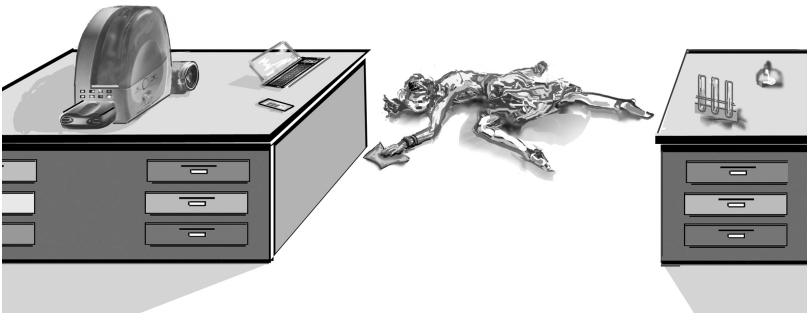


A BRAINS BENTON MYSTERY

BRAINS BENTON and the
CASE OF THE
OTHER MISSING
MESSAGE



By Scott Lockwood

Illustrated by Scott Dickerson

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This book is intended as an homage and a fan fiction
extension to the world of Brains Benton fiction.

BRAINS BENTON #10:

THE CASE OF THE OTHER MISSING MESSAGE

Combining the worlds of young sleuth **Brains Benton**
and great inventor **Tom Swift** in one exciting story!

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Prologue

OK, already, I'll confess: yes, I wrote *"The Subtraction Mystery."*

Well, that does overstate it: actually, Brains handed the notes on the case over to me and I tweaked it here and there. Brains truly did write about 99% of it. But...

"You've always been the 'Watson' of our organization," he told me after he handed me a flash drive with the transcribed account of our previous adventure. "There's no reason why you shouldn't continue as such."

"This is really more your adventure than mine," I told him. "If I decide to turn this into a book, I'll probably do it from your point of view."

Brains just shrugged. "Fine. Whatever pleases you."

"Aren't you a little afraid that by telling the story of the subtractor, someone else might be able to figure out how to build one?"

Brains gave me a pensive look, then shrugged. "It's true that once a principle has been discovered, it's impossible to 'un-discover' it. Yes, this might serve as inspiration for some genius somewhere; they may try to see if such a device is possible. But, it might also serve to dissuade anyone from building one as well. So, by all means write up the account."

And, so I did. Like I said, I made a few improvements to Brains' otherwise-dry account of the case. That said, the events were just as he told it. From what we could remember of it anyway.

It's very strange: I can easily remember the kidnapping, the pain, even the conversations. But, I'm damned if I can recall any of the people involved in it, other than Brains, his girlfriend or myself. Nor do I have any memory the device –

the "subtractor" – itself. I only know it was built into a SwiftTalk smartpone because Brains told us so in his narrative to his own SwiftTalk.

It's a bit like someone telling you of a dream they had in which you yourself was involved. And that, I'm afraid, is all I can really say about it. So I might as well end this prologue and get on with the next case.

Before I do, however, I'd better answer a question I've been asked repeatedly since "Subtractor Mystery" came out: yes, Brains has tried applying the nerve-cluster template to other paraplegics. But the results have been mixed: some people regained up to 50% use of their legs, others as little as 15%. Oddly, women have had better results, with one woman regaining at least 75% percent usage. Other women were as low as 35%.

"There's still a lot about this method that's unknown," Brains told me. "Clearly, we have a technique that works, but some unknown factor prevents it from being a 'one size fits all'. Along with my work on bionic limbs, I will continue to investigate mystery as well." And I will continue to keep you informed in succeeding volumes. And update my weekly blog as well.

James Carson

PS: Yes, I'm the one who came up with the chapter titles for Brains' book. Brains was all for letting the chapters simply have numbers, but all of my other books had chapter titles, so I didn't see why Brains' novel should be any different...

Chapter 1: LOCKED-ROOM MYSTERY

Michael Phydeaux, SwiftTech's CEO, had told Brains that whenever a mystery would come along that was too weird or unsolvable for the police, he would turn it over to Brains (or rather, Benton & Carson) to look into. What we didn't expect was for our first mystery to take place just down the hall (so to speak) from Brains' lab!

It started early one morning when I was in Brains' lab getting my new legs checked over. I'd lost my original legs a while back when an evil SwiftTech scientist used her device to sever them, as related in the above-mentioned novel *The Subtraction Mystery*. But that was OK: they weren't working all that well anyway. They'd been paralyzed for close to fifteen years and only recently revived.

But all those years of non-activity took its toll and even though I enjoyed having feeling them once more, I moved around like a ninety-year-old man. Now I'm outfitted with a pair of bionic legs far superior to anything out there on the market. But they were still prototypes and had their problems. Brains arranged for me to come in about once a week so he could do a thorough exam. Yes, they had wireless telemetry for 24/7 monitoring, but Brains still insisted on hands-on maintenance. For the most part, the legs were pretty much bug-free. But every so often, when I made, say, a sudden change in direction while walking, or if I re-crossed my legs too suddenly, they would refuse to work. Or there would be a delay before they did so.

Brains was still trying to figure out the cause. It wasn't the spinal damage; the bionic limb sensors were connected to the undamaged part of the spinal column. Brains felt that it was due to something in the analog chip's programming. So he kept tweaking and modifying it, hoping to eliminate it completely. The results were a bit mixed: eliminating one bug often caused another to pop up in its place.

I sat in Brains' lab, dressed only in a pair of swimming trunks, my leg panels open for easy access. But Brains didn't actually do much to the hardware itself, though he had several probes hooked into them. He continued to have me move the legs at unexpected times while he examined the holographic image floating nearby, as well as an image displaying the programming code.

I had done this to the point where I was rather bored with it, so I started playing "Angry Kittens" on my SwiftTalk. I had just scored using a ninja kitten against their enemies, the zombie pit bulls, when Brains said, "OK, Jimmy, fold your legs inward as fast as you can."

Putting my phone aside, I complied, only to have my legs suddenly lock up on me. I had to grab the table I was sitting on in order not to fall off.

"Can you extend them again?" Brains asked with hardly a glance in my direction.

"Not really," I grunted, trying to do just that. I couldn't move them in or out, they were stuck in one place.

"Good," he said, sounding pleased.

"Not seeing what's so good about it, Brains," I told him.

"Hold on a moment," he replied, continuing to tap away. Then he pressed a few other keys and waited. I realized he was rebooting the computer. Moments later, without warning, my legs shot inward, then back out again. I realized I could control them once more.

I got off the table and began to move around. Brains had me practice taking sharp turns and moving in unexpected directions. The legs continued to work without any problems.

"It's as I suspected, Jimmy," he said when I took a break. "It was in the programming. By its very nature, analog programming is very slippery and imprecise. Which is fine in some ways, and a pain in the ass in others. The programming that has gone into your legs falls into the second category," he told me.

I didn't bother to try and get an explanation on what, exactly, went wrong with the programming. I knew I'd never understand it. So I said, "And I take it you've fixed it?"

"For now," he replied. "I believe I've corrected the worst of it. It's likely that other problems will appear, though. But I believe they should be relatively minor." Brains began removing the probes from my legs and closing hidden panels.

"I can get dressed now, I hope?" I asked him. "I should be getting back to my apartment before Betty calls." She was a nice girl who worked on the medical articles for the Los Angeles *Journal*, the paper I worked at. Since I got my new legs, we'd been seeing each other off and on.

"Go right ahead, Jimmy," he said with a smile. As I got

ready to go, however, Brains' SwiftTech smartphone beeped. Brains frowned at the image on the screen, then touched it. At once a voice spoke: "Brains! I need you to come to Floor 35, Room 212. There's a dead body inside the lab. I need to know if she was murdered!"

We exchanged looks. A case for Benton and Carson, perhaps? "May Jimmy join me?" Brains asked. He turned his phone towards me and I saw the image of Brains' boss Michael Phydeaux staring at me. He looked at me a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I remember him being your partner in former times. By all means bring him."

"We're on our way," Brains said and hung up. "Ready, Jimmy? Looks like we may be getting a new case."

After years of putting up with Brains' "I'm no longer a detective!" bit, you can't imagine how thrilled I was to hear the excitement in his voice once more. And while I don't mean to sound ghoulish over someone else's death, a part of me suddenly felt alive as well. This was how it's supposed to be: Benton and Carson on the case once again!

We made our way to the elevator. Brains went through the usual security procedures. I didn't have to, my visitor's pass had a wireless transmitter in it. "Floor 35," Brains said after we stepped in. The doors closed and I felt it descend. A short time later they opened and we began making our way to the scene of the crime. There were no problems locating the lab: a holographic arrow appeared in midair and led us right to it.

The lab doors weren't open when we arrived. Instead, the holographic arrow morphed into an image of Michael Phydeaux. As always, I was very impressed at the high

resolution of these images: no scan lines or pixilation.

Brains once remarked that Tom Swift's telejector had been built with 2K high definition in mind from the beginning, and that it's been upgraded numerous times since then. Anyway, his boss said, "I'm on my way as well. Be there in a couple of moments." True to his word, he showed up hardly fifteen seconds later and the hologram vanished.

Michael greeted us, then turned to the door. "Open the door. Michael Phydeaux, override code 'Ouroboros.'" The doors slid aside.

Inside, the lab was in fairly neat order. In the middle of the room, however, a black-haired young woman with slightly dark skin lay in a heap, close to one of the lab tables. She was wearing a white blouse and a dark gray, knee-length skirt. Motioning us to stay where we were, Brains walked over and began to examine her. As he did so, I turned to Michael and asked him, "Who is she?"

He nodded towards the corpse. "She's one of our leading researchers on solid-state energy storage. Batteries, in other words. Her name is Dr. Bashalli Prandit."

Chapter 2: The Missing Message

Michael went on: "Dr. Prandit and her partner are our top experts in the field of battery research. The batteries that are currently in your legs and Brains' girlfriend's arm are upgraded versions of Tom Swift Junior's SwiftSure batteries. They were the team that improved them," he said with no small amount of pride. "It was due to their efforts that Swift Enterprises has practically stolen the battery market away from companies like Quik Battery and others." (What he said was certainly true; whenever I'd buy some batteries at a grocery or discount store, they were almost always SwiftSures. They were kind of on the pricey side, but they did last a good long time.) "Currently," he continued, "they were working on a new type of battery that was supposed to have the power of a Mighty Midget atomic capsule without actually being nuclear in nature."

I gaped at him. "Are you kidding me? They were trying to create battery with the power of a nuclear plant?"

Michael laughed. "Well, not the power of a regular-sized plant! But yes, something along those lines. I know from their reports that they were very close to achieving this. They wanted to have them ready for the new type of robots the Swifts will be using at their atomic plant in New Mexico. And if they worked there without any problems, the commercial possibilities will be endless!"

Which made me turn back to the corpse of the young lady. "So what happened to her, Brains?" I asked him. He

looked as though he was about finished examining her. "Was there some sort of accident?"

Brains shook his head. "I don't know, Jimmy. I can find no immediate signs of deliberate murder: no blood, no discoloration of the lips or eyes that would indicate poison. No signs of body trauma, other than where she hit her head when she fell to the floor. A thorough autopsy, along with her medical history, would tell us more or, more likely, identify the cause, if not the culprit. For the moment, Michael, I am unable to answer your question. All I can say for now is that it doesn't *appear* to be a murder. I am a bit curious as to why you would have assumed as much."

Michael looked at us for a moment, then said, "Brains, that's the main reason I had you see this. I need you to—" but he was abruptly cut off.

"Morning, Mr. Phydeaux!" I heard someone with a nice British accent say. Turning around, I saw a very pretty woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes enter the lab. She was wearing a yellow pastel shirt and blue jeans that emphasized her great figure. She had a warm smile that really lit up her face. "Did you need something?" she continued. She gave me a puzzled look, then saw Brains. "Dr. Benton?" she asked. Then her eyes slid from Brains to the body on the floor. Her face changed in an instant. "Bash? *Bash!*" she cried and ran over to the body. "Is she all right? What happened to her?"

Brains, looking uncomfortable, shook his head. "I'm sorry, miss...?" his voice trailed off."

"Swift. Doctor Thomasina Swift."

"Doctor... Swift." His voice gave away his obvious puzzlement. I was equally baffled. Was she related to the Swifts? "I'm afraid your lab partner is dead. By what cause, we do not as yet know. But I believe the time has come," he turned back to Michael and myself, "to have someone come here and take her someplace to be examined."

"And that's what you're going to do, Brains," Michael said, over Thomasina's cries (she kept repeating "Oh, Bash! Oh, Bash! Oh Bash!" over and over). Before Brains could reply, he held up a hand. "I know you're not a forensic scientist, but you're the closest thing we have on site. I need to know if this is a natural death or not before I take any action."

Before Brains could respond, Thomasina looked up at Michael, baffled. "W-why do you want Dr. Benton to see what happened to B-Bash?" she stammered. "What can he do?"

"It might surprise you to know, Dr. Swift, that he has some experience in solving, let us say, strange events."

"Well, that has yet to be determined," Brains said. Then he sighed. "All right. We'll need to bring her to my lab. I can recalibrate some of my equipment to probe her body and determine the cause of death." He turned back to Thomasina. "Dr. Swift, did Dr. Prandit ever discuss her medical history with you? Do you know if any member of her family was prone to ailments like heart failure or brain aneurysms?"

Thomasina had slowly regained her feet. She stared at Brains, then said, almost angrily, "Bash? Are you kidding me? She was as healthy as a horse! Her whole family

was, from what she told me. No diseases or heart defects or anything like that!"

"Are you sure she was telling you the truth?" Brains asked calmly.

"Yes! And the entire five years she's worked here, she's never taken a sick day!" She turned to Michael, who nodded his confirmation. "In fact, when we were in college, she never had anything worse than an occasional case of the sniffles!"

Brains gnawed on a knuckle – an old habit – while he mulled that over. Michael and I looked around for something to move the body with. In the end, Thomasina simply picked up the body and carried it to Brains lab. Once there, he had her set it down on the examination table used for testing the bionic limbs.

"Are you going to, um, have to remove her clothing?" Thomasina asked, sounding uncomfortable. Michael and I exchanged awkward glances as well.

But Brains answered, "Not right away. I'm going to scan her arms and her head for now to see what they might reveal. Later on I will have to do a full body scan."

Brains soon had holoprojections of Dr. Prandit's head and arms. But the scans didn't reveal anything unusual.

"What's that dark spot by the side of her skull?" Thomasina asked.

Brains shook his head. "That was caused by her head striking the floor." The exam soon ended. "As I thought," Brains said, "I'm going to have to probe deeper." He proceeded to inject her with something.

"What's that, Brains?" I asked him.

"Active nanoprobes. Usually I use the passive kind, but they would be of no use since her circulatory system isn't functioning." He turned back to us. "You may as well leave. This may take a day or so. In the meantime, I'd like to examine the video of her lab from earlier today."

Michael nodded. "I can have that displayed down here." He walked over to one of the keyboards by exam table. A holographic display immediately appeared. Logging in, he quickly pulled up the recorded video from Dr. Prandit's lab. With a gesture, he tossed up an enlarged view for all of us to see. Brains walked over and touched the "Play" icon.

For a long while not much of anything took place. Brains began skimming through those sections. Finally we saw Dr. Prandit enter her lab, about twenty minutes before the start of the typical work day. She looked around for a few moments before walking over to the lab table where her body would be found. She picked something up, but her back was to the camera, so we couldn't see what it was. But, from the way her back stiffened, it must have startled her. She continued to stare at it for a few moments, then, without warning she keeled over, striking the floor. Michael reached up and paused it. He gestured at the display's time clock. "Security picked up on this image a short time later. They alerted me, and I alerted you." He sped through the rest of the footage until it showed the lab door opening and the three of us entering.

Brains frowned at the image. He reached up to the slider control and motioned it back a ways. Once again

we watched Dr. Prandit enter the lab, pick something up and look at it, then fall down. Brains reversed the image again, using the slo-mo buttons. Then he stepped through the incident, one frame at a time. "There!" he said, pausing the image.

"What?" we both asked. Impatiently, Brains gestured and expanded the image, zooming in on Dr. Prandit's left hand as she fell. This time I saw it. "She's got something in her hand! A note?" I asked, for it sure looked like a small sheet of paper.

"Very likely," Brains answered.

Unfortunately, the side she had been looking at was turned away from us, so there was no telling what had been written there. Then it hit me: "But Brains! Where is the note? I sure didn't see it there when Thomasina – uh, I mean, Dr. Swift moved the body." I shot her an apologetic look. She just smiled grimly back at me.

Brains turned to her. "Dr. Swift, did you notice a sheet of paper lying around when you picked up your partner's body? I was focused on the body itself and did not think to look at anything close by."

She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry Dr. Benton. I certainly didn't see anything like that. And," she turned her head back to the image, "you'd have thought she'd still be clutching it in her hand!"

Brains nodded. "Correct." He turned back to Michael. "Let's go back to the lab and look again. I need hardly point out that the note, if that's what it is, is likely a vital clue!"

Returning to Dr. Prandit's lab, we searched the floor

thoroughly, coming up empty. There was no trace of the paper she had been holding. Returning to Brains lab, he searched her clothing as well, then the hand she had been holding the paper in. But its disappearance remained as much as mystery as the death of Dr. Prandit herself. For Brains was unable to come up with an explanation for that, either. "We'll know more when the nanoprobes finish their scans," was all he could say about it. I asked him if he needed me for anything else, and he didn't. "Let me know if the glitch pops up again, or of any further troubles," he asked me. "In the meantime, Operative Three, search the newspaper databases, see what you can find by way of potential enemies for Dr. Prandit."

"I'll get right on it, X," I assured him. In case you haven't read any of my novels, "Operative Three" and "Operative X" were our code names back when we ran our own detective agency during our junior and senior high school years. You might be surprised that it was quite successful, too, until a tragic accident occurred – namely, to me – which ended with it shut down and Brains vowing to stay away from detective work the rest of his life. Thankfully, due to a bizarre series of events, Brains had been pulled back into the detective game once again. Not a moment too soon, either...

Chapter 3: Portrait of a Frustrated Artist

I still get strange looks when I walk into the Los Angeles *Times-Journal* building. I've been working there since I graduated from UCLA years ago, and I'd always been in a wheelchair. I wasn't surprised by the many looks I got when I walked back in there the day after Brains attached my new legs. Many people gasped, and I practically had to call a mini-conference of my own to explain how it was that I was walking once again. Needless to say, this made headlines and went viral on all of the various media services. We were soon inundated with calls by people wanting to know if Brains' new process could cure their paralysis or give them new legs. I hated to disappoint them, but I had no choice but to tell them both breakthroughs were still in the experimental stages and there were a lot of bugs to be worked out. Some people didn't believe me and before long there were conspiracy theories floating around about how the Swifts were withholding a complete cure for paralysis and wanted to jack up the cost of prosthetic limbs. Yes, the rumors soon faded away, and then came the discovery of the Brungarian children on the moon, which diverted the conspiracy nuts away from SwiftTech for a while. But, as I said, I still get stares from time to time, and I've even heard whispers behind my back that I'd faked the whole paralysis thing...

Back at my desk, I didn't start looking up Dr. Prandit's possible enemies right away. There were still other crime stories I had to follow up on, and articles that need

proofreading. So it was about two hours later before I finally started searching.

Can't say I came up with much, though. Dr. Prandit hadn't done anything particularly newsworthy. There was a small article about her being the first Pakistani to be working at SwiftTech, it had a sketchy background on her. Seems Dr. Prandit, after she graduated from high school in Pakistan, got her masters and even a doctoral at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. Her major was particle physics, with a minor in art. That was all it said. But it gave me a starting place.

By the end of the day I really hadn't learned much more about her. As Dr. Swift told us, they'd been roomies throughout their whole time in Germany. Apparently they'd tried a few German companies, but didn't get hired. So they tried a few here in the US, including Swift Enterprises. Mr. Swift must have liked what he saw, because within a month the two of them were working here at SwiftTech. Interestingly, Dr. Prandit pleaded hard to make sure that both she and Dr. Swift not only got hired but were able to work together as well. Guess having the same last name really helped. Further searching turned up some people they've dated. None of the relationships seemed to last very long. Nor were they seeing anyone currently. I made a list of names (it wasn't very long) and decided to start calling. First on my list was a man named Scott Dickerson.

I called his number, ended up leaving a message. It was the same with the others on the list: Cooper, Wolff, Hudson, Campbell, and the rest weren't available either. I had to resist the urge to slam my landline phone down, I thought I'd reach at least *one* of them! However, as I

pondered what to do next, I received a phone call from Scott Dickerson. When I told him it was about Dr. Prandit, he agreed to meet with me at a fast food place close by. Turns out he owned an art gallery in Beverly Hills, not too far from the L.A. *Times-Journal* offices.

Scott Dickerson turned out to be a large, well-muscled individual with almost totally, prematurely white hair who looked more like he belonged behind the wheel of a Mac truck rather than the owner of an art gallery. After we shook hands and placed our orders, we retired to a booth at the far end of the place. I wasted no time asking questions. "How well did you know Dr. Prandit?"

"Well, we weren't dating or anything," he replied. "She would come by my gallery every now and then, hoping to sell some of her paintings."

"She painted?" I asked, surprised. I knew of her art minor, of course, but I didn't realize she actually used it.

"Yes," Scott nodded, "but not very well. Oh, she wasn't bad for an amateur, but I told her repeatedly that she needed more tutoring to bring out her full talent. I don't know if it was vanity or not, but she seemed to think her talent was already fully developed. So she kept trying to sell her works. And believe me, I wasn't the only one she tried selling them to."

"Who else?"

I can't say I was surprised to hear the other names on my list mentioned. By now I figured they weren't boyfriends, but the owners of other high-end galleries in the L.A. area. From what Scott was telling me, she hit them all. And was rejected by all of them, too.

"How did she take the continual rejections?" I asked him.

Scott pondered the question a few moments, then gave a half-shrug. "Well, she'd put on a brave face and kind of joked about it, but I could tell it hurt her. One time, after I turned her down yet again, I happened by the back entrance and watched as she literally threw her canvases back into her van, then slam the door shut. Believe me, I really felt lousy after that, but what else could I do? She still hadn't mastered her skills enough to produce viewable paintings. Like I said, I tried telling her to go back to college and take some more art courses. Or maybe try selling her art online or at one of the lower-end art galleries. But that just made her angry." He shrugged again. "Guess it was vanity after all. She really thought she was the next Andy Warhol or something."

When I returned to my office, I called Brains and told him what I'd found out. "Looks more like she'd have a reason to kill them, rather than the other way around!"

On the display, Brains nodded. "Good work, Operative Three." He was silent a moment, then said, "Jimmy, go ahead and interview the others on your list. Chances are you'll probably hear more or less what Mr. Dickerson told you, but it can't hurt to verify it. And you might see if she tried to date any of them. It wouldn't be the first time a woman has tried to use her wiles to get what she wanted."

"Will do, X. I'll let you know what I find out."

I began calling the same people on my list. This time I was lucky to reach a few of them. The results were as expected: she had tried to sell them her paintings, but they considered her a rank amateur. Some even sneered at

her efforts. The others I couldn't reach on the phone, I drove by. In a way I was glad she only tried the high-end art galleries, most of them were close by. Otherwise I'd probably have had to drive all over the L.A. basin. At any rate, when I talked with the owners I didn't learn anything new. About the only thing I found out was no, Dr. Prandit didn't try to seduce the owners in any way. The few owners who were female told me that they'd tried to be encouraging to her, telling her that she had some raw talent that needed to be developed, but that only seemed to make Dr. Prandit angry. One owner told me how the good doctor stormed out of her gallery, swearing a blue streak! She was either getting tired of being rejected, or was developing a very thin skin.

Back at the office once more, just prior to quitting for the day, I called Brains and let him know. He nodded when he heard, then said, "Good work, Jimmy. At least we can eliminate the gallery owners as any possible suspects. But I'd like you to drop by our headquarters. I've run across some clues that may well point to the culprit."

"Who?"

He shook his head. "I'll tell you at headquarters. Brace yourself for a surprise." And with that, the connection went dead. For a moment I glared at my SwiftTalk, then broke out into a grin. Yep, Brains was definitely back to normal all right...

Chapter 4: The Phantom Menace

Our "headquarters," for those of you who haven't read Brains' book, was located in an abandoned warehouse out on Simi road. Back when Brains was trying to restore life to my legs, I'd nicknamed it "The Coach House," after our original headquarters in Crestwood. That actually was a converted coach house that Brains' parents let him use. Brains could have done anything he wanted with it; he chose to make it his crime lab. He'd really done an outstanding job; considering his low resources, it was quite state of the art for its time. It had everything from a secret entrance to an inner sanctum! Plus lots of chemistry, mechanical and electronics tools. We solved a lot of crimes from that place, up until the incident that left me paralyzed from the waist down. Now, with the tacit blessing of Michael Phydeaux, our new headquarters was now a state of the art crime lab. Much of the equipment Brains had been using to help me had been replaced with top of the line Swift file servers, super fast computers with super fast wireless connections, telejector holographic displays, and so on.

