

(And a Happy 60th Birthday to Tom Nichol.)

Denn die einen sin im Dunkeln
Und die andern sin dim Licht
Und man siehet die im Lichte
Die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht

There are some who are in darkness
And the others are in light
And you see the ones in brightness
Those in darkness drop from sight

---Bertolt Brecht---

Sandra Swift and the Solartron Plague

Prologue.

Playing tag with the gravitational field of Mercury wasn't generally considered to be the most casual of activities.

But Glenda Fottle was going to try anyway.

"Planetary magnetic field reading? Are we still quiet?"

Mendel looked up from his instruments. "Everything holding steady, Captain. No evidence of flux transfer events occurring."

Relaxing slightly in the command harness, Fottle turned to her sailmaster. "Watch the perigee approach, Davey."

"The solution's punched in and we're in line," David replied, most of his attention focused on the controls before him. Although Lazarev's magnetic sail system was highly automated, a human touch still worked to keep nerves at ease. Especially during a maneuver such as the one being carried out.

A spacecraft traveling close to Mercury faced problems not experienced elsewhere in the solar system. Traveling to the planet meant heading deep into the gravity well of the nearby Sun. On top of that the planet lived up to its name by having a faster orbital speed than that of the Earth. Dealing with all of this required larger amounts of rocket fuel than what was usually needed for space travel

Along with its sister ships, Lazarev employed vast "sails" composed of static magnetic fields. By carefully adjusting the fields, keeping an eye to solar storms and sunspot activity, the

spacecraft could make use of the Sun's constant outward flow of charged particles in much the same way a clipper ship of the 1800s sailed on the trade winds from one shore to another. This reduced the need for Lazarev to carry enormous amounts of rocket fuel, but what Fottle had in mind was still something of a delicate proposition.

The Sun was currently thirty five million miles away, while Mercury was steadily growing much closer. It was Fottle's intention to have Lazarev pass over Mercury's northern pole, making use of the planet's magnetic field to provide thrust. Right now, the spaceship's sails were oriented towards the pole, the resulting magnetic attraction working to provide acceleration. At a precise moment Lazarev would re-orient its sails, repelling the northern pole and rapidly levitating itself away from the planet.

It was not altogether a dangerous maneuver and was, in fact, a tried and true method for a "Ulysses" class "Cosmic Sailer" to travel around Mercury. There were, however, established approach routes and preset flight sequences which served to reduce the risk as much as possible. Hotdogging was officially frowned upon. But it was considered a point of private pride for a Cosmic Sailer skipper to try and make the gravity assist maneuver by skimming as close as possible to the surface of Mercury. This was Fottle's first run to Mercury since becoming Captain of Lazarev, and she was quietly determined to beat the record set by Taylor in Cartier three years earlier.

She knew that the proposed maneuver would have Lazarev back in Earth orbit at least three weeks ahead of schedule. Even if the computer records weren't thoroughly checked, the reduced arrival time alone would reveal to everyone what she'd done.

Fottle smiled to herself. There'd be the formal reprimand from SwiftSpace director Fuse-Detoro, as well as the expected dressing down from Commander Horton. But if her calculations proved out, then the resulting party with all the other Cosmic Sailer skippers would be one for the books. And the unofficial "sunburst" icon would appear next to her name in her file.

"Captain."

Fottle switched her attention out of her reveries. "Mendel?"

"Sensors are indicating CME precursors."

Fottle swore, thoughts of spaceflight glory swept completely away. Another hazard of flying so close to the Sun was the possibility of encountering a solar flare. Solar "weather satellites" closely monitored the Sun's activity from dozens of locations throughout the inner system, including sensors on board Lazarev. Most of the time it was possible to predict when a flare might occur and adjust a flight path accordingly.

Sometimes, though . . .

Fottle's hand hovered over the button which, when pushed, would sound the alarm that would send the ship's fourteen crewmembers scurrying for the shielded "storm cellar". "Talk to me, Mendel."

He was slightly shaking his head, frowning. "Captain I'm getting readings similar to a potential coronal mass ejection. But they're not usual. Solar magnetic field line activity is compressing off the scale. Something intense is focusing . . . Captain!"

"Mendel---"

"There's an extensive ion field building up all around us."

Fottle slapped at the alarm button and was already unbuckling herself from the harness as the howling sound began echoing throughout the ship. "Everyone get into the shelter," she said to the bridge crew. An unnecessary command . . . her crew was well-trained. But saying it made her feel good.

In spite of training, however, she noticed Mendel still staring at his instruments. "Dammit--"

"Captain, the intensity of the ion buildup's going to interfere with a lot," he explained quickly as he loosened his own harness. "I don't think the emergency transmissions will get through to Earth or any other ships."

"Worry about it later. Come on."

But he was giving a final look to his instruments. Especially at a rapidly blinking indicator. "Detonation, Captain. Particle stream on its way." The expression he turned to her was twisted with concern. "It's incredibly focused."

"Later, Mendel!"

But later was predicated on the possibility of survival.

Three minutes later, Lazarev no longer existed.

Chapter One: Morning Messages.

Sandra Swift suddenly woke up.

She was staring at the ceiling and immediately squeezed her eyes shut, wincing slightly as she felt the dream images continuing to clutch at her. The details remained sharp, but the overall influence was rapidly fading down into her consciousness.

Sighing she managed herself up to a sitting position in bed. The clock said 6:58. Almost time to be getting up anyway. But, as wake-up calls usually went, Sandy felt she would've preferred the clock's alarm to the things in her head which had driven her out of a perfectly good sound sleep. Shaking her head to clear it she climbed out of bed and trotted into the bathroom.

A shower went far to get her back on track and she managed to hum slightly as she went about her morning routine. From the mirror her reflection regarded her pleasantly: a freshly scrubbed twenty-seven year old in possession of clear blue eyes, blonde hair which was just curling beneath the nape of her neck, and a smile possessing a reputation for pleasing the right people at the right moments.

"I feel good," Sandy announced to herself as she finished brushing her teeth. So she had a nightmare. It was nothing to worry about. People had them all the time. Admittedly she didn't have them often, and the one she had was rather vivid, not to mention unusual. But she finally concluded to herself that, considering both the sort of life she lived and her home environment,

the dream she had wasn't too atypical. Her family, after all, was heavily involved into space exploration and development. So what if she had dreamed about a Swift Enterprises spaceship being blasted to atoms in the vicinity of Mercury?

* * * * *

"Good morning," she sang out as she came down the stairs.

"Hello to you, too," Mary Swift smiled at her daughter. "Sleep well?"

"Pretty good," Sandy admitted, pushing aside the memory of her dream and concentrating on kissing her mother's cheek. "Dad or Tom hadn't called in yet?"

"They should, but they might still be asleep. I really wasn't expecting to hear from either of them until later this morning. You'll be at work by then?"

"Probably," Sandy said, heading for the table. "Kelly and the rest of the cockpit design team want to make some final measurements, and I've also been needing to go over the test flight data with Sorroda. Good morning, Sestina."

The last comment was directed at a girl who was bringing a tray out of the kitchen. She was dressed in a traditional maid's outfit: crisp and black with the requisite white trim, matching apron and frilly cap. As with all of her clothing, the outfit had to be specially made. Sestina stood seven feet tall and not only possessed the physique of an Olympic level weightlifter, but the strength as well with plenty to spare.

Upon seeing Sandy the girl tried to make what was usually presumed to be a smile. As usual she failed completely. Sestina was somehow locked into a constant state of melancholy, being easily driven to fits of crying. It pleased Sandy that such episodes had grown considerably fewer since Sestina had been "adopted" by the Swift family. For some as yet unknown reason Sestina apparently lacked the ability to smile, and it took a bit of doing to determine signs of happiness or contentment within the sorrowful looks the giant gave out to the world. The situation was made even more difficult by the fact that, along with being unable to smile, Sestina couldn't speak. As with everything else about her, Sestina's muteness was possibly the result of her origins. She was a product of experiments designed to create a race of superhumans. The experiments had come to a sudden halt when Sestina's "inventor" had been shot to death seven months ago.

Since then the giant had found a home with the Swifts. She managed to regularly get across the notion that she was entirely pleased with her new situation, even if her outward look was perpetually gloomy. Among Sandy's usually full plate of projects was teaching sign language to Sestina as a means of making communication easier. Her brother Tom (who found Sestina's biology a source of fascination) had offered to come up with a small electronic "voice" for the giant, but Sandy suspected Sestina had had enough of being used by a laboratory, if even for a benign reason.

In the meantime Sestina, being something of a chronic busybody, enjoyed being the new cook for the Swift family, and one of the constant sources of amusement for Sandy was seeing the seven foot tall girl alongside the five foot six inch Mary Swift.

Helping herself to some milk and breakfast goodies from the tray Sestina was carrying, Sandy let her mind go over the odors she was picking up from the kitchen. "What's happening? Smells like . . . starting supper already?"

Mary nodded, helping Sestina with the tray. "Today I'm inducting Sestina into the sacred mysteries of preparing a pot roast."

"Learning from the expert."

"In return, Sestina's going to show me how to prepare paghach . . . that's a flaky Armenian bread . . . and a dessert made up of dried peaches stuffed with sugared walnuts. She wrote the name of it down for me." Mary produced a slip of paper from a pocket in her skirt. "It's alani."

Among the things which fascinated Sandy (and her brother) about Sestina was the fact that, even though the giant had been born and raised in Eurasia, and seemingly possessed the emotional state of a preschooler, she was able to not only understand spoken English but write notes in it as well.

Biting into a sausage roll, Sandy's attention turned towards a movement in the living room. She immediately frowned. "Bingo! Sit . . . down!"

"Working on it," Belinda-Glory Winkler-Horton replied, trying to waddle steadily but surely in the direction of the nearest chair. More familiarly addressed as "Bingo", the five foot four woman had been known throughout most of her life for her sprightliness and ease of movement. In recent months, however, a lot of the bounce had been taken out of her step . . . the prevalent reason being the advanced state of her rather obvious pregnancy.

Sandy was poised to rush over and offer immediate help, but Bingo managed to safely settle into the chair (albeit with a considerable lack of grace), letting out an audible "oof!"

She subsequently became the center of attention for the others: Sestina rushing over with some juice and a food-laden plate while Sandy and Mary hovered nearby.

"Should I have Dr. Slater come over?" Mary asked.

"Unless he's gonna jump up n'down on me and pop this critter out, I don't see the need," Bingo replied dully, nibbling at the food while Sestina quietly watched, the set of her face indicating that she was determined Bingo get every morsel down.

Sandy was shaking her head. "I gotta admit I'm losing money on you, girl. I had you pegged for delivering last Thursday."

"I know," Bingo sighed. "I'm getting' to think I'd make more speed if I laid on my side and rolled instead of tryin' to walk." She glanced over at the living room's communications console.

Mary spotted the look and reached out to pat Bingo's hand. "Well you just sit and stay comfortable and eat," she said. "The controls are by the chair for when Ken calls."

Another sigh from Bingo as Mary and Sestina wandered back to the kitchen. Sandy remained nearby, watching and sympathizing. Bingo's husband, Kenneth Horton, was commander of the Swift space station. Married less than a year, Bingo was an obvious demonstration of the passion the couple had for each other. In spite of that, Sandy couldn't help but think that it couldn't be easy for Bingo, what with having a husband some 22,300 miles overhead.

Sandy's father and brother . . . both of them Ken's employers . . . swore on Heaven and Earth that Ken would be back on the ground in time for the arrival of the baby. Giving Bingo's tummy another critical estimation, Sandy silently felt that it was going to be a close race.

She noticed Bingo giving the console another longing look. "He'll call," Sandy patiently declared. "Give him a few moments and I bet he'll be on."

Bingo was absently rubbing a hand across the current location of her offspring. "Yeah."

"Besides," Sandy went on, slowly crossing her arms, "you of all people should appreciate the realities of assigned duties . . . Sergeant Winkler."

At this Bingo gave Sandy a sheepish look. "Yeah," she replied in a smaller tone of voice. A niece of Charles "Chow" Winkler . . . the Swifts former cook . . . Bingo had been hired by Mary as a replacement when Chow retired to a life of writing. At least that was the cover story. But Sandy had recently discovered that, along with being a Cordon Bleu chef, Bingo was a former Army Special Forces sergeant. Mary had indeed hired the girl to be a chef, but her ulterior motive was to have Bingo secretly serve as a watchdog and bodyguard for Sandy. It was a move which had, more often than not over the past years, proved rather prudent.

When Sandy learned the truth she was surprised to find herself feeling more annoyed than angry. She soon realized that over the years she had not only come to rely on the wide variety of Bingo's skills, but appreciated the Texas girl as a very close friend.

There was also the consideration that Bingo's presence had prevented her mother from overly worrying (to some extent anyway) about the sort of things Sandy had become involved in. Case in point: the adventure which had resulted in Sestina joining the family. It had centered around a week-long trip back and forth across the country in search of a hidden computer program. Bingo had certainly been more than useful then.

Now, however, Bingo was definitely a Very Married Woman, and Sandy suspected that her days of dressing in black armor and getting into eskrima fights with cyborgs were probably and thoroughly in the past.

Noticing the way Bingo was absently caressing the large West Point ring on a particular finger of her left hand, Sandy silently suspected Bingo's only regret by the circumstances was the current distance between herself and her husband.

Beep . . . bop . . . boop!

"And that'll be Ken now," Sandy remarked, shaken out of her reverie by the sound of an incoming message on the console. And indeed, a SwiftSpace icon was forming on the screen.

In the meantime Bingo was already desperately grabbing for the console controls and pushing at buttons. As the screen image shifted to show Ken Horton's smiling face, Sandy began stepping aside to give the couple a bit of privacy . . .

But stopped as she saw the front door open. "Oh!"

"Hi," Tom Swift Sr. called out as he entered. He was closely followed by his son: a slightly taller and trimmer version of himself. "We're home."

"I can see that," Mary replied, coming out of the kitchen. "I wasn't expecting either of you back until maybe later today."

"Well, the meeting broke up early," Tom Sr. explained as he gave his wife a hug. "What with all that was discussed it was decided that more could be done back here at Enterprises. Tom and I are to get started immediately and report our findings back directly to the Committee."

Mary noticed the guardedly tired look on the faces of her husband and son, as well as the tone of Tom Sr.'s voice. Even Bingo was looking over her shoulder from the chair, and Ken's face was watching curiously from the console screen. From the kitchen Sestina leaned out to take in what was happening.

"What is it?" Sandy asked.

"Something peculiar," her father said. "We still need more information, but it seems that something's going on with the Sun."

"Oh?"

Her father nodded. "It looks as if it's growing darker."

Chapter Two: The Fading Sun.

"Darker?"

"Oh not noticeably or suddenly or anything," Tom Jr. spoke up. "It's just that some odd readings have been picked up at the observatories at Tenerife, Meudon and Udaipur, as well as some of the Moon based telescopes and satellites. That's why Congressman Knopf wanted Dad and me to meet with the Committee. They'd like some sort of coordinated look into the situation."

"Tom and I are going out to the observatory and start the ball rolling," his father explained. He suddenly noticed the expressions on everyone's faces. "It's just some fluctuations that no one has a definite answer for. For all we know it's probably a thin transient cloud of material passing between us and the Sun or something. There's no need to be breaking out the flashlights and blankets right this instant."

"Well," Mary remarked, "then you and Tom need to work on improving your delivery. Don't just walk in through the door and tell us the Sun's going dark."

"Sorry."

"Will you at least be back for supper? We're unveiling Sestina's first pot roast tonight."

"Oh, well I wouldn't miss that for the world," Tom Sr. said, giving the giant a smile.

"Excuse me," Ken said from the screen. "Mr. Swift, do you need me to alert the solar physics section?"

"Ah-hhh, might not be a bad idea," Tom Sr. considered.

"Something else," his son added to Ken. "Check the readings on the solar battery farms. See if you can get us a cross-section on the overall level of energy being received for the past month or so."

Ken nodded.

"But don't jump on it immediately. Talk to Bingo for a while."

Bingo smiled.

"And make sure you're packed," Tom added, giving Bingo a slightly calculating look. "You'll probably be taking the next rocket down."

"I'll be sending readings over to the observatory," Ken promised.

Tom Sr. went over to hug his wife. "I'll call when we know more about when we'll be home for supper."

"Okay," Mary replied. "And let us know about flashlights and blankets."

"Mind if I tag along?" Sandy asked. "Seeing as how you're heading out to Enterprises?"

"Would love to have you along, honey," her father said.

Accompanying her father and brother out to the family atomicar, Sandy drove the three of them the four miles to fenced-in enclosure of Swift Enterprises: the mammoth scientific and engineering research center which had been the focal point of the family's energies for years.

Despite herself she couldn't help glancing up at the Sun. "Seems okay to me."

"Any change wouldn't be visibly evident on an immediate basis," her brother remarked. He was tapping on the screen of his Tiny Idiot hand computer. "Dr. Alesh at the observatory at Udaipur had found some unexpected results in a survey of solar activity he'd been involved in. He quietly contacted some other astronomers, and we've all just started putting our facts together."

Driving onto the Enterprises grounds, Sandy followed the perimeter road, taking the atomicar to the extreme southern end of the complex. Passing through a small grove of trees, Sandy soon entered a clearing dominated by a five-story tower topped with a large dome: the Swift Enterprises Astronomical Observatory and Space Science Laboratory.

"I really didn't want to mention anything in front of Mom," Sandy said to her father as they entered the building, "but the idea of something going wrong with the Sun can't really be dismissed as trivial."

"No," Tom Sr. agreed, "and I'm glad you didn't mention anything in front of your mother. It was bad enough that Ken was listening in. Thank God he had enough sense to keep his mouth closed."

"Yeah, but keep in mind that Bingo's no dummy. For that matter, neither is Mom. And Sestina is rather perceptive at spotting lies."

"It might be nothing," Tom told his sister.

Sandy stared at him.

"And there's no sense in panicking until we know more."

Sandy decided to keep further arguments to herself for the time being.

The three of them rode up the elevator to the top, entering the dome which held the observatory's telescope array. Arranged on a mechanized track was the 107 inch reflecting

telescope which Tom Sr. had designed and built in his younger days. Next to it was the original megascope "space prober" which Tom Jr. had developed later on. Other instruments were located throughout the building and could be called upon when needed. For instance, although not an astronomer, Sandy knew that the slender white tower which projected up from one section of the observatory dome outside contained a heliostat which guided sunlight down to several instruments buried deep far beneath the ground.

It was the heliostat, in fact, which Sandy suspected her father was bringing into play as he sat down at the telescope control. Tom, in the meantime, was making himself comfortable at the master computer console next to where his father was working.

Tom glanced up as Sandy came closer. "On the trip back from Washington we got in touch with the major solar observatories throughout the world," he explained. "We're all going to be taking simultaneous readings and comparing our findings. Different wavelengths . . . spectrograph readings . . . helioseismology . . . magnetic imaging . . . the works. I'm setting up a computer link between all of us."

"I know about the solar constant," Sandy said, leaning on the console. "But solar activity's also cyclical."

"True," her father replied, making adjustments on his console. "The amount of solar radiation which reaches the Earth averages out at 1366 watts per square meter. During your usual sunspot cycle you get a variance of plus or minus one point three watts per square meter. Now Dr. Alesh has been reporting a greater than average variation and, according to him, the variation seems to be increasing."

"Could it be sunspots?"

"It could be a number of things," Tom Sr. replied. "That's what we're trying to determine now. Have you heard of the Maunder Minimum?"

Sandy shook her head.

"That was a period lasting from about 1645 to about 1715. It coincided with what we tend to call the 'Little Ice Age': a period of extremely severe winters throughout North America and Europe. Observations made during that time recorded little in the way of sunspot activity taking place. A solid correlation has yet to be made between the two events, but the evidence is rather attractive."

"I've got all the observatories online," Tom told his father. "Data is starting to come in."

Tom Sr. nodded, his eyes fixed on his readouts.

"Carl Packard up on the space station is also in the mix."

"Good." Tom Sr. frowned at an indicator. "I've got the CCD imager at fifteen hundred by fifteen hundred pixels, using a two millisecond exposure time with a broadband filter at 450 nanometers. I'm trying for a resolution of zero point two arcseconds."

"Kitt Peak and the solar observatory at Japan Prime are signaling they're going for comparable images," Tom reported. "Magnetometers onboard Phoebus-III and VI are sending in readings. Including ourselves we'll have a large amount of spectroscopy and spectroheliographic data coming in." He looked up at Sandy. "We're just trying to get as wide a cross-section of information as possible."

"I'm not complaining," Sandy said. "Just let me know if I need to go home and start helping Mom wash the blankets." Folding her hands upon the console she quietly watched her father and brother at work.

Eventually the two men wordlessly looked at each other.

"I've seen that expression before," Sandy gently pointed out.

Tom sat back in his chair. "Yeah."

"There's a definite measurable reduction in the amount of solar radiation reaching us," Tom Sr. said to Sandy. "We're still pulling in information, you understand. But, right now, we can't account for it."

"It's got to be something we haven't accounted for yet," Tom added. "Maybe it is some sort of material passing between us and the Sun. A gaseous tendril. I'd also still like to wait for all the gravitational flux numbers to come in."

His father slowly nodded. "True. That'd be the safest thing. As well as studying all the images that come in."

"Excuse my sticking my poor uneducated test pilot nose in," Sandy said. "Tom you mentioned two of the Phoebus solar satellites. They're part of the solar weather network. Aren't there any spacecraft closer to the Sun that could help?"

"The unmanned observatory on Icarus is currently on its outbound course," Tom remarked. He looked over at his father. "Of course there's . . ."

Tom Sr. nodded. "Yeah."

Sandy looked from one to the other. "What?"

"One of our Cosmic Sailers . . . Lazarev . . . is supposed to be in the vicinity of Mercury," Tom said to Sandy. "We've been trying to make contact with it but, so far, no luck. We think it's currently involved in a gravitational assist maneuver on the far side of the planet and is out of range, but . . . Sandy!"

Sandy was rapidly growing pale. "Oh it's not," she moaned.

"San---"

"Lazarev's been destroyed," she said, collapsing onto the floor.

Chapter Three: Visions.

Even before Sandy opened her eyes she automatically realized where she was.

"Not again," she murmured.

"Yes again," replied a familiar voice.

Opening her eyes Sandy found herself looking up into the face of Dr. Rudy Emerson: plant physician for Swift Enterprises and, for the past seven years, the leading authority on Sandy's medical condition.

Gazing down at the young woman which he sometimes half-humorously referred to as his "meal ticket", Emerson found himself thinking back to when he took the job over from the retiring Dr. Fredrick Simpson. He had been a freshly minted MD and an honors graduate from the United States Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine. When an opening was announced at Swift Enterprises, Emerson felt he was a shoo-in for the job.

Simpson had glanced at the resume. "Not enough," he muttered.

Emerson's eyes bugged out. "What?"

"Oh you're good," Simpson assured him. "And, out of all the candidates I've looked at, you're got the most necessary qualifications. You're probably gonna get the job." He held up the resume. "I'm just telling you that this won't be enough."

"I don't understand."

It was then that Simpson showed him some of the case histories involving the Swifts.

Four hours later he asked: "You're still interested?"

Emerson had still been looking over some notes concerning the treatment of an infected dinosaur bite. "To be honest," he slowly said, "I don't know."

Simpson sighed. "Look. Just keep in mind that every day is gonna be your first time with something totally new. You really want to know what in your resume attracted me?"

Emerson looked up at him.

"You were an Eagle Scout," Simpson said. "The Scout's motto is 'Be Prepared'. That's all you gotta remember for this job. Be prepared!"

* * * * *

"It obviously says something about me," Sandy muttered as she started pulling herself up into a sitting position, "that I can automatically tell when I'm in a hospital."

Emerson laid a hand on her shoulder, firmly pushing her back onto the bed. "You lie flat, Young Lady. I'm still running checks on you."

"I'm all right--"

"Lie there!"

Sandy grumpily obeyed. She was in the Enterprises infirmary, lying in a bed which she'd been in so many times that she privately felt her name should be permanently etched on a wall plaque.

"You collapsed in the Observatory," Emerson remarked, preparing a needle for something Sandy suspected she wasn't going to like. "On the surface there seems to be no evidence of blood pressure or respiratory problems. Hold still."

Memories moved back into Sandy's head. "Oh! Ow . . ."

"Don't be a big baby," Emerson murmured. "You've had blood drawn before. And, to answer the question you haven't asked yet, I've also passed on the news to Dr. Turner at SECFAR, and Dr. Cloerich at Johns Hopkins. We might as well get the entire Sandy Medical Support Team in on this." He filled another specimen tube. "It's not the fainting per se which bothers me. It's when you faint for no reason that I start having serious questions."

"There you are," Mary Swift said, managing to gracefully rush into the room, the quintessential picture of matronly concern. "Between you and Bingo I might as well pack up and move in here."

Sandy's eyes widened. "Oh my God! Don't tell me she's in labor?"

"Not yet," her mother assured her. "But all I need now is for an experiment to try and eat Tom, and we might as well set up a bed for me in here." She peered closely at her daughter. "How are you, honey?"

"Still alive," Emerson said. "Which is a definite step up. I'm going to get this blood on up to the lab," he told the both of them. "Mrs. Swift, do your darnedest to keep her in bed until I know something more."

"Oh I think I have the solution for that problem," Mary said, smiling at Sandy. She then stepped to one side and opened the door wider.

Sandy spotted the figure heading for her. "Oh . . ."

A few moments later she was being closely held in the muscular arms of Bud Barclay.

Dr. Emerson regarded the scene. "Yeah, that should do the trick," he said to himself and left the room.

After a while the embrace finally loosened a bit. Sandy gazed into the worried brown eyes. "Sweetie . . . oh, but you should still be undergoing medical debriefing at Loonauai."

The senior astronaut for Swift Enterprises, Bud had just completed a routine trip delivering supplies to the base which Enterprises maintained on the Moon. "Frankie and Ceridwen were gonna to be flying some technicians back here," he explained. "I managed to convince the medical staff I'd undergo a thorough debriefing at this end." He was searching Sandy's blue eyes. "I know it's against the rules--"

"Oh I don't care," Sandy replied, moving into another hug which was close enough so that Mary prudently directed her attention elsewhere for a few moments.

When it ended, Sandy saw that her father and Tom had also entered the room. They were accompanied by two others. One was Phyllis Newton: Sandy's best friend who was currently staring worriedly at Sandy while, at the same time, holding closely to one of Tom's hands.

Next to her was a man slightly older than Sandy and Phyllis, dressed in his usual black-on-black and scowling through thick horn-rimmed glasses. This was Sherman Ames: Enterprises chief of security.

"And I was actually beginning to think we were going to get through an entire year without any trouble," Sherman remarked.

"I just fell down---"

"Your mother or Tom or Phyllis falls down it's a minor thing requiring a bit of rest and some careful breathing. You fall down and I start scrambling emergency units."

Sandy stuck her tongue out at him.

Her father now moved closer. "Tom and I rushed you here after you collapsed," he explained. "That was about a half hour ago. Your brother and I were making a few calls---"

The memories once again moved into Sandy's head. Her hand tightened in Bud's. "Lazarev's gone, Dad," she whispered. "Destroyed."

Tom Sr. was calmly studying his daughter's face. "We've alerted Swiftbase, Little Luna and the space station. Drake and Ulysses are also currently between us and Mercury, and they're scanning for Lazarev as well. So far no one's picked up anything, and Lazarev is officially overdue for contact. Now . . . what do you know about the situation? More importantly, how do you know?"

Still holding Bud's hand, Sandy explained about her dream, trying to keep her voice as even as possible. "I saw an eruption leave the Sun, move across space and totally destroy Lazarev. But it wasn't an ordinary solar flare. It seemed narrower . . . focused . . . like a large laser beam fired directly from the Sun."

She noticed the looks being exchanged between everyone else in the room.

"All right," she said. "I know what I'm saying. Let's not tiptoe around it."

Her mother stepped closer. "Honey---"

"Mom, let's get it out into the open. It's a possibility we have to face." Sandy was referring to the fact that, years ago, Swift Enterprises made contact with an alien race which was collectively known as "The Space Friends". Over the years mutual communication had been maintained, and tentative exchanges of information had taken place between Tom and the extraterrestrials. Everything seemed peaceful.

Then came the moment when Sandy had come into contact with an example of Space Friend technology off the coast of Ecuador. Since then it seemed as if a link had somehow been established between her mind and the aliens. Sometimes the link had proven to be helpful. Other times, however, Sandy had been disturbed at the ways in which the link manifested itself. The link was undetectable . . . sometimes even capricious.

Even more disturbing was the fact that, ever since Sandy's encounter in Ecuador, the aliens had been less forthcoming in information. Direct questions concerning any sort of possible connection with Sandy had gone unanswered.

"Okay," Tom Sr. said. "Let's go ahead and talk about it. Presuming, for the moment, that you actually witnessed Lazarev being destroyed, why would the Space Friends show this to you? A warning? Are they trying to let us know about something going on with the Sun?"

"It would certainly be interesting if there was a definite link between what happened to Lazarev and what's going on with the Sun right now," Sandy considered. "But that wouldn't necessarily prove that the Space Friends were responsible for what I saw, or that they were in any way involved. And why destroy Lazarev in the first place?" Sandy's expression darkened. "My dream didn't just show me the ship being blasted. It also let me know that there were fourteen people on board."

"Glenda Fottle was in command," Tom murmured.

Next to Sandy, Bud inhaled sharply. "I knew Glenda," he said. "I co-piloted her first flight to the space station."

"Was Glenda and Lazarev on any sort of special mission?" Sandy asked.

Tom shook his head. "Lazarev was on a standard inner system run. Recovering an AstroDynamics satellite, then using a gravity-assist of Mercury to put it on a course for an eventual Mars rendezvous. Everything routine."

Sandy thought it over. "You mentioned Drake and Ulysses. Are either of them heading for Mercury?"

"Ulysses was, and I've personally ordered Brian to make a course change. Until we know more I'm cancelling all flights to or within the orbit of Mercury. I'm also passing this on to NASA, AstroDynamics and the others."

Sandy's eyes narrowed as she noticed an additional darkness on her brother's face. "What's wrong?"

Her brother exchanged a morose look with her father.

Sandy went on. "It's not just Lazarev, is it." It wasn't a question.

"No," Tom eventually breathed out. "It isn't. Just before we came in here to talk with you we picked up some additional information from the observatories that are monitoring the Sun. Tomorrow Dad and I are flying back to Washington to address the Committee. We weren't originally expecting to do so this soon, but some of the clearer images are showing what we think is the overlying cause behind what's going on out there."

"Oh? What's the cause?"

Tom sighed. "Me."

Chapter Four: Indictment.

Fresh in the morning found Sandy once again chauffeuring her father and brother in the family atomicar. This time the destination would be Washington D.C.

There was naturally the expected resistance. Notably from Dr. Emerson (strictly backed by Sandy's mother), with everyone else close behind. "I feel fine," Sandy assured all of them. "And your tests haven't shown anything," she added to Emerson.

"If the Space Friends are somehow affecting you," her father said, "then you might not want to be wandering around."

"If the Space Friends are affecting me," Sandy countered, "you don't want to leave me behind."

It was an argument Tom Sr. couldn't easily contest and, against Mary's protests, he reluctantly gave his consent for Sandy to accompany him and Tom. Dr. Emerson also looked put out by the decision, but finally gave grudging permission as well (after attaching a bracelet to Sandy's wrist which would monitor her vital signs and updating both Toms on operating the medical kit which the atomicar routinely carried).

The drama didn't necessarily end there. Just before leaving, Sandy noticed her father in a last minute conversation with her mother.

"Does Tom really have to do this?" Mary asked her husband.

"It might not come up," Tom Sr. assured her. "But, if it does, Tom doesn't want to be accused of withholding information."

Sandy noted how the statement didn't sit too well with Mary. But then her father said something which gave Sandy an even worse feeling.

"It might not be necessary," he said, "but you may want to consider making preparations for a move down to the Citadel."

Mary's eyes had widened. "It could get that bad?"

"Just look into it," Tom Sr. said before he softly kissed her.

Ten minutes later found Sandy taking the atomicar up into the air and pointing it south for the half-hour trip to Washington D.C. There was hardly any conversation as both Toms were absorbed with their Tiny Idiots, murmuring between themselves as they worked on arranging facts into an organized state. This left Sandy free to concentrate on dealing with Washington Air Route Traffic Control Center, carefully navigating her way through the closely screened routes until she was finally able to land the atomicar upon the rooftop helipad of the Dirksen Senate Office Building.

"I guess we're expected," she said, noticing the four rather official looking men who were waiting at the edge of the helipad.

"I guess we are," Tom said.

Sandy caught the whisper of sadness in his voice and she glanced back at him. "You really don't have to do this--"

"I hope I don't," he replied, looking hard at her. "But I got to face up to the possibility. You of all people should understand that."

"Yeah," she muttered, opening the atomicar's canopy. A part of her was wondering what would be involved in a high-speed atomicar escape out of D.C.

She also remembered Bud's goodbye before they left Shopton.

He had hugged her closely. "Watch yourself, Hotshot."

"You know how careful I am."

He didn't smile. "Watch yourself, Hotshot."

Now, following her father, her brother and their official escort down into the building, Sandy found herself wishing Bud had come along. But then she remembered that Bud sometimes had a habit of telegraphing his occasional bursts of action.

And their escort had guns.

An elevator ride . . . a somewhat disorienting walk along several different corridors . . . and the group was finally led to a door and on through into the room beyond. Sandy had enough time to glance at the placard which announced that the room was holding a closed session of the United States Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Science and Space.

Sandy was privately glad she had picked her nicest outfit.

Inside, the Swifts were led to a long table where they were directed to sit (Tom taking a place between his father and Sandy). The table faced a high curving podium behind which sat eleven men and women. Sandy also noticed a man sitting behind a table which was located to her left.

"Good morning," the man at the center of the podium said to no one in particular. "This special closed session of the Committee has been called to hear some new findings by Doctor . . . excuse me, I mean Mr. Tom Swift and his son, Mr. Tom Swift Jr. For the record I am Senator Kerwin Carlson, Chairman of the Committee."

He gave a nod to the man sitting to the left. "I also want to welcome an additional member to these proceedings: Dr. Rex Morrow: Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Dr. Morrow will be advising the President directly in regards to whatever information is revealed."

Senator Carlson became silent, and Sandy soon realized that the Committee members were pointedly looking at her.

Her father came to the rescue. "This is, of course, my daughter Sandra. She was kind enough to help bring Tom and I here."

Sandy couldn't ignore the slight perverse pleasure she felt at seeing the effect her name had on the Committee members; many who almost looked as if they expected her to suddenly explode. There had been times in the past when her reputation had been a source of bother. This time, however, she rather enjoyed the effect.

"We are, of course, familiar with Miss Swift," Senator Carlson said drily, "and appreciate her being here today. Now . . . Mister Swift," he went on, returning his attention to Tom Sr. "You requested the re-convening of this Committee based on some new information which you've been able to acquire. Allow me to start off by saying how much we appreciate the speed at which you and your son have been able to locate what we hope will be some clear answers."

"Thank you, Senator," Tom Sr. replied. "First off, I should point out that the quickness of the results were due to the fact that we had a coordinated and cooperative effort from practically every observatory capable of carrying out solar astronomy. This includes several facilities in

space." Turning slightly he motioned for an attendant to come closer, handing over a data disc. The attendant, in turn, passed a remote control to Tom Sr. and went to a nearby console to insert the disc.

A large projection screen lowered from the ceiling. "What we are going to show," Tom Sr. explained, "is the result of the combined observations which, for the most part, were made within the last forty-eight hours. In a few cases, some of the information we are passing on are from much older observations, such as those made by Dr. Toril Satesh at the Udaipur Solar Observatory in India."

Pressing a button, Tom Sr. caused an image of the Sun to appear on the screen. "This is a composite of the most recent views taken of the Sun in visible light," he said. "It does not show what is occurring, but I can now report that the amount of solar radiation reaching the Earth is gradually being reduced, and at a measurable rate."

A murmur passed among the Committee members, and Sandy noticed how Dr. Morrow was frowning.

One of the Committee members, a woman whose nameplate identified her as Senator Faith Adams, leaned a bit closer. "Mr. Swift, I am not an astronomer. But I have attended enough of these meetings and have done enough reading to know that the Sun isn't really old enough to be exhibiting this sort of change. What is going on?"

Tom Sr. exchanged a look with his son. "In brief, Senator Adams, the Sun is being blocked off."

Another brief flow of murmurs. "And what is responsible for this?" Senator Carlson asked.

"The cause is not visible in normal light," Tom Sr. replied. "But observations were made of the Sun at different wavelengths and through a variety of filters." Once again he looked at the screen. "I am now going to present an image of the Sun taken through a Hydrogen-alpha filter."

The picture changed. The Sun now being shown was the same size as in the previous image, but with two significant changes. First it appeared as if it had been photographed with a black-and-white camera.

The second change was that everyone could now see the spidery black lines passing back and forth across the Sun's surface.

"Those lines," Tom Sr. said, "are a slowly growing web of solid objects appearing on the surface of the Sun. As near as we can determine they are not sunspots, nor are they any other sort of recognized natural solar phenomenon. They are solid objects composed of some sort of material the nature of which we have not been able to determine."

He turned back to the Committee. "In the short time which we have been keeping the Sun under close observation we have determined that the lines are spreading and new ones are being formed. As this web expands it will block more and more of the Sun's surface, preventing more radiation from reaching the Earth."

Sandy was also looking at the members of the Committee. She knew that, in spite of their positions, very few of the Senators before her had any sort of realistic scientific education. Their faces silently told her they were still trying to understand what they were seeing. Only Dr. Morrow seemed to fully understand, the expression on his face making it appear as if it were carved from stone.

"And these . . . objects," Senator Adams managed to say. "They're actually on the surface of the Sun?"

"That is a very rough estimate," Tom Sr. told her. "Obviously we're still collecting information. The objects may be forming several million miles above the surface. We're not certain as of yet but hope to know more soon."

"How can they survive the heat? The gravity?"

Tom Sr. sighed. "As I said, they are apparently made of a material which is beyond anything my son and I can conceive. We plan to confer with several people who are more versed in materials science." He glanced again at Tom. "My son, however, has a theory regarding the ability of the objects to survive so close to the Sun, as well as providing an explanation of how they're being created."

This immediately collected the attention of the Committee members.

Tom Sr. gave his son a final, cautious look. "Your show," he murmured.

Tom nodded, softly clearing his throat.

"The objects may be using the energy of the Sun to create themselves," he said.

The Committee members waited.

Taking a breath, Tom went on. "As some of you might remember, years ago I was working on a theoretical device I called the `solartron'. Basically I was interested in seeing if I could convert energy into useful amounts of both matter and antimatter."

Sandy saw Dr. Morrow slowly nodding.

"The idea was more obviously more experimental than practical," Tom admitted. "I set up a pilot program involving a dozen solar panels, with each panel covering a space equaling four acres. All total, I created an area of over two million square feet. But even with that setup the best I could accomplish was an output no greater than 194 megawatts."

He noticed the blank looks on many of the Committee members and suspected they now knew how Phyllis sometimes felt. "With that sort of output it would've taken me over six years to create a pound of anything." He shrugged. "I recorded my notes, ran a few more tests then wrapped up the experiment."

Dr. Morrow now spoke up. "Then these objects at the Sun," he said. "Are they supposed to be the sort of machine you were trying to create? These . . . `solartrons'?"

"It's just a theory," Tom said to him. "The objects growing around the Sun could be solartrons. They're gathering solar energy much more directly, and in much greater amounts. If they're solartrons then they could be converting the energy directly into the matter needed to construct similar devices. And, if they can produce matter fast enough, they could replace themselves as fast as the Sun's environment could destroy them. That could explain their ability to survive so close to the Sun's surface."

Senator Carlson leaned closer. "Mr. Swift, let me see if I can sum this up. Are you saying that the Sun is slowly being surrounded by a machine which you originally developed?"

Sandy heard the underlying tone in Carlson's voice and decided she didn't like it.

"I admit that I once worked on something which might be similar to what's taking place on the Sun now," Tom slowly replied. "But that's the only connection I can offer. A much more advanced version of my solartron idea could conceivably produce the sort of effect we're currently seeing."

Another member of the Committee . . . Senator Richard Tobey . . . looked over at his colleague. "I certainly don't feel that any sort of untoward implication needs to be leveled at Mr. Swift," he said. "Both Mr. Swift and his father have performed numerous services on behalf of the nation."

Sandy was silently grateful that Tobey hadn't brought up her name.

"Not to mention the somewhat direct contributions Miss Swift has made towards national security."

Sandy reasoned that at least it was a pat on the head.

Carlson looked as if he wasn't buying any of it. "I appreciate the opinion of the Senator from Arkansas," he said icily, his eyes still glaring at Tom. "I also appreciate the fact that a possible connection could very well exist between the Swifts and this . . . solartron plague. I of course am referring to the constant contact the Swifts maintain with an alien race. These 'Space Friends' of theirs."

"We have, of course, seen the reports which the Swifts have submitted concerning the aliens," Tobey pointed out to Carlson. "The contact between the Space Friends and Earth have been marginal at best."

"Marginal!" Carlson sat back a bit and looked at Tobey. "Is that how you would explain the appearance of Nestria?" Carlson was referring to the small planetoid which the Space Friends had sent years ago, and which now orbited the Earth at a distance of fifty thousand miles. Swift Enterprises had spearheaded an expedition to the planetoid, establishing a scientific outpost . . . Little Luna . . . upon its surface.

Sandy noticed how Carlson's question seemed to have a disquieting effect upon some of the Committee members. Out of habit she found herself judging the distance to the exit.

"I don't deny that Nestria's initial appearance was the cause of some calamity," Tobey slowly said. "But I also can't conceive the Swifts having wanted to bring some sort of disaster down upon us. I might also remind my colleague from the state of Florida that the Defense Department authorized the Swifts to carry out an expedition to Nestria. An expedition which, I add, was thoroughly approved by our predecessors on this very Committee."

"I am of course aware of that," Carlson shot back. "I am also aware that, when Nestria first appeared, there were several reputable scientists which accused the Swifts of conducting secret experiments with the aliens; experiments which would've had catastrophic results."

Something snapped inside Sandy. "Those accusations were never proven," she said, standing up.

Tom touched her arm and she shook it off. "My brother and my father remember what was said," she hotly said to Carlson. "Especially by Voort at Grandyke. His ideas were later discredited by the scientific community, and invalidated by Senate investigations into the entire Nestria situation."

"San---"

She shook her head briefly at Tom. "Before you start throwing any sort of blame around," she continued to Carlson, "you'd better be able to back it up with more than hearsay. Tom could've kept the entire solartron theory to himself. But he's just as mystified as everyone else by what's going on. And he's in the best possible position to help with the problem." Trying to collect herself, Sandy sat back down.

The room was quiet for a bit. Then Tobey spoke. "While I want to go on record and state that I firmly believe the Swifts are thoroughly working on our behalf, I also feel obligated to raise a question concerning the Space Friends." He looked at Tom. "You maintain that there can be no terrestrial origin for these . . . solartrons . . . forming around the Sun?"

Tom nodded.

"Seeing as how Swift Enterprises enjoys the closest relationship with the Space Friends, may this Committee presume you plan to communicate with them in an attempt to solicit information?"

"Yes," Tom said. "I do."

Tobey seemed to think to himself for a few moments. "In that case," he said, "my immediate recommendation is that this Committee establish a liaison between ourselves and Swift Enterprises with the objective of passing on new information as rapidly as possible. That information will be used by not only this Committee, but also by Dr. Morrow and his staff as a means to formulate a course of policy regarding the crisis."

"Motion has been made," Carlson said tightly. "All in favor?"

The Committee members signaled acceptance, and Sandy noticed how Carlson and two others seemed a bit slow in doing so.

"And none opposed." Carlson let out a sigh. "Very well, Mr. Swift. This Committee will go into recess for the purpose of selecting a liaison who will report directly to you and your fellow researchers at Enterprises." He seemed to have trouble meeting the eyes of the Swifts.

Senator Adams spoke. "Just one more question, Mr. Swift. You said that this web of solartrons is growing. What will eventually happen?"

Tom steadily returned her gaze. "Understand we're still making calculations, Senator. But a tentative estimate has the Sun completely enclosed in a solid shell within eighteen months."

Chapter Five: Targeted.

The Swifts were eventually escorted back up to the roof. "Gee," Sandy remarked to her father. "I can remember when you and Tom would appear in Washington and it'd be all smiles and 'Please, Mr. Swift' and 'Thank you, Mr. Swift' and 'Mr. Swift you and your son are so clever' . . . and offers for lunch at Zatinya and photo ops with Congressmen and passes to the Kennedy Center . . ."

"Well," Tom Sr. slowly replied, "you sort of have to see their point, Princess. Usually Tom and I are helping out with a particular scientific or engineering project. You really couldn't expect the Committee members to be all joy and smiles over this."

Sandy stepped out onto the roof. "For a moment I thought they were going to throw Tom in the brig . . . if this building has a brig."

"They'd probably build one," Tom said, following her. "I can understand their position, though."

"Tom! This whole business isn't your . . ."

Sandy had been turning to speak to Tom, and it was perhaps that motion which saved her life as she spotted a brief flash of green light over on the far side of the roof, and then the glint of metal. Thrusting her hands out she pushed Tom away as the first gunshot missed them both to hit the doorway, shrieking "Down!"

Tom Sr. was still looking dazed. "San---"

Both Sandy and Tom had ducked low, and Sandy grabbed now out at a leg of her father's pants, pulling him down roughly as two more shots struck (with one reaching the spot Tom Sr. had been occupying).

For their part the four members of their escort had immediately drawn their guns and were returning fire.

One of them was speaking into a throat phone. "Shooter on the roof near the tennis court."

The Swifts were lying flat alongside the edge of the helipad, using both it and the atomcar for cover. "Everyone all right?" Tom called out.

"A little scraped," Tom Sr. replied. "But that's got to be better than being shot. Sandy, how are you . . . Sandy!"

Reaching into a pocket in her belt, Sandy had removed a slim metal cylinder the size of her hand. It was a multi-function tool known as a Snooper and, as her father watched, Sandy was snapping it open, revealing its mini-telescope function. "Sandra!"

"Shhh!" Moving as cautiously as possible, Sandy peeked over the edge of the helipad, peering through the telescope towards the opposite side of the roof where the shots had been fired from.

She suddenly felt a firm hand on her head pulling her down hard. "Ow!"

"Young Lady you stay put," Tom Sr. commanded.

Sandy decided not to argue. She hadn't seen the sniper anyway . . . not even the metallic glint which had initially alerted her.

But before her father grabbed her she had seen a glimmering pattern of bright green moiré lines at the location where the sniper had been.

Their escorts had stopped shooting and one of them said, "I think it's safe now, Mr. Swift."

Tom looked up. "You think?"

"Let's get all of you back into the building for the time being," the man suggested, his eyes still searching outward as he motioned for his fellows to provide enough protective cover for the Swifts to slip back into the doorway and down the stairwell.

Sandy and the others carefully obeyed, and Sandy glanced back to see people in what looked like SWAT regalia moving out onto the other side of the roof.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later the man (who, it turned out, was in charge of security for the Dirksen Senate Office Building) came up to them as they were sitting in a lounge. "No sign of the shooter," he announced, not looking too pleased at the news.

Tom Sr. had been talking on his phone. Among other things the shooting on the roof had produced a spike in Sandy's vital signs, which caused the bracelet she had been wearing to tattle to Sherman and the others back in Shopton.

He now put the phone away. "Both Sherman and your mother aren't happy about what's happened," he said to his children. A sigh. "And I can't say I'm thrilled about it either," he went on, giving the security man a severe look.

The man ran a hand through his hair. "We're still searching, but it looks as if we're dealing with a professional. So far we haven't even been able to locate any bullet casings on the roof."

"Assassin's weapon," Sandy murmured. "Collects spent casings so as not to leave evidence behind."

The man nodded. "Miss Swift I noticed you looking with a small scope. Did you see anything?"

"Nothing but a green flash of light. Could you see who you and your people were shooting at?"

"There was someone crouched at the corner of the roof entrance to the tennis court. Whoever he was he was in a bad position for us to make out any sort of useful details. We also saw a sort of green flash just before the security team made it up there." He took a breath. "I really can't tell you---"

"Then don't," Tom said. "You and your people managed to get us out of a tight spot up there, and that'll do. To tell the truth, I was sort of expecting something like this to happen."

"The FBI are going to be here shortly---"

"And we'll be gone by then," Tom Sr. said. At the rising look of protest on the man's face he went on: "If you can get us to our Tommycar then it'll provide adequate protection against further shots. I'm sure you gathered from the Committee meeting that my son and I have a lot of work to attend to. We can do that and be sufficiently guarded back at Enterprises. As for the FBI, we have a good liaison system with the Bureau, and I suspect that Sherman Ames, our chief of security, is already in touch."

The man thought it over, then reluctantly nodded.

Once again . . . this time with additional armed men escorting them . . . the Swifts trooped up to the roof. As they stepped through the doorway Sandy turned, reaching out with a hand to touch the marks which the bullets had made, her face set in tight lines.

"Sandra," Tom Sr. warned.

"Just checking something," she said before following her father to the atomicar. Once they were all sealed in Sandy engaged the lift thrusters, sending the vehicle high into the air while she negotiated with the local air traffic control. Once they arrived at a mutual understanding she pointed the atomicar in the general direction of New York and home.

Sandy had been expecting her father and brother to spend the trip immediately starting work on the solartron problem. But as they were flying over Bethesda she happened to glance up to the rearview mirror and see the both of them solemnly gazing at her. "What?"

Tom Sr. let out a breath. "Little Girl you worry me."

Sandy's eyes widened and she glanced back at him. "I'm sorry."

"I don't mind the fact that you were quick in spotting the sniper, and that you probably saved yourself and Tom and me from being shot, and possibly killed. What worries me is that you've become the sort of person who immediately spots snipers." Another slow breath. "I know we've talked about this, Princess. But it isn't the sort of life I would've wanted for you."

