

**Tom Swift**  
**&**  
**The Hunt for Planet X**

**by Michael Wolff**

**A Wolff-In-Exile Publication**

## **Dedication**

Charlie Campbell found many significant errors and suggested many significant (and rather appreciated) corrections. Well... everyone has to have a hobby (even if it's not Cosma). Thanks, Charlie.

# TOM SWIFT AND THE HUNT FOR PLANET X

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## Chapter One: A Falcon on the Porch.

“Tom,” Mary Swift announced, coming in through the door. “Mail’s in. More than one in fact,” she added, referring to the infant who she carried pressed against a shoulder.

“Is that a joke coming from you?” Tom Swift asked, smiling as he approached his wife.

“I’m certainly not all that humorless,” Mary retorted.

“Maybe not,” Tom shrugged, reaching for the mail. “But Mr. Damon commented on how you’ve grown more talkative since we got married.”

“One has to be a talker to last around you and Mr. Damon,” Mary replied, giving Tom a kiss on the cheek as she went to start adjusting the baby into a high chair. “Lunch’ll be ready soon.”

“Um,” Tom murmured, looking over the envelopes. Spotting one particular item he hurriedly opened it, removing the contents and studying them intently.

Mary had given the baby a biscuit and she now looked up, immediately noticing Tom’s expression. “News?”

“That could almost be another joke,” Tom considered half to himself. “It’s a letter from Ned. It looks as if the talks with Hearst might be in trouble.”

“Oh no.” Mary knew that Tom was placing a great deal of hope in getting the Hearst organization to help finance construction of a nationwide chain of theaters which would hold the video machine Tom had invented a few years earlier. “What’s the problem?”

“Hearst’s people are actually warm to the idea,” Tom said. “Especially after they attended a demonstration of the machine. But it seems that even the great Mr. Hearst isn’t immune to the economy. He’s had to sell one of his major newspapers... *The Washington Times-Herald*... and it looks as if he might have to start merging

some of his other papers.”

“Oh, Tom!”

“The timing’s just bad, that’s all.”

Absently patting Tom Jr’s head, Mary took a few moments to study her husband. Seventeen months of marriage had turned out to be more than just an adventure in romance. She loved Tom dearly... more dearly in fact than she felt possible... and she almost felt she was managing to keep in step with the world she had to share him with. Her husband was an inventor, which was rather like saying the sky was sort of blue. Tom was almost a national prodigy, what with the vehicles and machines he had designed and built, and the various expeditions he had undertaken on behalf of this or that interest.

It had been thoroughly drummed into Mary that as a wife (and a still newly-minted mother), her major concern was in whether or not her husband was a decent provider. There was little doubt in Mary’s mind that Tom was all of that. They were living comfortably in the house just outside of Shopton, New York. But when Tom wasn’t fretting over an invention he seemed to be concentrating more and more on bringing in further income.

Of course, Mary silently considered, smiling down at her young son, there were times when Tom could be significantly diverted.

*“Did Ned mention whether or not he’s written Helen?”*

“He probably did,” Tom replied, the tone of his voice making it seem as if he were miles away. He then shook his head and smiled back at her. “I’m sorry, honey. I don’t mean to ignore you.”

“It’s okay. I know you miss Ned and would rather he were here.”

“Well... yeah,” Tom admitted, absently running a hand over his blonde hair. “I’ll be the first to admit that Ned’s more level-headed in regards to business than I am. He’s keeping me informed on the progress with Hearst. Or lack of it, actually. But it’s not the same as having him here to bounce ideas off of.”

Mary had pulled a cold ham out of the refrigerator and was cutting

slices. “Surely you’ve already considered what to do in case Hearst can’t help?”

“Sort of,” Tom told her, moving past to get some milk out of the refrigerator. “I can still set up an appointment with RCA. And Ned hinted he could go over and speak with Zukor at Paramount.” He had opened another envelope and was reading what, to Mary, appeared to be several legal-looking documents. “Oho! Some good news at least.”

“What?”

“Looks as if the settlement from the Jardine Brothers is coming through after all. That’ll make for a nice chunk in the bank.”

Mary quietly decided not to mention that the arrangement also left Tom with the *Silver Cloud* dirigible. Admittedly it had proven to be rather useful; especially in rescuing her, Tom’s father and Mr. Damon from a disastrous fire. But it was also something of an albatross around Tom’s neck. Fortunately Tom had entered into an arrangement with the people in Lakehurst concerning storage...

“I’ll be!”

Mary’s reveries evaporated. “What?”

Tom didn’t immediately answer but, rather, was continuing to study the contents from another envelope. “Interesting.”

Mary tried to be patient, knowing that an “interesting” from Tom could cover a wide stretch of ground.

“An astronomer out in Chicago wants me to help him find a planet.”

Mary disliked using the word “Huh”. But... “Huh?”

“A Professor... Lee Dempson,” Tom explained, reading from the letter. “He’s with the Astronomy faculty out at the University of Chicago and he’s apparently searching for a new planet. He wants my help.”

“A new planet?”

Tom nodded. “It seems that---“

“Mistah Tom?”

Tom and Mary turned towards the voice. “Yes, Rad?” Tom asked.

Eradicate Sampson, the Swift’s handyman, appeared at the back door. “Sorry to bothers you,” he said, adding a particularly contrite nod in Mary’s direction, “but wonders if you knew when Missus Baggert’s was supposed to come back?”

“Mr. Damon had offered to take her and Koku into town for the shopping,” Mary told him.

The news pleased the old gentleman. “That’s good then. I gots the new big freezer out back to working with your new parts, Mistah Swift, so she’ll have it to put the bigger items in.”

“That’s great, Rad,” Tom told him. “We didn’t even hear it being plugged in.”

“That motor you made runs real quiet.” Rad was staring down at his feet, and he bent down to pick up an object. “Mistah Tom, you or Mis Mary drop something?”

Mary shrugged at Tom. “I might’ve had my hands full with Junior.”

Tom went to the door. “What is it, Rad?”

Opening the door, Rad passed the item to Tom who looked it over.

Mary noticed how Tom’s eyebrows rose significantly. “What is it?”

In answer Tom held out the item. Taking it, Mary saw that it was a simple white card. On one side was a rather elegant drawing of a falcon.

On the other side was a handwritten message:

STAY AWAY FROM DEMPSON, TOM SWIFT. THE NEW  
PLANET IS MINE!

## Chapter Two: Interrupted Pursuit.

“Could it have fallen out of one of the letters?” Mary asked Tom.

