of course I wasn't there too long. Sestina? Pudding? Did you . . . did you run away from them? From Sun Ohm Erato?"

Sestina seemed almost to crumble into tears again, but she nodded.

"Ohhhhh." Reaching out, Sandy gave the giant a hug. "And you came out in the nasty rain to find Aunt Sandeeeee."

"Oh Lord," Bud muttered.

The look Sandy gave him over Sestina's head was considerably removed from the warm and loving expressions Bud had come to expect from her.

"Bingo," Sandy said. "I think we could all use something to eat."

Catching the emphasis, Bingo immediately went to the kitchen.

Sandy was still comforting Sestina. "Bud? Better get Sherman or someone on the phone. I'm getting a feeling."

Nodding, Bud reached for the keypad on the coffee table.

"Here we are," Bingo sang, coming back. In one hand was a plate heaped with oatmeal-raisin cookies, and a large glass of milk was in the other. At the sight of them Sestina's face seemed to lose a lot of its mournfulness.

"Go ahead," Bingo offered.

The giant shyly accepted the goodies and, after drinking half the milk down, put the glass on the floor and commenced moving cookies into her mouth.

A phone icon appeared on the screen. "Swift Security---"

"Get him," Sandy barked. "Now!"

It was a credit to Sherman's training that the voice hadn't asked who was calling, or what was meant by "Him". A few seconds later the entire screen lit up to show Sherman's face. "Sandy---"

"We got a possible situation here," Sandy broke in. "There's a better than even chance Sun Ohm Erato and his agents are in the immediate area."

Sherman nodded then peered closer. "Do you guys have a bear in there with you?"

Her mouth full of cookies, Sestina began crying loudly again.

"Shhhhhh," Sandy assured Sestina while throwing Sherman a rather harsh look.

"I got it," Bingo said, moving closer to the giant. "Want some marshmallows on your cookies, sweetpea?" she cooed to Sestina. "Some nice marshmallows? I got the colored ones. How `bout that? Yes, yes, it's okay. It's okay."

"Focus," Sandy snapped to Sherman.

Sherman knew when to back down. "I've got a Drumhawk and an Omnicopter not more than twenty miles away from your present position. Now the Omnicopter's a special deal. It's not carrying a pod and can pick the HOW2 up and fly it away."

Sandy nodded half to herself. "I don't know yet how bad the situation is---"

Gunshots were suddenly heard at the same time impacts were felt striking the HOW2.

"Oops! Yes we do."

Bud immediately headed forward.

"Sherman we've got people shooting at us."

"We're getting mobile," Bud declared, strapping himself into the driver's seat and hitting switches. "Get ready."

Bingo moved closer alongside Sestina, trying unsuccessfully to get her arms around the giant. "Hold on, sweetie. We're goin' for a ride."

Sandy went forward to peer over Bud's shoulder, noticing that he had only raised the barrier over his windshield. "Can't make out how many's

there," he told Sandy, "but they're shooting from at least two cars. I'm gonna try to make it out of the park."

Knowing that ordinary gunfire wouldn't penetrate the HOW2s hull, Sandy wasn't so much concerned as annoyed. At least for the time being.

Sherman's face appeared on the small repeater screen between the front seats. "Well?"

"Gunmen in cars," Sandy told him, letting Bud concentrate on moving the HOW2. "We're trying to leave the park so you can get a clear field in case we want a pick up . . . oh whoa!"

"Sorry," Bud said, regaining control. A car had swerved close across their path, gunfire coming out of the passenger window, and Bud had put the HOW2 into as tight a turn as he could manage. "There's three cars out there shooting."

"You guys don't have any weapons?" Sherman asked.

Sandy was trying to ease herself into the seat alongside Bud. "Sherman, you know Dad's attitude about weapons. Plus, and I know this sounds ridiculous at the moment, but we're trying to promote a honeymoon package involving the HOW2. Packing heat sort of sends the wrong message."

"So does getting killed."

"I can try maybe ramming them," Bud said, grimacing as he made another violent turn, sending the HOW2 deeper among the trees. "Sandy, if you're gonna fall, then fall the other way. I need to see the instruments."

"Sorry." Sandy grabbed at the safety harness.

"I can't make it to the road which leads out of the park," Bud explained, making another rough turn as more gunfire rattled on the HOW2's surface. "They keep cutting me off, herding us away from the exits."

"We're trapped between them and the lake," Sandy breathed, getting ready to tell Sherman to send the cavalry in.

Bud's face suddenly lit up. "The lake!"

"Huh?"

"Hang on, kids," Bud called out. "I'm gonna make a Bat-turn."

"Oooo neat," Bingo answered from the living room.

Throwing the control yoke over as hard as he could, Bud sent the HOW2 into a spin on the road, the rear of the vehicle almost batting away one of the attacking cars.

One hundred and eighty degrees later he gunned the throttle, sending the HOW2 speeding into the darkness.

Opening the barrier over her windshield Sandy peered ahead. "You're driving us back."

"Uh huh."

"But there's nothing there but the lake."

Bud nodded firmly. "Uh huh."

"But . . ." and then Sandy's face copied Bud's light. "Ohhhhhh."

She looked back over her shoulder. "Bingo? You and Sestina brace yourselves. This might be rough."

"They're all behind us," Bingo replied. "I can hear the shots hitting the back."

"We'll be losing them soon," Bud promised. "Hold on!"

Ahead of them the dark surface of Lake Carlyle dimly glistened through the rain. Instead of slowing down Bud continued increasing the speed of the HOW2 and, moments later, the vehicle knifed into the lake, sending thick sprays of water sluicing up on either side.

Bud began touching buttons. "Retracting wheels . . . sealing the lower compartments . . . pumps on . . . hull integrity green . . . superconductors charging . . . MHD drive online . . . cycling wheel-well covers to hydrofoil setting annnnd we be gone!"

The impact into the lake had eaten up a lot of the HOW2s speed. But now it was moving again, gradually picking up velocity as it began skimming smoothly across the waters of Lake Carlyle.

Bud was nodding at the instruments. "Sixty five knots and holding. We be good!"

Sandy was catching her breath. "Just for the record, I so want to throw my arms around you and kiss you passionately. But you sort of got your hands full for the moment."

"Yeah." Bud was looking at the map screen. "I'm taking us across to South Shore State Park. From there we can take . . . Huey Road south, then get back east on US 50. As for our friends, it'll take them at least a half-hour to circle around the lake. We should be safely away, hidden or both by then."

"Guys?" Sherman called out. "A little info here?"

"We've escaped the bad guys," Sandy told him. "Again."

"I can see that," Sherman replied, looking offscreen. "So I'm guessing the HOW2 water travel conversion passed its first real test." He exhaled, seeming to relax a bit. "Do you need to make a rendezvous?"

Something inside Sandy was screaming YES. She struggled to bring the impulse under control and bent close to the map screen, her tongue poking the inside of one cheek as she studied. "Sherman can you try and track the bad guys?"

"Ahhhhhhh . . . iffy but possible. I can get a Swiftsat to look for the heat trails of active car engines back at the park. If there were three, and if they're keeping in a group, I might be able to get a fix."

Sandy nodded. "If you can get a lock then have the Drumhawk shadow them. Try and see if you can get a fix on where they're heading. A fix on Sun Ohm Erato would be even better."

"What about you people?"

Sandy was still studying the map and she now poked at the screen, setting up a course for Bud, who glanced at it and nodded.

"Sherman, we're heading for Salem. It's just a half-hour further on US 50."

"Okay. I see it on my screen."

"I show a small airport to the northeast of the town, just near Interstate 57."

"Ahhh . . . got it."

"It's nine-thirty about now. We're going to lay low near the airport. Let's get together for a conference at . . . ten-thirty. You think the folks'll be up for it?"

Bud snorted.

So did Sherman. "Sandy, I don't want to tell you what your folks said they'd do to me if I passed up a chance for them to contact you."

"Ummm, point. And, if necessary, the airport'll be a decent place for a rendezvous or pick up if one's desired."

Sherman was frowning at Sandy, trying to read her face. "You don't think it's time you guys came in?"

"A . . . new complication's arrived," Sandy replied, glancing back into the living room. "We'll talk again in a few." Reaching over she switched off the connection.

"We're coming up on South Shore State Park," Bud said.

"Uh huh." Unbuckling her harness, Sandy leaned over to kiss Bud's cheek. "You're wonderful."

"Thanks." Bud glanced up at her. "Are we going in?"

Sandy's smile was small. "How well do you know me, dear?"

Bud sighed. "Yeah, I thought so. Hoo boy!"

Giving his shoulder a pat Sandy went back into the living room to see Sestina on her side, with her head in Bingo's lap.



The giant's eyes were closed and, as Sandy approached, Bingo put a finger to her lips. "Guess the excitement wore her out," she whispered, her other hand gently stroking Sestina's head.

"Yeah." Squatting down on her ankles, Sandy regarded the giant.

"We still need to get out of all these damp clothes," Bingo pointed out. "I guess I can take a sheet and cut holes in it. Make a sort of caftan or somethin' for Sestina while we're washin' her outfit."

Sandy was quiet, noticing how peaceful Sestina looked as she slept.

"Sandy."

She looked up to meet Bingo's eyes.

The Texan was wearing a somber expression. "This could be a trap," she said, nodding down at the head slumbering in her lap. "I mean, yeah I understand how bad Sun Ohm Erato is and all, and how someone like Sestina could just up and run away. But she specifically ran away to us."

Sandy didn't answer.

"Okay," Bingo went on, "so we were probably in the area, and maybe Sestina was accompanying the gunmen for some reason and decided to make a break for it when she spotted the HOW2. Or maybe . . . maybe Sun Ohm Erato intended for Sestina to do this."

Sandy had gone back to gazing at Sestina.

"Maybe Sun Ohm Erato knows what sort of person you are and that you'd probably take Sestina in. Maybe doin' somethin' like this would slow us down, make us easier to track, or to catch. I don't know. I don't want this to sound bad or anythin', but maybe this Sun Ohm Erato person's tryin' to take advantage of your good nature."

"Maybe," Sandy murmured. "Maybe it is a trap. And Bingo?"

"Yeah?"

Sandy stood up. "It worked." She went to the icebox for a soft drink.

## **Chapter Twenty-Three: The Salem Conference.**

Forty-five minutes later found the HOW2 settled in the parking lot of Salem Medical Center, just under a mile east of Salem-Leckrone Airport. There was still some time before the planned conference was to begin,

offering a chance to prepare for what Sandy suspected would be a rather intense session.

It also provided an opportunity to attend to other things as well.

"Here we go," Sandy said, trying to guide rather than push a drowsy Sestina down the hallway to the bedroom. It was something of a tight squeeze. "Just a little further, honey. That's it."

True to her word Bingo had managed to convert one of the larger sheets into a caftan ("One comment about `Omar the Tent Maker'," she had warned Bud, "and it's your butt!"). Bingo had even managed to use some leftover material, as well as a bit of elastic, to come up with a sort of nightcap for Sestina ("There! All pretty!").

Now the giant was yawning as both Sandy and Bingo managed to move her through the doorway and nudge her in the direction of the bed (while Bud, who had been firmly banished to the forward compartment while the girls changed Sestina into her new nightclothes, watched with a bemused look).

After tucking Sestina into bed Sandy sat on the edge of the mattress for a bit, holding one of the giant's hands. "You're safe here with us," she assured Sestina, smiling at her. "You can sleep here and we'll take care of you."

The expression on the giant's face was still sad, but there seemed to be peace pooling within the eyes and she gave Sandy's hand a squeeze before settling in under the covers.

Waving goodnight, Sandy and Bingo tiptoed out of the bedroom, softly closing the door behind them. "Now we can talk with the folks without disturbing her," Sandy said.

Bingo glanced back at the closed door. "She seems to be an adult physically. How old do you think she is mentally?"

"I don't know. If we get a chance I want to take some readings on her and send them on to Enterprises for evaluation." Sandy's frown deepened. "I also want my hands around Sun Ohm Erato's neck."

Bud was shaking his head at them as they entered the living room. "You realize, of course, we won't be able to fit her into the bathroom?"

Sandy sighed. "We'll work it out."

"Love, I'm not complaining about Sestina being here. I'm just pointing out something that, in this current outbreak of your rather sporadic maternal instinct, you didn't take into consideration."

"Sporadic'?"

"Sandy, the last time you got this gooey and motherly it was with twenty-six oversized kids living beneath the surface of the Moon." Bud shook his head again. "Y'know, some people tend to make do with a cage of hamsters, or a dachshund."

"Well, speaking of something that could be replaced with a dachshund--  
\_"

"I think the call's starting to come through," Bingo diplomatically broke in.

They arranged themselves on the couch facing the wall screen, Sandy positioning herself between Bud and Bingo. "I do love you," Bud said to Sandy.

"I'll think about it," Sandy replied tartly. As the screen came to life, however, she found herself automatically moving closer against Bud.

Once again the screen showed three segments. The two smaller ones displayed Sherman and Grace. The larger one was showing Sandy's parents, Phyllis and the Newtons all arranged on the sofa in the Swift living room, with Ken standing behind them.

At the sight of Ken Bingo dimpled a little, letting her hand bob in a small wave.

"All together again," Mary Swift said, her face easing into relief at the sight of her daughter. "Despite all that Sherman's reported you three look none the worse for wear."

Sandy shrugged. "Yeah, well . . . the way I see it what's a road trip without some explosions and a running battle with gunmen?"

"That's what I really like about you, Sandy," Bud remarked. "You're a fun date."

Sandy responded with a nudge to his ribs.

"Before the conversation falls completely off the tracks," Mary went on, "some of us need to catch up. What's this business about a crying bear in the HOW2?"

Sandy mentally added another tick mark on her mental list of Reasons Why I Need to Slap Sherman into the Middle of Next Week. "It's like this, Mom," she began and explained Sestina's arrival.

When she was finished she wished (not for the first time during this trip) that she could save the image of the looks on everyone's faces.

It was Helen who broke the silence. "I know I'm in the running for Most Naïve Question of the Evening, but do you think that was a wise thing to do, Sandy? If I recall, when Sun Ohm Erato's people kidnapped you and took you to his plane it was the giants who handled you roughly."

Sandy shook her head. "It wasn't Sestina, it was Tiresias. And it wasn't so much handled roughly as . . . well . . . guaranteeing my cooperation throughout the meeting with Sun Ohm Erato. Sestina was more of a maid, or a housekeeper or something."