"Would it help if I said that I'm sort of unhappy with it too?"

"And I saw that look on your face just before we got into the car," Tom said to her. "It's what Bud calls your `Madame Curious' look."

"Well . . ."

"You're already investigating this in your head, aren't you?"

"Well aren't either of you concerned about who'd be shooting at us? I am."

"San, it's been on our minds too. In fact it reminded me of back when Nestria appeared. Some nutbar with a knife attacked Dad and me."

Sandy nodded. "I remember. But, in the first place, I don't see some random nutbar managing to get to the roof of a Senate office building. In the second place, everyone knew about Nestria. It's only been a few days since the problem with the Sun's been investigated, and the cause wasn't known by anybody but you guys until a couple of hours ago. Hardly enough time to send top shelf killers after us."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "You're suspecting Carlson, aren't you?"

Sandy groaned mildly. "Tom, I think I'm smarter than that. Yeah, I'll confess I didn't like a lot of what Carlson was saying."

"Join the club," her brother muttered.

"But even if Carlson was in a position to order a sniper up onto the roof, what would be the point? Why attack one of the few people possessing the best chance of solving the solartron problem? What's the advantage?"

"I hate to bring this up, honey," Tom Sr. pointed out, "but it's been my experience that Reason has an unfortunate tendency to fly out the window when people are scared."

"Yeah," Sandy said, "but, whatever I might think of Carlson, I still don't suspect him of anything. And I bet Sherman'll back me up. Not only that, but I bet that when Sherman looks over the evidence, he'll agree with me that it wasn't the sniper's intention to kill us, or even hurt us."

The expressions on the faces of both Toms sharpened.

"Okay," Tom said. "Keep going."

"A professional sniper wouldn't have missed the way he did," Sandy said. "At least not to my way of thinking. I mean criminy . . . he had a clear shot at Dad before I pulled him down. In fact, shooting at Dad was probably something of an afterthought. Neither you or him were the targets."

"Huh?"

"I'm probably going to be accused of having an over-inflated ego," Sandy slowly said. "Again. But I made a point of noticing the visible marks which the shots made. The grouping of the majority of the shots tells me that I was the sniper's main target."

"You're---"

"Crazy? Kidding? Ask Sherman when he sees the evidence. He'll agree with me."

Tom Sr. was staring at his daughter in a way which made Sandy feel she could see wheels rapidly spinning inside his head. "Sandra . . . if it makes hardly any sense to have tried to kill Tom or me, it makes even less sense to try and shoot you."

"As to that," Tom said, looking at her, "and not particularly wanting to raise an uncomfortable issue, but Sandy's managed to make a lot of people upset over the years. This might not even be related to the solartron problem."

Tom Sr. frowned deeper. "An unresolved loose end?"

"Which, admittedly, there are many," Sandy said. "But then we come back to the question of why am I still alive? It was practically by accident that I spotted the gunman in the first place." She shook her head. "Once again, the intention wasn't to kill me."

"A tap on the shoulder," Tom Sr. said. "Getting your attention."

"Making certain you're involved in the mix," Tom added.

Sandy turned her attention back to the atomic controls. "And it's worked," she muttered.

* * * * *

Mary Swift's arms seemed stronger as she delivered intense hugs to the returning members of her family.

"We're all right," Tom Sr. tried to assure her.

"I'll decide when you're all right," Mary declared, burrowing her face into his chest. "And I won't reach that decision until Rudy looks all of you over thoroughly, and then when the three of you are finally at home." She raised wet eyes to her husband. "Maybe . . . maybe New Mexico wouldn't be that bad an idea."

"We'll be just as safe here. Besides, all the research can be done better here."

Sandy was about to offer her own reassurances, but she suddenly found herself swept tightly into another set of arms. "Oh! Bud!"

"What did I tell you about being careful?" Bud asked her firmly.

"I didn't ask to get shot at."

"You never get asked to get shot at."

Further conversation became rather problematical at that point, and even Tom had difficulty with talking as he found himself suddenly occupied with a rather upset Phyllis. In the meantime, Sherman Ames and Dr. Emerson stood a little apart from the group and patiently waited for the demonstrations of worried affection to die down.

"Am I going to have to keep you constantly in sight from now on?" Bud finally murmured to Sandy.

Sandy privately considered that, the way she felt right now, such an arrangement could have definite advantages. "I'm pretty certain Sherman's already laid out plans for my continued well-being," she said, nuzzling closer. "Of course, if you'd really like the job of guard duty, I'm sure we could come up with something."

Sherman let out a cough. "As to that," he said, moving closer, "I've already stepped up security details both here and at your home. And yes, Mr. Swift, I've been in contact with the FBI."

"Anything new yet?"

Sherman shook his head. "Everyone's still gathering information. I'll let you know directly when more is known."

Tom Sr. nodded. "In the meantime---"

"Home," Mary said.

Sighing, Tom Sr. gently squeezed his wife's shoulders. "Eventually. And believe me, I very much want to be there after the way this day's been going. But there's something Tom and I need to attend to first."

Tom nodded. "The Space Friends."

Chapter Six: The Hunt for Immediate Answers.

Mary was still in a mood to argue, but even after thirty years of marriage Tom Sr. could still outwrestle her so she followed the others along to the Administration Building, grumbling all the way.

Tom's office held one of the dedicated transmitting/receiving consoles which allowed for two-way communications with the Space Friends, and everyone gathered around as Tom sat down before the machine and unlocked the keyboard. Above it was a display screen large enough for everyone to not only see the message which Tom would type out, but whatever response the Space Friends chose to send.

Sandy felt herself drifting to the rear of the group as Tom worked. She was silently remembering a time when she had been utterly fascinated by the fact that her brother had managed to make contact with an intelligent extraterrestrial species. It had been ten years ago when a meteor-like object crash landed not too far away from where she now stood. The object had been covered in symbols which Tom and Tom Sr. had managed to translate well enough to make the first tentative contact with the aliens. That had been the start of the incredible years when, in what seemed to be a burst of activity, Swift Enterprises made major inroads into science and technology, establishing footholds at the bottom of the ocean and on the Moon. Throughout all this the relationship with the Space Friends had grown, the exchange of knowledge being accomplished in bits and pieces. It was eventually learned that there had been an alien presence on and around Earth for centuries. With Tom's help the aliens had been slowly filling in the pieces . . . an ongoing mystery which had always tantalized.

Ecuador changed everything.

The Space Friends were not a unified race, but was a society composed of factions. One faction . . . which Sandy had come to refer to as "The Senders" . . . apparently broke some sort of law by sending probes out into space in an attempt to establish random contact with other races. One such probe arrived on Earth, remaining hidden in Ecuador until it was found by Barton Swift: Sandy's grandfather. The probe managed to thoroughly scan Barton Swift, becoming familiar with the overall genetic structure of the Swift family.

Learning of the Senders contact with Earth, the Space Friends took steps to carefully investigate. Having intercepted the transmission containing the Swift genetic code, the Space Friends sent a probe of their own directly to Enterprises . . . a sort of laboratory test designed to uncover just how much the Swifts had learned from the Senders. Additional steps were taken, including sending Nestria to Earth as a "spy satellite".

Then Sandy located the original probe in Ecuador, inadvertently activating long-dormant functions within the mechanism. The probe destroyed itself rather than risk capture by the Space Friends. Since then the Space Friends had become increasingly guarded in their communications with Earth.

And since then, Sandy felt as if she had been modified by the probe. In the back of her mind was a constant sense of a connection between herself and the aliens. They had come to her rescue once on the Moon, and off and on throughout the years she had encountered evidence of their personal influence on her. Tom still held out a belief that the aliens overall purpose was benign, and Sandy tried not to argue with him. But whereas Tom and Tom Sr. were publicly recognized as being the world's authorities on the aliens, Sandy had personally experienced more of the powers and abilities of the Space Friends. On the scales of her mind the balance wasn't entirely right.

Now she watched Tom setting up communications with the aliens, her expression hard. She was being silently noticed by Phyllis, Bud, Sherman and Dr. Emerson.

"Let's see," Tom was murmuring, his fingers moving onto the keyboard. Words began appearing on the screen. OBJECTS OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN ARE FORMING CLOSELY AROUND THE SUN. ARE YOU AWARE OF THIS AND CAN YOU OFFER AN EXPLANATION?

"Hopefully an answer won't take long," Tom Sr. said.

Sandy kept silent. She could recognize the symbolic language of the Space Friends when she saw it, but could barely translate more than a few of the basic words. The alphabet used by the Space Friends had a foundation rooted in mathematics. But the alien glyphs also apparently expressed concepts such as emotional states, gender, level of educational development and even spiritual outlook. The "apparently" was because, even after a decade of careful research, even Tom wouldn't admit to being comfortable with the language.

Applying her own personal brand of paranoia, Sandy suspected that the situation would have been worse if either Tom or her father had demonstrated a greater linguistic familiarity with the aliens. It was all another subtle test of how much illegal knowledge the Senders had possibly passed on; a suspicion reinforced by Sandy knowing the aliens possessed the ability to communicate directly and clearly with the human mind. The use of a symbolic language was, to her way of thinking, an absolute sham. A piece of cheese placed at the end of a laboratory maze which humans were meant to run.

"Here we go," Tom suddenly said.

Everyone had seen the flash of the "incoming" icon on the screen and there was a collective holding of breaths.

New words appeared. NO EXPLANATION YET.

For several moments everyone was silent.

Then: "Well," Mary said. "That was certainly informative."

Of all the group only Sandy felt like laughing, and she thoroughly suppressed the impulse.

"At least they didn't respond with 'what do you mean?', or something similar," Tom Sr. remarked, putting a hand on his son's shoulder.

Sandy decided it was only her imagination behind the feeling that many of the people standing around were consciously trying not to look in her direction.

"I suppose we can go about our own work," Tom said, still staring at the screen. "Maybe they'll offer more information later on." Reaching over he touched a switch which linked the machine to the communications console at the Swift home. "I hate to do this, but I think this is definitely something we're all going to have to sleep on."

"Finally," Mary said, "someone decides to listen to Mother." Her eyes took in everyone in the room. "If both Sestina and Bingo followed my suggestions, there should be supper enough for everyone waiting at home."

Sherman had been leaning against the edge of a table and he now straightened up. "Unfortunately, Aunt Mary, I've got a date with a tuna sandwich and a Pepsi. There's still a lot of evidence from the shooting to go over. I'm pretty sure Bud wouldn't mind filling in."

"I think I can manage," Bud replied, slipping an arm around Sandy's waist.

"And I'm thinking I should kidnap Sandy and both Toms and keep them wired for examination overnight," Dr. Emerson said. "But the look on your face, Mrs. Swift, tells me I'd be better off suggesting home care."

Mary smiled.

"If any of you should drop dead between now and tomorrow morning," Emerson said to Tom, Tom Sr. and Sandy, "please give me a call."

"We'll try to let out a holler," Tom assured him.

Unhooking the monitoring bracelet from her wrist, Sandy held it out to Emerson.

"Not sleeping with this on me tonight," she told him.

Mumbling something, Emerson accepted the bracelet and shuffled on out.

"I'm going to get some notes from my office," Tom Sr. said to Mary, "then we can all leave."

"We'll go get the car ready," Sandy told him. "Or do you want us to call Bingo at home and let her know we're on our way home?"

"Either'll be fine, but that reminds me. We'll need to rig something up so that Sestina can communicate over the phone if and when she's there by herself. Can she type?"

Sandy frowned. "Good question."

The group gradually trooped out with the exception of Tom and Phyllis. Tom was still sitting before the communications machine, shutting it down. Watching him, Phyllis suspected his mind wasn't really on what he was doing.

She gently touched his hair. "Hey."

He glanced up at her. Tried to smile.

"You're not going to get an answer immediately," Phyllis said to him. "You know that. The solution isn't going to automatically appear before you, no matter how good your Mom's pancakes are."

Another attempt at a smile from Tom.

The smile on Phyllis' face was more sincere. "I keep thinking that you'd marry me if I learned how to make pancakes like Aunt Mary can."

This time Tom's attention lingered on Phyllis' appearance. "Well," he slowly said, "admittedly I can think of a few other reasons."

Phyllis' smile widened. "That's better. Concentrate on what you can deal with."

Tom let out an exasperated breath. "I'm supposed to be a genius---"

"And, better than anyone else, you know you can't force it," Phyllis sharply reminded him. "You've solved problems, but only after you've given it thorough thought and careful effort." She saw him beginning to speak and beat him to it. "Yes this is a serious situation. Yes there are a lot of people who're going to be depending on you. But, even though things are desperate, you've still got plenty of time. Organize it and make use of it. Rack the problem instead of your brains."

Tom thought it over quietly for a moment. Then he looked back up into her face. "Do you really understand me as well as I think you do?"

"Tom . . . I'll probably never understand you. But I love you."

Reaching out, Tom let a hand lightly rest on her hip. "I think I can settle for that."

"As for me, I'll settle for at least fifteen minutes of unrestricted cuddling out on the back porch late tonight."

Tom nodded. "That's the best idea I've heard all day."

"See? You are a genius."

* * * * *

"Green flash of light?" Sherman asked.

Sandy nodded, helping herself to some coffee. "And I'm an idiot because I didn't think to take video footage with the Snooper. You probably would've wanted to see it."

It was early the next day and she was in Sherman's office, discussing details of the shooting with him.

Sherman was lightly rocking his chair back and forth. "Laser sight?"

Sandy frowned. "Maybe. But it really didn't seem like it. The first flash I only got half a glimpse of, but the second one was more of a moiré sort of effect. It wavered like a heat mirage."

Sherman thought it over. "Well, at least it's something to go on. I can start a search on laser sights and see if any mention a moiré effect. And thanks for telling me."

"De nada."

"I agree with your theories, by the way. You were definitely the sniper's target. And the intention was not to kill you."

"Yeah, but why? Why in that particular place, and at that particular time?"

Sherman slowly sipped at his own coffee. "Off the top of my head I'd suggest that someone wanted to make certain you were involved in this solartron business---"

"But that's crazy. Other than most of the world's solar astronomers, the only people who knew about the solartrons were the Committee members we talked to yesterday. Who in that group would want me shot at, and why? To get me involved? I mean I'm flattered and all, but I

don't see what I can do that Tom or Dad couldn't. And if they wanted me involved they could've asked 'pretty please', and I would've said yes. Easily."

"Well then," Sherman continued, "my next suggestion would be to echo Tom's idea that this is somehow related to an older situation you were involved in."

"Hmph! I was almost expecting you to refer to it as one of my previous cases."

"Would it bother you if I did?"

Sandy considered it. "Probably not. Just don't use the term when Mom's around. But, getting back to the discussion, there're two problems with the suggestion. The first is that any old . . ."

"Enemies."

"Any old enemies I have would've had much better opportunities and locations to take potshots at me. And they probably wouldn't have missed on purpose."

"Mmmm, true. And the second problem?"

Sandy's expression became rueful. "My old enemies are, for the most part, dead."

"One of Geiner's former associates? One of Sun Ohm Erato's henchmen?"

"I don't know." Sandy let out a dry chuckle. "And to think I was voted Most Popular in my high school class."

Sherman was gazing at her with a mixture of fondness and concern. "Since there's no immediate answer appearing, it means there's a detail we're overlooking. I'll be talking to the Bureau investigators who're still looking into the shooting. See if they've got some ideas. In the meantime, keep your eyes doubly opened and your Snooper close at hand."

Sandy nodded, staring down into her coffee.

"And anyway, look at the bright side."

"Oh?"

"If Tom's right, the whole situation'll be moot in eighteen months."

Sandy heard the shadow in Sherman's words. "You don't think it'll get that bad, do you? Tom'll think of something."

"Yeah," Sherman sighed, looking away. Following his gaze, Sandy noticed the photograph of Freida Morgan on his desk.

But there was something Sherman had said that was tickling her mind. "Overlooked details."

Sherman glanced up from his reveries. "Um?"

"Tom tried to call the Space Friends last night and pump them for information."

"Yeah, and got squadoo."

Sandy nodded thoughtfully. "But it occurs to me that Tom didn't make use of every possible avenue of information."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. And it also occurs to me that I haven't talked to the kids in quite a while."

Chapter Seven: Children (Once and Future).

"The kids?"

Sandy nodded. "Can I use your console? I'd go upstairs to my office, but you might find this interesting."

Sherman silently gestured assent and Sandy bent over the keyboard on his desk, her fingers tapping in a sequence. Watching her, Sherman managed to make out some of the code groups as communication prefixes for calls onto the SwiftSpace network.

Over against the wall a videophone screen came to life, and both Sandy and Sherman found themselves staring at an elf. At least that would've been the first impression. The girl who looked out of the screen would've been almost seven feet tall if she'd been standing. Possessed of a slender body seemingly as delicate as if made from spun glass. Above it a pale oval face accented by luminous violet eyes, and crowned with a curtain of silvery blonde hair which (Sandy knew) almost reached down to her ankles. If the hair had been slightly pushed back, Sandy would not have been surprised to see pointed tips on the ears.

"Swiftbase communications," the girl announced in slightly accented English. Then she apparently recognized who she was speaking to because her expression blossomed into immediate happiness. "An'Sandy!"

"Hello, Nelli dear," Sandy replied, smiling. "I thought you were working over in the Biology Section."

"Helping out here," the girl replied. "Are you and N'cle Bud coming soon?"

"Soon," Sandy promised. "Is Vera around?"

Nelli nodded. "She'll be here in a bit. I'm answering the phones."

"And doing a very nice job of it. How're the others doing?"

"They're 'kay. Klara and Timofei are on Nestria right now, and Pollina's helping out at Japan Prime."

"Very good. I'm glad all of you are getting the chance to move around. I want you to promise me you'll pass the word and tell everyone I called."

The girl nodded brightly. She was one of twenty-six children who Sandy and Bud had discovered while being lost beneath the surface of the Moon years before. The offspring of a failed Brungarian space mission, the children had been living in the remains of the spaceship

which had brought their parents to the Moon. With the help of carefully recorded instructions (plus, it was later learned, two Space Friends), the children had thrived.

They were now a part of the population of the Enterprises base located near the lunar northern pole. Not only was such an environment natural to them, it was probably the only one they would ever know. Having been born on the Moon it was estimated that the greater gravitational influence of the Earth would be more than their bodies could withstand. Meanwhile they were healthy and happy, surrounded by their "family" of Swiftbase personnel, and enjoyed something of a fan following back on Earth.

Nelli suddenly became serious and leaned closer to the video pickup. "An'Sandy."

"Yes, honey?"

The girl's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "I saw Zakhar and Olesia a few days ago."

"Well I would hope so. You grew up with them."

"But An'Sandy . . . they were kissing!"

Sandy made some rapid mental calculations. Nine or so years old biologically when they were found . . . add seven years . . .

Oops!

"Well," she replied cautiously, "we've had a little discussion on this before, Nelli. Remember? Since you're all getting older you'll be reaching the point where you might like to . . . kiss each other. Or at least the boys you really like."

Next to her, Sherman was prudently attending to some work on his desk.

For her part Nelli was solemnly taking the information in. Then her face suddenly brightened. "So can I kiss Dr. Simon?"

A moan echoed deep inside Sandy. "Maybe you'd better talk that over with Vera," she said diplomatically.

"Kay. An' here she is. Bye, An'Sandy. Love you!"

"Love you too, sweetie."

Smiling, Nelli's face bobbed away from the screen. Moments later it was replaced by the older face of Vera Millionspell: Swiftbase Director of Communications (which meant she answered the board whenever anyone contacted), and unofficial den mother to the "Moon Children".

"Hi, Sandy," she said in the cheerfully tired voice universal to operators of children's daycare centers and anyone who had to spend a large amount of time around teenagers. "You gotta do something about your kids."

"My kids?"

"You found them."

Sandy couldn't deny the accusation. "Nelli already tattled about Zakhar and Olesia," she said. "I take it we're not just seeing an isolated incident here."

"Not . . . as such," the other woman replied. "I estimate we'll be having our first weddings up here in a few years. At the most."

Sandy firmly updated her plans to travel to the Moon and spend time with the kids. "And who the heck is Doctor Simon?"

Vera chuckled. "Yeah. I was gonna send you a note about him. He's the local scientific prodigy. Dr. Simon Link."

This time Sherman looked up.

Sandy worked to overcome the surprise. "Simon . . . Link?"

"Uh huh."

"His older brother's a New York City police detective?"

"Why yes, he's . . ." Realization suddenly dawned on Vera's face. "Oh! That Detective Link. Your special friend."

Sandy nodded. "I thought Simon Link was in charge of Xenobotany over on Nestria."

"He was, but he's brought his work here to spend some time studying possible reactions to the Moon ice you and Bud found." Vera smiled. "Nelli's been following him around like a puppy."

"Well . . . if Simon's anything like his brother then you might want to sit Nelli down and have a serious talk with her."

"Simon's actually just five years older than her. Thereabouts."

"Yeah, and I'd keep a shotgun handy thereabouts."

"I'll make a note of it. But you didn't call just to pick up the latest gossip."

Sandy shook her head. "Vera, have any of the kids been picking up . . . special messages recently?"

Vera cocked her head a bit to one side. "How do you mean special messages?"

"Talking about odd dreams? Unusual images?"

Sherman's eyes narrowed.

Vera shook her head. "Nothing's been said. And I think they'd tell me otherwise."

Sandy sighed.

"What's up?"

"It's just that the kids have spent most of their lives under the influence of the Space Friends. I have reason to believe things might be happening soon, and I don't know if the Space Friends have further plans involving them."

"Does any of this have anything to do with the increased work in the Solar Astronomy Section here?"

"Probably."

Vera slowly nodded. "I'll keep an extra eye on them. But just letting you know, Sandy, they're scattered all over the Moon and on Nestria. And Faina's on an internship at the space station."

"I'll pass word to Ken about her. Just wanted to give you a heads-up."

"I appreciate it. And thanks."

"Take care," Sandy replied, touching the keyboard and breaking the connection with the Moon. "Well . . . that was a long shot," she admitted.

"But a good one," Sherman said. "You were thinking about the vision you had of Lazarev being destroyed."

Sandy nodded. "It's like I explained to Vera. The kids have been around the Space Friends longer than I was, and I've always suspected they were meant to be part of some sort of plan."

"I remember you telling me that after you and Bud found them."

"There are aliens hidden on the Moon, Sherman. I'd bet on it. We never found the two which got away, and we never found the Foresight robots they took and modified. There's still something going on deep in those caverns."

Feeling the rising intensity in Sandy's voice, Sherman carefully made an attempt to shift the conversation. "Did Tom or your father tell the Committee about the loss of Lazarev?"

Sandy blinked in mild distraction. "N-no . . . come to think of it, I don't remember either of them doing so. But it's all still really early, and I think Tom still holds out some sort of hope that there'll be survivors." She noted the look in Sherman's eyes. "Well . . . yeah. But you know Tom's always been more of an optimist than you or me."

"But you believe the attack on Lazarev's definitely connected with the solartrons?"

"Until it's proved otherwise, yeah." Wrapping her arms around herself, Sandy stared at the floor. "We're still missing something. Why would I get a vision of Lazarev being destroyed? What was the point of that?"

"A warning for us to keep spaceships away from the Sun."

"But why just to me? Why not send a message the usual way? And we're not the only people with spaceships. Why hasn't everyone else been sent a warning?"

"Like you said, it's still really early."

"Yeah," Sandy muttered. She thought quietly for about a minute before sighing and heading for the door.

Sherman watched her. "Where to now?"

"Home," Sandy announced. "Lunch. And more thinking."

* * * * *

She arrived home to find her mother, Bingo and Sestina accompanied not only by Phyllis but by a shapely older woman who possessed a good deal of Phyllis' attractiveness and was, in fact, her mother Helen.

"Hi," Sandy said. "Aren't you working?" she added to Phyllis.

"I can have lunch here too," Phyllis replied. "Besides, Tom left the notes for the Werewasp sports model here and I need them."

Mary was helping Sestina lay out a tray of cold cuts, and she noticed the shadowed expression on her daughter's face. "What've you been up to?" she asked.

Sandy related her talk with both Sherman and the Moon. Listening to her, the other women passed surreptitious glances between themselves. They were hearing a familiar song: Sandy falling into a pattern of personal investigation and searching for answers.

No one really objected to Sandy finding answers. In fact, she was rather good at it. The problem was that Sandy's way of finding answers usually ended up including everything from gunfights to aerial battles with terrorists to being attacked by submarines, and anything in between. Mary was especially thinking of the difficulties Sandy had been recently experiencing in getting a life insurance policy.

"You can tell Tom and your father what you've found out---"

"Or lack thereof," Sandy muttered.

"---when they come back from the airport," Mary finished. "They've gone to pick up the liaison the Committee's sending."

"Great. Wonder what quivering piece of snot we're having to put up with?"

"Be charitable," her mother gently admonished. "Our tax dollars pay for his services."

"Wonder what tax-fattened quivering piece of snot we're having to put up with?"

Mary shook her head.

Sandy went to flounce down on the couch next to Bingo. "Oops," she said in a sudden apologetic tone. "Didn't mean to rock you there."

"S okay," Bingo replied. "I don't think I could be rocked by anything less than a land mine."

Despite herself, Sandy couldn't keep from looking the other woman over.

Bingo noticed the attention. "Should I charge admission?"

"Sorry."

"No no, it's okay. Sorta goes with the territory, I guess. It's just . . . the expression on your face."

"Well," Sandy began hesitantly, "I'm trying not to make it sound like too much. I mean, I've certainly seen expectant mothers before. But you're the first one I've really known closely and had a chance to spend a lot of time around." She glanced over her shoulder to where her mother and Helen were at the table fixing themselves plates. "Along with Phyllis and me," she continued to Bingo, "you're the big authority now on being married and all."

"Emphasis on the `all'."

"But it's still good, isn't it?"

"Well . . ." Bingo absently drummed her fingers on her easily reachable stomach. "The real downside is not havin' Ken around to get me through this time. I know he'll be back soon," she quickly added, "but I'm just lettin' you know that, when you're a newlywed, you pretty much lose the taste for sleepin' alone."

"Ummm. Is there an upside?"

"I've finally got more of a figure. Maybe not quite the one I was lookin' for . . ."

"I imagine Ken thinks you're attractive."

"Well," Bingo considered, "Ken obviously loves me."

"It sort of shows," Sandy drily replied.

"Sestina'll be bringing you a plate over," Helen called out to Bingo.

"Thank'ee."

"I have to admit, though," Phyllis said to Sandy, coming over to the couch, "now you've got me curious as to why you were shot at yesterday."

A small cough from Helen who nodded over at a frowning Mary.

"Sorry, Aunt Mary," Phyllis said. "But you and Sherman are right," she told Sandy. "Why this odd way of getting your attention? What would anyone expect you to do concerning the solartron problem?"

"What do I have to contribute to the situation?" Sandy pointed out.

"Your connection with the Space Friends," a still frowning Mary answered from the table. "Do you want onion?"

"I'll be over there in a moment." Sandy mused to herself. "Okay, admittedly a lot of people know about this idea of my being linked with the Space Friends. But there's no clear definition of what sort of link it is."

"But that'd be enough for someone to maybe take action," Mary countered.

"But who?" Sandy asked, getting up from the couch to go to the table. "I'm stuck on square one, Mom. The whole shooting business happened all too quickly. I don't have anything in the way of useful suspects." She began putting a sandwich together. "The only possible people who could've arranged for a sniper would've been the scientists who know about the

solartrons, or the Committee members. None of them with any realistic sort of motive. And, even if there was a motive, no one really knew I was in Washington until I showed up with Dad and Tom at the hearing. That's nowhere near enough time to arrange something. Did we run out of relish?"

Sestina trotted to the kitchen to get the relish.

Helen was reaching for some potato chips. "Try this," she slowly said to Sandy. "You don't have any suspects among the people you know are involved. Forget about involvement for a moment and consider the perfect suspect. Who would it be?"

A collection of "Oooooohs" from the others (Sestina contributing an appreciative tap to Helen's forehead as she returned with the relish).

"That's . . . attractive," Sandy murmured half to herself, staring off at nothing. "Come up with someone I can fit the facts to."

"If you had the complete facts," Helen pointed out. "Which you don't."

"True," Sandy agreed. "But I do have an additional one. Lazarev."

She noticed the blank looks on the others. "Losing Lazarev qualifies as the earlier point that we're looking for. If someone links that to the solartron problem . . . which Sherman and I believe . . . then there would've been enough time for someone to be goaded into response."

Phyllis was frowning. "Just barely."

"But it's something," Sandy insisted. "Sherman raised the point that the Committee hasn't yet been made aware that Lazarev's been destroyed. That eliminates them even more as suspects. And, according to Dad, outside of SwiftSpace and Enterprises workers, only a handful of researchers know about it."

"I hate to rag on my fellow employees," Phyllis said, "but we're not really the most close-mouthed bunch in the world."

"True, but it does help build the possibility of the perfect suspect we're looking for." Sandy kept thinking. "And then there're the organizations and agencies who manage the scientists that know about Lazarev and also about the Space Friends---"

"That's it!" Bingo suddenly shrieked.

Everyone was suddenly galvanized into action. "Omigod," Mary cried out. "Ah-hhh . . . Helen? Call Dr. Slater and tell him we're heading for the hospital. Sestina? Go get Bingo's overnight bag. Sandy? Sandy! You've got the space station on your cellphone. Call it and call Ken---"

Bingo let out a loud whistle. "Wait!" she cried out. "It's not the baby."

A chorus of groans.

"Don't do that," Mary gently chided.

"Sorry," Bingo replied apologetically. "I was just excited because I think I know the direction Sandy's supposed to go."

Mary looked at her. "Would rather it was the baby," she muttered.

"I'm really sorry. But Sandy . . . that's it! Don't you remember how, after you took care of Geiner---"

"It sort of stays on my memory," Sandy replied.

"---you figured out how the Space Friends had probably infiltrated several international space groups, like Section Omphalos? Wouldn't they been monitorin' you and keepin' track an' all? Wouldn't they know if Lazarev'd been blown up?"

Sandy gazed at her in mild appreciation. "Apparently being pregnant makes a woman smarter. I'll have to remember that."

Mary turned widening eyes to her.

"Oh, and who keeps bringing up the subject of grandchildren?" Sandy pointed at her mother. Phyllis pointed at Helen. Sestina's fingered wavered between the two older women.

"The only problem with your theory," Sandy went on to Bingo, "is that any alien-influenced humans would be more likely to shoot me than shoot at me."

"So reassuring," Mary muttered.

Bingo was waving her hands. "It's not like that. We were wonderin' who would be shootin' at you and why. The `why' was to get your attention and get you suckered into the solartron business."

"Suckered"

"The `who'," Bingo went on, "is probably someone who thinks you've got an in with the people on Earth who're workin' for the aliens, or are controlled by them. That's your job: to bust up the Earth-Alien Connection!"

Everyone stared at her.

Sandy most of all. "Okay, Bingo," she said. "Not that I don't follow your chain of logic here. But if that's what someone wants me to do, then why doesn't this `someone' simply come up to me and go: `please, Sandy, please go and bust up the Earth-Alien Connection?'"

"Beeee-cause . . . oh! Whoever shot at you wanted to remain anonymous."

"Slip a note under my door, for criminy's sake."

Bingo pouted a bit. "I didn't say it was a perfect theory."

"Well, be that as it may, I actually think you might be on the right track." Sandy took a bite from her sandwich. "What I mean is that I need to look into the possibility of this `Earth-Alien Connection' thing."

"Something else," Phyllis said. "Maybe the shooting wasn't intended to get you involved. Maybe it's the exact opposite. Maybe someone wants you to not get involved, and the shooting was meant to be a warning."

"The only problem with that," Sandy remarked, "is that it makes Mom the prime suspect."

Mary was shaking her head. "I could never group shots that closely from the distance you told me the sniper was."

A pause, then Sandy turned back to Phyllis. "You see how mother-daughter conversations tend to go in this household."

"Getting back to everything," Helen said a bit loudly, "now that we've figured out something, what's the next step?"

"I may have a better idea as to a suspect," Sandy said, "but that still leaves a lot of questions. Regardless of if I'm being invited, or warned, someone thinks I can really do something concerning the solartron mess. I still don't know what . . . but maybe I've now got a direction to go and find out."

Phyllis smiled. "And that means---"

"The All-Girl Ninja Team rides again," Sandy replied.

The two of them slowly turned to look at Bingo. "Of course," Sandy continued, "seeing as how our utility infielder is currently benched . . ."

"Sorry," Bingo said

At that Sestina suddenly raced away from the dining room and rapidly stomped down the hallway, disappearing into her room while the others watched.

"Was she on fire?" Helen asked.

Everyone waited, listening to the sounds of thumpings and grunts coming from the room.

"She knows where the bathroom is," Mary remarked. "So it wasn't anything related with that."

It took five minutes and then Sestina reappeared, this time somewhat more sedately. The giant was dressed in a utilitarian-looking brown tunic which Sandy recognized as the outfit Sestina had originally been wearing when they came across her in Illinois. Some changes had been made to the outfit. Sestina's feet were tucked into black leather boots, and a wide belt encircled her waist. Attached to one side of the belt was a pocket which clearly held a Snooper similar to the ones used by Sandy and others.

Sestina stood in the living room, giving Sandy a rather plaintive and shy look.

"I think you've got your new utility infielder," Mary told Sandy.

Sandy was eyeing Sestina. "Yeah. Mom? Can we borrow the truck?"

Chapter Eight: Coded Warning.

The "truck" was, in reality, a modified Swift "Marius" atomivan (or "Tommyvan") which Tom Sr. had added to the family vehicle inventory soon after Sestina had joined the Swift family. Sandy and Phyllis now rode up front while Sestina patiently sat in the back of the vehicle, hugging her knees. Sestina had made many trips in the vehicle (usually as a very visible companion to Mary on grocery trips), and a large cushioned seat (complete with safety straps) had been thoughtfully added by both Tom and Tom Sr.

"We really appreciate you coming along," Sandy called out to Sestina as the group headed for Enterprises.

Sestina bobbed her head in acceptance.

"Especially since it means you might miss your shows." Sandy was referring to the fact that Sestina was a fanatic devotee of Hello Megan, The Days of the Week and Mrs. Falbo's Tiny Town. "Mom or Bingo or Aunt Helen'll probably record them for you."

Sestina briefly touched her forehead, then the Snooper on her belt.

Trying to keep her eyes on the road, Sandy noticed the gesture in the rearview mirror. "That means she'd rather be here with us," she explained to Phyllis.

"You're good," Phyllis remarked. "I still have some trouble reading her."

"It helps if you spend more time around her. Mom and Bingo really have it down cold."

"One thing's for certain," Phyllis said with another glance back at Sestina, "we're certainly going to be much more visible."

"We're the good guys," Sandy insisted. "We don't have to be sneaky."

Reaching the Enterprises main gate, Sandy made a few inquiries with the guard and then drove on through to head for the Administration Building.

"I was thinking you were going to start by making some computer inquiries," Phyllis said to Sandy.

"I'll probably end up having to," Sandy said, maneuvering the van into a parking slot. "But before I really get my hands dirty with this business I want to make sure I've checked out all the available tools I'll have at my disposal. And, speaking of tools, I want to look over the liaison Washington's sent us."

"Ahhh."

They got out of the van and, after opening the side door to allow Sestina to climb out, Sandy paused. "Am I handling this the right way?" she asked Phyllis.

Phyllis made a brief choking sound. "All these years and now you're asking for my advice?"

Sandy leaned a bit against the door. "Lazarev gets destroyed a few days ago. In that same space of time we find out about the solartrons. Then yesterday I get shot at. Already the

eyes are looking at me, the fingers are pointing and I can hear the people saying: `c'mon, Sandy, solve it'."

An eyebrow lifted on Phyllis' face.

"Okay," Sandy said with a nod. "Admittedly I'm tripping over my ego here. Again. But if the available facts are right, someone wants me involved. It's so quick, though. It's so right away."

Phyllis continued to stare at her friend for a bit.

Then: "there's something I didn't want to mention in front of your Mom. Or my Mom either, for that matter."

"Oh?"

Phyllis nodded. "We've all been running around saying that someone . . . and possibly the Space Friends . . . put the vision concerning Lazarev into your mind."

"Well . . . yeah."

"Yeah," Phyllis echoed dully. "San, did it ever occur to you to consider that maybe it was you and you alone who produced the vision?"

"Huh?"

"Think about it. All this time you've been concerned about this link you might have with the Space Friends. You've never been able to figure out what it was. What if you're somehow able to pick up on what the Space Friends are doing? What if you've got some sort of prescience or clairvoyance regarding them?"

Sandy looked away, considering it.

"What's that phrase that's always coming back to you? `Stay tuned'?"

At this Sandy winced. "Stay tuned" was a term which had been used on several interesting occasions ever since Ecuador. The Space Friends had made use of it when they had helped her while on the Moon years before. Sun Ohm Erato and his agents had employed it on occasion. But if the phrase was meant to be an alien command or trigger, or some sort of assuring message, it was all a mystery to Sandy.

"Well," Sandy finally said, "you were right in not mentioning this idea to Mom."

"But it's something to consider, right?"

"I'll consider it," Sandy said, "but only because it helps to keep me focused on wanting to figure out why it was necessary to kill the fourteen people on Lazarev." She began walking towards the entrance to the building.

Phyllis and Sestina caught up with her, with Phyllis squinting up to the Sun. "Hard to imagine something's going on up there," she said.

"Not for much longer," Sandy replied, opening the door. "Astronomy's the most amateur-heavy science in the world. There're a lot of people out there with Hydrogen-alpha filters for their telescopes and, sooner or later, the word's going to leak out beyond the professional research community."

"And then what?"

Sandy really didn't want to dwell on that.

Traveling to the top floor they went to Tom's office. There they found both Tom and Tom Sr. chatting with a prominently mustached man in a suit.

They turned as the girls entered, and the man's eyes widened considerably as he saw Sestina.

"Hello," Tom Sr. said pleasantly. "We were just getting better acquainted. Girls, this is Dr. Roger Palfrey. You might remember his father: Leo Palfrey."

Phyllis and Sandy frowned as they searched their memories. "Wait," Sandy finally said. "Years ago. That business with the alien cache on the ocean floor. Wasn't Leo Palfrey the one---"

"---who helped out with our research," Tom Sr. said, nodding. "Carl here was attending a conference over at the Naval Observatory, but he's actually associated with the solar observatory out at Big Bear in California." He turned back to the newcomer. "Roger, this is my daughter Sandra . . . her friend Phyllis Newton . . . and Sestina."

"I'm of course familiar with Sandra Swift," Palfrey remarked, reaching out to shake her hand, then repeating the gesture with Phyllis and then (after an almost measurable pause) with Sestina.

"Roger's been sent by the Committee to serve as liaison," Tom explained. "We've just been bringing him up to speed regarding the situation."

"And it sounds increasingly serious," Roger said. "I've been studying the findings you and your father have acquired, as well as the latest data from Big Bear. We apparently still have so much to determine, and not enough time to do it." He shook his head. "If we'd been paying more attention to the trees we might've had more time."

Sandy looked perplexed. "The trees?"

"Remember we mentioned how the reduced sunlight level was first spotted by Dr. Alesh at Udaipur?" Tom asked.

Sandy nodded.

"The reason he was looking into it was because his brother's a dendroclimatologist."

"Ouch," Phyllis murmured.

"It's a branch of science that looks into the effects of climate on tree growth," Tom went on. "Dr. Alesh's brother had been noticing a widespread thickening of tree bark over the past few months. Usually this occurs because the weather's getting cooler, and Dr. Alesh's brother reasoned that less sunlight's been reaching the Earth . . . which we now know to be true. It's not cool enough for us to really notice. At least not yet. But it's grown cool enough to have an effect on tree growth."

"So the woollybears will be signaling a hard winter," Phyllis spoke up.

Tom was smiling at her. "That's just folklore."

"Says you."

Roger moved a bit closer. "Tom, have you been able to determine anything more about these . . . `solartrons' . . . you've discovered? Their size for instance?"

"Not yet," Tom admitted. "I can make generalizations, but that's all. The linked devices can be seen clearly enough, but they're too close to the Sun to make a complete physical determination possible."

"What about your megascope?"

"I've made a few attempts," Tom replied. "Unfortunately, the megascope's scanning beams suffer distortion when trying to read through the Sun's gravitational field. I'm trying to create a more powerful scanning beam, but . . ." He shrugged.

Roger looked from Tom to Tom Sr. and back. "This is probably sounding premature," he said slowly, "but I know a few in the Committee have been making noises about some sort of space flight to the Sun to collect more data directly."

Sandy noticed the look her brother and father passed between them. "That might not be possible," Tom finally said to Roger, and told him about the loss of Lazarev, not mentioning Sandy's vision.

The scientist's face paled. "Oh no!"

"Until I know better," Tom said, "I don't want to risk a manned ship within the orbit of Mercury. Perhaps an unmanned probe can be sent."

Roger was nodding to himself. "The solar studies people at NASA were going to send a magnetosphere exploration satellite next launch. Maybe we can talk to them."

"We can also call around," Tom Sr. added, "and see if something can be sent up sooner."

Tom touched Roger's shoulder. "Here's what I've worked out already," he said, leading him over to his design table, the others following.

Pressing some buttons, Tom caused lines of numbers to glow within the telejector field. Nearby floated an image of the Sun. "The solartrons are operating much closer to the Sun than I managed with my own pilot program. Obviously, the closer an object is to the Sun, the greater the energy density.

"Earth, and my pilot program, was ninety-three million miles from the Sun. At that distance the Sun has a radius of point zero zero four six, so my solartrons obviously weren't hitting a hundred per cent efficiency. The new solartrons, though, are clearly operating at a hundred per cent efficiency. Taking that into consideration I calculate that one of the new solartrons can produce a pound of matter every fifty-one days."

Roger was pulling on his mustache. "Are the solartrons expanding exponentially?"

"I haven't been able to determine that as of yet. Obviously, if they are, then the Sun might end up totally enclosed before my guessed deadline of eighteen months. And you've also got to take into account the notion that we don't know what the solartrons are composed of, or what their complete inner workings are. I made an estimate of how long it'd take to surround the entire Sun in a shell, but do we actually know that's the intention of these machines?"

"Are you suspecting them of having destroyed Lazarev?"

Tom sighed. "I'm basing all my plans on that assumption."

Roger continued staring at the data floating in the air before him. "Dr. Sheerton at the observatory was mentioning something about how these machines might be taking in hydrogen from the solar atmosphere and using that as building material."

Tom seemed to consider it. "Did he mention anything about using Big Bear's fifty centimeter Gregorian to confirm his theory?"

Roger shook his head. "I can contact him later on and ask."

Tom nodded, then suddenly looked pained.

Sandy noticed it. "What's wrong?"

"I'm an idiot," Tom told her. "I want to show Roger the prints Dad and I took earlier, and your secretary was nice enough to help me with copying. I went and left them in your office."

"Oh I'll go get them," Sandy said, turning to leave.

"I'll come with you. Won't take a moment," Tom added to Roger.

Sandy threw a quick smile at Roger and the others and accompanied Tom out into the hallway, trying hard to remain calm. Tom's use of the "secretary helping with copying" phrase was a code meaning that something was wrong and he needed to talk with her in private.

Sandy and Tom moved far enough down the hallway for safety's sake, and then Sandy turned to her brother. "What?"

"Roger mentioned Dr. Sheerton at Big Bear."

"And?"

Tom shook his head. "Sheerton died two years ago. That's why I asked the question about using the fifty centimeter Gregorian. There's no such instrument at Big Bear."

Sandy's eyes widened.

"This guy may be calling himself Roger Palfrey, but if he's a solar astronomer then I'm Mahatma Gandhi."

Chapter Nine: The Right Hand of Evidence.

Sandy stared at Tom. "But if that's not Palfrey . . ."

She didn't finish the statement. She didn't want to finish the statement. And, in any case, the look on Tom's face told her he was arriving at the same conclusion.

"I'm going down to Sherman," she said, already heading for the elevator. "Keep him talking."

"Things must be serious," Tom muttered to himself as he headed back to his office. "I'm taking orders from my little sister."

The elevator seemed to take forever before it reached the bottom floor of the Administration Building. But the doors eventually slid open and she shot out like a cannon shell, heading for the Security Office.

"Hey!"

Glancing over, Sandy saw Bud entering the building. "C'mon," she called out. "Trouble."

Breaking into an immediate sprint, Bud managed to catch up with her, the both of them reaching Sherman's office at the same time. What with everything Sherman was currently involved in . . . including a joint investigation with the FBI . . . the absolute last thing he needed was the sight of a wild-eyed Sandy racing through his door.

It's finally happening, he told himself. Armageddon!

"Tom's office," she told him. "Punch it up on the screen."

Sherman knew when to ask questions, and this wasn't one of those times. His fingers immediately raced over the buttons on his desk and, a few seconds later, one of the screens on his wall lit up to show Tom's office.

Looking at the image Sandy managed to calm down slightly. There was no blood, no sign of violence, just Tom talking to an attentive Palfrey. Keeping her voice as even as possible she explained the situation to Sherman and Bud. Sherman immediately responded with a word that would've earned him a severe frown from Mrs. Swift had she heard it.

Bud looked as if he was poised to race upstairs, but Sandy laid a hand on his arm. "Tom's on top of the situation," she said. "Plus Sestina's there, and she can move pretty quickly."

Sherman's fingers were continuing to dance over the buttons. "Pico!"

Pico Jefferson, Sherman's second-in-command, leaned into view.

"I want a security detail outside of Tom's office now," Sherman directed. "Keep it quiet and just out of sight for the moment."

Nodding, Pico quickly moved out of sight, his voice already calling out orders.

Meanwhile another screen on Sherman's wall came to life. On it was a front and side view of Palfrey's head, accompanied by rows of text.

Everyone was looking over the information. "According to Palfrey's FBI file," Sherman remarked, "that's who's up in the office with Tom right now."

"But Tom's got doubts," Bud pointed out.

"And, given the present situation, that's good enough for me." Sherman's frown deepened slightly. "If only . . ."

"You've got more pictures of Palfrey?" Sandy asked. "Voiceprints? Video files?"

"Accessing," murmured Sherman. "I'm going into the databases of the New Jersey Institute of Technology, NASA and the National Science Foundation."

The remaining screens on Sherman's wall began producing different images of Palfrey.

"New Jersey Institute of Technology?" Bud asked Sandy.

"They're the people who're currently running Big Bear," Sandy said. "Management changed hands back . . . Sherman, wait! Stop!"

"More specific, Sandy. Please."

"Bottom right-hand screen, go back two pictures."

Sherman obeyed while Sandy moved closer to the screens. "Okay, Sherman," she said, "zoom in on Palfrey's left hand in that photo."

Once again Sherman obliged, and Sandy looked back and forth from the picture to the ongoing view from Tom's office.

She soon nodded. "Does anyone else see it?"

Sherman sighed. "Show off later, Sandy---"

"Sorry. Look." She pointed at the close-up of Palfrey's left hand. "Here he's wearing a ring." She now pointed at the live feed from Tom's office. "Here the ring's on his right hand."

Working quickly, Sherman summoned up other pictures which provided views of Palfrey's hands.

"The ring's on the left hand in all the other photos," Bud said.

"Close enough for government work," Sherman muttered. Reaching up he lightly tapped at his glasses, triggering the communications link within the frame. "All right, people, remain quiet and out of sight but be ready to move in. If I order you to move in I want Dr. Palfrey immediately immobilized."

He listened to his earpieces for a bit. "A medical support team is also on standby up there."

In the meantime Sandy had taken her phone and dialed Tom's office. On the screen they saw Tom pull out his own phone and answer it.

As carefully as possible Sandy explained the situation. Tom's expression remained placid.

"Sestina's got a Snooper if you need it," Sandy added.

Tom casually glanced over at the giant. "I've got one over in my desk," he calmly said to the phone, his eyes returning to gaze at Palfrey.

"Pico," Sherman called out, "contact the FBI, the Naval Observatory and the Federal Transit Desk at National Airport. Try and determine that the person which arrived here was definitely Dr. Palfrey."

Everyone watched as Tom, still holding on to the phone, strolled over towards his desk, keeping up a conversation with Palfrey.

"Sestina's suspecting something," Sandy said, looking at the giant.

"So's your father," Bud said. "It won't take long for Phyllis to pick up on the vibes . . . especially with Tom trying to place himself between Phyllis and Palfrey."

Sandy could feel her fingernails digging into her palm. "Sherman?"

"Tom's on top of it," Sherman replied, his eyes on the screen. "I've got fifteen security and medical people practically standing outside his office. I say the word, or Tom says the word, and Palfrey goes down."

They continued watching as Tom went over to his desk and opened a drawer, producing a sheaf of photographic prints.

Sandy let out a breath. "He remembered that we originally left the office to get some pictures and he had to produce something."

As she watched, Sandy also noticed how Tom's other hand was palming an object from inside the drawer.

"C'mon," she softly urged her brother.

Tom handed the prints over to Palfrey.

Sherman nodded. "Look how he's moving. Now he's drawing Palfrey's aim away from the others."

Looking at the prints, Palfrey was talking to Tom, turning along with him. At the precise moment that his face was in line with the security camera he suddenly paused, and a slight smile appeared.

This time Sherman, Sandy and Bud all made remarks that would've had Mary sending them to the corner. "We've been made," Bud added.

"Impossible," Sherman said.

But Palfrey's smile was growing, and then the screen suddenly burst into static.

Someone shrieked, and Sandy realized it was her. "Sherman!"

"Move in," Sherman barked.

Sandy remembered the phone in her hand and brought it up. "Tom? Tom?"

Sherman was listening to his glasses. "Stun grenades just went off."

"What?"

"Or something." Sherman began tapping buttons. On the wall several screens switched to images of the corridor outside Tom's office. The members of the security team were moving through what seemed to be a cloud of dense smoke.

"On my way upstairs," Bud declared as he started to whirl about and head for the elevators.

"Don't," Sherman barked.