Tom was already searching through the mail. “I opened the note from Ned. The notice concerning the Jardines, and Dempson’s letter.” The frown deepened on his face, then he moved to the back porch. “The card wasn’t in one of the envelopes but added to the mail,” he went on looking around. “Someone must’ve slipped it into the mailbox. Rad? Have you seen anyone moving around out there?”

The handyman shook his head. “No suh, but ah’ve also been workin’ on the new freezer. Ah can takes a look ‘round, tho’.”

Tom nodded. “Do that, and take the dogs with you.”

“Yessuh... ah!”

They all saw it at the same time: Tom’s electric truck pulling into the yard. At the wheel was a smiling elderly man, portly and mustachioed man who waved as he brought the truck to a stop. He was Wakefield Damon: one of Tom’s friends and a sort of unofficial source of advice. Next to him sat Mrs. Baggert: the housekeeper who had practically raised Tom from an infant ever since his mother had died, and who seemed utterly prepared to do her best in assisting Mary with Tom Jr.

In the back of the truck, fitted amongst bags of groceries, an enormous man squatted. He was Koku, a member of a South American tribe which Tom had visited years earlier. Events during that visit had led to Koku placing himself under obligation to Tom, and he had accompanied the young inventor back to America. Since then he had managed to become quite useful to Tom on many occasions: standing nine feet tall and weighing 400 pounds, with most of it solid muscle.

“Bless my mohair jacket,” Mr. Damon remarked as he eased out of the truck. “There must be something about having Mrs. Baggert as company that improves my skill at the wheel.”



“Which means he kept his driving fairly steady,” Mrs. Baggert added as she also stepped from the truck. Mr. Damon’s mishaps while in the process of trying to drive or pilot vehicles were legendary throughout Steuben County.

“Oh, and Mary,” Mrs. Baggert continued. “I took the liberty of stopping by the agency in town and having them send over a few more girls for you to consider.” She stopped as she noticed the expressions on the faces of Tom, Mary and Rad.

Mr. Damon also noted the mood. “I declare, Tom, all of you look rather put out.”

“Did any of you spot anyone walking on the road while driving back?” Tom asked.

“I take it you refer to someone other than the usual denizens.”

Tom nodded.

Mr. Damon and Mrs. Baggert looked at each other and shrugged. They then turned to Koku who had been quietly unloading the truck, but had paused to listen. The giant slowly shook his head.

“What is the difficulty?” Mr. Damon asked Tom.

In answer, Tom passed the card over to him and the older man examined it, with Mrs. Baggert peering over his shoulder. “Bless my astrolabe,” Mr. Damon eventually murmured. “Have you acquired an asteroid or some such while we were shopping?”

“No,” Tom said and explained the situation. “Rad’s going to search around with the dogs.” His eyes moved to Koku. “I’d like for you to look around as well. Keep an eye open for anyone you haven’t seen around here before. If they’re on the property bring them to me.”

With a nod, Koku immediately bounded off. Meanwhile Rad had released the bloodhounds from their kennel and was bringing them forward. “Mistah Tom, if theys get a sniff at that there card they might be able to get on the trail.”

“Good idea,” Tom said, and offered the card to the curious dogs who gave it a thorough going-over with their noses.

“C’mon now,” Rad said, tugging at the leashes. “Let’s go find ‘im before that big boy does. C’mon.”

Eager to be on the run the dogs began leading Rad off in a direction only slightly different from the one Koku had taken.

Mr. Damon watched them go. “Bless my pistachios. Seems I can’t even be away for a little shopping without something happening around here.”

“I’ll go get some tea started,” Mrs. Baggert said.

“I was fixing a little lunch,” Mary told her.

“And I’ll finish fixing it,” Mrs. Baggert replied, “plus get some groceries into this young heathen in the high chair. You three,” and she fixed a firm eye on Mr. Damon, “can bring in the groceries then relax. I swear, Tom, all the trouble you attract.”

Even with the concerns caused by the mysterious card, Tom couldn’t help but smile.

“It was all very well when you were younger and kyoodling about, and the only hair which turned gray was my own,” Mrs. Baggert went on, entering the house. “But you’re now a respectable businessman. Not to mention a husband and father. You should take that into consideration.”

“Which reminds me,” Tom said, moving past Mrs. Baggert and reaching again for the pile of mail, pulling out a single envelope. “I thought I recognized a return address,” he said, opening the envelope. “It’s from the clinic Dad’s at.”

Shaking her head, Mrs. Baggert busied herself with the food Mary had been preparing.

Keeping an ear out for sounds from Rad and Koku, Tom perused the letter. “The doctors say Dad’s doing well... but they point out that he’s very old.”

“And he’s had to raise a comet disguised as a son,” Mrs. Baggert added.

Tom considered the letter. “I’d better call the clinic and see if I can

talk to this Dr. Roeber. Maybe even talk to Dad as well. We should plan to go up and see him this weekend.”

“Oh let me know if we do,” Mrs. Baggert said, brightening up. “I can fix him some of that consommé he likes.”

Mary and Mr. Damon now huffed in through the back door.

“Thanks for the help with the groceries,” Mary told Tom, pushing bags onto the table.

“Got a letter about Dad,” Tom said lamely, showing Mary the evidence.

The look he received in return made him quietly decide to go out and get the rest of the groceries.

“Bless my tea cozy,” Mr. Damon said, “but I hope your father is doing well.”

“He could be doing better,” Tom murmured, heading back out. He tried to be upbeat for the benefit of Mary and the others, but Tom felt himself beginning to face the unpleasant reality that his father wouldn’t be around for much longer.

More than anything Tom wished Ned was back from California. But, upon reflection, Mary tended to provide adequate companionship. In some ways more than others...

He paused, putting the remaining bags of groceries down on the porch as he suddenly heard barking from far away. The dogs had found something... and it seemed to be near Merton Avenue.

The truck was still nearby, but Tom knew he could get there faster in his roadster and immediately went for it, jumping behind the wheel and touching the ignition button...

The roadster suddenly burst into flames.

## Chapter Three: The Hunt for Planet X.

Concerned at the sight of Tom rushing off, Mary had gone to the back door, reaching it in time to see the car become suddenly engulfed in flames.

“TOM!”

But the flames disappeared as suddenly as they had begun, leaving the sight of Tom leaping from what should’ve been an inferno. Tom was quickly rolling in the dust, trying to prevent himself from being burned beyond belief... and then realized there was no danger. At least not from fire, but he abruptly found himself in danger of asphyxiation as the arms of a near hysterical Mary squeezed tight around him.