Gaining access to the crime lab wasn't easy. Except, of course, for Brains and me. You might be tempted to think there were a lot of high-tech locks: keycards, retina scanners, palm scanners, voice print identifiers and so on. But Brains told me he knew all too well just how easy those could be defeated. So he came up with a better way.

When you reach the warehouse, there's only one door, which is locked. Once you unlock it and go inside, you

find yourself looking at what appears to be an ordinary office: a metal desk with a computer monitor and the usual stuff found on a desk. A coat rack. Some file cabinets. A few bland pictures on the wall. A small fan on top of a bookcase. Some chairs in front of the desk. That's about it. What you don't know is that one wall is actually made of SmartGlas, and what's on the wall is just a projection. On the other side of the wall is the actual lab itself. And Brains is there, taking you in. He alone decides whether to grant you access to the lab. No fancy AIs or facial recognition stuff. Just Brains alone. If you are allowed to come in, the projection shuts off and the wall swings upward. If not, you'll leave the place no wiser than when you arrived.

Curious as to how *Brains* gets in when he can't be there to let himself in? It is easier than you might think. Tom Swift, before the SwiftTalk, had created a secure communications and identification device. He disguised it, making it resemble a small shirt collar button. He tentatively called it a "TeleVoc," saying the name sort of "popped into his head" one night. Anyway, it works like no other two-way radio you've ever heard of. It started off by reading both the wearer's Alpha brainwaves as well as detecting subtle muscle and jaw movements and the person thought and subvocalized what they wanted to say. It sent raw data to a secured server that converted it into audio, added the caller's voice to it, and, whoever they were trying to reach "heard" the caller's voice inside their head. While a great idea, ultimately Sherman Ames vetoed the idea for the time being. He still thought there were too many ways such messages could be intercepted. Tom shelved the idea and soon forgot about it. But not

Brains.

Brains took the device and built a foolproof lock from it. Only he, and only when fully conscious, could send the entry code, silently and with no hope of being intercepted. If he was unconscious or thought a different code, the SmartGlas might open but the lab would be sealed and some sort of knockout gas released, keeping the bad guys held until the police arrived. Brains told me he plans to reintroduce the concept to Sherman Ames, but not until it gets a thorough field-testing.

Did I ever tell you Brains is really intelligent?

Inside, I walked over to one of the holographic displays Brains was sitting by. Pulling up a chair, I said, "OK, X, what's the big surprise I need to be prepared for?"

In answer, Brains pointed to the image of an auburn-haired woman. "Recognize her, Jimmy?" he asked.

I took a close look at the image, then nodded. "Yeah. Isn't that Ithaca Foger, the mystery woman who drove that bizarre race car (or whatever it was) at the land speed record thing a few months back?"

Brains nodded. "Yes, that's her."

"She vanished in the end, didn't she? I know it was in the news a lot. And there was some big scandal involving the company that made it, CEM/Anahuac. We heard lots of rumors that there had been an attack planned on the Swift's space station, that the whole speed record thing was just a cover-up."

"Correct, Jimmy," Brains said.

"So what's this got to do with Dr. Prandit's death?"

"Just this," he replied, and activated a video recording close to the image of Ithaca. "Watch closely."

It was the same recording I'd seen at SwiftTech, of Dr. Prandit walking into the lab, picking up something off of a lab table, staring at it, then keeling over. I didn't see anything especially different, and said as much to Brains. He nodded, then said, "I'm going to slow it down a little." He tapped some commands into a holographic keyboard, then slid the video display bar back to the beginning. This time the video moved much slower. I watched again as Dr. Prandit entered the room. After a while, we reached the point where she picked up the object we presume to be a piece of paper. As she did so, there was a curious shimmer right by her. At normal speeds it wouldn't even have been noticed. I blinked, then used the slider myself to roll the image back. I watched it again. The shimmer was definitely there.

"What is that, Brains?"

He gave me an enigmatic smile. Then he slowed it down further. There was no mistake this time: though blurred, I could make out the image of an auburn-haired woman wearing goggles and a hood, dressed in a metallic jumpsuit, approach Dr. Prandit and touch her, then leaving as fast as she'd entered. I paused the recording, reversed the video to the woman and, concentrating on the face, expanded the image as much as I could, then looked back at the image of Ithaca Foger. Near as I could tell, they were identical. I shook my head and turned back to Brains. "But Brains, this is impossible! In spite of what was reported on the news, the CEM/Anahuac vehicle that

Ithaca was said to be driving vanished into an artificial black hole! There is no way in the world she could return from something like that!"

Brains nodded. "Which is pretty much what I would have thought, had I not seen this video. And here's something you might not have heard: this isn't the first time she's come back from the dead."

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"Ithaca was reported dead some years ago after an experimental race car she was involved with exploded. Then she shows up out of nowhere at Swift Enterprises in an explosion that tore apart their Durastress fence. Not only was she as good as new, she was even better! She seemed to possess super-fast reflexes and the ability to emit high levels of electrical discharge."

"Sounds like a comic book supervillainess," I muttered.

Brains shook his head. "True, but she was completely real."

"But how could she possibly do all of that?" I asked. "You have one of the most advanced bionics lab in the world, but even you can't give someone abilities like that!"

"An excellent question, Operative Three," he said with slight smile.

"Well, here's another one: you said that Ithaca could shoot lightning from her fingertips, or something close to that. But I remember you also saying there were no burn marks on Dr. Prandit's body. Shouldn't there be some?"

Brains nodded. "Which brings me to my next surprise: the autopsy on Dr. Prandit."

"What did you find out?"

"She was killed by an electric shock that stopped her heart. Something a defibrillator might do, only there were no burn marks to indicate one had been used. But something that Ms. Foger might have been able to do if she'd undergone further enhancements."

I shook my head in disbelief. "I still don't see how. An electrical shock is going to leave a burn mark, no matter what you do."

Brains nodded. "And that's not the only mystery here. How did Ithaca Foger get into SwiftTech, get down to Dr. Prandit's lab and get in without Dr. Prandit noticing her?"

"I thought that maybe she was moving too fast to be seen," I ventured.

Brains shook his head. "You can accomplish a lot with super-fast reflexes, but it doesn't render you completely invisible. My first guess was the same as yours: Ithaca entered at super-speed, too fast to set off any alarms, and somehow remained so while in the elevator. Then she slipped into the lab the same way and killed Dr. Prandit. But this theory doesn't hold any water, because she would have had to have escaped the same way. And without Dr. Prandit opening doors, as it were, there's no way for her to have utilized the elevators. Nor is there any way for her to have slid past Dr. Prandit, after she came into the lab, without creating a disturbance in the air."

"Still, Brains, all we saw on the video was a slight disturbance – and we had to slow it down in order to see

that much! Maybe it it's more than just super-speed, maybe she can make herself invisible too!"

Brains didn't reply right away, he mulled that one over. "I won't say you're wrong, Operative Three," he finally said. "There's so much about Ithaca Foger we don't know. How she survived her first death. And how she apparently survived her second one. And then there's the small matter of *why* she would want to kill Dr. Prandit. I've followed up on some of the history you dug up and wasn't able to find any connection between them at all."

We both fell silent for a bit. Then a thought occurred to me. I gave Brains a wide grin. He raised his eyebrows at me. "Well, maybe we don't know much about her, but I sure as hell know someone who probably does!"

"Enlighten me, Operative Three."

"Two words, X: Sandra Swift!"

Chapter 5: Tom Swift Has Déjà Vu, Sandra Swift Is Perturbed

Brains wasted no time contacting Tom Swift. I realized this was something of a gamble. I may not know all of the details, but I knew enough about the Swifts and the Fogers to realize there was plenty of bad blood between them. After the strange reappearance of Ithaca Foger and her odd participation in the land speed record affair, would Tom or Sandra be willing to talk about it, or would it just annoy them? And it wasn't as though Brains and Tom were close friends or anything. They'd only talked that time when Brains needed help on the bionic arm. So I was mentally prepared for a curt cut-off when Brains brought up the death of Dr. Prandit.

When Tom picked up, Brains threw the image onto the nearest SmartGlas monitor. "Dr. Benton?" Tom answered. "Uh, I mean, Brains? What can I do for you this time?"

Brains nodded at the image. "Hello, Tom. Sorry this call can't be under more pleasant circumstances. I assume Michael Phydeaux informed Sherman Ames about the strange death of Dr. Prandit, and he informed you in turn." It was more a statement than a question.

Tom nodded. "Yes, to a degree. Have you discovered anything else?" There was a hint of a question in Tom Swift's eyes; you could almost hear him thinking *why am I hearing this from you and not Sherman Ames?*

"Yes, I have," Brains answered. "Watch this video."

Brains played the slow-down version of the lab intrusion.

I heard Tom gasp. "No! That's not possible!"

Brains nodded. "That's what we thought, too. I will, of course, send a copy of this to Sherman Ames. But what I'd really hoped to do was talk with your sister Sandra about what happened that day in Utah, and anything else she can inform us about Ithaca Foger."

Tom was silent a few minutes. "I'll ask Sandy to contact you. As you might imagine, this is still something of a sore spot with her – with all of us, in fact. Still, I'm pretty certain she'll tell you everything she can..." Tom's voice trailed off and he fell silent once more.

"Tom?" Brains said.

Tom Swift blinked, then shook his head. "It's nothing," he said. "It's just that – ever since I was told what happened, I've been wracking my brains trying to remember where I'd heard the name Bashalli Prandit before. It's one of those 'right on the tip of my tongue' moments, but I simply don't recall ever having met her. I even asked Sandy and Phyl if they might have introduced me to her sometime in the past, but both denied having done so." He paused a moment, then add, "Though Phyl gave me one of the *oddest* looks..." He shook his head again. "Well, it doesn't matter. I'll show Sandy the video and ask her to get in touch with you. Don't be surprised if her mood isn't that great. She's not going to be happy to hear about this!"

Tom was correct. We were contacted by Sandra Swift about a half-hour later. I let out a gasp myself when her image appeared on the monitor. I'd seen pictures of

Sandra Swift before, but her beauty really does take your breath away. There was more to it than that: I was forcibly struck by her close resemblance to Thomasina Swift. It was enough to really make me wonder. But given the severe frown that was currently on her face – her eyes were all but shooting lightning bolts – I decided that right now was not really the best time to be bringing it up...

"Dr. Benton," she said with barely controlled anger, "is this someone's idea of a joke? Because if it is, I promise you heads will roll over there at SwiftTech and I may just wield the sickle myself! I don't know where you got this – this preposterous video from, but Ithaca Foger is gone! Vanished! She's not coming back!"

"And yet, Miss Swift, it would appear that she has," Brains replied. "And we have a dead body to prove it."

Brains started to inform her about the death of Dr. Prandit, but Sandra brushed it aside. "Tom's already told me about that," she said. "It hardly proves anything. We don't really know where Ithaca's technology came from." A strange expression came over her face as she said that, but she pressed on, "So there's no reason why someone else couldn't have undergone the same kind of surgery as Ithaca."

Brains shook his head. "However blurred, the image is that of Ithaca's."

"So?" Sandra challenged. "Whoever this is might have a way to disguise themselves as well."

"For what reason?" Brains threw the challenge right back. "Why use Ithaca's image when this theoretical projection system could have used anyone's? Or no

one's?"

Sandra paused for a moment, lost in thought. A moment later she shook her head. "I don't know. A red herring, something to throw the police off? This whole thing doesn't make much sense. If, somehow, this *is* Ithaca, why would she kill some obscure scientist at SwiftTech? I think it more likely she'd come after me, Tom, or someone else in the family. Is there some sort of connection between Ithaca and Dr. Prandit?" she asked Brains. "I certainly don't know of any!"

"Neither do we," Brains replied. "Which is why we wished to speak to you. We were hoping you might know."

Sandra shook her head. "Well, like I said, I don't." She was silent for a few moments, then added. "I can think of only one other person who might know something."

We brightened up at once. "We would appreciate any kind of lead you might have," Brains told her.

Sandra held up a hand. "Well, this may be of very little help. You see, the man I was thinking of is Ithaca's former employer: Sun Ohm Erato."

Chapter 6: The Chosen One

Sandra Swift set the wheels in motion. Ordinarily, you'd have better luck trying to contact President of the United States for a casual chat than getting hold of someone like Sun Ohm Erato. Even more so these days, as he was keeping a pretty low profile since the land speed record debacle (there were more than a few rumors that things weren't going so well between Erato and the Kranjovian government). But Sandra Swift, apparently, had some sort of "in" with him (she declined to elaborate). When she contacted us again, she let us know that a meeting had been set up for the following Tuesday at four o'clock. "And he only wants to talk with you, Mr. Carson."

"Me?" I exclaimed. "I thought he'd want you to be there as well. To say nothing of Brains!" Brains nodded, looking equally puzzled.

Sandra shook her head. "No, he wants to meet with the author of the 'Brains Benton' book series." She gave me a wry grin. "Seems he really liked reading them."

I gulped, not feeling especially flattered. "But why weren't you included? I would have thought he'd want another chance at getting..." I stopped, not liking where I was heading with this.

"Another chance at getting his paws on me again?" Sandra snapped, finishing my sentence. "Don't think he wouldn't enjoy that! But he knows I would have refused to come, so he didn't even bother. No, it's just going to be you alone, Mr. Carson."

"I suppose I'm going to have to meet him in his plane, the way you did?" I asked her.

Sandra shook her head. "Today's really a day of surprises, I guess," she said, more to herself than me. "No, he wants to meet you in downtown L.A. – in the old Bernacki Auditorium, in fact."

I looked at her in surprise. "Sun Ohm Erato is going to be in a public area? Where he could easily be apprehended by government agents or whatever?"

Sandra shrugged. "He said something about 'hiding in plain sight' when I brought that up. At any rate, he knows his plane would be far too conspicuous, so he's using another means to stay off the government's radar. At least, that's what I gather. At any rate, before you meet up with him, I'd better go into more detail about how my meeting went."

Sandra proceeded to do so, letting me know Sun Ohm Erato's various mannerisms and about the two giants he keeps as bodyguards. Of course, she also told me that despite his Asian-sounding name, he was Kranjovian by birth. "Above all, Mr. Carson," she concluded, "don't let that Buddah-like manner of his fool you. He's as ruthless as the Black Cobra ever was, and he'll try to weasel any information about Swift Enterprises or SwiftTech that he can."

"If that's the case," I said, "why not ask for Brains instead of me?"

"Too obvious," she answered. "And he knows that Dr. Benton would be on guard against that kind of probing. He knows he's not going to get any technical details from you, but he will use you to find out about any upcoming

Swift projects that might be a threat or of interest to him. So when you're asking questions about Ithaca, be very careful how you phrase them and how you answer any questions." Sandra told me about some other things to watch out for, then we hung up.

"I'm not overjoyed to hear that you'll be facing these enhanced humans," Brains told me with a grave look. "Especially since Sun Ohm Erato would appear to be quite temperamental."

"Oh, I'm not too worried about that," I assured him. "I've got a secret weapon of my own."

Brains continued to frown at me. "Jimmy, I hope you're not counting on your bionic legs. I believe I made it clear that they're not super-strong."

My grin widened. "Oh, come on, Brains! I have a certain individual in mind who can probably counter this 'Tiresias' person quite easily."

Brains blinked. "Who did you have in –" Then he stopped, suddenly getting it. "Oh! But I have to wonder if he'll be available on such short notice."

I shrugged. "Only one way to find out." I picked up my SwiftTalk and punched in a long-distance number, one I hadn't used in years...

Chapter 7: My Bodyguard

After we hung up, Brains and I looked up the Bernacki Auditorium. It was located in southeast L.A., in just about the worst neighborhood of the worst part of the city. It had been built back in the 1920s and had been the scene of a lot of famous musicians, from Louie Armstrong to Benny Goodman, Frank Sinatra to Buddy Holly. Those had been its glory days. Things took a turn for the worse in the mid-1960s, starting with the Watts Riots which resulted in the building being damaged. After that, a lot of third-rate rock bands played there for a bit, then the drug and street gangs moved in and took over the place. Gang wars and police raids came and went, each taking its toll. Now it was all but abandoned, used only by the homeless or whatever gang currently claimed it for its own. I could scarcely think of a less likely place for someone like Sun Ohm Erato to want a face meet.

"How would he even expect us to get there?" I asked Brains. "I seriously doubt he expects us to casually stroll through the neighborhood!"

"Even were you to arrive in, say, an old battered car," Brains agreed, "you would probably still stick out like the clichéd sore thumb. I imagine that most people in that neighborhood keep an eye out for any strangers who might pass through."

"So how do we get there?" I asked. "Drop us from a helicopter, maybe?"

Brains grinned. "I think you need to be a bit more

inconspicuous than that, Jimmy. We'll work out a method, so don't worry."

And, in the end, Brains came up with a doozy!

The day of the meeting, my friend and I found ourselves deep inside SwiftTech, in an all-white paneled room that looked like something Stanley Kubric would have come up with. In the middle of the room was a raised platform about ten feet square. Close by was a transparent control panel on a pedestal.

"What is this, Brains?" I asked him.

"I think you have a pretty good idea, Jimmy," he replied with a smile.

I'd heard of the Swift's famous Transmittaton teleporter, but had never actually seen one before. The Swifts never used it to any great degree, they never gave any explanations for that lack of use, either. "So, it's, uh, pretty safe?" I asked a bit nervously.

Brains nodded. "Have no fears, Jimmy. And I've already downloaded a tracker app onto your SwiftTalk. Once you've finished talking to Sun Ohm Erato, just press it and the two of you will be teleported back here."

We still hesitated a few moments. Brains gestured impatiently towards the platform. "Go ahead. The meeting is about to begin, and I rather imagine Sun Ohm Erato is a stickler for punctuality!"

So I squared my shoulders and walked up the short flight of stairs to the platform and my friend joined me a moment later. We stood in the middle, waiting. Brains touched a button on the panel, there was a flash of white light. Before I even had time to register it, we were there.

I looked around. We were just where Brains said we would be: in the alley close to the old auditorium. It was directly across from us. Fortunately for us, there was no one in the alley other than some drunk (or drugged) man who stared at us in astonishment. He said something to me, but it was so slurred and filled with street language I could barely understand him. Still, it wasn't hard to guess he was asking where I came from. Then he caught a look at who was with me, let out a strangled cry and ran. I grinned at my companion, then motioned him to follow me as we crossed the street to the auditorium. I tried several doors, all but one was locked. Even as I opened it, I heard a voice say: "Come in, Mr. Carson!"

I turned to my companion and quietly told him to wait about five minutes, then to come in. He nodded.

Inside, I walked through the inner doors and down an aisle between many overturned or trashed metal seats. The place reeked from many different odors, none of them in any way close to pleasant. Up on the stage a man sat in a large chair. His figure was cloaked in shadows, but it wasn't hard to guess it was Sun Ohm Erato. I was puzzled at the lack of any bodyguards. Not for long: even as I approached the stage, I saw two huge individuals emerge from the shadows where the backstage curtains hung in ruins. Sandra hadn't exaggerated any: these two modified humans were giants. Of course, I knew who they were – Tiresias and Sestina. Like their master, they stood in the shadows so it was impossible for me to read their faces. But I rather doubt they were smiling sunny smiles at me.

Sun Ohm Erato gestured at Tiresias and he jumped off the stage, landing with a loud THUMP. Moving faster

than I would have expected, he walked around to my back, gripped my shoulders with hands the size of a small boulder and propelled me gently but firmly to the base of the stage.

"That's better!" Sun Ohm Erato said. "I wish to see your face up close. Faces can reveal quite a lot. And I have several questions for you, Mr. Carson."

"I thought we were here to answer *my* questions," I told him.

"In good time. But mine have the greater priority." I felt the hands holding me give my shoulders a slight squeeze. I clenched my jaws shut to avoid shrieking with pain. "Would you not agree?"

Still unwilling to back down, I just nodded, glaring at him while I did so.

"Good. First question: where is Ithaca Foger?"

I stared at him in surprise. "That was going to be *my* question!" I told him. "In fact, that's what I came here to ask you: have you been in touch with her?"

Sun Ohm Erato stared at me for a moment. Then he gestured at Tiresias again. The pressure returned to my shoulders. As I grimaced in pain, he said, "Please, Mr. Carson, do not stand there and insult my intelligence. I had thought Ithaca to be lost, until Miss Swift contacted me and set up this meeting. The only logical conclusion is that Swift Enterprises either found a way to bring her back or captured her prior to the *Sungold's* disappearance into the event horizon. Either way, it's obvious this is a rather oblique way of fishing for more information from me, since I seriously doubt Ithaca has told you anything."

For a long moment I just stared at him, not believing what I was hearing. "Are you crazy?" I exploded. "Do you think for one moment I'd be here, in this godforsaken cesspool of a neighborhood, asking about Ithaca if we actually had her on hand??"

The pressure on my shoulders tightened once again. "Do NOT talk to me in that tone of voice!" Sun Ohm Erato thundered at me. "And yes, I well believe you would. I know about you, Mr. James MacDonald Carson. I know about your bionic legs, about your life-long friendship with Barclay Benton who currently works at SwiftTech. I even know about the series of books you wrote some years ago, although, contrary to what I told Miss Swift, I have never read them; children's books do not interest me. I said that merely as a lure; I find that flattery works quite well with some people, especially authors.

"I can hardly overlook the fact that you are the perfect candidate to send in to worm information from me about my relationship with Ithaca. Someone who pretends to not know where she is, hoping I might reveal what I know of her relationship with CEM/Anahuac, as well as myself. It was a rather futile strategy, I'm afraid. You are not nearly as disarming as you thought you were. Enough of this! Now you will tell me her current location: SwiftTech? The Citadel? Or somewhere on the grounds of Swift Enterprises?"

The pressure on my shoulders increased. Sun Ohm Erato was correct about one thing: I'd had enough. I looked him in the eye and spoke, rather loudly, one word: "YAMA!"

Sun Ohm Erato blinked. Whatever it was he had been expecting me to say, that certainly wasn't it. "Yama?" He frowned. "Is that supposed to be a code word of some kind? If so, I'm afraid you'll find – " He never got a chance to finish his sentence. Even as he was speaking, there came a meaty-sounding *KLOMP!* just above my right shoulder. The pressure on my shoulders vanished instantly as Tiresias whirled around and found himself staring at someone almost as tall as he was. Almost as tall – and definitely, pound for pound, much more muscular.

I turned back to look at Sun Ohm Erato and was rather pleased at what I saw: For the first time he had lost his composure and was gaping in astonishment. I smiled. "Sun Ohm Erato," I said, "I'd like you to meet my bodyguard: Tokyama Sonomota. But you can call him 'Yama' for short. It's rather fitting, since it means 'mountain' in Japanese. He's a close friend and a former sumo wrestler, and has won more than a few trophies. Your enhanced human here might be somewhat stronger, but I doubt seriously he knows even a quarter of the martial arts techniques Yama does. And Yama knows how to shrug off pain to a considerable degree."

I found out the truth to my statement a moment later. Maybe Sun Ohm Erato gave Tiresias a signal I didn't see, or maybe the giant acted on his own. Maybe he thought that because he was taller, he could easily cow Yama. At any rate, I'd barely finished speaking when Tiresias threw a punch straight to Yama's face and followed it with a jab to the throat. Well, it may have been a while since Yama last fought, but he certainly hadn't forgotten anything! He didn't just block both punches – Yama grabbed both of Tiresias's arms and yanked the giant forward, slamming

him into Yama's rock-hard, impressively large stomach. The giant hadn't been expecting that and bounced off Yama like he'd hit a rubber wall. He landed near the base of the stage. And he was a bit slow getting up. But he charged Yama once again. Yama let him and within moments had flipped Tiresias head over heels, giving him a brutal slamming to the floor. A moment after that and Tiresias was pinned. I gave Sun Ohm Erato a triumphant look, but the man wasn't finished yet.

"Sestina!"

I gulped and lost my smile pretty fast – I'd forgotten about the other giant Sandra had told us about. I wondered how well Yama would be able to take on two giants, or even if he would, considering his second opponent would be female.

Sestina, however, far from rushing into combat, gave her employer a sad look.

"Sestina!" Sun Ohm Erato repeated.

"Help your brother! Now, Sestina!"

Walking over with a great show of reluctance, Sestina jumped off the stage, ignoring me and going over to where Yama held Tiresias. Crouching down, she studied the two of them for a few moments before reaching out and grabbing one of Yama's arms in an attempt to dislodge it. But Yama must have foreseen this, because he let her pull it free – and as she started to straighten up, he yanked her forward, twisting her arm as he did so. Moments later she was pinned as well in an ordinary arm lock. Below him, sensing that Yama's attention was no longer on him, Tiresias attempted to throw Yama off. But in a rather slick move, Yama pulled Sestina across him

and used the combination of their weight to keep Tiresias pinned. Once again we had the upper hand. But for how long? If Sestina and Tiresias worked in concert, they could probably throw Yama off without much trouble. I could easily see the giantess's face from where I was. I watched to see her begin gathering her strength to do so.