"Still---"

"Aunt Helen I couldn't just leave her out there in the rain, and with the gunmen all around the area. It wouldn't have been the right thing to do."

Mary smiled softly.

"And there's something else to consider. If Sestina possesses the same physical attributes as Tiresias or Kondor, then I really didn't think it'd be the most practical move to try and abandon someone capable of tearing the HOW2 apart with her bare hands."

"Well yes, but still---"

"I think what Aunt Helen is getting at," Tom said, "is the possibility that Sestina could still be working for Sun Ohm Erato." At Sandy's darkening look he quickly went on. "I don't mean consciously or willingly, of course. But maybe Sun Ohm Erato intended for this to happen."

Sandy forced herself not to look at Bingo.

"Maybe," Tom continued, "Sestina has some sort of tracking device on her."

"If it's in her clothes," Bingo remarked, "it's in the rinse cycle right about now."

"Or embedded in her," Tom pointed out.

Sandy chewed at her lower lip. "Tom? Sherman? Can you determine if any sort of unusual transmissions are leaving the HOW2?"

Tom's eyes shifted, as did Sherman's, and Sandy realized both of them were probably looking at different versions of the same three-segment display.

"We've got good track on the HOW2," Sherman said. "I can go through recent data and run a broadcast emission search, plus make certain to look out for anything in the future along those lines."

Ken was nodding. "I've got the station focused on the HOW2. They'd tell me if something showed up on their sensors."

"Ummmm. Okay. Next issue. Sherman, what about Sun Ohm Erato's people?"

Sherman nodded, happy to be able to report something positive. "I've been able to track using both the Swiftsats and the Drumhawk I've got shadowing them. I'm also pulling in further aerial assets to add to the mix. Right now the three vehicles are . . . spread out in a loose line between Effingham and Mt. Vernon. If they're managing to track the HOW2 they aren't doing a very good job of finding you. Of course, they could simply be setting up position for when you move again. But I've alerted Illinois State Police and, within the half-hour, arrests should be made."

Sandy felt Bud and Bingo exhale on either side of her.

"And Sun Ohm Erato?"

"Frankly I'd be surprised if he was among them."

"Well," Sandy admitted, "so would I."

"Why is he doing this?" Phyllis now asked. "The bomb and the shooting and stuff? It certainly isn't going to help you find the Unzip Key, and that's what he wants."

"I sort of agree with what Orry Moe Moses said," Sandy replied. "I think Sun Ohm Erato's starting to become unstable."

"'Starting'?"

"Well, yeah . . . true. But he's apparently got something up his tail and it's driving him to take measures which, to us sensible people---"

Bud and Bingo both looked at Sandy.

"---would seem desperate. Maybe this business about the Turkish assassins got him rattled. Which brings me to my next question. Sherman? Aunt Grace? Any progress on Sophronia Sanna?"

Sherman gave a small nod. "Take it, Grace."

"Thank you," Grace replied. "Sandy, the Library's had its European and Middle Eastern operatives concentrating on this question. The deeper we try to get the more it seems that something is or has been officially blocking all details concerning Sanna's death in the air crash. Of course that's only made us look harder, and a rather interesting detail has surfaced."

"Oh?"

"Our agents in The Hague have come across a EUROPOL file which seems to have escaped being purged. The business about Sanna's fingerprints showing up in regards to the Cybertron-II theft has not been the only incident. Since her reported death there has been three other occasions where Sanna's fingerprints have been found."

Sandy's eyes widened. "Oh my!"

Bingo was a bit more vocal. "Yikes!"

"Naturally we're continuing our research. Austin has put a very high priority on this."

"Aunt Grace," Tom asked, "is there any evidence revealing who might be responsible for all the official blocking on Sanna's death?"

"No firm answer from Austin yet, but there's some indication that elements of the Turkish government might be involved."

Tom nodded dully. "Yeah."

"You've got something," Sandy said to her brother.

"Just a very uncomfortable thought," Tom slowly replied. "Remember that Sun Ohm Erato tried to find refuge in Turkey. We don't know for how long, or what he was doing there. But I'm now reminding myself that this isn't the first time Sun Ohm Erato's been connected with the resurrection of a dead person."

A chorus of "ohhhs" emerged from several within the audience.

Sandy was shaking her head. "I know what you're getting at, Tom. And it's a good thought. But we're not dealing with another cyborg here."

"Yeah, but---"

"Ithaca Foger was working for Sun Ohm Erato, but I don't believe he was responsible for creating her. You yourself pointed out how advanced her technology was. Too advanced for terrestrial science."

Realization dawned on Tom's face. "Your theory---"

"That Ithaca Foger was created by the Space Friends. And, in the time since we dealt with her, I've become more and more convinced of that."

Tom Sr. was scowling. "You're not thinking that the Space Friends are involved in this?"

"Dad, no." Sandy shook her head. "I don't think we're dealing with an Ithaca type cyborg here. And I haven't been getting the usual vibes I tend to get when I run up against Space Friend involvement." For calm's sake Sandy decided not to mention how Jascha Kondor had used the phrase "Stay Tuned" when he and Sandy had fought during those last desperate moments in the Arctic. "Stay Tuned" had been a common element running throughout her encounters with the Space Friends.

On the other hand something quiet in her head was bringing up the disturbing fact that Duran Geiner, who had been under Space Friend control, had not made use of the phrase. But Kondor had.

And, according to Orry Moe Moses, Kondor had been one of Sun Ohm Erato's bionds.

Sandy drove the thought away. "We're getting off track here. Let's continue looking into Sanna's death and apparent return, but right now let's move onto something more immediate. Our next move."

"Home," her mother, father, Ned and Helen chimed.

Sandy took a breath. Let it out. "Well, actually we seem to be getting closer to home all the time. But I want to consider the latest clue we received from Bergman." She picked up the paper which had been found in St. Louis. "All of you have received copies of this. Both sides. Does anyone have any thoughts on the meaning?"

"A Sad Lady keeping a watch over a witch who has the final clue," Tom Sr. slowly said. "As much as I enjoy puzzles, Sandy, I'll freely admit Bergman's stumped me here." He managed a smile. "At least for the time being. And you're shaking your head again."

"Because we're overlooking something. See here?" With a finger Sandy indicated a line on the poem. "We're not just looking for a witch. We're specifically looking for a `very fine witch'. I've spent the past few days walking around inside Bergman's twisted head, and I think I'm getting a better grasp of how he thinks. He didn't just make this distinction for the sake of poetic license. He actually means A Very Fine Witch."

Tom Sr. nodded. "Good point."

"An alternate meaning," Sherman suggested. "Maybe relating to the name of someone."

"I don't think so," Sandy told him. "At least not in the way you or I would think. Remember that Bergman wouldn't have known when someone would begin following the clues and looking for the Key. He wouldn't risk assigning a clue to someone who might've been dead by the time a search was started. No . . . this is referring to something permanent. Something that would be there for years and years . . ."

And Sandy suddenly paused. For a moment she felt as if something vital had just appeared. She couldn't put her finger on it, but it was the oddest sensation that she was somehow close to the answer.

"Well we've already got a Sad Lady," Bud pointed out. "She's asleep in the bedroom right now."

Sandy almost chuckled. "Okay, I'll grant you that. But that's also wrong. Bergman set all this up in 1965. Sestina wasn't even a Hershey bar in her Daddy's back pocket then."

Ken began laughing.

Bud stared at Sandy. "'A Hershey bar in her Daddy's---`"

"An expression I heard."

Next to her Bingo was very red-faced.

"Besides, there's certainly nothing frozen about Sestina's tears. Well, what about this bit then?" Sandy continued, moving her finger. "'The prize you desire is with the fairest of all, but you will never find it without the number to call'."

Phyllis frowned, looked at her parents. "Snow White?"

"I'm betting it has something to do with this," Sandy said, turning the paper over. "I don't think it was an accident that Bergman wrote this on a calendar page."

"Nineteen sixty-five," Ned said. "When Bergman died. A beautiful person from that time." It was now his turn to frown. "Elizabeth Taylor? Julie Andrews? Sophia Loren?" He noticed Sandy's expression. "Yes, I remember what you said about not using living people. But keep in mind that there were actresses in movies which, logically, would still be around even today for use as reference."

"What about the numbers circled on the calendar?" Sandy asked. "Three, six and nine?"

"He's given us the number we need to call," Sherman declared.

"But what number, Sherman. What's the context? It's not a phone number. Is it a post office box, or a safety deposit box number? An address? Length in feet? Distance in miles? And if it's the last two, in which direction do we go?"

"I noticed the nine was circled twice," Ken said, with Tom nodding.

Sandy agreed. "Yes. Once again I don't think that was an accident on Bergman's part. A three, a six and two nines. But in what order? What's the significance?"

"Well. Given those numbers there are . . ."

"Twenty-four possible permutations," Tom said. "I can start running those down and look for a connection somewhere."

"Sad to say, Big Brother," Sandy told him, "but I'll be surprised if you find it right off the bat."

"If I can put on the Downer Hat for a moment," Bingo said, "has anyone thought this might be a big red herring?"

"If it was anyone but Bergman," Sandy replied, "I might agree with you. But remember he didn't really care if we found the Unzip Key or not. He just wanted everyone to know how clever he was. Or devious. Or both." She closed her eyes briefly. "People, it's sort of late. And we've had a big day which I'd like to put behind me and move on."

"You want the Omnicopter to bring the HOW2 in?" Sherman asked.

Sandy slowly shook her head. "Let's sleep on it. Literally. We're safe for the time being, and you've got everyone in the air and in space watching over us. Let's get rested and fresh and decide on things later on."

The look on Mary's face carried doubts. "You're certain about this, honey?"

"Mom, we're close. I feel we're so close to this and I want to chew over what we've discussed and see if a fresh start brings anything useful."

"Ummm . . . okay. But the next time you plan something like this I'm definitely going with you. Honeymoon promotion project or no."

Sandy wasn't certain, but she thought she heard Bud mutter "What honeymoon?"

"I agree that sleep is the best thing all around," Tom Sr. said. "Sandy, let's get back in touch later on, or sooner if, Heaven forbid, more trouble arrives."



Sandy nodded, trying not to yawn. A final exchange of endearments, blown kisses and (in the case of Ken and Bingo) silently mouthed words of affection passed through the airwaves, and then the screen went dark.

Bingo rose from the couch, stretching. "Well . . . Sestina's got the bed, and I've got my sleeping bag, so that means you guys get to wrestle for the couch."

"Almost a Freudian slip there," Sandy replied.

She then noticed Bud giving her a look she couldn't read. "What?"

"You've been walking around in Bergman's mind," Bud nonchalantly replied, rising from the couch to go over to the icebox. "But I've spent years walking around in yours, Madame Curious."

"What do you mean?"

Bud was helping himself to some milk. "I mean that Bergman isn't the only one around here who enjoys being clever. Or devious. Or both."

Sandy sighed. "Okay, Bud Barclay. Out with it."

"That was a very good examination you engineered on the St. Louis clue. You covered all the important points. All except one." He gave Sandy a quirky smile. "Why didn't you bring up the first lines of the poem? The bit about the hall of the Northern Gods? Answer: you've already figured it out, haven't you?"

Sandy gave an innocent shrug. "It was simple. In fact that was the easiest part of the clue. I know where we've got to go next and, while it's on my mind, I'll go set the destination into the HOW2 and get us started while we sleep."

Getting up she padded forward to the driver's compartment.

Bud and Bingo watched her. "Well?" Bud asked. "You going to let the rest of us in on the secret?"

"In a bit," Sandy called back. In a few moments the gentle murmur of the HOW2 getting underway could be heard.

"Actually," Sandy remarked, returning to the living room, "I'm a little surprised no one else twigged on it."

"Yeah, well . . . color us stupid," Bingo said.

"Not stupid," Sandy assured her, stretching out upon the couch. "In fact, the solution doesn't really clear things up. I know where we need to go, but I haven't got the faintest idea of what to do once we get there."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean where in the heck do we find a witch in Westchester County?" Sandy closed her eyes.

## Chapter Twenty-Four: The Witch and the Devil.

The emergency occurred somewhere between Effingham and Terre Haute.

When Sandy first heard the cry her first impulse was to roll over a bit and return to sleep, thinking that it was Bud's turn to get up and feed the baby . . .

She then came fully awake, sitting up on the couch. "Sestina!"

Bingo was also sitting up in her sleeping bag, hurriedly trying to squirm out. Meanwhile Bud (who had been making do with sleeping in the forward compartment) was already moving past them and heading for the bedroom, following the plaintive wails.

By the time Sandy and Bingo caught up they were hearing Bud. "Hey, Princess. What's wrong?"

Poking their heads into the room the girls saw Bud sitting on the edge of the bed, being tightly held by the arms of a whimpering Sestina. For his part Bud was doing his best to keep breathing, as well as deliver reassuring pats to the cloth covered head.

"I think someone was having a nightmare," Bud stage-whispered. "It's okay, sugar," he continued to Sestina. "It's okay."

"Poor thing," Bingo said.

Sandy, in the meantime, was giving the adjacent bathroom a critical look. "Bingo? If we open this panel up, change the water pump and recycler settings to 'maintenance' and then swing the whole business out on the inspection frame, I think that would widen the doorway enough here for Sestina to make a potty trip."

"Oh! Good idea."

Sandy nodded. "Just keep her quiet a bit," she said to Bud, "and we'll get things ready."

"Women I can handle," Bud replied. "Most of the time," he added sotto voice.

Sandy and Bingo quickly began working, with Sandy mentally blessing whoever among her father, her brother or Phyllis had come up with the notion of making the HOW2's internal systems easily accessible. "We'll have to unlatch this panel down here."

"Yeah," Bingo said. "I see it. Hold on."

It was then Sandy noticed that Sestina had stopped crying.

She could also hear Bud's voice singing low. "Oh, gee, but ain't it grand to have a girl so big and fat, that when you go to hug her, you don't

know where you're at? You have to take a piece of chalk in your hand, and hug a bit and chalk a mark to see where you began."

Looking over, Sandy saw that Sestina had quieted, her eyes half-closed as she let Bud gently rock her back and forth.

"That man of mine," Sandy murmured, returning to her work.

Bingo looked up. "What?"

"I love him so."