“It’s okay, honey,” he said, trying to comfort her. “It’s okay. I’m all right.”

Mrs. Baggert (holding Tom Jr.) and Mr. Damon had also come out, their faces wreathed in deep concern.

“Bless my pet coatimundi named Gilbert,” Mr. Damon breathed. “Thomas!”

“I’m all right,” Tom insisted, returning Mary’s embrace, his eyes looking over the car. The roadster was apparently undamaged. Looking closer, though, Tom could see what seemed to be a series of faint lines criss-crossing the car.

As gently as he could he removed himself from Mary’s arms and cautiously crawled closer to the car.

“Careful,” Mary said.

“Don’t worry,” Tom murmured, almost pressing his face to the car, examining the lines. His eyes on them he reached into his pocket, pulling out a jack-knife. “Mrs. Baggert,” he began, unfolding the knife. Then he glanced over at the others. “No! Mr. Damon. Can I borrow your handkerchief?”

The elderly gentleman wordlessly passed it over. Taking it, Tom held it open against the metal of the car. With his other hand he used the knife to scrape at one of the faint lines, sending flakes of dust onto the silk.

“What have you got?” Mary asked.

“The reason why I didn’t burn to death,” Tom said. “And I bet I’m not going to like the answer.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Nitrocellulose.”

Mary was hugging Tom Jr. to her. “That’s bad? Or good?”

“It’s unusual,” Tom replied, still gazing into the microscope. He, Mary, Mr. Damon and Mrs. Baggert were in one of the workshops maintained near the house. This particular workshop was where either Tom or his father engaged in occasional chemical work, and Tom had taken advantage of it to analyze the flakes he had scraped off the car.

With a sigh Tom leaned back, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. “As near as I can determine, someone wrapped several yards of twine which had been treated with nitrocellulose around the car, attaching it to the roadster’s ignition.” He looked at the others. “Stage magicians use nitrocellulose to make flame effects in their act. It burns rapidly and vanishes, leaving no ash. The residue I picked up was all that remained of the twine.”

“Are you saying you weren’t supposed to be killed?” Mary asked.

Tom considered it. “I think I was supposed to be scared.”

“Well it worked on *me*.”

Tom lightly petted her arm. “Both the flame and the ‘falcon’ card were, I think, meant to scare me off of working with Dempson.” His expression drifting away he absently chewed on a knuckle.

Mary was about to suggest that maybe Tom should heed the advice, but then everyone heard the sounds of the dogs approaching,

as well as the voices of both Rad and Koku.

“In here,” Tom called out.

The handyman and the giant soon appeared in the doorway to the workshop, Rad holding tight to the leashes of the bloodhounds. “Laws, Mistah Tom, what all happened here?”

“Tell you later,” Tom replied. “What’d you two find?”

“No one,” Rad said apologetically. “But someone been’s here all right. More than jus’ one.”

“Found tracks at the far end of the field,” Koku rumbled. “Three men, and tire tracks. Car had been there.”

“Three men,” considered Tom.

“But if more than one was here,” Rad asked, “then how comes the dogs only smelt one of them?”

“They were following whoever handled the card,” Tom said. “The others probably came from a slightly different direction so that they could rig my car to burn,”

Both Rad and Koku looked surprised. “What?” Rad blurted.

Tom waved the question aside. “Rad, I need you and Koku to carefully look around again. Have the dogs sniff around the car and around the garage. See if you can pick up more tracks. Search as far as Longwell then come back. But for God’s sake be careful. Whoever we’re looking for is full of tricks.”

Koku nodded then slipped away. “Hang on, tall boy,” Rad called after him. “Don’t run off without these here dogs and me. C’mon, animals,” he went on, tugging at the bloodhounds to follow.

Tom watched them go. “They probably won’t find anything,” he muttered. “Anyone who can rig up my car to produce flames without being seen by any of us is way too professional to be caught even by a hunter as experienced as Koku. But I’ll feel better if they give the place a look around.”

“Are you going to be calling the police?” Mrs. Baggert asked.

“I’ll talk to them,” Tom promised, his eyes on Mary. Quietly he

felt that the Shopton constables would be less likely to catch the unknown visitors than either Koku or Rad. But any effort to calm Mary down would be time well spent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Much later in the evening, long after Mr. Damon had gone home (and Rad and Koku had returned, empty-handed as Tom had predicted), Mary quietly appeared at the door to Tom's study.

Tom was bent over some open reference books, but he had noticed her out of the corner of his eye. "Hm?"

"The baby is asleep," Mary said.

Tom nodded, turning a page in one of the books.

"Tom."

"Hm. Yes, dear?"

"I said the baby is asleep."

Something low and soft in Mary's voice caused Tom to glance up at her... and then to take an even longer look. "Oh!"

Smiling, Mary left the doorway to head for the bedroom.

Moments later Tom was easing in alongside her. "I'm glad you're feeling calmer," he murmured to her.

"I won't lie to you," Mary whispered. "I'm still very concerned. But you seem to have figured everything out so I guess I'll trust you with this."

"Nothing bad will happen," Tom said, lightly touching her cheek and hoping he sounded as if he were speaking the truth.

Mary looked as if she were balanced between wanting to say something, and wanting to invite more of Tom's touch.

Tom caught the uncertainty. "What, sweetheart?"

A small perplexed frown bloomed on Mary's face. "It's just... I mean, why would anyone want to scare you off of maybe working

with this Professor Dempson? It's just looking up into the sky, isn't it? Why would anyone act in such a way because of that?"

Tom sighed, supporting himself on an elbow and gazing down at Mary. "Yeah. I know that people think scientists are supposed to be calm and rational and peaceful. But you've been around me enough by now to know that it isn't always the case."

"True," Mary admitted. "But, looking for a new planet. Is there even such a thing?" She knew that asking such a question put her original plans for the evening into severe risk. But her mind still carried the sight of Tom being surrounded by flames, and her heart quivered. If there was a reason for Tom to be in danger she definitely wanted to learn as much as possible.

Tom considered the question. "Here," he said. "I'll try to explain. In 1846 the planet Neptune was discovered. Do you know how, dearest?"

Mary shook her head.

"Let's try this," Tom suggested and gently uncovered Mary's stomach. "Now," he said, letting a finger lightly trace a circle on her skin, "throughout the early 1800's astronomers were noticing that the orbit of Uranus wasn't quite steady. It was perturbing... demonstrating clear deviations like this. Follow me?"

Mary nodded, perhaps a bit rapidly.