That didn't happen, however. Far from being angry, Sestina looked resigned, downright miserable in fact – as though she were about to break out in tears at any moment. I was tempted to ask Yama to let up on her, but caught myself in time. For all I knew, this could be just an act on her part. I remembered what Sandra had told us about her, but I wasn't about to chance it. Instead, I turned back to Sun Ohm Erato and said, "Looks like you're out of bodyguards!" Of course, for all I knew, he may well have other guards hidden around us, armed to the teeth. If so, we were in deep trouble. But I decided to bluff it out anyway. "Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?"

Sun Ohm Erato glared at me. Obviously, the idea of someone beating his two champions never occurred to him. Then, to my surprise, he gave me a nod of acquiesce. "Very well. Savor your momentary victory, Mr. Carson. We will meet again under considerably less pleasant circumstances. For now, this meeting is at an end." He turned and looked at his bodyguards. "Tiresias! Sestina! When Mr. Sonomota releases you, you are to take no further action. Leave the way you came. Do you understand me?" The threat in that last question was unmistakable. Both nodded. "Very well. Mr. Carson?" He obviously wanted me to tell Yama to let them go. But I was puzzled: wouldn't he want the two of them up there

with him as escorts, if nothing else?

"Hey, wait just a minute!" I said. I took a couple of steps forward and easily jumped up onto the stage. My bionic legs are not super-powered in the comic book sense, but they're still pretty powerful. "I still want to know about Ithaca Foger! I want to know if you rescued her from that black hole thing in the desert, and why she's attacked SwiftTech! I want – " but I broke off and stared at Sun Ohm Erato. It was my turn to be astonished. Because, you see, I was staring right through him!

Chapter 8: Boys in the Hood

"Really, Mr. Carson, did you honestly think I would physically visit a location as unsavory and dangerous the one you're currently in?"

"Yeah, guess that was rather foolish on my part..." I muttered. A hologram! Small wonder Sun Ohm Erato stayed in the shadows. From the distance he looked real; only when you got up close enough could you see the obvious difference. He wasn't using a Swift telejector, that much was obvious: I could now make out the scan lines.

"Until next time, Mr. Carson. Rest assured I will find out what you have done with poor Ithaca."

"*Poor Ithaca!*" I sputtered. "You're the one who is –" but I was speaking to an empty chair. "– keeping her someplace..." I let my voice wind down, then turned away in disgust.

"Jimmy-san?" It was Yama, speaking for the first time.

I nodded. "Go ahead, Yama. Might as well let them go. Sounds like they have some pretty clear-cut orders not to try anything further."

Nodding, Yama stood up, releasing his captives. Immediately he shifted to a combat stance, but he needn't have bothered. Both giants regained their feet and, without so much as a look at either of us, walked over to the stage, climbed up upon it and marched to the rear.

Moments later we heard a door open and close. Which left the two of us.

"C'mon, Yama. We might as well take off too." I pulled out my SwiftTalk and thumbed it on. Punched in the passcode – and stared in dismay: NO SIGNAL. "Um, that's not good."

"What, Jimmy-san?" Yama asked. I showed him my cell phone. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a SwiftTalk of his own. Thumbing it on, he nodded. "As you say: not good!"

"C'mon, let's head outside. Maybe we can get a better signal out there." But this didn't make any sense, I thought as we walked up the aisle. How could Sun Ohm Erato transmit and receive if the signal wasn't coming through? That made me wonder: was Erato blocking our signals, now that he was gone?

Outside, the signal continued to remain blocked. Whether by nature or deliberate attempt, the result was the same: we weren't going to be teleported out of here very soon. And, thanks to the same lack of a signal, I was unable to pull up a map of the surrounding area, so I really had no idea which way to go. I concentrated hard as I could, trying to recall what I'd seen of the map that Brains pulled up last week. But the details of it were, alas, rather fuzzy. It simply didn't occur to me at the time that I would need them. After all, we were just going to teleport right in and right back out again! So much for *that* plan.

"Jimmy-san," Yama said quietly.

"Um?" I inquired.

"Not to alarm you, but we seem to be attracting unwanted attention. Perhaps it might be better to move back inside while we plan our escape."

Looking up, I realized that we were two white people in a predominantly black neighborhood – and not a particularly friendly neighborhood at that. More than a few passerbys were frowning at us. And around a street corner came a group of teenagers. I won't go so far as to say "street gang," but their faces certainly hardened the moment they saw us. And they began to head over in our direction.

"I can see your point, Yama," I told him. "Let's get back inside." Doing so we went back in, immediately closing the door. The door, however, couldn't be manually locked, so I found some rusty metal poles and wedged them into the door's metal handle. The inner doors swung inward, so we were able to stack some of the old auditorium seat rows against it. Outside, we could hear the door rattling as our new-found friends tried to gain access. They shouted at us as well, threats mixed with a lot of profanity.

"This won't hold them for long, Jimmy-san," Yama said.

"We're not sticking around, Yama," I replied. "C'mon! Let's see if we can find the exit Sestina and Tiresias used."

Hurrying to the stage we made our way to the rear door. Fortunately, it wasn't hard to find. Outside, an alley ran both ways. Neither of us had the faintest idea which way to go, so I just pointed in a direction and hoped for luck.

Running down the alley, we slowed only when we reached the street. As best we could, we tried to be as nonchalant as possible. "Inconspicuous" was pretty much a no-brainer, and we avoided eye contact, walking down the street as if we had every right to.

About every two minutes I'd pull out my SwiftTalk and see if we were past the jamming area. But I still continued to receive the "no signal" warning. Maybe it was some sort of dead zone: no one else was using their cell phones either. For a while no one was hassling us. But we didn't seem to be making any progress either. I desperately needed to find a street map of some sort. But the one gas station I went into was completely out of them. At least, that's what I was told, in a rather unfriendly way. But the sun was getting closer to the horizon and our cell phones still weren't working. Twice I tried to use a public phone so I could at least let Brains know what had happened. But public phones didn't seem to have a long life in this part of town. And attempts to use someone's land line were abruptly turned down. By now I was beginning to see a very unwelcome pattern in all of this. Certainly not everyone down here would be this hostile towards us – unless someone applied pressure somewhere and spread the word around. Like a certain former Kranjovian, maybe? Whatever the case, the odds were looking less and less in our favor. The crowds were thinning out and we seemed to be getting closer to the heart of southeast L.A. rather than away from it.

"Jimmy-san," Yama said, motioning to me. He pointed towards an alley close by. No one seemed to be currently occupying it, so we went in a few yards.

"What is it, Yama?"

"Maybe we should be looking into finding some shelter for the night. Perhaps there is a nearby church that might take us in. Perhaps they might even have a phone we can use."

I nodded. "Good points, Yama! I hadn't thought about a church, but then, I didn't think we'd be here this long! Keep your eyes peeled, hopefully we'll find one soon." And equally hopeful, they hadn't been threatened or bought off by Sun Ohm Erato. Unfortunately, this was something we'd never find out: we'd barely turned around and started out when a large group of teens entered the alley. As we started to back up, we heard noises behind us. Turning around, we saw another group just starting up the far end of the alley.

"Thanks for making this easier for us," the leader of the gang said with a triumphant smile.

"It will not be so easy for you if you do not get out of our way," Yama challenged.

"Pipe down, fat guy," the leader said as he unlimbered a shotgun and cocked it. His followers took out automatics, pistols, and what was either a MAC-10 or an Uzi, it was too dark to really see clearly. "You ain't exactly bulletproof."

"What is it you want?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Well, your wallets first of all," he said. "That'll do for a start. Then we'll have us a little chat in more comfortable quarters. Maybe we can learn why some foreign guy spread so much money around, telling everyone in sight to keep an eye on you two and prevent you from leaving our little hood. Yeah, lots of rival gangs

have been keeping an eye on you two all day. Love to learn how you got in here to begin with, without any of us seeing you do so. Might be nice knowing that trick. But we got to you first."

Looking behind me, I asked, "Would one of those rival gangs you mentioned be them?" I hooked a thumb behind me.

The gang leader lost his smile as he noticed the approaching gang. I'd assumed they were part of our captor's bunch, but it soon became apparent how wrong I was.

"Hand 'em over, Zee-Ray!" the leader of the new gang barked. At least, that's my best guess as to what he said. The street accents were so thick I could barely understand a word either one actually said. So some of this conversation I'm about to relate is, I'm afraid, pure guesswork.

"Not a chance, Chrissler! We found 'em first! Back off before I let my boys have some fun!"

"You're on our turf, wasteoid!"

"Naw, this is neutral territory and you damn well know it! We ain't crossed into Demo territory yet. We'll be leavin' now."

"No you won't!"

"Yeah, we will."

It was at this point that guns were drawn on both sides, leaving Yama and me right in the middle! I was about to say something that I hoped would forestall hostilities when I noticed Yama looking the gangs over

with a certain kind of squint. I'd seen that squint years before when he took on Borkin's gang. I guess Yama was prepared to go down fighting. But – even as Yama prepared to attack and I started to open my mouth to say something, everything came to a halt when a car horn blared behind the other street gang. To everyone's surprise, a yellow taxi roared up the alley and straight into the backs of the other gang members, scattering them like ten pins.

The back doors opened; a voice yelled, "Get in! Hurry!" Immediately we dove in, the taxi taking off before we could close the doors. The gang ahead of us likewise scattered. The taxi shot out of the alley, tires screeching as it turned, barely avoiding oncoming traffic. Several bullets flew by the windows as the gang raced out of the alley. If any hit the taxi, I couldn't tell. When I finally regained my breath, I looked to see who had rescued us.

Sitting in the front seat was an elderly Asian man who, at the moment, was understandably focused on the traffic as he tore down the streets at almost insane speeds. The speedometer needle was up around 90, sometimes higher. Every now and then he'd pick up the microphone and shoot off some rapid-fire words, then listen to the garbled, incomprehensible reply. He still hadn't said a single word to us.

I looked over at Yama, but he put a finger to his mouth. Hard to say if he didn't want anything we said to be overheard, or if he thought our talking might break the older man's concentration. Might have been both, so I kept my mouth shut.

It wasn't long before I could tell we were being pursued. Maybe by our street gang buddies, maybe someone else. Anyway, the bullets flying past the window pretty much tipped me off. After the first round, the driver glanced in his rear-view mirror and finally spoke to us: "Keep heads down, damn idiots!" We immediately obeyed, though it was easier for me than for Yama.

With my head down, I could no longer see where we were going. I felt the taxi swerving this way and that, taking hair-pin turns, horns blaring all around us, bullets occasionally flying by. Once there was a huge jolt; we obviously rammed into something. Not the least bit daunted, our mysterious driver slammed the taxi into reverse and we backed up several hundred feet. I peeked over the back of the seat and watched as he began driving down a series of alleys, most of the dark and deserted. Then we drove across a short dirt field, entered yet another alley, took a right turn and came to a halt in front of a graffiti-covered brick wall. The driver pressed a button on his dashboard and, to my surprise, part of the wall swung upward. I could just make out a large metal arm attached to a metal plate in back.

We drove on through and it closed up behind us. We drove in the dark a short ways, then went down an incline. Up ahead was a series of bars stretched across a dimly-lit opening. I soon realized the bars were part of a gate. The driver came to a halt, got out, and unlocked the heavy chain wrapped around one side of the door. He climbed back in, drove us on through, then got out relocked the gate.

We were being driven through a series of large concrete tunnels, probably part of L.A.'s older aqueduct

channels. The entire time he kept his headlights off, relying on the tunnel lights instead (and some of them weren't even working). Insofar as we were no longer being pursued or shot at, I finally ventured a question: "Um, sir, where are you taking us?"

Looking over his shoulder, the man smiled faintly at us. "You see," he answered. "Not worry! Take you safe place. You see!"

I thought that as all he was going to say, but he turned his attention to Yama. Then he said something to Yama, presumably in Japanese. All I caught of it was Yama's full name. Yama responded with a "Hai!" of agreement, then asked something in return. Before long they were jibber-jabbering back and forth. I was almost a nervous wreck, more than halfway expecting the old man to crash into one of the aqueduct walls, but he seemed to know every inch of his route, taking turns without even bothering to look.

Finally we reached another gateway – and this one was occupied.

Chapter 9: Lots of Speculation

There were several Asian-looking guys (I soon found out they were all Japanese) with Uzis at the gate. But, while all of them looked serious, none of them looked hostile. Quite the contrary: several soon broke out into broad grins when the driver rolled down his window. They spoke to one another for a few moments, then the driver made Yama's window slide down. At once, several of them spoke to Yama in almost awestruck tones and even bowed to him several times. Apparently Yama was well known. Then Yama pointed to me and spoke a few times.

But when he mentioned Brains' name, the man's jaw about hit the floor. At once he switched to English and said, "You are Jimmy Carson, the one who wrote all of those wonderful Brains Benton books! I loved those as a kid! I read about all of your adventures! I had heard you were working as a reporter these days and how you now have bionic legs! This is true?"

I nodded. Then I asked a question of my own. "But, uh, tell me: where are we?"

The man laughed and responded, "Welcome to Little Tokyo, Jimmy Carson." Then, to Yama, "And you as well, Tokyama Sonomota!"

By now the gateway was open, so, after exchanging a few more words, we drove on in.

Before long we emerged from another building of some sort, probably a warehouse, and were driving through the rather crowded streets of Little Tokyo. Like

L.A.'s Chinatown, I'd heard of Little Tokyo but had never actually been there. We soon pulled up in front of a building. Yama tried to pay the driver, who shook his head and held up his hands. They spoke for a few minutes in rapid-fire Japanese, then Yama motioned for me to get out. I did so, and got to see the damage the taxi had taken: bullet holes here and there and the front passenger side was stoved in. It's amazing the thing still ran. I turned back to Yama, wondering what they'd been talking about. Before I could even ask, he said: "He did not wish any payment, just that I sign his and his children's autograph books."

"I never realized you were such a celebrity, Yama!" I said with a grin.

"Not just because of my former career, Jimmy-san!" he replied, smiling back. "You forget what your books have done for me. Thanks to *Painted Dragon*, I am even more renown now than I was back when I was young!"

I have to admit, I was startled by that. I knew my books sold pretty well overseas, but I guess I never realized they'd made such an impact. Well, whatever. "Time for us to get out of here," I said, pulled out my SwiftTalk once again. This time, I was pleased to see all five bars displayed. But before I could pull up the transmittaton app, Yama put his hand over my phone and shook his head.

"Not just yet, Jimmy-san," he said. "We have been invited to a feast to honor both our escape and our presence among our rescuers. It would be both rude and dishonorable to them if we refused."

I was about to tell him to hell with that, that I'd had

enough adventures for the day, but reconsidered. First, Yama was right: if they really were throwing us a party, it would be kind of rude to snub it. Second, I was more than a little bit curious how the old taxi driver showed up right at the proverbial nick of time. And third, making friendships here could possibly pay off in terms of future contacts – it never hurt to cultivate more of those. And fourth: what the hell, I love a good party! Just hope they don't expect me to drink a lot of saki or whatever; in spite of the stereotypes about hard-drinking reporters, I never could hold my liquor worth a damn...

* * * * *

Several hours later, Yama and I reappeared on the transmittaton platform.

Earlier, just before we began eating, I contacted Brains and let him know we were all right.

"Jimmy!" he'd exclaimed. "We were getting very worried. When, after an hour had passed and there was no retrieval signal from you, we tried contacting you and learned that Sun Ohm Erato was somehow jamming all wireless signals in that area. I was able to trace it to an overhead satellite. I finally was able to break through their security and shut it off just a short time ago."

"And by then," I added, "we were already gone from there." I proceeded to let Brains know what had taken place and the aftermath. And about the feast that was being thrown in our honor.

On the screen Brains nodded. "All right, Jimmy," he said with a grin. "I think you deserve a big feast after all of that!" Then he sobered. "But don't delay your return if you can help it. You see, while you were gone, Ithaca

Foger struck here again!"

"What?" I exclaimed, then lowered my voice. "Brains, what happened? Did she kill someone else?"

Brains shook his head. "Not this time. Instead, she was hunting for something."

"Any ideas?"

"Yes. The subtractor!"

I whistled. "Man alive, if she or Sun Ohm Erato were to get their hands on that thing...!"

Brains shook his head again. "No danger of that, Jimmy. All evidence of it has been erased, remember? Apparently she was trying to find any small bit of information that might have been overlooked. She came up empty this time, but..."

"Yeah," I concluded for him. "This means we haven't seen the last of her!"

Believe me, this kind of soured the mood during the feast, though I tried my best to enjoy myself. Afterwards, we tried to get out of there as best we could, but Yama soon found himself signing autographs and pictures from his sumo wrestling days. I was doing likewise – to my six original Brains Benton books. It took about an hour and a half, but with many bows and expressions of gratitude (and believe me, we were quite sincere about that!), I finally used the transmittaton app and we were zapped away.

After a brief talk with Brains, I took Yama back to his motel, then returned to my apartment. I ended up falling asleep with the TV on, my dreams filled with menacing

figures, gunshots, insane car chases and wild parties. Only the ring tones of my SwiftTalk brought me back to consciousness around ten the next morning. It turned out to be Brains, letting me know that Michael wanted to talk to both Yama and myself later on.

So, that afternoon, we were up in Michael Phydeaux's office. Brains, Michael, Yama, myself – and Sandra Swift! Yes, Tom's sister had zapped herself to SwiftTech in order to hear from us in person what we had learned from Sun Ohm Erato. Of course, I let her hear the recording I'd made with the SwiftTalk, then I told her anything else I could think of that might help.

After we finished, Sandra sat back in her chair and shook her head. "This," she said, "is very strange. Why on earth would Sun think that we had kidnapped Ithaca and were using her somehow? Or is this just some sort of game on his part to cast off suspicions?"

Brains nodded. "We seem to have more questions than answers. If we take Sun Erato at his word, then it would seem Ithaca's reappearance is as much a mystery to him as it is to us. He may well believe that she didn't disappear into the event horizon at the end of the race, but was somehow rescued by us – most likely you, Miss Swift – and brainwashed into working for us. And that something went wrong with the brainwashing – perhaps reprogramming might be a better word – that turned her against us once more. We are still unable to determine the motive behind the death of Dr. Prandit. And this latest break-in which appears to be a search for any information on the subtractor device. To what end?"

Sandra shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe she

wanted to upgrade her already formidable built-in armament. Maybe she wanted to sell it to Sun to get back in his good graces, assuming she needed to. Maybe there's some other reason we haven't discovered yet." I noticed that Sandra looked very worried when she said that. Was there something else she hadn't told us? If so, I didn't get a chance to find out. There was a beep on Michael's desk and a 3D hologram of Swift Enterprises security chief Sherman Ames appeared. He didn't look happy, so I knew the news wasn't going to be good. It wasn't.

"Don't ask me how two people the size of Sestina and Tiresias managed to escape, but they did," he told us. "I had the police and the DHS set up roadblocks and inspections at all of the airports, water ports, and roadways into and out of L.A. They came up with nothing."

"Sherman," Brains said, "could they simply be in hiding somewhere?"

Sherman Ames nodded. "Very likely, Dr. Benton. Erato probably has them holed up someplace, waiting for the heat to die down. Then he'll take them to an obscure beach someplace and have them picked up."

Sandra threw us a puzzled look. "What 'heat' are you referring to, Sherman? Neither one of them is wanted for anything in the US that I'm aware of."

"True, Sandy, but after the land speed record debacle, anyone connected to Erato is wanted for questioning. I know of more than a few DHS people would love to question them, so to speak, about Erato's activities after the events in Utah."

"Question them? How? Both are mutes!"

"Well, presumably Erato taught them how to read and write," Sherman sighed. "But it's a moot point for now."

"OK, do you have anything on Ithaca's latest break-in?" Brains asked him.

Sherman looked disgusted. "For a supposedly top secret lab, SwiftTech is getting way too porous! I'm getting tired of unauthorized people going in and out of the place like it was a department store. Granted, Ithaca is kind of a special case. Anyway, to answer your question, no, nothing new. We analyzed the video taken of her raid on the Topology lab, all it shows us is the barely-discernible flicker of her entrance, search, and exit. What really drives me up a wall is that none of the other cameras in the place show anything else! Just the ones in Topology. Much like the first time, there's no signs of her entering the building, using the stairs or the elevators, or her going up or down the corridors, let alone leaving. She's only visible in the room where she does her dirty work and nowhere else."

Sandra looked very worried. "Sherman, is it possible – I mean, could she be using some sort of teleportation device?"

Sherman Ames shrugged. "Well, if so, it's definitely not a transmittaton! We'd know that in an instant. If they could come up with something like that black hole powered race car of theirs, who's to say Anahuac didn't come up with one of their own? It's about the only way to have pulled something like this off."

I thought I heard Sandra mutter something to herself, but I didn't catch what it was. She shook her head and

said, "So, what's to prevent this from happening a third time?"

"I'm sorry, Sandy," Ames replied. "At the moment, nothing. If she really does have some alternate means of teleportation at her disposal, she can pretty much come and go as she pleases. And not just at SwiftTech: Swift Enterprises or the Citadel are wide open to her as well."

I heard Sandra mutter once again – some very unladylike words this time. "Don't worry, Sandy," Sherman hastened to assure her. "I plan to get together with your brother and see if we can come up with a trap of some sort – something that can be set up on the grounds of all three places."

Sandra sighed and shook her head. "Don't count on my brother too much, Sherman. He's still up in Seattle working on the *Sky Queen III*. That's his consuming passion at the moment. Phyllis told me she plans to pay him a visit soon just to remind him that there's more things in life than oversized airplanes."

"Well, if he wants his family and his company protected, he'd *better* pay some attention to this!" Sherman barked.

They talked a bit more about Tom Swift Jr.'s workaholic tendencies, then Sherman turned to the rest of us. "Dr. Benton? Any further thoughts on this?"

Brains, however, was silent; he seemed to be lost in thought. After a moment, though, he looked up and said, "Sounds like you have it pretty well covered, Mr. Ames. Until we can determine the means of her access to SwiftTech – there may well be more than one way to do this – we certainly cannot formulate any means of

preventing further attacks. Jimmy and I will continue to determine her methods as well as a motive for Dr. Prandit's death, which remains a mystery. Please keep us informed of any plans you and Tom Swift come up with and we will keep you apprised from our end as well."

Sherman looked a bit disappointed, but nodded. "All right. I'd better get back to work. I've got some phone calls to make." A moment later his hologram vanished.

No one spoke for a moment, then I said, "OK, now what?"

"Jimmy, you take Yama back to his hotel room. I believe his plane takes off in a few hours." He turned to Yama and held out his hand. "Yama, many thanks again for your help! Jimmy would have been in great peril without you there!"

Yama gave Brains a formal bow. "Most happy to oblige, Brains-san! We are still very much in your debt for the help you once gave us in recovering Yamada-san's missing pearls!"

Brains waved that aside. "More than happy to have helped," he kind of muttered. Even though Brains is back in the detective business, the Old Days can still inspire painful memories...

We soon broke up. Brains and Sandra left first, Yama and I following. It's just as well we did, because I was able to overhear him quietly say to her: "Sandra, if my hunch about this case is correct, you will not have to fear any further visits by Ithaca Foger."

Sandra threw Brains a startled look. "Huh? What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

Brains shook his head. "This is just a hunch, so I can't go into a lot of detail until I collect some more facts. But it could be we're looking at this case completely wrong..."

Chapter 10: My Dinner With Thomasina

After returning Yama to his hotel and seeing him off from LAX, I gave Thomasina a call. "Mr. Carson?"

"Yes, it's me," I acknowledged. "Um, Doctor Swift – "

"Thomasina, please!" she said with a laugh.

"All right, Thomasina, I was just wondering if you had any plans for tonight." Yeah, a bit lame, but most opening lines are.

"Well, now that you mention it, I was feeling kind of hungry..."

"Would it be too forward to ask you to have some dinner with me?"

"Are you asking me for a date, Mr. Carson?" But her tone of voice was warm and inviting.

"Well, as a matter of fact – I am! And it's Jimmy, please!" We both laughed at that.

"Where would you recommend we go? I can tell an awful lot about a man by the restaurants he takes his dates to!" she said.

I shrugged. "Well, if you haven't been converted to vegetarianism, there's a nice steak house out on Moorepark Road I like to go to now and then."

"Yes, the Charcoal Pit," Thomasina replied. "Bash and I have eaten there a few times as well. An excellent choice, Mr. Carson! This date is off to a promising start. What time shall we meet?"

I looked at the time on my SwiftTalk. "It's almost six now, so how about at seven? I can pick you up if you like."

"Great! I'm living at the Falcon Grove Apartments on Janss Road. Just give me a call when you arrive."