Bud froze, looking back at him and Sandy.

Sherman was still listening. "They're all right," he announced. "But Palfrey's missing." He resumed touching buttons. Outside the office an alarm began screaming, and red lights came on. "I'm sealing all the exits. Palfrey's apparently trying to escape the building and he might be coming close by." At the last he gave Bud a pointed look.

Bud nodded and began heading for the main entrance.

"Bud," Sandy cried out, unholstering her Snooper and tossing it to him. Snatching it out of mid-air, Bud gave her a nod and moved away.

Sandy then turned back to Sherman, her mouth full of questions. But then she caught the faint voice from her phone and returned it to her ear. "Tom?"

"Everyone's okay," Tom said between coughs. "Palfrey somehow set off some sort of flash and smoke bomb. I almost had him but he's moved off. Does Sherman have him?"

Sherman apparently heard through his glasses. "Tracking," he announced, and Sandy watched with him. One of the screens was showing an electronic map of the Administration Building's fifth floor. A red blip was seen moving along the outermost corridor. The source of the blip was the transmitting chip embedded in the visitor's badge which Palfrey wore.

"He's heading for the stairwell," Sandy said.

"He thinks he is," Sherman remarked. "I've just locked the doors, as well as the elevators. All units," he went on to the audio pickup in his glasses, "Dr. Palfrey is currently between Sandy's office and Stairwell One, moving counterclockwise. Intercept and secure."

An adjacent screen showed a section of corridor. Both Sandy and Sherman watched but, just as a moving figure began to appear, the screen blazed with distortion.

Sherman growled. "Palfrey's using a laser to blind the cameras. But he can't jam the tracking signal."

They watched as the blip moved past the stairwell and suddenly turned to enter a room.

"All units," Sherman announced. "Palfrey has just entered Room 512. Converge."

"Look," Sandy said.

Sherman was seeing it as well, causing the electronic map to zoom in. The blip moved across the room, then paused. It slowly headed back for the corridor but, just before leaving the room, it stopped and once again reversed course, this time traveling rapidly.

As it struck the wall the blip disappeared. At the same time a new alarm began beeping and a message appeared on the map: WINDOW 512A SHATTERED.

"Unsealing the exits," Sherman shouted. Reaching into his desk he produced a device which resembled a handgun but was actually a Spinner: a device which fired an immobilizing blob of adhesive plastic (the Snoopers were equipped with smaller rounds).

With Sandy just behind him, Sherman ran out of the office. "Our man's jumped," he shouted to Pico. "Put people outside."

Near the entrance Bud saw Sandy and Sherman and, putting two and two together, ran out into the open before they did. "Left," shouted Sherman to his back.

Leaving the building, Sandy sprinted to the left, trying to determine where Palfrey would've landed. She eventually caught up with Bud who was standing still, accompanied by two of Sherman's people.

As she came alongside him she saw what they were looking at. Fragments of the Tomasite-reinforced glass window were scattered on the pavement near the low decorative hedge which encircled most of the building. Among the fragments was the visitor's card which Palfrey had worn.

Of Palfrey himself there was no sign.

Chapter Ten: The Steel Swift.

A half hour later the afternoon was growing late, and the Administration Building still looked like an anthill which had been kicked over. Security people were crawling all about it, a pair of Tommycars hovered overhead, and robot surveillance drones flew back and forth, crisscrossing the airspace over Enterprises.

Sandy was sullenly sitting on the curb near the entrance to the building, looking up as Bud came over.

"Well," he said. "Seventy-two hours and you saw a manned spaceship get destroyed, been shot at by a sniper and uncover a break-in by a very talented spy. All in all I'd say it's par for the course for you . . . and, from the look in your eyes, I'd also say you're not really in the mood for my smart mouth."

"Sorry." With a small groan Sandy got up on her feet then moved over into Bud's arms. "Sort of more in the mood for this."

Bud certainly didn't feel like complaining, although he would've preferred to have had Sandy in a happier frame of mind while he held her.

"Talk to me about it?" he murmured.

A hard sigh pushed against his upper chest. "Here I go again," she murmured. "I mean I'm like Sherman. I thought I was going to have a whole year out of trouble."

Bud gently stroked her back. "And here I thought you were getting all enthusiastic about this."

Another sigh. "I don't mind trying to find out what killed the people on board Lazarev," she said. "And if anything's threatening Tom or anyone else, then I'd certainly want a hand in

clobbering it." Her face raised and she looked up into Bud's eyes. "You know I'm not the type to hide under the bed. If there's a clue to be deciphered, or a hideout to be located, then I'm game. You know that."

Bud's mind was flooding with memories. "Oh yeah."

"But that," Sandy said, waving a hand in the general direction of the Sun. "What the heck am I supposed to do about it? That's more Tom's side of the street, and even he's a little uncertain as to what to do."

"I know," Bud said. "But we've all got faith in Genius Boy."

"Me too. But I've been listening to Tom and Dad. Tom says that it'll be eighteen months before the Sun's totally enclosed. But we might not last half that long if more and more of the Sun's radiation becomes blocked off."

"And it's still only been a few days since we've really become aware of the problem," Bud told her firmly. "Who knows what sort of answers or possible solutions we'll have after a week? Maybe even two? Give Tom a chance."

"I guess so," Sandy said.

"And give yourself a chance too," Bud added, leaning closer to put a kiss on her forehead. They then turned as the sound of Sherman's grumbling grew louder.

"Fifteen people at Tom's office," Sherman was saying, coming up to them, "and Palfrey still managed to slip through."

"They weren't really expecting stun grenades and smoke," Sandy pointed out.

"And I wasn't expecting him to spot the security camera in Tom's office," Sherman replied, his hands on his hips. "Those things are supposed to be inobtrusive. That's the whole point."

Watching him, Sandy felt her mood lifting slightly. Frieda Morgan had recently and privately confided to her how she thought Sherman looked "so cute" when he was angry. Sandy was beginning to understand Freida's point of view.

Sherman was now looking up at the broken window, his face settling into thoughtful lines. "Bud? Could you break your way through one of the windows here?"

Bud speculatively followed Sherman's gaze. "Not easily," he admitted. "Maybe if I had a real long head start."

"Ummmm."

"I was thinking Palfrey, or whoever he was, had some sort of contact explosive that shattered the window," Sandy said.

"A possibility," Sherman muttered, still looking up. "That's about a forty-eight foot drop. Could either of you survive a fall from that height?"

"Survive?" Sandy looked up, judging the distance. "Not . . . very probably."

"And even if I survived," Bud said, "I don't think I could just immediately run off."

"He didn't have a helicopter or anything like that waiting outside the building for him to jump onto," Sherman considered. "He didn't have a jetpack or Werewasp, so he couldn't have flown away. There wasn't a net or any sort of safety device waiting for him down here. So how did he survive the fall? And where the heck did he go?"

"And was he the real Dr. Palfrey, or . . ."

"As to that," Sherman said, looking down at them, his expression brightening somewhat. "We've found Palfrey."

"Wow," Sandy said. "Where?"

"In a maintenance closet at the National Airport in Washington," Sherman explained. "Pico just reported it to me a while ago. He's in a hospital and the FBI's watching over him."

"Has he---"

"Nothing useful as of yet. It's been determined that he was heavily tasered or something, then tied up and hidden away." Sherman turned slightly to wave at Tom as he walked by on his way back inside the building. Tom waved back at the three of them. "The Bureau wants Palfrey to rest up more before questioning him further, but seeing Tom reminds me that I want to look at any items our mysterious friend might have touched in order to search for fingerprints."

Sandy was frowning slightly. "Could he have been the sniper?"

Sherman and Bud exchanged a look.

"Think about it," Sandy went on. "The sniper managed to somehow escape from the roof of the Senate Office Building without being seen. Whoever impersonated Palfrey practically did the same thing from here."

"It's sort of a scary thought," Bud admitted.

Sherman nodded in agreement. "And I learned a long time ago not to ignore your instincts," he said to Sandy. "Now I really want to check for fingerprints in Tom's office."

"Did I hear someone mention Tom?" Phyllis asked, coming up.

"He just went in a few moments ago," Bud told her. "Sherman wants to dust his office for fingerprints."

"Well, no one actually dusts anymore---" Sherman began.

"Hi," Tom said, coming up and slipping an arm around Phyllis' waist. He looked at Sherman. "Dad wants to talk with you about arranging for a new liaison from Washington . . . why are you guys looking at me funny?"

Sandy, Bud, Sherman and Phyllis stared wide-eyed at Tom, turned to look over at the Administration Building, then back at Tom.

"Didn't you . . ." Bud began. "Didn't you just go inside the building?"

Tom looked mildly perplexed. "I was with Dad and some of the security people over by the Tommyvan, talking about getting a new liaison."

Sandy, Sherman and Bud stared at each other.

"Oh . . ." Sandy whispered.

". . . no," Sherman finished.

The two of them suddenly began running towards the Administration Building, Bud and Phyllis just behind them.

Tom was the last to move, but he rapidly caught up. "What's wrong?"

"I just hope we're mistaken," Sherman said.

Entering the building, Sherman spotted one of the guards. "Did Tom just come in here?" he asked.

The guard was looking confusedly at Tom. "But . . . he just did. Right there."

"Ohhhhhhh," Tom moaned and raced for the elevator.

"Have everyone outside surround the building," Sherman ordered the guard as he followed Tom. "This isn't gonna happen twice in one day," he muttered.

In the elevator they let Sherman use his security override to take the car immediately to the top floor. "It couldn't be the same guy," Bud declared.

"But he looked just like Tom," Sandy argued.

"From a distance."

Sherman was checking the clip on his Spinner. "Who's got Snoopers?"

"I've still got Sandy's," Bud answered.

"This time," Sherman suggested, "let's not wait. Let's nail this guy immediately."

"Where's Sestina?" Sandy asked.

"She was standing over near Dad," Tom replied.

Sandy nodded, quietly relieved that Sestina was available for bodyguard work in case something happened in the parking lot.

The elevator door opened and Tom immediately bolted out, heading at breakneck speed for his office. Bud shouted after him, but it was no use and everyone concentrated into trying to keep up as closely as possible, reaching the door to the office almost five seconds after Tom raced through it.

At the doorway they suddenly paused in surprise as they saw . . .

Two Tom Swift Juniors standing in the office and staring at each other.

* * * * *

"Oh," Phyllis murmured. "This is so awkward."

Sandy mentally gave her friend points for the understatement of all time. Meanwhile she and the others were looking back and forth from one Tom to another, making comparisons.

"I wouldn't have thought it was possible," Bud said. "Even the t-shirt's been duplicated."

They cautiously stepped into the office as the two Toms continued to face each other like Old West gunslingers about to draw.

"Just letting you know," Sherman announced loudly, "that neither of you are leaving this room until this is resolved."

"Good idea," the Tom on the left said. "Seal off the building and get as many guards up here as possible."

Sherman opened his mouth, then shut it. "But the fake Tom would've said something like that to throw me off," he pointed out. "That's what I'd do."

"And you'd be right," the Tom on the right said, not taking his eyes off the other.

"I wonder what a voiceprint analysis would show?" Sandy asked.

"Depends," Sherman said, "on if we can get the both of them to cooperate while we set it up."

"The fake Tom would resist."

"Which is exactly what worries me."

Bud raised his Snooper. "Dose both of them," he suggested. "We'll sort it out later."

Sherman grunted agreement and raised his Spinner.

"Wait," Phyllis suddenly said. Her eyes fixed on the Toms she took a step closer. "Tom . . . what's your pet name for me?"

"Pillow'," the Tom on the right immediately said.

Bud and Sherman simultaneously fired at the other Tom, releasing yellow tendrils of adhesive foam. To their amazement, though, the double ducked aside, easily dodging the bursts.

He wasn't so fortunate with the real Tom who, moving closer, suddenly delivered a solid haymaker to the false Tom's face. The next surprise of the day then arrived as, rather than ending up flattened on the floor, the double remained firmly on his feet, his head simply knocked aside a bit.

As for Tom he was holding his hand tight and howling.

"That hurt," he exclaimed. "Like hitting a brick wall."

Everyone automatically looked back at the double as it regained its former pose.

"Oh my God," Phyllis whispered.

Sandy was in private agreement. Everyone could see the double smiling at all of them . . . but it only did so with half its face. Tom's punch hadn't knocked the double down, but it had succeeded in removing half the skin from its face . . . revealing shining metal beneath.

Staring at it, Tom immediately forgot his pain. "What . . ."

"Rush it," Bud said. "Whatever it is."

He and Sherman both moved, but the double moved even faster, raising both arms. Arcs of electricity flickered from the hands, and both men were violently thrown back.

Tom looked as if he was going to try a move, but he suddenly found himself facing a pointed finger which was humming ominously.

"I'd suggest curbing your immediate impulses," the double said, the voice no longer like Tom's but, rather, an electronically synthesized rasp.

Sandy and Phyllis were kneeling down close to a groaning Bud and Sherman.

"Your friends have only received low voltage shocks," the double was explaining to Tom. "Just strong enough to keep them from injuring themselves further. If necessary, however, I can easily render them permanently incapable of further bother."

Tom was frowning, half out of anger and half out of curiosity. "Who . . . what are you?"

In answer a soft silvery glow began to ripple across the double's body. As it faded all remaining appearance of a duplicate Tom totally vanished. In its place stood a sleek humanoid figure composed of pewter-grey and black metal. The face was totally devoid of character: a shining funeral mask that gazed without emotion at the real Tom.

"A robot," breathed Tom.

Still trying to catch his breath, Sherman was struggling to reach up and touch his glasses.

Sandy immediately understood. "I'll call security," she said, reaching for them.

The robot's head suddenly turned towards her. "What? And not even wait for me to show all of you my best trick?"

As everyone watched the silvery glow once again appeared, and this time became more intense. The body of the robot began undergoing minor alterations in regards to physical appearance and size, becoming slender . . . taking on rather feminine curves. As the glow started to fade in and out new skin could be seen forming over the metal . . . and new clothing over the skin. Hair reappeared atop the body, became darker . . .

The glow finally began fading entirely, revealing the robot in its new form, and Sandy's mouth fell open. "Oh no!"

"It can't be," breathed Tom.

Ithaca Foger spread her arms wide and smiled. "Ta-daaaa!"

Chapter Eleven: The Latest Thing.

Sandy was struggling to get over her shock. "That's . . . impossible."

Ithaca smiled at her. "Rather an odd word coming from you."

"You died," Sandy said. "You fell into a quantum black hole years ago, back in Nevada. No one could've survived that."

This time Ithaca sighed. "Sandy, you're still trying to talk like your brother. It doesn't really fit you. Develop your own style, for goodness sake. A personal sense of panache. Try a more . . . I don't know . . . sort of a nineteen-fifties science-fiction movie poster approach. Something like: 'Killer Cyborg Bitch Returns from the Unknown'. That sort of thing.

"But," she calmly went on, "it is true that I struck the unstable quantum gravitational anomaly which you helped create, you heartless girl you. And, under normal circumstances, I admittedly would've been annihilated. But my creators felt I was much too useful and managed to, shall we say, 'recover' me and keep me in storage until I was needed once again."

"Your creators," Tom said. "But definitely not Sun Ohm Erato."

Ithaca shook her head. "A brain like yours," she said to him, "and still the slowest thinking person I've ever met. I did work with Sun Ohm Erato . . . and, by the way, that was a rather nice job of arranging his assassination, Sandy . . . but my orders, and my origin, came from a completely different source. Sun Ohm Erato was allowed to believe that he had created me, but that was all." She once again looked at Sandy. "You, on the other hand, correctly guessed my background early on."

"The Space Friends built you," Sandy said.

"Bravo," Ithaca said, applauding lightly. "When I was originally blown to bits years earlier, in the attempt by Ferrari/Lotus to break the land speed record, the Space Friends managed to collect enough useful cellular material to put me back together, albeit with a much more impressive bio-mechanical body. Later on, after ending up in the quantum anomaly, the Space Friends once again managed to salvage enough material to not only rebuild me, but to supply me with an improved body and enhanced abilities. You'd be amazed what they can accomplish with just a handful of living cells and viable brain tissue." Ithaca seemed to consider her words. "Or perhaps not."

"So it's the Space Friends who sent you here."

Ithaca nodded.

"So you're somehow connected with the solartrons that're appearing on the Sun," Tom said.

Ithaca thought it over. "I might be," she slowly answered. "Keep in mind, Tom, that I am, at best, a useful tool. In this instance I've been designed to serve as something of a reconnaissance force. I'm not obligated to know everything. My mission is simply to carry out orders."

"And you impersonated Roger Palfrey."

Another nod. "Among my new talents is the ability to assume the appearance of anyone I wish," Ithaca explained. "Impressive, huh? My creators felt it was necessary to sound you and your father out about what you knew concerning the solartrons."

Tom stepped closer to her.

Ithaca held up a warning hand. "Careful."

"You made a comment as Palfrey about how the solartrons might be taking in hydrogen from the solar atmosphere, using it as building material," Tom said to her. "Is that it, Ithaca? Is that what's being done?"

"As I said, Tom, I'm not totally in the loop. I have orders of my own and was given just enough information to carry out my job."

"Why couldn't the Space Friends ask Dad or me directly?"

"Tom, how many times do I have to repeat myself---"

"What are your orders, Ithaca?" Sandy asked.

The cyborg looked at her. "The Space Friends have their own agenda," she said. "I only know I was sent here to carry out whatever directives they pass on. But there's one other thing." Ithaca's eyes narrowed slightly. "You and I have unfinished business, Sandy. We will meet one final time. I promise. In the meantime: Stay Tuned!"

It was too much for Bud who struggled to his feet to rush at her, while Tom attempted to do the same. But Ithaca was suddenly outlined by a pulsating field of electricity and the two of them paused.

A keening whine of power filled the office. Brilliant rings of thin green light erupted up from the floor, quickly rising around Ithaca's body. As they appeared, Ithaca rapidly faded away. When the rings passed up through the ceiling she had completely disappeared.

Moments passed in silence. Then Tom quickly turned to a nearby cabinet and opened it, withdrawing a device which Sandy recognized as a portable version of a Damonscope: Tom's custom designed radiation detector and analyzer.

Using it he carefully swept the area where Ithaca had been. "I'm not picking up anything dangerous," he soon announced. "And I can't take very detailed readings with this unit, but I'm seeing what I think are fading traces of localized particle entanglement at the subatomic level. I really need the more advanced Damonscope for this."

"Back up a bit," Bud said. "Is Ithaca still here?"

Tom shook his head. "I don't want to make a firm commitment to this until I've looked at more data, but I think she teleported out of here. And yes, that sound you're hearing is my jaw hitting the floor. Sherman? You've still got Enterprises wired for tracing magnetic activity back from when we first encountered Ithaca?"

Sherman had managed to move into a sitting position, adjusting his glasses. "Yeah, and I'll run a check on the sensors when I get downstairs."

"After you and Bud've been looked over by Doc Emerson," Tom ordered, lowering the Damonscope. "One crisis at a time." He was looking over at Sandy.

Sandy met his eyes. "Yeah," she said. "It looks like a list of them is forming."

* * * * *

Dr. Emerson performed a brief examination in the conference room which was located between Tom and Tom Sr.'s offices. "Seems like nothing more than enough of an electrical shock to stun them," he eventually announced to the group. "And I think we now know how Dr. Palfrey was knocked out."

"It felt like being hit in the chest with a brick," Bud told him.

"Be grateful," Emerson said. "The last time Ithaca was here she damn near killed Sherman and tried to do the same to Sandy."

Sherman had been murmuring into his glasses, issuing instructions to his people. He now raised his voice. "Well, if I'm not in immediate danger of falling over dead I'm going downstairs and start work on this."

"Don't push yourself," Emerson warned. "Let Pico or someone else handle the donkey work."

"I'll be okay," Sherman replied. "But I've got something of a personal score to settle with Friend Foger." Scowling he walked out of the room, heading past Tom Sr. and Sestina who had joined the others.

Tom Sr. watched him go then turned to the others. "Frankly, I just can't believe it," he said. "The Space Friends have always been---"

"Unpredictable?" Sandy offered.

"I was going to say `benevolent'. But . . ."

"Have they ever been helpful, Dad?" Sandy asked of him. "I mean, really and genuinely helpful?"

Tom Sr. sighed. "I know your feelings about them---"

"If I can be allowed to inject something into what is shaping up to be a radically deteriorating conversation," Phyllis broke in, "I'd like to point out that we all know there're more than just one kind of Space Friends operating here. The original version, and the ones that Sandy calls the `Senders'."

"Which reminds me of something I've always wondered," Tom added. "Could these `Senders' be the ones the Space Friends told us about before? The race they called the Space Legion?"

Sandy noticed how everyone was looking at her. "I only know what I've managed to infer from my own personal contact," she told them. Then she grimaced. "Great. Now I'm starting to sound like Ithaca."

"If the intentions of the Senders are hostile," Tom suggested, "then it'd certainly explain both Ithaca and the solartrons. Not to mention the attack on Lazarev."

"But the way I remember Sandy telling it," Phyllis replied, "the Space Friends and the Senders are definitely at cross-purposes. Our problem might be that we're caught in the middle of whatever their conflict is."

"But why won't the Space Friends give us more information?" Tom Sr. asked her. "We helped them before against the Space Legion . . . or, if you prefer, the Senders. Why all this silence now?"

"Maybe they're busy," Bud suggested.

Tom thought it over. "Let's see if they're more in a mood to talk."

They followed him back to his office and to the communications machine. Powering it on Tom sent: WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT ITHACA FOGER AND HER MISSION ON EARTH?

This time the answer was immediate: NO EXPLANATION YET.

"Color me surprised," Sandy muttered.

But Tom wasn't in a mood to let it go. WE ARE BEING THREATENED DIRECTLY HERE. WE URGENTLY REQUIRE ANSWERS.

NO EXPLANATION YET.

Tom growled and, for a moment, Sandy thought he was going to put a fist through the screen.

"The situation with the Space Friends might be serious," his father suggested. "They may not be able to answer us directly."

Sandy kept her opinion to herself.

"This can't go on," Tom said, looking up at his father. "Between the solartrons and Ithaca this means serious trouble for us."

"For me," Sandy said.

Everyone looked at her.

Sandy was gazing at the words on the screen. "You heard what Ithaca said before she vanished. She and I have unfinished business."

"Revenge," Bud murmured.

Her eyes went to his. "She obviously blames me for what happened in Nevada."

Tom Sr. frowned. "And the solartrons?"

Sandy let out a slow breath. "She's connected to them, Dad. But I suspect she's got far more personal plans involving me."

"Well," Phyllis said. "At the risk of sounding impossibly foolish, what do we do now?"

"At the risk of sounding impossibly obvious," Tom told her, "we try to come up with a plan as quickly as possible."

"Right now, though," Tom Sr. said, "I think it's time we headed home. Among other things, your mother needs to be brought up to speed on what's going on."

"Including Ithaca's return."

"True." Tom Sr. idly rubbed a hand through his hair. "Your mother isn't going to be too happy about any of this."

Speaking of understatements, Sandy silently thought.

Chapter Twelve: Plans, Arrivals and Headlines.

Mary Swift certainly wasn't happy with the situation.

It even reached the point where both Sandy and Tom heard raised voices . . . Mary's in particular . . . from their parent's bedroom late at night. To Sandy that was far worse than the solartrons, or Ithaca.

* * * * *

The next morning Sandy was the last person down the stairs and, in spite of a cheery "I'm up", kept her approach cautious.

"Good morning, dear," Mary Swift said evenly. She was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables alongside Sestina who was busy with handling hard-boiled eggs. Bingo, in the meantime, was sitting at the kitchen table with a large aluminum bowl of snap beans. Tom had apparently already left for Enterprises.

Sestina and Bingo carefully caught Sandy's eyes, the both of them making silent little gestures which told Sandy that Certain Moods had improved, but treading gently was still advised.

"One of these days," Mary remarked, her eyes still on her work, "I plan to learn sign language so I can fully understand those signals you girls give behind my back."

Bingo's mouth opened wide. "How did you . . ."

"You'll soon find out," Mary replied, going to the refrigerator for more bell peppers. "Once you have the baby you'll grow eyes in the back of your head. You'll have to."

Continuing on down the stairs, Sandy went over to give her mother a hug. Mary accepted it without immediate comment or reaction, but she then frowned curiously at her daughter, stepping back a bit to get a better look. "Where did you get that shirt?"

Sandy looked down. Today she had slipped into a pair of slacks and deck shoes, topping off the casual ensemble with a white t-shirt which carried the message SMALL BLONDE DOT.

"Bud got this for me when we went to DickersonCon a few months ago," Sandy explained. "Remember? We visited his folks and spent the weekend at the convention."

"Bud got you that shirt?" Mary asked.

Sandy nodded.

"That answers one question."

"I'll admit the shirt's a bit tight---"

A corner of Mary's mouth twitched. "Well," she reasoned half to herself, "as long as you can still breathe I suppose I shouldn't worry. What right have I to worry anyway?" she went on, returning to the vegetables. "You are obviously, after all, a grown woman. Out on your own . . . unmarried . . . no children . . ."

Sandy tried to keep from sighing out loud and wondered how she could safely get out of the house. Or, failing that, at least divert the conversation into safer waters.

Fortunately the problem was rendered academic by the arrival of Sherman. "Bing bong," he said wearily, coming through the door. "Swift Enterprises Security . . . Home Delivery."

Mary turned towards him, her eyes sharp. "Is it really you, Sherman?"

Sherman sighed. "Aunt Mary you called me at two-fifteen this morning, waking me up out of a sound sleep, and told me to get my skinny worthless butt working as quickly as possible on a solution to the 'How to detect Ithaca' problem."

"Mom!" Sandy admonished her mother. "Sherman's butt is not worthless."

"Kinda skinny though," Bingo observed.

Walking closer, Sherman put a small black case on the table near Bingo. "Okay, everybody," he said, opening it. "Line up."

The others gathered around as Sherman prepared a pneumatic injector. "So what's this?" Sandy asked.

"A modified version of the medical nanobots," Sherman explained. "As you know, the `bots are designed to routinely beam signals to a monitoring computer." Reaching for Sandy's arm he pressed the tip of the injector against her skin, then pulled the trigger. "The computers at Enterprises and related facilities will monitor these `bots, listening for signals. Anyone who doesn't produce a signal will set off an alarm." Going over to Mary he injected her. "All employees coming on shift will receive injections."

Mary rubbed at her arm. "You don't think Ithaca will be able to duplicate a nanobot signal?"

"Believe it or not, I actually considered that," Sherman replied. "The monitoring computers are being programmed to ask for new transmission codes every so often on a random basis. Anybody who doesn't automatically respond with a new code will also set off the alarm." He went and injected Sestina. "I'll also be able to manually trigger a code change anytime I want. Ithaca may be a whizbang space cyborg . . . but I'm willing to bet even she can't keep up with something like that."

Sandy secretly considered that, given Ithaca's vastly improved abilities, the nanobot defense wouldn't provide much in the way of protection. But she noticed how it seemed to satisfy her mother.

Bingo now held out her arm for an injection.

Sherman paused. "I don't know if I ought to be putting nanobots into an expectant mother."

"Oh." Bingo blinked. "Didn't think of that."

"We'll just cross our fingers and hope Ithaca doesn't think of assuming your form."

"Mmmm . . . okay."

"Don't think there's enough mass in the universe to copy you anyway the way you are right now," Sherman added thoughtfully.

"Eat hot death, Ames."

"Did you pick up any magnetic signals for Tom?" Sandy quickly asked Sherman.

"Oh . . . yeah. And thank you," Sherman said, accepting some cold milk from Sestina. "There was a whopping big magnetic field within the area of those green light rings we saw. Lasted for only a moment, but stuck out like an ink stain when I pulled the records. Tom thinks that those light rings were," and here Sherman frowned in memory, "the visible manifestation of a magnetic corridor designed to hold the disassembled Ithaca together until she reached the other end of her transmission. Whew. Oh, and don't be carrying any big magnets onto Enterprises for a while. I've reset the sensors and switched the alarms to maximum sensitivity."

"That's . . . gonna play Hob with some of Tom's work, isn't it?" Bingo asked.

Sherman nodded. "Uh huh. I gotta go back and look over the places where he plans to do research involving intense magnetic fields. Work over an alternate form of security." He suddenly frowned towards the front door. "What now?"

"Just me from space," a new figure said, entering the house.

At the sight of him Bingo almost burst with light. "Eeeeeeeeeeeee . . ."

With six long steps Ken Horton crossed the floor to gather his tumescent bride into his arms. "Here I am," he murmured to her.

"Yes," Bingo whispered emphatically, trying to nuzzle against him as closely as possible.

A warm look came over Mary's face as she smiled at the couple. "I guess we'll be pushing some beds together into the guest room," she told Sestina. "Unless you two want to take a room at the hotel." The last comment was directed at the Hortons.

Ken and Bingo were a bit too involved to reply.

"Push the beds together," Sandy suggested to her mother.

Mary nodded. "Ummm, probably."

The lovers finally parted a bit. "Not that I'm complaining," Bingo said to Ken, "but I wasn't expectin' you `til later on."

Ken nodded. "I had planned to come down on Hyperion," he told her. "But the Star Lance was at the station and scheduled to return to Fearing, so I hitched a ride and thought I'd surprise you."

Bingo's eyes were shining. "Thank you."

"You're welcome . . . ow! What was that?"

"Vitamins," Sherman said, pulling the injector away from his arm. "I recognize the look in Bingo's eyes."

Bingo stuck her tongue out at him.

"I think my chauffeur is still coming," Ken said, looking back over his shoulder.

"He's here," Bud remarked, entering the house. "You don't mind me giving your husband a ride here, do you?" he asked Bingo.

"I'll live with it," Bingo said, her arms still tight around Ken's waist.

"Well if you're here," Sandy said to Bud, "you can drive me over to Enterprises."

"If he can keep his eyes on the road," Mary muttered.

Bud looked at her questioningly.

"I think Mom's referring to the rather snug nature of my shirt," Sandy explained.

Bud had, in fact, been noticing the shirt. So much so that he didn't make a comment when Sherman injected him.

Noticing his level of attention, Mary crossed her arms. "Well?"

Bud took a slow breath. "I'm trying to come up with an answer that won't get me sent to the woodshed."

Sestina sternly whittled a finger at him.

"Well it's all irrelevant anyway," Mary concluded, "since I'll be wanting you to stay as close as possible to Sandy during the current situation."

"Oh?" Bud gazed at Mary, trying to appear as innocent as possible. "Just how close are we suggesting here?"

Mary sighed. "I'll talk things over with Sandy's father tonight."

Ken whistled.

"I knew there was a reason I got out of bed this morning," Bud said to himself.

Sandy poked him in the side. "Down, Romeo. Mom's being serious."

"So am I."

"And Sestina's also going with the both of you," Mary added.

Bud sighed. "There goes Paradise."

"You need Sestina here to cook and help look after Bingo," Sandy pointed out.

"I think I can fumble my way around a kitchen," Mary replied drily. "Besides, I suspect Bingo's suddenly acquired a much closer source of help for the time being." She turned to Sestina. "Stay close to Sandy and protect her."

Sestina nodded and immediately moved to place her formidable physique behind Sandy.

"For a while there I was really living," Bud muttered. "Okay, we'll take the truck. Sestina? Looks like we're on the road again."

* * * * *

"What I'm wondering about," Sandy was saying to Bud on the way to Enterprises, "is what Ken and Bingo are going to do after the baby's born? I know both of them's got military backgrounds and accept the reality of being apart. But I also know neither of them like it."

"I know Tom's talked it over with your Dad," Bud said. "The first option is that Ken resigns his commission and turns over command of the space station to Gorsky."

"I don't think Ken would go for that. He loves working in space just slightly less than he loves Bingo."

"Which brings us to the second option. I remember Tom going over the plans for the phase three expansion to the space station with Fuse-Detoro a few weeks ago. He's considering including a dedicated residential section, with the emphasis on family dwellings."

"Oh!"

"It's like the situation with the moon kids," Bud went on. "Eventually we're gonna have to deal with the reality of families setting up permanent residence in space."

"True," Sandy mused.

Bud glanced at her. "That was sort of a pensive answer."

"I know." Sandy sighed. "I was just wondering if the Space Friends will give us enough time to have families?"

Bud tried to give her a longer look while keeping his eyes on the approaching Enterprises gate. "The Space Friends aren't perfect," Bud assured her. "And neither is Ithaca. For all her powers she's still fallible. You managed to get the better of her back in Nevada."

Sandy snorted. "Sheer luck."

"And you managed to see through her disguise as Palfrey."

"Ummmm . . ."

"We've also got to get all the information in," Bud went on. "Like Phyllis pointed out, it might not be the Space Friends but those other guys. The Senders."

"But who's really with us and who's really against us?" Sandy argued.

Bud shrugged, unable to come up with a clear answer, and feeling somewhat unhappy at being able to shake Sandy free of her mood. Passing through the gate he drove the truck over to the Administration Building (noting the queue of employees receiving nanobot injections).

With Sestina close behind them, Sandy and Bud traveled up to find Tom and his father in Tom Sr.'s office.

Sandy immediately noticed the looks on their faces and her own mood was quickly reduced in importance. "What's going on?"

"Seen the news yet?" Tom asked.

Sandy shook her head and Tom passed a copy of the Shopton Bulletin over to her.

The headline practically jumped out at her and Bud.

SWIFTS REVEAL SUN THREATENED BY ALIENS.

Chapter Thirteen: Special Edition.

Fifteen minutes later Phyllis was looking at the newspaper and shaking her head. "No," she told Tom, passing the paper back to him. "There's no way I'd release a story like that to the press without first clearing it with either you or your father. In truth, I'm sort of disappointed you'd even consider that I'd do such a thing."

"Apologies," Tom told her. "I just wanted to make doubly certain before Dad and I started tearing off certain people's heads."

"Have we released anything concerning the Sun?" Sandy asked.

"Nary a word," Phyllis told her. "I was under the impression that Washington wanted this kept under wraps as long as possible."

The desk intercom buzzed once again. Sighing, Tom Sr. touched it. "More of the same, Illoquacia?"

"Unfortunately yes," Miss Trent answered from the front office. "Now I've got both Reuters and Figaro-Pravda on the phone wanting statements."

"Close down all incoming calls with the exception of those on the Prime list," Tom Sr. said, his eyes meeting his son's. "And get that call to Perkins through."

"Yes sir."

Tom Sr. switched off the intercom.

"We knew word would get out eventually," Tom told him.

"But we didn't reveal anything," his father replied.

"And even if we did," Phyllis pointed out, "I sure as heck wouldn't phrase a headline that way." She waved a hand at the paper. "That's just flat asking for panic and other trouble."

Sandy was looking over to where the main video screen in her father's office was showing a montage of scenes from broadcasts being made by CNN, CBS, BBC and other news services. The broadcasts had started at about the same time Tom had called Phyllis up from the Public Relations Department for her take on the story (which was the same time the intercom began an incessant announcement of queries from news agencies). Even though the sound had long since been turned down, the images clearly showed the commentators discussing both Swift Enterprises and the Sun.

The intercom buzzed again. "Mr. Swift? Dan Perkins on One."

"Thank you, Illoquacia." Switching off the intercom, Tom Sr. touched a button which would put the telephone conversation on the speaker box. "Dan?"

"Tom, I know what you're going to say," replied the voice of Dan Perkins, former managing editor of the Shopton Bulletin and, for the past few years, the director of Syracuse Media, owners of the Bulletin. "I know that no one at Enterprises would release this sort of story, and I just got off the phone with Berenson asking him where in hell he got it."

Sandy had noticed how both her brother and father had practically been ready to jump down Perkins' throat. At his words they were making an attempt to calm down.

"All right," Tom Sr. said. "Where'd the Bulletin get it?"

"He says it was a standard wire offering."

"Dan---"

"I know, Tom. I know. When I turned the Bulletin over to Gary I made him promise that he would never ever release a major news story involving Enterprises without first checking with either of you Toms. At the very least he was to get in touch with Phyllis." A sigh. "I think I picked the wrong person for the job."

"Dan it's going crazy down here."

"I can well imagine." A pause. "Tom . . . between the two of us, and way off the record, was there anything to the story?"

"I can give you a qualified yes and that's all. I can also inform you that the story was supposed to be under wraps until Washington cleared it."

A small moan came over the speaker. "Yeah, I'll have to come down to Shopton and handle this directly. Tom, I'm sorry."

"So are we, Dan. Look . . . if you can manage it, try and find out where the Bulletin got the story, then get back to us."

"Will do. Tom, was this the sort of story Washington would leak?"

Tom shook his head at his father. "We don't think so," Tom Sr. told Perkins, "but that's another angle we'll check out. Get back in touch with us when you get to Shopton."

"Will do."

Tom Sr. switched off the phone. "Phyllis? You look like you want to say something."

"There are a number of reporters who file stories from Enterprises," Phyllis said. "They put the stories up on the wire services and that's where the networks and magazines and websites get their information. The thing is, the Bulletin has a full-time reporter here in the PR pool. Susan Okanokumo. The Bulletin shouldn't have to pull stories off the wire concerning Enterprises."

"Check with her," Tom said. "And check with whichever wire service broke that story."

Nodding, Phyllis reached for her phone and began pressing buttons.

"I know it's usually stupid to disagree with you," Bud said to Tom, "but are you and your Dad sure about Washington not leaking the story?"

"That's our next line of inquiry," Tom said. "Or rather, Dad's."

Tom Sr. nodded. "It's about time for Dr. Palfrey's flight to come in. You'd better get going."

Sandy's eyes goggled. "Wait! Whoa! Dr. Palfrey?"

"The real one," Tom assured her. "Regardless of Ithaca's interference he's still a top level solar physicist and astronomer, and Dad and I figure we need his help more than before. I was about to leave for the airport."

Sandy gave Bud a look. "We'll tag along, if you don't mind."

Tom shrugged. "Sure."

Tom Sr. was looking down at his notes concerning the Senate Committee. "So you're actually taking Tom out to the airport?" he asked his daughter.

"Sure am."

"Wearing that shirt?"

"Everyone really seems to notice this shirt," Sandy said to Bud (who was trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible). "Must be more attractive than I thought."

Raising his face, Tom Sr. regarded Sandy critically. "You don't think that shirt is maybe a bit . . ."

"Mom said I could go in it," Sandy replied innocently, crossing two fingers behind her back.

"Yes," Phyllis said, "but how far are you planning to go?"

"Hmph!" Sandy sniffed. "But that reminds me of something."

"What?"

"Pillow'?"

"Mind your beeswax," Phyllis told her archly.

* * * * *

"Uh oh," Bud said.

"I see them," Sandy replied.

Ahead of them the other side of the Enterprises gate was crowded with cars and vans, most of them bearing news network logos.

Sandy slowed the truck only slightly. "Sestina pudding? Are you strapped in tight back there?"

The giant nodded.

Next to her Tom was adjusting his safety straps. "I was afraid of this. Sandy? Do what you have to."

Nodding, Sandy kept her eyes on the road, resting her right hand on an instrument-laden throttle between her and Bud. "Engaging vertical thrusters."

The truck was still thirty feet away from the gate when it suddenly and smoothly rose into the air on jet lifters, neatly flying over both the gate and the waiting vehicles.

"Vectoring for forward thrust," Sandy announced to the others. "We'll be at the airport in about five minutes."

"Hated doing that," Tom said, pulling out his phone. "But it was either fly over them or try to deal with questions I wasn't prepared to answer. I'll call Palfrey and tell him to meet us at the airport helipad." He sighed. "There's probably going to be reporters waiting at the airport. I know hindsight is 20/20, but I guess Dad and I should've had Palfrey land at Enterprises directly. Stupid."

"You've got a lot on your mind," Bud pointed out.

"Bud's right," Sandy agreed. "You and Dad let us sweat the petty stuff---"

"And you and your Dad can pet the sweaty stuff," Bud finished.

Sestina looked slightly confused.

"Don't bother," Tom gently assured her.

Sandy radioed ahead to Shopton International Airport for helipad clearance, silently giving thanks that none of the pursuing reporters had thought to employ helicopters or Tommycars. "We'll be landing in a jiff," Sandy passed on to Tom. "Did you get hold of Dr. Palfrey?"

"Yeah. He'll be waiting in the food court nearest the helipad. Did you guys want to wait in the truck while I got him?"

Sandy considered it. "Like you said, there might be reporters. You might need Bud's muscle and Sestina's . . . outgoing personality to make it through any crowds."

"Is that what it's called?" Tom asked, smiling at the giant.

Sestina ducked her head shyly.

Swooping down over the airport, Sandy brought the truck to a landing on one of the heliports near the terminal building.

Bud, in the meantime, was studying the surroundings. "I see cars heading up Van Ness. They look like some of the newsies we dodged."

"It'll still take time for them to get into the terminal," Sandy said, shutting down the truck and reaching for a Tiny Idiot which had been preprogrammed with remote control for the vehicle. "I'd keep the initial greetings to a bare minimum however."

Leaving the truck the foursome immediately went to the terminal, nodding at airport attendants who (alerted not only by the truck's landing, but also by the approach of Sestina's considerable bulk) were helpfully holding the door opened.

Inside, Tom searched the interior of the food court. "There he is," he said and waved. Following his gaze, Sandy forced herself to remain calm as she spotted the same man who, only twenty-four hours earlier, had transformed into Ithaca. Fortunately this Dr. Roger Palfrey had possessed the presence of mind to wear a different suit of clothes.

Spotting Tom and the others (notably Sestina), Palfrey headed over to them, holding onto a briefcase. "Hello," he said, smiling mildly. "I understand we've all met before."

"Surprised you were able to leave the hospital," Bud said to him. "All things considered."

Palfrey nodded. "Yes. According to what Tom told me you and I have both sampled this . . . cyborg's particular brand of hospitality." He idly ran a hand across his forehead. "My doctors, as well as some members of the Committee, advised me to remain in Washington. But it was felt that Enterprises possesses adequate medical facilities."

"We do," Tom told him.

"And, to be honest, this situation needs to be studied and addressed as rapidly as possible."

Tom agreed. "Do you have your luggage?"

Sandy's phone purred in her pocket and she removed it. "Yes?"

"Are you guys heading back immediately?" Phyllis' voice asked.

"We should be soon," Sandy told her. "Why?"

"Tom's gotta see this. We've been talking with Susan Okanokumo and Gary Berenson from the Bulletin. Gary transmitted a copy of the wire story that supposedly came from us."

"I feel an `uh oh' coming on."

"Sandy, all proper wire stories carry special code groups as headings."

"Yeah?"

"The code group on the story that Berenson received was made up of what was first thought of as dingbats. But your father looked at it and almost went ape. Sandy . . . the code group is made up of Space Friend symbols!"

"Yikes!"

She had the attention of Tom and the others.

"What is it?" Tom asked.

"We're heading back," Sandy declared. "Now!"

They started out for the helipad, with Sandy trying to explain as quickly as possible what Phyllis had reported. But as they stepped outside the terminal they noticed the attendants and ground crew were all standing still and staring up at something.

Following their gaze, Sandy saw the same thing they did: a large gleaming metal disc hovering high over the airport.

Chapter Fourteen: Crossed Wires.

A sound from Tom drew Sandy's gaze away from the sight of the saucer. She had seen her brother's expression consumed with curiosity, or obsessed over a scientific or technical problem. But now Tom appeared to be practically on fire with wonder. He was enraptured, and Sandy realized his fondest wish had been granted. The Unknown had literally appeared before him.

"Ohhh," he murmured.

For Sandy's part she felt considerably less enchanted. But that didn't keep her mind from taking in facts. The disc looked to be about two hundred feet in diameter and, to her eyes, was hovering eight or nine hundred feet in the air. The inner one-third of the disc's underside was a shallow dome. Around the rim of the disc could be seen a ring of pale green light. From the general direction of the object Sandy could faintly hear a high-pitched whine.

Looking around quickly she saw people inside the terminal pressing anxious faces up against the windows. A few of the attendants and ground crew who were outside with them had overcome their initial fascination and were running back indoors.

Tom was also breaking free of wonder, but only somewhat. "And me without a Damonscope or any instruments . . . Sestina! Pardon me." Without waiting for permission from the giant, Tom snatched the Snooper from her belt and raised the device up into the air, pointing it at the saucer.

Sandy remembered her own Snooper and unholstered it, twisting the barrel to switch on the direct link with Enterprises Security. "Sherman!"

"We see it," Sherman's voice appeared from the tiny speaker. "It never showed up on radar until the very last moments. Are you guys---"

"We're all right," Sandy said. "So far. Tom's taking readings and recordings with a Snooper."

Tom had overheard Sandy. "Sherman? Launch drones at the saucer. If Dad's listening I want the Sky Queen in the air as soon as possible."

Sandy looked at him. "Tom---"

"Sandy we've got to get information while we can. And Sherman . . . contact the station and have them focus sensors on it from orbit." Tom stared about. "No NOAA research vehicles or anything like that. No National Guard jets. Damn!"

"Tom it'll take at least fifteen minutes to launch the Sky Queen," Sandy said. "You know that."

"Raise it to the surface," Tom replied hotly, "and the airport will be within range of a lot of its sensors." Something else occurred to him and he took a step closer to Sandy who held the Snooper out. "Sherman. Do you or Dad know if any messages have come in from the Space Friends?"

"Tom," Sherman said, "we're jugglin' a lot of eggs here right now."

Tom took another look around, then stopped as he regarded the Tommytruck. "We take off in that."

Sandy nodded. "Yeah. We can get back to Enterprises---"

"We can fly it up to the saucer---"

"TOM!"

He stared at Sandy.

"We are . . . not . . . flying the truck up to the saucer," she emphatically said to him.

"San---"

Sandy realized she was balling her hands into fists and was actually wondering if she could knock her brother unconscious. A slight glance over at Sestina, and the giant immediately understood and began gently drifting closer to Tom.

"We get Palfrey safely back to Enterprises, and then we worry about our visitor," Sandy firmly declared.

"The drones," Bud suddenly said.

Everyone looked back up to see two blue and white surveillance drones fly past the saucer, then start to sweep around for another pass.

The whine from the disc quickly rose in intensity, as did the glow at the rim. As the drones were about to make their second pass the disc began moving up higher into the air, steadily accelerating. Just before it completely passed out of sight it was surrounded by a bright spark of green light.

Watching the disc depart, Tom let out a low, anguished breath, one fist striking hard against his thigh. Without a word he began striding towards the truck. Her lips pulled in a tight line, Sandy followed. Behind them, Bud gave Sestina and Palfrey a glance and motioned for them to follow.

Bud also made a final look around. "The news cars are heading towards us."

No answer and everyone was soon in the truck which lifted off to make the return flight back to Enterprises. The trip was made in a complete and rather heavy silence.

After landing, Tom began walking back towards the Administration Building.

Her eyes on his back, Sandy let her breath out in a low hiss. Then she quickly stormed behind him, slamming a hand hard against his back. Tom quickly turned to glare back at her.

"Don't . . . you . . . treat . . . me . . . like . . . this," Sandy said to him in a voice hot with anger.

"We needed information," Tom shot back at her.

"We needed safety!"

"The power behind that saucer could've destroyed us anytime it wanted to," Tom argued. "It didn't."

"We didn't know anything about its purpose," Sandy said, her voice rising.

"We could've if we'd stayed . . . or if we'd flown up to meet it."

"You've got plenty of information," Sandy went on, her face almost nose to nose with Tom's. "The Snooper. Whatever the drones managed to collect---"

"We needed more," Tom almost roared.

"We had people we couldn't risk."

"Everyone's gonna be at risk if we don't get this solartron business worked out," Tom threw back. "We have to accept chances."

"Yes," Sandy agreed. "We . . . you and I . . . have to accept chances. Not Dr. Palfrey. Not the people at the airport. We can't afford to be irresponsible---"

"Oh!" Tom said, his eyebrows rising. "Like the way you were up in the Arctic? Or with Sun Ohm Erato? Or with Solomon? You can decide when to be responsible or irresponsible, but I can't? Is that is?"

Almost without realizing it, Sandy's right arm was swinging to knock Tom over. But then a shadow fell over them, and Sestina was quickly inserting her muscular bulk between the two. Her hands were gently but firmly pushing the siblings apart, and she was throwing Tom and Sandy each an angry look.

Bud came up, giving Sestina a pat on the back. "Good work, Gorgeous," he murmured. He then put his hands on his hips and faced the two most important people in his world.

"Okay," he breathed. "If I'm the voice of reason in this situation then that's an obvious sign things have gotten really bad. You two," he went on, looking from one to the other, "are gonna settle down and patch things up, or I'm gonna have Sestina sit on both of you. Now."

Sandy and Tom were having trouble looking at each other.

"It's possible that the both of you are right and the both of you are wrong," Bud calmly said. "Tom, you did manage to get information. We need to look at it and figure things out. Sandy, I agree we needed to be careful. All of us had points to make, and all of us were also on the verge of maybe making some serious mistakes. I say let's go on and continue with what we now have."

Tom and Sandy managed to exchange a neutral look. Then they continued on to the Administration Building, with Sestina following close behind.

Bud shook his head. "Half a loaf," he muttered. Then: "I'm sorry you had to see that," he said to Palfrey.

"Mr. Barclay," the scientist replied, "I was recently attacked by a cyborg. Just a little while ago I witnessed a visitation by a UFO. Frankly, a spat between brother and sister would be a welcome spot of relief. Besides," he continued, "you weren't at my family reunion last year."

"Just letting you know they're not often like this."

"Actually, if it takes a crisis with the Sun to bring things to this level, I should be relieved."

* * * * *

"This isn't really bad, Tom," Tom Sr. remarked as he examined the Snooper he'd used. "You managed to record thirty-seven megabytes worth of video footage. That'll go along well with what the drones recorded on their pass."

They were all in the conference room. Tom Sr. was carefully uploading the contents of the Snooper's video camera into the conference table's computer link. "I wish I'd been there to see it," he said.