"The idea was that there was another planet out there possessing sufficient mass and gravitational influence to have an effect upon Uranus' orbit." His finger slowly described a slightly larger circle. "Careful study of the sky eventually revealed the existence of Neptune."

"Oh yes!"

Tom smiled at the enthusiasm of his pretty student. "For a while things seemed to settle down. But then there were discrepancies being noted in the orbit of Neptune. Several astronomers... chiefly Percival Lowell... speculated that this was due to the existence of another planet beyond Neptune."

Mary's eyes were wide. "Do you know its orbit?"



“No one does yet, dearest.”

Mary seemed slightly disappointed at the news, and Tom grinned. “But Lowell’s theories have led to a search among the world’s astronomers for what’s being called ‘Planet X’. Lowell was searching for it until he died fourteen years ago, and others have taken up the hunt since then. Obviously there’s a lot of fame and prestige for whoever finds Planet X.”

“And this Professor Dempson,” Mary whispered. “He can find it?”

Tom shrugged. “He might.”

“B-but how can you help him? You’re very clever, and you explain things so nicely, but you’re mainly an inventor. An engineer.”

“True,” Tom admitted, giving Mary’s stomach a small pat. “But I’ve sometimes thought about trying to build a telescope. I’ve got some ideas on how to improve the resolving power by applying a special electric current to the lens. I haven’t built anything yet, but I’ve written a paper on the theory. Dempson read the paper and thinks I might be able to improve the telescope he’s using at the Yerkes Observatory. Not certain if it’s the 40-inch refractor he’s referring to.”

“The forty inch what?”

“Refractor. The sort of telescope you look through one end and see out the other. The forty inch at Yerkes is the biggest.”

Mary shifted, snuggling closer, her eyes bright in the dim light. “Really?”

Tom was beginning to experience some difficulty in concentrating on astronomy. He reminded himself, though, that the science enjoyed its best accomplishments in the dark and, reaching over, turned the bedside lamp off before resuming the lecture.

To his delight Mary proved herself a rather fervent and attentive pupil.

## Chapter Four: Tom Decides to Travel.

The next morning found Mrs. Baggert looking up in curiosity. “Mary? Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Mary murmured as she drifted somewhat unsteadily into the kitchen, taking a rather gentle bounce off the sink before heading towards the icebox.

Mrs. Baggert continued to watch and, at the same time, attempt to feed Tom Jr. “Can I help you with something?”

“Going to make Tom a meatloaf,” Mary said, gradually filling her arms with ground beef, pork and eggs. Her heart in her throat, Mrs. Baggert watched as the young woman managed to transfer the load to the adjacent counter without falling over.

“Do you need help, dear?”

“Umm-mm.” Mary stared down at the collection of ingredients, her eyes half closed. “No. Not a meatloaf. Maybe I should roast a turkey. Do we have a turkey?”

“Ah-hhh...”

“No,” Mary decided, “I guess a meatloaf will be good.” Opening a drawer she pulled out an enormous butcher knife.

That was enough for Mrs. Baggert who quickly got up. “Why don’t you let me start, dear, and you can say good morning to the baby and finish feeding him? I can also get you some coffee.” With careful moves she took the knife from Mary.

“S’good,” Mary said, wobbling over to the table and plopping down near the high chair, nodding absently at Tom Jr.’s gurgling welcome.

Pulling bowls and such down from cabinets, Mrs. Baggert began mentally reviewing Mary’s preferred meatloaf recipe. “Did you get enough sleep last night?” she asked, glancing back in mild concern over her shoulder.

“Oh I’m fine,” Mary said, a lazy smile on her face as she lightly teased the baby with the end of the bottle, taking it in and out of his reach. “Tom was teaching me about astronomy.”

“In the middle of the *night*?”

“That’s when it happens,” Mary replied around an enormous yawn. “Gotta use those great big telescopes to find those planets!”

Shaking her head, Mrs. Baggert pulled down parsley, pepper and kosher salt, trying to remember if there was fresh garlic in the house. She was extremely fond of Mary, but sometimes it seemed as if the child had grown... well, peculiar... ever since she and Tom got married.

As if on cue, Tom entered the kitchen, smiling and whistling to himself as he paused to put a brief kiss on his son’s head, then deliver a much longer one on his wife (having to maneuver a bit more carefully as Mary’s responding aim was somewhat precarious). “Good morning, Mrs. Baggert.”

“Morning to you as well. Coffee’s on the stove and you can get your wife a cup while she’s making meatloaf.”

Tom looked from Mary to Mrs. Baggert. “But... Mary’s feeding Junior, and it looks like you’re making the meatloaf.”

“She’ll catch up.”

Tom decided not to pursue the matter further and went to prepare coffee. He loved both Mary and Mrs. Baggert... one far more dearly than the other... and he was certainly enjoying married life. But he knew he’d be the first to admit that the ways of women were unfathomable.

“I’ll continue breakfast in just a bit, as soon as I get some these ingredients mixed,” Mrs. Baggert commented. “Not that I don’t mind you cheerful, Tom, but one would think that, with all that happened yesterday, you’d be a bit more concerned.”

“One would think that Rad and Koku would’ve handled anything that came along,” Tom replied, carefully adjusting a full cup of coffee within range of Mary who was making silent kissing motions at him.

“Speaking of which, have they shown up this morning?”

“Had their breakfast earlier,” Mrs. Baggert said. “Arguing amongst themselves as usual. If they found anything they didn’t tell me.”

“I’ll talk to them later on,” Tom said, sipping at his coffee and looking thoughtful. “Need to find out a few things before deciding what to do.”

“Well, just be careful if you go check the mail.” Mrs. Baggert brought a plate of fried eggs and biscuits to the table. “Better yet, get Rad or Koku to collect it for the next few days.” She went back to get the gravy. “And try to help your wife get more sleep at night. She’s wearing herself out.”

“You’re doing fine, Tom,” Mary assured him. “Wonderful in fact.”

Tom nodded idly, gazing out at nothing in particular while collecting his thoughts.

His attention was drawn to sounds from outside, and he waited as both Rad and Koku stepped into the kitchen.

“Found no one,” Koku told Tom. “No more tracks. No more signs.”

“The dogs ain’t raised a scent,” Rad added apologetically. “Not one sniff.”

“Well I feel better for knowing you two were out there roaming around and checking,” Tom assured them. “If anything, you’ve convinced me that we’re dealing with real professionals, although why they’d want to scare me off of helping Dempson is beyond me. I understand professional competition and all, but how many people knew Dempson would contact me?” He gave the two men another look. “Go and get some rest but check with me personally before starting anything else.”