"You got it!" I replied and we hung up. Back at my apartment, I got shaved, took a shower and put on some semi-formal clothes. A dash of aftershave, too. Surfed the Web a bit on my laptop to kill some time, then took off shortly before seven.

I reached Thomasina's apartment complex without any problems. Gave her a call, she appeared moments later, now wearing a nice yellow dress and sun hat. She smiled when she saw me, and I got the impression that she might have been killing some time as well.

We mostly chit-chatted on the way to the restaurant. Fortunately, we didn't have to wait long before we were seated. After placing our orders, I asked her about her first meeting with Bash.

"Oh, that was years ago," she told me. "My father was a petroleum engineer who worked contracts. While I was still in high school he accepted a three-year contract job to work in the oil fields of Pakistan. So he moved us all over there." She ate a couple of appetizers, took a sip of water, then continued. "At the time I hated it: I was uprooted in the middle of term, leaving all of my friends and school projects behind. And while the city of Rawalpindi was nice, it certainly wasn't Hertforshire, my home town. I had a hard time adjusting to a Muslim school, too. It might have been a lot worse had I not met Bashalli Prandit.

"At the time I was still using my father's surname, Levesque. It wasn't until I was in college that my grandmother hinted that I might be related to the famous Swifts. Anyway, Bash and I hit off right from the beginning. Thanks to her, the other girls at Rawalpindi High School began warming up to me. Bash knew everyone! Her father worked for the government and her family was well-connected, so after we graduated, we were able to attend a rather prestigious two-year college without any problems. But I wanted more than just a simple BA in general engineering. So I applied to various other colleges around Europe and was finally accepted to the University of Heidelberg. Bash was accepted there as well."

"So you both were engineering majors?" Of course, I already knew the answer to this, but it was fun hearing her talk about her college days.

Curiously, Thomasina hesitated a moment, then nodded. "Um, yes, we both were. Bash, um, obtained a minor in art – she was always fascinated with various schools of art, and she had a real talent for sketching."

Not all that great, I thought, but said nothing.

Thomasina continued: "Anyway, as you can see, we've been friends for almost a decade now." Her face looked sad. "It feels so strange to enter the lab and not see her standing there, asking about the latest test results..." her voice trailed off for a moment it looked like she might burst out crying.

"Hey, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked you anything about Doctor Prandit so soon. That was inconsiderate of me."

Thomasina waved it aside. "No, it's all right. Fact is, I'm rather glad to talk about her to someone. It doesn't hurt quite as much when I do so. Did you know that she was the one who insisted I use my, well, hypothetical last name?"

I shook my head.

She went on: "Bash was so excited when she learned that I might well be related to the Swifts! Right after we got our doctorates, Bash started applying to Swift Enterprises at once."

I looked up at her, puzzled. "But I thought you applied to some other engineering firms in Europe."

Thomasina nodded. "Well, yes, *I* did! I didn't really want to work for a company that didn't acknowledge my mother's existence. But Bash was determined and made me use my last name as a kind of catalyst. Well, before we knew it, the two of us were working at SwiftTech!"

"And you think it was due to guilty feelings, perhaps?" I asked.

Thomasina shrugged. "Maybe. Who knows? I was just glad to get a job here. My other attempts at landing a job sure weren't going anywhere."

"OK. Your boss, Michael Phydeaux told me you're working on some sort of revolutionary new battery, one with the power of a nuclear reactor!"

She gave me a look and lowered her voice. "That's classified, you know. As with practically every other project there. But, since Michael himself told you a little about it, guess it can't hurt to go into a bit more detail. I'll have to keep it simple, though."

"Fine by me," I answered.

"Well, I was looking at how the SwiftSure stored solar energy, and wondered why the same approach couldn't be done with nuclear energy as well. Needless to say, it wasn't quite that simple. Capturing the energy from atomic fission was considerably more dangerous than mere sunlight, to say nothing of how to dispose of the spent batteries afterwards. We worked on the project for years before we hit upon a rather unusual approach."

"Which is?" I prompted.

"Classified," she answered me. "As I said. Keep in mind that this new approach, which shows a lot of promise, hasn't been perfected yet. We're hoping to have it ready for the new Solomon robots at the Citadel."

I blinked. "The Swifts have a new line of robots? I hadn't heard anything about that!"

Thomasina nodded. "Yes, the new 'wife' robots that the Citadel's AI Solomon utilizes. Currently they run off of the usual SwiftSure solar batteries, but Mr. Swift has been wanting to create a power source that would last even longer. And we were so close to perfecting it!"

"A battery with the power of an atomic reactor," I mused. Shaking my head, I added, "To call that a game-changer would be the understatement of the century!" A thought hit me: "Say, could that be why Ithaca killed Dr. Prandit? Could Sun and his pals at Anahuac be close to completing something like this himself, so he decided to get rid of any competition?"

Thomasina shook her head. "I really don't know, Jimmy. How could he have found out? And if he did

know, why didn't he have me killed right along with Bash? And why did Ithaca start searching for information on the 'subtractor' app?" She shook her head a second time. "There's a lot of things about this that doesn't make any sense."

I nodded. "That's for sure!"

Our dinner soon arrived and we ate in silence for a bit, both of us lost in thought. During dessert, I asked her, "So, what now? Do you plan to continue your work on the new battery?"

"I guess so," she said with a reluctant nod. "It won't be the same without Bash working with me." I could see her eyes watering a bit. "But I know she wouldn't want me to give up. And, as you said, this could revolutionize everything!" Her voice became enthusiastic. "Imagine: no more power companies! Just plug one of our nuclear batteries into a wall in your house and you'll have all the power you ever need! The same could be said for any type of transportation as well! Pollution-free transportation! Even rockets could be developed that could utilize it, using repelatrns or their equivalent!"

"You'll also be putting a lot of people out of work," I told her. "I'm not saying it won't benefit mankind in the long run, but it could cause an awful lot of disruption in the meantime."

Thomasina gave me a slightly chilly look. "Progress often does, Jimmy. You need only look at what trains, then cars, then planes did to various professions when they came into bloom. The same for new types of power production. It's always like that! And it's not like mine are going to be all that easy to produce, even when we do get

it perfected. So the change won't happen overnight!"

"OK, OK!" I threw up my hands. "I'm not saying you're wrong by any means! Only that it's going to be a rocky road before we get there!"

Surprisingly, she smiled at me. "I know, Jimmy. Bash and I talked a lot about that, too. Our new battery is definitely what you would call a 'disruptive technology.' And as much as part of me would like to see it become an overnight sensation, I'm also hoping it won't, just for the reasons you pointed out."

I calmed down as well. "I know. Sorry, Thomasina. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Me too. Don't forget: it still has a way to go. And without Bash, it might be years before I get it perfected."

"Would you be willing to take on a new partner?" I asked her. "I realize it may be way too early to ask that, of course, but I mean down the road, if you get stuck."

She nodded. "I may well have to. Believe me, it's been on my mind a lot. If so, I really have no idea who to ask for right off the bat."

We had finished our desserts and were just taking our time. Our waitress soon dropped off our checks. "You ready to go?" I asked her. She nodded. We left a generous tip, then made our way to the cashier and paid via our SwiftTalks. Moments later we were outside. I stretched and yawned, feeling curiously fatigued. "Sorry," I muttered to Thomasina. To my surprise, she did the same.

"Oh, gosh! Guess I'm feeling a bit sleepy myself," she said back to me.

We began walking towards my car, our feet strangely uncertain. Thomasina stumbled against me and I instinctively wrapped my arms around her, more to hold her up than anything romantic. Even so, I heard her sigh, "That feels nice, Jimmy." I felt a kind of thrill myself! But I couldn't stop my eyes from closing on their own. I felt like I had to shove my eyelids back open to see where I was going.

As we neared my car, a black van pulled out of one of the spaces. I sort of stumbled to the side of it, then leaned against the side to keep myself upright. Moments later the side door slid open and arms yanked us inside. I think someone threw a hood over me, but I don't remember much after that.

Chapter 11: Conversations With The Enemy

I woke up with a very dry mouth and a ringing head. I was also chained to a chair. Arms, legs, chest, near as I could tell. "Thomasina?" I sort of croaked out.

"He's awake," someone said, and a moment later the hood was removed. I blinked at the bright floodlights that were focused on me. I seemed to be surrounded by them and they were, as intended, giving me a splitting headache.

"Well, Mr. Carson," I heard a very familiar voice say. "I believe it's time to resume our conversation. Only this time there will be no family friend coming to your rescue! Quite the opposite in fact. Allow me to illustrate my point."

The floodlights suddenly went out, and another came on, high above me. I let out a gasp. It was like something out of an old-time circus act: a ladder went up at least fifty feet to a long diving board. At the end of said board I could make out Thomasina. There was a noose around her head, and large square tubes on either side of her neck. Also, from what I could make out, a harness holding her in place.

"She is safe for the moment," Sun Ohm Erato assured me. "As you can see, the harness is keeping her in place. Doubtless those tubes on either side of her neck puzzle you. To alleviate your confusion, each tube holds hundreds of fire ants. And her neck and hair have been treated with honey. You will now give truthful answers to

all of my questions, Mr. Carson. Failure to do so will cause the harness as well as the ants to be released. With the noose around her neck, I seriously doubt I have to tell you what the end result will be when the ants begin biting her!"

I could see it all too clearly in my mind: poor Thomasina going crazy from the pain of the ant bites and stepping right off the end of the diving board. I could only hope her neck would snap quick before the fire ants ate her alive...

Erato gave a laugh. "Yes, I can see that you grasp the situation quite well. Now, shall we begin?" The floodlights snapped back on, I was unable to see Thomasina. In many ways, it made the situation worse; now I could only imagine what it was like for her up there.

"So, once again, Mr. Carson," Sun Erato began. "*Where is Ithaca Foger?*"

For long moments I didn't answer. How could I? What could I say? Then, below the level of the floodlights, a large black box I hadn't noticed before suddenly came to life. Red LED numbers began counting backwards from fifteen. Not hard to guess what would happen when they reached zero.

"I don't know!" I shouted. "They haven't told me!" The countdown didn't stop. "It's the truth!" I yelled. "I don't work at SwiftTech, why would they tell me anything?" I asked rather reasonably.

"You're a reporter, Mr. Carson, and you frequent SwiftTech to a considerable degree," Sun Erato replied. "Surely those well-tuned reporters' ears must have picked

up something."

Five seconds remained.

"Please don't hurt her!" I screamed again. "I honestly don't know anything about Ithaca Foger's appearance at SwiftTech!"

The counter reached zero.

"What a pity you keep insisting on your lies. I have to wonder what it is about Ithaca that inspires such unswerving loyalty. Ah, well..."

High above me, I heard some mechanical noises. I mentally cringed, waiting for the screams to begin – and abruptly end.

But, to my vast surprise – and, I imagine, Sun Ohm Erato's as well – that's not what happened...

* * * * *

We were running for our lives. It was now an hour later, near as I can tell. But, for the moment, both Thomasina and I were alive. Safe, however, is not a word to describe our current condition.

Panting heavily, we made our way into a store of some sort. I'm not really certain just where we were. We found some benches to rest on and finally began to regain our breaths. Seemed like we'd been running practically forever. At the moment, there was no signs of our mysterious rescuer. When our breathing finally came under control, I turned to Thomasina and asked her, "Are you all right? Thomasina, what happened back there? How did you manage to escape? In all the confusion, I could barely keep track of what was going on!"

She looked at me and said, "Jimmy, I started planning my escape from the moment Erato finished talking to you. It really wasn't as hard as you might think. For some reason, the harness released me first, before the tubes started letting out the ants. Not by much, maybe a few seconds. The moment it did, I turned around and jumped backwards, grabbing at the noose. Fortunately they used handcuffs on my wrists, rather than rope or chains. As it was, it put a terrible strain on both my wrists, shoulders and arms! I still had some momentum, though, so I swung myself upward and managed to grab the rope with my legs. That took the strain off my hands, but now I was upside-down, my dress falling all around my head, preventing me from seeing anything. Further, the noose had now closed around my right hand; and my legs, thanks to my pantyhose, were continually slipping off the rope! And let's not overlook the fact that the rope was now swinging in a circle, carrying me close to where the ants were. Then I started hearing all of the commotion down on the floor. So now it's my turn: what happened down there?"

I was trying to recall that much myself. "Let's see." I thought hard. "After the countdown clock reached zero, I kept expecting to hear you screaming. Then I heard Erato yelling 'What's she doing?' followed by 'Well, she can't stay like that for long!' I knew you were attempting something, but I couldn't see anything either and couldn't do anything anyway. At least now I know..." Thomasina patted my hand and motioned for me to continue. "Well, right about then is when that weird green light appeared. Suddenly all of the floodlights shorted out and I felt the chains around my wrists and chest grow very hot. Man,

that hurt! But the heat increased and they abruptly fell off. I was able to snap the ones around my legs easily, they were pretty soft as well. Anyway, my first thought was to get up there and rescue you."

"Just as well you didn't try!" Thomasina exclaimed. "By then that diving board was probably crawling with ants!"

"I'm not doubting you," I replied. "But I was still trying to regain my vision, so I wasn't going to be of much help to you for several minutes anyway."

"By then," Thomasina said, "I felt something burn through both the handcuffs and the rope. But, instead of falling straight to the floor, I felt myself sliding along something while my skin was tingling like I had the world's biggest case of static electricity!"

"How do you mean, 'sliding'?" I asked her. "On what?"

Thomasina shook her head. "Jimmy, I honestly don't know! Please keep in mind that my hands, now free, felt like someone had taken a branding iron to them and hurt like hell, I was still upside down and fighting my dress all the way down, and what little I could see was that damned green mist all over the place! Then, when I felt like I was about to hit the floor head-first, something flips me upright and I'm staggering around on my feet!"

I nodded, remembering the rest. For me, it was as though Thomasina had appeared out of nowhere. I was expecting to hear screams followed by a loud THUD! Instead, here's Thomasina, her hair and dress in complete disarray but otherwise just fine. Before I could even begin to ask what had happened to her, an elderly gentleman shows up. Maybe I ought say: the image of

one does. Because that's what it looked like: a low-resolution hologram, the kind you see in older science fiction movies. Anyway, he beckons us to come with him. We both go along, not wanting to stay in this place any longer than we have to. The weird hologram (if that's what it was) leads us through a maze of corridors in another part of the building, Erato's men in hot pursuit. And, from the heavier treads, it wasn't hard to guess that Tiresias and Sestina were among them. But our holographic friend didn't lead us astray and we soon found ourselves outside.

The strange projection continued to lead us on, far away from our pursuers. We were in the older part of a city, but which one we couldn't guess at. We continued to follow the image until it led us into this abandoned building. Then it promptly vanished.

"OK," Thomasina said. "We seem to be safe for the moment. Do you still have your cell phone?"

I checked, thinking we could use the Transmittion app to get us out of here. Then I remembered that Brains had deleted that function as soon as I returned, as a security precaution. At the time I thought he was being too cautious, now it made perfect sense. Anyway, my cell phone was gone. I turned back to Thomasina. "And you?" I asked.

"In this dress?" she asked sardonically. "Does it look like it has pockets in it? And my purse is gone, of course."

"OK, guess we'll have to see if we can find a land line." We began looking around. I still couldn't quite figure out what this place was. Not a store, I couldn't see

any signs of it having been one. A former office complex was more likely: amongst the dirt and grime on the floor there were rectangular strips of cleanliness. Once I realized that, my heart sank: it was pretty clear that this office had been stripped of anything useful to us months ago. I said as much to Thomasina.

"Do you think it's safe to leave?" she asked. "Maybe we can find a payphone someplace. Or maybe someone will let us use their phone."

I went over to the door and peeked out. There were no signs of pursuit, the street was basically empty, aside from a few parked cars and a couple of pedestrians. "I guess so," I answered uncertainly. I glanced at myself, then at Thomasina in her evening dress. Even though neither of our formal attires were in all that great a shape, we'd still stick out like the proverbial sore thumb in this run-down neighborhood. "Wish we could find more, um, unsuitable clothes."

Thomasina gave me a quick grin. "I know what you mean! We don't dare stay out on the streets for long. We'll have to find a safe haven as quickly as possible."

I looked outside again. "Any particular direction appeal to you?" I asked her.

Thomasina looked out as well. There were still no signs of Erato's men. "Um, I guess..." She pointed her finger up the street. "That way!"

I pointed my finger in the opposite direction. "And you didn't choose this way because...?"

"That way's better! You'll just have to trust my feminine intuition!"

"Works for me!" I certainly liked her decision-making process far better than one of Brains' long-winded explanations.

We waited until the street was empty of people. Then we left the office and headed up the street, hoping we'd soon find a gas station or something. Before we'd gone very far, though, we saw the green glowing light coming out from an alley just ahead of us. The two of us exchanged looks, but decided to see if the light was still on our side.

As we stepped into the alley, we were abruptly surrounded by the light. It was as thick as a fog. Moments later we let out gasps as we were lifted skyward...

Chapter 12: Concentration

The glowing green conveyance soon joined another, brighter one – which is the only way I could tell that we had done so. Otherwise, the green fog we were in was too bright to see through. So it seemed a safe assumption we were, as the saying goes, docking with the Mother Ship.

The glow around us faded, and we found ourselves in a large room with pulsing grayish walls streaked with bizarre traces of red and blue. A geodesic of green hexagons held the grayish walls in place. The room was a good two hundred feet in diameter, with the ceiling at least twenty feet overhead. The light came from the geodesic structure, near as I could tell.

"Where are we?" Thomasina asked in a nervous tone of voice. "What is this place?"

Before I could reply, the image of the elderly gentleman appeared once more. I heard Thomasina let out a gasp. "It can't be!"

"What?" I looked from her to the hologram. "You know who that's supposed to be?"

"Yes! That's my grandfather, Henry Swift!"

I thought that over for a few moments. "Wait! If he's your grandfather, wouldn't that be Barton Swift?"

Thomasina threw me an exasperated look. "Yes! His full name is Barton Henry Swift! He always had me call him 'Grandpa Henry,' though."

I looked back at the hologram, which was continuing

to stare at us in return. "So, um, what's your grandpa – or rather, this hologram of him – want with us, anyway?"

"Well, how should I know?" Thomasina snapped at me. I guess that was a rhetorical question; before I could throw a snippy answer her way, she answered her own question: "The only way we're going to find out is to ask him." She turned back to the hologram. "Grandpa Henry? I'm your granddaughter, Thomasina!" The hologram smiled and nodded, but didn't speak. "Why have you brought us here? When will we be released?"

In answer, a bunch of strange green symbols suddenly appeared in the air. Thomasina and I exchanged baffled looks. "Is that supposed to mean something?" she asked him. "I'm afraid I don't understand." The symbols winked out, then reappeared again. They winked out, then reappeared a third time, as if for emphasis.

I crossed my arms. "Obviously, Thomasina, what we have here is the failure to commun – "

"Don't say it!" she snapped at me. "Grandpa Henry is trying to tell us something important! This is no time for dumb jokes!"

I held out my hands in supplication. "OK, fine! But unless you know how to read alien hieroglyphs, we're not going to reach an understanding anytime soon!"

"You're right about that," she replied in a milder tone of voice. Thomasina turned back to the hologram. "Grandpa Henry, we don't understand what these symbols mean! Can you try another form of communication?" The green glowing hologram stared at her for a few moments, then he and the symbols vanished.

Several minutes passed. Then the holograms reappeared, but much different. This time there were a series of images, each separated by what were clearly plus and minus symbols, ending in an equals sign. We stared at it in amazement. "Good God!" I said. "Is that – can that actually be a *rebus*?"

Thomasina let out a squeal of delight and clapped her hands. "Yes! Jimmy, that's exactly what that is, just like that old game show from years back!" Then she settled down to stare at the images.

The images were: a picture of Ithaca Foger, plus a picture of the Earth, minus a picture of a department store lost and found window, minus a picture of the Google home page, plus an exterior image of SwiftTech, followed by the equals sign.

We stared at the rebus for a while. Then I sighed. "Sorry, Thomasina, but I can't make heads or tails of this either!"

"Well," she replied, "I certainly can! I was always pretty good at rebuses. I guess Grandpa Henry remembered that!"

"So, what are they saying?" I asked a bit impatiently.

"Hold on, let me concentrate!" she snapped back.

I left her alone. For a while she just stared at the images, mumbling to herself. Then she shook her head. "Near as I can tell, I think they're asking us where Ithaca Foger is!"

I just stared at her, mouth agape. Then it was my turn to shake my head. "Seems like every entity and its third brother wants to know that! Just because she showed up

at SwiftTech, why do they assume that *we* know her whereabouts!"

"I don't know, Jimmy," she replied. "I'm as baffled about this as you are." She spoke out loud, "Grandpa Henry! We don't know the whereabouts of Ithaca Foger! We don't know why she killed my lab partner, or who is currently employing her. Or maybe she's acting on her own! We just don't know! Can you, um, please return us to our respective residences?"

The rebus disappeared. I suppressed a groan as another one appeared in its place. I didn't say anything, just looked at Thomasina as she began to work this one out. "Um, I think he's saying that we are going to have to be patient."

"Why?"

"Don't know, it doesn't go into any detail."

So we waited. A few more rebuses appeared. Thomasina just muttered, "Oh, dear," a few times, but didn't bother to translate them for me. After the third one vanished, I turned to her again and asked, "Thomasina, what's going on? What are they saying? Are they asking us about Ithaca again?" Because I'd seen her image included with the others.

"No, not that," she answered me in a curiously hesitant voice. "It's – it's something directed to me personally." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter, it has nothing to do with us getting back."

"How do we get them to let us go?" I asked her.

Thomasina hesitated, then spoke – but not to me. "Grandpa Henry, can I speak with you in private a

moment?"

I looked at her in surprise. "Thomasina?"

She turned to me and smiled, but her eyes looked troubled. "Just bear with me a bit longer, Jimmy. I just need to talk with my grandfather – assuming that's really him and not some weird alien in disguise – for a few minutes. I'm sure I can get everything straightened out and us back home."

Before I could answer, one of the wall hexagons opened with kind of a slurping-like sound, revealing another chamber. Thomasina took that as an answer and walked over and through it without hesitation. It closed up behind her.

For a while I just sat there, wondering what was going on, hoping she hadn't placed herself in danger by going in there. So far, though, our green-glowing host hadn't made any hostile moves. Then, just as I was about ready to go over and knock on the hexagon (and hoping it wasn't as gooey as it looked), the panel squelched open again and Thomasina emerged. She had a serious look on her face and she motioned to me to follow her. "Thomasina?"

She shook her head. "Come along, Jimmy! Time for us to go."

"Anything wrong?" I asked her.

She just gave me an odd look, then shook her head once again. "Grandpa and I worked a few things out," was her reply.

We walked back to the end of the room, where we'd first appeared. I guess that amounted to the "transporter room" because once again we were surrounded by a green

glow. There was no sensation of motion, but when it faded we found ourselves on the roof of a large building. The green glow was completely gone. From the looks of the sky, it was around midnight or later. Thomasina and I exchanged baffled looks. Cautiously, we walked over to the edge of the roof (which took about a minute to reach. We were about dead center on the roof which, as I said, was very large). Looking down, I could see we were up fairly high, but not real high. We could make out a mostly-empty parking lot. Looking out further, we could see a curved road or boulevard, and an empty field separated from it by a brick wall. The field was shrouded in darkness, and I could see a few two-story buildings at the far end of it, their lights out. There was a large hill in back of the buildings and what looked like the lights of houses on top of the hill.

"Any guesses as to where we are?" Thomasina asked.

I shook my head. "Let's take a look on the other side."

We made our way over to the far side and looked out once again. This time we saw the lights of hundreds of houses and businesses. But none of them looked familiar in any way. Well, it didn't really matter. I had just told Thomasina to search for a rooftop door or maybe a ceiling panel when one burst open not too far from where we were. Guards poured out and told us to put our hands on our heads. We did so, but as we did, I couldn't help asking where we were. The guards exchanged puzzled looks. "You mean, you climbed all the way to the top of this building and you don't know where you are?"

I shook my head. "No, we don't. And we didn't exactly climb up here, either. But never mind that. Where are

we?" I repeated.

The head of the guards gave me a suspicious look, as though he wasn't certain if I was putting him on or not. "You're currently on top of the SwiftTech building..."

Chapter the 13th: (Nobody Named Jason Here)

Once we were taken down to the top floor, Thomasina wasted no time contacting Michael Phydeaux. One quick conversation later and we were released, then escorted to his office.

Inside, we took turns relating the evening's exciting events. When we finished, Michael shook his head and flashed Thomasina a wry grin. "Well, Dr. Swift," he said, "you sure can't accuse Jimmy here of being a dull date!"

Thomasina laughed and nodded. But she quickly sobered and added, "It seems like every time we turn around, Ithaca Foger keeps messing things up, whether she's actually present or not!"