Tom was quietly sitting nearby, his arms folded across his chest as he slowly rocked back and forth on his chair. Sandy was sitting on the other side of the table, doing practically the same thing. Looking at them both, Tom Sr. quietly shook his head.

Bud decided to make another attempt to break the mood. "How's everyone in the area responding to the UFO?"

Tom Sr. glanced over at Phyllis, who sighed loudly. "I'm considering having the phones shut off. It's been nonstop. And having you guys fly off immediately after the saucer left really didn't help the overall situation." She quickly lifted a hand. "I know you guys wanted to get back here as soon as possible. I'm just giving you the public spin on it."

"Phyllis is working on a press release," Tom Sr. said. "We'll go over it and then send it out."

"Is a release gonna be enough?" Bud asked him. "At this point I'd think a full-blown conference might be called for."

"I'm waiting to hear from Carlson and the rest of the Committee about that," Tom Sr. replied. "Frankly, I'm tempted to go ahead and hold a press conference without their permission. The Committee members are sitting all nice and safe and anonymous, but Enterprises is hanging in the breeze."

"Speaking of press release," Phyllis said.

"Yes," Tom Sr. nodded vigorously. He touched a button on the table controls. "Tom? What do you make of this?"

On the wall screen appeared lines of black symbols on a white background.

Tom stared at them, his grumpiness fading. "These are, I take it, the Space Friend symbols that were found on the wire story."

"Which MyaWorld says it never sent," Phyllis said. "But somehow a signal got sent to the Bulletin that came out on the MyaWorld printer."

"They're still tracking it down," Tom Sr. added.

Tom's eyes were still on the symbols. "I recognize a few groups," he slowly said. "That bit on the second line . . . the ones preceded by the slash marks . . . it has something to do with 'field narrowing', or 'field focusing'. Something like that."

"That's as far as I got," his father said. "And, before you ask, I ran the symbols through the translation program. The symbols we see here are arranged in a much more complex pattern, and I haven't been able to produce a respectable translation."

"I'll look it over," Tom promised.

Dr. Palfrey had been quiet, and he now leaned forward slightly. "Excuse me, but is it usual for the Space Friends to leave untranslated messages behind?"

Everyone else looked at each other.

Sandy turned towards Palfrey. "Years ago I was assisting in an investigation---

Bud and Phyllis coughed loudly.

"---involving a group of terrorists who were using modified Nazi technology. I learned that the leader of the group had been under alien control because I found Space Friend writing on an EEG strip. Unfortunately," and here Sandy sighed, "the evidence sort of got destroyed."

Bud quietly remembered the smoking ruins of Duran Geiner's base. Sort of got destroyed, his mind said.

Palfrey now waved a hand at the screen. "Do you think any of this is related with the appearance of the UFO?"

"I'm tempted to say yes," Tom admitted. "Even without enough evidence. And there's been no direct messages from space?" he asked his father.

"Not a word," Tom Sr. said.

Tom thought it over. "Let's go ahead and look at the saucer footage."

Tom Sr. began tapping buttons. "I'll give us the footage from one of the drone cameras first," he said. "I only had time to take in a bit of it myself, but you'll see it's a good clean image."

Everyone turned to the screen as the Space Friend symbols faded away. A few moments of darkness, then the screen produced an image of the sky above the airport. In the center of the shot could clearly be seen the saucer, and it was rapidly expanding towards them as the drone camera grew closer.

"Freeze," Tom ordered.

Tom Sr. touched a button, and the footage halted, allowing the saucer to fill the entire screen. Everyone now had a good look at the upper section of the disc, although there was little else to see beyond an expanse of smoothly curving metal.

Standing up, Tom went closer to examine the image more carefully. "I can probably combine the footage from the other drone and the Snooper to set up a multiple perspective shot I can use to create a three-dimensional image in the telejector."

"Does it look like any of the other ships you've seen?" his father asked.

Tom shook his head. "The specimen ship the Space Friends sent to the Moon was smaller, and had a different design. This also looks different from the Space Legion ship we saw years ago."

Sandy's head was in her hands, her elbows on the table as she looked at the saucer. "What about radar?" she asked.

"Enterprises radar, the airport radar . . . we even contacted the Angel and asked them to check their radar," Tom Sr. added, referring to a mountain-based radar installation in the Adirondacks which routinely monitored Enterprises activity on behalf of a clandestine organization. "We were able to track the saucer for about seven seconds before it completely disappeared. One moment it was there, and the next it wasn't."

Tom murmured something. To Sandy's ears it sounded like "teleported".

He turned more towards them, looking as if he were about to announce something, when an alarm beeped from the table.

On the screen the saucer image was quickly replaced by Sherman's face. "We've got a situation," he announced.

"What is it?"

"Reporters and such are surrounding your house. Your Mom and the others are being mobbed."

Chapter Fifteen: War of Nerves.

Tom Sr. rose to his feet. "Sherman---"

"Police have already been alerted," Sherman announced, "and I've dispatched a Security team on Werewasps, as well as an Omnicopter."

Using the table controls, Tom Sr. split the image on the screen. Sherman was now on the left, and a broadcast from Channel 14 occupied the right side. Behind the broadcaster . . . Sandy recognized him as Neil Coates . . . she could clearly see Merton Avenue and her house. She could also see vans and cars from other media agencies pulled up against the hedge.

"We've been trying to get a statement from the Swift Family in regards to the UFO sighting at the airport," Coates was saying to his audience. "It was well known that a Swift vehicle departed from the airport at the same time as the UFO. There's been no formal response from Enterprises, and we're here now at the Swift home---"

"Do they think we'd be at home?" Tom Sr. asked, his voice rising.

Suddenly eight figures dropped out of the sky. Each of them was wearing a Swift Werewasp suit: the ducted fans bringing them in to a smooth landing on the front lawn. Once on the ground they unlimbered Speedbumps, the carbine version of the Spinner, and were aiming them at the newspeople.

The Channel 14 camera panned up to show a boxlike aircraft hovering over the house on twin rotors. At the same time police sirens could be heard, and the camera panned back down to show several Shopton Police Department cars arriving at the scene.

Both Tom and Tom Sr. started breathing a little easier, and Sandy felt equally relieved. She then saw her father remove his phone from his pocket and answer it. "Yes?"

Then: "No, honey, stay inside the house with Ken and Bingo. Everything's going to be all right now."

I hope, Sandy silently added.

"No," her father went on, "don't let the dogs out. But if you can get them into the house with you that'd be okay. We're working it out from this end. Just stay on the phone with me."

Everyone now watched as Police Sergeant Areeka Zoot emerged from one of the cars; a megaphone in one hand and an unpleasant expression on her face.

She raised the megaphone. "VERY WELL," her voice boomed out. "WE'VE ALL DONE A WONDERFUL JOB OF SHOWING THE WORLD HOW RUDE WE CAN BE IN STEUBEN COUNTY. ON BEHALF OF THE SHOPTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE YOU HAVE MY GRATITUDE. NOW . . . LET'S HAVE A LOVELY DEMONSTRATION OF HOW EVENLY WE CAN DISPERSE. IF THAT ISN'T TO EVERYONE'S LIKING, PERHAPS AN EXHIBITION OF THE CITY JUDICIAL SYSTEM CAN BE IMMEDIATELY ARRANGED."

Channel 14 began quietly moving further back. Some of the out of town reporters . . . notably the ones from New York City . . . seemed determined to argue the issue, and they were finding that Sergeant Zoot was rather intractable.

Tom Sr. turned to Phyllis. "Get in touch with Miss Okanokumo and your contacts with Channel 14. Start passing the word that we'll be holding a press conference tomorrow morning at nine."

Phyllis nodded, reaching for her phone.

"Without permission from the Committee?" Sandy asked.

"Those people tried to get at your mother," Tom Sr. said in a tone of voice which signaled an end to any arguments.

He turned back to Sherman. "Sherman, my compliments to Sergeant Zook and her officers. And to you and yours as well. I know I'm sounding over-anxious here---"

"I'll dispatch more people to the house," Sherman assured him.

Tom Sr. looked grateful. "Pull back the Omnicopter at your discretion, but I want the car readied to bring Mary, Bingo and Ken to Enterprises at a moment's notice." Something occurred to him and he turned back to Phyllis. "When you're setting up the press conference I want priority seating and attention given to anyone who wasn't in that crowd."

Phyllis smiled. "I didn't notice the Bulletin there."

"Which means Dan's riding herd on his organization." Tom Sr. nodded. "Good." Raising his phone he resumed talking to Mary. "It'll be okay, sweetheart. Sherman's sending more people and I'll be home soon."

Bud had moved closer to Tom. "Why're we waiting until tomorrow for a press conference? Phyllis has thrown them together with far less notice."

"Everyone's going to be asking a lot of questions," Tom explained to him. "It might improve our overall situation if we had a lot of answers."

* * * * *

Later on Sandy accompanied Tom, Bud, Roger and Sestina to the observatory, leaving Phyllis to perform further work on the press conference, and Tom Sr. to go home and check on Mary and the others.

Tom was sitting before the controls of his megascope space prober. "As I explained yesterday to your duplicate," Tom said to Roger, "I usually experience something of a problem in using the megascope directly on the Sun. The scanning beams become distorted by the Sun's gravitational field."

"I had talks with Harley at Kitt Peak," Roger replied. "They've been trying to refine the electrostatic lens arrangement on their prober, with limited results."

Tom nodded. "I was looking at Harley's notes earlier. I'm going to borrow an idea from him and try to correct the gravitational aberration by using more than one megascope in a sort of interferometer arrangement. Right now I'm interlocking the megascope here with the one up on our space station."

"You're going to focus both of them at the same point on the Sun."

"Exactly. Now . . . considering the relative motion of the space station, this might not produce as long a useful scanning period as I'd like. But if we can scan at least a few of the solartrons that'll be enough." He continued making adjustments to the controls. Meanwhile, the megascope began lining up with the opening in the observatory dome, aiming itself at the Sun.

"Why did the saucer appear?" Sandy asked out of the blue. "No landing, no anything. Just appear over the airport, and then it disappeared."

Tom was still working with the megascope, but Sandy could see him frowning.

"There was no reason for the saucer to arrive," she continued.

Bud was regarding her steadily. "You're figuring something out, aren't you?"

"Something's running around in my head," Sandy admitted, turning to him. "First there's the press release with the Space Friend symbols. Then the saucer appears."

Tom now turned slightly in her direction, keeping his eyes on his work. "What're you concluding?"

"Only that both events resulted in the same thing," Sandy said. "The public's getting stirred up. What's more, we seem to be the target for all this attention."

Tom now looked at her fully.

"A war of nerves," Sandy explained. "The Space Friends, or the Senders, want everyone on Earth tense and on edge."

"Which is another reason we need to get our hands on as much hard information as we can," Tom said, turning back to the controls.

"And how does my erstwhile duplicate fit into this scheme?" Roger asked.

"The one thing I'm pretty sure of," Sandy said to him, "is that Ithaca's returned to get back at me for what happened between us years ago. Beyond that I can only guess---"

"And that's stopped you before?" Bud remarked.

Sandy gave him a slightly withering look. "I'll deal with you later," she promised. "But anyway, as I was saying, Ithaca's overall mission might be to prevent us from stopping whatever the Space Friends are up to."

Bud slowly looked around. "Then shouldn't she be up here right now?"

Sandy shook her head. "We're just feeling things out right now. Fact finding. Ithaca won't strike until we've planned something big."

"Reassuring," muttered Tom. He then leaned closer to the controls. "Okay, I think we're going to get something now."

Roger moved closer, the two of them studying the readouts.

"Here we go," Tom announced. "Hexagonal shaped tiles . . . apparently smooth, but don't quote me yet on that . . . each tile covering an area of eight hundred and forty-four square miles."

"Can you get an approximation of altitude above the Sun's surface?" Roger asked.

"Don't think so," Tom murmured, lost in concentration. "We're doing good to get what we've got so far. We---" He paused as several red lights began blinking on the console, then let out an exasperated sigh. "The electron lenses can't maintain the new alignment. I'm going to have to shut down and break the link with the space station."

"We managed to get something," Roger pointed out.

"Yeah, but I was hoping to get more of a definite idea as to how fast the solartrons are appearing." Tom continued shutting down the megascope. "The Sun's surface area is over two trillion square miles. If each solartron is eight hundred and forty-four square miles, then," his forehead furrowed as he mentally calculated, "it'll take almost three billion of them to completely encompass the Sun." He looked at the others solemnly. "I originally had an estimate of eighteen months. Now I'm wondering if we've even got that long?"

* * * * *

By mutual agreement it was decided not to repeat Tom's forebodings about the solartrons within Mary's hearing. Especially as she (with as much assistance as a waddling Bingo could provide) was throwing together a special meal to not only welcome Roger Palfrey (the real one), but to demonstrate her relief at having weathered the media storm earlier.

Upon arriving home, Sestina immediately shooed Bingo out of the kitchen and took over the task of helping with dinner. Meanwhile, Tom quietly cornered his father and Ken and, accompanied by Roger, brought them up to date on what was learned. Sandy stood close enough to listen in.

"I want to try and get as up to date a reading as possible on the amount of solar radiation reaching us," Tom said. "I'd especially like to have that information before the press conference."

"My own feeling," his father pointed out, "is that the press conference will concentrate on the saucer sighting."

"Maybe," Tom said, "but I'm betting that the questioning will eventually get around to the Space Friends. Has there been anything else about the saucer?"

"Sherman spoke with NORAD. They never picked up anything. On the other hand, Sherman's been paying closer attention to the magnetic activity sensors. No sign of Ithaca yet, but Sherman's instruments have been picking up numerous magnetic `clouds' in the area."

Tom and Roger both frowned. "'Clouds'?" Tom asked.

"That's Sherman's word for it. I looked at his readings, and it seems to be areas of magnetic intensity which are briefly appearing throughout the region."

"I'll call Sherman about it later on," Tom said.

"And I'll get in touch with Washington and explain the need for the press conference," Roger added. "Since details have already been let out of the bag, the best thing we can do now is try and calm people down and answer questions."

"Everybody eat," Mary announced.

People began drifting towards the table as Sestina tried to convince Mary to sit and allow her to handle the rest of the serving. Along with a baked ham, Mary and Bingo had managed to put together scalloped potatoes and a broccoli salad. For her part, Sestina contributed fassoulia: a thick Armenian soup made up of string beans and cooked tomatoes.

Bingo glanced over her shoulder towards the front of the house. "Are we feeding Sherman's people out there?"

"Well I made enough ham," Mary considered. "And if I know Sherman he's equipped the people out there with little more than ration bars and coupons from McDonald's."

"I'll go check," Sandy said, getting up from the table and heading for the door.

"We've got enough bread," her mother called out from behind her. "Tell them they're at least welcome to fresh sandwiches."

Stepping outside onto the porch Sandy saw the twelve Security people wandering loosely around outside. A Swift Enterprises van . . . doubtless a mobile command center . . . was parked nearby, and Sandy mentally chided Sherman. The guards would've been free to set up shop in the living room.

She was about to head for the van but took a moment to frown down at some of the damage which the news people had made to the front lawn. One of the cars, in fact, had left clear ruts almost up to the porch, practically tearing up part of the hedge, and Sandy reached out to try and pull it back into position.

It was then she noticed something hidden in the shadows of the hedge and leaned down to see a small paper sack. Her first thought was that someone had left their lunch behind and she bent closer to open it and peer inside . . .

And immediately froze. There was just enough light coming from the porch to allow Sandy to clearly see the object within. A battery . . . some sort of metal device . . . wires . . . and all of it attached to a grey bulk twice the size of her hand.

"A bomb," she breathed.

Chapter Sixteen: Answers Are Demanded.

A part of Sandy's mind was rapidly trying to reason out the situation. Of course the object in the sack didn't have to be a bomb. It could've been something left behind during the confusion earlier. People were always accidentally leaving behind paper sacks carrying mysterious bits of equipment. That explained why her insides were trying to escape from her body right now.

As gently as possible she held the sack in her hands and straightened up.

Several of the Security people who'd been standing around had noticed her, and they now started moving closer. "Miss Swift---"

"Put a Werewasp down close to me," Sandy said, her eyes still on the sack.

The guards had been specially trained by Sherman, and part of the training had included a seminar on Behaving Around Sandy. Without saying a word one of the guards brought a folded Werewasp suit over to her, laying it down on the lawn at her feet.

"Unfold it," Sandy ordered, "then everyone clear back."

The guard touched a foot pedal within the folded suit and moved away. Before everyone's eyes the mechanism expanded upward and outwards and, within moments, it was a full-sized Werewasp frame; the "wings" with their ducted fans outstretched and ready for use.

Still moving carefully, Sandy secured the sack to the suit's waist brace.

Behind her she heard the front door opening. "Sandy?"

"Don't move, Mom," she called out, her eyes still on her work. Reaching to the suit's wrist controls she switched it on, then fed power to the lift fans while, at the same time, vectoring the fans so that the suit would fly straight upwards. She then stepped back as the suit suddenly whisked away into the night sky.

Mary, Tom Sr. and the others were now alongside her. "What the heck was all that about?" Ken asked.

Sandy was watching the suit disappear into the sky. "I think I got rid of a bomb---"

All of a sudden the sky above them exploded with a single bright blast.

"Okay, I definitely got rid of a bomb."

The guard who had brought the suit had also been looking up. "Everyone out of the way," he warned.

Sandy and the rest of the family ran back to the safety of the porch while the guards rushed on out past the van, all of them anxiously watching the sky. But only a few smoking fragments . . . the remains of the Werewasp suit . . . fell onto the lawn. Sandy and the others waited on the porch while the guards quickly doused the fragments with fire extinguishers. "One of you suit up and take off," a guard ordered his companions. "Make sure no hot fragments ended up on the roof or flew out and hit anywhere else."

Mary let out a breath. "Will someone please---"

"Maybe that wasn't the smartest move I ever made," Sandy admitted. "But I reasoned I had to get the bomb away from the house as soon as possible."

"Was probably a good idea," a guard said, coming up to the porch. "I think what you found was an explosive linked to some sort of motion detonator. Any sudden move armed it and brought about an explosion a few moments later." He sighed. "The good news is that you happened to find it and treat it carefully."

"And the bad news?" Mary asked.

"The bad news is that it was Miss Swift who found the bomb." The guard shook his head mournfully. "Sherman's gonna kill us."

* * * * *

Sherman was indeed somewhat put out by events.

"Twelve Security personnel," he said icily as he slowly moved down the line of stiffly attentive guards. "Twelve highly trained Security personnel . . . and not one of you noticed a bomb sitting practically at the front door to the Swift's home."

"Sherman," Sandy said.

The sigh which Sherman released was the prelude to a funeral dirge. "There will definitely be changes in employment in certain quarters very soon---"

"SHERMAN," Sandy snapped.

His attempt to be ominous fading, Sherman looked over at Sandy. "What?"

Motioning him over, Sandy led him away from everyone else.

When they were far enough away, Sandy turned so that both of them could speak without being overheard. "I'm not trying to tell you how to run your department," Sandy said low but firmly. "But remember that the guards had been instructed to protect the house against threats from outside. The bomb had been planted earlier and so was already in place. I only happened to find it because I was concerned about the hedge. As it was, your people acted smoothly and took orders without question, otherwise what occurred could've been a heck of a lot worse."

Sherman seemed to accept this reluctantly. "I'll go over the video record," he said. "See who was parked close to the hedge and could've planted the bomb."

"Now that sounds sensible."

Sherman was looking around, still collecting his thoughts. "And don't take this the wrong way," he said, "but I'm glad it was you who found the bomb."

"No wonder Freida loves you. You say the sweetest things."

He now met her eyes. "I mean it. Maybe it's because of what you've been through over the years, but you've got the coolest head in the family."

They headed back to the others, and Bud now rushed up. His face was carrying a concerned look and his arms immediately went around her.

"Stupid question," he asked, "but are you okay?"

Speaking of sweetest things, Sandy thought. "Just hold me like this," she whispered. "It's what I need for the time being."

* * * * *

The next day Sherman announced that his section, the Shopton Police and a forensics team from the FBI were going to look over the surviving fragments from the explosion to see if any bomb parts could be found and analyzed further.

If Tom and Tom Sr. didn't seem too overly interested in the development it was because they had bigger fish to fry. It was nine o'clock in the morning, and they were preparing to face the press conference they had called for. By popular consensus (which meant that Sherman had yelled the loudest), the conference was going to be held within a room used for just such purposes at the headquarters for Shopton Police. That way, Sherman reasoned, there'd be an excuse for armed officers to work the crowd, and the overall security would be better. But he decided to up the ante and have several of his people, all armed with Spinners, scattered throughout the conference attendees. An Omnicopter with a passenger pod was waiting on the roof, its engines ticking over, in case Sherman decided a speedy getaway was called for.

"Get nervous much?" Tom asked Sherman, then saw the look in the eyes of the Enterprises security chief and decided to curb further attempts at humor.

Tom and his father were going to be playing to a full house. All the major networks and news carriers, domestic and international, had a representative in the room. There was even someone from Lepton Press: the news agency which was believed to supply items to such "fringe subscribers" as Brungaria and Kranjovia.

From the wings Sandy, Bud, Phyllis, Mary and Sestina watched as Tom and Tom Sr. walked out to take their seats between a table which had been set up on the stage, and a projection screen. Sandy could also look across the stage to see Sherman standing in the opposite wing, carefully examining the crowd from his vantage point. Behind her Roger Palfrey was on the telephone, still arguing with members of the Committee in Washington about the fact that the conference was being held.

Tom Sr. made the introductions. "I appreciate the fact that so many of you have shown up in hopes of learning more about what has been going on for the last few days," he said, his remark producing a slight hiss of sarcasm from the audience (Sherman automatically noting the source). "My son and I have certainly been doing our best to find answers. We'll begin with a formal statement . . . copies of which will be distributed to all of you . . . and then we'll answer questions.

"As all of you are aware, Earth has been enjoying infrequent communication with an intelligent extraterrestrial race for well over a decade now. In all that time contact with the aliens has been rather sporadic. Now, however, it seems that the aliens, who we have come to refer to as 'The Space Friends', have decided to show themselves more to the public. This was especially demonstrated by the appearance of what seemed to be an alien spaceship yesterday at Shopton International Airport. Neither my son or I had any sort of advance warning that such a ship was going to appear, nor do we have any knowledge as to what its mission was. At the time it appeared we were at the airport to meet a scientist who had arrived from Washington."

Tom now spoke up and, assisted by images which were shown on the projection screen, described the saucer and explained what was known about it. Unfortunately, the information was sparse, and Sandy could tell the reporters were wanting much more.

Tom now called out for questions, and Sandy silently believed she could feel the breeze caused by the sudden forest of raised hands.

Tom Sr. carefully looked over the audience and picked out a hand. "There."

A woman stood up. "Marge Blaine . . . American Natural History Magazine. Mr. Swift, we have readers throughout the world who're amateur astronomers. Some of them have been sending in inquiries concerning unusual activity on the Sun. Considering the rather . . . interesting . . . announcement which Enterprises released yesterday--"

"And which we didn't," Tom pointed out.

Blaine paused just a fraction. "Can either you or your father report on whether or not there is something going on?"

Tom and his father exchanged a look, and now Roger looked up from his phone and waited to hear what would be said. Sandy could tell that Tom wasn't too happy about having to go further with this, but he had earlier announced to his family that there would be no sense in holding information back.

The projection screen now showed an image of the Sun, complete with the black criss-cross lines of the solartrons. Cameras immediately snapped throughout the room.

"Scientists all over the world," Tom said, "including my father and myself, have recently learned that nine per cent of the Sun has been covered by alien devices. These devices . . . a system of giant, interlocking machines . . . are somehow able to withstand being in close proximity to the Sun, and more of them seem to be appearing on a regular basis. We do not know what the purpose of these machines are, only that they are capable of producing large amounts of energy in a focused state. An Enterprises spaceship . . . Lazarev . . . was lost with all hands several days ago, and we now believe that it somehow triggered some sort of effect from these machines which unfortunately proved fatal. Naturally we've taken steps to prevent other ships from traveling near the Sun---"

He was being drowned out by shouted questions from the audience, and he eventually was obliged to point to someone else. Sandy thought he was trying to aim for a man she recognized as Ronald Drake from National Geographic.

Instead the man next to him suddenly stood up. "Hill Johnson . . . Chicago Examiner. Mr. Swift, if you're in such close relations with the aliens, what attempt is being made to find out more about what these sun machines are?"

"As my father stated," Tom replied in an even tone of voice, "contact with the aliens has always been sporadic. Only rarely have we been able to initiate an exchange. Whatever is happening with the Space Friends, and whatever is going on with the Sun, we have not yet been able to find an answer. But it's only been a few days since this situation has been discovered, and not only Enterprises, but observatories and scientific institutions throughout the globe, are working on solving the mysteries."

"But these objects covering the Sun. What effect will this have on the Earth?"

Sandy could see that Tom was slowly reaching an edge, and her hand reached out to take one of Bud's.

"So far," Tom emphasized, "there's no drastic effect to the Earth's environment other than the beginning of a cooling trend to the climate---"

"And you don't consider that serious?"

"It is why scientists all over the world are looking into it," Tom said, once again trying to be calmly emphatic. "It is also why my father and I are continually trying to establish contact with the Space Friends."

Another reporter now stood up. "Mister Swift, Robert von Hoffmann . . . Washington Post. Years ago these aliens sent Nestria into orbit around the Earth." Von Hoffmann apparently saw something in Tom's expression because he started speaking quickly. "I know and am aware of the enormous scientific value which Nestria has become. But even you cannot deny that its

initial appearance was catastrophic. Are these objects at the Sun going to turn out to be equally catastrophic?"

"We will not know," Tom said to him, "until we have more information." He then nodded at another reporter.

"Ivan Johnson," the man said. "Figaro-Pravda. Mister Swift are the governments of the world cooperating with the United States in this problem?"

"Ouch," muttered Roger from close behind Sandy.

"My father and I are part of a special committee which Washington has assembled to study the situation," Tom slowly said. "We have also been in contact with numerous scientists throughout the world. How many of them have confided the news to their respective governments is not known, but I have to presume that other world leaders are aware of what's happening---"

A woman now stood up. "Victoria Vale . . . Stately Manor Broadcasting. Mister Swift, if these objects at the Sun are continuing to appear, then how long would it be before they cover the entire Sun? Could they cover the entire Sun?"

Tom didn't answer immediately, and Tom Sr. took over. "We're still trying to determine how quickly the objects are reproducing, Miss Vale. We don't even know if their intent is to cover the Sun. Once again I emphasize that we're still in the early stages of examining this situation and, when my son and I have more information, it'll be passed on to you."

"But can you deny that this could conceivably threaten life on Earth?" von Hoffmann shouted out.

With a small growl Roger pushed his way past Sandy and stepped out onto the stage. Behind him followed Sergeant Zoot at a very close distance.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Roger said to the audience, "that's all the time we have for questions---"

An immediate howl of protest from the audience.

"Both Mister Swifts will be available for further comments once something new is learned." With help from Sergeant Zoot (as well as from Sherman, who appeared from the other side) Tom and Tom Sr. were firmly and smoothly escorted off the stage, the shouts and continued questions still rushing out like a wave behind them.

Everyone quickly went to the roof where they were bundled into the waiting Omnicopter. Once everyone in the Swift party was on board (minus Sherman who was remaining behind to help Zoot coordinate the getaway), the aircraft lifted off.

Inside the passenger pod, Tom slumped back against the cushioned couch, sighing heavily. "That could've gone smoother," he said.

Phyllis was curled up against him. "You did your best," she said in an attempt to be reassuring. She then looked over at Roger. "And thanks for breaking that up. Technically that should've been my job, but I don't think I could've handled the crowd."

Bud was shaking his head. "So much easier in the old days. Everyone wasn't trying to tear us apart. People actually listened."

"It would've helped if we had more solid information," Tom said wearily.

"And you'll get it," Bud told him. "Like you and your Dad kept telling the reporters, it'll just take a little while longer."

"Thanks to things like the saucer appearing yesterday," Roger said, "the public will be demanding answers a whole lot quicker." He glanced over at Sandy. "I think you're right. This is all a war of nerves."

"But why?" Mary asked everyone.

Sandy shook her head. "I don't know. In the meantime, though, can I get dropped off at home?"

Tom Sr. nodded, reaching for the microphone to send instructions up to the cockpit. "Tom and Roger and I are heading back to Enterprises to continue work. Anybody else coming along?"

Catching Bud's eye, Sandy quietly signaled for him to accompany Tom, receiving a small nod in return. "I'll tag along with you guys," Bud lightly told Tom Sr.

"I'll stay with you," Phyllis said to Sandy. "I know I've probably got a ton of work waiting for me at the office, but I need to relax for a bit."

"Let the work wait," Tom said to her. "We can even drop you at home if you'd like."

"I'll call the folks from your house," Phyllis said to him. "Maybe bug out for home a little later on, after matters settle a bit."

"Which reminds me," Tom said to everyone. "According to Sherman, everyone travels by Tommycar from now on."

Phyllis thought it over. "A crowd of bloodthirsty reporters I could maybe handle," she remarked. "Sherman, on the other hand . . ."

A minute later the Omnicopter settled down on the backyard of the Swift home (now thoroughly encircled by Sherman's centurions) and Sandy, Phyllis, Mary and Sestina trooped out. The aircraft then soared away to continue on to Enterprises.

"Miz Swift, I've been feedin' pork chop sandwiches to the security people," Bingo announced. "I hope you didn't mind me usin' that party pack of chops you had in the freezer."

"I don't mind the chops," Mary told her as she entered the house. "What I do mind is you running around the kitchen."

"Oh I sat here and supervised," Bingo said. She nodded over to where Ken was busy at the stove. "My faithful Indian companion over there was handlin' the cookin'. He's not classy, but it's hard to ruin a pork chop."

"The security people have also been coming in for orange juice and grapefruit juice," Ken added. "Sherman's army was marching to the C."

"Ignore him," sighed Bingo. "He's been waitin' all mornin' to say that."

"We also watched the press conference on television," Ken said solemnly.

Bingo replied with a few words which made Mary gasp. "And you kiss your husband with that mouth?" she asked Bingo.

"Rather well, in fact," Ken said. "But I've got to say I can't argue with her opinion."

"Well," Mary confessed, "neither can I."

In the meantime Sandy and Phyllis had gone upstairs. Phyllis was noting the heavier than usual tread of her friend's footsteps, as well as hearing a low and seemingly unending stream of barely audible invective.

"San---"

"They had absolutely no right to treat Tom and Daddy like that," Sandy replied, whirling around to face her.

Phyllis reared back slightly. "I agree---"

"How many times have Tom and Daddy saved the world? How many times?"

"And they'll do it again," Phyllis said, trying to calm Sandy down.

"And the people will be just as ungrateful," Sandy muttered.

They entered her room. "Everyone else hides as much as they can," Sandy told Phyllis. "Those . . . people in Washington are perfectly willing to let us swing in the breeze and take all the heat. And then, once Tom and Daddy find a solution, they'll be first in line to take the bows. Bastards!"

Phyllis winced, glancing at the doorway as if expecting Mary Swift to suddenly appear with a cake of soap and a stern expression.

"And everybody somehow wants me involved," Sandy went on, pacing back and forth.

Realization now dawned within Phyllis. "And that's what's really bothering you," she said. "You want to help. You want to be back in the saddle and leading the charge, and you have no way of doing so."

Sandy stopped and looked directly at her, and Phyllis could clearly see the battle being waged behind the blue eyes.

Then: "You're right," in a small voice. Sandy looked away.

"I certainly don't like it," Phyllis told her. "It's not just the fact that it's eating you alive. It's just that, after all this time, I've sort of grown used to you finding a solution, or at least a course of action."

Sandy didn't answer, her eyes still looking away.

"It's like your Dad and Tom said, it'll be better when the Space Friends decide to tell us what the heck's going on. All we need are a few answers. That's been the problem."

Something new appeared in Sandy's expression, and she now turned back to stare at Phyllis.

"No," Sandy said. "The problem isn't that we're not getting answers. The problem is that maybe someone else needs to ask the questions."

"Huh?"

Turning, Sandy went to her bed, crawling across it to reach the communication console located on the nightstand. "I can make contact from here," she said, her fingers tapping on the buttons. "Tom and Daddy have done it before the console downstairs. Ah!"

Moving onto the bed near her, Phyllis peered closely at the screen above the keyboard. A home page was visible: FAR SPACE COMMUNICATION CHANNEL. WARNING --- UNAUTHORIZED USE FORBIDDEN. ENTER ACCESS CODE TO CONTINUE.

Phyllis' mind immediately went back to the last time she had seen the page. It was years ago and she had been on board a seacopter in the ocean depths off the coast of Ecuador. Sandy had been in the Wintergruppe hydrodome and had ordered her to set up the link.

"Oh, San---"

"Shhh," Sandy said, concentrating on her work. Her fingers resumed working and she typed in: ORBIT/335.

A pause, then the screen responded with a text box and the message: CHANNEL OPEN.

Sandy paused, collecting her thoughts and trying to calm herself. She rested her fingers on the keyboard, feeling like a concert pianist about to begin a performance.

THIS IS SANDRA, she typed. I WANT TO SPEAK WITH YOU PERSONALLY.

Phyllis suddenly moaned and collapsed on the bed.

Surprised, Sandy immediately touched Phyllis' arm, felt warm skin. "Phyllis?"

No response and Sandy gave her friend a shake. Still no response. "Phyllis?"

Then her panic was checked by the appearance of someone in the doorway. Looking at the newcomer, Sandy's eyes widened. "Oh my . . ."

Phyllis was lying on the bed next to her, unconscious.

And Phyllis was also standing in the doorway, smiling at Sandy.

"I agree," the new Phyllis said. "It's time you and I had a talk."

Chapter Seventeen: The Space Friend.

The person standing in the doorway certainly resembled Phyllis. But as Sandy continued to stare she began picking up subtle differences. Throughout the years she had seen quite a number of emotions and expressions upon the very familiar face of her friend. But never the one she was seeing now. Never the calmly smiling attitude backed by a hint of . . . "ancient serenity" was the best way she could describe it.

Sandy was forcing herself to try and relax, and wished she was doing a better job of it. "Wh-who . . ."

"I think we both know who I am, Sandy," the stranger calmly replied in Phyllis' voice. "You called, and I answered."

"Then you're not Ithaca."

A slight shake of the head. "Ithaca's powers of mimicry are good, but she will never be able to achieve the same level as that of my species."

Sandy's eyes glanced beyond the stranger, while her hand brushed against Phyllis.

The stranger seemed to understand. "Phyllis has not been harmed," she assured Sandy. "Neither has anyone else in your home. With the exception of you and I everyone else here is currently existing in a state of temporal grace. May I sit?"

Sandy dumbly nodded, moving to a tailor's squat on the bed as the "Phyllis" entered the room to settle in the chair at Sandy's desk.

Calm, Sandy mentally screamed at herself. You wanted this. "I'm trying to find the proper way to begin," she said. "But I guess it can all be summed up with the one word 'Why?'"

The stranger thoughtfully pursed her lips, a move which managed to make her look more like Phyllis than before. "Did I arrive too suddenly, Sandy? Should I have, as an example, used some sort of spaceship and landed here? Some sort of approach which would've given you time to adjust?"

"I . . . oh, I don't know. I guess I'm just thinking that Tom should be here to ask the questions, instead of me."

The stranger smiled brightly. "You've always been afraid, Sandy. Deep down inside you've always been uncertain. That's your secret. That's been the source of your courage. Your power. No dragon has ever been slain without first being faced."

"Yeah," Sandy muttered. "I just . . . say, what do I call you anyway? It sure as hell isn't going to be 'Phyllis'."

The stranger considered it. "I guess 'Faye' will do. It's the closest approximation in your language not only to my actual name, but also to the current situation."

"And you're one of the . . ."

The all-too-wise expression once more appeared. "You're trying to say 'Space Friends', but you actually want to say 'alien'. Perhaps accompany it with a few rather unfortunate

adjectives. And no, Sandy, I'm not reading your mind. At least not yet. Among our people we have a practice which, in your language, could best be referred to as 'putting the cards on the table'. In this instance it means I must courteously accept your lack of telepathic ability. Fairness in mutual communication. In spite of this, however, your thoughts and your feelings are as open to me as if they were written on a page. To go back to your original question, though, I am indeed one of the Space Friends."

"Hundreds and hundreds of questions," Sandy said almost in a moan. "I just don't know where to start."

"Then allow me to begin making the way between us."

Faye raised a hand and light suddenly burst in the air between her and Sandy. The light was immediately followed by a rapidly expanding darkness which seemed to be flecked with jewels and dots of fire, and Sandy realized Faye was conjuring up an image of outer space between the two of them. It was like watching one of Tom's telejector images, only without the accompanying equipment.

The center of the image was now being filled with a roughly globular cluster of multicolored filaments. Greens, reds, blues, golds . . . thousands of threads of brilliant color all seemingly close enough to touch.

"What you are seeing," Faye explained, "is my homeworld. Or, rather, you are seeing the location from where my race originates. Your astronomers refer to it as Cassiopeia A. It lies at a distance of eleven thousand eighty-four light years from Earth. I've somewhat enhanced the image with colors so you could more easily appreciate what I'm showing."

Sandy was studying the image, wishing she could snap her fingers and make Tom immediately appear. "I'm not an astronomer," she slowly said, "but I know that Cassiopeia A is a supernova remnant."

"Oh indeed," Faye replied. "We created it."

Sandy stared across at Faye through the transparency of the projected image. "Huh?"

"I'm showing you this to better illustrate the ongoing situation which exists out in space," Faye explained. "Thousands of years ago we realized a definite need to protect ourselves from the threats which were then present in this area of the galaxy. With that in mind the decision was reached to detonate our star."

"What?"

"Through careful manipulation of stellar masses . . . some of which were artificially created for just that purpose . . . we were able to induce the parent star of our system to become a supernova. This has resulted in enveloping the home space of my people in a shell of intense radiation lethal to most lifeforms throughout the galaxy. In addition, the remnant of our parent star has been induced to become what you would call a black hole."

Sandy felt her jaw falling open.

"Our civilization . . . the Space Friends as you call us . . . exist now in a carefully designed and constructed geodesic structure built around the black hole and balanced on the edge of its gravitational field. Our nations . . . states . . . neighborhoods . . . nurseries . . . laboratories . . . everything exists in a globular lattice of armored environments protected within the outer Sea of Radiation." Through the image Faye's eyes met Sandy's. "I wanted to give you an idea as to the extent of our technology, Sandy. I hope I've succeeded."

Sandy nodded. "Then you're genuinely an interstellar race. In the beginning Tom speculated that you had to be from Mars, or perhaps Titan or Europa. He couldn't otherwise conceive how you were able to reply to our messages in so relatively short a length of time."

"We allowed your brother and others to follow their initial misconceptions," Faye said. "Quite often simple ignorance has proven to be our greatest defense. Consider that if we are capable of accomplishing all that I've shown you, then it becomes a simple matter to bend space along particular paths and allow messages to pass back and forth between stellar distances at a rate to make mutual communication possible."

"But we have modified the system on the local level. Some time back we installed an automated relay station in orbit around your world in order to expedite communication."

"Nestria," Sandy breathed.

"Yes," replied Faye. "It was a simple matter to take an existing asteroid in your system and fashion it into a relay station."

"But that wasn't its only function, was it." It was not a question.

Faye paused a bit before answering. "No," she said, her voice almost dropping to a whisper.

"Ever since Ecuador," Sandy said, working to choose her words, "I've been carrying a lot of ideas in my head. Theories . . . I don't know. They sometimes feel like facts."

"And you've been correct in a lot of your assessments, Sandy. I'm here to fill in several of the gaps in your knowledge."

Once again Faye lifted her hand. The image of Cassiopeia A between them quickly receded in a rush of stars that went on for a few seconds. When it finally stopped Sandy was looking at what she realized was one third of a spiral galaxy.

Her own galaxy.

"Within the area of space that you now see," Faye explained, "are six thousand three hundred known intelligent races. And even we don't claim to believe that's the total number. For centuries all of these races have tried to peacefully coexist and develop. It has not been easy, and there have been severe setbacks, but for the most part we work to maintain a mutual harmony."

"I mentioned how it hasn't been easy. Consider the situation of my own people. As you have correctly perceived, Sandy, my society contains contentious elements."

"The Senders," Sandy replied.

"Even so," Faye nodded. "Others on your world have named them 'The Space Legion', but 'Senders' is a far more accurate term. The Senders and my people have been philosophically opposed for centuries."

Faye leaned forward a bit. "You see, Sandy, we believe that one of the cornerstones of maintaining peace throughout the galaxy has been an effort to prevent destructive technology from falling into the hands of criminal or irresponsible races. You yourself have witnessed just how comparatively advanced our science is. Improperly used it could lay waste to entire star systems." Once again Faye's voice dropped to a sad whisper. "On several occasions it has."

"The Senders, by comparison, feel that peace could be guaranteed if every intelligent race possessed an equal degree of scientific knowledge, or at least equal access to it. A level playing field, so to speak."

"They tried to send out your science to other worlds," Sandy said.

"The Sender machines locate the most sophisticated species on an alien planet, whereupon it then performs a genetic scan," Faye told her. "Once the scan is completed the machine provides a carefully designed boost to the genetic makeup of the target species, with the eventual aim being improvements to the species' intellectual and inventive capacity."

"Naturally we made every effort to intercept and suppress these machines whenever possible. On occasion, though, we would fail."

"One of the machines reached Earth," Sandy said.

"Yes. The Senders knew of Earth because, three thousand years ago, a survey ship from our world crash landed here."

"Tom found out about it," Sandy pointed out. "It crashed in the Yucutan region of Mexico. The Mayans who were in the area were descended from the crew."

"Not quite," Faye said. "Our natural biological form, Sandy, cannot exist on your world, much less reproduce with any of the species on it." A slight shrug from the alien. "Our mastery of gravity, along with several millennia of technological achievement, makes it possible for us to . . . project ourselves . . . upon Earth for periods of time. Yes, Sandy, I am a cyborg. But I am as far above Ithaca as you are above a bar of soap. When I return to my ship I will distill myself back to my original body."

"But I'm getting off the subject . . . a habit I've picked up from years of studying your species. The Mayans in the Yucutan are not descended from my people. Rather, they're the seed of a Governor Race we hoped to establish on Earth."

Sandy blinked. "A Governor Race?"

"When we locate a species that possesses the intellectual potential to eventually threaten galactic harmony we sometimes find it in our best interest to genetically modify select subgroups within a race. Such modified groups serve as a means of keeping the technological balance of a planet in check. They do not entirely suppress development, but they work to insure that such development remains calm and steady, working to eliminate lethal activity. The Mayans were chosen to accomplish this."

"Throughout the next century my people studied Earth, setting up automated experiments in various locations. We then departed, registering your world as a monitored preserve in the hands of a Governor Race." Faye sighed. "Unfortunately, a natural spontaneity event occurred, and the Spanish of the 16th Century overcame the Mayans before they had a chance to expand their influence over humanity."

"But there was an even greater problem. As you guessed, and although we did not know it at the time, a Sender machine managed to secretly arrive on Earth. The Senders knew of our interest in your world and they had programmed their machine to lie hidden until a suitable subject for modification arrived."

Sandy was having a little trouble with something in her throat. "My grandfather."

"Barton Swift did manage to activate the machine's primary functions," Faye agreed. "But keep in mind, Sandy, that it was hardly necessary. Without the Governor Race, the human capacity for invention developed unchecked. Discoveries which should've taken millennia to arrive were made in centuries . . . even decades. By the time your grandfather reached the Sender machine your father was already a brilliant man, and your brother clearly possessed the potential to outdistance him. And their intellect, while impressive, was hardly unique.

"My people intercepted the signals which the Sender machine transmitted after it had contacted Barton Swift. This, combined with our failed attempt at establishing a Governor Race, resulted in a decision being made to step up our efforts concerning Earth."

Sandy frowned.

"You've demonstrated an appreciation of our situation, Sandy. Consider: we had to find out how much illegal technology had possibly fallen into human hands while, at the same time, keeping knowledge of such technology secret. It was decided that, since your family's genetic structure had been the primary one scanned by the Senders, your family would be the key to our investigations."

"The probe you sent to Enterprises," Sandy said.

"Yes," Faye said, nodding. "The response which your father and brother made to it was going to help us in determining future action, as well as provide a means by which direct communication could be initiated between our species.

"That probe was only the first of many tests. Again and again we subjected your father and brother and, through them, the rest of the human race to various examinations in order to judge not only what your species had learned and developed, but what it could potentially learn and develop."

"The ship you sent to the Moon," Sandy told Faye. "There never was a plague on your world."

"Not hardly," agreed Faye. "But we wanted to see how you would react when confronted with certain animal, plant and microorganic life. Was your science and technology going to reveal signs of contamination by the Senders?"

Sandy made a brief choking sound. "But it's just been over twenty years since my grandfather found the Sender machine. The Senders certainly couldn't have made that big an impact in human knowledge in so short a time."

"But was your grandfather the only one who had accessed the machine?" Faye argued. "Was the transmission we intercepted the first and only one? The Senders had become incredibly subtle in hiding their influence within alien genomes. That was why we couldn't expose your race to direct telepathic examination in order to find out what we wanted to know. For want of a better term we had to lay traps to see if Sender contamination would reveal itself. You suspected we had ulterior motives in sending Nestria to Earth, and you were right. Along with serving as a relay station, we wanted to see how humans in general, and your brother in particular, would respond to the gravity polarizer which we left there. Nestria's other purpose was to provide close continual scanning of Earth, trying to locate the Sender machine."

"A spy satellite."

"If you wish," Faye conceded. "Along with Nestria we also established outposts on several of the minor planets beyond the edge of your solar system."

Sandy's eyes narrowed. "And on the Moon itself."

Faye slowly nodded. "We discovered the remnants of the Brungarian expedition. The descendants of the original crew . . . the children you and Bud found in the ice caverns . . . were of particular interest and, as you surmised, we not only studied them but nurtured them as well. It had been our hope that the children could perhaps be used as the seed for a new Governor Race. Unfortunately your flesh isn't as malleable as ours, and having been raised in the gravitational field of the Moon ultimately made them unsuitable for insertion into the population of Earth."

"Imagine my disappointment," Sandy said drily. "Was my grandfather's flesh also not malleable enough?"

Faye looked down for a few moments. "I am sorry, Sandy. As I said, the Senders are subtle when it comes to hiding information within human genomes. Unfortunately, the scanning process can prove . . . chaotic. Your grandfather was already injured by the time he found the Sender machine. He couldn't survive the scanning."

Sandy sighed.

"Space friends," she murmured.

"Pardon?" Faye asked.

Sandy shook her head. "You directly intervened on the Moon on my behalf," she said to Faye. "Why?"

"We couldn't allow our investments to be at risk."

"The Moon Children?"

"And you."

Sandy's eyes widened. "Me?"

Faye tilted her head a bit. "Certainly that's been the question you've been waiting to ask, Sandy. The nature of the connection that's existed for years between us. Ever since you made contact with the Sender machine you've been our most valuable spy."

"Spy?"

"Was the term too harsh? Would you have preferred 'observer', or 'agent'?"

"I was spying?"

"What better way to keep close tabs on the Swift Family then by having an agent directly in its midst? When you accessed the Sender machine you set up a mutual link between yourself and my people."

"But . . . but it was a Sender machine. Wouldn't I have been spying for them?"

"Ordinarily, yes. But remember that the Sender machine destroyed itself shortly after contacting you."

Sandy could hardly forget such a moment. She still suspected she wasn't too popular south of the border.

"The Sender machine had orders to carry out such an action when it suspected it was in danger of being discovered by my people. By doing so it interrupted any chance the Senders had of gaining control over the connection which was created within you. You became an open circuit . . . one which the relay station on Nestria was able to take full advantage of."

"So all these years everything I heard and saw was being sent to you."

"Yes. But, for reasons which should be obvious, you eventually became more of a focus in our observations than your father or brother. You soon became the most effective of our agents on Earth."

"Oh! So there's others?"

"Your father and your brother were certainly not the only human intellects we kept under observation, Sandy. When possible, we had other agents in place to watch over this or that person---"

"Ithaca!" Sandy breathed. "You put her on Earth to watch Sun Ohm Erato."

Faye nodded.

"But she didn't touch the Sender machine. How did she . . ."

"We take advantage of all sorts of opportunities, Sandy. As Ithaca explained to you, when she apparently died in the car explosion we recovered enough of her biology to rebuild her and eventually set her to keep Sun Ohm Erato under observation."

"And Duran Geiner?"

"A failure on our part," Faye admitted.

"He was part of Section Omphalos," Sandy went on. "Your people penetrated that organization."

"Sharply put," Faye agreed reluctantly, "but essentially correct. The Europeans who made up Section Omphalos were trying to pry what they felt was secret information about us which your family was withholding. Whereas their beliefs were woefully misguided---"

"I kept telling them that."

"They presented us with an additional means of trying to determine just how much Sender contamination was present on Earth. As a result they were targeted for possession." A sigh from the alien. "Since he had already been trained in espionage among your kind, Geiner was to be the forward element in our efforts from that direction. Unfortunately, he turned out to be mentally unstable."

"Do tell."

"Ummm." Faye grimaced slightly. "Another trait my time on Earth has taught me has been an ear for sarcasm. Seeing as how you managed to put an end to the careers of both Geiner and Sun Ohm Erato---"

Sandy raised an eyebrow.

"Well," Faye considered, "perhaps not altogether directly. But we've been repeatedly impressed by the amount of wear you've managed to put on our efforts."

"Have you been on Earth long enough to hear the phrase 'what goes around comes around'?"

Faye looked away. "I suppose that was deserved. No matter where we've turned in this affair we've encountered tragedy."

Something in the alien's tone of voice tickled a dread within Sandy. "What do you mean?"

Faye turned large sad eyes back to her. "I'm speaking about the decision that's been ultimately reached concerning Earth. The possibility of Sender contamination has grown too great, and steps must be taken to cleanse the infection."

"Oh. So . . . what does that involve?"