Nodding gratefully, the two men went to their respective quarters.

Mrs. Baggert watched them go then turned to Tom. “And what are you going to do?”

“Start the ball rolling,” Tom said, finishing his coffee and grabbing a biscuit as he got up from his chair. I’m going to try and call the University of Chicago and speak to Dempson.”

“You’re thinking of settling all this business about threats and your car catching on fire and such?”

“Hope so,” Tom said, leaving the room. Watching him, Mrs. Baggert sighed to herself then turned to deliver a remark to Mary, only to find that the young woman had her head down on the table. Her eyes were closed and she was producing a gentle snoring sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

To his delight Tom learned that the University of Chicago had recently joined the gradually growing system of his photo telephone network and, after a connection had been established, he found himself facing a young man who identified himself as the “Photophone Clerk” for the University.

After introductions had been made, Tom asked if Professor Dempson was available for contact.

“I’m sorry,” the clerk replied, “but my notes tell me Professor Dempson is spending some time at the observatory in Williams Bay, Wisconsin. He’ll be back in Chicago at the beginning of next week.”

*“Can you get a message to him?”*

The clerk assured Tom that he could. “Please get in touch with him as soon as possible and tell him that Tom Swift would like to meet with him personally over the next few days,” Tom said. “I can be at the observatory later tonight, but I have to make some preparations beforehand. I’ll wait until I hear from the Professor before taking off.”

“Certainly, Mr. Swift. Is there anything else you’d like passed on to the Professor?”

*Thinking for a moment Tom said, “Yes! Tell him I’ve had a visit from the Falcon. I think he might understand.”*

“Very well.”

*Breaking the connection Tom switched off the phone, then leaned back in his chair, his mind slowly turning over.*

“And I thought you were planning on visiting your poor father this weekend,” Mrs. Baggert announced from the doorway.

Tom glanced over at her. “We still can. The *Winged Arrow* can get me to Wisconsin in no time.” Rolling over to his desk he pulled down an atlas, opening and consulting the pages. “Yes. Here we go. I can set down in Geneva Lake, practically on the doorstep of the observatory. A day or two talking to Dempson and then I fly back. Simple.”

“What happens if Mary or I get another scare?”

“Koku and Rad will be here to watch over all of you,” assured her, “and I’ll leave word with Chief Glaun.”

Mrs. Baggert seemed concerned. “You’ll go to Wisconsin all by yourself? I know Ned’s in California. You won’t take anyone useful with you?”

Tom considered it. “I can take Mr. Damon.”

“You won’t take anyone useful with you?”

Tom chuckled. “It’ll be all right. I just want to consult personally with Professor Dempson about this Planet X business before making up my mind if I can provide any real help. He might contact me in the next few hours and tell me the trip won’t be necessary. All we can do is wait and see.”

“We can also be more careful,” the housekeeper pointed out. “Next time, Tom, the fire might not go out so quickly. Keep that in mind.”

## Chapter Five: Message from Beyond.

The original *Winged Arrow* was Tom's design for a twin-engine seaplane; being sixty feet long with a wingspan of 110 feet. It could travel at a hundred miles per hour, featured personal (if somewhat snug) accommodations and required several crewpeople to operate.

Although useful, Tom eventually felt he needed a somewhat smaller and more personal version of the plane for more private work, and it was that aircraft which rose from Lake Carlopa into the noonday sky. The model-2 *Winged Arrow* was just as long as its predecessor, but possessed a shorter wingspan and more powerful engines, enabling it to reach a top speed of 120 miles per hour. More importantly, it could be handled by one person.

"Bless my autographed Edna Ferber," Mr. Damon remarked as the plane began turning west, "but is this trip truly necessary, Tom? I understand, of course, the necessity of perhaps speaking to this Dempson chap personally, but bless my pine needles if I'm not concerned over the well-being of your beauteous bride... not to mention the rest of your family."

"Mary and the others will be okay with Rad and Koku," Tom reminded the old gentleman (while mentally crossing his fingers). "This 'Falcon' person, whoever he is, seems to be interested in me particularly."

"By now I certainly understand how competitors in this sort of venture can be driven to rather extreme means. Bless my caramel nougat center, though, if the level of mischief we've already experienced here tends to astound me."

"Sort of astounds Mary as well," Tom replied, making a quiet note to someday tell her and Mr. Damon about the "Bone Wars" which occurred late in the last century. "There's a lot of prestige riding on finding Planet X, and that can mean all the difference in the world to a scientist."

Mr. Damon seemed to consider it. "Well... bless my chrome

pencil box if I rather wish Ned were with us. Not that I don't doubt you or I could make a good accounting of ourselves in a tight situation, but an extra pair of fists would put me at ease."

"Wouldn't mind having Ned with us either," Tom admitted. "But we're only going to be with Dempson for a little while. The way I see it not much can happen."

For the next few hours Tom flew steadily over the northern coast of Lake Erie, eventually passing Detroit, crossing the lower half of Michigan and then Lake Michigan before reaching the Wisconsin coast, skirting Kenosha and flying inland.

"Here we are," Tom finally announced. "Walworth County, Wisconsin. Specifically the pristine waters of Geneva Lake and the sprightly community of Williams Bay: home to this, that and, most important of all, the Yerkes Observatory."

Mr. Damon had been dozing in the chair next to Tom and he now woke up to peer out at the approaching expanse of water. "Bless my oblate spheroid, Tom, but you tend to make rather a smooth ride of things on occasion."

"One tries to give service," Tom murmured, concentrating on making a steady glide onto the surface of the lake.

Mr. Damon was still studying the landscape. "And where's the observatory?"

"It might be visible once I get around this point. It'll be back among the trees a little bit removed from the shore. Hang on." His hands firmly on the controls, Tom brought the *Winged Arrow* down upon the smooth water, skimming the vehicle easily in a gentle turn towards the north shore of the lake. A few boats were out on the water, and the plane's appearance generated quite a bit of interest.

"Here we go," Tom finally said as he throttled the engines down. "This is the marina for the George Williams College. We can tie up there and walk the rest of the way to the observatory."

Carefully maneuvering the plane closer to the marina docks, Tom allowed Mr. Damon to lean out from the passenger side hatch and toss



a line to one of the men who were standing there. A few final movements and the seaplane was soon nicely secured.

After shutting everything down, Tom climbed out to join Mr. Damon on the docks. "Were we to be met, Tom?" his friend asked.