\* \* \* \* \*

Fortunately the crisis was successfully abated (especially after Bud was pried loose from Sestina so that he could once again be sent forward while Sestina attended to her ablutions). The rest of the night went by peaceably as the HOW2 piloted itself on into Indiana, and then onwards into Ohio.

Everyone was awake and settling down to breakfast by the time they were approaching Akron. "I guess I'm really getting used to the Cybertron-II," Sandy was remarking. "But I'd still feel safer if one of us was at the wheel while driving through a city."

Bingo was nodding. "I'll take care of it after I eat. I like drivin' the HOW2. An' I gotta be doin' somethin' `round here, seein' as how I might be losin' the cook job."

The last remark was due to the fact that she was sitting with the others at the table while Sestina was busy in the kitchen preparing food. Despite her size the giant was nimbly moving about in her work, everything in the HOW2 kitchen within her considerable reach.

Watching her, Sandy tried again. "Sestina honey, you don't have to do this for us. You're our guest---"

"Let her be," Bud softly told her. "She wants to feel needed,"

Sandy swallowed the rest of her comment, occupying herself by critically regarding the now freshly-washed dark brown tunic Sestina had changed back into. It seemed to allow her freedom of movement, and looked comfortable, but small wonder Sherman first mistook her for a bear.

At least something had been done with her hair, courtesy of a shampoo and some careful brushing out by Bingo ("Ooo oui! Mademoiselle will look so ver-ree charmeeng!"). Sestina's hair was now a clean smelling ash brown wave reaching just beneath her neck (and set off by a bright butterfly hairclip Bingo had somehow come up with).

But that tunic . . . "We need to check the map," Sandy commented. "First reasonably large town or city we come to after ten o'clock I want to make a stop long enough to find a store and get Sestina a new outfit."

Sestina looked back at her. Her face still seemed to be fixed in a permanent state of melancholy (Sandy was put in mind of a "Tragedy" mask from classic Greek drama), but there seemed to be an overall calm. Certainly not joy, but the tears had gone away for the time being.

Sandy nodded. "Yes, dear. You need some pretty clothes."

As usual, Sestina made no comment, but spots of deeper pink appeared in her cheeks and she turned back to her work. A few moments later and she turned back to bring two plates to the table, setting one each before Sandy and Bingo.

Sandy looked down, already smelling the food. "Oh. This is . . ."

"Looks like she scrambled these eggs with tomatoes," Bingo replied. "I believe it's an Armenian recipe. And this . . ." Bingo experimented with a large roll. "Oh! That's what she was doin' with the sausage. She ground it and stuffed it into the bread."

Sandy reflected that one of the benefits of having someone with Bingo's culinary background was that the HOW2's supplies included not only processed food, but a variety of fresh ingredients as well.

She began eating. "Oh my! Bingo, you might want to update your resume."

Sestina now returned and laid a plate in front of Bud. Sandy and Bingo couldn't help but notice how his plate held several large frosted pastries.

"She woke up the same time we did," Bingo whispered. "How in Fanny's basement---"

The girls also couldn't help but notice how Sestina stood close alongside Bud, waiting with an anxious expression as he picked up a pastry and carefully bit into it.

"Mm," he said, looking up into the waiting eyes. "Are these ground nuts you've mixed with honey or something inside the Danish?"

Sestina nodded rapidly.

"It's sort of like baklava," Bud remarked, taking another bite. "It's quite good."

Something that tried very hard to be a smile made an attempt to appear on Sestina's face. It didn't quite happen, but the giant impulsively bent down to take Bud into a large hug. To his credit, Bud didn't try to immediately escape.

Smiling, Bingo let her voice drop to a Lon Chaney pastiche. "She will hug him and squeeze him and pet him, George."

"Bud's always had this effect on tall girls," Sandy added, smirking across the table at him.

Letting him go, Sestina seemed to bounce happily back to the kitchen.

Watching her, Bingo began softly singing. "Get your biscuits in the oven, and your buns into---"

"Don't go there, Winkler," Bud warned.

Chuckling, Bingo finished her eggs and got up from the table with her second sausage roll. "So. We're goin' to Valhalla, New York?"

Sandy nodded. "Yep!"

"That's what was throwing me off," Bud admitted. "The poem said `hall of the Northern Gods'. I figured Norse mythology, but I was thinking Asgard."

"`Hall', not `home'," Sandy corrected. "Asgard was the home of the Norse gods, but Bergman specifically wrote `hall'. That was Valhalla. We keep making this mistake of not following the literal meaning of his clues. Besides, it occurred to me that Valhalla was the logical destination, seeing as how Bergman lived in Westchester."

Bingo smiled at her. "By Jove, Lord Merridew, Sir, you don't miss a trick."

Sandy and Bud returned blank stares.

The Texan pouted. "I bet Ken would've gotten it," she muttered, heading forward.

"I bet Ken's been getting a lot of it," Bud said under his breath.

Sandy kicked him under the table, then went to go help Sestina with the dishes.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time the HOW2 was rolling through Pennsylvania, Sandy knew there was no sense of putting off the argument any longer. She knew that, once they left Ohio, it would soon become evident to Sherman and the others that they weren't taking the quickest route back to Shopton.

On the living room screen Mary crossed her arms, giving her daughter a steady look. "Sightseeing?"

With a sigh, Sandy explained to her mother their eventual destination.

Mary copied her sigh. "You could at least come home and rest a bit. Valhalla's not that far away from us, and vice-versa."

"I know, Mom, but . . . but . . . but I guess I really don't have a reasonable explanation, do I?"

Mary tiredly rubbed the bridge of her nose. "If you were capable of reasonable explanations, Sandra, then you wouldn't have been through half the

things you've experienced over the last years or so. But you don't want Tom picking you up or something? You could get there much faster."

"Truth be told, Mom, this is sort of nice. The HOW2's comfortable, and it's getting us there just slow enough for us to carefully consider our plans."

A slightly malicious gleam entered Mary's eyes. "Which reminds me. Someone else is waiting to talk to you." Giving a nod offscreen she moved away from the camera's view.

She was replaced by a rather severe Phyllis. "Sandy!"

"Phyllis? Girl chum? Friend of my youth?"

"What's happening to my Maiden Flight promotion tour? You guys are supposed to be demonstrating a sweetly romantic getaway."

"Been trying, Phyl," Bud muttered, wandering past. "Been trying."

"Instead I'm getting a James Bond movie. Honeymooning couples do not want a James Bond movie."

"I would," Bingo replied from the driver's seat.

"Normal honeymooning couples do not want a James Bond movie," Phyllis continued. "I want sweetness and romance."

"There you go," Bud declared from the hallway. "Our official orders."

Sandy considered that they were probably running low on aspirin and made a mental note to restock at their next stop. Otherwise she would be breaking into the bourbon. "Phyllis . . . we're doing the best we can. If it were just up to me I would spend this entire trip hugging and kissing with Bud."

"Witness!" Bud said.

"Witness!" Bingo echoed.

From the kitchen, where she was chopping vegetables, Sestina paused to raise a hand.

"Believe me," Sandy said, "I want Maiden Flight to succeed as much as you do. And, speaking of such," here she smiled, "how's your personal project with my brother working out?"

Phyllis glanced about, then leaned a little closer to the camera. "It's still anyone's game," she quietly confided. "I think I've got him on the ropes, but there's still some fight left in the boy."

"Ropes," Bud commented, coming back. "Haven't considered that yet."

Sandy studiously ignored him. "Well, we're all pulling for you here. And tell you what. Like Mom said, Valhalla isn't all that far from Shopton. If you want go research some possible places in the area for location shots and maybe we can set something up."

Phyllis considered it. "Fair idea. As long as photos are the only thing being shot."

"From your lips to God's ears."

"Oh, and how's Sestina turning out?"

Sandy smiled. "See for yourself," she said, beckoning for Sestina to come into range of the camera. The giant shyly came closer, and Sandy once again silently congratulated herself on the girl's new look. A stop at a clothing store had resulted in several good finds, and Sestina was now decked out in a crisp cool white blouse and Navy blue skirt. If there was a flaw to the overall result it was in the fact that no one apparently manufactured attractive styles for a girl needing a size fourteen-EEE shoe.

Sestina came into view as Mary, Tom Sr. and Sherman also leaned in to get a peek.

"Oh she shines up nice," Mary commented.

Sherman nodded. "Yeah. Sort of looks like Mary Poppins after thirteen weeks at Parris Island."

"Wahhhhhhhhhhh . . . ."

"Sherman!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Four-thirty in the afternoon finally found the HOW2 rolling up North Broadway into Valhalla. Sandy and Bud were forward while Bingo and Sestina peered out from the nearest windows behind them.

"Well now we get to the hard part," Sandy remarked. "If I was a witch, where would I be?"

"Hogwarts," Bingo said.

"Needing something a bit more constructive here, Bingo."

"Sorry." Bingo poked her head forward. "What `bout where Bergman lived? Or would that be too obvious?"

"Ah-hhhh . . . good suggestion but yeah, too obvious. Bergman lived over in the chi-chi section of Westchester, closer to Chappaqua, and if you start in with Katherine Hepburn's routine from Desk Set I'll lock you in the closet."

"I can't help it if you and Bud let me pick the movies we've been watchin'. And Sestina liked it. I think she wants to grow up to be Joan Blondell."

"Anyway, I'm going to mark Bergman's home address on the map screen." Sandy reached down to touch it. "We might need it later."

Next to Sandy, Bud was consulting a Tiny Idiot. "Valhalla," he read aloud. "Named by a fan of Wagner's music. Population: three thousand, one hundred and sixty-two. Major industries and attractions . . ."

His voice faded and Sandy glanced at him. "What?"

Bud was still regarding the computer. "Not a whole lot here."

"We're looking for a tower," Sandy prompted. "Everyone keep your eyes open for that."

They continued on, passing through Kensico Dam County Park and further into the town proper, with Kensico Lake on their right. Sandy tried to drive as slowly as possible as they all looked about.

"We could stop and ask someone," Bingo suggested. "If there's a legend or something' about a witch then maybe it'd be common knowledge. Not to mention the tower."

"A very fine witch," Sandy reminded her.

"Yeah."

It was then that Bud let out a soft moan. Looking over, Sandy saw him sitting back, his eyes closed. "What's the matter?"

No answer for a moment, just a slow shake of the head.

Then: "You found Bergman's poem in Cholame, and Bingo helped figure out the Four Corners clue and got us to St. Louis. I guess it's my turn now."

"What do you mean?"

Bud opened his eyes, his expression weary. "I mean make this left onto Prospect Avenue and head south. Here." Leaning forward he started setting up a course on the map screen.

Sandy looked at it and nodded. "You know where we've got to go?"

"I think I've got it, but I want to make sure. And Bingo?"

"Yeah?"

"If I'm right you're gonna kick yourself for not knowing this."

Her curiosity rising, Sandy fought down her impulse to grill Bud further and concentrated on following the course he laid out, shimmying about from road to road until they turned right onto Grasslands Road from Legion Drive.

"Start looking on the right," Bud remarked calmly. "It should be coming up soon. If we reach the Hebrew Hospital Home we've overshot."

"Bud, I don't do calm very well."



"You're doing fine, love."

Sandy's mind was about to boil over when her eyes spotted something which almost made her swerve into the path of an oncoming car in the opposite lane, Managing to keep control she carefully pulled off the road, coming to a stop and peering through the windshield for a closer fascinated look.

Bingo's face was just behind her shoulder as she also peered. "Oh!"

"I agree," Sandy murmured.

"Well, ladies?" Bud asked. "What do you see?"

"A tower," Sandy replied. "I see a tower." And it was exactly that. In clear sight before them was a ninety-eight foot tall granite tower, part of a wide stone entranceway, the end of which the HOW2 was currently parked at.

A sign was nearby and Sandy read it. "Kensico Cemtery."

Bud nodded.

Sandy felt something draining out of her. "'The witch lies still' . . . we're looking for a gravesite."

"I'm not certain," Bud argued, more feeling entering his voice. "I mean, I think I've got the answer. But there's a problem and I can't figure out a way around it."

"Bud . . . where do we go? Who . . ."

"Drive on in," Bud instructed. "We're looking for Ossipee Avenue." His eyes caught a furtive movement behind him. "Stay away from the computer, Bingo. If I'm right I want to enjoy this moment."

Feeling more and more excited, Sandy piloted the HOW2 onto the cemetery grounds, carefully following the gentle roads and examining the guiding signposts. Finally locating Ossipee Avenue she reduced the speed until they were barely crawling as she looked around.

"There'll be a great big beech tree," Bud said, glancing down at his own computer. "A weeping beech tree."

Sandy had already spotted it and stopped the HOW2, setting the brake. "Everyone out!"

They all climbed out of the vehicle, with Sestina bringing up the rear as Sandy practically broke into a run, already heading for the large bronze statue which was clearly visible beneath the tree. Mounted on a granite pedestal, sitting on a base of the same weathered bronze . . . the figure of a woman, her hands demurely poised on a knee, her expression and overall pose one of serene sorrow.

"Oh," Sandy breathed. "Oh . . . oh . . ."

She looked down, seeing the name.

"A very fine witch," she whispered. "A very fine witch indeed."

BILLIE BURKE

Bingo had come up alongside her and was also reading the name. "Well," she remarked. "Kick me."

"Mary Wilhelmina Ethelburt Appleton `Billie' Burke," Sandy said, growing calmer. "The Good Witch of the North. And Bergman's a stinking genius."

"Maybe not," Bingo sharply said, and Sandy noticed the Texan had brought along a computer and was studying it.

Turning towards an approaching Bud, Bingo waved the computer at him. "You're wrong, Bud. You're so wrong."

Bud nodded tiredly. "You found it."

Sandy looked from one to the other. "What's wrong?"

"Plenty," Bingo replied. "Bergman died in 1965. Billie Burke died in 1970!"

Sandy softly swore. "But it all fits," she insisted, looking back at the grave. "Burke played Glinda. We're in Valhalla. The tower . . . the Sad Lady. It's all here."

Bingo rubbed the computer against her chin. "Lemme pull up the cemetery website. Maybe there's another witch buried here."

"With another sad statue?" Bud asked.

Bingo looked dejected. In the meantime Sestina had come closer and was peering in soft fascination at the statue. Looking at the scene it occurred to Sandy how much the statue's face matched Sestina's.

"And anyway," Bud went on, "how was this place supposed to help us find the Unzip Key? I'm betting that this statue doesn't have a secret compartment or anything like that."