"Quite simply," Faye softly replied, "the destruction of this planet, and every living creature upon it."

Chapter Eighteen: Sentence.

"WHAT?"

Faye seemed to think it over. "In my life I've encountered four hundred and seventeen variations of a single syllable exclamation . . . and they all seem to sound the same. But yes, Sandy. The decision has been reached, albeit reluctantly, that the overall preservation of galactic harmony requires the cauterization of a potentially dangerous element. Namely: the human race."

Sandy's head was pounding. Not only with shock, but with her mind racing through all the "humans being judged by aliens" stories she'd read in books and seen on television. What was that one Tom had given her when she was fourteen? The one by Heinlein?

Shaking her head she tried to focus. "You can't," she said to Faye.

"Unfortunately we can," Faye replied. "And unfortunately we've done so before."

Sandy stared at the alien who wore the face of her best friend. "There are six billion people---"

"Six billion, nine hundred seventy-three million, seven hundred thirty-eight thousand, four hundred and thirty-three---"

"You cannot just kill us all." Sandy quickly lifted a hand. "Yes, I know. You have the technology to do so. But there's no need. We're not a threat."

"It is so easy for you to say that," Faye said in a whisper tinged with anguish. "It's what my race has heard numerous times from other species. Variations on a theme. 'We're simply

mischievous' . . . 'we misbehave on occasion' . . . 'we're strident' . . . 'we're high-spirited' . . . 'we're inventive' . . . 'we're basically good'." Tears were now forming in her eyes. "And that's the worst of all: 'we're basically good'. The number of times in our past we've heard that defense and have held back our hand . . . and the price we paid again and again for doing so."

"You can't accurately predict what our race will do."

"You mentioned over six billion people on this world, Sandy." Faye nodded at the sky visible through the window. "In what we would call the immediate area of space there are over two hundred billion intelligent creatures . . . and the Earth hangs over all of them like a hammer. Clemency sounds wonderful, Sandy. Mercy carries with it an undeniable nobility. But I've personally seen the results of following such notions. Dust where once entire civilizations thrived. Ruin. Destruction." Faye slowly shook her head. "My race swore an oath to never let it happen again."

Sandy's mind was racing, trying to ward off saying anything that might ruin an already fatal situation. "But you're talking about destroying us simply on the basis of a possibility," she pointed out. "You said Sender contamination was only a possibility."

"Even the chance of contamination is too severe to ignore," Faye said. "Once we learned of the Sender presence here we made a careful study of human development. We admit that your species has produced admirable things. But . . . but . . ." Faye took a breath, once again met Sandy's eyes. "You build impressive monuments to peace and virtue, and then surround them with the graves of millions of soldiers. And that's even without the possibility of Sender contamination."

Sandy realized her hands were fiercely gripping the sheets of her bed. She worked to keep herself calm. "I cannot believe that a race such as yours," she said evenly, "cannot easily find a solution other than this. You've been around for so long. You're capable of so much. There has got to be an alternative course of action."

"Don't you think we've tried?" Faye cried at her. "Every conceivable method of preventing catastrophe has been experimented with. Using force fields to fence in planets, or even entire star systems as a form of blockade. Introducing chemicals or microorganisms into a planetary environment which could stunt the intellectual growth. Alterations to a planet's food chain, introducing a new predator species. Direct and open governing of civilizations." Faye shook her head again. "Nothing worked. Even the attempts we've tried here have ultimately proven unsuccessful."

Sandy blinked. "You tried . . ."

"We mentioned the agents we've had on Earth, monitoring your race's most inventive people. Your brother . . . Sun Ohm Erato and others. As a way of perhaps finding an alternative to destroying your race we attempted direct telepathic scrambling of the mental processes in order to affect the more potentially harmful inventive abilities." Faye saw the expression growing on Sandy's face. "Not drastically or radically, you understand. Just enough to distort. Haven't you noticed how your brother's inventions in recent years have become rather . . . impractical?"

Sandy thought it over. "His idea for something he was calling a 'cosmotron express'," she murmured. "His G-force inverter scheme. There was a time back then when he was just throwing out all these crazy ideas that went absolutely nowhere."

Faye nodded. "As I said, we tried to direct his mind away from potentially harmful areas, and the result was that his schemes became more and more unworkable."

"But Tom managed to develop the Core Cannon. SmartGlas. His self-repairing metal. The Werewasp."

"We ultimately had to discontinue our experiment," Faye explained. "It wasn't producing the results we were hoping to achieve. Besides, of all the scientists whose minds we were attempting to affect, Tom was becoming sensitive to our intrusions."

Sandy's eyes widened. "The dreams Tom used to have. He was telling us about things he called 'galaxy ghosts'."

"We tried again," Faye went on, "but we decided on a much different approach. We began beaming telepathic signals from Nestria. Not very powerful, you understand. Just enough to promote a worldwide sense of apathy and even mild distrust in regards to science and technology. Slowly throughout Earth, and especially in this country, the overall perceptions of your species began to shift away from substance and more towards form. Scientific ignorance was almost being embraced as a positive quality. But still it wasn't enough. People were becoming dependent upon the things being developed by people like your brother. A clear need for technological development existed that we couldn't easily remove or control."

"But there still has to be an alternative to what you're planning to do."

"Sandy, even if we lobotomized every human being on Earth . . . and yes we've even gone that far . . . it still wouldn't work. Intelligence is useful, even beautiful. But it also possesses a perniciously strong capacity to assert itself, overcoming even the most stringently placed barriers. And we've found that an attempt to totally wipe out an inventive skill within a species usually results in the eventual rise of a stronger and much more powerful skill."

Sandy continued thinking. "But it's not as if we're going to immediately jump out into interstellar space and begin causing trouble. It'll probably take us at least a century to develop the solar system. We've certainly got time to try and adjust ourselves."

Faye pressed her lips into a thin line. "That is true, Sandy. Which is why it's ultimately better if we carry out our intention now, while the population of Earth is all in one location."

"You're a monster."

"There are worse things than being thought of as a monster. Try watching forty-seven inhabited worlds being wiped out by a thought, and knowing you could've saved every living person on those worlds if you'd only acted sooner against one particular species." Faye sighed. "If I have to bear the label of 'monster', then I'll manage to sleep peacefully at night. I'm sorry."

"Sorry," Sandy echoed dully. "If it was left solely up to us we could find a solution. If I have to die . . . if every living person on Earth has to die . . . then we'll do so knowing a supposedly superior race simply gave up on us and washed their hands."

"You have faith in your people," Faye said. "I have faith in history."

"How . . ." Sandy began, paused, then tried again. "How long do we have?"

"Your brother was almost correct," Faye replied. "Where he made his mistake was in presuming that our intention is to fully surround the Sun with a globe and block off its light and warmth. That won't be necessary."

"Then it is the solartrons---"

"They are forming several bands around the Sun. Their main purpose is to serve as capacitors. Energy collectors. When the construction is complete, and when enough energy has been stored, a single focused burst will be directed at the Earth. All life will be annihilated."

In her mind's eye Sandy saw it. A lance of pure fire racing out from the Sun. It would take just over eight minutes for it to cross the space to Earth and strike like a colossal bolt of lightning.

"How long?" she whispered.

"The solartrons are still forming," Faye said. "They will be triggered by a signal in seventy-six days."

"Seventy-six days," Sandy murmured. Over two months.

"That still gives us time," she pleaded. "Talk to my brother. My father. The government. Anyone."

"It will do no good whatsoever."

"It has to," Sandy declared. "It has to make a difference somehow." Frustration suddenly boiled up inside her. "If this is what you're going to do then why in God's name are you telling me? Why aren't you keeping it as much of a secret as possible and just letting it happen? Just let us all die in ignorance? Don't you know what'll happen when word of this gets out?"

"Panic," Faye said simply. "Fear. Mass suicides. Blind terror."

"We might also find a way to beat all this."

Faye nodded slowly. "There is that possibility, which is another reason we're having this conversation. Regardless of what you think of me . . . of my people . . . we are not totally without feeling. Several of us have come to respect and appreciate your race. We feel you are owed a chance, even if it's a hopeless one."

Sandy felt her self-control starting to slip. "It'll take time to get all this out into the open. People'll think I'm crazy when I tell them."

"No they won't," Faye told her. "This talk between us is being transmitted live throughout the world."

Sandy's expression almost exploded in shock. "What?"

"Consider the news item we managed to make appear. This is the same thing, only on a larger scale." Faye spread her arms out a bit. "All this will eventually appear on every television throughout the world. Our words will be heard on every radio, and transcripts will appear in print. Everyone will know, Sandy. Your brother . . . your family . . . everyone."

"You did this to me?"

"Sandy---"

"Without talking to anyone else and giving them a chance?" In a single move Sandy lunged off the bed, throwing herself across at Faye. With her left hand she grabbed the blouse of the creature wearing Phyllis' form, and with her right hand she punched the image of her friend fully in the face.

The blow knocked Faye out of Sandy's grip, and the alien tumbled to the floor within the open doorway.

Breathing hard she looked back up at Sandy. "I owed you that," she said. "I owed you some sort of response, no matter how useless it was."

Sandy stood over her, her hands curled into fists. "You---"

"The wait will not be as unbearable as it might seem," Faye told her. Before Sandy's eyes her form began to fade away. "Seventy-six days will pass more quickly than you can imagine. And then it'll happen. I promise you, though, the end will be merciful." In the last moment before she was gone completely something like a tragic smile appeared on the alien's face. "The end will be swift."

Chapter Nineteen: Initial Reaction.

Three hours after Faye disappeared the phones were still ringing.

Tom Sr. finally switched all of them off (and Bud had taken a hammer to one).

They were now in the living room . . . Tom, Tom Sr., Bud, Mary, Phyllis, Bingo, Ken, Ned Newton, Helen Newton, Sestina and Roger Palfrey . . . most of them sitting around Sandy who was huddled in the center of the couch. Those who had been in the house during Faye's visit had not experienced any ill effects from being unconscious.

"People are going to be expecting all of you to get in contact," Ned said to Tom Sr.

Tom Sr. was slowly pacing about "I'm aware of that," he said to his oldest friend. "And Sherman's probably wanting to hide us in a salt mine or something. But before we release statements or anything I think we all need to quietly sit down and take in what's happened. And you and Helen might want to consider what to do about Phyllis."

The Newtons glanced at their daughter, who was holding hands with Tom. "What do you mean?" Helen asked.

"What Dad means," sighed Sandy, not looking up from the floor, "is that nearly everyone on the globe saw someone who looked and sounded just like Phyllis announce that she was going to blow up the Earth in a few months."

Phyllis' eyes grew large, and her hand tightened around Tom's. "Oh."

"We can probably arrange to have Sherman or someone sneak her onto Enterprises," Tom pointed out. He looked over at Phyllis' parents. "In fact, Uncle Ned and Aunt Helen, it might be a good idea if all of you quietly went into hiding for a while."

"This is happening all too fast," Helen said.

Tom Sr. was still pacing.

"A civilization that had interstellar travel and could induce supernovas back when the Earth was still in the Neolithic Age," he muttered, "and this is the best they can do to solve a problem." He shook his head. "Insane."

"If I can put in a comment here," Roger said.

Tom Sr. looked up. "Please do."

"When we consider it prudent to get back in touch with Washington, one of the first things we might consider doing is suggest to the Committee that some sort of alien contact team might be established." He saw the look on the other man's face. "I'm fully aware that both you and Tom have been handling the brunt of the dialog with the Space Friends all this time. But, given the circumstances, I think we need to put together a group made up of anthropologists, sociologists . . . I don't know, some linguistic and philosophy people as well."

He saw he had everyone's attention. "We've got to consider that the operative word in the term 'alien civilization' is alien. I'm just as scared and confused as all of you right now, and I suspect it's because we can't understand the motive behind the decision made by the Space Friends. We can't understand the motive because we keep trying to unconsciously assign human ethics and qualities to what is literally an alien species."

Tom and his father looked at each other. "He's got a point," Tom said.

Tom Sr. nodded. "When we talk to the Committee I'll also put in calls to the heads of the various SETI groups throughout the world."

"They might already have started work on their own."

"Um. Probably."

"You know," Ned considered, "it occurs to me that Helen and Phyllis and I could probably use some company in hiding." He looked at Tom Sr. and Mary. "Understand that I haven't seen as many science-fiction films as other people might have. But, if I understand the way such stories usually play out, the next usual step when something like this happens is that this house will soon be inundated by men in pressurized suits, and we'll all be giving endless samples of things we'd just as soon not normally bother with."

Phyllis grimaced. "Ew."

Mary had been carefully watching Sandy. "Sweetheart?"

Sandy still stared moodily at the carpeting.

"I know you're upset---"

Sandy suddenly stood up, striding over to the glass doors which looked out onto the patio. Bud made a move to follow, but both Tom and Mary silently shook their heads at him and he settled back on the couch. Everyone quietly watched as she spent a few moments looking at the backyard.

"Okay," she finally said to no one, her voice sharp. "I messed up. Big time."

Her mother sighed. "Sandra---"

"No!" Sandy declared, turning to give her mother a burning look. "No, Mom. This time I've really messed it up. The big moment between humanity and the Space Friends and, instead of Tom or Dad, it's the Dummy who ends up doing the talking. And what happens? The Earth gets flushed down the toilet."

Her father now tried. "You handled it---"

"Miserably," Sandy shouted. "Forget about Phyllis being in any kind of danger. There're probably mobs headed here right now to string me up." She turned back to the glass doors. "Lord knows they've got enough reason."

"Let me talk," Tom Sr. calmly insisted. "The decision made by the Space Friends wouldn't have changed no matter who was speaking to them. I don't think any one of us would've reacted differently to what they said. And you managed to add more to what we know about the Space Friends in a half-hour than what Tom and I have managed to learn in ten years." His face hardened slightly. "Including the fact that my father died because of them."

Mary reached up to take her husband's hand.

Bud stood up and quietly moved to where he was halfway between Sandy and the group.

"So what do you do now?" he asked in a low voice.

Sandy didn't turn around, but she visibly stiffened.

"What's your course of action?"

With a sudden snarl Sandy yanked the glass door open, stepping out of the house. Bud didn't make a move but remained where he was, watching and waiting as, moments later, he spotted Sandy on horseback racing out of the stable. Despite the heavy presence of Sherman's people, Sandy managed to expertly weave through them and rode off, the horse galloping towards the forest between the house and Enterprises.

He felt rather than saw Tom Sr. and Mary come up behind him.

"Was that smart of her?" Mary asked. "Will she be safe?"

"If she is," Bud said, "it'll be a welcome change."

* * * * *

The sun was well on the way towards setting when Sandy returned (her ride having been quietly monitored by Sherman's surveillance instruments). She guided the horse through the now larger number of Enterprise security people and Shopton police surrounding the house, letting them assist in carefully escorting her through the increased number of onlookers.

Bud was waiting for her in the stable. "Hi."

She didn't answer, didn't acknowledge his presence. But after sliding off the saddle she went straight into his arms, allowing him to hold her close. He lightly stroked her hair, feeling the dampness on her cheeks through the material of his shirt.

"Did it help?"

Her head shook against his chest. "No," she answered in a small voice. "But thanks for not making a scene and letting me run off like that."

"You know I don't like letting you go," he said. "But I know sometimes it's the way it's got to be."

She raised her face to his, her lips parting. As her eyes drifted shut Bud noticed how red they were. The kiss which followed was deep and passionate, but he felt an unresolved tension inside her.

Finally they let a bit of space take root between them and she let out a low breath. "So," she said, trying to keep her voice light, "what's new on the crisis front?"

Slipping an arm around her shoulder they started slowly walking back towards the house. "Well, for openers we've had the opening salvo of calls for an investigation concerning the way the Space Friends managed to interrupt broadcasts all over the world. Lawsuits against your family have already been mentioned."

"Damn it."

"Tell me about it," Bud said. "Meanwhile the phones have been turned back on which, if you're asking for my opinion, was a stupid move. But everyone needed to start getting work done. Tom's been talking to a United Nations representative who's raising the issue about trying to negotiate with the Space Friends."

"Meanwhile, your Dad and Roger have been talking with the Committee in Washington. One of the Committee members was strongly advocating having Congress decide on military action against Cassiopeia A---"

"Oh my God!"

"---and your Dad had to waste a half-hour trying to explain to the moron what a light year was." Bud sighed. "Guy works on a Senate Committee involving space, and he thought the Moon, planets and stars were all the same distance from Earth. Jackass."

"Then, just like Uncle Ned predicted, a team from Pittsburgh CDC arrives on the premises dressed in full Hazmat gear. They tried to push through Sherman's people and barge into the house."

"Oh dear."

Bud nodded. "Sandy, I consider your Mom to be the sweetest and most level-headed woman in the world."

Sandy looked up at him.

"I also said 'level-headed'."

"Oh! Okay, go on."

"Yeah. I thought fire was gonna come out of your Mom's eyes when the CDC people were trying to barge in. Things get worse when they notice how pregnant Bingo is, and they began making noises like they were about to put Bingo inside a sealed container and carry her off. That's when Ken was about to start ripping lungs out."

Sandy winced.

"Fortunately your Dad and I managed to enlist Sestina as crowd control, and cooler heads eventually prevailed. In no uncertain terms your Mom instructed the CDC people to `git'." Bud's voice lowered a bit. "Between you and me, Ken wouldn't have minded letting Bingo going through a complete look-over after what happened earlier. But Ken didn't care much for the way they were treating Bingo like she was a lab specimen."

"I can well imagine."

"I don't think we've heard the last of the CDC. In the meantime, though, the Newtons bugged out for Enterprises before the crowd started getting bigger. They'll be living in the Sky Queen for the time being. Tom and your folks have been debating whether or not to do the same, and I personally vote yes. Especially since there's already been two attempts to break into the Newton home."

They stepped back into the house, and Sandy found herself in the middle of a hug with her mother on one side and Sestina on the other. "I'm okay," she assured the both of them. "I'm a colossal screw-up, and I run away when the chips are down, but I'm okay."

Sestina's arms tightened a bit.

"You're not a screw-up," Mary assured her. "The way things went I was tempted to follow you."

"Yeah, I heard how you went up against the Center for Disease Control and the Center lost." Sandy looked towards her father and brother. "So where do we stand now?"

"Those . . . people on the Committee," Tom Sr. said, "want to talk personally to the Space Friends and want us to set up a direct communication device in Washington. Failing that, they're going to set up shop here."

Hearing the tone in her father's voice, Sandy suspected she had a pretty good idea of what he thought of that suggestion. "How's the voting in the Senate going towards having me burned at the stake?"

"Sandy," Mary admonished.

"Look me in the eye, Mom, and convince me the thought isn't going through some minds in high places." Moving into the kitchen, Sandy opened the refrigerator and began poking through the leftovers. "Are we moving to Enterprises?"

Her parents and her brother exchanged looks. "I'd really hate to do that," Tom Sr. told Sandy. "Among other things it'd sort of be like throwing in the towel. Admitting that all the naysayers are right and there's nothing we can do. I don't believe it."

Having spotted some roast beef, Sandy bent down to get it out of the refrigerator.

"I wish I didn't," she whispered to herself.

Chapter Twenty: Shock Waves.

Early the next morning Sandy tiptoed downstairs. It was her intention to reach the living room without awakening Tom or her parents.

She almost succeeded. Or at least she was a few steps shy of the bottom of the stairs when Sestina suddenly loomed into view.

Sandy took a few moments to catch her breath. "You are the quietest big person I know. And then there's a little matter of your hearing."

Her face wearing its constant sadness, the giant nodded down the hall, motioning that Ken and Bingo were still asleep in the guest rooms. This was followed by gestures which Sandy took as questions concerning breakfast. "I'll get some milk for myself right now," Sandy told her.

Sestina now nodded towards the outside, her fingers weaving a message that all had been quiet so far during the evening.

Sandy peered closely at her. "Honey, have you slept?"

As usual there was no answer, and Sestina's face settled into stoic lines. Pondering that she had no real knowledge of how much sleep a medically modified human being needed, Sandy drifted into the kitchen for some milk (Sestina a large shadow just behind her).

She then went to the communications console and switched it on, bringing the volume down low and programming the television for random searches. Silently sipping at her milk she watched the channels cycle through the passing show.

"Stocks continue to plummet . . ."

"Rioting and demonstrations taking place in Cairo, Chicago, Los Angeles, Madrid, Beijing . . ."

"Frank there still appears to be a run on the purchase of ammunition . . ."

"Judgment upon the Godless . . ."

"Spiking upon subjects such as the Sun and alien contact . . ."

"The failure of the previous Administration to address this . . ."

"Ecumenical Convention in the planning stages . . ."

"Mass suicide apparently linked to the alien threat . . ."

"Missiles fired at unidentified aircraft . . ."

"World gold markets fluctuating as a result of . . ."

"How is the military responding . . ."

"Tonight, a special. Hollywood celebrities give their thoughts on . . ."

"Why haven't the Swifts been brought up on charges . . ."

Sandy immediately held on the last channel. She didn't recognize the broadcast, but two well-dressed men were sitting across from one another on a simple set.

One of them was holding forth rather excitedly. "---well known for years that the Swifts had been in contact with these creatures. This in spite of all common sense."

"The Swifts have made every effort over the years to distribute information concerning these beings," the other man said in a somewhat calmer voice. "It's not as if the Swifts actually solicited contact from space."

"Are we so certain of that?" the first man argued, leaning forward in his chair, his chin jutting out. "Tom Swift Jr., just starting out on a career similar to that of his father. Swift Enterprises still practically brand new. A major investment. What better way to attract important attention, and possible investors, than by establishing and monopolizing communication with creatures from another planet?"

"So you're now claiming the Swifts want the Earth to be destroyed?"

"I'm claiming that the Swifts have carried out this whole matter recklessly. The fact that this disguised alien chose to deliver her message to Sandra Swift . . . a known international troublemaker . . . demonstrates how little thought has been put into this. And now the entire population of the Earth is at risk."

Sandy was putting herself through several deep-breathing exercises designed to replace her rising anger with a much desired calm. Otherwise she suspected her foot would firmly go through the large screen.

A touch on her shoulder and she turned to look into Sestina's gentle eyes. Sighing, Sandy reached up to pat at the large fingers. "I'll be okay, pudding. It's a bald-faced lie, of course, but I'm trying."

It was then that she saw Tom solemnly approaching her, his eyes on the screen.

"I caught a program earlier this morning," he murmured. "The fact that Faye looked and sounded like Phyllis has brought all the conspiracy nuts out of hiding. According to them this entire thing is a hoax designed to set up a one-world government, with Dad and myself as the rulers."

"Oh good Lord---"

"They contend that you've been in secret negotiations with both Brungaria and Kranjovia."

Feeling her insides twisting, Sandy quickly drank down the rest of her milk. "Tom . . . I know I'm being obvious, but this is insane."

"I agree. Part of me wants to understand why this is happening. Then I hear about other things. Several laboratories and computer centers throughout the world have been firebombed."

"Oh no!"

Tom nodded. "It's felt that, if the Space Friends are doing this because of our inventiveness, then perhaps we'd all be spared if we eliminated all machines. Several people

have already called for an immediate end to air and space travel, as well as a global ban on internal combustion engines."

Sandy looked away.

Tom took a deep breath. "And Phyllis' house got burned down around midnight."

"Oh no . . ."

"Yeah," Tom said, staring darkly at the screen. "Police and FBI were keeping watch, but someone managed to get through with what looked like a homemade rocket propelled grenade."

"But Phyllis . . . Uncle Tom and Aunt Helen . . ."

Tom shook his head. "They're all safe at Enterprises."

"Tom . . . it hasn't even been a week since we found out about the Sun. Faye made her threat yesterday. How could things have deteriorated so fast?"

"I'm not a psychologist," Tom admitted. "Or a sociologist. Maybe things will calm down after the initial shock, although I privately doubt it. Some idiot in Denver has already released a 'Solar Explosion Countdown Clock' onto the internet." He looked steadily into Sandy's face. "This isn't how I remember people, Sandy. When the Space Friends first contacted us there was some concern, yeah. But there was also a lot of curiosity. None of this . . . this . . . embracing of raw stupidity."

"Are we going to move into Enterprises?"

Tom shrugged.

Sandy glanced down the hall. "Maybe we should at least consider getting Bingo somewhere safe," she murmured.

"Umm." Tom lightly tugged at his lower lip. "Yeah. Good thought. And Ken would definitely agree. I'd suggest he take Bingo down to Texas and hide out with their folks, but he might not to risk a cross-country trip." He seemed to grow distant . . . thoughtful.

"I know I was mopey last night," Sandy told him.

Tom grunted. "You had a right to be." His eyes once again met hers. "You also know you handled Faye a lot better than I would've."

It was on the tip of Sandy's tongue to shout out a rather profane term usually employed in describing bovine fecal matter. She struggled to keep in mind the possibility that her parents and the Hortons were still asleep, however, and settled for a whispered "You're nuts."

"So Phyllis says on occasion." Tom gazed at the screen, not seeing any of it. "You used to accuse yourself of being arrogant. But you're just an amateur compared to me."

"Tom---"

"All these years I thought I was the big expert on the Space Friends. I was going around passing myself off as having a firm connection with an intelligent extraterrestrial race. Well . . . my nose's been rubbed in it. Hard."

Sandy lightly touched his elbow. "Haven't we learned anything?"

A sigh. "Not too much. Oh! Yeah! Those magnetic `clouds' Sherman's been seeing on his sensors?"

Sandy nodded.

"I think they're localized space warps. It's how Ithaca manages to teleport in and out, and it's also how the saucer managed to suddenly appear, and then disappear. Which reminds me, there's been several more sightings of the saucers in the last seven hours."

"Let me guess," Sandy said to him. "They've been appearing in the cities where rioting has broken out."

"Yeah." A flicker of exasperation crossed his face. "It doesn't make sense, Sandy. At the rate things are going we'll do far more damage to ourselves than the . . . Space Friends could manage with their solartrons."

Sandy caught the pause which had appeared in Tom's voice before his use of the term "Space Friends". How high have the mighty fallen, she thought. And she remembered the shadowed look on her father's face when he recalled how the aliens had been responsible . . . perhaps indirectly . . . for the death of Barton Swift.

Further ruminations were interrupted by a sudden beeping, and Sandy and Tom turned to see a SwiftSpace icon blinking on the screen. Leaning forward, Tom touched a control.

The collected news broadcasts were replaced by the somewhat harried expression of Vera Millionspell calling from the Moon. "Oh there you are," she breathed. "I'm glad I managed to get you directly."

"What's wrong?" Tom asked.

Vera shook her head. "Actually I need Sandy. There's something going on with the kids."

Sandy moved closer to the screen. "What's going on?"

"They're having some sort of . . . oh, I don't know . . . a collective nightmare or something. Just over a half-hour ago they all began repeating the same word over and over again."

"What word?"

"The Russian word for `going'. Again and again."

Tom and Sandy glanced at each other. "Are they actually asleep and dreaming, Vera?" Sandy asked. "Or can you ask them what's wrong?"

"We don't really know if it's sleep or not, Sandy. We've tried distracting them, or calming them down and asking what's wrong. But they just go back to the same thing: going. The medical staff here's trying to tranquilize them, or at least find some way of calming them down."

"Is it just the kids on the Moon? There're a couple located elsewhere."

"We've contacted the space station," Vera said to her. "Faina's also chanting."

"What about on Nestria? Klara and Timofei?"

"We're still trying to get a clear signal through to Nestria. There's a problem with the communications link."

The frown on Tom's face deepened. "What sort of problem?"

"Contact with Nestria became erratic about forty-five minutes ago," Vera told him. "The last time I managed to talk with Preston he said something about mild seismic activity."

Going to the couch Tom sat down and reached for the controls set into the surface of the coffee table. His fingers moving across the keyboard he caused Vera's image to suddenly share screen space with several other images. Sandy recognized some of the data that Tom was calling up. Orbital charts . . . gravitational "footprints" and figures dealing with trajectories. Meanwhile, Tom Sr. and Mary, as well as Ken and Bingo . . . all of them obviously awakened by the alarm . . . were drifting into the living room.

Tom's eyes flicked across the information for several moments. Then he swore under his breath. "We've got to get in touch with the personnel on Nestria and order an evacuation," he said. "Immediately."

"What's wrong?" his father asked.

"Nestria's going to leave orbit."

Chapter Twenty-One: A Weapon Is Triggered.

Tom Sr. leaned closer, suddenly becoming more awake. "Are you certain?"

"Look at this," Tom said, pointing at the screen while, at the same time, causing one of the images to expand. "Precession variance. It's slight . . ."

His father frowned. "But we've seen that before. Back when Nestria was entering orbit around Earth. The adjustments and shifts before it settled." He straightened up. "God!"

"We may have a few hours," Tom Sr. muttered. "Maybe less." Using the controls, he shifted the images aside to once again bring Vera into the foreground. "Get Mackay awake," he ordered. "What ships have you got at Swiftbase now?"

Vera frowned in concentration. "Ah-hhh . . . Rhea."

"Tell Mackay I don't care how he does it, I want it launched and heading towards Nestria. He should have solid fuel strap-ons there, and you can launch fuel mules on a following trajectory. I'll be here if he wants to talk. Ken?" Tom looked over his shoulder. "Ken!"

Ken had already pulled out his phone. "I'm getting the station," he announced. "Oceanus should still be docked at the station, and I think Theia's arrived. I haven't checked with Gorsky recently. I take it . . ."

"Same thing. I don't care if Gorsky and the others have to push, I want those ships heading for Nestria. And have the station try to get through to Nestria. If they can then have

Gorsky tell everyone there to get into space as soon as possible. I wish I knew what ships were on Nestria."

"Ah-hhh, I know Coeus is. I think Phoebe's on its way."

"We'll just have to try, but I don't want anyone left behind. Junk all the weight and toss out anything that can be quickly tossed out, but get everyone on board. Dammit!"

Mary Swift didn't mind the profanity from her son. The less technically proficient person in the room (except perhaps Sestina), even she recognized the seriousness of the situation. Despite what some science-fiction shows would've had their audience believe, there was no way to just push a button and launch the giant rockets Enterprises used to transport people and cargo between Earth, Nestria and the Moon. Even with the repelatron launch system, such as what was used at the Swift space facility on the island of Loonau, the nuclear engines which provided the main thrust for the rockets still required preparation before they could be brought online.

If Nestria began moving before everyone could be evacuated . . .

She moved a little closer to Tom. "Are you certain Nestria's---"

He suddenly motioned for silence, and Mary saw Mackay Florian, the commander for Swiftbase, appearing on the screen. "Tom we can have Rhea in space in forty minutes with the strap-ons if we throw out the safety manual---"

"Throw it out," Tom declared. "Boost it on an approach towards Nestria and prep the main engines en route. And forget about the standard communication link. If you can manage it, use the megascope and pulse messages to Nestria that way. They've got to abandon the base and get out into space as soon as possible. Don't worry about having Rhea try to land on Nestria. Just tell the crew to make a careful approach and search for anyone who might be floating in space."

Mackay nodded and began calling out orders offscreen.

Ken now leaned over the couch to speak to Tom. "We've got a bit of luck. Gorsky says Theia's engines are still turning over. Mayrick'll be disengaging from the station and boosting for Nestria within fifteen minutes."

"Make it faster," Tom ordered.

"The docking port---"

"Can be repaired later. Tell Mayrick to get that ship moving."

Ken paused, then began rapidly speaking into his phone.

Tom leaned back, sighing.

"Indian givers," he muttered.

Sandy looked at him. "What?"

"It makes sense," Tom said tiredly. "The Space Friends have written off Earth, so they're recalling Nestria. Getting it out of harm's way."

Mary decided to try again. "But are you certain Nestria will leave orbit? Considering the way they've been acting so far, couldn't the aliens simply crash it into Earth and cause damage?"

"It doesn't work like that," Tom Sr. gently explained to his wife. He nodded over to the screen where some of the information Tom had called up was still visible. "The orbital eccentricity and perturbation figures are shifting towards an escape orbit. The numbers would be different if Nestria was in a descending orbit. And besides," he added, a distant storm entering his tone, "that's not what the aliens told us is in store for Earth."

"Dad!"

"Tom?"

"I don't know why my mind's so slow. Get a call up to Challenger and have the crew there prepare to break orbit. They could possibly get to Nestria faster than the rockets."

Ken lowered his phone. "Theia has undocked," he reported in an even voice to the back of Tom's head. "Severe damage to the docking port with loss of life support integrity throughout eighty per cent of Spoke Six." He paused a bit. "Everyone was on alert and in space suits, but there were injuries."

Sandy noticed how Tom continued staring at the screen, his expression stony.

Still on his call to the orbiting Challenger, Tom Sr. looked around, caught Sandy and Bingo with his eyes. "One of you call Roger Palfrey at the hotel," he murmured. "Better bring him up to speed."

Bingo nodded and was the first to pull out a phone.

Mackay Florian reappeared on the screen. "Got through to Nestria," he announced. Levon's going to try and get Coeus off into space, but it might be dicey. Everyone's in suits, and Levon's got an idea to have everyone attach themselves to solid fuel boosters and ride them out into space. They're spot-welding additional air tanks to the boosters---

"Tell him to do it," Tom announced. "Theia and Rhea will be there shortly and will make pickup. Make certain everyone's got beacons. If Levon can somehow launch Coeus in . . . twenty minutes, then tell him to continue working. Otherwise go with holding onto the boosters. We might be able to get Oceanus out there as well."

Sighing, Ken resumed speaking to his phone.

"We've got a bit of additional luck," Florian was now saying. "AstroDynamics just called and said they've got a ship en route to the Moon that can reconfigure for a Nestria rendezvous. It'll arrive in eight hours---

"That's good enough," Tom said, "and my thanks to the AstroDynamics crew."

Florian looked over some notes on a Tiny Idiot someone handed him. "Tom? Once we pick up everyone where do you want them?"

"Forget about bringing them back to Earth or the station," Tom said. "Take everyone to Swiftbase. I know you'll be cramped for room, but ask AstroDynamics and Japan Base if they'll take the overflow. Also use the pressurized section of the caverns if you have to."

Florian nodded.

"And now we wait," Tom muttered.

* * * * *

Ninety minutes later Nestria was a dwindling dot in the night sky as it moved out of Earth's orbit and headed deeper into space, gradually picking up speed from some unknown source of propulsion.

Of the two hundred and seventeen people who had been working on the moonlet, sixteen failed to make it into space and were still on Nestria when it departed.

Upon receiving the news Tom silently got up from the couch and went out into the backyard. It was at least an hour before he returned.

* * * * *

It was the middle of the afternoon when Sandy, finishing a call from Phyllis, looked up to see Bud entering the living room.

"How's . . ."

"Bout the same," Bud murmured, coming around to sit next to her. "He didn't want to talk to me. Your Mom and Sestina are the only ones he'll let in and, next to him, Sestina's a talking fool." He sighed.

Sandy shook her head. "I feel like I should be crying. I'm more numb than anything else."

Bud nodded, reaching for one of her hands. "Losing Lazarev was bad enough. Now this on top of everything else. You're right. This is a war of nerves. On top of threatening everyone on Earth the Space Friends are also trying to crack us individually."

"Not just us," Sandy said. "Phyllis was just giving me the latest updates. We'll be getting a delegation from Washington shortly."

"Oh . . ."

"Yes, I know. Tom's in no mood for something like that. But this isn't just about the solartrons. Or actually, it's related. The delegation wants to talk about the continued rioting and troubles and stuff going on around the world."

"I haven't looked at the news recently."

"The National Guard's been called out in several locations throughout the country," Sandy said. "There's been . . . breakdowns in local control all over. Neighborhoods are on fire in Detroit and New Orleans and Los Angeles. And that's just the domestic scene." Sandy rubbed at her face. "Rioting's going on in Jakarta and Mumbai."

"And what does this delegation want us to do about it?"

"Well," breathed Sandy, "for one thing they want us to be more visible than we have been."

"More visible?"

"Well, we've been trying to keep the world at arm's length while we figure something out. Apparently there's some sort of idea that things might calm down if we're more in the public eye. Making more statements to the press. Things like that."

"More visible as targets, y'mean."

"Was sort of hoping you wouldn't put it that way. Which reminds me." Sandy looked calmly over at Bud. "Am I going to get an explanation concerning the rather prominent bulge currently pressing against my thigh?"

"Oh. Yeah." Looking a bit sheepish, Bud eased aside a bit, the movement allowing Sandy a better look at the holstered pistol at his side. She gazed at it, recognizing the weapon as a Beretta 92.

"And just what do you intend to do with that?" she asked Bud.

"What I intend," Bud replied in a gently emphatic tone, "is to keep you from ending up as a rather attractive statistic on a morgue report."

Sandy almost smiled. "That's particularly sweet of you, dear. But, in the first place, we have all sorts of non-lethal protective devices to fall back upon---"

"Says the woman who hunted down both robots and Russians with a machine gun."

"---and in the second place," Sandy continued, primly ignoring him, "I wouldn't let Dad see that in the house."

"I'm well aware of your Dad's opinion concerning guns," Bud said. "And I'm even more aware of his opinion concerning you. He realizes that not only are you and your family on the hit parade of every vicious kook in the world, but let's not forget Ithaca."

"I'm not forgetting Ithaca," Sandy retorted. "And neither is he. But I don't think a 9x9 millimeter Parabellum cartridge is going to be very effective against an alien cyborg."

"Call it a security blanket, okay?"

Leaning over, Sandy kissed him on the cheek. "Just don't let it give you false confidence," she asked. "You'd make a handsome statistic, but I have other plans for you." Looking up she saw someone entering the house. "Hi, Dr. Palfrey."

Accompanied by Sherman, Roger Palfrey nodded and came closer. "Got some more information for your father." He looked around. "I guess everything's still pretty sour here."

"That'd be putting it mildly," Sandy told him. "But you just missed Dad. I know he took a call from you a little while ago, but he stepped out to go to Enterprises."

"Without an escort?" Sherman asked.

"Bud saw Dad leave with some of your people when he arrived," Sandy assured him.

Sherman managed to calm down a bit. "Life's a bit easier now that I've got Phyllis and her folks under wraps. I'll really feel better when you and the others decide to move on into Enterprises."

"Me too," Bud added.

"A girl could really appreciate all this concern," Sandy said. "Were you expecting Dad here?" she asked Roger.

"I thought I was," the scientist said. "He really seemed to want to see what I had. But I guess that, with all that's happened today, he might be a bit distracted."

"What d'you have?" Bud asked.

Roger indicated a Tiny Idiot he was holding. "In your talk with Faye she mentioned something about the solartrons being triggered by a `single focused burst'. That got me to thinking what she meant by it. A burst from where? What sort of burst?"

"I was talking to Morris Griet over at the Prairie View observatory in Texas. His people had been working on an idea for a maser capable of providing detailed scans of the solartrons. But the more we talked the more I became concerned that this, or something like this, could be the triggering `burst' that Faye mentioned. If the solartrons are going to be set off by a transmission from beyond the Sun, then it'd have to be some sort of highly concentrated emission."

Sandy frowned. "Would Griet's super-maser be powerful enough to do that?"

"I don't know," Roger replied. "Admittedly it's just a concern I'm knocking about. But what really set off alarms in my head was that I already knew of a machine capable of sending concentrated emissions to the Sun."

"Ohhh," Bud said. "The megascope space prober."

Roger nodded. "Especially with the electrostatic lens configuration Tom developed from Harley. With that in mind I was suggesting to Mr. Swift that, for the time being, we should refrain from further observations of the Sun using the megascope, or any similar system. Your father wanted to look over my notes."

"But he's not here now," Sandy mused. "Sherman?"

Sherman touched the frame of his glasses, activating the communication link, and Sandy and the others could see information flickering on the lenses.

"I show your Dad entering Enterprises eleven minutes ago," he said to Sandy. "Without his Security escort."

Something cold raced through Sandy's head. Apparently it was contagious because she noticed Bud, Sherman and Roger growing tense.

Sherman was murmuring to the audio pickup in his glasses. "Okay," he told the others, "I sent out an alert that your father had . . ."

Bud held up three fingers.

"Three of my people with him. They're starting a search. So far Pico's spotting nothing on video surveillance. But your father was definitely noted entering Enterprises."

Sandy rose from the couch. "Let's go."

Bud joined her. "We tell your Mom?"

"I got a feeling we'd better move fast. Ken and Bingo and Sestina will be here, and we can call on the way over." Going outside, the four of them headed to atomicar, with Sherman shouting orders to the security people still on duty.

Bud took the driver's seat and, following the mood of the others, elected to take off into the air and fly as fast as possible towards the research complex.

Halfway to Enterprises Sherman suddenly became attentive to what his glasses were reporting. "Bud? Land near Building 3."

Bud nodded.

"What's up?" Sandy asked.

"We've found your Dad's escort," Sherman told her. "But not your Dad."

The coldness inside Sandy grew deeper. Moments later Bud was bringing the atomicar down to a landing, and everyone could see several security teams gathered around a side entrance to Building 3 (Electronics Research).

Trying to keep herself calm, but knowing she was failing miserably, Sandy was the first out of the car. Closely followed by Sherman she raced over to where the largest crowd of people were gathered.

Seeing her approach (and with Sherman close behind), the people parted, making a direct opening to the center of attracting. Sandy could see two Enterprises medical technicians in "Paradoc" gear examining three men who were lying on the ground. All of them were wearing security badges.

One of the technicians looked up at Sandy and Sherman. "Concussion," he reported. "All of them. We'll be moving them to the infirmary in a bit. Two of them were fully unconscious when we arrived, but this one here . . . Morales . . . managed to say something before passing out."

"And?" Sherman asked.

"It was Mr. Swift," the technician said. "Morales said Mr. Swift suddenly attacked."

Chapter Twenty-Two: A Weapon Is Stopped.

Sandy and Bud looked at each other.

"No," whispered Sandy.

"We don't know for certain," Bud replied.

"It was your Dad when he left the house with Morales and the others," Sherman pointed out to Sandy. "A cyborg or an alien couldn't have switched places with him without their knowing."

"Unless it wasn't Dad to begin with," Sandy told him. "Unless . . ."

Sherman listened to his glasses for a few moments. "Launch drones and have them visually sweep the area," he said to the audio pickup. "Get teams out on the grounds and begin a systematic patrol directed out from Gate 3. Move!"

Sandy meanwhile was running back to the atomicar.

Bud, Sherman and Roger raced after her, barely managing to climb back in as she powered the vehicle up and sped off towards Gate 3. "I know you're panicking," Bud was telling Sandy, "and I know you've got a perfect right to do so. But we've got to try and figure this out. Are we following your father, or an alien?"

Sandy was trying to swallow the feeling of snakes wrestling in her stomach. "I don't know," she said, nodding to the gate guard who waved her on through. "Either way we've got to find him." She took another breath. "But you're right, of course. Even if it's not Dad then he's definitely up to something and we can't just wander around aimlessly hoping we'll see him." She slowed the atomicar a bit, trying to think. "Why now? What set him off?" She glanced up at Roger's image in the rearview mirror. "Can you remember Dad saying anything odd when you talked with him?"

Roger shook his head. "Nothing at all. The conversation got around to the possibility that the solartrons could be triggered by emissions from a megascope, and Mr. Swift asked to see my notes . . ."

Sandy suddenly stopped the car and spent a few moments pondering.

"Observatory," she said, turning the car south. Driving through the grove of trees they reached the domed building.

Of Mr. Swift there was no sign, but Bud pointed. "Over there."

Following his gaze Sandy drove closer to something which was barely visible near the entrance of the observatory. As they climbed out they saw it was a man lying crumpled close against the shadowed portion of the short staircase leading into the building.

"That's one of your astronomers," Roger pointed out to Sandy. "John Putnam. Your Dad introduced us."

Sherman bent down, performed a brief examination of the man. "Unconscious but alive," he said. "Apparently we're on the right trail here." He touched his glasses. "I want teams converging on the observatory," he ordered. "That includes Medical." He then straightened up. "Dr. Palfrey? Wait here by Dr. Putnam and direct the medicos to him when they arrive." His eyes then moved to the observatory entrance. "In the meantime . . ."

"Wait," Sandy said. "Roger? The solartrons aren't fully charged yet. At least not if we believe what Faye told me. If they were discharged now what would the effect be on the Earth?"

Roger looked as if he didn't want to really answer the question. "The effect of a massive focused solar emission directed at Earth?" he slowly replied. "It might not be as destructive as what the Space Friends intend, but it's all apples and oranges. The difference between killing the entire human race, and maybe killing only one-fifth of the population." He frowned slightly. "You think that's what your Dad intends?"

"It's not my Dad," Sandy snapped back hotly. Seeing Roger's reaction she caught herself and tried to calm down. "I'm sorry. I . . . don't know. I just . . ."

Turning suddenly she headed for the entrance, Bud and Sherman close behind her. As cautiously as possible they eased on into the building.

Inside the lobby was cool, dark and quiet.

"Dad?" Sandy called out, immediately realizing how senseless the action was. But her common sense was wrestling with her heart, and common sense was losing.

She was trying to debate whether or not to take the stairs or the elevator when a tentacle of yellow foam shot out from the shadows by the stairway. It barely missed Sandy but firmly struck Sherman in the chest, throwing him back against the wall and pinning him to it.

Sandy and Bud were still dealing with the shock of the attack when Tom Sr. suddenly lunged out at them from the shadows. A second later and his fist caught Bud smartly against the side of his head. With a moan Bud collapsed.

Shock upon shock piled within Sandy's mind, and she felt as if she were swimming through syrup as she turned towards her father. "Dad?"

The look he gave her seemed calm. But Sandy noticed the eyes and saw something she had only seen before in mirrors some time ago. Back in the days when she had been suffering from amphetamine addiction. The same wired expression. But there was something deeper . . . something which seemed to be crawling around inside his head.

All this took only a moment. Then, before Sandy could do or say anything else, he had turned and ran towards the stairs, quickly disappearing upwards.

Sandy's first impulse was to run after him, but she remembered Bud. Quickly going to one knee she checked for a pulse, finding it.

She then looked at Sherman, seeing him struggle to free himself from the grip of the adhesive anti-personnel round.

"Go after him," he said to her. "The others'll be along in a bit and they can get me out of this."

Sandy nodded and began turning towards the stairwell.

"Sandy."

She looked back and saw the cold anguish on Sherman's face.

"It's not an alien. It's really your father."

Sandy knew what he meant and, as if in a dream, she knelt back down and removed the Beretta from the holster Bud wore. "Yes," she whispered. "I know."

"Sandy . . ."

Ignoring him she went on to the stairs and, gingerly peering upwards to make certain that the coast was clear, began moving towards where she knew she had to go. The observatory itself, where the megascope was located.

Of course it was really her father, her mind was crying. It explains the way this entire situation was set up. It's why Dad didn't stop me. Oh please, Jesus, help me.

She thought it was taking slow hours to make the journey up the stairs, expecting (and hoping) at any moment to have her father suddenly appear and try to struggle. There would've been a chance with a struggle. A hope.

But in reality it only took a few minutes for Sandy to soundlessly slip through the doorway at the top of the stairwell and enter the foyer which surrounded the dome. Pausing just before the entrance she examined the scene before her.

Tom Sr. was at the controls to the megascope, his back to her. A distance of some ten meters. Above him both the megascope and the observatory dome had been properly aligned to allow the instrument to point directly at the Sun. Meanwhile Sandy could hear the sound of the megascope powering up.

Sandy silently assessed the situation, judging how long it would take her to cross the distance to her father and pull him away from the controls. She could see him tapping settings into the computer. Near his fingers the "activation" button still had its safety cover.

Pressing herself back against the wall Sandy tensed, getting ready to bolt across the floor. All she needed was a few moments . . .

But then Tom Sr.'s hand moved across a button, and a latticed metal security barrier lowered over the entrance. Sandy immediately halted, less than a heartbeat away from colliding hard against the barrier.

Tom Sr. never looked back but continued working.

Sandy stared at him. "Dad."

Silence.

Sandy took a breath. "I know why this is happening. I know what I'm supposed to do, but please fight it. Please don't let them win this."

More silence.

Feeling the tears leaking from her eyes, Sandy anxiously looked around. "Faye, don't do this," she pleaded out loud. "This isn't a game. Please, Faye. We're not toys, dammit."

Nothing, and Sandy's mind was screaming at the security people and the Medical team she knew were probably downstairs. Didn't any of them have Spinners or something similar she could use? And why oh why didn't she have her usually ever-present Snooper with her?

Her mind screamed back that she knew why things were the way they were now. Why the gun in her hand was such a demanding weight.

But she shook her head. "No."

Even as she watched her father calmly reach over and raise the safety cover to the "activation" button she shook her head. "No!"

One-fifth of the world's population, Roger had said.

"I won't do it," Sandy insisted, even while her hand was raising the gun.

The sound of the megascope was keening towards release.

"Daddy . . ."

Tom Sr.'s hand was moving towards the button.

"Don't make me do this," Sandy cried out to him. "Please."

The hand paused, began lowering.

"Please, Daddy," Sandy shrieked, aiming the gun through the latticework of the barrier. She had a clear shot and couldn't miss. "Oh God, please!"

He was definitely going to press the button, and no one was going to arrive to help Sandy. The decision was very much in her hand, hard and metallic.

With a single choked cry she pulled the trigger.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Pieces.

She was sitting on the floor when Bud and Sherman found her, sobbing, her head down against her knees. The gun had been kicked across the floor.

Sherman quickly directed the men who followed him to get the barrier raised and attend to Tom Sr. Bud meanwhile knelt close by Sandy. "Honey---"

"NO," she shrieked wildly, trying to tear away from him. "NO, NO, NO . . ."

Bud struggled to hang onto her, to calm her down. "You did okay, Sandy. You did good--"

"They wanted me to kill Daddy," she wailed. "They wanted me to kill my own father!"

"But you didn't," Sherman remarked, staring across the observatory floor. "It looks like you made a clean shot directly at the primary computer directly next to Uncle Tom. Totally disabled the megascope, preventing it from firing."

"That's not what they wanted me to do. You know that."