Michael nodded. "And we still have no idea of her current location, or what her endgame is."

"For that matter," I chimed in, "who or what was that green glowing place we were in? Was that a spaceship of some kind? And if not, just what was it? And why did it have a hologram of Thomasina's grandfather?"

Michael gave me a kind of strange look. "You mean, you don't recall the strange visit from the green orb a few years ago? It occurred about the time Tom was perfecting his telejector."

Then I remembered, as well I should: I wrote some copy on that story myself. "You mean, that's where we were? Up in that brain-like thing? No wonder those walls looked gross!"

Thomasina turned to me with a frown. "Never mind that, Jimmy! It's plain to me that we need to lie low for a while until this whole thing blows over. Every time we go out in public we become a target for whatever lunatic thinks we are involved with Ithaca Fogger in some way. Well, I've had about enough of that!" She turned to Michael. "Do you or Sherman Ames have some sort of safe house where we might hole up for a while?"

"Hey, wait a minute!" I protested. "I'm a reporter! I can't just drop everything because of all these crazy people! I have a job to do!"

"You'd rather get kidnapped yet again, Jimmy?" It was Michael who asked that this time, rather than Thomasina. "Dr. Swift's point is well-taken." He was silent for a few minutes. Then he said, "Apart from the labs right here at SwiftTech, I can't think of any other place that you might consider safe." Well, I thought about "The Coach House", of course, but unlike the original it really wasn't built to be a second home. And Michael thought the same about SwiftTech: "But the labs aren't exactly hotel rooms."

"What about some of the offices above ground?" Thomasina asked. "Surely someone must have modified theirs for the occasional all-nighter!"

Michael smiled. "Yes, but I rather doubt my mid-management employees would like to have someone camping out in their office for weeks on end! Word would soon get around." I'm sure he was thinking in terms of Ophelia O'Reilly, the big-boned, big-mouthed government liaison, who loved nothing better than to stir up trouble for SwiftTech and Swift Enterprises. "I'll get in

touch with Sherman Ames, see if he might know of a safe place to keep you two for a bit."

"What should we do about tonight? Or rather, what's left of it? What time is it anyway?" I pulled out my SwiftTalk even as I asked. To my surprise, it showed 12:25 AM. It seemed like it ought to be morning by now.

"I have a rather posh office adjoining this one," Michael told us. "I use it for entertaining various bigwigs. It's got a couple of nice, plush couches you can use. And the cafeteria puts out a pretty decent breakfast."

"Um, well, before we decide to settle in," Thomasina said, "I need to run by my apartment and get a few things. What about you, Jimmy? Do you need anything from your apartment too?"

I nodded. "Yes, there are a few things. My laptop for one. But would it be safe to venture out again?"

Thomasina shrugged. "No way to answer that one. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let these people frighten me! C'mon, Jimmy! We'll take my car!"

Well, obviously. We could hardly take mine...

* * * * *

Michael did try to talk us out of it, but Thomasina was determined. We kept an eye out, but the parking lot was pretty much deserted. Nor were we bothered by anyone or anything as we made our way to Thomasina's apartment. I escorted her to her door, and we cautiously entered the place. I kept expecting someone with a stocking cap and a shotgun to leap out from behind every door or piece of furniture. Thomasina seemed a bit nervous too: she soon had on every light in the place. But

our fears were groundless, there was no one in the apartment. She soon had several boxes full of stuff ready, and we placed them in the trunk of her car.

On our way over to my apartment, my SwiftTalk rang. To my surprise, it was Brains.

"Brains," I started to say, "Thomasina and I – " But he cut me off.

"Jimmy, forget about the Zeta tests for now. Just put them on hold until tomorrow. I need you and Dr. Swift to come and meet me over by the old AnimalLand amusement park. I have something vital to tell you that I can't repeat anywhere else."

Thomasina and I exchanged looks. "Uh, sure Brains, but Dr. Swift and I were just – "

"Never mind, Jimmy!" he said sharply. "Whatever it is can wait! You and Dr. Swift get over here as fast as you can!"

Thomasina and I exchanged looks. She started to say something, but Brains cut the connection before she could.

Thomasina looked over at me. "What on earth is that all about?"

I shrugged. "Beats me. Guess we'll have to go there and find out."

"What are these 'Zeta tests' he's referring to?" Thomasina asked.

I shook my head. "I have no idea. I've never even heard of them! I'm certainly not running any tests." I sighed. "Guess that's another thing I'll have to ask him

about!"

Thomasina pulled into a parking lot and turned the car around. We took Moorepark Road back to Thousand Oaks Boulevard and made our way to where the old AnimalLand park used to be.

As we approached the place, which was already in the process of being torn down, I continued to ponder what Brains meant by "Zeta tests." There was something familiar about it; I know Brains had used the word before. But where...?

Thomasina had just pulled into the parking lot when the answer hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks: *Satellite Zeta is in orbit*. It was an old code phrase Brains and I had used when we were kids, it usually meant to get over to headquarters pronto. But in this instance, I realized it meant the exact opposite; this was a warning from Brains. "Thomasina!" I yelled. "Get us out of here. *NOW!!*"

Too late. Before she could even turn her head to me to demand an explanation, the car was surrounded by people brandishing rifles and guns. Nor did they look the least bit happy to see us...

Chapter 14: Meet The Fogers

We climbed out of Thomasina's car, hands raised. Two of the men came to us, turning us around and tying our hands. Then we were marched over to an SUV. Hoods were thrown over our heads and we were shoved into the vehicle. All this time, no one said a word.

We were driven around for a while, it was hard to say for how long. An hour, maybe. Finally we reached our destination. The hoods were yanked from our heads and one of the men told us, "Get out!" The doors were opened and we wiggled out as best we could.

We were in a parking garage. An underground one, from the looks of it. Our captors led us to an elevator, cutting the cords from our hands. As we massaged our sore wrists and arms, the elevator door opened. We were thrust inside, but no one followed us. Instead, one of them reached inside, pressed the button marked "PH" and hastily retreated. The doors closed moments later and the cab ascended. For a moment, neither of us said anything. Then I said, "Well, I don't know about you, but this is starting to get monotonous!"

As I had hoped, Thomasina laughed. "Yes, maybe the bad guys could get together and start selling T-shirts with the slogan 'We kidnapped Thomasina & Jimmy Too!'"

Both of us laughed at that. A moment later, the elevator began to slow down. "Guess we'll find out who our latest kidnappers are in a moment," she said. I had nothing to add to that, so I just nodded my head. The cab came to a

halt and the flatscreen display over the floor buttons showed the word PENTHOUSE.

The doors slid open, revealing more men with guns waiting for us and they motioned for us to leave the cab. I thought for a moment of maybe ramming a finger into one of the other floor buttons on the cab wall, but remembered that it took several moments for the cab doors to close. We'd be riddled with bullets by then. Also, I needed to know where they were keeping Brains.

The penthouse main room we were shown into was every bit as luxurious as you'd expect: a large open fireplace, beautiful and expensive-looking furniture, floor-to-ceiling windows showing off the spectacular view of Los Angeles and other nearby skyscrapers, a large-screen telejector TV hooked into a very high-end Bang & Olufsen home theater system. A very plush carpet underneath. And, sitting in one of those plush chairs, his hands bound as well, was Brains. He nodded to me and Thomasina, but pursed his lips in a way that was the equivalent of holding a finger to them. At least this was one of our old signals I happened to remember. So I didn't say anything, other than nodding in his direction. Thomasina, on the other hand, was under no such restraints. "All right, will somebody please tell us what this is all about?"

"You want to know what this is all about?" One of the men spoke and stepped forward. "I should think it would be obvious! I want to know what you Swifts have done with my daughter, Ithaca!"

I gaped at the man in shock. "Your – daughter??" I stammered.

"Jimmy, Thomasina," Brains spoke up. "Allow me to present Ithaca's parents: Andrew Alpha Fogger and his wife, Eleanor Grace Fogger."

* * * * *

Well, once we got over our shock as to who our kidnappers were, the interrogation began. And believe me, these people weren't messing around! As was becoming usual, the three of us told the Foggers what had happened at the lab and about the videos of Ithaca. We even told them about my meeting with Sun Erato, but I didn't tell them about the kidnapping later on or our visit with the Green Orb. No point in confusing things. As for the Foggers: naturally, they didn't believe us at first. They waved guns and knives in our direction, held the tip of the knife right up close to our eyes at one point, threatened to have us tied to chairs and worked over by their men until we told them the truth. They definitely lacked the finesse of Sun Erato, but made up for it with potential brute force. But the three of us stuck to our stories – like we could do anything else! – and the interrogation soon slowed down to a crawl. Eventually, Andrew Fogger threw his knife on the carpet in disgust. During the lull, when I guess they were looking for another way to try and trip us up, I spoke up. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" I sort of threw it out into the open, not knowing which one – if any – would reply.

Andrew looked at me warily. "What?"

"If I remember correctly, when the Swifts asked you about Ithaca after she, um, showed up at Swift Enterprises, you refused to answer or tell them anything about her. Why this sudden interest now?"

The man stared at me for a long while, and I wondered if planned on ignoring my question. Then he turned away and sort of muttered, "She's family. However much we may hate what she did during her life, and what sort of monstrosity she was turned into afterwards, she's still our daughter. Twice we thought she was gone from our lives forever, and each time she managed to cheat death somehow." He turned back to me. "I've always assumed it was the Swifts, that they kidnapped her and experimented on her; Tom Swift Senior's revenge for the bad blood between us. Now," he shook his head, "now I just don't know."

"Then what do you propose to do with us, sir?" Brains asked.

For a long couple of moments he didn't answer. Then he shrugged. "Let you go, I suppose."

"Now wait just a minute!" his wife spoke up. "Are you trying to tell me that you actually buy their answers! They could be lying their fool heads off! I told you we should have questioned them separately! They probably made this whole story up to cover their asses! Are you telling me that you think our daughter actually murdered someone? Ithaca might be a lot of things, some of them unpleasant, but she's no murderer!"

Andrew looked at his wife. "How do we know what Ithaca is capable of these days! No matter who might be responsible, she's hardly the daughter we once knew. She could easily be capable of cold-blooded murder!" He turned back to us. "I don't know why, but I feel they're telling us the truth. We've threatened them with bodily harm and they didn't break. And why would that psycho

Sun Erato interrogate Carson here like that?"

"Because he was wondering the same thing!" his wife shot back. "Why would he do so if the Swifts weren't responsible?"

"Or was he covering his own ass," Andrew countered, "trying to throw off suspicion?"

Well, they went at it like that for a while. Mr. Foger was now pretty much convinced that we had nothing to do with Ithaca's reappearance, while his wife still thought we were covering up for the Swifts. The other people in the room watched the argument go back and forth, like an audience at a tennis match. I looked at Brains, who gave me a grim smile. I had to wonder if he had some sort of trick up his sleeve like he always did. Looks like I was right: Brains spoke up a moment later: "Excuse me!" They both turned to look at him. "I can see that this argument is going to end in a stalemate. So I suggest a possible solution is to let you examine the recording we made of both of Ithaca's visits. I'm sure you have audio/video technicians of your own who can determine if the recordings are falsified or not." Mr. Foger nodded, and his wife gave a reluctant nod as well. "I suggest you allow the three of us to return to SwiftTech. I can download copies of the recordings and bring them back here. By all means let your people accompany us, though I certainly don't intend to escape. But this way you can be sure we will return."

Andrew Foger looked thoughtful. His wife looked outraged. "Is he out of his freakin' mind?? Let the three of them walk out of here and they'll contact the police at once! Or their security chief! No way are we going to

allow this to happen!"

Mr. Foger turned to her. "Dr. Benton is right, though. We need to look at those recordings to see what really happened. All we have is hearsay thus far." Before she could answer, he turned to his men. "Take them back to the car at AnimalLand, but follow them from there. When they reach SwiftTech, keep her – " he pointed to Thomasina " – with you until they leave the place. Load them into our van and return here."

"Oh?" Mrs. Foger said. "And what's to stop them from calling in their security force and surrounding our van? They could easily force them to surrender her!"

Brains shook his head. "We want this resolved as much as you do. There are too many people wanting to know about Ithaca; this whole dilemma won't end until all of us are satisfied with the truth."

Mrs. Foger glared at us, then threw up her hands. "Fine! But this is going to be done with *my* men!" She pointed at three of the meaner-looking men. "You three go with them. At the first sign of trouble, or if Specs here – " she pointed at Brains " – tries anything funny while at SwiftTech, start hurting them. Hurt them bad!"

The three singled-out men looked at us, but especially at Thomasina. "Oh, that shouldn't be much of a problem," one of them said. Thomasina gasped. I clenched my fists and thought, *just let them try!* I thought Andrew Foger might protest, but he just shrugged and said, "Well, if you're satisfied, they'd better get going. I want to see these recordings of Ithaca."

So the three men lead us back to the elevator. I noticed Mrs. Foger leave the room as the elevator doors closed.

On the way down, a cell phone belonging to one of the men began ringing. He removed it from his pants and held it to his ear. I was standing next to him, and while it was pretty quiet, was able to pick up a few words. "Canyon." "Dump them." "Make sure." "Back to me." Not very much, but it wasn't hard to connect the dots. I sure hope Brains heard some of it as well, because I didn't get a chance to relay any of that conversation to him.

Hoods were placed over our heads once again as we were marched to the van. The drive lasted quite a while this time, or maybe it just seemed that way. The van door slid open not long after we reached our destination. We were marched outside. "Line 'em up against the lip," one of them said.

"Should we remove their hoods?" another asked.

"Why? Let's get this over with," the first one replied.

"Well, they might have our fingerprints on them. And she told me to be careful about leaving evidence."

"All right, fine. Though I would think it better if they didn't see what was coming."

Apart from the men talking, it was pretty quiet. A few crickets could be heard off in the distance, an airplane flying far away, but that was about it. Behind me, I could sense a vast space. Not hard to guess we were standing with our backs to a canyon lip someplace and were about to be executed – by the order of Eleanor Grace Foger. Andrew Foger really needed to have a serious talk with her; I made a mental note to inform him of that. But that was for later. For the moment we had to somehow survive being shot and dumped over a cliff.

But a funny thing happened on the way to our deaths: as the hoods were removed from us – I was the last to have mine removed – I overheard the man removing them whispering something to Brains and Thomasina. Couldn't make out what it was until he reached me: "Play dead." That was all. I stood there, mouth wide open, wondering what he meant when he said to the other two, "I'll do it." I think the first man was going to object and demand the privilege when the second man whipped out his silencer-equipped gun and fired three shots, one for each of us. At point-blank range he could hardly miss...

Chapter 15: The Great Leap Downward

My chest was on fire, it stung like crazy. My shirt was wet. A moment later I keeled over. Beside me, Thomasina and Brains did likewise. All of us (as I later found out) were careful to land on our backs.

"Let's go," the second man said.

"Hey, we're supposed to dump them off the cliff, aren't we?" the first one asked.

"Yeah," said the third man, speaking for the first time. "We need to make it harder for the police to find them."

"No real need," the second man told them. "We're way out in the middle of nowhere, their bodies won't be spotted for weeks. Let's get out of here."

The other two protested but didn't seem too eager to come over and push us off. They soon gave in and climbed into the van. Then it tore off.

As soon the taillights vanished, all of us got back on our feet. I looked at the dark reddish spot on my shirt, touching it gingerly. My chest still hurt like hell. I rubbed the red liquid: it looked like blood but didn't feel like it. Then I sniffed it. "Paint!" I said out loud.

"Paint?" Thomasina asked as she did the same thing I did.

"Yes, Jimmy, paint," Brains said in a definitive tone. "We were shot with paintballs. The paintball gun the man used was obviously disguised to look like a standard automatic with a silencer."

"But – why?" I asked. "Why go through all of this trouble just to save our lives in the end?"

"I think we're about to find out," Thomasina answered for Brains as another black van pulled in the dirt shoulder. Moments later two very familiar people stepped out of its side. Then a speaker that must have been mounted on the van's grill came to life.

"James Carson! Thomasina Swift! And you must be the famous Barclay 'Brains' Benton!" It was, of course, Sun Ohm Erato. "Glad to see that you are alive and well, your current appearance to the contrary."

In my head, a gear clicked into place. "That man who saved us – he was one of your people!"

"Correct, Mr. Carson!" Erato's voice boomed. "I've had people planted within Foger's vast empire for years, it's how Ithaca came to my attention in the first place. And I had no intentions of letting Mr. Foger or his wife kill you off until I learned what the Swifts have done with Ithaca. So my well-paid employee used a gun I had designed for special occasions like this. Now, I would like for the three of you to join me in my van."

"What for?" I demanded, almost belligerently. "Plan to drive us off the cliff?"

"Nothing so dramatic, Mr. Carson," Erato replied. "Indeed, I wish for you to carry out your original plan: to obtain the video feed that displays Ithaca's two visits. Then we will determine what information can be abstracted from it. Tiresias! Sestina! Escort our three members of the walking dead to the van."

The two giants began to approach us. As they did, I

turned to Thomasina and Brains. "Thomasina! Do you trust me?" She shot me a puzzled look but nodded. "OK, do exactly what I do. And whatever you do, don't flinch or hesitate!" I turned back to the van. "Forget it, Erato! This never-ending game of kidnapping IS OVER!" I ended, perhaps a touch too dramatically. But I didn't care. Instead, I turned around and raced for the cliff edge – which was all of about three feet away. Not hesitating a moment, I leaped into the darkness.

* * * * *

Thankfully, Thomasina and Brains landed by me moments later. See, I knew this cliffside area pretty well. We were in an undeveloped area northeast of Thousand Oaks. While I was learning to use my new bionic legs, I practiced at various areas around the city: the more rugged, the better. And this place was one of them. Even in the darkness, it didn't take me very long to recognize it. So I knew something that Mrs. Foger apparently didn't: there was a huge dirt slide about fifteen feet below us. It was fairly soft and reached all the way to the bottom. I'd jumped off the cliff down into it numerous times and slid all the way down. Anyway, I heard both of my friends let out grunts as they impacted on the dirt.

As they did so, I immediately reached out, catching them before they fell over on their stomachs. Fortunately for us, there was just enough moonlight to let us see what we were doing. We already had enough momentum to start sliding, but I told them in a quiet voice: "Do it like this!" I sat on my rear end, one leg extended forward, the other drawn back, hands on either side for stability. I usually wore gloves to protect my hands. Brains recognized this method at once: we used to do it when we

were kids. I was a bit surprised to hear Thomasina say, "Oh, I used to do this when I was a girl!" So we all slid down the dirt slide, each of us recalling our childhood days, if only for a few moments.

As we neared the bottom, I heard two more impacts farther above us. I wasn't surprised; obviously, it we could do this, so could Tiresias and Sestina. From the sounds of things, though, they knew nothing about body-sliding the way the three of us did. On the other hand, that meant they were headed straight towards us like a couple of runaway boulders!

We reached the bottom a few moments later. I helped Thomasina to her feet, Brains bounced up at once. "Which way, Jimmy?" he asked. He already knew that I knew the area pretty well.

"This way," I said, heading forward. Soon we were pushing our way through lots of low-level shrubs and tall foxtails. We would pause for a few moments both to catch our breaths and to keep from making any noise. Hearing our pursuit wasn't all that hard, and even in the darkness we could easily make out the two giants. Thankfully, whatever else Erato did to them, night vision wasn't among their upgrades. But they still had keen hearing, and I wasn't all that certain how keen their sense of smell was. So I lead the way down by a small stream near the bottom of the ravine. Both the noise and the smell of water would, hopefully, nullify those potential advantages. And it certainly seemed to: once they reached the stream itself – we were close by, huddled behind some large boulders, not making a sound – they looked around this way and that for a few moments, then headed away from us. We didn't let out our breaths until they

were nowhere in sight.

"Okay, Jimmy, where do we go from here?" Brains asked.

I was pondering that very thing. Usually my jogging path was in the same direction the two giants were now taking. It would eventually lead to a road further down. Said road wound its way back to Thousand Oaks. I said as much to Brains.

"And if we go the other way?" Thomasina asked, pointing in the opposite direction.

I shook my head. "It just takes us back to the top of the hills. And it would be hard getting up there: lots of trees, rocks, poison oak, and who knows what else? In the dark, you could easily trip and sprain an ankle or break a leg. Then you'd still have to make your way down to the road again."

"So our only option is to follow Sestina and Tiresias," Brains stated.

I nodded. "Looks like."

"And if they give up searching for us on the trail, they'll soon be headed back this way!" Thomasina threw in. After a moment she asked, "Is there any way to climb back up the slope again?"

"Beats me," I shrugged. "I've never thought to try it. But then we'd have to climb back up the cliff – not the sort of thing I'd want to tackle in the dark!"

"Agreed," Brains said. "I suggest we continue to lie low for now. If we're quiet enough, Tiresias and Sestina may pass right by us. Then we can head down the trail

with little fear of them following."

Well, that sounded like a plan to us. While we waited for the two giants to return, Thomasina and I filled Brains in about our less-than-quiet dinner date. Then we asked him how the Fogers got their mitts on him.

"My fault," Brains admitted. "I was checking on something outside of SwiftTech and wasn't paying any attention when a van pulled up. A chloroform gag was clamped over my face and I was dragged inside. Next thing I knew I was in the Foger's penthouse, awaiting your arrival."

Thomasina and I exchanged looks. "Not like you to be so careless, Brains," I said. Also, I thought the explanation to be surprisingly short. "What was it you were checking on?"

"I was verifying a hunch," he told me.

"What was your hunch?" Thomasina asked him. She sounded a bit nervous, but I didn't pay that much attention, we all were.

"That there would be no further attacks on SwiftTech by Ithaca Foger," he told us.

"There won't?" I asked in surprise. "Brains, how can you possibly know that? There's no telling when she might strike again!"

"Oh, I think I can safely say that we need never worry about Ithaca bothering anyone again," he said, using that condescending tone of his.

"How??" I demanded.

"It's simple, Jimmy. Ithaca Foger was never at

SwiftTech to begin with."

Chapter 16: Sad Revelations

I looked at Brains in astonishment. "What? Have you flipped? Brains, how can you even – "

"I knew it!" It was Thomasina. "I knew that second attempt was wrong!"

"And you were correct, Dr. Swift," said Brains. "If you had restrained yourself from trying to 'hammer the point home' so to speak, you would have been safe."

My head was flipping back and forth between them like a weathervane in a wind storm. "*What are you two talking about?*" I almost screamed. Almost – but I kept it down to a stage-whisper shout, I was fully aware of the need to stay quiet.

"I know who killed Dr. Prandit, Jimmy," Brains replied. "And it wasn't Ithaca Foger."

"But Brains! We saw her image on the video! Both times! How could it possibly be anyone else?"

Brains was about to reply when we started hearing the heavy tread of feet. Ducking down immediately we stayed quiet, praying that the two giants would pass us by. They didn't. For long moments we hardly dared to breath. Could they see us, I wondered. Was a hand or a foot sticking out in the open? Or could their sharp ears hear our heartbeats over the sound of the stream? Moments dragged by. My body began to itch in a dozen places, as though ants or other bugs were crawling all over me. Then, to our vast relief, the heavy footsteps

continued. Once they vanished into the distance, we all let out pent-up breaths. Brains motioned for us to get moving, so without a word we made our way down along the path towards the road.

When we finally reached it, we took a few moments to catch our breath. "With any luck," I said, panting, "Tiresias and Sestina are way up near the top of the hill, still hunting for us."

Brains nodded, then added, "But we don't dare count on it. They could have turned around and already be heading back here."

"We'll probably hear them if they are," Thomasina said. "Let's move down the road a bit, shall we?"

We nodded agreement and walked on down the shoulder, ready to dive behind the bushes if we heard them approach. But all was quiet thus far. That being the case, I quietly asked Brains: "OK, Brains, if it wasn't Ithaca, who killed Dr. Prandit?"

"Really, Jimmy," Thomasina interjected, "this is hardly the time or place to be going into that! It can surely wait until we're someplace safe!"

"Afraid of what I might tell Jimmy, Thomasina?" Brains replied. "He deserves to know the truth about you."

"What do you mean, Brains?" And my voice turned rather chilly. "What are you implying here?"

"That there's a bit more to your potential girlfriend than meets the eye," he said. "She was the one who killed Dr. Prandit."

If the statement hadn't been so blatantly impossible, I swear I would have punched Brains right in the mouth. "Are you out of your mind? Brains, that's impossible on so many levels I can barely put them into words!" But I remembered what Thomasina had said just a short time ago: *I knew that second attempt was wrong!* What had she meant by that? Second attempt at *what?* "They're the best of friends!" I went on. "She would have no reason to – " Then Thomasina placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Stop, Jimmy," she said. "That's very sweet of you to defend me, but I'm afraid Brains is correct. I did kill Bash. And please believe me when I say that I really didn't want to, and wish there had been some other way to handle the situation. But I had to do it. There was simply no other way to stop her."