"'The most difficult part still lies ahead'," Sandy quoted to herself, still staring at the statue. Then louder: "Bergman wouldn't have used an assistant or anything like that. He wouldn't trust someone to wait for Burke to die and then have that person leave a clue. He made a point of personally leaving all the other clues, and he would've done the same thing here."

"And he couldn't anticipate Burke's death," Bud pointed out.

A pause, and then Sandy slowly turned to look at him. "Maybe he could," she said thoughtfully.

"Huh?"

"Maybe that's precisely what he did."

"Sandy . . . Bergman was sneaky, but certainly he didn't plan Burke's death or anything."

"Yeah," Bingo chimed in. "And anyway you don't whack the Good Witch."

An odd light was in Sandy's eyes. "Either of you two still have the cemetery website up?"

Bud and Bingo both nodded.

"Find the administration center for this place," Sandy said, moving past them and walking back to the HOW2. "I specifically want the place where the records are kept. Sestina? Time to go, honey."

The others followed her, Bud and Bingo tapping on their computers. "The cemetery administration office is a little further north of here," Bud said. "Over on Commerce Street, on the other side of Lakeview."

Sandy nodded.

"You're not going to tell us your idea," Bud said to her back.

"You didn't," Sandy pointed out, raising the hatch on the driver's side and climbing in. Swallowing further arguments Bud settled in alongside her while Bingo and Sestina entered behind them.

Besides, Bud quietly reasoned, it'd be a short drive. And, after several minutes of cruising about the winding roads of the cemetery, Sandy was moving the HOW2 into the parking lot of a rather large and cheerful looking white painted house (which, according to commentary from Bingo, had served as the private railroad station for cemetery visitors . . . Bingo punctuating this information with a slight "eew").

Bud was forcing himself to remain patient. But, as they were strolling across the parking lot to the house, he finally spoke up. "You're going to make me look stupid, aren't you?" he asked Sandy

"Oh Bud, I would never make you look stupid."

"Huh."

"At least not accidentally."

"Gee, thanks!"

Entering the building, and in spite of all preconceived notions concerning cemetery offices, the group found themselves in a foyer rather like what one would expect in a public library or a small post office. The impression was heightened by the presence of the requisite prim-looking but smiling matron behind the wide counter (Bingo had been expecting a gaunt man dressed all in black).

The woman's smile faltered just a bit as Sestina loomed her way inside, but she quickly regained her composure. "Afternoon," she politely said. "May I be of assistance?"

The nameplate on the counter cheerfully announced ON DUTY: COROLIA BLUEDINGE, and Sandy put on her most friendly expression. "Hi! We're visitors---"

The woman's smile widened slightly. "I didn't think you were residents."

And Bud thought: a funny cemetery clerk!

Sandy managed to recover. "Right," she said. "We were touring the grounds and had some questions concerning the Billie Burke site."

"Oh certainly," Corolia Bluedinge chirped. "That's one of my particular favorites. What would you like to know, dear?"

"Well, the statue on the grave . . ."

The clerk nodded. "Wasn't that pretty? The statue was actually a memorial which Billie Burke dedicated to her mother: Blanche Beatty Burke."

Sandy brightened. "So the statue had already been there? Before Billie Burke's death?"

"Oh my yes, dear."

Bud closed his eyes. "Ohhhhhh . . ."

"But did Billie Burke actually plan to be buried where the statue was?" Sandy asked.

"Oh well, yes," Bluedinge replied. "Most of the celebrities who are buried here make arrangements well in advance. Particularly when they tend to reach a certain age," she added delicately. "It was arranged to have both her and her husband, Florence Ziegfeld, buried at that rather lovely spot."

Sandy's eyes were glittering. "Would you happen to know how far in advance the arrangement was made?"

"Well, let me think for a moment." Bluedinge tapped at her lips with a fingertip. "I don't happen to have that information exactly in my head, but I imagine I could find out. It would be in the official records."

"Could we see them, please?"

Bluedinge considered it. "Well, it's not all that unusual a request I must say. The information is certainly available to the public. I cannot of course let any of you take the records, but I can allow you a look at them here."

"Please."

"Just give me a moment then." Smiling, Bluedinge turned to wander towards a forest of tall shelves stretching out behind her. "Are you people by any chance in show business?" she asked over her shoulder.

Sandy nodded. "Yes."

"In a moment." Bluedinge moved out of sight among the shelves.

Bingo looked curiously at Sandy. "We're in show business?"

"I'm a magician," Sandy replied with a small smile. "And I believe I'm about to pull a rabbit out of the hat."

A few minutes later Bluedinge returned to the counter, placing a large leather bound volume down upon it. "We file these by alphabetical order," she explained, opening the book and starting to leaf through the pages. "Over the years you tend to have things like trees being replanted, or damage to the graves being discovered or repaired. Things like that."

"One further question," Sandy asked. "Who on the cemetery staff helps people with arrangements and designs concerning gravesites?"

"Oh that would be the members of our Board of Trustees," Bluedinge explained. "Especially if it involves a celebrity."

"And the Trustees," Sandy went on. "I imagine a lot of local people tend to be among them?"

"Oh many of the area's prominent citizens tend to serve. It's considered something of an honor. Here we are," Bluedinge went on, finding a specific page. "The information concerning the Burke-Ziegfeld gravesite. Oh, and you can see the names and initials of the Trustees who assisted in the arrangement, right up on the top heading." She turned the book around so that Sandy and the others could study the page.

Sandy's eyes went first to the heading, and she fought down an urge to scream and jump when, among the names listed, she could clearly read Gabriel F. Bergman.

And, below that, information proclaiming that burial arrangements for Billie Burke and Florence Ziegfeld were finalized.

Keeping her voice calm, Sandy looked over the information. "Ziegfeld died in 1932 and was already buried here. Billie Burke of course made plans to be buried alongside him. Her own ideas for her internment, including the statue, were finalized and recorded . . . in 1953," her finger moved down the page, "and updated in 1965." She looked up into Bluedinge's curiosity-filled eyes. "Why updated, Ms. Bluedinge? Would you know?"

"Well, let me see here a moment," Bluedinge replied, raising a pair of glasses to her face and turning the book slightly to get a better look. "Oh, yes. This Mr. Bergman. See? He wasn't on the Board when the original arrangements were made, but he was serving in 1965. I think . . . I think . . . yes! Here it is. This note down here concerning having the beech tree inspected by a tree surgeon. It seems there was some concern about beech bark disease."

Bud and Bingo looked at each other.

"The tree," Bingo whispered.

"No," Sandy told them. "The tree could've died since then. Look here. Down where Bergman's initials are by the note."

Crowding closer, the others saw where Sandy was pointing. There, at the end of the annotation concerning the tree surgeon visit, a rather hastily scratched set of initials.

And immediately alongside it: 6939.

"For her next magical trick," Bud murmured.

Sandy tapped at the number. "Ms. Bluedinge, what does this represent?"

The clerk bent closely over the page. "Why I'm afraid I really don't know, dear. I've found all sorts of things in these records, and there's sometimes no explanation for them." She looked up at them. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Sandy replied. "Thank you, Ms. Bluedinge."

"Why you're very welcome, dear. Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Oh, more than you'd believe!"

They headed for the door. "Now what, Madame Curious?" Bud asked.

"We've got what could be the final clue," Sandy said. "No more directions or poems. All we have to do is put the pieces together. We're practically home free."

Stepping outside the door they suddenly stopped, all of them staring at the two people who were waiting in the parking lot. One of the people would've been difficult to overlook, seeing as how he was as large and as formidably built as Sestina.

The other person was . . .

"Sun Ohm Erato," Sandy remarked. "Why am I not surprised?"

## **Chapter Twenty-Five: Confrontation and Direction.**

Sandy immediately felt as if she were moving in slow motion while everything around her was speeding up. On either side of her she sensed both Bud and Bingo tensing as if preparing to leap out and pounce. From behind her she heard Sestina produce a thick gasp.

Meanwhile she saw Tiresias (dressed in the same sort of tunic which Sestina had originally appeared in) shifting into a crouch, as if he were about to try leaping onto the side of a mountain and start clawing his way through.

Only Sun Ohm Erato . . . dressed in a simple business suit . . . seemed calm as he softly smiled at her, his eyes filled with the deceptive kindness she so clearly remembered.

"We meet again, Miss Swift," he said. "And I don't truly believe you're all that surprised by my appearance here."

"Actually I'm more delighted than surprised," Sandy replied evenly. "I find something undeniably appealing about the idea of you in a cemetery."

The Kranjovian responded with a small nod. "I'm pleased to see that your sense of humor hasn't totally deserted you. I still happen to have the quarter you sent me after our last encounter."

His eyes flicked to Sandy's right, and Sandy noticed that Bingo had once again managed to produce the short batons, holding them in a way which, along with the determined expression on the girl's face, promised something unpleasant. "Bingo . . . no!" She then looked to her left. "Bud! Don't do anything."

Bud's eyes were bright and hot as he kept them on Sun Ohm Erato. "San---"

"Tiresias will eat your lunch."

Bud regarded the giant. "Yeah, but I'll get me a ham sandwich before he does."

"Calm!" Sandy snapped. "Both of you."

For his part, Sun Ohm Erato looked at Tiresias, making a small signal with his hand. The giant returned to a posture of silent attention, his eyes remaining fixed on Bud.

"It would be an interesting test of determination versus strength," Sun Ohm Erato remarked, turning back to Sandy. "But I suppose we must try and maintain an air of civility."

"Easier for some than for others," Sandy replied.

Another smile from Sun Ohm Erato. His eyes then looked beyond Sandy, and a touch of sternness entered his voice. "Sestina."

Turning, Sandy saw how the giant was quivering, her eyes large and frightened and her face about to collapse into tears. "Sestina . . . no, dear! No! Listen to me." She laid a hand on Sestina's arm. "Listen to me now. You're all right. You're safe with us. I promise."

It took an enormous effort, as if a large mouse was trying to turn its eyes away from a snake, but Sestina slowly managed to focus on Sandy.

"I promise," Sandy repeated. "I'm stronger than he is. I am."

Something in Sestina's eyes seemed to say prove it.

Keeping her hand on Sestina, Sandy turned back to Sun Ohm Erato. "Well there's no denying a lack of stones on your part," she said. "You've

got police in several states looking for you . . . probably the FBI as well . . . and that's just for openers. You're on the Very Wanted List, and here you are out in the open."

"Oh I think I'll have a little something to say about public reprisals, Miss Swift."

"And I think a combined law enforcement effort could take care of Tiresias as well as you."

"Possibly," admitted Sun Ohm Erato. "Very possibly. But consider something else for the moment. The police in Illinois managed to capture several of my remaining agents. But I still have a small number left. Or did you think I would only be accompanied by Tiresias?"

Sandy and the others carefully looked about. There were several other people in the parking lot, with most of them obviously interested at both Tiresias and Sestina.

"Oh you won't easily see them," Sun Ohm Erato assured her, "but they are most definitely in close position, and are most definitely armed." His eyes narrowed. "I am confident you wouldn't want the overall peace of this sacred area shattered unnecessarily."

Sandy was trying to calm the dark surge rising in her.

"Your move, Miss Swift."

Sandy took several breath, working for an answer.

Then: "Come with me," she said curtly, starting for the HOW2.

"San---"

"Bud, if he's right then everyone will be safer if we're all inside."

His hand was on her shoulder and he was turning her about to stare into her eyes. "Sandy!"

For the briefest moment her face softened.

"Trust me," she murmured. "Please. I love you."

Bud knew she was asking a lot with those last words. He also knew she was the only woman, perhaps the only person in the entire world, who could ask so much with those words. A slight squeeze on the shoulder and he let her go, watching her harden again as she continued leading everyone to the HOW2.

Everyone guardedly filed inside, Tiresias automatically turning to watch the others enter, and his eyes especially on Sestina as she cautiously followed.

Sun Ohm Erato was looking about with interest. "Charming," he remarked. "Formidable."



Sandy sealed the hatch shut, which was the signal for everyone to begin jockeying for positions. Sun Ohm Erato took a seat at the dinette, with Tiresias standing close beside him. Bud, Sandy and Bingo, in the meantime, settled on the couch and chairs in the living room, while Sestina stood behind them, her arms folded across her chest.

Seeing where Sun Ohm Erato had decided to sit, Sandy allowed her hands to lightly brush across the controls on the coffee table, disengaging the dinette console as well as sealing the entrance to the forward compartment.

The movement had not escaped the notice of the Kranjovian. "I'm not going to pretend that you won't try some sort of undeniably heroic action," he said to Sandy. "No doubt you're somehow sending a message to the authorities, as well as to your people at Enterprises. I only hope, however, that before things degenerate into a rather rough sort of silliness you'll take the opportunity to carry out a calm discussion with me."

"We can talk `till the cows come home," Sandy replied, adjusting comfortably on the arm of the couch. "We're not the ones everyone's after. When the police do come we can all watch which of us they haul away. And not just for what's happened recently in St. Louis and in Illinois." Her eyes narrowed. "There's still the attempt you made against the space station years ago. Not to mention the attempts on all our lives. And God alone knows what could've happened to everything if your `Sungold' vehicle hadn't been stopped. You've got quite a lot to answer for."

"You have an enviably democratic conscience," Sun Ohm Erato said. "How many deaths can be laid at your door, Miss Swift? Explosions? Damage? Chaos? Put your history alongside mine and let us determine who is the true Angel of Destruction."

Bud saw how Sandy seemed to freeze at his words and something boiled over inside him. He rose from his chair.

"Bud!"

"Don't mind me," he replied, slowly approaching Sun Ohm Erato. "I'm just gonna rip the bottom of his mouth off and use the jawbone of an ass."

She grabbed at his arm. "Sit down . . . Sit Down! Now!"

They glared at each other for a few heartbeats before Bud reluctantly allowed her to guide him back to his chair.

"I can take him," Bingo whispered.

Somehow Sandy believed it. "So can I," she whispered back. "And my way's better."

Forcing herself back into calmness she once again faced Sun Ohm Erato. "I'm fully aware of my sins," she told him. "The difference between the two of us is that I've confessed to mine, and I'm willing to bet that I reach redemption much sooner than you will. But you didn't come out into the open just to have a discussion on ethics."

"Quite true," Sun Ohm Erato said. "I perceive that you are very close to locating the Unzip Key, and I wish to personally be on hand to collect on my investment."