Looking around, Bud nodded at one of the medical technicians to come closer. The man immediately understood and reached out to Sandy, the tip of a pneumatic injector already appearing through one of the fingers of his Paradoc harness. Sandy was so distraught she never noticed the finger pressing against her, not until the tranquilizer dose had already been injected and was doing its work, sending her into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Once again Sandy knew where she was before she opened her eyes.

"I'm really getting tired of this," she muttered.

Then the memories rushed in all at once and she sat up in bed, wild-eyed. "DADDY!"

"Is all right," Dr. Emerson said, coming to the bedside. "He's next door. When you shot the megascope control panel he caught some fragments, and he picked up a few mild burns on a hand from some electrical sparks, but that's all . . . wait! Whoa!"

But Sandy was already out of bed and rushing barefoot out of the room.

Tom Sr. was indeed in the next room, Mary next to him holding his hand. They both looked up as Sandy blustered in.

Her father produced a wan smile. "There's Deadshot Swift . . . oh! Hey!"

Sandy had thrown herself upon the bed and was clinging to him, sobbing uncontrollably. With Mary reaching out to touch her daughter's hair, Tom Sr. held Sandy close, slowly stroking her back.

"It's okay, Princess," he murmured to her. "It's okay."

"It's not," her muffled reply came from somewhere against his chest.

"You did the right thing," he assured her. "You thought it out and saved the day." Tom Sr. gave his wife a look and Mary nodded, silently getting up and mouthing endearments to him before leaving the room.

After a few minutes the crying eventually reduced itself to gulps and sniffs. Sandy raised a bleary face to her father. "Are you all right?"

Tom Sr. considered it. "All things being equal I've had better days. I'm just not used to being possessed by an alien intelligence."

"I'm stupid," Sandy declared.

"Honey, you're not---"

"I'm stupid. When Faye disappeared she told me exactly what her plan was. She told me the end would be `swift'. I just didn't think she meant it literally."

"I don't think their ultimate aim was to have everything end right at that moment," Tom Sr. pointed out.

Sandy adjusted herself into a sitting position on the bed.

"Like you said," Tom Sr. continued, "the aliens are watching us closely. I think they noticed things like Roger Palfrey's theory concerning the megascope, as well as Bud having a gun, and they saw an opportunity to try something."

"They wanted to see if I'd actually kill my own father," Sandy replied dully. She sighed. "It's why you stopped Sherman and Bud but not me. They wanted me to be the only piece in play

on the board. I wonder now what would've happened if I hadn't taken the gun up to the observatory with me?"

"Regardless, shooting it was a good move. Drastic, but good. I've already sent out severe instructions to have all megascopes rendered inoperable until further notice. It may not have been the original intention to have it fired off at the solartrons now, but it could very well be their eventual intention. If they could possess me then it'd be a simple matter for them to do it again some other time."

Sandy nodded. Then she noticed the intent way her father was gazing at her. "What?"

Tom Sr. took a deep breath. "I asked your mother to leave the room so that she could get back to arranging our move into Enterprises."

"Oh! So we're doing it?"

A nod. "Things are getting worse, Princess. But I also wanted a chance to talk privately with you, where your mother wouldn't hear." His hand reached out to cover hers. "Listen to me, Sandra. Listen. We were lucky this time. Very lucky. But if the situation arises again, and if you find yourself in a similar position---

"Dad---

"Don't hesitate and try to make a choice. Don't choose me over the world."

Temperature rose within Sandy. "No!"

"Sandra Helene---

"No!" She shook her head emphatically. "Don't ask me to do that, Daddy. I'll never do it. Ever!"

"You almost did," he gently pointed out.

"They had their chance," Sandy declared. "They had their shot. Literally."

They stared at each other for several moments. Then Tom Sr. sighed and patted her hand. "Okay, Princess. We'll talk about it later. And I'll trust you to do the right thing, whatever it is."

Sandy felt like changing the subject. "You said things out there were worse."

Tom Sr. nodded grimly. "Paris has been hit with nuclear weapons."

"Oh God . . ."

"Saucers appeared over France. Nuclear-capable aircraft from the Charles de Gaulle were launched and fired off three missiles. All three missiles were deflected and they ended up striking Paris. A four hundred and fifty kiloton blast . . ."

Sandy squeezed her eyes shut.

Watching her, Tom Sr. made the decision to give her the rest of it. "Rioting and fires are widespread in Dallas, Miami, Los Angeles and several other cities. Trouble's also breaking out in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and New York City. There're incidents of military uprisings throughout Africa and the Middle East, as well as a severe rise in suicides---

"Stop!"

Tom Sr. paused, then changed the subject slightly. "We're not just moving in here because we're personally being threatened," he said. "We've been advised by Washington to take all necessary precautions. The President, along with many high-ranking members of Congress, and that includes the Commission, are preparing to evacuate to the Emergency Operations Center on Mount Weather until the crisis passes."

Sandy looked at him sharply. "This'll pass, Dad, when the Earth is gone."

"We're still working, Princess---"

"I know we're still working," Sandy said. "I know we'll probably work until we're all roasted by the Sun. But they can play with our minds. I don't know . . . maybe there are limits to their technology and they can't totally control all minds at once. Only make suggestions on a global basis, like Faye said. But they have the power to take us out at any time they choose."

"I know." Tom Sr. was quietly noticing that Sandy was no longer a sobbing wreck, but calm and in control. Angry, but still in control.

She was now looking as if she was twisting a thought inside her head. "What do they want, Dad? I know Faye explained it, but it doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't to us. But we've got to remember what Roger said. It's useless to think of the Space Friends in human terms. Their minds, their whole system of ethics and behavior are obviously so different---"

"God," Sandy remarked.

Her father blinked. "What?"

"Something I always wondered back when I was in Sunday School," Sandy remarked, her eyes looking elsewhere. "All my life I was taught that God was supremely powerful. Created the entire universe in six days. Capable of doing practically anything. So why was He always so upset at the way people thought, and the things that people did? Did we actually threaten Him? If God is so powerful, then why are we so significant?"

She turned her eyes back to her father. "It's the same with the aliens, Daddy. Technically they might as well be gods as far as we're concerned. But we threaten them. We somehow represent a danger to the entire galaxy." She shook her head. "It doesn't make sense."

"Seldom does," Bud said, entering into the room. He didn't stop but kept on moving, and Sandy rose from the bed to smoothly enter his arms.

"You definitely feel better now," Bud told her when the kiss ended. He then looked over her shoulder at Tom Sr. "Tom wanted me to tell you he'll have a complete workup of the space situation within the hour."

Tom Sr. nodded. "I should be out of here by then."

Sandy looked from one to the other. "What's going on?"

"We're just putting together some special contingency plans," Bud said. "Something your Dad suggested."

"Contingency plans," Sandy said half to herself. A sort of determination appeared on her face and her lips tightened. "Yeah."

"What's up?"

Looking as calm as possible, Sandy let a fingertip slowly move up and down Bud's chest. "I think you should go out to California and get your folks," she said carefully to his throat.

"Well, yeah---"

"In fact, I think you should stay close with them and make certain they're okay."

"Sandy I'd naturally do that---"

"And keep as far away from me as possible," Sandy let out in a single breath.

The silence that followed hit the room like a bomb.

Then Bud gently touched Sandy's chin and raised her face to his. "All right," he told her carefully. "Let's have all of it."

Sandy was working to keep herself calm. "I don't want you to get hurt," she said to him.

"Sandy---"

"I don't want you to get hurt!" she declared emphatically.

Bud stared into the blue eyes, seeing the storm behind them. He then remembered Tom Sr. watching them from his bed. "Okay Lady," he told Sandy. "Outside."

"Bud---"

"You and I are gonna have a fight. C'mon." Taking Sandy's hand he led her out of the room.

Behind them Tom Sr. shook his head, reminding himself that young people had to fight their own battles.

Out in the hallway Bud guided Sandy to a lounge alcove near a window. "All right, Sandra. From the top."

"They almost got my Dad," Sandy said to him, still working to stay in control. "The next time they might try for you. I don't want that to happen---"

"And it won't." Reaching out he held her by her upper arms. "I told you once that I'd never let anything get you." He gave the arms a mild squeeze. "I promised."

"I believe you, darling---"

"And we'll figure something out and save the Earth---"

Sandy was shaking her head. "That's got nothing to do with it. You forget, Bud, that I'm under sentence of death. Ithaca's still out there, and I'm pretty certain she won't wait for the solartrons to be triggered. I'll be dead before that happens . . . killed by her."

"No."

Her voice almost broke. "And I don't want you to see that." Her eyes were slowly filling. "Oh my love, I don't want you to remember me that way."

"Sandy---"

They embraced.

"I don't want this to end," Sandy whispered, drawing in as much reassurance from his arms as she could. "You can't imagine how much I need this. How much I need you. But as much as it'd hurt . . . and I know Ithaca will make it as painful as possible . . . it'll hurt even more if I know you're there when . . . it happens."

"Sandy---"

"Please, darling, just go. Now! Please! I can tell the others---"

"No!" Once again he looked down into her eyes. "The only way I'm going to leave you is if Ithaca kills me first, which is the way it'll have to happen. I'm sorry, Sandy. If it breaks your heart or makes you hate me then I'm sorry, but Ithaca is going to have to go through me if she wants to get to you."

"Beloved---"

It was then they saw Sherman moving towards them.

"M'sorry," he said. "I know I've probably interrupted something important, but we've got a situation going."

"What?" Sandy asked.

"Apparently a group of rioters from several locations throughout the area have organized enough to march on Enterprises. Right now there's about three hundred people about to storm the main gate."

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Most Incredible Miss In the World.

Some mornings, Sandy thought, it just isn't worth getting out of bed. "Where's Tom?"

To her surprise Sherman looked a bit hesitant. "He's . . . still a little out of it because of Nestria."

"Oh Lord." Was that today? No wonder I feel like I've been running up a mountain. "Is he at least on the premises?"

"Ken went to pick up Tom, Bingo and Sestina. They spotted the crowd gathering at the same time the police reports started coming in. They're racing back here in an Omnicopter but

they're taking sort of a wide path around to avoid trouble and will come in low over the lake. And yes," he added, nodding at Sandy's expression, "I've got people watching the lake in case this group coming to the front gate's just a diversion."

"Ummmm." Sandy glanced back towards her father's room, her mind racing.

Bud and Sherman saw her expression, the two of them recognizing what was going on. "Sandy," Bud warned.

"Let's go see the crowd first," Sandy said. She noticed the looks on their faces. "I just want to assess the situation before reporting back to Dad. He's got enough on his mind right now."

Including a crazy daughter, Bud thought, but he and Sherman obediently followed close behind Sandy out of the Enterprises infirmary.

Outside they met Mary and Sestina.

"Did you see---" Mary began.

Sandy nodded. "Where's Tom?"

"Helen, Ned and Phyllis are taking him to the Sky Queen. He's . . ."

Sorrow painted her face and Sandy reached out to touch her cheek. "Okay. Go up and tell Dad what's going on. Where's Ken?"

"Taking Bingo to one of the HOW2's for safety."

Sandy put her mind into overdrive. "Okay. Go tell Dad what's going on. We're gonna go see how bad it is and report back."

"Sandra---"

But Sandy was already sprinting for one of the electric utility carts used to move around the Enterprises grounds, Bud and Sherman at her heels. Watching her go, Mary sighed and indicated to Sestina that she should join them. With a nod the giant loped after them, her legs allowing her to rapidly catch up.

With the four of them in the cart, Sandy drove off towards the Enterprises main gate; Bud sitting next to her and Sestina bouncing along in the rear. In the middle Sherman was calling out instructions and listening to the reports coming in through his glasses. Glancing up, Sandy could see Enterprises security personnel whizzing overhead in Werewasp suits while, higher up, Omnicopters could be seen airborne and heading in the same direction.

Reaching the gate Sandy could already see a large number of security officers lined up inside the tall fence which surrounded the complex. All of them were wearing protective armor and carried Speedbump carbines. Several of the larger security vehicles were also visible close to the fence and the gate.

The sun had set and bright security lights and portable searchlights were on, shining in the direction of the trees which formed much of the border around the research station. Following the direction of the lights Sandy could clearly make out large clumps of people starting to converge near the closed gate. Even with the sound of the aircraft overhead she could hear the shouts from the growing crowd.

"How did these people get here without being spotted earlier?"

"I asked Zoot the same question," Sherman replied. "Apparently they bypassed Shopton and came in using Metter and Winding Road. A whole convoy of trucks and other vehicles. They parked out in the trees and walked the rest of the way. Zoot's got cars and officers at the other end of the crowd, trying to disperse them."

Shaking her head, Sandy brought the cart to a stop and climbed out. Followed by the others she approached the nearest crowd of security people, her eyes still taking in the sight. So many people, and she could already feel the tension in the air.

Ugly, she thought. This could get so ugly.

It was an unreal situation. Enterprises had always been the good guys. A high level of security was one thing. Keeping out vandals and professional thieves and such was one thing. But no one ever expected a siege.

Realistically Sandy knew that the fence surrounding Enterprises couldn't be easily broken or penetrated. She also knew that the Speedbumps fired only non-lethal adhesive crowd control rounds.

But still . . . but still . . .

Someone would think of ramming the fence. Or the gate. Someone might have a bulldozer or something similar and try to smash through. Sandy also remembered the bomb she had found at her house, plus the burning down of Phyllis' home. What if someone in this crowd had similar weapons? Or what if one of Zoot's officers panicked?

She could now make out specific words in the shouting. Stop it, people were yelling. Stop bringing the aliens. Stop threatening us. Don't kill us all.

Sandy turned to Sherman. "Someone's gonna get hurt."

"Yeah," Bud muttered. "Probably us."

Sherman had been talking to some of his officers and he now turned to Sandy and Bud. "I'm in contact with Zoot and her people. They're trying, but it's pretty wild out there. You've got people with cellphones and stuff taking videos of all this. Everyone's getting really worked up. Right now it's just a major protest, and I've given out orders that no one is to fire unless it looks as if they're going to try and climb the fence."

Sandy shook her head. "Even so it's going to get very bad, Sherman."

"I can order the Omnicopters to try and use their downwash to disperse the crowd."

"And that'd only delay the inevitable," Sandy argued. "Remember they're out there taking videos of everything that happens. We don't want the world seeing us taking steps like that."

"Do you want the world to see us get overrun and stomped?"

Sandy and Sherman stared hotly at each other for a few moments.

Then Sandy looked around, spotted something. "Sherman you've got your glasses. You also got a communicator?"

Nodding, Sherman passed it over to her.

"Do you have loudspeakers? If I speak into this can you broadcast what I say to the crowd?"

"Sandy," Bud cried.

Sandy ignored him.

Sherman looked as if he was tempted to debate further. But he nodded. "Yes."

"Okay." Turning, Sandy started towards where a large flatbed truck had been parked close to the gate. "When I get up there have all the lights turned on me and get ready to broadcast."

Bud and Sestina followed as Sandy reached the truck, climbing onto it.

Bud tugged at her. "Just what are you---"

"I've got to try something," she snapped. "This whole thing is disorganized. I'm going to try focusing it."

Once on the truck she was less than ten steps away from the gate. On the other side was the largest concentration of the screaming, jostling crowd. They hadn't spotted her yet but, moments later, Sandy was clearly visible, painted in light from all sources as Sherman's orders were carried out.

At the sight of her a large ahhhhhh rippled outwards through the crowd, and Sandy oddly felt the way she did back when she participated in a high school recital. Back then she thought the crowd had been hostile.

Compared to this, though . . .

A silence slowly began growing, and all eyes were turned upon her as she slowly stepped to the edge of the truck closest to the gate. A brief shifting of the truck, and Sandy glanced back to see Bud and Sestina also climbing on. But only she was pointed out in light.

Even in the glare Sandy could see what seemed to be countless faces. All the anger and the fear and the uncertainty. She could see the little glistening faces of the cellphones and other video devices. Inside she was wondering if any of the people she knew in Shopton were in the crowd? Neighbors and friends and people she'd known for years.

A voice suddenly cried out from beyond the gate. "It's her!"

Sandy raised the communicator, and her voice boomed out to the crowd. "Yes . . . it's me!"

A blanket of murmurs in reply.

Sandy struggled for calm, tried to stare out at everyone. "All of you. You know who I am!"

Another moan from someone in the crowd. "Oh my God!"

"You know who I am!" Sandy repeated. Then something caused her to add: "You know what that means."

One single heartbeat of silence.

Then it happened quickly. A distant crack from the darkness. Almost too faint to hear. At the same instant Sandy's head snapped back as if she'd been violently slapped, and she was knocked down hard upon the truck.

A scream from the crowd. Then another. Then several more as the crowd suddenly began breaking up. Sirens and flares . . . lights coming down from the hovering Omnicopters . . . Werewasps swooping down as the crowd turned and, almost as one, started rushing back into the trees and disappearing. From the darkness the increasing sight of pulsating blue lights as the cars of Shopton police began moving in.

Bud and Sestina and Sherman noticed none of it as they immediately rushed towards Sandy. Bud reached her first, taking her into his arms and feeling the blood from her head. "God!" he moaned. "God---"

"Medics," Sherman screamed out. "Now!"

* * * * *

This time, when Sandy awoke, she immediately sensed something was odd. An unusual sort of pressure against the right side of her head.

Her eyes fluttered open and she was seeing what she knew should've been a familiar sight by now: a sea of concerned faces surrounding her . . . even Tom and Bingo, as well as the ashen expression on both her parents, and especially on Bud.

"Wh-what . . ."

"Lie still," Bud murmured to her. "Just lie still."

His voice was sounding peculiar. Not just from concern, but as if she were listening to an audio track that was somehow off kilter. Carefully reaching up she could feel the extensive bandage on the right side of her head.

"It's okay," Dr. Emerson said, leaning into view. He then looked apologetic. "I mean, it's not entirely okay . . . but you'll pull through." In a mutter he added, "Once again."

"What happened?" And now her voice, as well as Emerson's, sounded a bit weird.

Emerson sighed. "Someone took a shot at you." His face shadowed. "Small wonder about that," he went on in a tone which clearly said you colossal idiot. "Your right ear was torn clean off your head."

"Oh." It was on the tip of Sandy's tongue to remark: it'll grow back. But she reminded herself that ears didn't grow back.

No wonder her mother looked as if she'd been crying.

Her eyes searched for Sherman, spotted him.

He immediately understood. "When you got shot the crowd panicked. But it was the sort of panic that made people want to get away fast. Our people are working with the police, trying to track down the ringleaders and such, but it's like holding water in a leaky bucket."

"You've lost some blood," Emerson told her, "and obviously you're still in some shock. But you just rest there for now and get better. The crisis has passed . . . for the time being . . . and we've got some breathing room."

"Everyone's here at Enterprises now," her father assured her, his voice trying to remain level. "We're all safe. Just lie there, honey and rest up."

"I'll be here with you," Bud promised, bending to kiss her. "I'll sit up with you and keep you company. We all will."

Sandy felt her mind trying to wind down and guessed she was doped up on painkillers and numerous other medications. With a small nod she allowed herself to lie back against the pillow, her eyes closing.

One ear left, her fading thoughts considered. Well . . .

Around her the crowd began backing away a bit (with the exception of Bud, as well as Sestina who quietly took up position near the bed).

Sherman took in Tom and Tom Sr. with a look, indicating that they should follow him outside.

In the hallway Sherman turned to them. "I'm still in contact with Zoot," he told them softly. "Obviously we'd like to get our hands on whoever shot Sandy---"

"So would I," Tom Sr. said ominously, while Tom nodded agreement.

Sherman sighed. "I don't want to make it sound as if Sandy was being reckless, or suicidal." He paused, considering his remarks. "Well . . . okay, I'll admit to reckless. But deep deep down, and being as coldly logical as possible, she made the most practical move in regards to dispersing the crowd. What happened to her punctured the tension and drove the crowd away. On top of that, anyone who was watching the videos, or who'll see the videos, saw an unarmed woman being gunned down."

"She could've been killed," Tom Sr. pointed out.

Sherman turned large serious eyes to him. "Oh?"

Tom Sr. saw the expression and forced himself to swallow his protests. "All right," he finally said. "Go on."

"I've talked it over with the others at the gate," Sherman explained. "As near as we can determine, Sandy was shot by someone in the back of the crowd. That's way in the back of the crowd. Perhaps well hidden among the trees. Our best guess is the shot was made from a range of one thousand yards. Maybe eleven hundred.

"Sandy was a clearly visible target. To kill her from a distance of one thousand yards would have been difficult for most people, but not impossible. To just clip an ear off of her," Sherman shook his head. "Either our mysterious sniper made the most incredible miss in the world . . . or he was good enough and professional enough and that was his intention."

"What are you saying?" Tom Sr. asked.

"I'm saying that maybe we've met our sniper before. Like perhaps on the roof of the Senate Office Building."

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Blueprints of Despair.

"I've a mind to have you tied to the bed and sedated," Dr. Emerson said.

"Thanks," Sandy replied as she pulled the grey tunic down over her, "but I usually don't go that far on a first date."

No answer and she glanced back over to see him and Nurse Wilhelm, the two of them standing in the doorway and scowling at her.

"People used to laugh at my little attempts at humor," Sandy muttered, smoothing her clothes over herself. She then frowned a bit. "Am I eventually going to get adjusted to this new way of hearing?"

"We can have you fitted for a prosthetic ear."

"Oh I just bet you could." Sandy reached for her shoes.

Emerson stepped into the room. "Sandy, you've been through a traumatic episode---"

"Par for the course, wouldn't you say?"

Emerson paused then tried again. "A great many people . . . and I'm definitely one of them . . . would appreciate you spending a few more days in bed."

"Well there you have it," Sandy said with a bit of a sigh. She turned to face Emerson. "A few more days is the sort of luxury we really don't have anymore, do we?" With one hand she indicated the nearby window. "It's a bright new morning . . . well, afternoon anyway. The sun is shining, the birds are singing and everyone on Earth has about seventy-four days left to live."

"I understand the---"

"One thousand, seven hundred and seventy-six hours."

"Sandra---"

"Tick, tick, tick . . ."

"All right," Emerson told her. He turned to Wilhelm. "Go ahead and clear this patient. Lord knows she never listened to me before. Now, with one ear gone, what chance do I have?"

"Be positive," Sandy said to him.

"I am. I'm positive you won't listen to me."

Smiling a bit, Sandy strolled on past them and out the door.

* * * * *

Minutes later she poked her head into the doorway of her father's office. "Milk below!"

Tom Sr. looked up at her. "Out of bed and out of the Infirmary. Why in the world am I not surprised?"

Sandy was trying not to visibly react to the fact that her father seemed tragically older. "I was lonely," she admitted, keeping her tone light as she entered the office. "No one came to see me when I was conscious, and this place feels deserted."

"It pretty much is," her father replied. He was sitting at his desk and Sandy noted how it was covered with charts and his Tiny Idiot. "After last night we concluded that we might not be so lucky next time and made the decision to start evacuating all but the most necessary personnel." A tired sigh. "A lot of them have families, and some of them might want to head to safer locations."

Sandy was curious as to where on Earth one could find a safer location, but decided to put it aside for the time being and took a seat across the desk from her father. "What about Tom and the others?"

"On the Sky Queen, along with the Newtons and Sestina. We've got a room ready for you there as well."

"Ummmm." Sandy looked around idly. "The quarters on the Sky Queen are nice but, if you don't mind, I'll shack up in a HOW2 for the time being, if any are still available." Sandy was referring to the latest version of the Swift Enterprises House on Wheels: a remarkable automated recreational vehicle capable of traveling on land or water. Months earlier she and Bud had piloted the prototype on a trip to recover a missing scientific discovery.

Her father shrugged. "As you wish. You're a grown woman. Which reminds me, we've been trying to get Bud to head out to California and pick up his folks. He's been talking to them and tells us they've got a place up in the Sierra Nevada mountains that they're thinking of heading for. Armin and Joanna have been making very broad hints to Bud that they'd like for him to join them, and Bud's told them he'd like to speak to you first."

Sandy smiled a bit. "No doubt."

Tom Sr. seemed ready to say something, but didn't and, instead, resumed puttering through the work on his desk. Watching him, Sandy concluded that this was yet another subject better left alone for the time being. "So I suppose the remaining people at Enterprises are up in the shift apartments?"

A nod. "We've also got six HOW2s on the premises and have given them over to some of the senior staff. With them and the Hortons we've still got two HOW2s left. We offered one to Sherman, but the Generalissimo has decided to sleep in his office for the duration."

Sandy shook her head. She then found herself taking a closer look at the information which was on the wall screen near the desk. It was a list of the nineteen Titan-class rockets which Enterprises operated and maintained. Next to each name was a line showing its current status.

"Dad?"

"Um?" Tom Sr. looked up and saw what had drawn Sandy's attention. "Yeah. I was going to bring you up to date on that. Tom and I are working out a plan."

"Which is?"

Tom Sr. sat back in his chair. To Sandy's eyes it looked as if he was getting ready to deliver a long-rehearsed speech.

"We don't have much time," he said to her. "Maybe even less. We can't really predict what the Space Friends have in mind. Especially after all that happened yesterday. With that in mind we're working on a way to . . . minimize the damage."

Sandy didn't like the feeling that was starting to bubble up inside her. "Go on."

"AstroDynamics, Boeing, Grumman, JAXA, NASA, ESA . . . every space agency that can field large-scale rockets. Even the Brungarians if we can get them into the act. We're going to try and evacuate as many people as possible into space before the Earth's destroyed."

"Evacuate . . ."

"The space station will coordinate the evacuation because we're considering abandoning all the bases on the Moon. Once out in space the ships will try for Mars, or perhaps even Europa, Ganymede or Titan."

Sandy was performing some rapid mental calculations. "Dad . . . a Titan can carry an average of forty people. That's . . . what? Ten average families? Nineteen Titans means we can evacuate only seven hundred and sixty people."

"Sandy I know---"

"And that's if you only carry people. You'll also probably want to carry additional life-support gear and consumables. Even if the Titans use strap-ons that cuts it down to maybe twenty people per rocket. Less if you want more of a safety margin, which you will. And the Titans are the biggest cargo carriers in space. Even with the Brungarians throwing in, we can't expect to safely evacuate more than---"

"We're hoping to get at least five hundred people out into space," Tom Sr. concluded, a bit of sharpness in his voice. "We're also considering boost the space station out of orbit and using that as a base platform. We might change our minds about the Moon and see if some people would think of taking their chances and hiding down in the caverns."

"At least five hundred people," Sandy echoed dully, staring at him. "And how do we determine who goes and who stays?"

Tom Sr. was taking his time in answering, his eyes not meeting hers. "Of course we would want you and Bud to pilot one of the ships. Tom and Phyllis would be in another---"

Sandy slapped a palm down hard on the desk. "And what about stopping the Earth from being roasted?" she said. "Where's the plan for that?"

"Sandra---"

"We've still got time," Sandy argued. "It might not be much, but it's still there. You and Tom, and every other brilliant person on the face of the globe. All of you should be working on some sort of solution."

"We are." This time his eyes met hers. "We're in constant communication with everyone throughout the world. Roger Palfrey's flown to New York City to coordinate the government's efforts with the United Nations. But the situation both here and in other countries continues to deteriorate. We need a fallback solution in case we can't stop the solartrons from firing."

"A fallback solution?" Sandy asked, "or a run away from solution?"

"That's unfair," her father declared. "I said we're still trying to find an answer. A course of action. We're also still trying to contact the aliens and somehow negotiate with them. But something of this magnitude demands that we make preparations for the worse-case scenario."

"Which brings me back to my original question. Who decides who leaves Earth, and who---"

"Certain criterion will be applied," Tom Sr. said curtly. Reaching for his Tiny Idiot he made something of a show out of studying its small display. "Which reminds me," he murmured. "It might be considered best if Sestina were . . . left behind when the time came."

Something seemed to explode within Sandy. "I do not believe you---"

"Then don't! For God's sake, Sandra, don't ever think I'm making this kind of decision casually. I'm not. I'm forcing myself to be as rational and as realistic as possible. If the evacuation works, and if some sort of viable colony is established, then what it'll need most are people who're able to contribute. That means intelligence and, more importantly, children."

"Sestina is a---"

"A wonderful person. I know that, and you know that. But face the fact, Sandra. Sestina's mental faculties are not up to survival standards."

"You can't say that for certain."

"Then consider this. Like it or not, Sestina is also a mule. She's sterile. Sun Ohm Erato purposefully designed her that way."

Sandy was shaking her head, trying to ignore not only his words, but the tears in her eyes.

"You might not believe this," Tom Sr. said, "but I'm hating myself more than you probably are right about now. Please believe me . . . I'll struggle for a way to save Sestina. Not only her, but every living soul on the face of the Earth. But you may have to face the ugly fact that we won't be able to . . . Sandy!"

But she had already left his office.

Tom Sr. spent several moments watching the space where she had been. Feeling the sting of Sandy's words, and remembering a conversation which had taken place much earlier in the day.

* * * * *

Mary considered it. "Sounds rough."

"It'll continue to be rough," Tom Sr. admitted. "Even after we've smoothed out the edges and neatly outlined the details."

They had both been in their room on board the Sky Queen. Mary was still in the process of trying to arrange a more homely look to the surroundings while Tom Sr. sat on the edge of the bed, tapping at his Tiny Idiot.

"Will you be trying to evacuate all at once?"

Tom Sr. shook his head. "We don't have enough launch facilities on Loonau, and the pads on Fearing can't handle the Titans. I want to start sending people up to the space station as soon as possible and get them established. Then, as each Titan comes down, we'll load it up and get it launched with the next group of evacuees."

"Oh."

Tom Sr. continued concentrating on his computer. "Mary?"

"Yes?"

"Iapetus is scheduled to blast off from Loonau in three days."

A small chuckle. "I've always admired your gift for small talk, dear."

Tom Sr. worked to keep his voice as casual as possible. "I'm just saying that I know living conditions up on the space station aren't going to be the easiest in the world. It might be best if you went ahead and began getting things ready for the rest of us."

No immediate answer. Tom Sr. gave it about ten more seconds then looked up.

Mary was staring at him. Her eyes were wide and tragic, her mouth opened and, for a moment, she was once again the eighteen year old girl he had once rescued from a runaway horse.

"I thought you loved me," she slowly said.

"Mary . . ."

"I thought you loved me," she repeated.

He immediately got up from the bed and went to her. For the briefest of moments it almost seemed as if she was going to pull away from him. But the instinct to embrace was firmly in the both of them and their arms automatically entwined about their bodies.

"I do love you," Tom Sr. softly declared to his wife.

"Then why are you doing this to me?" Her voice was gentle but accusing.

"Mary, I---"

"Why are you sending me away?" she asked.

"Just to get things ready for us on the station---"

A short, accusing cough. "Thomas Aeneas Swift I have lived with you all these years . . . bore you two children, cooked God alone how many dinners, suppers, lunches, late night snacks and have washed more of your clothes than I care to remember, speaking of hazardous materials. You long ago lost the ability to lie to me or withhold the truth."

He lightly stroked her cheek. "I just want you to be safe."

"And I want to be with you." One of her hands rose to cover his. "I married you, Tom. I didn't come all this way to turn and run away at the end." She saw his mouth starting to open and rushed on. "If this is going to be the end then I've earned the right to be at your side when it happens." Determination entered her voice. "And if you think I haven't then I'm going to go lock that door, get you to lie down on that bed with me and prove it to you. As many times as it takes."

* * * * *

Sandy almost collided with Phyllis in the corridor. "Oh!"

"I see you're up and about," Phyllis told her. She studied her friend's face. "And I see Uncle Tom's been outlining his grand scheme to you."

"What is . . ." Sandy began, her breath coming hard. She tried to bring herself under control. "What the hell is going on around here?"

Phyllis took Sandy's hand, leading her into the conference room. "First off," she was saying, "I sympathize with you totally. Tom and your Dad have only told a few of us here about their scheme. And yes I cried, my Mom has cried and your Mom looked a bit red-eyed, as well as somewhat breathless and flustered earlier today."

"So we've essentially given up?" Sandy asked Phyllis. "Is that it?"

"I don't know," Phyllis replied, moving around the table a bit. "It surprises me too. But maybe it's because I'm not as scientifically clever or educated as Tom and the others. Maybe I was under the impression that all scientific disasters were the same, and I haven't really appreciated how serious this is." She looked back at Sandy. "Maybe we've finally reached the one crisis that's going to finish us all."

"It's been seven days," Sandy slowly said. "Seven days and the aliens have brought the whole world to this point. God, at this rate we might not make it to the end of the countdown." She was gazing at the polished surface of the table. "If I just had a handle on what the aliens had in mind. If anyone did."

"Tom was sending messages to them last night," Phyllis told her. "Still no reply. The government's been sending a steady stream of messages. Same response."

Sandy looked up at her. "Is that's all Tom's been doing? And please don't tell me he or Dad or anyone else still needs time with this. It's one thing to be working on a solution. But if all anyone's doing is yelling at the aliens, or drawing up evacuation plans, then that's not good enough."

Phyllis' expression grew shadowed. "Tom's still not himself." She saw the look that was growing on Sandy's face. "For God's sake, Sandy, be fair."

"They broke my brother," Sandy said. "I'm mad, but not at him. I'm mad at the Space Friends. They broke Tom. They broke my father. The two people who always had the answers, and now they don't."

Phyllis regarded her friend. "And what about you?"

Sandy looked up at her sharply. "I've been broken," she said simply. "I know how it feels, Phyllis. It took me over a year to get myself back together. We don't have a year."

"So what do we have?"

Sandy didn't answer, but turned to leave.

"Sandra."

Sandy paused at the doorway, looked back.

"I'm very scared," Phyllis told her. "But I'm not scared of the idea that Tom or your Dad won't find an answer. I'm scared that someone else will . . . and I know you, Sandy."

"I don't have any miracles to pull out of my hat," Sandy said. She walked on out of sight.

"Never stopped you before," Phyllis muttered.

* * * * *

Taking one of the Enterprises bicycles Sandy pedaled over to Building 14. The HOW2s were parked in the covered storage lot adjacent to it and Sandy wanted to check out which of them were left before dropping by the Sky Queen to see how much of her clothes and other belongings had been brought over.

At the entrance to the lot Sandy suddenly swerved to one side, quickly ducking alongside an access ramp and hunkering down out of sight. From her vantage point she quietly watched Bud stroll out of the lot, climb onto a cart and motor off. It looked as if he were heading in the direction of the Infirmary.

Sighing, Sandy waited until he was completely out of sight before standing up. She never thought she'd see the day where she wanted to avoid Bud. But she knew he was the only one who could convince her of almost anything, and she knew he probably had several things she didn't want to face. At least not at the moment.

Walking the bicycle into the lot Sandy headed towards the smaller one-bedroom HOW2s, suspecting that Bingo and Ken would've set up housekeeping there.

She was right, but she found herself wishing she was mistaken. Reaching a vehicle maintenance cart she paused, then drew back until she was almost hidden. She needn't have worried about being seen as both Bingo and Ken were far too occupied to notice her. They were standing by the open door to a HOW2, and Ken was holding Bingo very close. From where she was, Sandy could clearly hear Bingo's uncontrolled crying, could see the girl pressing one protective hand to her stomach.

Bingo crying . . .

Something reached into Sandy and pulled hard and she silently backed away further, turning and heading for another HOW2. Oh God, she thought. Oh God, oh God, oh God . . .

Reaching the HOW2 at the far end of the lot, Sandy found the combination pad and tapped in the master override code, causing the door to rise open. She entered the vehicle, immediately closing and sealing the door behind her. Without pausing she walked to the rear, stepping into the bathroom which was adjacent to the bedroom.

It took over a minute of anxious splashing of cold water upon her face before she could finally come to grips with things once again. Everyone broken . . . everyone scared.

And Bingo was crying.

Raising her face, Sandy gazed steadily into her reflection in the mirror.

"Well, Old Girl," she whispered to the reflection, "what are you gonna do?"

Another minute, and then she left the bathroom to go flounce upon the bed, a hand reaching for the communications console.

It took a few seconds after dialing in the code for the call to go through, and the screen lit up to show a pleasant-faced dark haired woman.

"SECFAR/Cybernetic Research," the woman briskly announced. "Oh! Hi, Sandy."

"Hello, Freida."

Freida Morgan, a researcher and senior programmer for the Swift Enterprises Center for Advanced Robotics in New Mexico, produced a slightly embarrassed smile. "When I saw that the call was from Shopton I thought it was . . ."

"And I'm sure Sherman will be calling before the day is out," Sandy told her. "Right now, though, I'm the one that needs to speak to you. Freida . . . I need to ask a very big favor of you."

"Sure."

"Before you say yes I should explain a few things. This favor I want could very probably cost you your job and get you very much arrested."

Freida's eyes widened.

"It could also help save the world, including Sherman."

The worry immediately left Freida's face. "What do you need, Sandy?"

"Okay. First off . . ."

Chapter Twenty-Six: Third Law of Motion.

Sandy and Freida spent several hours talking and planning.

A good part of the planning Sandy was making up as she went along, but she felt she didn't have to mention that to Freida.

* * * * *

Sandy surprised herself by actually sleeping that night.

Sleeping wasn't the hardest part. The hardest part was earlier: having dinner with her family and the Newtons and trying to keep a straight face . . . although Phyllis was giving her some rather long suspicious looks.

She was just grateful Bud was still busy with something somewhere. It would've been impossible otherwise.

* * * * *

Early in the morning she bathed and got dressed. Nothing too stylish, nothing too casual. Not too certain who I'll run into she thought.

One definite item in her ensemble was the cloth belt she fitted around her waist. It held specially designed pockets on either end. One would hold her Snooper. The other was designed for her Tiny Idiot and, as she picked it up, she saw the icon which meant it now held all the downloads Freida had sent. Everything was set.

Leaving the HOW2 she saw Ken and Bingo heading off towards the Sky Queen in a cart. It was in Sandy's mind to shout out after them, to talk and say a few words. But if everything was going to work she had to keep contacts down to a minimum. Instead she stood still and watched them drive off, noting how Ken had one arm close around Bingo.

Getting on her bicycle Sandy pedaled over to Building 9 (Biological Sciences).

She went to the room where Swift Enterprises maintained a small menagerie of experimental animals. "Hiiii Stuart."

Dr. Stuart Pabodie glanced up from his work. "Hey, it's the Princess."

Sandy was looking around at the rows of cages. "You holding down the fort by yourself now?"

"Pretty much," Pabodie agreed. "I told Glenda and Sophie to scoot on out and be with their folks." His cheer faded some. "I guess I'll be doing the same by the end of the week."

"Oh!" Sandy was idly wiggling a fingertip at one of the rabbits. "What're you gonna do with the animals?"

"Well, I was thinking of just . . . turning them loose." He looked at Sandy and shrugged lightly. "I mean, really doesn't make too much of a difference, does it?"

"True." Sandy tried to tempt the rabbit with a bit of lettuce, but it was already occupied with some food. "Did Sophie mention anything about a book she wanted me to borrow?"

"Ah-hhh, no. But things have been a little crazy around here."

"Understatement. I'll go to her desk and see if she left it there."

Pabodie nodded. "Sure. And thanks for the visit."

Smiling, Sandy let Pabodie return to his fluid studies and drifted into the work cubicle which Sophie O'Brien had used. With one hand she made a rather visible show of searching through the rather extensive collection of paperback books which Sophie had kept at her desk.

Her other hand, in the meantime, quietly opened a small locker near the desk, and Sandy mentally blessed the absent Sophie as she noted that the item she was looking for was still there. Looking to make certain that Pabodie was engrossed in peering through a microscope, Sandy removed the item from the locker and slipped it into her pocket.

"Bye Stuart."

"Take care, Sandy."

Sandy's next stop was the Infirmary.

Dr. Emerson looked up from his computer. "Oh my God," he said. "You're coming in here voluntarily. And conscious. Who are you and what have you done with the real Sandy?"

"Still me," Sandy replied, pulling her hair back a bit to show the bandage still covering the spot where her right ear used to be.

Emerson rolled his chair closer to her. "Is it too much to hope that you've decided to have yourself committed?"

"Sort of." Leaning over, Sandy allowed Emerson to poke about the bandage. "Was talking with my folks last night." At the end of her hand two fingers casually crossed. "What with Dad having been possessed by the aliens, and me having some sort of active mental connection with them, we decided we might need some sort of immediate way of determining odd brainwave activity when it happens."

"Makes sense," Emerson murmured, noting that Sandy was keeping the dressing on her head clean and dry.

"So. You've still got that portable EEG thingy the people at the Mayo Clinic sent some years back?"

"Sure." Getting up, Emerson went into an adjacent room and rummaged around for a bit, eventually returning with a flat object the size of a child's suitcase. "It should be charged up and all, but the adapter cord's included." He handed it over to Sandy. "The operating instructions are on the inside cover . . . and yeah, for a moment I forgot who I was talking to."

"That you did." Pulling out the shoulder strap, Sandy draped it over her.

Emerson watched her. "I'm glad to see you finally starting to take sensible precautions."

That was almost too much and Sandy had to turn away before she either burst out laughing or started crying. "Thank you for all the help you've given me, Dr. Emerson."

"Take care, Sandy."

She walked out of the office. "I try to," she muttered.

Returning to the lobby she happened to meet Sherman, and her insides did a brief flip-flop.

But Sherman continued strolling past with a nod. "Busy today?"

"Yeah." Sandy flashed him her most disarming smile. "Got all sorts of errands to run."

She almost made it to the door when: "Sandy."

Slowly she turned back to see Sherman standing at the elevator, a calm look on his face.

He stared at her for a bit. Then: "You know, when Mom died, your Mom practically raised both Dody and me."

Sandy nodded at him.

"So many times Dad and Dody and I tried to thank your Mom for always being there for us when we needed someone."

"Mom's always been like that," Sandy told him.

Sherman nodded. "I know. And it was both fun and interesting to grow up with you and Tom." A pause. "I think you also know that there was a time when I was really in love with you."

Sandy's look at him was gentle. "Yes."

"Then Bud came along," Sherman went on briskly, seeming to snap himself out of his mood. "So! Anyway . . . things have their own methods of working out."

"Freida's very sweet," Sandy pointed out.

"Considerably." Sherman seemed to be interested in his reflection in the elevator door. "We're all in an awful lot of trouble," he said. "Things are looking very bad. If I thought for one moment that there was a chance for survival . . . some single source of hope somewhere . . . I'd support it as much as I could."

Sandy remained quiet.

The elevator opened. "Have a nice trip, Sandy," Sherman said, and entered it.

Letting out a long, slow breath, Sandy stepped out of the Infirmary.

Then she was suddenly in a strong pair of arms, being whirled about and found herself staring closely into Bud's face. Uh oh . . .

"Finally found you," he said. "Been having to help out with the security build-up at the Construction Company. Y'know, Phyl's father's harder to work for than your Dad or Tom."

"Bud---"

His grip on her was secure. "We've got to talk."

Looking into his eyes Sandy could see the entire conversation, and she struggled with her reply. "I've got a little errand to run---"

"Sandy."

"Just a little job to do," she said to him. "Then we can talk all we want." She swallowed something large inside her. "I promise."

He was staring deeply at her. Into her, and Sandy knew what he was looking for. Her mind was going over and over again: Gentle Jesus, please. Just this once let me lie to him. Please.

Finally his hold on her began loosening. "Okay," he said. "I've got a few things I guess I need to tell your father. Then we can talk."

Sandy nodded, and then she gave him what had to be just a light, casual kiss. Hardly even a brush across the lips. Then she was turning away from him, going to her bicycle and climbing on, giving what she hoped was a pleasant, airy wave.

It was hard to see at first. But her eyes eventually cleared.

* * * * *

"Knock knock."

Jed Hadley . . . currently the general manager and dispatcher at the Enterprises airfield . . . looked over at the doorway. "Hey Sunshine!"

"Hel-loooo Jed," Sandy sang out, entering the office. She glanced out the window at the various aircraft on the flight line. "I don't suppose a nice, big brilliant man such as yourself got something a bored girl can check out for a bit of flying?"

"Flying around these days ain't exactly the safest proposition right now, baby girl."

"I know," Sandy sighed noisily, "but I'm going buggy just sitting here. If I could just fly around the pattern a bit, or if there's some hauling I could do---"

Hadley's face suddenly brightened. "Now come to think of it, your timing just might be good." He picked up a Tiny Idiot. "Turns out they need some fuel suction lines over at Fearing. Got the request by computer an hour ago. I didn't even know we had those lines here."

Neither did Sandy until she and Freida had found them last night after searching the computer inventory for Enterprises. She kept an innocent look on her face. "Oh really?"

"I was going to fly them out myself if I couldn't find anyone else," Hadley told her. "You think a ride back and forth from Fearing would do the trick?"

"Certainly would," Sandy said. Hadley passed his computer over to her and Sandy tapped out her codes onto the authorization page. "They're already loaded up?"

"Uh huh. Number three on the line. Already fueled and waiting."

"Thanks, Jed."

"No problem. You came along at just the right time."

"Yeah. Amazing how that works out."

Heading into the preparation area, Sandy pulled a one-piece flight suit over her clothes (rearranging the items she was carrying with her). She then walked out to the flight line where one of the Swift Enterprises "Whirling Duck" VTOL aircraft waited. Knowing that the clock was

ticking, Sandy forced herself to take the usual walk-around and make all the safety checks before climbing into the light transport vehicle. Only when she was airborne, and had adjusted the large ducted fan rotors for horizontal flight, did she allow herself to believe she was in the clear.

Setting her course east she applied full throttle, then reached for her Tiny Idiot. Switching the computer on, she studied the message on the display:

PROGRAM MORGANPIRATE RUNNING.

PHASE ONE --- COUNTDOWN IN PROGRESS.

PHASE TWO --- COMPLETED.

Sandy switched on the computer's audio function. "Recognize Sandra Swift."

The display responded with RECOGNIZED.

"Program Morganpirate. Shut down all communications between Swift Enterprises and Fearing Island."

PHASE THREE --- COMPLETED.

Sandy sighed. "I am so gonna get yelled at."

An hour later she was flying out over Great South Bay and heading further over the Atlantic.

Fifteen minutes later a voice appeared in her headset. "Aircraft you are approaching a restricted facility. You are identified as SEWD/117 ex Shopton, please confirm."

Sandy keyed the radio. "Fearing Island Traffic Control I confirm SEWD/117 on scheduled delivery run. Estimated time of arrival . . . nine minutes."

"SEWD/117 we're monitoring approach. Is this Sandy?"

"Sure is."

"Hi Sandy. We're running a surprise launch test so please take the northern approach and come down on helipad one."

"Noted, and thanks."

Minutes later Sandy was approaching a three mile long piece of island. Ordinarily it would've been just a lonely patch of sand and scrubland. But Tom had long since converted it into his central rocket research base, as well as the departure point for his ocean-going vessels. An airfield and administrative center occupied the northern end of the island. Then there were the warehouses, support depots, construction center and launch control in the middle, and finally the two launch pads themselves at the far southern end.

As Sandy banked the Whirling Duck towards the north she kept her eyes on the main launch pad, and especially on the large silver grey rocket with the red nose and fins which stood upon it. It was the Star Spear, Tom's first manned rocket, and Sandy could make out the activity going on around it.

Pulling her eyes away from it Sandy concentrated upon landing at the designated helipad, smoothly bringing the aircraft to a full stop.

A ground crew was already waiting at the helipad, and they moved in once the rotors had spun down. "Good to see you back, Sandy," one of the crew called out.

"Good to be here," Sandy replied as she climbed out. "I just needed an excuse to get some flight time in and this delivery came up."

The crewman nodded as he looked over his computer. "Yeah. Somebody apparently needed those lines real bad. I guess if we're gonna run tests like that," he now nodded towards the distant launch pad, "they'll come in handy."

Shielding her eyes, Sandy stared towards the pad. "What's going on?"

"Someone wants us busy or something. An order for a full test of the emergency crash launch procedure came over the computer yesterday, and everyone's been jumping around."

Depending on the mission it usually took an average of two months to safely and thoroughly prepare a rocket such as the Star Spear for launch. But Tom had been fascinated with the possibility of seeing if he could radically reduce the preparation time and had come up with a means for launching the rocket within a twenty-four hour period.

Of course the procedure had never been tested all the way . . .

"Who's working the pad crew?" Sandy idly asked.

"Uh-hhhh, Graham and his crackers I'm sure," the crewman replied. "How come?"

"Oh. Just been awhile since I've seen the Star Spear up close." Sandy stood there for a moment, still looking towards the rocket. "You think they'd mind if I went over for a peek?"

The crewman shrugged. "Well . . . seeing how it's you."

"Thanks." Giving the crewman a sunny smile, Sandy trotted over to where a cart waited at the edge of the helipad. Climbing on she started it up and began driving south.

Once again she pulled out her computer. "Recognize Sandra Swift."

RECOGNIZED.

"Program Morganpirate. Time remaining on Phase One."

T MINUS 14 MINUTES.

"Close," Sandy muttered, pocketing the device.

Knowing that Graham Lachlan ran a tight ship in regards to procedures, Sandy slowed down as she approached the launch pad, giving him every chance to recognize her. "Got a spare hard hat?" she asked as she drove up.

Smiling, Lachlan tossed one to her. "Wondered who'd be fool enough to show up during a live test. Hi, Sandy."

Holding the reinforced helmet to her head, Sandy peered up at the rocket. "So it's fueled and everything?"

"Yeah." Lachlan followed her gaze. "We're gonna take it all the way to zero and a simulated launch. Ever since the order to carry out the test showed up on the computer schedule we've been running around like rabbits."

"I'll bet."

Lachlan shrugged. "Well . . . if anything it's been keeping us busy and our minds off of other things. Which reminds me, you know what's going on with Enterprises?"

Sandy looked at him. "Going on?"

"Naturally I try to coordinate launch tests with Shopton. But we haven't been able to get through to the mainland for a while now, about the time you arrived."

Sandy shrugged. "Might be something Sherman's testing, or an idea of Tom's. Things are weird all over."