It took me several minutes to get my thoughts back under control. Even then all I could do was stare at her, my thoughts a bizarre mixture of disbelief, fear, sadness, and betrayal. "Thomasina, I – I..." my voice trailed off. I had no idea just what I wanted to say. Then I rallied: "Stop her from *what?*"

Thomasina continued as if she hadn't heard me: "But I never meant for it to get out of control like this! It wasn't supposed to happen this way!" Before she could go on, once again we heard heavy footsteps approaching. Just one set, but we didn't stick around to find out which giant it was. As quietly as we could, we took off.

The three of us wove in and out of the various bushes while Brains used various twigs and dead branches to erase our tracks as best he could. We could hear our pursuer behind us, whichever one it was continued to

approach at a steady pace. It was either very confident we couldn't escape or it was still searching for us. But the identity soon became clear: it was Tiresias. How did I know that? Well, a few moments later we almost literally ran into Sestina...

* * * * *

The two giants must have split up, we later decided. What wasn't so clear was if they were using the old method of flushing us out or if they were simply trying to cover more ground in their search. Either way, we were trapped between them. Tiresias was closing in fast, hardly more than a few minutes away. But even as we stood there, mouths agape, a strange thing happened: Sestina beckoned for us to follow her, putting a finger against her lips for us to be quiet. The three of us exchanged glances. Brains shrugged and indicated that we might as well follow her. I could think of no good reason to trust the sad giantess, but with Tiresias almost upon us, the argument that she might be leading us into a trap was probably moot.

I was amazed at how quietly Sestina could move when she wanted to. We tried to be equally quiet as we went along – not exactly easy on ground full of leaves and twigs. And we had to move fast, too, to keep up with her. We were steadily going back uphill again. Finally, when we reached a crest of sorts, Sestina motioned to us, pointing down the other side of the hill. It was a camping area and I could see some SUVs and tents nearby. Brains and I realized at once that we might be able to borrow someone's cell phone and call Michael. I didn't include Thomasina in that because she and Sestina were talking quietly to one another. At least, Thomasina was doing the

talking – Sestina was gesturing. Whatever it was she was indicating, it must have pleased Thomasina, because she broke into a large smile and I heard her say, "Thank you, Sestina!" Then she patted her on the arm. Sestina reached out and touched Thomasina's forehead in turn, then waved and hurried back the way she had led us. I had little doubt she was going back to meet up with Tiresias and would hopefully lead him off in another direction.

We made our way down to the campground, Thomasina and I sitting at a nearby picnic table while Brains went to one of the campers and knocked on the door. While he talked with the people in there, I was trying my best to avoid staring at Thomasina. I simply couldn't believe she'd cold-bloodedly killed someone, whatever the reasons. I guess she could tell what I was thinking because she said: "Please don't think less of me for what I did, Jimmy. I'm not an evil person. And I may have saved two lives by doing this."

I shook my head. "I still don't get how you did it to begin with! You weren't even in the room with her. And the video clearly showed it was Ithaca!"

She smiled at me. "Did it? Or were you fooled into thinking it did?"

I stared at her. "Are you saying you doctored the video somehow? I would have thought that was impossible!"

She continued to smile, but shook her head. "No, I didn't alter the recording in any way. But the atomic battery I was working on – let's just say it was hardly my only invention!"

I frowned on her. "Don't you mean 'Dr. Prandit and I?'"

"No, Jimmy..." Thomasina looked down at her feet for a moment. I spared a glance at Brains, he was currently talking on a cell phone. The person he borrowed it from was standing fairly close. I looked back at Thomasina. "Jimmy, I loved Bash like a sister. We were the best of friends, really. But the truth is ... the whole 'Dr. Prandit' thing ... Bash ... she was a fraud. A fraud I helped to create."

"What?" It came out as a whisper, I was so stunned. "You mean – she really wasn't a PhD?"

Thomasina shook her head violently. "No, the doctorate was real enough, but she wouldn't – *couldn't* – have obtained it without me. I did about ninety-five percent of the actual work."

I just stared at her, unable to say a word. She smiled at me again. "I know, Jimmy. Bash was quite the celebrity when she and I were hired to work for Swift Enterprises, wasn't she? Pakistani girl makes it big in the US! But that, of course, was the whole idea."

I finally found my voice. "You mean, you exploited her to get a job with Swift Enterprise?" I can't begin to tell you how outraged I was. But once again Thomasina was shaking her head.

"No, Jimmy! You have it backwards! *She* exploited *me!* But that was fine, because that was the whole idea. Bash's idea, actually. You have no idea how desperate we were to get work, Jimmy! Long before graduation, we were putting out feelers all over Europe. Bash was trying her best in the Mid East. But no one seemed interested in us. At that time, Bash was barely holding her head above the water in her engineering classes. We had mounting

loan debts and weren't able to obtain grants to pay for anything. And we both knew there were far harder, much more expensive courses ahead of us. Then she comes up with the idea of me helping her to get her doctoral and she, in turn, using the fame of becoming the first Pakistani girl to work at Swift Enterprises! That's how we played it, and it worked fine. I was able to take a lot of her exams, they were mostly taken in a large hall filled with computers and students taking tests. No one could tell if you were the right student or not. Believe me, we weren't the only ones who cheated like that! I think it's a lot harder to get away with that kind of thing these days. Anyway, I did all of her homework and mine as well, completed all of her projects. I wasn't able to take any oral exams, of course, or ones that required actual writing. But I was able to coach her through the worst of them. Then I used my name to get an interview with Swift Enterprises, and the next thing we knew we were at SwiftTech, working on an atomic battery. Of course, I'd really pictured working at Swift Enterprises in Shopton..." Thomasina shook her head. "I used to have some really strange dreams about working there."

"I'll bet!" I kind of muttered. "You and Dr. Prandit were probably superstar inventors, out-inventing Tom Swift and probably forcing him to retire, no doubt!"

Thomasina shook her head in a curiously sad way. "No, Bash was never in these dreams. They always started the same way: I would arrive at Enterprises on a motorcycle and find it a run-down wreck of itself. Tom was nowhere in sight, Mr. Swift was a sorry drunk, none of SE's other people like Arv Hanson or Hank Sterling could be found, and poor Sandra trying to run the place

all by herself. She'd try to explain to me what happened to the place, but I could never quite hear her, as though she was speaking quietly in another room, so I never did find out why Swift Enterprises was such a mess. Then, somehow, I was able to come up with all of these crazy inventions that pulled Swift Enterprises from the brink of ruin. Sadly, I could never quite remember what they were when I woke up. Well, of course, they were just a bunch of silly dreams. Wish fulfillment, most likely. After all, they mostly vanished when I got started here at SwiftTech."

"You're getting a bit off-topic, Dr. Swift," came Brains' voice, startling both of us.

I looked at him and he nodded. "I was able to reach Michael. He's on his way here in his own car, it will probably take him about ten minutes. So let's return to the main topic: how you killed Dr. Prandit. It was ingenious, I'll give you that."

"How much did you figure out, Brains?" I asked him.

"Yes, I'm curious myself!" Thomasina stated.

"It was the second attempt," Brains told us. "Up until then, everything pointed to Ithaca Foger, though her method of ingress and egress to SwiftTech still remained a mystery. But while we were talking in Michael's office after your escape from Sun Erato, I kept going over the seeming reappearance of Ithaca. Apart from Jimmy's novelization of the event (in which a great many details were altered), the facts about the subcontractor case had never been made public, and we did a thorough job of eliminating any possible leftover information. So how could Ithaca have known about it? Even given the fact

that she had been outside the boundaries of space and time, which may have made her immune to the subtractor's strange effects on human memory, she still would have had to have known the details in advance in order to know what to search for. The same goes for her first break-in to kill Dr. Prandit. How could Ithaca have known where your lab was, Dr. Swift? Or about your atomic battery project? Apart from Michael, the only other person who knew about it was yourself. Once I began looking at it from that point of view, a lot of facts began to make some sense. Naturally, the 'how' of the seeming appearance by Ithaca was still a mystery. So, after our meeting in Michael's office ended, I paid my friend Beth Byrd a visit."

Beth Byrd was Brains' one true friend at SwiftTech. I didn't know all that much about her, other than her work having to do with high-tech displays and stuff like that. She and Brains were currently working on a bionic eye.

"Beth confirmed," Brains went on, "that you had asked her some questions about telejector images, and if there was a method for making them 'wearable'. She told you that it was possible in theory, but at the moment such a device was years away. It wasn't hard to guess that you had made one in fact."

"Didn't take as long as she thought," Thomasina confirmed, with more than a little pride. "Once I realized it could be done, it took me about three-quarters of a year to turn out a prototype."

"You mean, this invention projects images around you?" I asked her.

Thomasina nodded. "When I was little, I used to watch

a cartoon about an all-girl rock group that used holograms to change their appearance. I always thought it would be so cool to invent something like that! After talking with Beth, I began sketching various ways to accomplish that. Of course, work on the atomic battery ate up a lot of time, or I might have finished it sooner."

"But how were you able to able to make it look as though Ithaca killed Dr. Prandit?" I asked.

"That took quite a lot of research," Thomasina confirmed. "I mostly relied on what footage I could get from the security tapes at Swift Enterprises after Ithaca's attack on Sherman Ames, and her later appearance at the land speed record event. The security footage from the *Sky Queen* wasn't all that great, so I had to improvise a bit. You see, Jimmy, my wearable projector doesn't just project an image around the person who is wearing it, but can project an image forward or backward at the same time. I was able to make myself completely invisible – no *Predator*-type outlines or anything that might have given me away. At the same time, my device projected an image of Ithaca sped up to the point of near-invisibility ahead of me as I walked. I didn't activate it until I was right at the lab, just as Bash was right on the verge of touching the note – which wasn't a note, by the way."

"What was it, then?" I asked her.

But it was Brains who answered: "It was one of the atomic batteries, Jimmy."

Even Thomasina looked startled. "But how could you – ?"

"Simple deduction, Dr. Swift," Brains said loftily. "Once I deduced that Ithaca was just a projection, it was

easy to work the case backward and discover how you accomplished it. Most of what you told us about your wearable image projector I'd already worked out. As for what killed Dr. Prandit: I realized it had to be electrical in nature, it was the only way to have stopped her heart. I knew it wasn't Ithaca's electrical powers, so that left only your experimental atomic battery. A look into your test results showed the effects the early prototypes had on mice, how the invasive discharge wasn't concentrated on one particular area of the body, as would a normal electric shock, but affected all the cells simultaneously. Hence, no burn mark."

"After which," Thomasina continued for him, "the battery wafer completely disintegrates, right down to the sub-atomic level, leaving not a trace."

"What wafer?" I asked them. "There was nothing there but a piece of notepaper!"

"That *was* the wafer, Jimmy!" Thomasina told me with a smile. "I just made it look like notepaper. You see, that was the problem I kept running into again and again. I found a method to store nuclear energy on a wafer, a wafer I could make into virtually any size, shape, or color. Storing the energy on the wafer, though difficult, wasn't the problem. Getting it to discharge in a useful fashion was! No matter what I tried, it kept discharging all at once."

Before we could discuss it any further, Michael's car arrived. "Get in!" he shouted to us and we did so. Michael burned rubber getting us back to SwiftTech. I think all of us were holding our collective breaths, wondering if some other group would kidnap Thomasina and me. To our

amazement, though, the journey back was uninterrupted.

Chapter 17: Welcome To The Night Gallery

In Michael's office we took turns bringing him up to date on our latest adventures. When we reached the part where Thomasina patted Sestina on the arm, he asked her, "What was that all about?"

I'm surprised he was focused on that, after hearing that Thomasina had not only faked Ithaca Fogger's appearance but had killed Dr. Prandit as well.

"That?" she replied. "Oh, Sestina let me know that she had released the straps on the harness earlier tonight, allowing me to escape just before the ants were released."

"Thomasina," I asked her, "what about that private conversation with your 'grandfather?' What was that *really* all about?"

Thomasina looked abashed. "He, um, he knew what I had done to Bash, and we, uh, had an argument about it. He wanted me to turn myself in, but I was able to persuade him to let us go. I said I would explain it all to you later on – as I'm doing right now!"

So Thomasina continued, telling Michael about the flaw in her atomic battery design and how she used it to kill Dr. Prandit.

"Dr. Swift, you still haven't told us why you killed your best friend and colleague!" Michael stated. "What drove you to do this?"

Thomasina looked sad, shaking her head. "Many thing, sir. But the main reason was knowing well in advance

that she planned to kill Tom Swift Jr. and his fiancé, Phyllis Newton."

Both Michael and I let out a shout of "What??" Brains, on the other hand, merely nodded. "I thought that might be the case," he said. All three of us looked at him.

"Once I established that Ithaca Foger's appearance had been simulated by Dr. Swift and the probable means by which she killed her colleague, I began checking into Dr. Prandit's background for a motive. What little information I dug up was hard to come by, but it indicated a growing obsession with Tom Swift Jr."

"Obsession, Brains?" Thomasina replied with an unlady-like snort. "That's a mild way of putting it! It's closer to a cult-like devotion! Even back in Pakistan, Bash would continually point out pictures of Tom Swift Jr. in the newspapers, asking me if I didn't think he was 'incredibly handsome' or 'amazing-looking'. She'd drool over those grainy black & white images for hours. And you should have seen how disappointed she was when it was just Mr. Swift who congratulated her on becoming the first Pakistani engineer to work for Swift Enterprises – you would've thought she believed Tom Jr. was going to throw a ticker-tape parade for her! I think he was involved in another adventure at the time, however, and really didn't know anything about it. Anyway, once we were here in California, it only got worse.

"As I said before, Bash really wasn't an engineer. She mostly showed up here at the lab and would go through the appearances of helping me, something she soon grew very bored with. So, on various pretexts, she would leave SwiftTech and try to sell her paintings at high-end art

galleries." Thomasina shook her head some more. "Bash is a very good artist, but she came with an artist's over-large ego and really thought she was the next Rembrandt! She did not take criticism or advice lightly, and almost bit my head off when I made the mild suggestion of attending an art school. She continued trying to sell her paintings, but no one was buying. This, as you can well imagine, only added to her bitterness. Recently – which is to say, in the last six months – she began talking about moving to Shopton so she could be with Tom Jr. I didn't bother to point out that Tom already had a girlfriend, Bash knew about Phyllis and hated her with every fiber of her being." Thomasina turned to me. "Remember me telling you about some of my dreams?" I nodded. "Well, Bash had lots of dreams too – all of them involving Tom Jr."

"How do you know this?" Michael asked. "Did she tell them to you?"

Thomasina shook her head. "No, I overheard them – Bash talks in her sleep a lot! Well, maybe 'mumbles' might be more accurate, I never could make out much by way of words. I could only hear Tom or Sandra's names now and then. Apart from her mentioning his name, it was always easy to tell when she was talking about Tom Jr. or to him – her voice became very sarcastic or snippy. It was much more polite when Sandra's name came up, I got the impression she liked her."

"And Phyllis Newton?" asked Brains.

Thomasina frowned. "You know, that was the strange part. I never once heard Phyllis' name mentioned. I guess she was dreaming of a world where Phyllis never

existed."

"So what do these dreams have to do with her hatred for Phyllis Newton?" Brains asked.

"And if she was so obsessed with Tom," I threw in, "why would she be so snarky with him in her dreams?"

"Oh, that's just her way," Thomasina answered. "Bash always had a Don Rickles kind of personality. Sometimes it was pretty funny. Other times..." She shrugged. She turned back to Michael. "Anyway, to answer your question..." Her voice trailed off and she tapped her fingernails on the arm of the chair. "Look, the best way I can answer your question – and show you proof of her intentions towards Tom and Phyllis – is to take you to her apartment, I have a key to the place. There, she has paintings, ones she's never shown to anyone. I came across them by accident one day when I was helping Bash with her paintings. Those paintings scared the hell out of me! You need to see them before you come to any decisions about me."

"Thomasina, are you nuts?" I exploded. "We end up kidnapped just about every time we set foot outside these doors! No way are we going anyplace other than to bed!"

Thomasina gave me a playful smile. "Why, Jimmy! And this is only our first date!"

I turned several shades of red, realizing what I'd just said. "Uh, sorry! Didn't mean that the way it sounded! Just goes to show you how tired I am!"

Thomasina pretended to pout. "Well, you really know how to hurt a girl!"

Fortunately, Michael had no time for her banter. "Dr.

Swift," he said rather coldly, "pay attention! Or have you forgotten that I can – and probably should – have you arrested for first-degree murder!"

"Of course," she replied, no longer smiling, "though you might find that harder to prove than you think, my confession notwithstanding. But I would still insist upon you seeing Bash's paintings first."

"Tell me where they're located and I'll have them brought here. Mr. Carson is right, you shouldn't be leaving these premises for at least a week."

Thomasina suddenly became frightened. "No! Believe me, the last thing you'd ever want is for someone else to see those paintings! Because after you've seen them, I'm going to destroy them. I know how terrible that sounds, but trust me on this – you'll be more than eager to help!"

* * * * *

We used Michael's car once again. It must've been charmed or something: our ride to Dr. Prandit's apartment was as uneventful as the ride back to SwiftTech. Even so, we kind of crept our way to the stairs that led to the third level, then made our way like so many commandos to her door. Thomasina unlocked the door and let us in.

Dr. Prandit's apartment was tastefully furnished, and there were more than a few paintings on the walls. I looked at a few of and wasn't all that surprised to find she'd painted most of them. Thomasina was right: Dr. Prandit was a very good artist. Most of the pictures were landscapes: some of the Thousand Oaks area, others from different places. Thomasina didn't give us much time to look around, though. She beckoned us into the bedroom. At once she went to a walk-in closet and shoved some

clothes aside. The three of us squeezed into the small space and watched as she continued to shove more clothes aside on all three rods. Michael and I gasped, and even Brains let out a grunt of surprise: every square surface of wall space was covered with pictures of Tom Swift Jr. Newspaper clippings, photographs from magazines, even drawings that Dr. Prandit had obviously done. Most of them were surrounded by red hearts and arrows in everything from red pencils to red electrical tape. Thomasina motioned to an area right behind us. And there we saw something that took our breath away: pictures of Phyllis Newton. Pictures that were sliced, ripped, partly burned and partly dissolved. Some had obscenities scrawled all over them, others had targets painted on them – and holes in the center of the bull's-eye. I think some of them were bullet holes.

"I'm beginning to see your point..." Michael said.

Thomasina shrugged. "This? This is just tip of the iceberg stuff. Let me show you her paintings."

Thomasina led us to a second bedroom which was set up as an artist's studio. Various paintings hung on the wall, a few unfinished ones lay against the far wall. There was a canvas on an easel with something sketched on it, but it was too faint to see what it was. Thomasina ignored all of those and went to another walk-in closet. Switching on the light, she moved more than a few canvases out of the way. Then she removed a large bedsheet from a bunch of paintings hidden in the back. "I came upon these by accident," she told us. "I was helping Bash move some of her paintings in here. When she went to use the bathroom, I found these hidden away. When I saw what they were, I looked at a few, then hid them back up again. For more

than a few reasons, believe me!"

And once we saw the paintings, we had no trouble believing her. I'm not going to write down what we saw. You'll sleep better at nights not knowing. All I will say is that in these paintings, Dr. Prandit showed what she would like *to do* to Phyllis Newton, and what she wished *would happen* to her. I will add this: we helped her destroy the paintings so no one else, especially Tom Swift Jr. or Phyllis Newton, would ever see them. And I couldn't help but appreciate the irony of *these* paintings: had she shown them to those high-end art galleries, they probably would have snapped them right up...

Chapter 18: To Phyl With Love

You know, by rights this whole story should end here. It should end with Thomasina being led away in handcuffs by the police and Brains, Michael and me getting back to our jobs. But that's not what happened. Not by a long shot. As I used to say when I was a kid: *Creeps!*

Well, by now we were a lot more sympathetic towards Thomasina. We returned to the living room and began talking about Dr. Prandit and her incredible hatred for Phyllis Newton. It seemed hard to believe that anyone could hate another person to that degree.

"Once you saw those paintings," Brains said, "you began to develop a plan to not only kill Dr. Prandit, but make certain you weren't implicated as well."

Thomasina nodded. "Yes indeed. As I said, I really didn't want to kill her, but by now she was transforming herself into someone I no longer recognized."

"Couldn't you have contacted someone about this?" I asked. "Why didn't you just alert Sherman Ames, or Tom himself?"

"What could they have done?" Thomasina countered. "Put Phyllis under some sort of twenty-four-hour guard? Kept a constant watch on Bash? You've read or heard plenty of examples of how well such 'restraining order' tactics work! All Bash would have to do is bide her time and the next thing you know, you'd be reading about poor Phyllis having an 'unexplainable accident' in the morning papers!"

We were silent for more than a few moments. No one could deny the truth of her statement. Then I noticed Thomasina looking across the room at something. I looked as well but didn't see anything. "What is it?" I asked her.

Without answering, she got up and walked across to a glass curio cabinet. "Something's missing," she said, as much to herself as the rest of us.

"What?" I asked again.

"One of the figurines is gone, but I can't remember which one," Thomasina answered.

"Is it important?" Brains asked her.

"I'm – I'm not certain," she answered a bit hesitantly. "But Bash loved those figurines; her family sent them to her over the years. She was always taking them out and dusting or polishing them. And she was always careful to put them back in again. So why would one be missing...?" Her voice trailed off and she looked alarmed.

Thomasina wasn't the only one – I noticed a similar expression Brains' face as well. Michael and I exchanged puzzled looks. "Brains?" I asked.

"Thomasina?" Michael asked.

They didn't answer. Instead, almost as one, they began to hunt around the apartment. Thomasina found wrapping "bubbles", the kind that's always fun to pop. Brains found a set of thermal labels in Dr. Prandit's computer. He activated the computer, but it had a passcode on it. "Here, let me," Thomasina said. Moments later the desktop came up. She seemed to know what it was Brains had been

looking for: a spreadsheet with the cells adjusted for print label size. And at the top of the spreadsheet was Phyllis Newton's home address.

"Well, this can't be good!" Thomasina exclaimed.

"Obviously, the missing figurine was mailed to her," Brain said. "The question is: why? It could hardly be considered a gesture of friendship!"

"And who would she have used for a return address?" Thomasina asked. "Hardly her own."

"Tom Swift Jr., I'm willing to bet!" I put in.

Brains nodded. "Yes, very likely, Jimmy. Dr. Prandit would have wanted it to appear to be a gift from Phyllis's boyfriend. But apart from the figurine, we still don't know what could be in the package."

"I wonder..." Thomasina muttered. She resumed nosing around the apartment. We left her to it, not knowing what it was she was looking for. Then we heard her gasp, and she began saying over and over, "Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!"

We ran into the bedroom and found her in the same closet as before, standing on a chair and having pulled something from the top closet shelf. It turned out to be a large box. Thomasina jumped off the chair and brought the box over to the bed. I didn't see anything to be alarmed about; the box was filled with large white squares of somewhat-thick writing paper.

Then I got it.

"That's the same stuff you made the note for Dr. Prandit with!"

Thomasina shot me a stricken look and nodded. "I thought—" she gulped and tried again "—I thought she didn't know anything about this!"

Brains looked at her. "Explain."

"Bash has been so wrapped up in her effort to sell her pictures and her obsession with Tom Swift that I assumed she wasn't paying me any attention the few times I tried to explain to her the current state of the project!" She shook her head sadly. "I guess she heard me, though, when I told her about the problems with the atomic battery holding its charge."

"Obviously, she had the same idea that you did on how to utilize such a defect," Brains stated.

Thomasina nodded. "Yes, she did! We've got to retrieve that package! But we've got to do it in such a way that Phyllis doesn't know about it!"

"What?" I sputtered. "Thomasina, we've got to let her know! Otherwise she'll open it and touch the atomic battery!"

"That's just it," she replied. "If Phyllis is killed by the atomic battery, all of the evidence will, for the time being, point to Tom as the culprit. Sure, we could speak up and tell them about Bash's plot, but then the public would find out about how Bash was a fraud and I'm a murderer – one on the Swift Enterprises payroll. Don't you see? This kind of scandal could badly hurt Swift Enterprise's reputation! Plus we have a promising new energy source that doesn't even work! We mustn't allow this to happen!"

I didn't know about the others, but I detected more than a little bit of self-serving interest in her plea. This would

neatly get her off the hook. But that didn't make her arguments invalid.

Michael had already whipped out his SwiftTalk and was calling the Newton's residence. "Hello? Mrs. Newton? This is Michael Phydeaux, the head of SwiftTech in Thousand Oaks ... could you please put Phyllis on the phone? I just need to ask her something ... Oh, I see ... do you have her hotel number?" He paused and punched in a number. "Oh, um, well, it's nothing really important, I just needed to see if she'd received a small package from one of SwiftTech's physicists ... oh, she did? Do you still have it? ... Oh, you did? ... Um, no, it should be fine ... What? Oh, yes, Sandy was here earlier today – uh, I mean yesterday ... no, it's not connected ... uh, thank you, Mrs. Newton, I really need to get going. Nice talking to you..." It didn't sound all that nice. Mrs. Newton's voice was coming through loud, angry, and very pointed. Her voice was a bit tinny, but it was obvious she was demanding to know what this phone call was all about. Michael very wisely hung up before she could pry any information out of him. He gave Thomasina a dark look. "The trouble you cause for me, Thomasina..."