"You've managed to stay on our trail," Sandy said.

"I have my methods. Your progress has been monitored from the moment you left Shopton in this rather unique vehicle, and by very unique means."

In spite of herself, Sandy couldn't keep it in. "Including Sestina?"

"Sestina's . . . defection . . . was entirely of her own making." Once again Sun Ohm Erato laid ominous eyes on the giant. "I will deal with her later."

"Keep in mind that, without me, this will be as close as you get to the Unzip Key," Sandy told him. "And if you hurt Sestina it'll be over my dead body."

"She is my property."

Now it was Sandy who was in danger of boiling over. "Oh I assure you she most certainly is not!"

Sun Ohm Erato tsked. "Your charity blinds you to reality. Without discipline, without guidance or control, Sestina possesses no more vital spirit than a lump of coal. I consciously designed my biods as living machines subservient to my will. Even Jascha Kondor, whose destruction you so blithely contributed to, was operating under my original programming."

"You lied to me," Sandy told him. "When we first met you told me Sestina and Tiresias had been dying because of physical disabilities and you had managed to save them. Orry Moe Moses told me how they were normal infants that you modified in your laboratory. Add child abuse and torture to your record."

Sun Ohm Erato's face had lost all friendliness. "And you believe the Oligarchy?"

"Ach . . . should I believe you? I accept that there's no love lost between me and the Oligarchy, but at least they've drawn the line at murder. And even they rejected your biod work."

"For now," Sub Ohm Erato replied, recovering his calm. "But I think that, when I acquire the Unzip Key, the Oligarchy will come to my way of thinking. After all, I will give them the means to achieve dominance over the world's computer systems. And, in spite of your singular efforts against my biods, I still have Tiresias as a demonstration model." With a mild wave he indicated the giant at his side. "Along with the power of the Unzip Key, the Oligarchy will gain the means to create an army of near-invincible soldiers."

"Blind stompin' loco," Bingo breathed.

Sandy crossed her arms. "And what makes you think I'm just going to lead you to the Unzip Key? Especially after telling me all of this?"

"Two important reasons. First: years ago I made you and Enterprises a generous offer to cooperate with me. I now make an even more lucrative offer. Help me to regain favor with the Oligarchy and I promise that Enterprises will play a significant role in the order to come."

A yawning emptiness of cold opened within Sandy. She had seen this sort of thing before. It was how Ykaterina Rotzog had acted during her final moments on the Moon. Duran Geiner had been the same way when Sandy had encountered him at his hidden base further to the north, as had Jascha Kondor during their last battle. Even the rogue Solomon computer program had seemed to produce an air of this towering twisted vision.

And by now Sandy knew that, at each of those times, she had been in the greatest personal danger.

But Sun Ohm Erato still needed a reply, and Sandy made what she felt was the only logical one, responding with two specific words.

Sun Ohm Erato didn't seem surprised. "Admittedly tempting," he considered, "but unsanitary." He sighed. "Very well. Consider, then, my second reason. Whatever you may think of me, even you must admit I possess cleverness. Certainly you couldn't believe I would blithely present myself here, risking possible capture, or worse, without some sort of exit strategy?"

Sandy glanced at Tiresias.

Sun Ohm Erato noted it. "Yes, he would certainly play a part in it," he said, nodding. "But I have a further move to make on our chessboard. An unknown element which will insure my eventual escape."

A snarl slowly moved onto his face. "And then, Miss Swift . . . and then I will devote the rest of my life to hunting you and your family down. Perhaps I shall even wait for you to have children before beginning my revenge. But I will certainly leave you for last, and I promise you I will be the hellish shadow always at your shoulder."

This time Bingo and Bud both moved. But Sandy had been expecting it and threw herself between them and Sun Ohm Erato. "Stop it," she screamed at both them and the Kranjovian. "Just stop it right now! All of you!"

"You heard him," Bud argued.

"And you're gonna hear me now!" Sandy declared. "Sit down. SIT DOWN!"

They all did so . . . even Sun Ohm Erato, who had seen the venom in the faces of both Bud and Bingo, and he made a small commanding gesture to Tiresias who had almost lunged into action.

Sandy stood in the middle of the living room, breathing hard, arms stretched at both her friends and at Sun Ohm Erato, hotly breathing as she looked from one to the other. Finally collecting herself . . . just barely . . . she went to the coffee table and began pounding hard on the keyboard buttons.

"Miss Swift," Sun Ohm Erato began warningly.

Sandy pointed a finger at him. "You want to see a hellish shadow at someone's shoulder," she snarled, "then interrupt me just one more time." She returned to her work, muttering under her breath as everyone quietly watched (Sun Ohm Erato doing so with slitted eyes).

The big screen came on, producing the scanned copies of both the Cholame and Four Corners clues. Sandy, meanwhile, had pulled the St. Louis clue from a drawer and was spreading it out on the table. She scowled down at it then did the same to the images on the screen.

"Miss Swift . . ."

"I said shut up!" Sandy barked, throwing Sun Ohm Erato a fiery look. "You threaten me that's one thing. But you've threatened my friends . . . my family. And I don't know if I'll ever have children, but God help you because you've just threatened them as well. You made me a promise. Now I'll make one to you. I'll see you lying in Hell with your back broken."

"Give me the Unzip Key," Sun Ohm Erato declared, "and you'll never see me again."

Sandy slowly returned to studying the clues. "If only for the satisfaction of proving that I'm smarter than you."

"Miss Swift . . ."

"You had the same opportunities I had in solving this, so screw your wounded ego. It must've really hurt you, though, when you realized that Bergman was smarter than you. Not even a scientist . . . just a clever businessman. In your eyes nothing more than a common tradesman, and yet he's managed to outwit you. He damn near managed to outwit all of us."

Sandy looked back over at him. "You probably engineered all this just to get me where you could eventually step on me at your leisure. But I've managed to follow Bergman's trail and solve his chain of clues. Me! Sandra Swift. The interfering little American girl. Nowhere near in your league . . . but I stopped you in Nevada years ago. I stopped Kondor in the Arctic. I've managed to steal another one of your precious bionds, and I'm about to sandbag you here."

"Tiresias take the Winkler woman and tear off her arms and legs."

"He takes one more step," Sandy said to Sun Ohm Erato, "and you'll never see the Unzip Key."

Sun Ohm Erato made a quick gesture, and Tiresias returned to his previous position. "Very well, Miss Swift," he murmured. "Very well. But I'll remember your remarks."

"I hope so," Sandy breathed, returning to her studies. She looked from one clue to the other, re-reading them as if she were seeing them for the first time.

"We've now got all the pieces," Sandy reasoned aloud. "According to Bergman we just picked up the final clue, and even that was nothing more than

the proper way to apply something we learned in St. Louis. We should be able to go straight to the Unzip Key from this point."

"The number might be a street address," Bud offered.

Her eyes still on the clues, Sandy shook her head, waving him to silence. "It's all right here," she said. "Right here in front of us. There are elements in these clues we still haven't fully or properly considered. Bergman wouldn't have just led us to this point and stopped. No. There's something . . ."

She found herself looking at a line in the St. Louis clue.

"'So remember carefully all that's been read'," she murmured. "But we've read everything. We've got it all." Her eyes slowly moved across the lines, suddenly wishing she had either her father or Sherman with her.

"'Sending you east to see the world'," she read from the Cholame clue. "We've gone east. But we certainly didn't see all the world. And Bergman certainly wouldn't intend for us to leave the country. Or would he?"

Her face rose and she stared out at nothing. "'So remember carefully all that's been read'."

"And there's also the business of this beautiful person from 1965," Sun Ohm Erato pointed out.

At that moment Sandy felt she could pick up the entire coffee table and throw it at the Kranjovian.

Bud caught her rising anger. "I can't believe I'm saying this," he quickly told Sandy, "but he's right. That's the part of the clue we still haven't figured out. The beautiful person from 1965."

A thought suddenly struck Sandy hard between the eyes. Or, rather, a memory of past attempts at figuring out the clues. She slowly looked over at Bud. "Say that again," she said.

Bud blinked. "The beautiful person from 1965."

"That's not what we're looking for," Sandy declared, something like sunlight bursting within her. "Pi are round . . . gingerbread are square!"

"San?"

"Shush!" Sandy's mind wrestled. "It's almost there. It's almost there." She looked back down at the St. Louis clue.

"In 1965," she whispered. "Six nine three nine!" Once again her eyes rose to gaze at something only she was seeing. A distant memory was trying to force its way in.

"But that's impossible," she argued to herself. "If I'm right then it would've been found long before now. Unless . . . but Bergman wouldn't play it that way. He wanted us to be able to get the Key. I know it."

Bingo and Bud looked at each other, and Bingo shrugged.

"So remember carefully all that's been read'," Sandy said. "All that's been read."

Her fist slammed down on the table. "All that's been read."

She rapidly began tapping again on the keyboard.

"What are you doing, Miss Swift?" Sun Ohm Erato asked.

"We're gonna go see the world," Sandy told him. She turned to face the screen where the Cholame and Four Corners clues were replaced by Sherman.

"Sandy---"

"Get the others," she said. "Now. And get Aunt Grace as well."

Dropping whatever arguments or questions he had, Sherman got to work.

"And Sherman?"

Still busy, Sherman nodded that he was listening.

"The company that Bergman worked for. I want a complete list of all the products it manufactured."

Another nod. Within moments his image reduced in size, allowing three other sections to share the screen. Tom and Phyllis were in one, her parents were in another, and Aunt Grace was in the remaining one.

"Sandy," Mary breathed. "What---"

Sandy lifted her hands for silence. "I've got something to say first, so please listen. First off, if I move the camera pickup a bit, you'll see our two newest visitors: Sun Ohm Erato and Tiresias."

Sherman looked as if he was experiencing a heart attack.

The others didn't look much better. "Sandra!" Mary shrieked.

"We're currently operating under a sort of truce," Sandy explained, hoping that the slight lie would hold up. "Sherman, that means that the secret instructions you're probably somehow issuing are to be put on hold for the moment."

Sherman didn't look too happy, and Sandy was willing to bet quite a bit he'd somehow continue trying to move behind her back.

No matter. "Thanks to Sun Ohm Erato's . . . influence . . . I've been goaded into finding what I feel is the location of the Unzip Key. But I've also been put into something of a mood and I need to get a few things settled. Aunt Grace?"

Somehow the woman managed to become even more attentive. "Sandra?"

"Please understand that I don't intend any of what I say to be a reflection on you personally. I think I like you. I think I like you a lot."

But you're the liaison between Enterprises and the Pierce Library and, right now, the Library is on my bad list. And yes, I hope they're listening in right now.

"The Library's got this king-hell almighty reputation for being practically omniscient. I don't know personally . . . I've never been to Austin . . . but if the Angel is just a small annex of the Library then I guess I should be impressed. It's supposed to have research facilities that rival Enterprises. Cryptographers, interpreters, data and intelligence analysts.

"Aunt Grace, where was the Library in all of this? In terms of overall assistance in this thing I've had more solid help from Sestina, and she can't talk. Based on its reputation the Library should've solved the clues long before we did. But it didn't."

"Sandra---"

"I think you slipped, Aunt Grace. Maybe not intentionally, but you did. At the Angel you remarked how the Pierce Library had been thinking of recruiting me. I think that's still their intention. That's why I've been allowed to handle the majority of this investigation. A sort of final exam. If it wasn't for the fact that I've got Sun Ohm Erato sitting here I'd almost suspect that the Library was overall responsible for the Unzip Key hunt. If the Library isn't directly listening in right now then I want you to deliver to them a message from me.

"Tell the Library that I'm tired. That might not surprise a lot of you too much, but I wonder if anyone's really taken the trouble to actually think it over. I know I have a reputation for getting mixed up in things like this. For want of a better word: adventures. Yeah, they're all very thrilling and exciting." She looked over at Bud, Bingo and Sestina. "And I've grown a lot closer to some people in the course of all this nonsense.

"But no matter how thrilling or even fun an adventure can get, there's always the part that I've really come to dread. The part near the end, or afterwards, when the pieces have to be picked up. Everyone applauds all the action, but hardly anyone hangs around for the part when the mess has to be swept up. It's the part in these things which usually get me down, and I'm starting to get down now. I'm feeling the end coming, and in my head I'm already seeing the mess that's gonna have to be cleaned up. I'm just tired."

Sandy paused and took a breath. "Okay. Rant over."

"Righteously put," her father murmured.

Sandy nodded, then looked down as a sheet of paper whirred from the printer slot located beneath the keyboard on the coffee table.

"That's the list you wanted of the items from Bergman's company," Sherman said. "I . . . felt now was a good time to send it over.

Taking the paper, Sandy began studying it. "Ah, good. You arranged it by product type." Her eyes moved down the list, finally pausing at an item. She sighed. "Was almost hoping that I was wrong. But that's how he did it. Even Bergman couldn't resist a holdout."

"What is it?" Tom asked.

"Just something Bergman wanted us to remember." With one hand Sandy crumpled the sheet. She then bent back down over the keyboard. "Tom? As well-equipped as the HOW2's been I'm betting even it doesn't carry a particular item. I'm sending over the name of something I'd like for you to bring me."

Tom was staring at an offscreen display, watching Sandy's message come in. "Yeah. Got plenty of those. I take it you want one that's portable, preferably handheld."

Sandy nodded. "And one more thing. On your way to bring it I'd like you to make a detour to Chesterport and pick up Aunt Grace."

An eyebrow lifted on Grace's face.

"I'm finishing this," Sandy told her. "I'm finishing this tonight. I'm going to where the Unzip Key is located. That's why I want everyone present when I do . . . including the Library."

"I . . . understand, Sandra. And I'll come along."

"We'll be there in just under an hour," Sandy said, straightening up. "Tom? Everyone? Rendezvous with us at Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in New York City."

## **Chapter Twenty-Six: The Timely Solution.**

The sun had set by the time the HOW2 crossed the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge, continuing south on Interstate 678 into Flushing and merging onto College Point Boulevard and then Perimeter Road. From there it was only a matter of following the edge of Flushing Meadows-Corona Park.

Reaching the western end of the park, Sandy drove the HOW2 off the road and onto the grassy field, coming to a stop among the trees well within sight of the restored remains of what was once the New York State Pavilion during . . .

"The New York World's Fair," Bud said as he stepped outside.