"Tell me about it." Lachlan looked over to where a member of the launch crew was holding up a hand and he spoke into a communicator. "Mission Control I confirm main propulsion system helium pressurization isolation switches all set to `Open' repeat `Open'."

Sandy was once again looking up at the rocket towering above them. "You got someone in the ship?"

"Um? Oh no." Lachlan shook his head. "We're running with a simulated crew. No one's on board."

Sandy chewed a bit on her lower lip. "I don't suppose it'd be all right if I went up there?"

Lachlan gave her a look. Ordinarily such a request would've rated a stern "No". But not only was Sandy the Senior Test Pilot for Enterprises, she was also a qualified astronaut in her own right.

Besides, Sandy was Sandy.

"Well," he slowly said, "actually if you get up there quickly enough you can do the APU prestart procedure and look over some of the direct readouts."

"Oh that'd be neat," Sandy chirped. "Just go ahead and sign me in for the rest of the test."

Lachlan nodded and waved her on. "'Preciate it."

Stepping carefully, Sandy went to the small elevator which was part of the main service gantry. Entering it she pressed the button which sent the little car upwards.

"Easy," she murmured to her racing heart.

At the top she crossed the small aluminum catwalk and pulled herself into the flight compartment for the Star Spear. First things were first and she carefully disconnected the telemetry cables and support hoses, rolling them up and stowing them out on the catwalk. She then tugged at the main hatch, pulling it tightly shut, and then she sealed it.

A buzzing sound directed her attention to a nearby radio headset and she slipped it on as she settled into the pilot's couch.

"Sandy?" Lachlan's voice asked, "I show you've disconnected the flight cabin support cables."

"I thought I'd run a cabin pressurization test while I was up here."

"Ah! Good idea. Thanks."

Sandy was working quickly, her hands moving over the controls on the console before her. "Alternating current sensor set to `monitor'," she murmured to herself. "Nitrogen boiler supply . . . on. Nitrogen boiler controller . . . on. Boiler controller power set to A. APU controller power . . . on."

Her free hand reached up and pulled on a lever. "O2 flood . . . emergency pressurize. Setting pressurization at sixteen point seven PSI."

"Doing okay up there?"

"Doing fine," Sandy assured Lachlan. "You should be getting cabin pressurization readings now."

Pulling out her computer, Sandy pressed it to one of the Velcro pads on the console. She then asked for the time remaining on Phase One.

SEVENTY TWO SECONDS.

Biting her lip, Sandy reached up to a series of switches outlined in red, touching them one by one. Next to her computer the Star Spear's readout screen suddenly announced ALL SYSTEMS SWITCHED TO INTERNAL CONTROL.

Dimly she heard an alarm wailing outside.

"Sandy," Lachlan's voice cried in her ear. "We're getting alerts all over. Something's wrong with the simulation. The rocket's actually gonna launch."

Sandy was adjusting herself into the straps on the pilot's couch. "Can you abort?"

"Abort's been disengaged. The bird's hot. Get out now."

"The gantry's already been retracted, Graham. Get your people out of there."

"Sandy . . ."

"Onboard abort should kick in immediately after launch. I can ride it out for a few seconds then jettison. You guys pick me up then. Get to safety. I'm all right up here in the flight cabin."

A pause. "We're outta here then. Just hang on, kid."

Sandy braced herself against the pilot's couch. "Best advice I've had all day," she said to no one in particular.

A few seconds later and the countdown reached zero. With a roar the Star Spear rose from the launch pad, picking up speed as it headed out into the sky and beyond.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Challenger.

The calls began ringing in Sandy's ears practically from the moment the Star Spear cleared the launch tower.

First was Lachlan. "Sandy we're all right. Please respond."

Then came Kevin Nack, the Flight Director at Fearing. "Sandy we can't access the abort system from our end. Remote control has been cancelled. You'll have to handle the ejection. Sandy?"

Sandy, meanwhile, was concentrating on dealing with the acceleration and watching the instruments. She was of course no stranger to traveling at high rates of speed, plus she was still in the flight suit she had worn when she'd piloted the Whirling Duck out from Enterprises. But traveling in one of Tom's rockets usually called for the additional comfort and protection supplied by one of his space suits.

Not only that, but Sandy realized she'd been too rushed and had neglected to switch on the anti-G neutralator. She now did so, and the computer-guided inflator cells in the pilot's couch began systematically expanding and contracting as they worked to cushion Sandy's body against the pressures brought on by the Star Spear's velocity.

She personally felt her condition would've improved, though, without all the yelling coming out of the headset. Technically she was now at the proper altitude in which to blow the escape capsule (and herself) free of the Star Spear and begin drifting down into the Atlantic.

However . . .

"I'm all right," she called out, feeling she at least owed it to the people on Fearing to prevent them from worrying more than they had to. Lord knew there'd be more than enough worry to go around as it was.

Speaking of which . . . "Recognize Sandra Swift," she called out to her Tiny Idiot.

RECOGNIZED.

"Program Morganpirate. Shut down all outgoing communications from Fearing Island."

PHASE FOUR --- COMPLETED.

Sandy knew that eventually it would occur to someone . . . more than likely Tom or her father . . . to use the communication equipment on board the Flying Lab or something similar and, that way, bypass the shutdowns she and Freida had designed. For that matter some bright person on Fearing could go to one of the moored jetmarines or diving seacoasters and snooker Sandy's plans. In the meantime, though, she hoped she was gaining enough of a head start to accomplish what she had set out to do.

And things were busy enough as it was. Eighty-five seconds after blasting off, Sandy felt a jolt, and the instruments confirmed that the Star Spear's depleted first stage was now falling away. By now it was doubtless becoming obvious to the people back on Fearing that she wasn't ejecting.

"Might as well move me to the woodshed and be done with it," she muttered.

Just over a minute later the second stage shut down and fell away. The initial severe acceleration was beginning to lessen off and Sandy was able to concentrate more on her surroundings. The central readout screen on the console was showing Star Spear following the standard low Earth orbit trajectory most rockets took after leaving Fearing Island, which suited Sandy fine as long as . . .

She checked the fuel tank pressurization on the fourth stage. True to Lachlan's word the stage was carrying a full load of propellant.

Sandy smiled. Good enough.

A beep (accompanied by a faint bump from somewhere behind her) announced to Sandy that the third stage had completed its job and was now pushing itself away from the final stage. Now that the business of getting into orbit had been accomplished, Sandy felt free to attend to several matters before the curtain went up on the next act in the little drama she'd concocted.

First she switched on smaller displays on either side of the central readout. These would provide additional information to assist Sandy in flying the Star Spear. Among other things, she would also be notified if she was being scanned by radar, if another ship was approaching (a possibility uppermost in her mind) or if someone was trying to communicate with her. It would especially let her know if a message was coming through from the Space Friends, although Sandy privately suspected they'd use a more direct means of contact.

Releasing herself from the straps she drifted closer to a supply locker. Opening it she removed a carryall bag and, more important, one of the emergency space suits which was standard equipment on the Star Spear (should've found the time to put this on before launch, Sandy mused).

Getting back her "space legs" Sandy changed out of her flight suit and clothes, drifting into the more utilitarian inner jumpsuit and then the space suit, leaving the helmet off for the time being (and transferring a Certain Object to an outer pocket). She then stuffed the flight suit, her clothes, her Tiny Idior and the machine she had picked up from Dr. Emerson into the bag, securing it firmly to the co-pilot's couch.

Returning to her own couch she began consulting the flight computer, poking the tip of her tongue against her inner cheek as she concentrated. Right now Star Spear was two hundred and forty-nine miles above the Earth. By comparison the Swift Enterprises space station was over twenty-two thousand miles further out, and there were presets and guides for maneuvering towards a rendezvous.

That was, if Sandy intended to go to the space station. Actually her intended destination was much closer, and she carefully searched the computer's "library" of orbital adjustments for the item she was looking for. She'd never tried it before . . .

And there it was. Actually orbiting just a hundred and twenty miles higher in its "parking zone". Easily enough delta-V available to make a transfer onto its path and (according to the computer) a rendezvous some fifty-two minutes later.

A small smile on her face, Sandy began instructing the computer to set up the various thruster burns.

* * * * *

Forty-five minutes later an alarm beeped, informing Sandy that she was approaching the "terminal rendezvous" point for her destination. Settling back into her couch she touched a switch which lowered the protective shutter from the main viewport, allowing her to see outside.

Ahead of her floated her goal. A gleaming white sphere fifty feet in diameter. Metal bands surrounded the sphere at three different axes, giving the entire object the look of a gyroscope meant for a giant.

Sandy was gazing at Challenger: the most advanced spaceship in Tom's fleet. She knew the rings surrounding the central sphere not only served to bleed off waste heat, but also manipulated and focused the powerful magnetic confinement field which helped produce the intense electrical thrust that made Challenger the fastest thing in space.

"Hello, sweetheart," Sandy whispered to it. "Aunt Sandy needs a little favor."

A whispering from the headset, and Sandy slipped it back on.

"Star Spear we show you on approach," a woman's voice said. "Is this Tom?"

Sandy keyed the radio. "You're close, Eleanor. And so am I."

A pause. "Sandy?"

"Got it."

"Oh, thank God it's someone. We were getting frantic here. First we lose contact with Enterprises, and then Fearing drops out of the loop. What's going on? Is Tom with you?"

"Just me myself and I," Sandy replied, her hands on the maneuvering thruster control. "Can you clear access to main docking?"

"Ummm, sure. Yes. Sorry, should've done that when you first appeared on radar."

As Sandy watched, two of the field rings rotated upwards, clearing the way towards a circular docking port located some twenty feet below the curving viewport of Challenger's flight deck. "Can you help bring me in, Eleanor? I'm not as smooth a hand as Tom or Bud."

"Hang on, Sandy, you're just now entering the outer magnetic containment bubble. We're focusing the docking cathodes now. Cut your forward velocity by fifty-eight per cent."

Sandy began firing the forward thrusters, braking Star Spear as it moved closer to the larger ship. With the assistance of the field rings Challenger established a magnetic "hook" which tugged at a metal "target" located on Star Spear's nose, pulling it to its destination. When the distance dropped to ten feet a collar extended from the docking port, expanded and gently grabbed at Star Spear. It then retracted, bringing the nose of the rocket firmly into the port.

"And here's where the fun begins," Sandy muttered, disconnecting herself from the couch. Grabbing at the carryall bag she drifted down into the space beneath the console where the forward airlock was located. Checking to make certain there was sufficient air pressure, Sandy unsealed the inner hatch and pulled it aside.

The outer hatch was already being opened, and Sandy immediately slipped a hand into her pocket, watching as the hatch was moved aside to reveal Eleanor Carter: a Swift Enterprises astronaut.

"Sandy," she breathed in relief. "Wasn't expecting you but am glad to see someone."

"Hi, Eleanor. Is it just you and the rest of the Challenger standby team?"

Eleanor nodded.

Sandy took a breath. "Good. Right now I want you and the rest of the team to get on board Star Spear."

"Huh?"

"I'm taking Challenger."

The surprise on Eleanor's face blossomed further. "What?"

"Like I said," Sandy calmly replied.

"Sandy, I---"

And then she was looking at the small handgun-shaped object which Sandy drew out of her pocket.

"This is used for animal control in our biology labs," Sandy explained. "It fires needles which are composed of a frozen drug the name of which I won't even try to pronounce. All I know is that if I pull this trigger you'll be asleep for about five hours."

"Sandy---"

"And at this range, Eleanor, I can't miss."

For a moment the two women stared at each other.

"Sandy," Eleanor slowly said. "I want to help. Please---"

"You're going to help," Sandy assured her. "You and the rest of the team are taking the Star Spear and leaving Challenger."

"Sandy," Eleanor began, then grew silent. Then tried again. "Listen to me just a moment. Be reasonable."

Sandy waited.

"There're seven of us here on Challenger. I don't think me or Betsie or Jorn can safely land the Star Spear with that sort of load. You should've brought one of the commercial variants. If we try to land with seven people crammed into the rocket there's a good chance we'll be killed."

Sandy smiled sadly. "Nice try, Eleanor. But there's no need for you to land on Earth. Star Spear has more than enough fuel for you to safely make it to the space station. Once you undock you can switch on the tracking beacon and Gorsky can have people come out and meet you."

Eleanor's eyes kept moving from Sandy's face to the gun and back again. "Sandy, I know what's going on," she insisted. "I can help. Let me help."

Sandy slowly shook her head. "You don't want to go where I'm going, Eleanor. And you really don't want to get involved in what I'm planning. Your priority is getting the rest of the team safely to the space station, and then back down to Earth."

"Betsie's a good astronaut."

"How's your mother, Eleanor?"

Eleanor reared back as if struck. Sandy knew Eleanor's mother was suffering from a chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and the pay she received from working for Enterprises went a long ways towards paying for her mother's quality care and treatments.

"Do you really want her to be alone during all this?" Sandy softly asked.

Eleanor was breathing hard. "Oh you bitch!"

With the gun Sandy quietly motioned Eleanor further back into Challenger, following her and pulling the bag with her free hand.

When they reached a communication pad on the bulkhead Sandy motioned for Eleanor to pause. "Now call the others down here," she instructed. "And remember, I can put you to sleep and do it myself, so be careful about the words you choose."

Her eyes on Sandy, Eleanor touched the pad. "Okay kids," she said. "Sandy's here and needs some help with Star Spear. Drop whatever you're doing and come on down."

She took her hand off the pad. "You're gonna do something desperate and crazy, aren't you?"

Sandy almost laughed. "Surprised?"

"And Tom and the others. They don't know about this, do they?"

"They'll be getting the general idea pretty soon . . . okay, Bryce. Everybody. Just line up along there."

The other members of the Challenger standby team had appeared, and they all saw what Sandy was holding in her hand. "This is gonna be simple," she explained to them as she backed into a space suit storage alcove. "All of you are going to peacefully move past me and get into Star Spear and fly to the space station . . ."

She suddenly spotted the man at the far end of the line about to make a move. "Travis, so help me God if I have to shoot you I will. And I'll make sure it hurts really bad."

There were no further attempts at heroics or escape and, with their all their attention on Sandy, the group filed on past and began moving into the Star Spear. Eleanor remained behind, calmly guiding her teammates on.

At the end she started to follow them, but paused and looked back towards Sandy.

"What about your family?" she asked. "What about Bud? What do I tell them?"

Sandy sighed. "To be honest, Eleanor, I don't know. I wish I did."

* * * * *

Five minutes later Star Spear was pulling away from Challenger, beginning to set a course for the space station.

Drifting onto the flight deck, Sandy strapped herself into one of the seats located before the large free-standing control console. For all her experience in space she had never tried to fly her brother's pride and joy. The enormity of what she wanted to do was a bit daunting. But Tom had boasted that Challenger was actually so fully automated that he could fly it with a Tiny Idiot.

Sandy wasn't quite confident enough to put it to the test and, rather, she began moving her fingers across one of the keyboards located on the console.

"Challenger systems engaged," the computer replied, and Sandy couldn't help but smile. Tom had used Phyllis as the model for the computer's voice. She continued typing.

"Radio frequency generators online," Phyllis' voice primly announced. "Injector feeds switched to preflight diagnostic mode. All coupler systems coming online. Superconductors charging. Magnetic confinement field geometry shifting into orbital escape velocity settings. Please begin course selection."

Sandy had already been studying course options and, feeling incredibly forlorn, began entering coordinates into the computer.

"Warning," the computer announced. "Selected course violates safety protocols."

"Now I lay me down to sleep," Sandy whispered.

"Please repeat statement."

"Override safety protocols," Sandy said sharply. "Do it!"

* * * * *

"Well?" Mary Swift insisted.

They were all in the observatory, and both Tom and his father were intently studying information which was coming in from the computer. Updated orbital data from Challenger.

Tom shook his head and muttered, "Stupid stupid stupid little . . ."

Mary felt as if she were going to explode. "Well?"

With a tired sigh, Tom Sr. turned to the others. "Understand it's still too early to really tell. Remember that, out of all Tom's spaceships, Challenger is not only the fastest but the most maneuverable. It's still possible that she can change course---"

"What . . . Is . . . Sandra . . . Doing?"

Tom Sr. rubbed at his eyes. "As near as we can determine," he said, "if Challenger maintains its current course and speed, it'll reach the Sun in thirty-one days."

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Family Counseling.

An hour later the conversation (as some were generous enough to refer to it) was continuing within the living quarters section of the Sky Queen. The emphasis of the discussion seemed not so much focused on what Sandy had done than in trying to calm Mary down. Dr. Emerson was now a part of the group gathered in the lounge, and his self-appointed contribution was to remain at the edge of things and silently keep in mind the sedatives he brought along.

For her part, Mary was not as large a screaming wreck as she felt she could be. She was pacing back and forth across the lounge, trying to keep her breathing under control and sound at least halfway rational.

"There has to be a way," she said to the lounge carpeting.

"Keep in mind," Tom Sr. began, "that it probably wasn't an accident that Sandy decided to take Tom's fastest spaceship---"

The look thrown at him by his wife told him to immediately drop that line of argument.

"I'm not stupid," she snapped out, resuming her pacing. "I'm not an idiot. I don't design spaceships or fly them, but I've been around all of you long enough to have picked up a few things."

"Mary---"

"There are other ships out in space, Tom. Surely one of them could rendezvous with Challenger."

Tom Sr. sighed. "Bud?"

Privately, Bud sympathized a great deal with Mary Swift's feelings. But he obediently touched some buttons and brought the lounge screen to life. On it was projected a diagram of the inner solar system.

Going to it, Tom Sr. indicated several labeled blips scattered throughout the diagram. "These indicate the current location and course of all Enterprises spaceships. Down here, still near the Earth, is Sandy in Challenger. She's apparently selected a course and speed which brings her to the Sun in thirty-one days.

"Now these two ships between Challenger and the Sun. Drake and Ulysses. Drake was already on course back to Earth and should reach the space station in eight days. Ulysses was heading for Mercury when the crisis started, and it's altered its course to make a gravity-assist flyby of Venus and swing on out to Mars on the far side of the Sun."

Tom Sr. sighed, keeping his attention on the screen so he wouldn't have to look into Mary's eyes. "Both these ships are Solar Sailers. Admittedly they're fast. But Challenger can easily outrun them. Not only that, but Sandy can outmaneuver them. Drake would practically have to tear itself apart to turn around and try to catch Challenger. As for Ulysses . . . the only way it could possibly catch Challenger would be to do a full gravity-assist orbit around Venus or Mercury, or the Sun. Course projections for all of those can bring Ulysses dangerously close within range of the solartron weapon. And, even if Ulysses made it safely past the Sun, Sandy can easily spot it and alter her own course and speed."

A motion next to him. Mary was standing there, her arms crossed as she studied the screen.

"Jess Rutledge is in command of Ulysses," Tom Sr. slowly said. "If you want I will personally contact him and order him to try and rendezvous with Challenger."

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the firming of Mary's jawline.

She waved a hand at the screen. "These ships closer to the Earth. They're Titans, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"They're nuclear powered rockets, Tom. I know that. I know they can run on full boost and, even at the risk of ruining their engines, possibly catch up with Sandy---"

Tom Sr. tried to keep his voice gentle and even. "The Titans are needed for the evacuation program."

A long harsh breath escaped from Mary's lips and she turned away from the screen. Seeing her expression, Dr. Emerson took a step closer, one hand reaching for his medical kit.

It was at that point that Tom and Phyllis entered the lounge.

"We can't raise her," Tom said to the others. "I've been trying . . . the space station's been trying . . . Swiftbase . . . even some of the spaceships we've got out there have been trying."

"Can't raise her?" Mary insisted. "Or is she just not answering?"

Tom was taken aback by the intensity of her question. "The telemetry we've been getting back indicate that Challenger's communication system has been . . . switched off."

Mary shook her head. "First these temporary communications blackouts, and now this." She suddenly turned to where Sherman had been quietly standing nearby. "And how in God's name did Sandy manage to switch off Enterprises communications the way she did?"

The expression on Sherman's face would've done justice to a Buddha. "I have absolutely no idea," he calmly replied.

"She obviously doesn't want to talk," Bud pointed out to Mary. He looked away slightly. "She isn't gonna talk," he said more to himself.

"Keep transmitting to her," Mary ordered her son. "She's . . . eventually we're going to reach her."

She suddenly turned to the controls Bud had used earlier, her fingers tapping on the keys.

The solar system diagram was replaced with an image of Vera Millionspell. "Swiftbase communications," she automatically said, then "Oh!" as she noticed the crowd (and especially the expression on Mary Swift's face).

"Get one of the kids," Mary said to her. "Now."

Even from almost two hundred and forty thousand miles away Vera clearly wasn't going to try to argue and she moved away from view.

A few minutes passed, and then a slender dark-haired whisper of a young man appeared on the screen. His blue eyes studied the group before him. "Uncle Bud . . . Mama Mary."

Mary moved closer to the screen. "Hello . . ."

"Alex," Bud murmured.

"Hello Alex," Mary said to the boy. "Please listen to me, sweetie. I need you and the others to talk to Sandy."

"Ohhhh," Tom Sr. said in realization.

The delicate face grew mournful. "Mama Sandy . . . we can't."

Mary's eyes sharpened. "But you could."

"Aunt Sandy is far away," Alex said sadly.

"Alex . . ."

"She is not tuned in, Mama Mary. She's so quiet." Alex looked away from them, the eyes seeing something far away. "She's hurt inside. Not doctor hurt. Not bandage hurt." With a hand he touched the center of his chest. "She's hurt in here."

Bud and Tom and Phyllis looked at each other, and Bud was silently mouthing not tuned in.

"I can stop the hurt," Mary insisted, and her husband could now clearly see the tears in the brown eyes. "I always made it stop hurting before, Alex. You have to help me."

"I would," Alex replied, looking directly at her. "We all would. But she has to tune in. She has to open to us."

"Please," Mary whispered.

"We will listen," Alex promised. "We will tell you when she opens."

Bud now moved closer. "Alex. Do you know what Sandy is going to do?"

Alex now seemed a bit nervous. "She's going where we couldn't. She . . . she wants to do what we can't." More intense now. "You understand, Uncle Bud. It's the way she's always been, and the way she always will be. Aunt Sandy is being Aunt Sandy. You know."

And Bud was now feeling his eyes wanting to do something they usually didn't. "Yes," he whispered to the screen. "I do."

"When she opens up we'll tell her," Alex promised. "But she already knows. She isn't tuned in. She's quiet, but we know you're deep inside her."

Bud now turned away from the screen, walking across the room and making a rather visible show of getting a glass of water.

"Keep trying," Mary told Alex. "Please, sweetie."

The boy nodded assent. "Even if it hurts," he said. "We know where she is and we will follow her." Another slow nod, the eyes closing. "Mama Mary," Alex intoned, and the image faded from the screen.

From the couch where she had been watching, her hand tightly clutching Ned's, Helen murmured, "Well, if anything the kids have picked up Sandy's predilection for drama." Then slightly louder: "Mary. I didn't know Sandy shared a psychic connection with the kids."

"I didn't either until a few minutes ago," Mary replied dully, turning to the others. "The idea just made sudden sense. The kids and her have all been under the influence of the aliens for years." She suddenly squeezed her eyes shut, her face pinching as if from pain. "Oh, Sandy . . ."

Tom Sr. moved his arms around her.

"She shouldn't be quiet," Mary insisted. "She could always talk to us during these . . . outings of hers. Why is she so afraid of talking?"

Bud was contemplating the insides of his glass. "She's afraid we'd talk her into coming back."

"And is that such a bad thing?" Mary shrieked at his back. "For God's sake, Bud, you keep saying you love her. Don't you---"

"Yes I do," Bud said, turning to face her. "Yes I want her back here right now. Either that, or the next best thing which is me out there on Challenger with her." His voice hardened. "You tell me how to accomplish either of those things and I'll do them. Now!"

Tom moved to touch his friend's shoulder. "Bud---"

"I'm sorry," Bud said to him, trying to work his voice back down. "And I'm sorry I yelled back at you," he added to Mary. "I've never liked being helpless, you know that. And I really don't like being helpless when Sandy's concerned."

"None of us do, son," Tom Sr. assured him, his arms still around Mary. "But, like Alex pointed out, Sandy is being Sandy."

"You'll excuse me," Ned told him, "but that's not really the most reassuring statement in the world."

Tom Sr. nodded. "Tell me about it. Sandy's done incredibly reckless things before."

Mary moaned softly.

"And a lot of times I've told myself it's God's way of getting back at me for all the reckless things I did when I was her age," he went on. He lightly squeezed Mary. "Knowing Sandy the way I do I keep telling myself that she has something in mind. Some scheme or idea. I have to believe that because, if I don't, then the only other alternative is that my daughter is . . . genuinely insane."

"Sandy does have a plan," Tom assured him.

He had everyone's attention as he went to the screen controls and called up the solar system display. "Note that I didn't say Sandy was sane," Tom went on. "But she definitely has something in mind."

Mary's expression was desperate. "What?"

"Of course she took Challenger," Tom told her, indicating the blip which marked the spaceship on the display. "It made the most possible sense she'd want the one ship that could easily escape pursuit. But the way she's heading for the Sun confuses the heck out of me. She could push Challenger to the limit and make it there in practically no time at all. Why is she traveling so slow? What's the point?"

"Sandy's never handled Challenger before," Bud suggested.

"True," Tom conceded. "True. But she's managed to leave Earth orbit and send it to the Sun. Speeding up should be comparatively easy." Turning from the screen he looked at the group. "Why is she taking so much time? What's the purpose?"

"We figure out the answer to that," Phyllis said, "we'll figure out her plan."

"Yeah," Tom replied. "I don't think the answer'll reassure us. But it'll be something."

"I'll settle for an answer," Mary said, "and then I'll work from there."

* * * * *

After a quiet talk with Tom Sr., Dr. Emerson went ahead and surreptitiously managed to dose Mary with a sedative. Everyone else began drifting off on their more or less separate ways.

The "less" category involved Tom and Phyllis. Hours later found him standing at the viewport in his quarters, gazing up into the night sky.

A touch at his waist became Phyllis' arms sliding around him. Her breath on his shoulder and her closeness pressed against his back.

"You're not gonna figure out Sandy," Phyllis whispered to him. "No matter how hard you try."

Tom continued staring out the viewport, one of his hands moving to twine fingers with hers.

"You and your parents have grown up with her," Phyllis went on. "But, with the possible exception of Bud, I'm much closer to her. I know the way her mind works."

"Then educate me," Tom said.

"It's not just the fact that she's taking more time than necessary in traveling to the Sun. What upsets me personally is that she's left the rest of the All-Girl Ninja Team behind."

"Well," Tom conceded, "Bingo I can understand. But Sandy's gone off by herself before."

"I know." Phyllis now rested a cheek against him. "I've been thinking about those times. Back when she was dogfighting with Geiner, or heading off on her own to stop Kondor." A sorrowful breath. "Back when she faced Solomon."

Tom didn't say anything.

"Those were the most serious times," Phyllis said. "The times when she faced a really huge risk and didn't want anyone else in danger. That's why she left us behind. Not just me, or Sestina, but Bud as well. And that's why I didn't voice this opinion in front of your mother."

"Oh?"

A slow nod against his back. "The fact that she's taking time to get to the Sun may mean that she has some sort of a plan. But the fact that's she doing this totally by herself . . . oh Tom! The fact that she's doing this alone tells me she doesn't expect to come back."

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Family Gathering.

Bud's dream was centered on a particular vivacious, blue-eyed blonde girl. She was teasing him, laughing and keeping just out of reach of his fingers as they chased each other about a sunny grassy field. There were mountains in the distance, and the area seemed familiar. Maybe around the Grand Tetons . . . perhaps Jackson Hole in Wyoming.

"You're not gonna wait for me," Bud called out to her.

She giggled. "No!"

And then the mountains faded, replaced by a cold abyss that yawned wide before them, growing larger and larger. The sun appeared within the abyss, but it gave off no warmth.

Bud immediately reached out for the girl, but there was some sort of undefinable gulf between them. She turned back towards him, her arm outstretched. But she wasn't trying to take his hand or get closer. Rather, she was silently warning him to stay back. To remain behind. There was fear in the blue eyes, but also a powerful determination.

"You're not gonna wait for me," Bud repeated, this time insistent.

She began turning away from him. Towards the abyss. "No!"

* * * * *

He was suddenly awake. The abyss, the cold sun and, most important of all, the blonde girl was gone. In their place was the familiar surroundings of the room he had on board the Sky Queen.

With a groan, Bud pulled himself up to a sitting position in bed. He felt clammy all over. Uncomfortable.

A sigh. "If you're trying to contact me," he whispered out to her, "then please try and make it a better dream."

There was a small knock on the door, and it occurred to Bud that whoever was out there might have been trying to get through to him for some time now. "Come in."

The door opened to reveal Mary Swift. She began pushing a food cart into the room . . .

Then just as quickly she paused and turned completely around. "You sleep au naturel?" she asked in a small voice.

"Ahhh, yeah Miz Swift." Bud pulled more of the sheets up around him. "Sorry `bout that."

Well, Mary silently considered, that's one Cosmic Mystery of the Universe finally solved. She patiently waited a few moments.

Then: "Okay, I'm presentable."

Swallowing the five or six comments fighting for dominance on the tip of her tongue, Mary turned back around and resumed pushing the cart. Bud had pulled on a t-shirt. The lower half of him was still covered with the sheet, so everything else was a matter of idle speculation. "You haven't eaten regularly since . . . well, you haven't eaten."

Odors escaping from the covered dishes on the cart were causing Bud's stomach to come rapidly to attention. But he was also noticing the shy look on the older woman's face. "Miz Swift---"

"There were some bad feelings and words between us yesterday," Mary slowly and quietly said.

"We were both pretty upset," Bud assured her. "None of us meant it."

She went and sat down at the single chair next to the small desk. "I just wanted to clear the air between us," she said. "I'd never forgive myself if you and I had a falling out. It'd be like yelling at Phyllis."

Bud was uncovering the dishes on the cart. Steak . . . hash browns . . . a nice stack of pancakes and a slice of what to Bud's eyes (and nose) seemed to be freshly made apple coffee cake.

He smiled slightly. "You clear the air much more and I won't be able to fit through the doorways around here."

"Eat," Mary instructed.

Bud was already working away at it. "You've had breakfast?" he asked.

Mary nodded, sitting and watching him. "Are your parents still heading for the mountains where they are?"

"Yes." Bud poked at the hash browns a bit. "I . . . was gonna try and take Sandy out there with me and join them."

"I know. And her father and I would've approved."

She noticed that his appetite seemed to slow down considerably. "I sort of take that back, Bud," she continued. "In the best of all possible worlds I would've preferred for all of us to have been together when the end came." Mary was gently surprised at how easy the idea of The End now came to her. "But I feel that Sandy and you would've deserved whatever quiet happiness the both of you could've managed."

He was continuing to toy with his food.

"Did I ever tell you how much I didn't like you at first?"

Bud looked up, surprised. "Huh?"

Mary nodded. "I mean it was such a strange time back in the days when Enterprises was still brand new. Here was Tom, seventeen years old, and he's thinking that just because he can design supersonic aircraft and submarines and stuff then other seventeen year old boys can do the same thing." An exasperated breath. "And here's his father nodding and going 'yes, I'll let you construct a multi-million dollar flying laboratory', 'yes, I'll let you build a spaceship and fly into space' and 'yes, you can start an astronaut program for boys your age'. This is where I began finding grey hairs on my head."

Bud was smiling now.

"And then Tom comes back from making a visit to UCSF, and he's all enthusiastic about this boy he's found. 'Mom', he says to me, 'this guy's smart and fast and he's passed the qualification tests I designed, and I got his parent's permission to bring him out here to Shopton'." Mary shook her head. "At the time I didn't say anything, but I wondered what the heck sort of parents would allow their teenage son to go off with people they hardly knew and begin pilot and astronaut training?"

"Well---" Bud began.

"I know, I know. That's when I almost threw all of the mirrors out of the house." Mary took a breath. "So then Tom's discovery arrives. To be honest, I was expecting a cross between Albert Einstein and John Glenn. Instead this punk kid shows up."

Bud's eyebrows rose. "Punk kid?"

"I'm sorry. You looked like a punk kid, you talked like a punk kid and you dressed like a punk kid. I went to the dictionary, looked up the term 'punk kid', and your picture was right there. But Tom kept talking you up, so what was I going to do?"

"Then you started sniffing around Sandy."

Bud shrugged. "First impressions and all---"

"No, I mean you literally started sniffing around Sandy."

"Well, what can I say? She smelled really pretty back then." Bud reflected for a few moments. "Of course she ended up smelling a lot better as time went on---"

"So Sandy . . . who'd been something of a tomboy from the word go . . . suddenly decides to become all feminine and start paying attention to boys. Or at least one particular boy." The look Mary gave Bud was almost accusing. "I came very close to shoving her into the Rocksmoond Young Ladies Seminary."

"Wow!"

Mary nodded emphatically. "Yes. And you know I wouldn't wish that fate on my worst enemy."

Bud had resumed eating. "But I seem to have grown on you since then."

"Well . . . yes. First, Tom managed to influence your fashion sense and make you look less like something out of the road show production of Grease . . ."

"I drew the line at those t-shirts, though."

Mary nodded. "Tom was right. You are intelligent. You then followed this up by getting into scrapes with Tom over the years and, more times than I care to remember, saving his life." Her expression grew a bit wistful. "Then there was the matter of you and Sandy . . ."

Bud's newly risen mood faded just as quickly and he looked away.

Mary's voice was plaintive. "Why in God's name didn't you marry her before now?"

Bud sighed. "Miz Swift . . ."

Mary waited.

"I know," Bud finally breathed out. "I know. I've kicked myself so many times for not setting things up back when she was hospitalized after Solomon. It would've been easy." He looked up at her. "It would've been too easy. Sandy was broken back then, and not just her body."

The look on Mary's face told Bud she understood.

"When she and I were searching for the Unzip Key we really got close to getting formally engaged." Got close to a lot of things, Bud mentally added. "It just felt so right, but we wanted things to settle down more and we thought we had all the time in the world. We both knew we'd eventually get married, but . . ." Bud pushed a bit at his plate. "We were stupid."

"That all sounds so familiar," Mary murmured.

For a moment Bud thought she was referring to Tom and Phyllis.

"I was in love with Sandy's father practically from the beginning," Mary went on. "And he felt the same about me. We also felt we had time, and we did. Oh but Bud . . . all the times I could've lost him. All the hesitating and holding back the both of us did when, in reality, we should've been married and together much sooner."

A small smile had returned to Bud's face. "Mr. Swift seems to have made up for lost time since then."

"Well . . . true." Despite herself Mary couldn't keep the dimples from appearing on her face. Then they vanished as sorrow once again took hold. "But Sandy didn't . . . Sandy never . . ."

"We've got to stop talking about Sandy in the past tense," Bud told her.

Mary looked down at her lap.

"Sandy's been in tough spots before, and she's managed to come out on top. She's gonna give this the best fight of her life, and she could still win."

Mary's face lifted and she stared steadily into his eyes. "Do you believe that, Bud? Do you honestly and truly believe that?"

"I've got faith in her."

"So do I," Mary replied evenly. "It's part of a mother's job to believe in her children." Her eyes widened slightly. "But my God, Bud. My God! No parent should ever have to expect her child to put her life on the line to save an entire planet!"

"Alex might've said it best last night. Sandy's just being Sandy."

"Bud . . ."

"I agree with you," Bud went on. "Sandy's wonderful and brilliant and resourceful. But she's still just a little girl. One little human girl. It's just that . . . just that . . ."

He paused for a moment, thinking. Then: "You've been in her room before."

"Well, yes."

"You've noticed that poster she had on her wall? The one with the sort of barbarian figure standing on the mountaintop? Holding a sword and fighting off a bolt of lightning?"

Mary nodded.

"She found that at a convention years ago. It's by an artist named Frazetta. The piece is entitled 'Against the Gods'."

"Oh no . . ."

"Miz Swift we both have faith that Sandy might somehow manage to win this one. What worries us is that, this time, the price for victory's gonna be really really high. I also think that, deep down, Sandy knows that."

"I want her back, Bud."

"So do I. I know I sound horrible, Miz Swift, but right now I don't care about the world. I just care about Sandy . . . huh?"

He reached over to touch the buzzing intercom plate on the wall. "Yeah?"

"Do you know where Mom is?" Tom's voice asked.

"Yeah. She just brought me breakfast."

"Both of you get up here quick."

"What's up?"

"Sandy's contacting us."

Chapter Thirty: The Long Drift.

As a student at John O'Connell High School, Bud had distinguished himself on the varsity track team by running the 440 yard event in forty-four seconds. But Mary easily outdistanced him to the Sky Queen lounge.

The original crowd was all gathered around Tom, watching him carefully operate the controls to the communication system with one hand while his other hand tapped on a Tiny Idiot.

Glancing up, Tom saw his mother staring at the blank screen. "It's just audio, Mom," he said. "Nothing coming through visually."

"So what are we getting?" Bud asked, coming closer.

"Began picking up an X-band transmission eight minutes ago," Tom explained. "Data prefix clearly identifies it as Challenger's transmitter. It's a really wide beam. Whatever Sandy's doing she's not only sending it to Earth, but also to the space station and the Moon."

"Is she coming back?" Mary asked. "Turning back?"

Tom Sr. slowly shook his head. "No course change indicated as of yet."

At the controls Tom suddenly paused, tapping up some data on his computer. "I think Gorsky's people on the space station have got it firmly locked in."

Mary briefly looked around. "Shouldn't someone let Ken know?"

"I really think Ken has other things to worry about at the moment," her husband pointed out.

"Here we go," Tom announced, sitting up.

And from the speaker in the lounge came the voice from space. The voice which was picked up by hundreds of receivers all over the world. It was picked up especially clear at Goldstone in America, Robledo de Chavela in Spain and Canberra in Australia. It was also listened to by the receivers on board the Swift space station, and by the sensitive antennas at Swiftbase near the lunar north pole (as well as AstroDynamics' Whitaker Observatory in Copernicus, and Japan Prime's Suta-Raito microwave receiver on the edge of the Mare Crisium).

In the beginning the voice would be heard by only a handful of people. But as the days passed the signal would be distributed throughout the world, and the handful soon became dozens . . . became hundreds . . . an audience that never seemed to stop growing.

There was death and danger among the stars. Everyone knew that.

And now there was Sandy.

* * * * *

"Okay . . . first off I have to explain that I'm only transmitting. I can't receive. In fact I've torn out all the receiver components, gone through the entire ship and have found every piece of

hardware that could be used to build a receiver, and have stuffed all of it into the airlock. I then blew it out into space.

"I'm sorry, Mom. It was necessary. If I heard your voice, or if I heard . . . other voices . . . I'd never be able to go through with what I'm doing. And believe me, I don't want to do this."

* * * * *

"Oh my! Just took my first stem to stern inventory of Challenger. Plenty of consumables to get me from here to the Sun. After that, well . . .

"No, scratch that. No, wait. Should I be honest, or optimistic?"

* * * * *

"Reaching the eighteen million mile mark. Hooray for me.

"I'm sleeping good in the zero-G section, but am also regularly using the centrifuge so there's no need to worry. I'm eating well, but I've come to the conclusion that I don't like eating alone. Personal memo to Tom: for God's sake download a bigger musical library into your ship computers."

* * * * *

"I cannot believe . . . I absolutely refuse to believe that the aliens are sincere about wanting to destroy us. Yes, I'm aware that they've seriously upped the mayhem ante, and yes I've been thinking over and over again about what Faye said. But there's something else. There just has to be. I know it says somewhere in the Bible . . . I think it's in first Peter . . . `Hope to the end'. And Tom? There's no Bible on this ship. I've looked and looked. Shame on you. You promised Mom.

"I'm gambling that the aliens are interested by what I'm doing. So interested, in fact, that they won't blow me to bits when I get closer to the Sun. I'm gambling that I'll fascinate them. I'm gambling that they'll respond to desperate reason.

"All this gambling. And oh, sweet gentle Jesus . . . I've got so little to put on the table."

* * * * *

"Outer Space Resolution number thirty-six: I'm gonna try to keep the weepy stuff to a minimum in these messages."

* * * * *

"You people are all in trouble now. I've found a harmonica."

* * * * *

"I'm not brave, I'm not special, I'm not brilliant, I can't work miracles. But what was it Tolkien said? `Bilbo the silly hobbit started this affair, and Bilbo had better finish it, or himself'.

"Seriously, people, I'm not doing this because I intend to die. I'm doing this because . . . because . . . well, what the hell else was I supposed to do?"

* * * * *

"Sandy's space maintenance report number six (toot on harmonica). Fault indicator on gas management valve in number two RTG. Debated whether or not to jettison the entire megilla. Managed to safely remove and inspect entire gas management assembly and discovered the diagnostic sensor was somehow misaligned. Fixed everything and had a Hershey bar. Expect nasty letter from Space Maintenance Union."

* * * * *

"Pale was the wounded knight, that bore the rowan shield. Loud and cruel were the ravens' cries, as they feasted on the field'."

* * * * *

"Bingo I hope you've had the baby by now. If there's any Justice in the world it'll be a girl. Tell her Aunt Sandy loves her and tell her to be a good girl."

* * * * *

", , , and Miss Euell had all of us take out some paper and write down what we wanted to be when we grew up. Boy, I sure hope she's hearing some of this."

* * * * *

"Halfway to the Sun. Tried to get drunk on reconstituted vegetable soup. Report to the Biochemical Department: you cannot get drunk on reconstituted vegetable soup. I know there's some way to make a still that employs vacuum, but the technical details just aren't coming to me .

..

"Ah, Mom? Don't pay any attention to me. I don't drink. Really. It's all just a mental exercise."

* * * * *

"Getting some nice images of the Sun through the telescope. It now looks as if the solartrons are covering nineteen per cent of the surface."

* * * * *

"Yeah, I probably sound blasphemous right about now, but I'm sorry. I really prefer Rory Gallagher's slide guitar technique to Duane Allman's. For that matter, I'd rather listen to George Harrison.

"And while music's on my mind, this whole `Robin Trower's just a Hendrix ripoff' thing is a total load of . . ."

* * * * *

"Oh Bud I've always loved you, and I don't care how many people hear it now. I'm lonely and I'm scared and I need you and want you, but you're back on Earth. I had to do this, so please don't hate me darling. I couldn't bring you along and have you in danger, and if you had told me not to do it I wouldn't have taken one more step.

"You're not here and I don't even have a picture of you with me. I close my eyes and can see you. I go to bed and, just before I drop off, I feel you with me. I need to see you and feel you and have you tell me I'm doing the right thing and I love you, I love you, I love you and . . . and oh crap!"

* * * * *

"Estimated time of arrival at solar chromosphere: five days, twelve hours."

* * * * *

"I took the eight dollars from your purse, Mom, back when I was six and you thought you'd lost the money at the store. And I also cheated on that tenth grade history test that you and Dad had to go talk with the teachers about. I'm sorry.

"And no, those aren't the worst things I've done."

* * * * *

"They're gonna listen to me. Damn it, they're gonna listen to me. Like it or not they're gonna get me down their throats."

* * * * *

"Any of you ever have those days when you do something really crazy that made a whole lot of sense in the beginning? Well . . ."

* * * * *

"They've got to know I'm coming. Can't they see me? What the hell are they waiting for? Do they think I'm gonna turn around and run back home? Don't they know that's the one thing I want more than anything?"

* * * * *

"Propellant ionization switched to computer control. ICH coupling on temperature presets. Diverting all auxiliary power to life-support."

* * * * *

"Oh God . . . thy Sea is so great, and my Boat is so small.
"Oh I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry . . ."
(eighteen minutes of sobbing until loss of signal.)

Chapter Thirty-One: The Big Downhill.

Of course during her trip to the Sun, Sandy did quite a bit more than make regular broadcasts to Earth.

She maintained a fairly regular schedule. Upon waking she would replace the cocoon in her sleeping harness, putting the used one in the wash. Then she'd float to the centrifuge and spend twenty to thirty minutes engaged in exercises with the gravity set a fraction higher than Earth normal. This would then be followed by fifteen minutes in the bathing bubble.

Cleaned, exercised and dressed, Sandy would then eat breakfast on Challenger's bridge; studying the displays and working out the day's activities. Her main goal during breakfast was to see if Tom or anyone else was trying to send a pursuit ship. Nothing ever showed up (she hadn't stolen Challenger simply because it was a pretty spaceship), but she felt that, with either her mother or Bud acting as a driving force, it wasn't a crime to be watchful. Breakfast was usually the first time during the day she'd think about Bud.

If there were no outstanding maintenance issues she would usually resume whatever reading she was involved in, gradually working her way through Challenger's computerized library.

She also played a great deal of chess with the computer. In the beginning it asked (still in Phyllis' voice) which level of difficulty Sandy wanted.

"Oh, show me no mercy," Sandy casually replied.

Fifty-eight straight vicious losses later Sandy said: "Okay . . . maybe a little mercy here."

She would also practice on the harmonica, assuring herself that she was probably the finest blues harpist insystem from Earth.

Her impromptu messages to Earth operated on no set schedule. There would simply be a time when her hand would reach out for the communications console and she'd begin talking. Usually after her broadcasts she would go to the galley and start supper, or go wash her hair, or simply drift off into a corner and huddle for a while.

A good part of her days were spent in Challenger's observation blister. Half the time she would study the approaching Sun. The other half she would be watching the Earth; especially when New York State was visible.

She wrote a total of two hundred and eighteen personal letters to Bud on the computer's word processing program. Every one of them was deleted.

* * * * *

Once a day there was a ritual she performed without fail.

She usually performed it in her room, drifting weightlessly about and occasionally and gently bouncing off the padded walls. The device she had acquired from Dr. Emerson would be fastened to her jumpsuit with a Velcro strap, and the headpiece from the device would be secured around her head.

Floating, she would switch the device on, close her eyes and spend at least a few hours in quiet concentration.

Again and again she would whisper two words.

"Stay tuned."

* * * * *

Upon passing the orbit of Mercury she waited a day, making certain the solartron weapon wasn't going to blast her out of existence.

"No," she finally concluded to herself. "They wouldn't have let me come this far just to kill me."

Going to the bridge she summoned up a telejector graphic of the Sun, letting the image form in the air above the main console. By that time Challenger was too close to the Sun to allow direct viewing through the ports.

"Display solartrons."

On the image appeared the weblike tracery of the machines.

"Indicate greatest concentration of solartrons."

The image rotated until Sandy could see what appeared to be the center of the solartron "web". An enormous black spot halfway between the solar equator and the Sun's southern pole.

"Plot a direct course to that location."

"Warning," Phyllis' voice replied. "Updated course violates safety protocols."

"We've had this conversation before. Override safety protocols and keep them overridden."

"Analysis indicates that this ship will not reach selected destination due to extreme conditions."

"Well . . . them's what's called the breaks, ain't it?"

"Please repeat."

Sandy sighed. "You've got my friend's voice, but my brother obviously programmed you. Access `food', access `omelet', access `eggs', access `broken'."

* * * * *

Five days later the alarms began.

"Hull integrity reaching critical strain. Life support systems past safe operational margins. Maneuvering systems can no longer handle gravity well. Collision imminent."

Sandy sat at the console for several moments. A few days earlier she had sent a message to Earth. The old prayer about the sea being large. At that time she'd let everything overcome her and, once she had finished crying, the computer had informed her that no further messages could be sent due to rising plasma interference from the Sun.

"Collision imminent," Phyllis' voice repeated.

"Oh well," Sandy said to herself. "I said all I was going to anyway."

Drifting to the bathing bubble she thoroughly scrubbed her face. Then she brushed out her hair.

She then drifted to the main airlock where her spacesuit waited, climbing into it. As she fastened the sections together, making the seals tight, she thought she could feel a buffeting begin to take place within Challenger.

"For what it's worth," she said, "you've been a good ship. Thank you."

"Diverting all emergency power to life support."

"Yeah." Reaching out, Sandy opened the airlock's inner door. She then stepped into the compartment beyond.

Closing the door behind her she pulled the helmet down over her head, sealing it. She then performed a complete check on all systems, switching on the cooling systems and making certain the light filters on her faceplate were set to maximum.

That chore done she began pressurizing the airlock, pushing as much atmosphere as possible into the compartment.

Inside her suit she could hear the pronounced level of her breathing and she worked to calm herself down.

"They didn't kill me," she said out loud. "They let me get this close. I know they mean to kill me, that's why they revived Ithaca. If they wanted her to do the job then they could've sent her any time. I'm . . . I'm . . . one more gamble, girl. Just one more."

Gulping in the cool air within her suit she touched the switch which armed the explosive bolts to the outer airlock door.

"'Fulfilled of signs and wonders'," she said. "'In life, in death made clear. Jehovah of the Thunders . . . Lord God of Battles, hear!'"

Her hand struck another button and, with a sudden shock, the outer airlock door blew away from the ship. The airlock immediately depressurized, hurling Sandy out towards the waiting blaze of the Sun.

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Shores of Phlegethon.

Sandy awoke cool and comfortable inside her space suit.

"Well," she said. "It turns out I'm not suicidal after all."

Feeling no broken bones, or bleeding (and, most important of all, not smelling the odor of scorched flesh), Sandy gradually moved herself into a sitting position. Poking her chin against the emergency button within her helmet she was relieved to see that all of the suit systems were intact and operational.

A touch of a button on her wrist brought up a medical report. So far so good, but Sandy instructed the suit's medical kit to deliver a caffeine/analgic injection into her bloodstream.

So much for the immediate. Sandy's attention now focused further out. Instead of the expected blinding impact of the Sun's light Sandy was seeing darkness beyond her visor. Since her eyes could clearly make out the interior of her helmet she knew she wasn't blind and decided to cautiously tune down the light filters.

"Oh!"

A small part of Sandy's mind half expected to find herself in an immaculate Louis XVI-style bedroom. Instead she was sitting on a smooth ebon surface which seemed to stretch out endlessly in all directions. On the distant horizon, everywhere she looked, a faint glow spread upwards. Following it upwards Sandy found she was able to make out several stars (or were

some of those stars Earth and Jupiter? She knew Venus and Mercury wouldn't be currently visible from her position).