"To be honest," Tom confessed, "when I got the Professor's telegram it seemed a little vague. But you've got to keep in mind the sort of hours which professional astronomers tend to keep."

"They have to sleep during the day so they can work at night."

Tom nodded. "Another reason I'm glad we arrived here in the early evening. Professor Dempson will be fully awake, and I can get a better look at his equipment and personally decide whether or not I can help in any way." Going over to where a group of marina officials waited, Tom made arrangements to have his plane watched over and attended to, explaining that he hoped to take off again sometime in the next day or so.

Returning to Mr. Damon he said, "Well I guess it looks as if we'll walk. Not that I don't mind stretching the legs. I was just sort of hoping we'd be met---"

"That would be me," a new voice said.

Tom and Mr. Damon both turned as a figure moved out from among the crowd which had been admiring the lines of the *Winged Arrow*. To Tom's way of thinking, his seaplane didn't possess the only admirable lines in the vicinity. The speaker was a slender woman who seemed to be his age. Fashionably dressed in a casual sleeveless blouse, her dark hair neatly bundled in a finger weave hairstyle beneath a cloche hat, she was smiling prettily at the newcomers, her soft dark eyes gazing pleasantly at them.

Looking at her, Tom experienced a rather interesting sensation. Namely: he found himself become rather aware of the wedding ring he wore.

Next to him Mr. Damon murmured: "Bless my rules of engagement."

The young lady moved closer, extending a hand. "Mr. Swift? I'm

Cosma Hobby. I work at the observatory as Professor Dempson's daytime assistant."

"Miss Hobby," Tom replied, touching the hand (and automatically noticing the lack of any sort of matrimonial jewelry). "I'm glad that, given the suddenness of our arrangements, someone from the observatory staff managed to come down." Privately he was also grateful that Ned was out in California, else he suspected there'd be a rather indecorous remark made about "wanting to take up a Hobby".

Cosma Hobby nodded towards the woods to the north. "The observatory is just over a thousand feet away," she said. "We can easily take the path to it."

Tom felt more than satisfied with the notion of a pleasant early evening stroll with an intelligent and charming lady (the image of Mary quickly materializing in his mind) and, giving assent, fell into step with his guide. Mr. Damon, finding the wherewithal to move much more vigorously than usual, took up a position next to Miss Hobby opposite that of Tom.

They were leaving the marina and approaching the path that the woman had pointed out when a movement caught Tom's eye. Glancing back over his shoulder he frowned briefly. The crowd which had been studying the *Winged Arrow* had been dispersing, but one of the spectators seemed to be in a particular hurry.

In fact, in the slowly growing dusk, Tom could have almost sworn that the scurrying figure bore more than a partial resemblance to Andy Foger: a man of Tom's age who, several times in the past, had produced no end of trouble. Thinking on it, though, Tom shook away the suspicion. Andy had been sent to Federal prison some years back and, even if he was out again, there'd be no reason for him to be here at Williams Bay.

Besides, Cosma Hobby was speaking to him. "The Professor was rather grateful that you decided to take the time to come speak with him personally about the project," she said. "The competition seems to be heating up throughout the astronomical community."

"Is the Professor using the forty-inch refractor?" Tom asked.

“Not as such,” admitted Cosma, “as you’ll soon learn. Among other things, you have to keep in mind that the forty-inch, plus the other major instruments, are in great demand for other projects. The Professor feels that anything which can maximize his observations would provide a significant advantage.”

Tom nodded.

“Bless my Annapurna,” Mr. Damon said, “but for something as important as Planet X couldn’t the astronomers let Dempson have the telescope all night?”

“It’s not as easy as that,” Tom explained. “There are many astronomers engaged in research. Unfortunately there are also very few telescopes to go around. Observation time is parceled out very carefully. Then you have to take into account the other problems that might occur, such as cloudy or rainy nights.”

“You’re very well informed,” Cosma told Tom with a smile, the expression sending a thorough warmth through him.

It was then that the observatory came into view, and Tom took a few moments to stare admiringly at the structure. Designed by Henry Cobb... the man who was responsible for designing many of the buildings on the University of Chicago campus... the observatory complex was a handsome structure set off by the three main domes that housed the various telescopes (including the larger one for the famous forty-inch device). Looking at it Tom felt confident it would long stand as a shining symbol of American scientific achievement and progress.

He was about to ask Cosma where they would meet Dempson when the trio suddenly noticed an excited young man rushing towards them. “There you are,” the man was saying to the young woman.

“What’s wrong?” Cosma asked him.

“I was told that Professor Dempson was waiting for visitors,” he said, giving Tom and Mr. Damon a brisk nod, “but no one’s been able to locate him. He didn’t show up for the evening meal and briefing, and we checked his rooms.”

Cosma frowned. “But that’s odd. The Professor specifically left a written message saying he wasn’t going to go anywhere and was waiting to personally meet Mr. Swift.”

“He may have been kidnapped,” the man said.

Cosma’s face paled. “What?”

“Come with me, please.”

Entering into a much more rapid pace the threesome followed the man to the observatory building. Entering it they found a group of people gathered around a table. At the approach of Cosma and her visitors the group stepped aside, and Tom saw that they had been studying a small device which was sitting on the table. He recognized it at once as a wire recorder.

Looking at it Cosma glanced at one of the men who had been a part of the group. “Did the Professor leave a message? He sometimes dictates notes to me with this machine,” she added to Tom.

The man who had been spoken to shook his head. “You’d better hear this for yourself,” he said and pressed a switch on the machine. As Tom and the others listened, an eerily spectral voice came from the speaker.

“I warned you, Tom Swift. You chose to interfere. Now Planet X will definitely be mine!”

## Chapter Six: Fox Among the Hounds.

Several of the people in the group were regarding Tom and Mr. Damon curiously.

“This is Tom Swift,” Cosma pointed out to them. “He arrived to talk to the Professor.”

Looks of understanding broke out among the group. By now Tom’s name was considerably well-known among scientists and engineers.

Tom, in the meantime, was still frowning at the wire recorder. “Did anyone see the Professor leave the area?” he asked.

No one answered. “The Professor was supposed to be relaxing in his quarters here,” Cosma said. “Wanting to be ready for when you arrived.”

Tom looked around at the people. “Has anyone called the police yet?”

“We just found the recording a little while ago, and also checked to see if Dempson was anywhere about,” one of the men said.

“Ummm. Better go ahead and call the police,” Tom said. “In the meantime, can I see his quarters, as well as his office?”

“This way,” Cosma offered and led both him and Mr. Damon up a flight of stairs.