"'The prize you desire is with the fairest of all'," Sandy quoted, moving alongside him. "And, in 1965, this was it."

Hands on his hips Bid shook his head, giving Sandy an admiring look.

Sun Ohm Erato, closely followed by Tiresias, emerged out from the HOW2 and looked around suspiciously. He then turned to Sandy. "Well?"



"Patience," Sandy replied. "All things come to those who wait."

"I have been more than patient with you, Miss Swift, and I have waited long enough---"

"And you'll wait a little more," Sandy told him. "But not for much longer," she added, looking up as sounds were heard coming closer. Following the direction of her eyes, everyone looked to see a Tommywagon gliding down out of the sky on its lifters. It was accompanied by a Tommytruck and a Swift Omnicopter (missing a central pod and obviously meant to pick up and transport the HOW2 if necessary).

The vehicles began settling around them and Sun Ohm Erato once again turned to Sandy. "If this is a trick---"

"Oh blow it out your rear," Sandy muttered tiredly.

"What?"

"Have no fear," Sandy replied in a louder and more confident voice. "All questions will be answered shortly." They all waited as the atomicars discharged their passengers. The wagon produced Tom, Tom Sr. and Mary, Phyllis and Ken, Aunt Grace and Pert Buxomity, while the Tommytruck produced Sherman and a squad of Swift security guards. The guards were armed with "Speedbump" non-lethal carbines.

"Miss Swift---"

"That's close enough, Sherman," Sandy called out. "You and your people hang back."

Sherman looked as if he was prepared to spend the next few weeks arguing, but he motioned for the guards to move several paces away.

For his part, Tom Sr. had to keep both hands on Mary, who was visibly struggling to run forward.

"Baby," she cried out anxiously.

"It's okay, Mom," Sandy said to her. "You always wanted to see my tightrope act up close. Here's your chance. Everyone? Come with me . . . but please, no sudden moves or heroics." With Bud and Bingo and Sestina closely flanking her, Sun Ohm Erato and Tiresias to her right and the others to her left, Sandy began walking up a gentle rise towards an area lit by nightlights.

Sun Ohm Erato had been looking around. "Miss Swift I know a little something about this place. Thousands of people have been here since the days of the World's Fair. Perhaps millions. No one's ever reported finding the Unzip Key."

"And no one ever found the clue in Cholame until a search was consciously started," Sandy told him. "Bergman's joy was in hiding things in plain sight. And here we are. Everyone gather around."

The group slowly (and cautiously) worked their way into positions surrounding a circular knee-high stone wall. Within the wall was a floor made up of stone slabs.

At the center of the floor was a smooth circular stone pedestal . . . a plinth.

Words were carved into the surface of the plinth.

The Time Capsules Deposited September 23, 1938 And October 16, 1965  
By The Westinghouse Electric Corporation As A Record Of  
Twentieth Century Civilization To Endure For 5,000 Years

Phyllis' mouth had dropped open. "Oh . . . my God!"

Sandy looked around at everyone. "And does anyone want to guess what year it'll be when the capsules are scheduled to be opened?"

"6939 AD," breathed Grace.

Sandy nodded. "And see there," she said, sweeping an arm out towards the interior of the park. Clearly visible in the distance was a one hundred and twenty foot diameter globe of the Earth standing twelve stories high. "Sending us east to see the world."

Sun Ohm Erato was the only one not interested in looking at the Unisphere. His attention was fixed on the plinth. Sweat was visible on his forehead and he was breathing harder.

"No," he whispered hoarsely. Stepping over the stone wall he went to the plinth, grabbing at it with his hands. "No."

"Don't bother," Sandy told him drily, watching. "I managed a little research on our way down here. That monument happens to be seven tons of granite. I doubt even Tiresias could move it."

Sun Ohm Erato turned feverish eyes to her.

"The capsules are buried fifty feet below us," Sandy went on. "They're composed of a corrosion proof alloy called Cupaloy which possesses the same strength as steel. The contents of the 1965 capsule are preserved in a glass container filled with argon gas."

"Bergman," snarled the Kranjovian. "One of the greatest scientific discoveries of the last century, and he buried it out of reach." He began slamming a fist upon the plinth.

Sandy was watching him, her expression as hard as the granite. "So you admit that you can't get at the Unzip Key."

The look Sun Ohm Erato threw at her was venomous. "Your government will learn of the Key's location," he said. "Someone will make the attempt to break in. It's too valuable a tool to keep buried. I can be patient."

Sandy stared at him for several moments. Then she turned to her brother, holding out her hand. "Tom?"

"I think I know what's coming," Tom murmured, going to her and passing over an object resembling a large flashlight.

Stepping over the low wall, Sandy began slowly approaching the plinth. "Bergman took special care with his clues," she said to all of them, and especially to Sun Ohm Erato. "One line in particular kept coming back to me. 'So remember carefully all that's been read'. He didn't just put that there without rhyme or reason. He had a rhyme, and he very definitely had a reason.

"Burying the Unzip Key in the time capsule would've been the safest thing to do. The most sensible thing. But Bergman wanted everyone to see how clever he was. If no one bothered to dig out the capsule and search for the Key then it all could've been considered hearsay." Sandy shook her head. "Bergman couldn't stand dying with that possibility hanging over him. He wanted the proof to be discovered. But only if whoever looked for it was careful, and remembered everything."

Sandy now looked directly at Sun Ohm Erato.

"This could've ended only two ways," she coldly told him. "Either I would win, or you would. I'm smarter than you . . . I'm stronger than you . . . and I'm better than you."

Raising the device she had accepted from Tom she switched it on. From the forward end shone a very pale light which she now pointed at the surface of the plinth.

For a few moments nothing happened. Then golden marks began slowly appearing upon the granite surface. They spread outwards, blossoming, gradually revealing intricate lines of text, numbers and charts. A complex document coming into view for all to see.

Tom and his father had come closer and were staring at the document.

"Both natural language text and flowcharts," Tom breathed.

Tom Sr. nodded. "Split into all three levels of accepted Turing machine description."

Watching the text materialize, Sandy let out a low breath.

"Thank you, Saint-Exupéry," she whispered.

Then louder: "Bergman tried to cut a deal with the same Japanese businessmen who had attempted to acquire the Unzip Key from Jeffrey Sowilo. By then he was already well into work on hiding the Key. As part of his offer Bergman even passed on a special clue which the Japanese could've used had they decided to search for the Key. The Japanese didn't, but in 1977, when a James Dean memorial was set up in Cholame, the clue was thoughtfully added."

Bud's eyes widened. "'What is essential---'"

"'Is invisible to the eye'," Sandy finished. "'So remember carefully all that's been read'. Being a good businessman who understood human nature, Bergman suspected that the Japanese would somehow make that clue available for anyone who bothered to search."

"But this," Mary said, waving a hand at the document. "I understand how this was written in some kind of invisible ink that fluoresces in the right light. But surely the rain . . . the weather . . ."

"Among other things, Bergman's company manufactured inks and dyes," Sandy explained to her. "On the list of his company's products I found an ink which was not only invisible, but was indelible as well. Bergman had intended it for special uses, such as creating invisible 'dog tags' for soldiers, or permanent medical records on people."

Sandy now looked at Sun Ohm Erato. The Kranjovian had been staring dully at the Unzip Key, but he now raised hooded eyes to her.

Sandy glared at him. "I win!"

Sun Ohm Erato's mouth twisted into a snarl. "Tiresias . . . kill her!"

Sandy was well within easy reach of the giant's lunging arm. Her father and brother were near, but there was no way they would reach her in time. And Sherman's guards couldn't get a clear shot through the crowd gathered around the plinth.

But as the enormous hand was about to grab her neck it was intercepted by an equally large hand.

Sestina. In the excitement concerning the discovery of the Unzip Key no one had noticed the giant girl easing around the outside of the crowd and moving into position close behind Tiresias. And, as he made his move, she made hers.

In the space of a heartbeat the two giants regarded at each other. Then Tiresias lunged out with his other hand. The move was promptly matched by Sestina and both giants were firmly braced against each other. Neither of them made a sound as they pushed against one another, their muscles bulging as they struggled. A tear slowly began appearing along a sleeve of Sestina's blouse as she grimaced, leaning into the equal bulk of Tiresias's body. And then, with a slight twist and a deep broken gasp, she leaned hard to one side. Her arms moved and, before everyone's eyes, Tiresias was thrown out beyond the circle of people . . .

And well into the sights of the weapons the security guards carried. The Speedbumps coughed simultaneously, and Tiresias was enveloped in a mass of yellow goo which rapidly hardened, immobilizing him.

Sestina had not stopped moving and, before anyone else could react, she had firmly grabbed Sun Ohm Erato by the neck, slowly lifting him into the air.

Sandy moved towards her. "Sestina---"

"Release me," Sun Ohm Erato croaked. "Or Miss Swift dies!" His eyes looked elsewhere. "Isn't that right?"

Sandy and the others looked and were surprised as Pert Buxomity produced a gun from her outfit and aimed it firmly.

Grace was the first to recover from the shock. "Pert!"

"Do not move," Pert declared. "None of you." She glanced to one side. "Mister Ames I can pull this trigger faster than your guards can fire. And, at this range, I cannot miss."

Sherman made a slow motion, and the guards lowered their weapons.

"Put me down," Sun Ohm Erato ordered Sestina. "Now!"

Sestina very reluctantly did so.

Sun Ohm Erato composed himself, brushing here and there and becoming calmer. "I believe we were discussing who was the winner," he casually said to Sandy.

Grace couldn't take her eyes off her assistant. "Pert, how could---"

"I told you I had a further move to make," Sun Ohm Erato said to Sandy. "An unknown element which would help me escape. Or, to be precise on the matter, two unknown elements. How else did you think I was able to so clearly track your progress in your House on Wheels? Child's play considering I had an agent in place within the Pierce Library who was regularly feeding me information."

Grace looked tragic. "But Pert was vetted by Austin."

Sun Ohm Erato smiled at her. "The Library enjoys a reputation for infiltrating governments and corporations and similar agencies. It never considers the possibility that it could just as easily be infiltrated." He nodded. "Yes, it's true that the main Library in Austin is extremely secure. But an annex . . . and especially a small town front office for an annex . . . is comparatively vulnerable. Especially if someone can produce convincing background documents and identification."

Grace's eyes narrowed. "No one's that good."

"No human is," Sun Ohm Erato agreed. "But some years back, when I first engineered this scheme, I made contact with a valuable ally who possessed the ability to create documentation capable of withstanding even the most thorough professional scrutiny." He gave Sandra a malicious smile. "As you yourself are fully aware."

Darkness opened up within Sandy. "Oh God, no!"

Sun Ohm Erato nodded. "Oh yes. So you see, Miss Swift, Solomon manages to have his revenge on you after all.

"As for the rest of it: I created a cover identity for Pert Buxomity and carefully arranged to have her placed within Grace Slater's office as an established agent of the Library. I worked carefully, remaining in secret.

Miss Buxomity and I have not even really met face to face until now . . . don't move, Mister Ames!"

Sherman had been trying to ease himself into a position for firing his own weapon. He now froze.

Sun Ohm Erato quickly looked around at everyone. "Miss Buxomity," he cried out. "Come here. Come closer."

Her hand still holding the pistol steady, Pert Buxomity carefully moved away from Grace, maneuvering herself alongside Sandy.

"There," Sun Ohm Erato breathed in satisfaction. "Hold the gun directly against Miss Swift's head. At the first sign of trouble you may pull the trigger." He looked around again, his eyes studying his surroundings. "I had anticipated being captured. I am far too much in the open out here. But it might be possible that I shall escape much sooner and much easier than I thought."

"You can't possibly take the Unzip Key with you," Sandy replied.

"Once again you are mistaken. I programmed my biods to possess photographic memory. It'll be too troublesome to free Tiresias, but Sestina has seen the Key. She will accompany Miss Buxomity and myself. We will avail ourselves of one of the atomicars and depart and, at my leisure, I will extract the Key from Sestina's memory."

Pert Buxomity had been looking steadily at the Kranjovian. "And you are, indeed, my employer? Sun Ohm Erato?"

"I admit this is an awkward way to punctuate a professional relationship," he confessed with a nod. "I hope you understand why we had to remain mutually unseen for so long. There was far too much at stake."

"I agree."

And, as everyone else watched, Pert Buxomity moved the gun from Sandy's head and aimed it directly at Sun Ohm Erato. She pulled the trigger, sending the bullet squarely between his eyes. As he fell backwards alongside the plinth, already dead, she continued pulling the trigger, emptying the pistol's magazine into his body.

No one moved and stood there frozen, staring as the woman murmured a few foreign-sounding words, and then spat upon the Kranjovian's body.

Sherman managed to shake himself free of shock and waved for the guards to follow him.

"Wait!" Pert Buxomity shouted, not looking directly at anyone. She slowly raised her hands, releasing the pistol and letting it fall into the blood which was leaking from Sun Ohm Erato's body. One hand then moved to her head, pulling firmly, and the long brown hair fell away revealing short-cropped hair the color of moonlight. Another pull peeled a thin layer of material off her face, and everyone now saw the pale skin beneath. Her hands then moved to her eyes. When they dropped away everyone could now see the brilliant blue color they possessed.

In a final amazing display the woman quickly peeled herself out of her clothing. When she straightened up she was wearing a thin bodysuit which clung tightly to her, revealing that her rather impressive figure had actually been part of a disguise built into her clothing.

As everyone watched she produced a laminated card, holding it up for all to see. "I am Major Perihan Bjechkty: Turkish National Intelligence Organization. My mission has been to track down and eliminate the Kranjovian criminal Sun Ohm Erato. He has been charged with atrocities against the Turkish people. As an operative of my government I formally claim diplomatic immunity."

Grace looked as if she were going to faint.

Sandy wasn't feeling too much better. "Major . . ."

The pale woman looked at her, and Sandy thought she saw a trace of sympathy in the blue eyes.

"I am sorry, Miss Swift," she said. "And I am sorry, Miss Slater. For the past few years I have been part of a team working deeply undercover. When someone claiming to be Sun Ohm Erato privately contacted me over computer channels, I took it upon myself to investigate further, especially when I was offered a chance to be placed within the Pierce Library. Realizing the value of the Library's resources I accepted the offer and began cultivating it as a means of carefully tracking down Sun Ohm Erato's location. With your help he was finally lured out into the open, and I finally had a chance to complete my mission. It may be of small help to you, but I am grateful."