"Oh my."

Touching another button she called up an environmental report. Gravity: one-G (easily confirmed by the fact that she was moving about). Radiation level: zero point eight millisievert (practically normal background levels on Earth). Exterior temperature: sixty two degrees Fahrenheit. Atmosphere: nitrogen-oxygen prevalent at one oh one point three kilopascals. Breathable.

Keeping in mind the adage about Greeks with gift baskets, Sandy very cautiously cracked her visor open, expecting the illusion to immediately shatter as the full force of the solar environment rushed in. But the temperature was comfortable and the air seemed breathable.

"In for a penny," Sandy muttered and unsealed her helmet, pushing it up off her head. Still no bright violent death and, feeling a rise of determination, she began unsealing the rest of her suit and climbing out of it. Soon she was wearing only the jumpsuit she had favored on board Challenger and carefully tried to stand. Despite the shininess of the surface she was on her slippers were finding sufficient footing.

"Okay," she asked, her hands on her hips as she looked around, "now what?"

In answer, a ring of lights began forming around her, and Sandy had to fight the immediate impulse to dive back into her space suit, forcing herself to stand and watch. She was being surrounded by twenty-two separate glows of soft light, each one twice the size of a basketball, forming a ring some sixty or so feet in diameter with her at the center.

The lights were all floating at waist height and, as Sandy continued to watch, she noticed an object within each of them. They were all different. One tended to resemble a picture Sandy had once seen of a bacteriophage: a geometrically shaped "head" with slowly weaving sticklike "arms" below. Another looked like a sea anemone, softly undulating within its light. Still another seemed to be a snowflake, but one possessing the glittering eyes of a spider, its segmented legs spreading wide as Sandy came closer. A fourth put Sandy in mind of Gila monster, but one which was ornately outfitted in silks and emeralds.

And then a familiar voice spoke. "Welcome, Sandy."

Sandy didn't immediately respond, but stood there for a few moments collecting her thoughts. Then she patiently turned around to face the newcomer. "Faye."

She was standing within the ring of light, nine paces away from Sandy. Once again the alien was humanoid. But, unlike the first time, Faye only superficially resembled Phyllis. Now she resembled something more abstract, more stylized. A Phyllis rendered into a department store mannequin dressed in a one-piece outfit of metallic green. The hairstyle was also different; smoother, glistening and appearing more as a helmet or a shell. But the eyes still carried Phyllis' warmth, as did the voice.

"I felt that you might be uncomfortable if I continued to totally resemble Phyllis," Faye remarked.

"I don't mind," Sandy murmured.

Faye replied with a softly accepting smile. "To answer your first question: you're in an environment we've established upon one of the solartrons." She gave a nod to their surroundings. "The environment extends for about fifteen miles in all directions and is upon the

central solartron node which you seem to have purposefully aimed for. We are floating upon the surface of the Sun's photosphere. Beyond the confines of the environment are temperatures averaging around five thousand degrees Kelvin."

Sandy was casually looking around.

Faye strolled nearer to the ring of lights. "To answer the second question," she said, "what you see around us are various representatives of my race."

Sandy remained silent.

"Thousands of years ago," Faye explained, "our race possessed a centralized physical form in much the same way as your species currently enjoys. However we developed technology that allows us to take on different biological or cyberorganic forms."

Faye's face seemed to lose some of its calm cheer. "As I explained, and as should be clearly obvious by now, we possess the technology to withstand the most extreme of environments. It was not the gravity of Earth that kept us from directly appearing there, nor was it the atmosphere or the microorganisms or anything like that."

"It was us," Sandy offered.

Faye nodded. "When we gained the ability to take on different forms we also acquired a radically heightened sense of empathy. Just as you feel the breeze, or the touch of ice or fire, we feel the emotional states of others." Faye gazed upwards. "To you and your kind, Sandy, the Universe is a field of beautiful lights. It is the same with my own kind, but the field also contains painful nettles. Poisonous nettles."

Sandy's eyes narrowed. "So now comes the actual truth. It's not that my people are a potential threat to galactic harmony. It's not just the Sender technology that's making you do all of this?"

"In a way it is," Faye replied, a trace of reluctance in her voice. "As long as your species remained safely confined within your solar system we could more or less avoid contact. But the Senders threw fuel on your race's already wildcatting sense of inventiveness. If your race moves out into interstellar space you'll begin causing pain on an unprecedented scale. You'll be a disease moving among the stars."

"I refuse to believe it," Sandy said. "You've played games with me, with my family and with everyone on Earth." She shook her head. "I'm still not getting the entire truth here."

"Regardless," Faye assured her, "the decision we made must stand. The Earth and the human race are forfeit."

"There is no reason," Sandy declared. "Not self-defense, not galactic harmony . . . not whatever other story you can bring up. Nothing is going to justify this."

"Sandra---"

"You continue to show me evidence that you're so high above us. On my own world we've encountered societies which existed at a considerably lower level of sophistication---"

"Many of which you promptly annihilated or enslaved."

Sandy closed her eyes briefly. "All right," she breathed. "I'm not going to try and pretend. I'd like the same courtesy from you. You call yourselves advanced. In many ways

you're almost like gods. That doesn't guarantee blind acceptance, not from me. I wouldn't bow down and worship a God who's less merciful or compassionate than I am, and I equally refuse to acknowledge the superiority of a race who cannot rise above murder."

"I told you the making of such a decision is never easy for us."

"Repeat that line over the ruins of Paris---"

"Destroyed by the paranoia of your own kind---"

"Which you stirred up and magnified," Sandy countered. "How many other 'dangerous species' has your kind been obligated to destroy? I'm curious to know, Faye. I feel I have a right to know. What's been the price tag for galactic harmony? For not stepping on the nettles?"

"We regret the necessity of our action."

Sandy nodded. "And if you go through with this you'll regret it even more. You seem to have studied our culture, Faye. There was a movie I once saw. A line in it has been running through my mind throughout the entire trip here. A line about how there are survivors in every massacre."

Now it was Faye who shook her head. "As tragic or as callous as it will sound, we manage to do a thorough job. This will even include the handful of survivors your people are planning to send out into space. No, Sandy. None will escape."

"Eventually," Sandy told her. "Eventually you and your race will encounter a species that will refuse to lie down and be murdered. When that time comes then how many ghosts will surround you? How many of the races you 'protect' will come to your aid?"

"A possibility," Faye softly admitted. "We will face it when the time comes."

"You don't have to face it at all," Sandy shouted. "There's not a single person on Earth who wouldn't bleed to find a solution to this situation. You keep telling me how you're so frightened of our inventiveness. Our cleverness. Consider the notion of turning our cleverness loose . . . the possibility that we could find an answer."

Faye didn't immediately reply but stood there for a while, calmly gazing at Sandy.

Then: "We had wondered as to why you made the decision to come to us. No, let me rephrase that. We knew your motive and guessed your intention. One school of thought was that you felt that your admittedly unselfish gesture would somehow convince us of the need to spare your race. Another thought was that you felt you would offer yourself up as a single sacrifice, and again that would convince us to stop our plan. However we couldn't imagine that you believed either approach would make a difference, so we were left with curiosity. We wondered about your ultimate motive, and that's why you're here now and alive."

Sandy sighed. "I had two reasons for coming here. The first was to directly confront you," she looked around at the ring of light, "all of you and try to reason or argue a way out of this."

"Dramatic," Faye replied, "but ultimately useless. You could've just as easily summoned me to Earth the way you did before. And the second reason?"

"The second reason," Sandy said, "was to try a rather radical idea."

An eyebrow lifted on Faye's face. "Oh?"

"Mmm. Your race has essentially judged and condemned us all without benefit of a trial."

Faye almost smiled. "Even given the possibility that we would respect your rather skewed judicial customs, do you think you alone could adequately defend your species?"

Sandy's eyes widened slightly. "Oh no. Not at all. In fact I've pretty much made a mess of things as it is. But have you ever encountered the term *amicus curiae*?"

Faye slightly tilted her head. "'Friend of the court'?"

Sandy nodded. "Even so. I didn't just spend the trip out here crying and working up arguments. I also spent a great deal of time in making contact with . . . well, let's call it a friendly witness."

Faye frowned.

"Oh don't worry," Sandy assured her. "It's someone we all know. Someone who's been very much a part of the situation but, up to now, has not been directly involved."

Thunder suddenly rolled across the sky. Sandy remained calm and still as Faye looked up.

Above them the sky was suddenly filled by an enormous object. A vast spherical mass that glowed with a yellowish-green light.

"You of course know the Senders," Sandy calmly told Faye. "Or, to use the term my people came up with, the Green Orb."

Chapter Thirty-Three: Advocate.

Faye looked back down at her, and Sandy was privately delighted to see a look of surprise on the alien's face.

"H-how . . ."

"The idea came to me when I was throwing this whole scheme together," Sandy remarked. "One of the things I remembered about the Green Orb was that it managed to interrupt your communications with Tom. Given the advanced level of your technology, that really struck me as odd.

"And then a solution came to me. Who in the universe would have the power to match yours? The obvious answer: your own kind. In this case, the Senders." Sandy nodded up at the enormous globe looming above them. "And Tom's description of what he called 'The Orb Brain' matched that of the energy device you sent to Earth years ago. The Visitor.

"Then, on top of everything else, a few moments ago you were telling me a story about how your race was sensitive to our emotional states. Interesting because the Orb Brain told Tom

it was sensitive to certain electromagnetic signals. You demonstrated you were familiar with the term amicus curiae, Faye. How good are you with QED?"

The alien's expression was growing stern. "You have no idea what you've done."

"Oh I think I do," Sandy replied. "The Orb Brain communicated via telepathy . . . a technology which you've demonstrated on occasion. When the Orb left our solar system it agreed to occasionally pass on information to Earth scientists by communicating through brain waves. When I left Earth I brought with me a device that helped me focus my own thoughts. With it I felt that I could contact the Orb and solicit its help.

"But that wasn't all. Since I had been apparently modified to serve as your spy, I felt that perhaps the link could work either way. I managed to set up the link and that provided additional help in establishing contact with the Orb." Sandy almost smirked. "I guess you can say I stayed in tune."

Once again Faye glanced at the Orb. "You've upset a balance of power that's been maintained for thousands of years."

"Too . . . damn . . . bad," Sandy snarled. "I'm desperate. I mentioned a line from one movie. Here's another one. A prime example of human wisdom. When your opponent is holding all the aces, then the only thing left to do is kick over the table."

"You may not have saved your world," Faye warned.

"But now yours is also on the hot seat," Sandy threw back. "How does it feel?"

Faye didn't answer, but glanced off to one side. Following her look Sandy saw rings of green light suddenly flow down from the sky, striking the surface of the solartron only a few paces away.

When they faded, Ithaca Fogger was standing there.

"Move," Faye announced. "And countermove."

"So you threaten me," Sandy told Faye. "That doesn't help your situation."

"So! The idea of death doesn't frighten you?"

"You yourself said it," Sandy pointed out. "No dragon has ever been slain without being faced. I knew there was a chance I'd die. And no, I don't like the idea. Not one little bit. But guess what, Faye. There are people on Earth I'd be willing to die for."

"For nothing," Faye replied. She gave the Orb a nod. "You think that changes anything?"

"It was worth a try," Sandy admitted. "The Senders can counter your power. Even more, they've demonstrated a certain kindness towards my people."

"You've made a deal with the Devil."

Sandy nodded. "The Devil or the dragon. I'll take my chances and hope I can reason with the Devil."

"It will do no good. Your race will still be eliminated."

But Sandy was suddenly breathing harder. "Oh! Oh no! Oh God! That's it. God, it's coming to me now."

Faye was watching her curiously.

"I just realized it. That's how we can defeat you," Sandy said, giving the Orb a look. "It all fits. You say your species is affected by our emotional states. The Orb Brain spoke of a sensitivity to electromagnetic signals. Brain waves and Lord knows what else."

She stared directly at Faye. "Every transmitter on Earth gets focused on this place. Thoughts . . . thoughts and more thoughts are sent here, and you shrivel up." Sandy took a step closer to the alien. "You didn't need the power of the Sun to create a weapon to destroy Earth. You needed the excessive solar energy to build a shield from our transmissions. But we can still penetrate it. Your sensitivity is too great . . . the Senders proved that when the Orb originally came through didn't they? Didn't they?"

"It won't help you," Faye said. "You have no way of sending this revelation back to Earth. As far as your race is concerned you died when Challenger crashed into the Sun. Once again, Sandy, you've proven the inventiveness of your species. But it gets no further than here. There is no way others can assist you. You're quite alone."

* * * * *

"Mary Swift!"

Mary suddenly sat up in bed, no longer tired.

Above her drifted a ghost. Or that's how she first thought of it. The faint image of a woman, her serene face wreathed in flowing black hair.

"Oh I know you," Mary whispered.

"Your child needs your help. Are you and the others ready?"

Mary got out of bed. "Yes!"

* * * * *

"Bud Barclay!"

Bud looked up from where he'd been idly tinkering with a small radio.

"You can save your heart's one true desire."

Bud stood up. "I'm ready."

* * * * *

"Sherman Ames!"

Sherman had been napping at his desk, but now his head snapped up to see the ghost floating before him.

"You once promised to protect the Swifts. All of them."

Sherman stood up. "I'm ready."

* * * * *

"Dody Ames!"

Dody had long ago stopped trying to get drunk and she had been staring moodily at the half-empty bottle of bourbon on the table before her. But when the woman appeared she found herself instantly alert.

"Do you believe in Law . . . or Justice?"

Dody stood up. "I'm ready!"

* * * * *

"Phyllis Newton!"

Phyllis turned away from the mirror (she had madly been contemplating meeting the end as a blonde) and looked up at the woman.

"Your sister calls."

Phyllis stood up. "I'm ready."

* * * * *

"Ken Horton. Belinda-Glory Winkler-Horton!"

Both of them held hands at the appearance of the ghost.

"The future has one chance left."

They stood up. "We're ready!"

* * * * *

"Earhardt Nospe."

He had briefly excused himself from a meeting of fellow European scientists who were discussing the proposed evacuation scheme. At the sound of the voice he looked up, seeing the face of the ghost.

"You were there when it started."

For the first time in many days a smile appeared on his face. "Then let's finish it. I'm ready."

* * * * *

"Harrison Link."

The detective put down the phone, his eyes lifting to see the feminine image hovering above him.

"You once claimed to love her."

Harris stood up from behind his desk. "I'm ready."

* * * * *

"Mrs. Victoria Applepound."

Mrs. Applepound looked up from the word processor with which she had spent fruitless hours in accomplishing absolutely nothing.

"You've run out of words. Have you run out of will?"

The woman stood up. "I'm ready . . . oh no, wait!" Reaching down she grabbed at a hat, quickly plopping it onto her head. "Now I'm ready."

* * * * *

"Leo Czardos!"

He had been strolling with Shweta through the gardens of his estate when the woman suddenly appeared.

"You once told her no one has to fight battles alone."

"I'm ready," Leo immediately said. Then he suddenly remembered his wife.

Shweta quickly reached for his hand. "We're ready," she said.

* * * * *

"Darya Lagounov."

The old woman looked up from the reports she had been reading, seeing the ghost hovering near the ceiling of her office.

"For Brungaria! For honor! For victory!"

"For her," Lagounov replied. She managed to make it onto her feet. "I'm ready."

* * * * *

"Children!"

Throughout Swiftbase the twenty-six Moon Children paused and looked up, all of them seeing the image of the floating woman.

"We're ready," they said in one voice.

* * * * *

In the galley of the Sky Queen Sestina paused in her task of rolling bread dough. Looking up over her shoulder she saw the ghost quietly watching. Waiting.

Reaching up she tugged the maid's cap off her head. She then raised a single fist into the air.

* * * * *

"David Yuchanne."

The Governor of the Zuni Pueblo . . . Chief of the Ashiwi People . . . looked up from the fire he had built upon the top of the Purple Mesa. Above the flames floated the image of the woman.

He rose to his feet. "Lady, you are expected. And the Combined Tribes are ready."

The woman folded her arms together. "Begin!"

* * * * *

"Thomas Aeneas Swift Jr."

In the lounge of the Sky Queen . . . surrounded by the rest of the "immediate family" . . . Tom slowly stood up to stare at the ghost.

The ghost grew more distinct and, for a brief moment, everyone saw her full appearance.

"Oh I knew it," Mary whispered. "I knew it."

The ghost continued staring at Tom. "Now!"

* * * * *

A tremor rippled throughout the solartron, and Sandy felt herself becoming unsteady for a moment.

At the same time arcs of lightning raced about the ring of lights. Sparks like popping flashbulbs erupted within many of the glowing habitats containing the various forms of the Space Friends.

And Faye suddenly groaned, clutching at her stomach and bending over.

Recovering her balance Sandy stared at the aliens. "What . . ."

"You're doing it," shrieked Faye. "Somehow . . ."

Realization dawned inside Sandy. "I got through," she whispered. "They heard me."

The look Faye threw at Sandy was dark and venomous. Then she suddenly glared up at the Orb and, for a moment, Sandy thought she was going to try leaping up to the enormous sphere. But the alien suddenly froze in place and, as Sandy watched, her form became devoid of color , , , all hue draining away until she appeared to be an image from an old black-and-white photograph.

Even more incredible the Orb was also losing all color; the yellowish-green glow fading into a uniform grey. All around Sandy the various elements of the light ring were clouding over, becoming a circle of featureless slate-colored globes.

For several moments Sandy looked about in confusion. "I don't get it."

"It's really quite simple," Ithaca calmly said, and Sandy turned to face the cyborg.

"You yourself realized it earlier," Ithaca went on. "The Space Friends and the Senders are the same species. Both of them are sensitive to the emanations from Earth. Mental . . . electromagnetic . . . everything. They were experiencing enough pain as it was, even with the shielding provided by the solartrons. But a great many people are now focusing electromagnetic transmissions at this spot. Not only that, but many thoughts," and here she shrugged, "call them prayers if you wish . . . are consciously being directed to you. All of this is causing the aliens enormous agony."

Sandy looked around again. "But . . ."

"The Space Friends and the Senders are the same species," Ithaca repeated. "Separately they couldn't hope to survive the onslaught being sent from Earth. Their only remaining defense was to combine their powers and enter a form of stasis." Ithaca solemnly looked at the Orb, and then at Faye. "Right now they're frozen in what I guess you could call a stalemate born out of mutual cooperation. It's incredible."

"How do you mean?"

Ithaca looked tired. "Oh figure it out, Sandra. Really. Only by requesting the direct intervention of the Senders could this have worked. Only the Senders were able to provide the additional means for the Space Friends to protect themselves, and vice-versa. You've demonstrated that the two factions . . . the Senders and the Space Friends . . . have to adopt a policy of complete coexistence in order to effectively shield themselves."

Sandy was taken by a sudden notion to go over to Faye and knock on the alien's head. She kept the urge buried.

"It's ironic, actually," Ithaca murmured.

Sandy turned back to her. "Why ironic?"

"Given time the people of Earth could've beamed this information out into space. Other races would've learned how to use it and, through this knowledge, gain a sort of defense against the will of the Space Friends."

"But that's it," Sandy said excitedly. "That's it. Why don't we have time?"

"Oh Sandy . . . you just don't get it."

"Get what?"

"The Space Friends and the Senders have locked themselves into a mutual shield to ward off the transmissions from Earth. But it doesn't change anything. The solartrons that we're standing on are still primed to destroy Earth . . . and I'm still under orders to kill you."

Chapter Thirty-Four: Her Best Shot.

Ithaca raised an eyebrow at Sandy's expression. "Oh, what? You managed to stumble upon the Space Friends' Achilles heel and you thought that'd be it?"

Sandy was still looking around. "I thought . . ."

"What? What did you think? That the solartrons weren't operating under independent control? Sandy, these creatures have at least a twelve thousand year head start over us in the field of robotics. For all practical purposes the solartrons qualify as intelligent life forms. They're gonna fire on the Earth no matter what."

Going down on one knee Sandy moved her palm over the black surface.

"Perhaps with some sort of explosive," Ithaca pointed out, "you might've had a solution. The solartrons are all linked through a sort of energy web. That's part of what holds them together. Destroy one and you'd set off a chain reaction. You'd have to be precise, though, and make certain you hit a prominent node. Otherwise the solartron would simply restore itself."

"Explosive," muttered Sandy.

"Which you didn't bring with you. Talk about Life's little ironies. The Space Friends were watching you from the moment you left Earth. If you had been carrying anything powerful enough to interrupt the energy web you would've never been allowed within the orbit of Mercury. That's why your Solar Sailer was destroyed: a concern that it might've somehow been used to interrupt the solartron creation process."

Sandy looked up at Ithaca. "How long?"

"You mean until Earth goes Boom? Good question. Originally the Earth had forty-three days left. Now that you've done this?" Ithaca glanced at the hovering Orb and shrugged. "Who knows? The solartrons already carry a charge which would be fatal to all life on Earth if released. It's the difference between being fried to death and total annihilation."

"And me?"

Ithaca didn't immediately answer but gazed down at her hands.

Then: "I meant what I said about the Space Friends and robotics, Sandy. When they reassembled me not even I was able to tell how much of myself is really Ithaca Foger and how much is a mechanism. But I do know that I'm as much bound by programming as the solartrons, and my instructions in regards to you are explicit."

Sandy rose to her feet. "So what you're essentially saying is that I wasted my time by coming here."

Another shrug. "Who can say? If you hadn't come here and forced the issue, the Earth might've had another forty-three days, and you could've spent all that time in Barclay's arms. Console yourself with the knowledge that, no matter when the solartrons fire, you'll already be dead and it won't be on your conscience."

Sandy couldn't put a word to the feelings inside her. Over the previous years she had faced the possibility that what she referred to as her "adventuring about" could result with her death. On a few occasions it very nearly had.

But there was something so impossibly surreal about the idea of facing death while standing on the surface of the Sun. Not just death, but being murdered by something with the outward appearance of another human.

"Why you, Ithaca?"

Ithaca tilted her head to one side. "Pardon?"

"I know how the Space Friends managed to choose you. But why did they choose you? The Space Friends obviously had the power and technology to kill me at any time. Why rely on you?"

"Um." The cyborg nodded a bit to herself. "It wasn't just Hobson's choice. When the Space Friends became suspicious of the Senders' presence on Earth they eventually focused on your family. It was felt that agents would eventually be needed to deal with the Swifts in the event extreme action was called for. You better than anyone else should understand that."

"That still doesn't answer my question. They managed to take over my father's mind and almost set off the solartrons. If they wanted to cause harm to me or my family they could've assumed control over any one of us. You seem to me to be an inexplicable piece of drama."

"They needed an independent agent, Sandy. Remember that human inventiveness frightens them. Something could've happened that might've prevented them from taking direct action. And, as powerful as it is, their telepathy has its limits. I was seen as the best solution, given a very prominent circumstance."

"Which was . . ."

"The desire for revenge," Ithaca replied simply.

Sandy fought the urge to release an exasperated moan. "I cannot believe you'd be so petty."

"What was that line again about having to face dragons?"

"I know all about what happened between our parents. But be honest with yourself, Ithaca. Face the fact that your father brought it all down on himself."

"And that's supposed to make a difference?" Ithaca replied. "If our positions were reversed then could you so blithely turn your back on your father because of things he'd done?"

Sandy almost replied. Didn't.

"I know what my father was," Ithaca declared. "I also know what he is. My father!"

"Wouldn't he have preferred help and support over . . . entering into a murder pact with aliens?" Sandy asked. "My God, Ithaca, you're indirectly cooperating with the killing of everything on Earth. Is all of that gonna make it better for your father?"

"The Space Friends brought me back to life. I owed them something for that."

"Becoming a cosmic murderer?" Despite herself, Sandy took a few steps closer to Ithaca. "When the solartrons are fired then you'll have committed a sin even your father could never have managed."

"I keep telling you I'm just as programmed as the solartrons," Ithaca said, her voice even. "When the Space Friends rebuilt me they made me powerful . . . fast . . . strong. They also took out things which they felt were counterproductive to my function. Little annoyances like moral choice and free will."

Sandy frowned. "But I've been alive all this time. If you're so guided by programming then why did the Space Friends let me live so long before allowing you to kill me?"

"Information. Remember, you're their spy. They were wanting up to date information until the very last moment. And I'm not only programmed to kill you, Sandy. In fact I've been your guardian angel all this time. Your very best friend."

Sandy blinked. "Huh?"

"You needed to be at the top of your game. The Sandra Swift drive to come out as the winner needed pointing in the right direction. Why do you think I personally worked so hard to make certain you remained involved in the thick of things?"

Sandy quietly stared at Ithaca in confusion.

Ithaca clucked reproachfully. "Sandra! Come on now. Where's that razor sharp perception that allowed you to beat the Kranjovians and Solomon and everyone else who got in your way?"

But Sandy's mind had raced far enough back and connected the dots. "It was you," she slowly said.

A small smile appeared on Ithaca's face.

"You were the sniper on the Senate Office Building roof. You were the one who shot me when the crowd was rioting at Enterprises."

"Alien technology makes me a rather superlative marksman," Ithaca replied. "I just wanted to make sure you'd be goaded into getting involved. I also wanted to defuse the tense situation at Enterprises and keep you on track."

"And the bomb planted at my house?"

"That was the work of a panicked individual," Ithaca admitted, "as was the burning down of the Newton home. But if you hadn't managed to so neatly dispose of the bomb I was preparing to move in and do the job myself."

Sandy sighed. "So! All this help and guidance . . . just so I'd come to the Sun and die for you."

"And be disappointed by learning humanity will die anyway," Ithaca added. "All in all a rather satisfying conclusion."

"I'm happy for you," Sandy murmured.

Ithaca's face briefly twisted into a snarl. "Don't patronize me, Sandy. Don't! Certainly I don't want everyone on Earth killed. That's just the desire of my masters. All I wanted was to see you cut down. The Great Sandra Swift humbled. Defeated."

"Killed. I wasn't aware you hated me so much, Ithaca."

"My father was just as important as yours, Sandy. Just as clever. But he always broke the rules. He ended up with the bad reputation and the shadows always over him. In the meantime your father ends up the darling of the world's intellectual elite. Your brother adds insult to injury by surpassing even your father." The snarl returned to Ithaca's face. Remained. "And then we come to you."

"Your father rebuilt his personal reputation."

Ithaca nodded. "Yes! He had to . . . while your father coasted along to greatness."

"Do you think it was easy---"

"Easier for him than it was for others. It not only affected him, Sandy, it affected me as well. I grew up as the daughter of a known troublemaker. While your brother and you breezed from one success to another I had to work twice as hard. Sometimes more."

"Ithaca---"

"My father ended up where he did because of your father." Ithaca struck herself in the chest. "I ended up where I did because of the groundwork your father had already laid down. Look at me, Sandy. Take a good hard look. Ithaca Foger . . . your family's greatest invention." Her eyes narrowed. "But of course you've looked hard before, haven't you? All these years . . . ever since you began getting involved in this or that situation . . . you've been staring into mirrors again and again. There's always been something staring back at you, hasn't there? Something hiding just behind the reflection. All these years of being Sandra Swift, the White Knight of Shopton, and you knew the reality, didn't you? You recognized what was hiding in the mirror."

Sandy shook her head. "N-no . . ."

"They've all been patting you on the back and calling you a good girl. Reassuring you that the deaths and the destruction weren't entirely your fault, or that they were somehow justified." Ithaca's voice rose. "Hero or horror, Sandy? What is it? How thin is the dividing line?"

She swept an arm out towards the still-frozen figure of Faye. Raised it to include the Orb. "Who's pushed the situation to the brink, Sandra? You or me? Who threw out the clock and tore up the calendar? I'm programmed to do all of this. What's your excuse?"

"Please don't---"

"I'll tell you," Ithaca continued. "It's always been Sandra Swift. The little girl having to be greater than her father. Greater than her brother. Doing good as long as it's her who's doing it."

"It isn't---"

"I didn't know you when you were younger, but I bet you rode your bicycle without putting your hands on the handlebars. I bet you were balancing yourself on rooftops, or trying to stand on your head on the edge of sidewalks." Ithaca's voice became sneering. "Hey Everybody, look at me! Aren't I wonderful?"

Sandy clapped hands over her ears. "SHUT UP!"

"The difference between us is you gave it your best shot and you succeeded." Ithaca's voice calmed, her expression smoothing out. "I tried to give it my best shot. I really did. I went for every chance that came along. I could've gone as far. I could've been the White Knight. Now I'm just a thing. A puppet. I have a perfect excuse for being an utter failure, and if all I have left is a part to play in the end of the world then . . . I guess that's just part of being a Foger."

Sandy was shaking, almost bent over, her hands still tight against her ears.

"I'll get to kill you," Ithaca said to her. "But the real tragedy is that the world will never know it was really you who messed things up here and yanked the rug out from under everyone's feet. Sandra Swift screws up on a cosmic level, and I'll be the only one who knows about it."

"So much passion," Sandy whispered, lowering her hands. She straightened up to return Ithaca's stare. "You keep saying you're just a machine, but you're capable of all this hatred you've built up."

"It's like living in a maze," Ithaca explained. "You're thinking I could do something to change the situation, but I can't. My responses . . . my options . . . all are limited. I can't fight them, Sandy, even if I wanted to be free. I work within a narrow frame of action and I'm completely obedient to the will of the Space Friends. They allowed me to keep you alive so that they could continue gathering information. They allowed you to come to the Sun because they didn't perceive you as a threat, and brought me here to make an end of it." Her expression grew even more serene. "An end of you."

"Ithaca, listen to me---"

"Faye is returning," Ithaca suddenly said.

Sandy glanced back at the alien.

"She'll revive herself shortly, once she's gathered enough strength to briefly withstand the bombardment from Earth. As with myself she's under orders, and one of them is to witness . . ."

She grew quiet, and Sandy surprised herself by how calm she was feeling. "My death?"

No reply other than a brief nod.

Something inside Sandy was telling her to try running. But other than herself, Ithaca, Faye and the inert spheres which held the other alien forms there was no place to hide or go to. Even if she could outrun Ithaca she'd eventually reach the limit of the environment which the Space Friends had established.

She slowly turned back to face the cyborg. "What will you . . . I mean . . . how . . ."

Ithaca almost looked casual. Even a bit apologetic. "Actually the simplest way would be to dissolve the section of solartron beneath your feet. Just let the Sun do its work. But Faye will want something a bit more, I don't know. Direct."

Sandy didn't answer.

"I could electrocute you from where I'm standing," Ithaca said. "It'd be quick." Once again she gazed down at her hands. "I'm quite fast and strong. I could crush your neck. You wouldn't even have time to realize you're dead."

A flash of light in the sky caught Sandy's attention. Several feet behind Ithaca's right shoulder, hovering some ten feet in the air, a ring of thin green light appeared. In another moment it was joined by countless more. A tunnel of green light rings stretching off into space.

Ithaca hadn't turned around at the tunnel's appearance, but she noted the look on Sandy's face. "Please don't get your hopes up," she said. "It isn't the cavalry coming to the rescue. Not this time. Faye has summoned a teleportation corridor. Once I've killed you I'm to be returned to Earth." She nodded as Sandy looked back at her. "The Space Friends want me there for the last moments, just in case. You see, Sandy, once you're dead I become superfluous. So if you want consolation there it is: the knowledge that I'll be killed along with everyone else on Earth."

Sandy found she was having trouble taking her eyes off of her appointed executioner. "I wish---"

"Don't tell me what you wish," Ithaca broke in coldly. "No matter if it's a wish for you or for me. I won't take back messages or anything like that, so don't insult me by asking."

Sandy became quiet.

"Please turn around now," Ithaca murmured.

Sandy could taste each breath she was taking. "You don't want to look into my face?" she asked.

"I don't have too many options," Ithaca told her, "so allow me the grace to choose from the few I possess. Trust me . . . this'll be easier and more painless for you if you're looking away."

A motion and Sandy glanced back to see color returning to Faye's form. The alien's body was slowly breaking free from its paralysis, the pseudo-Phyllis face turning to look in her direction.

She looked back at Ithaca, half expecting to see the cyborg reaching for her throat.

"Just accept it, Sandy," Ithaca said. "Just accept that we are where we're meant to be, doing what we were meant to do. Accept that your job was to try and save the Earth. My job," and here Ithaca seemed to attempt a smile, "was to break the rules."

Sandy decided she was going to try and make a lunge at Faye. She knew such a move would mean turning her back and giving Ithaca a clear shot. She didn't care. It would be something.

"Or," Ithaca was continuing, more to herself than anyone else, "to employ a more common expression: Life's a bitch . . ."

Sandy suddenly felt the hand closing on her shoulder.

". . . and so am I."

What Sandy fully expected to be her last second of life didn't quite turn out the way she thought it would. Ithaca's hand tightened, and then Sandy felt herself being picked up. Picked up then thrown directly into the teleportation corridor. Just enough time to let out a long surprised scream before her body was converted to energetic particles and beamed outwards.

Ithaca meanwhile kept moving, turning to face the now fully aware Faye. Seeing a look of almost human total surprise on the alien's face, the mouth moving to form a question, or deliver a severe reprimand.

At the same moment Ithaca willed herself to change both the charge and quantum spin of each and every atom in her artificial body.

Faye realized it. Saw the triumphant look on Ithaca's face as the cyborg slammed an antimatter fist down into the solartron.

"My best shot!"

* * * * *

The explosion which took place on the surface of the Sun was seen by Earth observers just over eight minutes later.

Tom and the others were quickly filing out of the Sky Queen, all of them squinting up at the sky. Seeing the Sun with the fading remnant of what had looked like a welding arc bursting upon the southern portion.

"Yeah," Tom was saying into his phone. "Yeah, keep those readings coming in. I want confirmation as soon as possible." Lowering his phone he looked at the others. "Both the space station and Kitt Peak report they can no longer make out the solartrons," he said. "It's as if they just suddenly . . . blew up."

"They're gone," Tom Sr. breathed. "It might be something else and we're still not out of the woods, but it sounds as if the solartrons are gone . . ."

He suddenly stopped as the meaning of his words sunk in. At the same time his eyes met those of Mary, seeing his wife's expression crumbling into grief, and he felt the sudden emptiness clawing hard inside him. The feeling no parent should ever experience: the knowledge that a child had died.

The sensation spread, and no one could speak or look at anyone else. Bud was feeling his knees start to buckle; felt as if an enormous fist had punched him hard in the place where his heart used to be.

In all the silence it was Sestina who saw it first, and she grabbed at Bud and pointed. Bud couldn't say anything, but he touched Mary and spun her around, also pointing. Within moments everyone was looking in the same direction.

A few feet away from them spears of ghostly light were materializing out of the air, moving to converge in one location just above the tarmac. At the point where they converged, a mass of pearly light was forming. The mass was taking shape, producing features . . . gradually taking the form of a person who was slowly rising from a kneeling position.

Insane hope caused Mary to immediately recognize the person. "Oh . . ."

She tried to rush to the light, but Bud and Tom both held her back.

"Wait," Tom said. "It's . . . she's still forming."

The figure was on her feet, slowly drifting dreamily about. A cape-like wave of iridescence flowed in a rich haze around the body, gradually becoming smaller, reforming to take on the appearance of hair atop the head. Features were becoming distinct on the radiant face; the eyes gazing about as if gently confused, or perhaps seeing everything for the first time.

More and more the person became solid. Became more visible. The eyes growing blue and amazed as they took in the sight of the people watching her.

The lips parted. Spoke.

"Oh," she said. "Home again."

And Sandy fainted away upon the tarmac.

Chapter Thirty-Five: "Everywhere! Anywhere! Forever!"

After about seventeen minutes of strolling about, Bud finally located Sandy quietly sitting beneath a large sugar maple. She had asked him to remain out by the car, saying she wanted some time to herself. Considering all that had taken place in the month since Sandy had been beamed back to Earth, Bud certainly sympathized with her desire for some solitude. It had been an insane time, filled with press conferences, parades and Sandy making appearances all over the world (including several days of intense medical examination, along with researchers wanting to interview someone who had actually been teleported across interplanetary space). The situation still didn't show any immediate sign of winding down, and Bud was one of the few who was able to see the need Sandy had for snatching at this or that opportunity to gain some peace.

But he couldn't deny he was having severe trouble being away from Sandy for very long.

He privately had to admit that the surroundings were certainly appropriate for finding quiet. For once they had managed to avoid the press and the curiosity seekers, and they

seemed to be the only people visiting the cemetery south of Rochester. It was a pretty day . . . a soft breeze . . . the cheerful song of some unidentifiable bird in the distance . . . and Bud wanted to be careful as he approached Sandy.

At first he thought she hadn't noticed him. But after a few moments she softly patted the ground next to her. "Please."

Bud was more than happy to comply, and even happier with the way she cuddled to him. Throughout the last few weeks the two of them had engaged in quite a bit of cuddling, and Bud personally felt that Sandy's technique had improved significantly. Sandy had always been affectionate. But now she seemed to be treating his arms as if it was the most natural location for her to be, and it was a frame of mind he hoped to encourage as much as possible.

He lightly nuzzled the warm sweetness of her hair. "Is it helping?" he murmured.

He felt more than saw the responding shrug. "She would've done the same thing for me. I'm certain of it."

Looking past her shoulder, Bud silently contemplated the simple gravesite, as well as the message on the headstone of polished granite.

ITHACA LOUISE FOGER

There Will Always Be One Who Remembers

Sandy had privately arranged for the stone to be made, replacing the earlier and much more pedestrian marker which had already been in the Foger burial lot. In order to accomplish this she had privately gone and spent several hours with Ithaca's parents, explaining what she wanted to do (and telling her story to the Fogers).

Bud remembered how Sandy's family had immediately volunteered to accompany her to Rochester, and how Sandy had firmly put her foot down. "No," she had declared. "This is mine."

"I wonder if Sherman's ever going to forgive himself?" Bud wondered aloud.

He thought he felt a light chuckle rising from within her. Or maybe it was a sigh. "It was really a very honest mistake," Sandy said, remembering that, as far as the Fogers knew or understood, Ithaca had originally died back when the Norfolk-Lampo blew up. They had actually buried the remains in the grave Sandy and Bud now sat near.

Then Ithaca had reappeared, and so naturally, when Sherman and his investigators had tried to directly question the Fogers, they were driven more by necessity than by tact. Small wonder the Fogers had thrown Sherman out without clarifying the matter.

Sandy had privately discussed the issue with her father and brother. The Space Friends had "rebuilt" Ithaca from her remains. But how much material had been required? An arm? A finger? Only a few cells? How much of the original Ithaca had actually been involved in creating the cyborg?

"Enough," Sandy had concluded.

She now spoke to Bud. "The cyborg carried all of Ithaca's memories, and apparently her original human personality. The Space Friends probably felt it was necessary if they wanted her to operate among people. Mmmmm."

The last comment was due to her shifting slightly and becoming more comfortable against Bud. For his part Bud was not only grateful for the closeness, but this was the first chance Sandy had to truly and privately open up to him since she returned from the Sun.

"Ithaca didn't like being a slave of the Space Friends even more than you or I would've," Sandy said, her attention fixed on the grave. "She wanted to escape, but how? Like she kept saying to me, her programming limited her responses."

A gentle smile appeared on Sandy's face. "The Space Friends were so scared of human inventiveness. What they should've been watching out for was human deviousness. They rebuilt Ithaca as an obedient mechanical doll, but they also rebuilt that wonderfully Machiavellian Foger mentality. She did her work but was patiently waiting for any opportunity to trip up her creators."

"And found you," Bud murmured.

"And found me," agreed Sandy. She shook her head ruefully at the grave. "The Foger propensity for backstabbing is apparently genetic in nature. Even before she first appeared she was laying down the groundwork for her scheme."

"The 'Stay Tuned' code phrase."

"Yes." Sandy took one of Bud's hands into hers. "It all makes sense now. Ithaca must've somehow managed to convince the Space Friends that my usefulness as a spy would've been enhanced by a two-way telepathic link. The basics had already been laid down when I came into contact with the Sender machine in Ecuador; all the Space Friends had to do was fine-tune it. They of course needed a human model to work with, and voila . . ."

"Ithaca was immediately available."

"She now had an ace in the hole, and the Space Friends unwittingly played along, making certain I got the code phrase when you and I were on the Moon, and then all the other times afterwards, keeping the connection operational. Ithaca had been working for Sun Ohm Erato, so she must've arranged for Kondor . . . one of Sun Ohm Erato's creations . . . to know the phrase when it was realized I'd be going up against him." Sandy shook her head again. "Clever girl."

"Now that brings up something I've been waiting for a chance to ask you," Bud said to her. "You're telling me that Ithaca was patiently waiting for a chance to break free of the Space Friends, using you as her secret weapon."

"Uh huh."

"So you're saying Ithaca arranged for the solartrons?"

"No. Not at all. That was entirely the aliens idea. Ithaca just saw the window of opportunity it presented. Consider: in rebuilding her . . . in giving her the power to change her form . . . the Space Friends had to give her the power to alter her mass at will, even at the atomic level. This put a potentially powerful weapon at her disposal, and especially when she realized that the Space Friends were going to be concentrated on or near the Sun while they carried out their threat. Everything was in place. The only problem was that Ithaca certainly couldn't request to be taken to within striking range of the solartrons---"

"But if you went to the Sun then Ithaca, being your designated executioner, would eventually have to be brought along." Bud let out a long breath. "Good night!"

"Ithaca herself pointed out that the Space Friends main concern was that I would somehow bring some sort of destructive material to the Sun," Sandy explained. "It never occurred to them that she was the greatest danger. She devoted herself to making sure I'd remain continually 'in play', hoping that I'd be driven to travel to the Sun." This time it was definitely a sigh that she produced. "In many ways she knew me better than I did."

"Sandy---"

"She was right. She was the reflection I was finding in the mirror. My other self." Her head moved and she turned plaintive blue eyes up to Bud. "Have you finally forgiven me for rushing off to the Sun?"

Bud steadily returned her look. "I'll forgive you if you please, please . . . please promise never to leave me behind like that ever again."

It came out in a rush. "I had to do what I did---"

"I know!" Bud took her hands. Squeezed them firmly. "Promise me, Sandra."

"Oh I promise. I do! So many times while I was flying out there I wished you were with me---"

Conversation became difficult for several moments.

"But you would never have let me go," Sandy whispered when the kiss finally ended. "You were the only one who could've stopped me."

"I followed you to the Moon," Bud softly reminded her.

"But this time I couldn't take the chance," Sandy argued, equally soft. "Bud, I couldn't take the chance that I would've failed."

"Sandy---"

"Or that Ithaca's scheme would've failed---"

"Promise me!"

It barely took a second. "I promise."

Another close hug.

"It's truly unfair, though."

Bud looked at her. "Oh?"

"All this craziness," Sandy said. "These meetings and celebrations and stuff. Everyone saying that I saved the world, and it was really Ithaca who did it. She saved all of us, and the real tragedy is that no one will ever be convinced of that."

"I believe you," Bud said. "So does Tom and the others. So does everyone else that Ithaca telepathically contacted when it was time to begin sending transmissions to the Sun. All of know the part she played."

"But it isn't the entire world," Sandy argued emphatically. "It's like that . . . damn statue they're gonna put up of me. By rights that should be Ithaca." A nervous sort of laugh came out. "People're calling this my greatest victory. My biggest triumph, and it's really Ithaca." She let a crooked smile appear on her face. "Once again a Fogger manages to mess it all up. I just hope that, wherever she is now, Ithaca's having a great big laugh at me." She glanced over again at the grave. "And an even bigger tragedy is that it might all be for nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"Bud, we may have only delayed the inevitable. The Space Friends and, unfortunately, the Orb as well . . . they were destroyed in the blast. But there're still others out there. Back at Cassiopeia A and elsewhere. Now we're more of a threat to them than before."

"But we've bought time," Bud insisted. "Everyone's transmitting the information about the Space Friends' weakness out into space. The other worlds will learn how to drive them off if they want to."

"Will that help us?"

"We now have something we can defend ourselves with."

Sandy snorted. "Oh right. All we have to do now is to make sure everyone on the planet keeps thinking happy thoughts."

"It's possible."

"Is it?" Sandy looked doubtful, then sad. "Remember that everyone on Earth heard Faye's announcement about the solartrons. About the Governor Race the Space Friends initially tried to set up. Dad was talking with Governor Yuchanne just before we left to come here. There's already trouble down in Mexico and Central America with the native tribes. Persecution . . . police round-ups `for the mutual protection of humans'."

"The tribes all over the world are uniting, though. They'll fight."

"Fighting," Sandy snapped. "The absolute last thing we should be doing. All the talk about an increased military presence in space." Exasperated she moved herself away from Bud, rising to her feet. "All the talking I did to Congress and world governments and the United Nations, and it's probably all for nothing. We may end up finishing what the Space Friends started."

Bud quietly watched as Sandy went to Ithaca's grave, kneeling down beside it. Placing some small flowers on it she remained there for a moment, staring at the marker. From where he was Bud could see that the flowers were a handful of daisies.

"As long as I live," Sandy said, "I'll see that flowers are always here. Asters . . . daisies." She looked back at Bud. "Sunflowers."

Bud was gazing at her.

Sandy quietly stared back at him for a few moments. Then: "God I wish I could read your mind right now."

"No real secret," Bud told her. "But I'd like to try and put it into words all the same."

"Please do."

Bud leaned back against the tree trunk. "Ever since you came back to Earth I've been having to pretty much stand on the sidelines and watch you be bounced around. Like you said, it's been crazy. All the people calling you the Savior of Humanity, the Champion of the World and things like that. The funny thing is, all those titles and honors and stuff, and the only thing I could think was `that's my girl'."

Sandy now smiled, her face softening.

"You matter to me more than anyone else. The future isn't going to be easy, Sandy. The future is never easy. Everything I got into with Tom I got into with my eyes wide open, and if I knew then what I know now I'm pretty sure I'd go through all of it again. It's been the same with you and me. All the times we've been uncertain and scared and making mistakes with each other, and I'd go through all of it again because it's you I'd be going through it with. I'm watching you right now, full of worry about what might happen, and I want to help. No more of this alone business . . . no more fighting by yourself. I want to help. Don't you see that?"

Sandy nodded. "I do."

"You've worked things out before. I can work things out too. You know that much about me."

"I do."

"You and I . . . we're not geniuses like Tom or your Dad. But we're not stupid either. Don't you think that, if the two of us put our heads together, we'd be smart enough to come up with a brilliant idea that'll make things better?"

Sandy opened her mouth to answer.

* * * * *

"I do!"

Trying to remain as steady as possible, Bud slipped the simple gold ring onto Sandy's finger. They then held hands.

"By the authority invested in me as a minister of the Church, I declare that Bud and Sandra are now husband and wife, according to the ordinance of God and the laws of this state; in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Whom God has joined together, let no one set asunder."

Sandy had certainly been kissed by Bud before. But admittedly there was something far more overwhelming about the one she now received and, as she did her level best to return as good as she was getting, a small part of her was struggling to keep her knees from knocking within the white gown.

Perhaps it was because, unlike all the other times, there was a rather substantial audience witnessing the kiss. Not just Tom and Phyllis, their attendants, but the Swifts and the Barclays in the front rows, along with everyone else inside the Union Church. Perhaps the only person who was thoroughly disinterested in the proceedings was Charles Kenneth Horton . . . all four months of him . . . who was comfortably snoring in the arms of his smiling mother, while his father sat next to her with an equal smile on his face.

There were others as well. Sherman was sitting next to Freida Morgan (whose happiness was perhaps augmented by the diamond ring she was currently wearing, and had very recently received). Nearby was Dody Ames, who had somehow managed to end up sitting next to Harrison Link. Whether or not it was accidental was still a matter for idle speculation. And whereas tears were definitely leaking from Mary Swift's eyes, everyone agreed that the loudest sobbing was coming from Mrs. Applepound a few rows further back. She was sitting next to Charles "Chow" Winkler (young Master Horton's namesake) who had arrived at the church accompanied by his lady friend: Lainie Waterford of San Antonio, Texas (introduced by Chow as his literary agent, but the two seemed to be sitting rather closely).

The wedding bells started ringing as Bud and Sandy began moving down the aisle, with Tom and Phyllis close behind.

Tom frowned a bit. "One of those bells sounds a bit out of tune."

Helen Newton covered her eyes and groaned softly.

"It'll work out," Ned Newton murmured to his wife. "It'll work out."

At the reception there was considerable interest to see who'd catch Sandy's bouquet. Despite valiant tries by both Mrs. Applepound and Sestina, they were beaten out by Phyllis (who some suspected had received secret coaching from Bingo). The look Phyllis triumphantly gave Tom had that particular young man clearly concerned about the immediate future of his bachelor existence.

Afterwards the happy couple emerged from the church in their going away finery: the both of them in matching flight suits. While some raised an eyebrow at their respective choices there was no denying that it made excellent sense, seeing as how a fully prepped Pigeon Special D-22 VTOL jet aircraft was waiting in the parking lot, its engines turning over and maintained by an Enterprises flight crew.

With final waves and goodbyes, the new Mr. and Mrs. Barclay climbed into the cockpit.

Fully settled in, the groom shared a kiss with his bride. "So," Bud said. "Any ideas where we're going?"

Sandy joyously settled her hands on the controls. "Everywhere! Anywhere! Forever!"

Before the eyes of the crowd the aircraft lifted upwards. Then the engines were vectored back and, accompanied by cheers and farewells, it moved off into the afternoon sky.

Tom noticed his mother still dabbing at her eyes. "Anything wrong, Mom?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Finally married," Mary declared. "She's finally married." A warm and thoroughly pleased sigh. "It'll all be better now. I bet now she'll finally settle down."

Suddenly the sky seemed to burst open as the jet plane reappeared, making a high-speed pass over the church. At the last moment it pointed itself upwards and, at maximum thrust, raced upwards out of sight. Moments later a sonic boom thundered down.

Looking up at the direction the plane had taken, Tom grinned widely. "Mom?"

"Yes?"

"I'll take a piece of that bet."