Mr. Damon leaned close to Tom. “Bless my extensive collection of Portuguese Brannock Devices, but this is becoming rather dramatic.”

Tom agreed. “This might be more than we originally bargained for.”

Reaching the second floor Cosma directed them down a long hallway. “The astronomers keep their offices on this floor,” she explained. “A lot of them also maintain sleeping quarters attached to the offices. It helps in adjusting them to their schedule.”

“Do you just assist Professor Dempson?” Tom asked her.

“Pretty much,” Cosma replied. “I generally run errands for a lot of the astronomers during the daylight hours, but most of my work tends to involve the Professor. And here we are.” With a key Cosma opened up one of the doors and stepped back, allowing Tom and Mr. Damon to enter.

Professor Dempson’s office was rather tidy. Books and rolled charts neatly stored on shelves along one wall, and a blackboard covered with figures on the opposite side. Between them was a desk, with a window beyond it giving whoever sat at the desk a fine view of the observatory’s northern grounds.

“And the Professor slept here during the day,” Cosma went on, opening a door next to the shelves. Going to the doorway Mr. Damon peered in to see a snug but comfortable looking bedroom, the walls festooned with charts and graphs.

“Doesn’t seem to be any apparent sign of violence or a struggle,” he said.

Tom had moved over to the desk and was frowning at some papers and a notebook which were spread out upon it. “Are these the Professor’s notes concerning Planet X?”

Cosma leaned closer to the desk. “Yes.”

Tom looked at the blackboard, noting how many of the items written on it matched what he saw on the papers. His frown deepened.

Cosma had clasped her hands together and was gazing at him concernedly. “Is there anything...”

“It’s just odd,” Tom said.

“In what way?” Mr. Damon asked.

“I’m going to presume for the moment that the Professor was kidnapped,” Tom replied, making himself comfortable in the chair behind the desk. “What’s the only reason for doing so?”

Both Mr. Damon and Cosma answered: “Planet X.”

“Exactly,” Tom said. “But look here. The Professor’s notes on the

desk. Why take Dempson and leave these behind?"

Cosma looked thoughtful.

"Perhaps whoever took the Professor photographed the notes," Mr. Damon suggested.

"Maybe," Tom muttered. He slowly turned back and forth in the chair, pausing to look at a small collection of framed pictures on the wall. "Cosma? Did the Professor ever say if he was close to finding Planet X?"

The woman's face scrunched slightly in concentration. "He mentioned how he had found some promising information in the latest studies he made of the geocentric ecliptic, if that helps. You might want to talk with Professor Abrams or Dr. Collosz if you want more detail."

"If and when the police arrive," Tom said, "and after they've interviewed the others, I'd like to talk with whoever was assisting the Professor in the Planet X work."

Cosma nodded to herself. "I'll go and see if the police have arrived yet."

"Good." Tom watched the woman leave the room, a frown still on his face.

Mr. Damon noticed it. "Bless my Burma-Shave sign, but I've seen that sort of look on your face before."

"Something's really wrong," Tom said, "and I don't just mean Dempson's disappearance. If this whole mess is linked to the Planet X search then why leave Dempson's notes behind?"

"Was he even taken from his office? No one actually saw him being kidnapped."

"True," Tom considered. "But if Dempson was close to finding Planet X then I would've made a serious grab for these notes. Of course the notes wouldn't be of any use if he wasn't firmly on the trail but, if he wasn't, then why kidnap him?" He rocked idly in the chair, looking at the blackboard. "Someone... maybe a member of the observatory staff... might've been systematically copying the notes

down. That would've eliminated the need to take them."

Mr. Damon's eyes narrowed. "That's why you waited until Miss Hobby left before voicing that theory. But certainly you don't suspect---"

"Cosma might've been copying the notes and filing them as part of her work," Tom said. "If this was an inside job then we might want to check Cosma's filing system for signs of break-in. It still leaves a lot of bother, though."

Mr. Damon waited.

"There are several groups looking for Planet X," Tom explained. Besides here at Yerkes we have Lowell Observatory, Lick, Mount Wilson... and that's not counting the telescopes in other countries. So far, though, none of the other groups have reported any sort of trouble. Only Dempson here at Yerkes."

"And perhaps because he was the only one who solicited your help," Mr. Damon softly pointed out.

"That's been bothering me a lot," Tom agreed. "Maybe Dempson's work hasn't been targeted because he's close to finding Planet X. Maybe it's because I was asked to help."

A visitor's chair was in the far corner of the room, and Mr. Damon pulled it over to the desk and sat down. "Could you help Dempson?" he asked.

"Mary asked the same question," Tom replied, a smile briefly appearing as he recalled the circumstances surrounding the discussion. "I've got an idea for enhancing the performance of a telescope lens. The thing of it, though, is that it's not something I can just throw together in a few days. That's why I needed to talk to Dempson personally."

Mr. Damon was looking at the blackboard. "Can you read his notes enough to make a determination?"

"I'm more of an engineer than a physicist," Tom sighed. "But I guess I can reason out enough from these notes. What worries me is what'll happen next, as well as whether or not Dempson is safe."



“I’m going to ask the question you’ve been dancing around, Tom. Is our mysterious ‘Falcon’ working for one of the other groups searching for Planet X?”

“I’d hate to think that,” Tom told the old gentleman, “but history tells me this wouldn’t be the first time scientific competition sunk to this sort of level.” He rubbed his hands together slowly. “And there’s something else to consider.”

An eyebrow rose on Mr. Damon’s face. “Oh?”

Nodding, Tom told him about believing he had spotted Andy Foger.

Mr. Damon’s eyes grew wide. “Bless my chrome hood ornament! But surely Foger is still in Sing Sing.”

“Maybe,” Tom said, feeling none too assured. “I really should’ve kept more track of things, but I got sort of... distracted.”

“Inventions,” Mr. Damon suggested. “Marriage. Fatherhood.”

“Um. True. But things would make more sense if Andy was involved. All of this would be part of a personal vendetta against me. Dempson would’ve just been caught up in the flood. Anyway, I want you to keep your eyes open. If you see Andy, or even if you think you see him, let me know.”

“Most assuredly,” Mr. Damon replied vigorously. “We should also call home and inquire directly if the devious Mr. Foger is still incarcerated.”

“Yeah. And I can talk to Mary.”

“That too.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It took some effort before Tom finally managed to get a clear telephone connection to Shopton, whereupon he spent a half-hour in conversation with Mary (punctuated by a succession of personal comments, as well as Mary insisting on having Tom Jr. try to talk over

the phone to his father). Tom actually found himself reluctant to attend to business and wished he could be back home.