Some distant corner of Sandy's mind was hearing sirens growing closer.

"Couldn't . . ." she began. She stopped and tried again. "Couldn't you have taken him prisoner or something? Taken him back to Turkey and put on trial?"

Perihan Bjechkty's face hardened. "Not after what he had done. The orders were direct: kill him."

Sandy sighed, rubbing at her head. "I guess . . . I didn't know exactly what was going to happen. The way I was thinking I guess I was expecting the police to come along, get involved, and then Sun Ohm Erato would end up in custody."

"This is better, Miss Swift. I assure you."

"And the police have come along," a familiar voice remarked. "And the police are getting involved."

Sandy turned, her heart lifting at the sight of the rather well-dressed young man standing nearby, accompanied by uniformed police. She could also see more police quickly approaching from all directions.

"Hello, Harris," she said wearily. "I was wondering when you'd show up."

"The thought's mutual," replied Detective Lieutenant Harrison Link of the New York Police Department's Counterterrorism Unit. "And, at the risk of sounding redundant, you're under arrest Sandra."

## **Chapter Twenty-Seven: Maiden Flight.**

The area surrounding the Time Capsules was quickly filling with uniformed officers (sprinkled here and there by plainclothesmen), while a growing string of flashing lights lined Perimeter Road. One group of officers firmly surrounded Perihan Bjechkty. Another group was attending to Sun Ohm Erato's body. No one was being allowed to move very far from where they were. Even the crew of the Omnicopter found themselves officially obliged to shut down the vehicle and climb out from the cockpit.

With Bud, her family and Phyllis next to her, Sandy was sitting on the low stone wall surrounding the Time Capsules. She now looked up as Harris strolled back from a conference he'd been having with the officers currently grilling Perihan Bjechkty.

He calmly regarded the people before him. "Y'know," he remarked, "I've got sort of a golden opportunity here. A chance to put the entire Swift Family behind bars. I bet there're some places where I'd get a medal for doing that."

"Not that I don't mind you being here," Sandy replied, "because I don't. But I thought you were assigned to the 17th Precinct. Aren't we somewhere else?"

Harris nodded. "109th Precinct."

"So how'd you rate a trip here?"

"Huh. You're not serious."

Sandy waved a hand about, indicating both Sun Ohm Erato's body and the nearby Perihan Bjechkty. "Does this look like I'm not being serious?"

"Yeah," Harris agreed, putting his hands on his hips and giving the scene an appraising glance. "I can see your point. Anyway, the story goes like this. Earlier in the week I notice in the news how Swift Enterprises is gonna run a contest to promote the House on Wheels II. Nice looking vehicle, by the way. This contest is going to involve selecting a couple who's planning on getting married." His eyes briefly took in both Sandy and Bud.

"I then read where the HOW2's on a cross-country promotional tour. Nice idea. At least at first. But then you guys reach the West Coast and don't travel to either Los Angeles or San Francisco or anyplace like that. If I had antennae on my head that's the point where they would've started to twitch, but I just shrugged it off. Big mistake.



"So then yesterday I hear about an explosion taking place in East St. Louis. This along with an unauthorized atomicar flight and a street chase involving what was described as `an unusual looking vehicle'." Harris directed a very pointed look at the HOW2. "Not too long after that I pick up a report concerning gunshots in an Illinois park. Unfortunately that in itself is not too unusual, but the report also mentions a Bigfoot sighting." Another pointed look, this time in the direction of Sestina who was patiently sitting on the grass nearby. "Things start adding up in my head and I sigh, begin working on clearing up my case load and waiting for the phone to ring."

"But we didn't end up in your precinct," Sandy pointed out.

"You think that makes a difference? A report comes in about atomicars and such converging on this area. That's when my boss sticks his head out of his office and yells: `Link? She's your girlfriend. You go handle her'."

Sandy found herself trying not to laugh.

"And I get into my car and start driving here. Then there's an announcement of shots being fired at Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, and I damn near kill myself flooring the accelerator and racing the rest of the way. I get here, along with the first arrivals from the 109th, and what do I find? An international incident. During the height of the tourist season yet."

Sandy tried to look as contrite as possible. "Would it help for me to say I'm sorry?"

"It really wasn't her fault, Harris," Mary gently told the detective.

"Yeah, I know." Harris exhaled noisily. "I know."

"Are we really all under arrest?" Sandy asked him.

"Good question," Harris replied, glancing over his shoulder at where policemen were still engaged in a conversation with Perihan Bjechtky. Now the crowd contained several more men in official looking suits. "I had a chance to talk with Rossi back there. He's sort of my counterpart for this precinct. Major Bitchkitty is singing like a little Turkish canary, admitting to everything and claiming diplomatic immunity. That, along with an examination of her gun, should be enough to put everything on her shoulders. We're ringing up the Turkish Consulate and getting what balls we have rolling. I can't promise too much, but I think arrangements can be made to keep all of you pretty much out of this." Harris sighed again. "But . . ."

"You'll need affidavits and, even more, you'd like information to fill the gaps in the story," Sandy pointed out.

"Would be nice."

"Let my folks go and I can stay behind," Sandy told him. "I can answer all the questions, and then you can decide whether or not you want to talk to anyone else."

The expression Harris was giving Sandy was best described as "interesting".

"Tempting," he murmured. "Could almost be called an attempt to bribe a policeman."

"You know I'm good for information, Harris."

"Oh I know you're good," Harris agreed affably. Rubbing at his chin he looked around thoughtfully.

"Tell you what," he finally said. "You've obviously been on this thing since the beginning. On the basis of that I think I can convince the higher-ups to consider your deal. Especially seeing as how Major Bitchkitty's being so cooperative. In fact, she's been making an effort to exonerate all of you." Harris thought to himself a bit longer. "Sandy, I'll go ahead and clear everyone else to leave. On my authority."

Mary smiled. "Thank you, Harris."

"Think nothing of it. But what about that?" he asked, giving Sestina another look.

"Believe it or not," Sandy told him as she stood up, "that's perhaps the least of my problems. `Scuse me a bit."

She walked over to Sestina, sitting down beside the giant and taking her hands. "Sestina? Honey?"

The look in Sestina's face was apprehensive.

"First off I want to thank you for saving me from Tiresias." Sandy glanced over to where a squad of New York SWAT officers were carefully herding the biod into a heavily armored police transport.

Sandy gave Sestina's hands a squeeze. "I'd like for you to come home with me. You can live in our house, Sestina. Would you like that?"

Nod nod nod nod nod nod . . .

"You can have your own room, we'll get you some more clothes and you won't be hurt ever again." Sandy mentally crossed her fingers concerning the last statement. But she remembered the vicious look on Sestina's face as she had fought with Tiresias, and decided that anyone who tried to hurt the giant would be risking his own life.

Sestina peered closely into Sandy's face, seemingly looking for something. She then touched a hand to her forehead, then brought the hand over to Sandy's forehead. It wasn't clear to Sandy what the gesture meant, but she presumed Sestina was accepting the offer.

Bingo and Ken were nearby, and Sandy looked at them. "Guys? Do me a favor?"

Ken nodded. "Sure."

"It looks like it'll be a while before I get home. Go ahead and take the HOW2 back to Shopton. While you're at it, take Sestina as well and help her get settled. No baby . . . no!" Sandy quickly responded to the sudden

anxious look on Sestina's face. "I have to stay here for a little while. But you know Bingo. She'll help you at home and you'll be all ready for when I get back. Okay? Okay?"

"It'll be great," Bingo told Sestina.

Sestina seemed to think it over, then she slowly nodded. Leaning over, Sandy planted a light kiss on the giant's cheek. "So be good," she whispered.

"You don't want us to at least leave you the atomicar?" Ken asked.

Sandy sighed, rising to her feet. "Probably not. I bet Phyllis wants the whole HOW2 for promotional work. In fact, I bet she'd want to travel with you guys. Probably Tom as well. I'll find my own way home."

She walked back to the others. "Mom?" she said. "We're mmmmm having some company move in with us."

"So I gathered," Mary asked, looking at Sestina. "Am I to take it there's been a significant addition to the All-Girl Ninja Team?"

"If so," Sandy considered, "Tom'll have to start building larger vehicles."

Harris had been talking to Sherman and a group of the men in suits. He now wandered back over to them. "I've sold them on your deal," he told Sandy. "Your folks, after all, aren't bad flight risks or anything. And when I explained how you knew everything about what was going on, the Deputy Commissioner snorted and made a comment that I really shouldn't repeat. If you don't mind being held a day . . ."

Sandy shrugged. "Suits me. You can even put me in protective custody."

"Something like that's occurred to me," Harris said with a smile. "Sandy'll probably be home by late tomorrow," he told the others.

"Sandy and myself," Bud said.

Sandy looked at him. "Oh! You're staying as well?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Bud replied, steadily looking at Harris.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grateful for the prospects of a detailed explanation, the police set Sandy and Bud up for the night in the Flushing Grand Motel (Sandy's father discreetly calling Harris to arrange for separate rooms . . . a condition which Harris quickly attended to). After a night's rest several meetings occurred at the precinct headquarters on 37-05 Union Street. Notes were taken, questions were asked and, more importantly, were answered.

The wrap-up (Sandy was reluctant to call it a "post-mortem") took place between Sandy, Bud and Harris in the most comfortable and personal of the precinct's briefing rooms.

Harris was consulting his notes. "So as I see it," he was saying, "Sun Ohm Erato's major objective was the Unzip Key. But he felt that, if he could also get back at you for what happened in Nevada, it'd be a bonus."

Sandy nodded. "He was really afraid of the Turkish assassins, for reasons which have obviously proven to be justified. Why Turkey was so mad at him I don't really know---"

"Ah, wait a minute." Harris went through files on his personal computer. "I got the downloads from the initial meeting with the Turkish Consulate. And Major Bitchkitty confirmed this. It looks like Sun Ohm Erato had actually managed to set up some sort of secret facility in Turkey. Bad news in itself. But then children began disappearing from villages. There's still some mystery concerning what happened to them."

Sandy shuddered.

"But this whole business with Sun Ohm Erato getting involved with Major Bjechtky," Bud said. "How'd that come about?"

"We're marking that down to Sun Ohm Erato's extreme paranoia," Harris told him. "Having found out about the Unzip Key, he wanted to try and get Sandy personally involved in the scheme. But he didn't want to break cover and so went on a private computer search for someone he could hire to get things started. He wanted a mercenary . . . a professional thief. After carefully searching the world he found someone he thought would fit the bill. A Greek woman named---"

"Sophronia Sanna," Sandy said, closing her eyes and sighing. "He didn't research deeply enough. Harris if your people look closely . . . you might want to bring in forensic specialists from the FBI on this . . . you'll see that Perihan Bjechtky's wearing carefully applied duplicates of Sophronia Sanna's fingerprints. The Turks didn't want to risk the possibility of Sun Ohm Erato having fingerprint records of their top agents and somehow tracing their movements. They designed complete disguises for their assassins." Another sigh. "Really ironic. Sun Ohm Erato was looking for a highly qualified thief. He didn't realize that the assassins who were after him would have exactly the sort of talents he was searching for. When Major Bjechtky was contacted she realized the opportunity that had fallen into her lap. But she couldn't coax Sun Ohm Erato out of his hiding place unless she came up with something worth taking the risk for. So she stole Tom's new cybertron, making certain she'd be noticed, and also involved Aunt Grace and the Pierce Library. She was using me as bait so that she could eventually get into a favorable position to kill Sun Ohm Erato." She shook her head. "Kranjovia's really going to write things about me on their bathroom walls."

"Maybe not," Harris said. "From what you said, the Oligarchy pretty much disavowed Sun Ohm Erato. This is mainly an issue between the governments in Ankara and Navsegda Adin. Now admittedly we don't like foreign assassinations taking place in New York, so there'll be some screaming from Washington as well. But, as far as you're concerned, you're pretty much in the clear."

Sandy didn't look too happy. "Yeah."

Harris and Bud exchanged a look. "Sandy---" Harris began.

"I know, I know." Sandy briefly rubbed at her temples. "I know I should get used to people dropping dead around me by now. But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Sun Ohm Erato was---"

"I know what he was," Sandy replied. "And I've been remembering what a friend pointed out to me during my Arctic trip. He said I should stop dwelling on my failures and, rather, concentrate on my triumphs." She looked at the men. "And, in spite of what he was, Sun Ohm Erato at least kept his promises."

Bud frowned slightly. "Oh?"

Sandy nodded. "He told me if I gave him the Unzip Key I'd never see him again." She sighed. "Well . . ."

Bud reached out to touch her hand. "Speaking of which," he said to Harris, "what happens to the Unzip Key now?"

"From what I've heard," Harris replied, "that's in the hands of the big computer boys. I do know that both the NSA and CIA have got people at the time capsules. I guess we're gonna have to trust that wiser heads and better natures shall prevail."

Sandy didn't mention how she had noticed Tom using a Snooper on the Unzip Key while everyone had been gathered around the plinth.

"Wiser heads and better natures," she murmured.

She then looked over at Harris. "Finished?"

The detective nodded briskly. "Yeah. I'll have our talk transcribed and added to the official record. If it's decided that we need more details well . . . we all know where Enterprises is." He gave Sandy a slight smile. "So! It's another goodbye."

Sandy nodded. "Bud?"

"Um? Yeah?"

Sandy looked at him. "Could you step outside for just a moment?"

Bud looked from her to Harris, then back to her.

"Please?"

Another look, then Bud got up and walked out of the room.

Sandy and Harris gazed at each other for a few moments.

"Thank you," Sandy finally whispered.

"You're more than welcome," Harris whispered back.

Another few moments, then they had both risen from their seats and were in each other's arms.

"You didn't have to," Harris murmured to her when the kiss ended.

"I just want you to remember that you'll always be very very special to me," Sandy said to him. "No matter what."

His arms tightened around her. "I appreciate that, Sandy. Just promise me one thing?"

"Anything."

"If Barclay ever gets stupid enough to let you slip away, please keep me in mind."

Sandy smiled. "A deal." Her smile widened slightly. "You know there'll doubtless be a lot of legal sweeping up to do concerning this business. I suspect Dody Ames will be in touch with your Department. You might want to consider working with her. She has a wonderfully developed . . . legal mind."

"I appreciate the very broad hint," Harris replied, smiling back at her. "But you know there's only one girl at Swift Enterprises I'm interested in."