To my surprise, she nodded agreement. "I know! Believe me, I never meant for all this to happen!"

"Oh?" I said a bit coldly. "And just what *did* you think was going to happen."

"Allow me to answer that, Jimmy," Brains said. The three of us looked at him in surprise. He, in turn, looked at Thomasina. "It was obvious that you never meant for this to get so out of control." She nodded. "When you

came up with your plan to kill Dr. Prandit, you needed someone to take the blame. And given the recent conclusion to the land speed record race, who better than a woman who vanished without a trace? And one that has been known to come back from the dead? Your wearable telejector allowed you to project the image of her entering the lab and touching Dr. Prandit at just the right moment when she picked up the so-called message."

Thomasina continued to nod. "That's right. I was actually close by Bash when she picked up the atomic battery."

"Correct," Brains said. "Of course, the death would be investigated and the image of Ithaca soon be discovered. Likewise a possible link to Sun Erato as well. But once that was investigated, the leads would dry up. Ithaca would not reappear. Nothing further would be discovered. Eventually, it would become a cold case. And that would be the end of it."

Thomasina nodded again. "Yes, that's essentially correct."

"But you became worried," Brains went on. "What if they got suspicious that it wasn't Ithaca, but some sort of trick? So you concluded that a second visit by Ithaca would 'clinch the deal,' so to speak."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Thomasina sighed.

"You knew a little about the subcontractor – just about everyone did at SwiftTech after the ordeal ended," Brains continued, "so you thought having her search for it would be considered plausible."

"Afterwards," Thomasina added in a bitter tone, "I kicked myself hard for that! It seemed so logical beforehand, but not so much after I did it! I should have realized that this would only prolong the investigation, not help to end it. And I sure as hell didn't foresee all these interested parties kidnapping us left and right!"

"Well, never mind that now," Michael said. He turned to Brains and me. "Mrs. Newton told me that she's received the package from Dr. Prandit yesterday. Phyllis is currently in Seattle with Tom Swift Jr., so Mrs. Newton has sent it on to her."

"Why didn't she just hold on to it until Phyllis returned?" I asked.

"It was marked 'urgent'," Michael told us.

"We need to get that package before Phyllis opens it!" Thomasina exclaimed once again.

"We will," Michael said. "I'll make arrangements for us to fly up to Washington."

"Fly?" I said. "Why not use the transmittaton? It's a heck of a lot faster!"

"And each use is recorded," Michael told me. "We want to keep this low-profile, remember? But you don't have to worry about us using the regular airways. I have a pilot friend who owes me a favor or two." He began skimming through his contacts, then jabbed a finger at one of them. The image was reversed from our point of view, of course, so I wasn't able to read the name. "Hello, Jim? This is Michael. Need a favor..." He wandered into the bedroom, still talking.

"Brains," I asked, "once we get up there, we'll go to the

motel or hotel Phyllis is staying at. But if the package is there in the motel's mail room, how do we go about getting a hold of it? And if it hasn't, what, exactly, are we going to do? Post one of us in the motel lobby or something?"

Brains grinned at me. "Not likely, Jimmy. If the package is there, I think a word from Michael is all that will be needed to obtain it. And if it isn't there yet, Michael can arrange for the motel or hotel manager to get in touch with us when it has arrived – doubtless we'll be staying at the same place if it's not there yet."

I nodded and I saw Thomasina doing the same. Then she frowned. "But SwiftTech's a mostly top-secret lab. Does Michael have the clout to do this?"

"Yes, I have," Michael replied, returning from the bedroom. Thomasina and I jumped, surprised. I wonder how long he'd been listening... "Don't worry about it. Anyway, I'll run you by your respective apartments. Get packed fast, I'd like to get us into the air within an hour. My friend should have his passenger jet ready by then."

"Wait," Brains said, holding up a hand. "Michael, run us by Jimmy's apartment first. Then swing by SwiftTech. While you take Thomasina to her apartment, I need to get a few things from the lab as well as give Jimmy's legs a quick check."

Michael frowned at him. "Better make it fast, Brains," he said. "We don't have a lot of time."

"Don't worry," Brains assured him, "this won't take long."

Forty-five minutes later found us arriving at a small

airfield northwest of Thousand Oaks. Walking through the gate to the side strip we found a Learjet waiting for us. Michael introduced his friend, James Merritt, and we all went through a round of hand shaking before climbing aboard, becoming airborne a short time later.

It was an uneventful journey. At the Seattle airport, Michael rented a Caddy for us to use. With the help of its GPS and our SwiftTalks, we found the motel Phyllis was staying at. Hoping we didn't run into her by accident, we went inside to the front desk.

Michael spoke with the man behind the desk. After showing him his credentials, the man checked, but came up empty. However, he informed us: "Most UPS packages don't arrive until around 4:00 or so. You could check back then, or give me a call if you prefer. I'll hold on to the package until you arrive."

"That will be fine, thanks," Michael told him. He then paid for three separate rooms. Room key cards in hand, we went back out to the Caddy to get our luggage. You know, you'd think by now we'd learn to pay better attention to our surroundings. But we were so relieved to have the situation in hand and Phyllis Newton all but out of danger that we let our guard down. Thomasina was already talking to us about going on a tour of the city to kill some time when about a dozen people, all wearing ski masks and armed to the teeth, popped out from behind the cars in the parking lot. A familiar-looking van pulled up alongside them, the door sliding open and an equally familiar-looking giant stepping out. All of us paused in dismay.

"Would the four of you be so kind as to join me?" It

was Sun Erato's voice, it was icily polite. "Don't keep Tiresias waiting. He's already put out over the deception you and Sestina pulled back in the canyon. And I'm not much happier myself."

Chapter 19: Superheroics

Well, naturally, we got in. Chains were placed on all of us, arms and legs. Tiresias and two men stayed with us, guns pointed at our heads. The others followed in their cars. Once again we were taken to an unknown location. This time, however, there were no melodramatic death traps for one of us. All four of us were chained to iron chairs that were bolted to the floor. But the forest of ultra-bright spotlights were fixed on us once again, inducing headaches.

Sun Ohm Erato got right to the point: "I don't need to repeat the question. You four already know what it is. This time you will provide her location. Should you refuse, I have ordered Tiresias to begin methodically beating one of you to a pulp, quite literally. Which he will be more than happy to do. I believe I will start with Dr. Thomasina Swift. I may choose James Carson next. Be warned: once Tiresias starts his beating, he will not stop until the deed is completed. Even I won't be able to order him to quit. So, you would do well to tell me where Ithaca Foger is."

"Wait!" Thomasina cried out. "Where is Sestina?"

"Why should you care?" Sun Erato asked in return. "Because she helped you to escape? Rest assured, she has been punished for this misdeed. Quite severely, in fact. And if you think she's going to help you to escape, I will tell you that she is currently recovering from her punishment at a location halfway around the world."

While he was talking, I felt something touch my right leg. I looked down to see a small metal telescoping pole fire a tiny beam of red light against my pants. I followed the pole back to Brains' hand. I guess he must have literally kept it up his sleeve. At any rate, I felt an odd sensation that wasn't pleasant but wasn't quite pain either as the tiny laser burned through the pant leg fabric. Brains worked fast and, moments later, a large patch of fabric fell to the floor. Brains immediately switched off the laser, then used the tip to poke the side of my leg, causing one of the panels to pop open. Then he began to probe inside.

Sun Erato had just finished answering Thomasina's question. At once he asked, "What are you doing, Dr. Benton?" Brains didn't answer. "Tiresias! Remove that object from Dr. Benton and destroy it!"

As Tiresias began to advance on me, two things happened. First, my legs suddenly *thrummed* with power and Brains whispered to me: "You now have super-powered legs, Jimmy." (Much later he would inform me that, back at the lab, he had installed a device in my legs that allowed the strength of either or both to be increased to a considerable degree.) Second, even as he was saying this, he'd switched the laser back on and was using it on the chains around my wrists. When Tiresias reached down to grab the wand, Brains shifted targets and aimed it at the giant's palm. At once Tiresias let out a screech of pain and drew his arm back. But the giant lashed out with his leg and kicked the laser out of Brains hand. By then, however, I was already in motion.

I thrust out with all of my strength against the chains around my legs, but it turns out I didn't need as much as I

thought: the chains around them snapped as though they were made of cheap plastic. Links went flying in all directions. The chains around my arms still held, however, which made moving around a lot harder. Tiresias charged at me, but I leaped to the side, which carried me a lot farther than I thought it would: I landed a good fifteen feet away. Tiresias ended up embracing air. I went tumbling a dozen feet.

Tiresias looked at me in surprise as I got back to my feet. But his eyes hardened as he came at me once more. I wasn't certain what I should do next. I could hardly charge the giant, super-strong legs or no. I made a mental vow to take up kickboxing should I get out of this alive. Not knowing what else to do, I jumped right over him, almost cracking my head against the ceiling, which turned out to be a good twenty-five feet overhead. I landed fairly well, but went skidding across the floor, landing on my rear end. A glance behind me showed that Tiresias had already turned around and was headed my way.

"Jimmy!" I heard Brains stage-whisper. "My tool!"

I made another leap, this one carrying me over the heads of my friends to where I'd last seen the tool. Tiresias changed his course at once and raced towards me. But here he made a mistake: either he wasn't told, or had forgotten, that the chairs we'd been chained to were bolted down. Apparently he'd planned to kick them out of the way to get to me. Instead, with a wordless cry of pain he stubbed his toe against Brains' chair and tripped. Such was his strength, though, that he partly tore the chair loose. He hit the floor with a bone-jarring *thud*.

I'd paused in my search to watch him fall, then continued to hunt. Fortunately it wasn't that hard to find. However, I'd just picked it up and was turning back to Brains when Tiresias grabbed one of my legs.

It was my turn to look surprised: I thought for certain the fall had knocked him out. Apparently not. Tiresias began to get back on his feet while I used my free leg to try and pull free from his grip. All I succeeded in doing was to drag him along the floor.

I was afraid his enhanced strength would crush my leg, so I stopped trying to shake it free and adopted a new strategy: I walked forward a pace or two and slammed my free leg down on his wrist. That produced a satisfying *CRACK*; Tiresias let out another wordless scream of pain and let go of my leg at once. Again I turned to Brains to give him his laser wand when Tiresias regained his feet with surprising speed. Letting out a yelp of fear I jumped backwards, barely missing the left hook Tiresias had thrown at me with his uninjured arm. Landing wrong, I fell on my rear again and went sliding across the floor once more. If I'd had more time I probably would have used the laser wand on him, but injured or not, Tiresias moved very fast. He was practically on me when a thought occurred to me and I leapt on top of his shoulders.

Well, tried to, anyway: I misjudged my strength again and flew right over him. I heard Brains calling out to me but I ignored him, I was too focused on Tiresias.

It was obvious our little game of "leap and roll" was getting to the giant: he was all but foaming at the mouth! That broken wrist of his must have hurt like hell, but he

barely paid it any attention as he continued to run at me, fists shoved forward like twin battering rams. Once again I leaped high – but this time Tiresias was ready for me. Plucking me out of the air with ease, he began swinging me around. I knew that if he built up enough momentum and let me go, I'd splatter like a watermelon against the nearest wall or I-beam. This time I aimed the laser wand at him, clicking it on. Tiresias let out a yelp of pain as the beam hit him on his forehead. Good thing for him I couldn't hold it steady, or it probably would have burned right through. As it was, he was going to end up with some nasty scars on his forehead. Still, it was enough to make him release me before he'd built up enough speed. Which didn't prevent me from flying across the room once again.

Feeling battered and bruised over most of my body, I regained my feet in time to see Tiresias coming at me. I tried to aim the laser wand at him again, only to find that I no longer had it. I looked around but couldn't see it. So once again I tried to leap over Tiresias, but was too tired overall to leap high. But that was OK: this time I succeeded in landing on his shoulders. The impact made him stagger backwards a few steps. He was reaching up to yank me off when I put my plan into motion: namely, I used my super-strong legs to put a choke hold on him. I figured that with his air cut off, he'd go down pretty easy and stay down. What a pity that before they could close all the way, my legs chose that moment to freeze up again...

I guess it goes without saying that my sense of triumph vanished like a hot meal on a cold morning. Tiresias plucked me off his shoulders with contemptuous ease,

pulling me down until we were face to face. He made quite a big show out of placing his fist against my face, then drawing it back, like a golfer addressing a ball. And I guess that's what must have triggered it: I was so overloaded with fear, wondering if his fist would literally go right through my skull that my legs twitched. Perhaps "spasmed" would be a better word. At any rate, for a small fraction of a second, they unlocked and flew in opposite directions. And, as it turned out, my right leg connected solidly with Tiresias's right temple. He fell over backwards like a chopped redwood.

I hit the floor as well, causing my legs to spasm again. But they still refused to function. I flipped myself over on my stomach, hurting my already-bruised ribs, and was prepared to crawl over to the others. But I didn't have to: seems the laser wand flew right into Brains lap. While Tiresias and I did our tango, Brains, Michael & Thomasina was able to get the laser wand aimed at one of their sets of chains and free themselves, then the others. The last of the chains had fallen off of Brains himself just as I started to make my way towards them (my chains? The mostly-melted chains had already come off during the fight).

"Hold on, Jimmy," Brains said. He came over and opened the same leg panel as before. Brains fiddled with something; moments later my legs came back to life. But they felt different, weaker than before. I rose to my feet on wobbly legs.

"Brains, something's wrong! My legs feel weak!" I told him.

I heard him give a quiet chuckle, then said, "Nothing's

wrong, Operative Three. Your legs are back to normal. It may take a bit before they feel that way once again."

"Well, we don't have 'a bit'!" I reminded him. "We need to get out of here!"

"And that is just what you WON'T be doing!" thundered Sun Erato's voice. "No one gets in or leaves without my permission. You put up a good fight, Mr. Carson, but I'm afraid it was for nothing. Guards! Put these four back in their seats and secure them with new sets of chains!"

Even as we stared at the approaching guards, Thomasina called out quietly, "Everyone get close together! Hurry!"

"Thomasina, what are you – ?" Michael started to ask, but she cut him short and motioned him to get closer. I noticed that she seemed to be fiddling with something on her shirt. I shot a look at Brains, who suddenly nodded. At once he walked over to her, motioning for us to follow; his face had a "now I get it!" look on it. Well, I didn't get what Thomasina was up to, but I went over to her anyway. Michael joined us moments later. We'd barely reached her when two things happened: the lights went out – or so I thought. Then two holes for my eyes appeared in the pitch-black darkness and grew wider. As they did, I saw the guards come to a dead halt, staring at us in surprise. As well they might: when I looked down, I couldn't see my body! Then the other thing happened: Ithaca Foger suddenly appeared.

By now, of course, I realized that Thomasina had been wearing her telejector projector the whole time; the device must have a feature that allows it to cloak itself.

And now she'd made us seem to vanish. Not hard to guess what the image of Ithaca was for.

"Ithaca!" Sun Erato said in a kind of hushed voice. Ithaca's image turned around as though looking for Sun, then it blurred and vanished. It reappeared an eyeblink later over by one of the doors. Once again it seemed to turn around as though looking for something. I abruptly recognized the way the image moved: it was the same as on the video of the supposed visit to the Topology lab. The image seemed to smile at the guards, who continued to stare at her in amazement. Then she blurred and disappeared once more. "Guards!" Sun bellowed. "Search the building! Find her!"

"Let's get going!" I heard Thomasina whisper.

"How?" I asked, speaking for all of us. "I can't even see my feet!"

"Nor can we," Michael agreed.

"You'll have to move carefully," Thomasina said. "And keep your voice down!" A moment later she added, "Here, I'll lead. Form a conga line behind me."

Fortunately I was standing right beside her. I felt her back and worked my way up to her shoulders. And I felt hands groping me in turn. Eventually someone put their hands on my shoulders – I'm pretty certain it was Brains, I could tell by the long fingers – and then I heard Brains say, "We're ready, Thomasina. Let's get moving."

Carefully, in an almost zombie-like shuffle, we made our way to one of the doors at the far end of the room. With Thomasina pulling it open we made our way out, finding ourselves in a long wide corridor and

immediately plastering ourselves against a wall as several guards ran by. Then Thomasina picked a direction and we marched on. I guess she was going by female intuition: at the end of the corridor was a door with an EXIT sign overhead. And it opened just fine. Unfortunately, it set off an alarm as it did so. Then it got worse: without warning, we abruptly became visible.

Chapter 20: Another Gratuitous Chase Scene

"Oh, dear!" Thomasina exclaimed. "I forgot to recharge it after that second time!" And for the first time, we got to see what her projector looked like: something like a macramé vest draped over her blouse. She repeatedly pressed a button at one of the node points by her side, but nothing happened. "Guess it's really dead," she muttered. "I really should have installed a reserve power supply."

While this was going on, Brains looked around the parking lot of the building we'd just vacated. Then, to my surprise, he began sniffing the air. "Brains, what are you – ?" Then I caught the scent as well: sea air! Obviously, we were close to either the beach or some docks.

Also close by were a pair of wide gates for cars to come in. It was currently closed. But a smaller gate was right next to it. However, it was padlocked. We ran over to it anyway. "Brains, do you still have your – ?" I started to ask.

"Already ahead of you, Jimmy!" he said, removing his laser wand. A moment later he'd melted the padlock off and opened the door. We were just heading through it when the guards appeared on the scene. We ignored the calls to halt, continuing to run out into the streets.

We had a pretty good head start as the guards ran to one of their vehicles. They then had to wait for the gates to open before they started pursuing. By then we were already several blocks away. We made our way carefully from there, just managing to spot Sun Erato's guards (the

Hummer with the "CEM/Anahuac" logo on it made that pretty easy) before they saw us. But I was getting worried: the sun was much lower in the sky by now. It wouldn't be long before Phyllis returned to her hotel and picked up the package. I mentioned this to Brains, who nodded. "Yes, I know, Jimmy. We must find a way to get back to our hotel."

"We need to flag a taxi," Michael said. Trouble was, we hadn't seen any. No, not one.

"It might take too long," Brains pointed out. "And even if we do succeed, note that it is close to rush hour. We could easily get caught in a traffic jam."

"What would you suggest, then?" Michael asked.

Brains was silent a moment. Then he said, "Come with me."

We followed him, making our way through various alleys and side streets until we reached the docks. Fortunately, it didn't take long to locate a place with motorboats for rent.

"You want to rent a boat?" I asked him.

Brains nodded. "Don't forget, Jimmy, our hotel isn't all that far from the beach. With a sufficiently powerful engine, we should reach the beach area within a half-hour."

"Will they have a place for the boat to dock?" Thomasina asked.

Brains shrugged. "We'll have to risk it."

Michael talked with the woman who rented the boat and before long we were underway (thankfully, Sun Erato

hadn't taken our wallets or Thomasina's purse). Also, we now possessed a map of Seattle, so we knew where we were and needed to go.

The boat had a powerful engine and we made good time. Before we had gone very far, though, a speed boat soon caught up with us – and it had the CEM/Anahuac logo on it.

"Pull over!" one of them barked at us. In response, I yanked the steering arm over hard, almost capsizing us. They weren't expecting that and shot past us. But they soon turned around and headed back. Over the roar of the engine, I could hear their guns firing at us. But the bullets only came near us, so it was likely they weren't trying to kill us. Even so, I kept the throttle wide open as I tried to head us back to shore. I knew we weren't going to outrun them on the water. Still, I couldn't resist flashing a smile at Brains, who returned it. Talk about *déjà vu*! This was like the "Battle of Lake Carmine" all over again!

The Sun Erato gang liked what I was doing and were trying to herd us in a particular direction. But I had no intentions of following orders. Instead, I zig-zagged in another direction, towards a barren stretch of coastline. You might have thought I'd want to go near a populated area so someone could call the police or something, but that was the last thing we needed. Sun's people came close to swamping the boat several times, and I think one of them was going to try and jump into our boat, but the water was starting to get pretty choppy close to shore, and their boat was in danger of capsizing as well. Then the inevitable happened and we ran aground. A few moments later the Erato boat scraped bottom as well.

The boat's engine died and we were thrown forward, Michael flipping over the gunwale and into the water. But he wasn't hurt. Thomasina almost went over the side as well, but I managed to grab her arm. She shot me a grateful look. "C'mon, guys!" I yelled out. "Time to abandon ship!"

Brains was staring at Erato's boat a few moments, then nodded. "All right, but let me lead the way, Jimmy. I've got a plan."

Hopping out of the boat into the shallow water we made our way to the shore. Behind us, we could hear Erato's men picking themselves up as well. "They're escaping!" I heard one of them say. "Stop them!" At once we heard them jumping off the boat and into the water as well.

Once we reached the shore, Brains led us up a short hill and across an open field. He seemed to be looking for something. "Over there!" he pointed. We saw a group of low-lying shrubs, almost a hedge. Brains took off at once, diving down behind them, the rest of us landing next to him. Through the gaps in the hedge we could make out the first of Erato's men coming up over the ridge. He was carrying a pistol and was looking around for any signs of us. He began searching the ground for our tracks.

"Brains, he's going to track us here in a few minutes!" I pointed out.

"We're not staying here very long," Brains replied. "Just long enough for – ah, there we go!" The rest of the boat crew appeared above the ridge, guns in hand. They scattered around, trying to pick up our trail as well. "They'll have a hard time doing it," Brains quietly told us.

"The ground is very hard due to lack of rain, and there's very little organic material to give us away."

"Even so," Thomasina whispered, "it won't be very hard for them to deduce where we've gone!" Even as she said this, we could see the leader of the men point in our direction. Two men split off and started to make their way over here.

Brains gave us a nod. "Time to go," he said.

"Go where?" I asked.

"Back where we came from," he told us and starting to make his way through the shrubs. I was surprised to see that the line of bushes led almost back to the shore. Guess I'd been a bit too focused on getting over the hill.

As quietly and carefully as we could, we made our way back to the shore. Once there, Brains told me to hold still. Once again he popped the panel on my right leg, using his laser wand to increase the power to maximum. "Jimmy," he said, "I want you to use your strength to push Erato's boat back out into the water."

"But won't it sprout a leak or something?" I protested.

"No, I didn't hear any stones scraping against the hull of our own boat," he said. "Like ours, his is just beached. So we're going to borrow it. It's a lot more powerful anyway and should get us back faster."

Thomasina and Michael gaped at the audacity of Brains' plan, but nodded. "Better get moving," Michael said, "before they return."

We raced over to Erato's boat. I was in the lead, of course. But I had to be careful not to put on too much

speed, lest my legs literally run out from under me.

Once we reached the boat, the others scrambled into it while I carefully pushed against the bow. My legs had so much power I knew I could break my arms if I pushed too hard. Or maybe my back once again. Once was enough, thank you. Fortunately, Erato's boat was mostly fiberglass, so it wasn't too heavy. Slowly at first, then faster as it began to float once more, I pushed it away from the shore. Once it was deep enough I let go, sort of half-swimming to the side of the boat, Michael and Thomasina reaching to pull me on board. Brains was at the controls, trying to restart the engine. A few moments later it turned over, gave out a few backfires and died. Brains tried again, and this time the engine roared back to life. He shifted it into reverse and the shoreline began to recede. After we'd gone about a hundred yards, he shifted it forward once again and we took off. Just in time: Looking backwards, I could see Erato's men coming back over the ridge. They stared at us for several moments, then raised their guns.

"Step on it, Brains!" I yelled. "They're opening fire!"

Opening the throttles, Brains was causing the boat to zig-zag, much as I had earlier with the other boat. We clutched the gunwales for dear life, hoping Brains wouldn't make the turns too tight. Curiously, it was a flight that was devoid of fear: the engines drowned out any noise the guns might have made – chances are we were too far away to have heard them anyway – and apart from an occasional tiny splash close to the boat, there was no feeling of being shot at. Before long the shoreline vanished and Brains throttled back a bit. Just as well: the bay was starting to become crowded with other types of

boats. But we weren't out of danger yet: just when we started to breathe easier, I heard the sounds of a helicopter approaching. We looked up suspiciously, and sure enough, a door slid open and some guy with a machine gun leaned out. Brains shoved the throttles forward and we took off once again.

It was a lot harder this time, the helicopter had no problems keeping up with us. Once again shots were fired over our bow to get us to stop. Brains ignored them. Instead, he called out, "Thomasina! Can you get us to disappear once again?"

"Brains," she replied, "my telejector's batteries are dead! Have you forgotten?"