"The idea has occurred to me," Sandy said, moving to kiss him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

She and Bud were holding hands as they strolled out of the police station into the early evening.

"Busy week," Bud commented.

Sandy felt a brief urge to collapse. "God, has it only been seven . . . no, eight days? Feels more like years have passed."

"Um." Bud seemed preoccupied.

Sandy noticed it. "What's on your mind? How to get home? We can---"

Bud shrugged. "Was rather thinking about you and Harris." He looked away slightly.

"Jealousy ill becomes you, Bud."

"I know," he said. "I mean, Harris' okay and all---"

"He's very much okay," Sandy agreed. She gave his hand a squeeze. "But some people are more okay than others."

Bud seemed to accept this. "And I know I shouldn't really talk."

"True," Sandy slowly replied. "But I will say how I've always admired the way you've treated all your girls as more than just throwaway flings."

"You make it sound like I've got a harem."

Sandy chuckled. "You just reminded me of something interesting Dody told me about the relationship the two of you had."

Bud looked at her curiously.

"Dody privately confessed to me that if you had proposed marriage to her she would've said yes."

Bud's eyes widened a bit. "Oh."

"Then she said something even more interesting. She said that even if you hadn't proposed marriage to her she would've said yes."

"Sandy---"

"It's all right," Sandy assured him. "You like Harris, and I like Dody. We're fortunate in our romances."

Bud nodded, something like a decision mixing into his expression. "Yeah," he said, turning to her. "You know, Sandy---"

It was then that they both saw Grace Slater. She was patiently waiting nearby on the corner of Union Street and 37th Avenue.

"Aunt Grace," Sandy said. The two of them went to her. "I thought you'd be back in Chesterport by now."

"I will be soon," Grace solemnly said. "But I've been assigned one more duty."

"Oh?"

Nodding over her shoulder, Grace indicated a small Chinese restaurant on the opposite corner.

"At every point you didn't have to get involved," Grace said to Sandy, looking back at her. "But this time I'm asking you to please do this for me. Someone wants to meet with you in the restaurant."

"Who?"

"He's waiting for you," Grace replied.

Thinking for a bit, Sandy turned to Bud.

He saw the look in her eyes. "San---"

"Just for a moment," Sandy asked him. "Please." Without waiting for an answer she started trotting across the intersection. Bud immediately moved to follow but was stopped by a touch from Grace's hand on his shoulder.

Entering the restaurant, Sandy noticed the solitary customer tucking into a plate of General Tso chicken and broccoli. Looking up he smiled pleasantly at her. Sandy saw a somewhat plump fellow whose hair was a shock of badly combed brown liberally shot through with grey. Green eyes twinkled at her.

"Miss Swift." The man indicated the seat opposite his at the table. "Please. Be comfortable. May I offer you some supper? At least some tea?"

Sandy eased into the seat. "Actually Mister Barclay and I have to return to Shopton."

"Of course, of course." The man nodded affably. "But I wanted a chance to privately speak with you before you left. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Blake Paige. I represent the Pierce Library."

There was something in the way the man had given his name which made Sandy feel as if she were being included in some sort of private joke. She gazed steadily back at him. "Excuse me, Mister Paige. But I always believed only women worked in the Library."

"That is true for the most part," Paige admitted. "But the Library makes use of all sorts of resources."

"And what do you do?"

The man seemed to contemplate the question. "I suppose," he slowly said half to himself, "I just tend to appear where I'm most needed. Take right now, for instance. My job is to apologize."

"Apologize?"

Paige nodded. "Miss Slater relayed your rather considerable remarks to Austin. As uncomfortable as I am in admitting this, Miss Swift, you were absolutely correct. I'm afraid the Library was consciously testing you with the hope that you would accept an offer of recruitment."

Sandy's look was stony.

"Yes," Paige replied ruefully. "You're justified in your feelings. By rights the Library should've offered more in the way of direct assistance during this whole affair. But you were progressing quite well on your own. We've grown to share your Mister Ames' opinion of you. Your instincts and resourcefulness are nothing short of astounding."

"Thank you," Sandy said simply.

"And our method of handling this affair was disastrous on a comparable degree." Paige shook his head. "The Library enjoys its successes, Miss Swift. And we've had many of them. Unfortunately we've also had our share of failures, and we must now count you among them. It's a punishment we deserve, and one we very reluctantly accept."

Sandy's eyes narrowed. "Along with the fact that your security was penetrated by Turkish intelligence." She spoke a bit more quickly. "If you really want to apologize to me you won't punish Aunt Grace---"



Paige lifted an assuring palm. "Miss Slater will not be held at fault. I assure you. A security violation of this magnitude cannot be laid at the feet of any one person in the organization. Rather, it touches the entire Library, reaching as high as its inner circle. And it might surprise you to learn that Major Bjechkty has not been the first person to successfully slip past our defenses."

"Oh?"

Paige nodded. "As I said, Miss Swift, we've experienced failures before. We're simply not in the habit of advertising them. Besides," and here his smile grew both interesting and personal, "some failures are not always defeats."

Sandy sat back in her chair. "So that's it? Your apology?"

"The Library must go on with your distrust," Paige replied, serious now. "Perhaps even your contempt. I assure you, Miss Swift, at best we would much rather have you as one of our agents. At the very least we desire your trust and friendship. However . . ." he shrugged.

Sandy started to rise from her chair. "In that case---"

"One moment." Paige pushed something across the table to her. A small white card. Picking it up Sandy saw both a phone number and a computer address.

"Try not to let that card fall into the hands of others," Paige explained. "Those are Library contact numbers."

Sandy almost gave the card back. "Enterprises already has an account with the Pierce Library."

Paige shook his head. "Not like this. Those numbers will give you immediate priority access to Library resources. No questions asked and totally without obligation on your part." He could see that Sandy was about to put the card back on the table. "Do not be hasty to reject this, Miss Swift. You're very resourceful, and Enterprises provides excellent backing. But there may come a time when you'll need an edge . . . and the Library is everywhere."

Sandy looked long and hard at Paige. She then slipped the card into her pocket.

"So now it's back to Shopton for the inestimable Mister Barclay and yourself?"

Sandy nodded. "Yeah. We'll catch a cab to LaGuardia and take a flight."

Paige produced a device which seemed part cell phone and part computer. He tapped rapidly upon it for a few moments, then returned the device to his pocket. "A taxi will soon arrive to take both you and Mister Barclay to LaGuardia," he explained to Sandy. "At the airport you will find a chartered helicopter waiting to take the two of you on to Shopton."

Sandy searched for a reply. "Thank you," was the best she could manage.

"Any time." Considering his name, Blake Paige's smiling expression was unreadable. "Any time at all, Miss Swift."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was just after eleven o'clock at night when the helicopter deposited Sandy and Bud at Enterprises.

"Home again home again, jiggety-jog," Sandy remarked as they walked away from the helipad. "I just wonder why the folks are in Building 14? I'd have been home by now, soaking my feet."

"Which has to be the best idea I've heard all day," Bud said.

Entering the Automotive Systems Research Building they immediately spotted Sandy's parents, Tom, Phyllis, Sherman and the Newtons gathered around a small table, smiling and laughing. Sestina was also there, having been changed into a fresh (and untorn) blouse. Upon spotting the newcomers they waved them closer.

"Oooh," Sandy said, seeing the open bottle of champagne on the table. "Celebrating our triumph."

"Something like that," Tom Sr. remarked.

Sestina hiccupped.

Sandy peered at her, noticing the glass in her hand. "Has she been drinking?"

"She seems to be handling the grape rather well," Helen pointed out.

"Besides," Mary added, "Helen's always enjoyed corrupting minors."

Helen stuck her tongue out.

"Nice of you guys to use a helicopter to get home," Tom Sr. said to Sandy. "Probably would've taken longer the commercial route."

"True," Bud said, pouring champagne for himself and Sandy. "Anyway, Mr. Swift, here's your daughter back. Safe and sound. As promised."

Tom Sr. raised an eyebrow. "You call all this safe and sound?"

"Well . . . here's Sandy back anyway."

Sestina hiccupped.

Seeing Phyllis brought a memory to Sandy's mind. "Oh Phyllis I'm really sorry."

"Oh?" Phyllis frowned slightly. "What's wrong?"

"The Maiden Flight project. I guess I didn't do a really good job with it."

The frown on Phyllis' face lifted into a smile. "I'm not too worried."

"Things have a way of turning out," Mary added. She was gazing fondly at Sandy and Bud, the both of them feeling a rather obvious meaning behind both her look and her words.

Wide-eyed they stared at each other. "Well-" Bud began.

"Yeah," Sandy said.

"I mean, you and me---"

"I know we never really talked it over the way we should---"

"Sensibly."

"Yeah. But I guess---"

"We could at least , , , I mean reasonably---"

"Bud, you know how I---"

"Yeah. Me too."

Mary watched them both, a very wide smirk on her face. "Much as I would so love to let this conversation reach a no doubt interesting conclusion," she said, "charity directs me to break in and point out that the issue has been rendered moot. The HOW2 isn't here."

"What?" Looking around, Sandy realized what was different about their surroundings. The HOW2 wasn't on its test bed. "Where the heck---"

"The contest is over," Phyllis said, sipping at her champagne. "We found a married couple."

Bud whistled.

"Wow," Sandy said. "That's what I call an eleventh hour save. Who'd you get? Someone local?"

"Pretty much," Phyllis said, smiling at the others.

"Phyl . . . I think Bud and I have really had enough mystery for a while."

"No mystery," Mary sweetly told her. "My dears, I have an announcement to make. Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Horton are currently on their honeymoon."

The glass fell from Sandy's hand onto the floor. She gaped at her mother. "Ken . . . and Bingo?"

Mary and Phyllis nodded.

Sestina hiccupped.

"They got married?"

"Well," Mary said contemplatively, "admittedly my own field of experience is somewhat limited. But, as I understand it, people usually get married before going on a honeymoon."

"Most of the time," agreed Tom Sr.

Sandy was having a bit of trouble catching her breath. "But what . . . I mean, how did they . . ."

"At least she didn't ask why," Ned commented to his wife.

"Well the HOW2 arrives back at Enterprises," Mary explained. "Bingo is leading Ken by the hand and explains to us that Ken proposed to her during the trip back. Bingo, being Bingo, wanted to get it nailed down before, and here I'm quoting her directly, 'the anesthesia wears off'. Ken didn't seem to have any objections, so we all piled into cars and drove over to Judge Dreesen's house."

"But the license. The waiting period."

"Judge Dreesen filled out the license right then and there. And it turns out that, in New York State, the waiting period can be waived by a judge of the County Court, which Ted Dreesen happens to be. All of us then filed into the parlor and we had the ceremony."

"I got to be bridesmaid," Phyllis said smugly.

"I got to be matron of honor," Mary added.

"I got to stand next to Ken and make sure he didn't fall over," Tom said.

"Polly Dreesen managed to put together a small bouquet for Bingo," Mary said, "and she played the piano while Bingo went in to Ken. Along with the bouquet, Bingo had a big gardenia on top of her head." She sniffed back some tears. "She looked so pretty."

"Oh they were all bawling during the ceremony," Tom Sr. told Bud and Sandy. "Sestina was just boohooing her head off."

Sestina hiccupped.

"What about rings?" Bud asked.

"Ken gave Bingo his West Point ring," Tom told him. "Naturally there was more ring than finger, but Bingo wrapped cotton gauze around it to help it fit. And I wouldn't want to be the person who tries to take it off her."

"So we all came back," Mary went on, "and Bingo then asks if she and Ken could pleeeeeeease have the HOW2. They wanted to drive down to Texas and give their folks the news."

Sandy was slowly shaking her head. "That little fink!" she said. "Couldn't wait twenty-four hours for Bud and I to get home, the rat." She thought for a moment. "Well . . . at least I can call the HOW2 and congratulate them."

"I would wait until tomorrow," Mary said, glancing at a wall clock.

"Oh no," Sandy replied. "Bingo's a night owl. She'll still be awake."

"I would wait until tomorrow," Mary repeated, a bit more firmly.

Sandy was going to argue further, but Bud leaned over and whispered into her ear.

"Oh," Sandy said, her cheeks reddening. "Yeah. That."

"Yes," Mary replied with a nod. "That."

"Well, I can call in the morning."

"Late in the morning," her mother suggested. "Early afternoon might be even better."

Sestina hiccupped.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eventually everyone wandered home, and Sandy and Mary spent some time patiently getting Sestina settled in the bedroom Bingo had been using. "We can get a bigger bed for her tomorrow," Mary said to Sandy. "I suspect Bingo will have other sleeping arrangements. At least for the very immediate future."

"Prudently put," Sandy said. "You're going to sleep okay?" she added to Sestina.

Looking all of five years old, Sestina nodded.

"We'll be here if you need us." Sandy touched the giant's cheek. "We'll always be here."

Later she accompanied Bud out into the backyard, the two of them holding hands as they wandered away from the house.

"Bingo and Ken," Sandy murmured.

Bud glanced at her. "Is that wistfulness I'm detecting in your voice?"

Sandy met his eyes, her expression soft. "Bud---"

"I know. We're all the time making jokes about Tom and Phyllis and the way their relationship's going. But are we really any better?" Reaching a shadowed part of the garden he settled down upon the grass.

Sandy eased down beside him. "We could've easily been the married couple Phyllis needed," she whispered to Bud. "So very easily. There were times during the trip---"

"Some very nice times," Bud told her.

"Yes." Sandy studied his face in the darkness. "What are we so scared of, Bud? I'm not pressuring you or anything, but what's holding us back?"

"A recent murder," Bud suggested, gently pulling her closer to him. "Several wild emotional highs. I don't want to seem like I'm evading the issue or anything, Sandy. And I'm probably gonna sound like a coward. But if we do what we're both thinking of doing, shouldn't we wait for a time when there hasn't been so many other things happening?"

"You're not a coward. A coward would've dropped me a long time ago."

"And I do want you," Bud said, easing his lady back onto the grass. "I want you so totally and completely."

"Darling . . ."

"We'll definitely need to talk about us," Bud said, moving closer. "About what we want to do."

"I'm ready when you are," Sandy replied, returning his embrace. "So very ready."

Above them the night sky was filled with stars. Patient and silent.

But the patience was about to come to an end.

\* \* \* \* \*

Coming soon.

SANDRA SWIFT AND THE SOLARTRON PLAGUE.