"Place your projector on Jimmy and run the recharger cable to his left leg. There's a USB-C port you can plug it into. I'll tell you how to access it."

Immediately, Thomasina removed her telejector "vest" and draped it over me. Following Brains instructions, she rolled up my pants leg, popped a hidden panel, then pulled out a small cable from one of the nodes on the vest. She stretched it down and, after a bit of searching, plugged it in. Brains also told her how to power down my legs to normal. Then she said, "Brains, there's a readout in his leg showing twenty-five percent. Is that the power remaining?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it is," he told her. "Fortunately, we're almost to the port. They can't keep following us for long, it would raise suspicions. Just get us cloaked."

Thomasina popped open one of the vest nodes and fiddled with the controls. Moments later the area around us went dark. Then "eyeholes" opened up. Brains

immediately threw the boat into a curve, then another one. The sounds of the chopper fell behind us. I can only guess what it must have looked like to the people in the chopper! Then a thought hit me: "Brains, aren't we leaving a wake in the water for them to follow?"

"No," Thomasina responded for him. "I've projected the image of calm water ahead of us and behind us. It doesn't perfectly match the water of the bay, of course – this isn't a real-time image, just a loop of some test footage I shot out by Zuma Beach a few months back. But it should fool them for a bit."

"I'm approaching the other side of the docks," Brains told us. "Not where they would expect us to land." Before long, we heard him cutting back on the throttles. Shortly after that, he told Thomasina to shut off the projector.

Brains had parked us at a dock with very few people around. Looking behind us, I saw the chopper off in the distance, still circling around the area where the projector had been activated. So far, so good. Scrambling up on the dock, Thomasina removed the cable from my leg, closing the panel; the recharging cable retracting to the vest. We began racing back to our hotel.

Once we got close, Brains had us slow down. He began looking around. "Chances are," he told us, "Sun Erato still has men posted here, in case we came back. We don't need to get caught a second time."

Spotting an alley which offered a clear view of the hotel entrance we ducked into it. It didn't take long before we saw suspicious-looking men inside and out of the hotel, just lounging around. As we tried to come up with a plan to get past them, Thomasina gasped, pointing,

"Look!"

A taxi had just pulled up and out stepped Phyllis Newton. We watched as she paid her fare, then went into the hotel. Through the large windows, we saw the desk clerk – NOT the person we'd talked with earlier – stopping her and handing her a small box...

Chapter 21: Not A Leg To Stand On

"Oh no!" Thomasina cried. "What can we do?"

"Not *we*," Brains answered, "*Jimmy!*"

I looked at him in surprise. "Huh? What are you talking about, Brains?"

"The telejector, of course," he replied, pointing to it. "Thomasina, go ahead and reconnect it to Jimmy's leg and make him invisible. Jimmy, follow Phyllis to her room and retrieve the package before she can open it."

"You don't want us to go with him?" Michael asked.

Brains shook his head. "It would be too slow and clumsy for all four of us to try it together. And currently, Jimmy is the only one who can supply power to the telejector vest so it won't die."

"That may happen anyway, Brains," Thomasina told him. "The readout is showing fifteen percent power remaining."

"If that goes to zero," I said in a horrified voice, "both the projector and my legs will stop!"

"Not quite, Jimmy," Brains reassured me. "You forget that each leg is independently powered. You can switch the projector to your right leg, though I'll admit that walking will be a bit awkward."

"A *bit* awkward...?" I kind of snapped at him.

"No time to argue," Brains said as Thomasina finished programming the vest. (To my surprise – and delight –

Thomasina gave me a kiss on the lips. "For luck!" she said.) "Get moving!"

So off I went. I was pleased to see that Thomasina included a head's-up view of the remaining power in my left leg. I wasn't pleased to see it drop from fifteen to fourteen percent. Thomasina was right about how much power this thing took to run. Doubtless my earlier super-powered exertions were a massive drain on the batteries as well.

Carefully crossing the street, I made my way into the hotel just in time to see Phyllis heading towards the elevators, still carrying the box. I hurried after her, needing to get into the elevator cab at the same time she did. After all, I had no idea what floor or room she was in.

I dodged around a bell hop (or whatever it is they're called these days) pushing a rack full of clothes, managing to zig-zag around several other people and just barely making it into the cab as the doors began to close. The electric-eye beam didn't see me either, so it was a close shave. I had to be careful not to bang into her or one of the walls. Or, for that matter, breathe too hard. But Phyllis didn't pay my invisible self much attention, she seemed preoccupied with something. The elevator dinged on the tenth floor and she made her way out. I had to dodge around several people getting on board. I heard one guy cry out "What the – !" as I kind of shoved him aside. I imagined him looking around, trying to see who or what had hit him. But I was too focused on following Phyllis to give it much thought.

Phyllis walked down a corridor, taking a right then

stopping about midway, holding up her hotel key card to the door plate. It beeped, a green LED coming on. Phyllis went on in.

To my surprise, she left the door wide open. Further, she tossed the package aside without even looking at it, threw herself on the bed and started crying! I heard her call out "Tom!" several times, and not in an endearing way. For a few moments I just stood there, wondering what this was all about – then I kicked myself for wasting time. Here was a perfect opportunity to get the package and I was letting it dwindle away.

I went over to the hotel desk where she'd tossed the package, grabbed it and turned to make my way out the door. Then I heard Phyllis gasp. I stopped in mid-stride, thinking she'd seen or heard me. I made myself look at her, fully expecting her to be staring right back. Instead, she was looking out the wide-open door as someone went by. Guess she'd forgotten that she'd left it that way. At once she rolled off the bed, heading towards the door. I broke out of my trance at the same time and raced for the door, no longer caring if I made noise or not; I had to get out of there! And if that wasn't bad enough, the floating display now showed I was down to four percent power.

It was a near thing: I just barely made it across the threshold when the door slammed behind me, hitting me in the back and flinging me across the hallway. I collided with the opposite wall and the package flew out of my hands, landing on the floor. But it seemed to be all right. Rubbing my nose where it had stuck the wall, I reached over to pick it up. Suddenly the air shimmered around me, the display and the "eyeholes" vanished. Further, my left leg abruptly went dead.

* * * * *

I was now in the hallway of a hotel, completely visible, with one leg dead and carrying a potentially deadly package. Not what you'd call a great situation. And it got worse. Struggling to stay balanced as I raised myself and the package back up, I began to drag myself down the hallway, acutely aware that Thomasina's projector vest was conspicuously plugged into my dead left leg. So I kept that side of me to the wall, hopefully concealing it. I headed towards the door with the "STAIRS" sign on it. Once inside, I hoped to switch the power cable to my other leg as Brains showed me, then make my way down to our floor. Yeah, down ten flights of stairs on a single leg. At least I'd be invisible again.

But that's not what happened. I'd just reached a cross-corridor when two men came out of nowhere. One snatched the package out of my hands, the other said, "Hello, Mr. Carson. Nice to see you again!" When they tried to make me march forward, however, I fell right over.

"What's wrong with you?" one of them asked, picking me up.

"My left leg is dead," I answered. Well, I could hardly lie about it.

"Hey, take a look at this!" said the first one. He'd obviously seen the power cable connected to the vest.

"What is that?" the other asked.

"This," the first one replied, "may well be how they eluded us these past couple of hours."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"It's gotta be an invisibility gadget of some sort. Look how it's connected to his artificial leg, and now his leg can't move. Guess your leg ran outta juice, huh?" He said this to me with a nasty grin. I just shrugged and nodded. He turned back to his colleague. "The boss is gonna love this! We may even get a raise!"

The other one just stared at his friend. "Are you nuts? Why should we turn this over to Erato? I know several other groups who would pay top dollar for something like this! Or we could use it ourselves! We could break into banks or places where drug deals go down, or gun deals, and just help ourselves to whatever we want! No one would ever see us and we'd be rich enough to retire in a few years!"

The other was nodding, eyes wide. "Yeah, that sounds good!" Then they seemed to notice for the first time that they were out in the middle of a hotel corridor and anyone could just happen by. "C'mon!" said the first one, and they dragged me down to the very stairway I'd been planning to use. Once we were inside, the second guy, who was carrying the package, suddenly became aware of it. "Hey, what's in here?"

The first guy looked at it as well. "It's addressed to a Phyllis Newton, from a Tom Swift." He looked at me. "You planning on giving something to your girlfriend, Sandy?" he asked with a knowing leer.

The other one shook his head. "Naw, he was too busy escaping us and the others all afternoon." Then he frowned. "Say, where are the other three?" He looked around, as if expecting Brains and the others to appear right in front of him.

At the moment, I didn't have an answer to give him. I was going over my options and not particularly liking them: fighting them off and running was hardly feasible. Neither was telling them what they wanted to know. I couldn't turn invisible again, nor would it do me much good even if I could. But there was one way that might work...

"I don't know," I finally replied. "And please give me back my package, it's personal."

"Oh, is it?" the first guy sneered.

"It is," I said, nodding. "It's nothing you'd be interested in."

The two exchanged looks. One of them shook the package. "Seems pretty light," he said. "Let's just see what it is!"

"Please!" I begged them. "Leave it alone!"

As I hoped, they ignored me. You'd think people would learn from Br'er Rabbit...

The first one took out a knife and cut the string wrapped around the package, then tore off the paper. A simple white box was revealed. They cut the scotch tape securing the lid and removed it. Eagerly, both grabbed the white paper wrapped around the figurine Dr. Prandit had placed inside. As soon as they grabbed it I cringed back into the corner of the stairwell as far as I could – which wasn't more than a few inches. I guess I was expecting a bolt of lightning or something. Instead, the men looked at the figurine inside. I couldn't see it from where I was, but there was a puzzled look on their faces.

"You mean," said the first one, "that's all there is?" He

turned to me and said, "Looks like you weren't lying after all. It's just a – " He stopped short, his mouth wide open. So was his friend's. Neither spoke another word; both fell over, the second one slid down the stairwell to the next landing. Of the paper they had grasped: even as I stared at it the paper was disappearing. Half a second later their fingers were holding nothing at all. I stared into the box at the figurine for a few moments. I thought about leaving it there, then put the lid back on and took it with me, along with the wrapping paper.

I stuffed them rather awkwardly into my shirt; it gave me a strange appearance but at least my hands were free. Then I rolled up my right pants leg, popped open my other leg panel and plugged the projector's power cable into it. There was eighteen percent power remaining, it should be enough. Using the stairwell rails, I made my slow, unsteady way down the stairs. A moment later I wised up and managed to hook my non-working leg over the rail. Carefully balancing myself, I began sliding down from floor to floor. Came close to losing my balance a few times, but before long I was back on our floor. Leaving the stairwell, I hobbled along, using my left arm to move my non-functioning leg (thankfully it wasn't locked in place) until I reached our room.

Inside, I found my three friends waiting for me.

"So that's what I look like when I'm invisible!" Thomasina said with a grin. "Or rather, *don't* look like!"

With the floating display showing a mere three percent, I removed the power cable from my right leg and instantly became visible once more. Michael jumped up and went to the door, closing it at once. Brains took a

look at the tell-tale bulge under my shirt. "I take it you were successful, Operative Three?"

"Yeah, but not without some excitement," I told him as I removed the box and the wrapping paper. "Speaking of which, could you do something about my legs? The battery in the left leg is dead and the one in the right is about to join it."

"Don't worry, Jimmy," Brains said. "I've brought several sets of fully-charged spares with me. Take a seat and I'll get them replaced."

While he did so, I brought the others up to date. "Smart thinking on your part, Jimmy," Michael said after I told him what happened to Erato's men. "But it means Sun Ohm Erato knows we've come back here. We need to leave as soon as you're ready."

"What about Phyllis?" Thomasina asked. "Is she in any danger from Sun Ohm's men?"

"Not likely," Michael replied. "They're too focused on recapturing us." He turned back to us. "Brains?"

"I'm just about finished," Brains answered. Indeed, moments later I felt power return to both legs.

"I wonder why Phyllis was so upset," Thomasina muttered as she picked up the box and looked inside.

"Who knows?" I replied. "Maybe she and Tom had a spat or something." I smiled as she removed the figurine. "That's why I kept the box," I told her. "I thought you might want it as a keepsake."

Thomasina smiled at me in return. "Thank you, Jimmy." She continued to gaze at the object, then put it

back in the box. "Of all the figurines she had, this one was always one of her favorites." Then she sobered up. "If you're ready, let's leave before we get accosted again. I don't know about the rest of you, but I've had enough kidnappings to last me a lifetime."

"Same here," I agreed. It took me only moments to pack. We left the room and went to Thomasina's, then Michael's. They tossed their stuff into their suitcases and were ready to go in minutes as well. We dropped our key cards at the front desk and made our way to the Caddy. In spite of our need for haste, Brains and Thomasina checked it inside and out to make sure Erato's men hadn't tampered with it. Michael was already on his SwiftTalk, speaking with Mr. Meritt. A short time later we were airborne once more. Only then did I relax a little.

Chapter 22: The Great Escape

I guess it should have been more adventurous, but the trip back to SwiftTech was completely uneventful. Michael said little during the trip, but it wasn't hard to guess he was wondering what was to be done about Thomasina. Should she be turned over to the police? Put on trial? But if she was, that would end up dragging Tom, Phyllis, Michael, Brains and I into the spotlight, to say nothing of the effect such revelations about Dr. Prandit would have on her family back in Pakistan. But – didn't they deserve to know the truth about their daughter, however much it may hurt? It was a mess, and I was glad not to be in Michael's shoes.

Once back in Michael's office, he said, "All right, the obvious big question is what to do with you, Dr. Swift. You've committed a crime, even if you had a very good reason for doing so and probably saved Miss Newton's life."

"To say nothing of saving Tom Swift Jr. from a lot of harassment," Brains tossed in.

Michael nodded. "That, too. Even so, you can hardly expect to escape without some sort of punishment."

Thomasina smiled. "I understand. Yes, you're quite correct. But would turning me over to the criminal justice system really be in everyone's best interest? I realize that's the legal thing to do. But it may not be the smart thing to do. My suggestion, however outrageous it sounds, is to allow me to continue working here at

SwiftTech exactly as if my plan had worked: that Ithaca Foger had Bash killed on orders from Sun Erato so as to keep the new atomic wafer battery from reaching the prototype stage. Ithaca returned to do a search for any data that might have been leftover on the subtractor, then she vanished without any further follow-up searches. And that's all anyone knows. That, after all, is what the evidence points to. Currently, that will answer any and all inquiries into the matter. Only the four of us will know anything different. I can scarcely think of any reason why we would wish to say anything different."

"Have it all planned out, do we?" Michael said in a rather grim voice. "Murder aforethought is still a capital offense!"

Thomasina nodded. "I'm not saying otherwise, Michael. Only that punishing me for it may be more trouble than it's worth!"

Michael glared at her, drumming his fingers on his SmartGlas desk, taking care not to activate any of the desk's icons. "You certainly aren't showing much remorse for your friend's death, Thomasina!"

Thomasina returned his glare. "You think what I did doesn't haunt me? That wasn't all acting when I came into the lab that morning! When I saw her lying there, even when I knew my plan to stop her had succeeded, all I could think about were the good times we had together since my family moved to Pakistan. I felt awful inside, like I had to cut off a limb to escape from a trap. Even if it had to be done, it will still haunt me for the rest of my life. But I don't know of any other way I could have handled it – not in the short amount of time I had to act."

Silence prevailed once again. I couldn't think of anything to say. I glanced at Brains, but he seemed lost in thought as well. Finally Michael threw up his hands in despair. "All right. I'm going to contact Sherman Ames and bring him up to date on all of this. Maybe he can come to some sort of decision that balances punishment with discretion." Brains looked as though he was about to say something, but Michael cut him off before he could. "And yes, Brains, I know this is buck-passing, but I'm hardly a criminal court judge. Like it or not, many of Thomasina's points about keeping this quiet are valid. So, for the time being, I'm not going to take any action against her."

"So, what am I supposed to do? Just sit here?" Thomasina asked.

"For now, yes!" With that, Michael jabbed an icon on the desk. Moments later, Sherman Ames's hologram appeared in front of him.

"Mr. Phydeaux?" Ames said. "If you've called about Ithaca, I haven't turned up anything further."

Michael waved him silent. "No, I already know the answer to that one. Now listen," and he began explaining everything that had happened in the past few days. He had us – Thomasina included – chime in as well to fill in the details. After he concluded with our escape from the hotel, he added, "And that's basically everything. I honestly can't decide what to do about Dr. Swift. Put her in a maximum security cell? Pin a medal on her chest? Both? I'm hoping you might have some insight."

Sherman's face grew increasingly grim the more the story spun out. By the time we'd finished, his expression

looked as though it had been cast in porcelain and would crack at any moment. His eyes positively blazed with anger. I shot a glance at Thomasina. For the first time she really looked scared. I guess she – like the rest of us – thought Sherman was about to unleash a tirade of fury at her. All of us, even Brains, cringed, expecting Sherman to cut loose at any moment. So it took us by surprise when he said, "I feel like quitting this damn job!"

"Wait – what?" Michael exclaimed.

"I had her psych profile on record all this time, and yet I still overlooked a potential killer in the making!" Sherman growled. Before we could say anything, his image turned to Thomasina. "Tell me, Dr. Swift, did you cover that up too?" he asked sardonically.

Thomasina shook her head. "No. Please understand, Mr. Ames, that at the time we first arrived in the States, I didn't think anything of her attraction to Tom Swift as anything more than a – a silly infatuation! Something she'd soon lose interest in. If anyone did the covering up, it was Bash herself!"

"A 'silly infatuation,' Dr. Swift? And it didn't occur to you that your friend would be very jealous of Miss Newton?"

Thomasina shook her head violently. "NO! Bash never said a word about Phyllis Newton to me. Not then, anyway. Nor was her name ever mentioned whenever I heard her sleep-talking. It wasn't until I stumbled upon her drawings and those pictures in her closet did I finally begin to understand what was going on inside her!"

Ames sighed. "Why the hell didn't you come to me about this earlier?"

Thomasina grimaced. "We've already been over this, Mr. Ames. Bash was getting ready to move to Shopton within the next few days. As I said, if I'd talked to you about this, there would have been very little you could have done to protect Phyllis Newton. Keeping an eye on Bash or placing Phyllis under guard or in some sort of safe house wouldn't have worked. While she might not be a scientist, Bash is very intelligent and she would have picked up on anything like this. She would have been on guard instantly and put her plans on hold as long as it took for you to lower your guard. And you would have after a while. Phyllis would have demanded it after weeks of nothing happening. And if I know Bash, she would have somehow arranged things to make it look as though she'd fled the country, or maybe died in an accident, or, well, *something*. Anything to create a false sense of security! And the next day you would be reading Phyllis's obituary and, more than likely, a story of Tom Swift Jr.'s disappearance or death." She stopped, almost out of breath. "All right, maybe there was a better way to handle it. Maybe you and I could have come up with it. Maybe Bash didn't have to die. I certainly would have preferred it. But, as it was, I barely had time to come up with my own plan to kill Bash and divert attention away from myself. Tell me, Mr. Ames, could you have done better – especially after you saw Bash's paintings?"

Sherman Ames was silent for a few moments. Then he shook his head. "I don't know. But it doesn't matter, I'm still going to have you arrested. For the time being, you will reside in a security cell back here at Swift Enterprises. Please don't try to resist arrest, Dr. Swift, my men are well trained. I'm having them sent even as we

talk." He turned to Michael and said, "Take her to the main entrance. My men will be there shortly." He turned back to Thomasina and gave her a sympathetic look. "I'm sure Mr. Swift will provide the DA with the extenuating circumstances and how you helped save Phyllis Newton's life. That should result in a much lower sentence, I would think." He shook his head once again. "But this mess you've created with Sun Ohm Erato and even that weird Green Orb entity... I have no idea how all of that is going to end."

"Then you'd better hope they stick me in a deep hole someplace, Mr. Ames!" Thomasina said rather vehemently. "Because Erato's boys are sure to come after me once again!"

Ames shrugged. "You'll be out of our hands by then, Dr. Swift. That will be *your* problem. Might want to consider that next time you decide to fake someone famous to take the blame for your dirty work."

Thomasina didn't reply and Ames cut the connection. For a long moment we just sat there. Then she said, "Well, come on! Let's not sit here exchanging gloomy looks. You might as well take me topside to face the music!" I saw Brains wince slightly at the cliché. But she was right, and we soon made our way to the front entrance. We must have timed it just right: a Swift security car pulled up even as we went out the doors. Thomasina turned to me and I wasn't too surprised to see that she had some tears running down her cheeks.

"I – I guess this is goodbye," she said. I walked towards her to give her an embrace, but, to my disappointment, she backed away from me. "No, please

don't. Wait until I am free. Then we can." I watched, almost on the verge of tears myself as the two security officers came up and put handcuffs on Thomasina. She looked at me one last time and, surprisingly, winked. Then they led her back to the car. After a short time, it drove off.

Brains put a hand on my shoulder. "It will be alright, Jimmy," he said softly. "I honestly don't know what Sherman Ames has planned for her, but rest assured he will take into consideration not only what she did to save Miss Newton but the bad publicity that might occur if knowledge of this whole affair leaks out."

I shook my head. "I don't know, Brains," I replied. "He sure sounded mighty upset with her. Sounds like he plans to throw the book at her!"

"Well, of course," he told me. "All of this took him by surprise. His reaction was understandable. But once he has a chance to cool back down, he will review the data and come to a more sensible solution."

I gave Brains an annoyed look. "You sure about that? Sounds like guesswork to me!"

Brains gave me one of those patented Operative X looks of his. "James, you should know by now that I never guess, I deduce!"

We began walking back up the stairs where Michael was waiting for us. "I just hope you're right. After everything she's been through, and everything she's had to go through, Thomasina really doesn't deserve to go to –"

"Excuse us," a voice said behind us. We'd been so

wrapped up in our conversation we failed to pay attention to the sound of a car pulling up. We turned around and I gaped in surprise. It was a Swift security car. Two security officers were standing outside of it, their doors still open. The man who spoke continued. "We're here to pick up a Dr. Swift."

"What?" I heard Michael say behind me.

"What?" I echoed.

Brains said nothing, but stared at the two men for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Jimmy, look!" he said, pointing. I didn't see what he was getting at – then I did. Thomasina's car was missing (Michael had both of our cars returned to the parking lot the other night).

"But Brains, how – ?" I stopped, at a loss for words.

"She anticipated it," Brains said.

"But we have her prototype!" I objected.

"True," he agreed. "She must have had a Mark II model ready. When Michael took her to her apartment just before we flew to Washington, she simply retrieved it."

"But how could she have set up the whole 'taken into custody' scenario?"

"Remember the couple of times she went to use the plane's bathroom on the return trip?" he asked me. I nodded. "Seems to me she had plenty of time for some on-the-fly holographic programming as well."

"That's why she didn't want me to touch her," I said, as much to myself as to Brains. "And why she winked at me like that."

"Hmmm," Brains mused. "Apparently the improved version allows for real-time interaction as well. No surprise there."

"Excuse me," said the security officer with more than a trace of annoyance, "where is Dr. Swift?"

"At the moment, officers," Brains replied, "anyplace she wants to be..."

Chapter 23: Epilogue

I heard from her again, you know. Not an e-mail, of course. That would have been way too easy to trace. No, it was an ordinary note on ordinary notepaper. I found it in my office one day; no one knew how it got there. But I could make an educated guess...

Dearest Jimmy,

I hope you will forgive the little trick I pulled on you, Brains & Michael. But especially you. I am quite fond of you. I think you would make a great lover, and I hope that one day you and I can resume our romance. For now, rest assured I am fine. My upgraded telejector projector vest keeps me hidden from any of Erato's (or anyone else's) prying eyes. I am already hard at work on an even better version. Plus, there is still the atomic wafer to be perfected, as well as some other ideas I have for potential energy generation. Not too certain just where I can secure the funding for such endeavors, but rest assured I will work something out.

Trust me, you will be hearing from me again.

Say hello to Brains and Michael for me, and please tell Sherman not to frown so much.

Your partner in crime,

Thomasina

I had to smile at the way she ended it. I hoped our paths would, indeed, cross once more. Say what you will about Thomasina, she kept life exciting. I'm afraid Sherman Ames didn't quite see it that way; he about went through the roof when he learned how she'd escaped. Naturally, he put out an all-points bulletin on her, but it was pretty pointless.

Disguised as she was, she could be anyone anywhere, male or female. As for Dr. Prandit, her body was returned to her family in Pakistan, the cause of death given as death by a notorious terrorist, one Ithaca Fogger.

Sherman Ames apparently saw the wisdom of adhering to Thomasina's storyline. As for me, every so often I pick up the figurine that sits on my desk. In her haste to depart, Thomasina had forgotten to take it with her. She said it was one of Dr. Prandit's favorites.

Well, I don't know about her, but every time I look at the small glass cat in my hand, I will always think of Thomasina Swift...

The End

Brains and Jimmy Will Return In:
Case of the Missing Movie Star