Eventually, though, he managed to learn from Mary that there had been no further mischief taking place in Shopton. Via her he passed on instructions to both Rad and Koku and asked her to also check with Police Chief Glaun concerning the current status of Andy Foger.

“But aren’t you coming home tomorrow?” Mary asked.

“I... sort of want to stay here a while and try to find out what happened to Professor Dempson.”

“But Tom---“

“It’s sort of my responsibility,” Tom said to her, wishing he didn’t have to sound so attached to his conviction.”

Hearing a faint tone of hurt in Mary’s voice didn’t help matters any. “All right,” she said. “I guess so. But remember we want to go see your father this weekend.”

“I certainly do,” Tom replied, and that led to a few more minutes of endearments exchanged over the phone line until both were firmly convinced that the other was the sweetest person in the entire world.

Mr. Damon had tactfully walked out of hearing while Tom was involved with the phone. Once Tom had hung up he came closer, accompanied by Cosma Hobby and a thickset man who regarded Tom with calm gray eyes.

The man held out his hand. “Mr. Swift? I’m Special Agent Solis with the FBI’s Milwaukee Office.”

Tom shook the hand. “So it’s been determined that Professor Dempson’s been kidnapped and he hasn’t just wandered off?”

“Well, between the Milwaukee Office, the Chicago Office and the officials with the University of Chicago, there’s been enough concern raised to have me look into things.

The man held out his hand. "Mr. Swift? I'm Special Agent Solis with the FBI's Milwaukee Office."

Tom shook the hand. "So it's been determined that Professor

Dempson's been kidnapped and he hasn't just wandered off?"

"Well, between the Milwaukee Office, the Chicago Office and the officials with the University of Chicago, there's been enough concern raised to have me look into things."

Tom's ears were picking up something interesting. "What else, Agent Solis?"

"It's no secret you've assisted the government in the past with your work," the agent admitted. "Your direct involvement in this affair sort of put the icing on everything, giving us an additional reason to enter the case."

Tom nodded. "You don't happen to have an agent or someone schooled in astronomy or physics, do you?"

Solis smiled sadly. "Fraid not."

"Reason I asked is because I was going to interview some of the people here and try to get some answers. I can pick my way through the theories well enough, but an additional technical mind on the scene would've helped."

"I can help," Cosma offered. "I'm not a degreed scientist, but I've picked up enough from working here to where I can be of assistance."

"Wouldn't mind that at all," Tom said, feeling Mr. Damon's eyes on him. Or perhaps it was all suspicion. In any case Tom decided to tell Solis about his theories concerning Andy Foger.

As he was about to, though, there was the sound of a distant *boom*.

Going to a nearby window Tom looked out to see a geyser of flame rising beyond the trees to the south. "Now what?"

Along with Mr. Damon, Cosma and Solis, Tom stepped out onto the southern lawn.

"Bless my Lincoln Logs," Mr. Damon said. "That seems to have come from the vicinity of the lake."

Tom was in agreement and broke into a run. He managed to cover the ground rather rapidly... Solis at his heels and Cosma not too much

further behind (and well ahead of Mr. Damon)... and, within a few minutes, managed to get near enough to the marina to confirm his suspicions. The *Winged Arrow* had blown up.

## Chapter Seven: Tom Begins Research.

Pushing his way through the crowd of onlookers, Tom went as close as he could to the marina before being stopped by a policeman. But one of the marina officials recognized him and allowed him through.

“We don’t know what happened,” the official explained to Tom. “It was all peaceful, and then the plane just... blew up.”

Tom was staring over at where the *Winged Arrow* once was, seeing nothing but a few smoldering pieces floating mournfully about. Not only the plane, but also a good section of the dock it was moored to had been destroyed.

“Was anyone hurt?” Tom asked.

The official shook his head. “Fortunately all the boaters on the lake who regularly use this marina had long since come in. No one was out on the dock.”

Tom turned to stare directly at the official. “You saw no one near the plane?”

“No. No sir.”

Special Agent Solis had caught up and was listening to the conversation. “I can have a team sent from Milwaukee to carry out an examination,” he told Tom. “If we can collect some of the wreckage we can try to figure out what happened.”

“I’ve got a pretty good suspicion,” Tom muttered.

Solis understood. “My team will also conduct a full investigation. We’ll question as many people as we can.”

Tom sighed wearily. “You should also be shortly receiving information on the current situation involving one Andrew Foger. Hopefully he’s still imprisoned in New York. If he isn’t, then you might want to keep your eyes open.”

Solis seemed very interested. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Cosma had now arrived (with Mr. Damon wheezing into view far

behind). At the sight of the ruined section of marina her hands went to her mouth and her eyes widened. “Oh no!”

“Oh yeah,” Tom agreed sullenly, looking back towards where the plane once was.

“Bless... my... northern... moon snails,” Mr. Damon managed to breathe out as he came to a stop, bending over with his hands on his knees as he also took in the sight. “Tom! If this... is the... Falcon...”

“Then he’s obviously playing for keeps,” Tom finished.

\* \* \* \* \*

Since Solis and the local police were organizing the investigation, Tom felt there was little else to do except call it a rather busy day and get some sleep. With Cosma’s assistance he and Mr. Damon managed to find a pair of spare beds in one of the unused astronomer quarters.

“I want to thank you for your help,” Cosma quietly told Tom before saying goodnight. “I’m just sorry this is threatening you so directly.”

“Well, so am I,” Tom admitted. “But at least this tells me I must be on the right track somewhere. Why else would someone be trying to scare me off?”

With an attempt at a smile on her face, Cosma wandered off.

From the bed he had chosen for himself Mr. Damon had been watching the exchange between the two. “The answer, of course, could be Andy Foger,” he gently pointed out. “Just possibly.”

“True,” Tom said, closing the door and going over to his own bed. “But if Andy’s out, and is involved in this to get revenge, then why would he kidnap Professor Dempson? He could’ve had a clear shot at me back home.”

“I must confess,” Mr. Damon said, “Foger’s way of thinking has never struck me as possessing an abundance of clarity.”

Tom was privately of a mood to agree.

“I must also confess that your way of thinking is rather cloudy at the moment.”

Tom had sat on the bed and was removing his shoes and socks. He now paused and stared at his friend. “Oh?”

Mr. Damon seemed to be gathering his thoughts together. “Forgive my theorizing, Tom,” he said slowly, “but I can’t help but feel you seem to be actively hoping that Foger is at the bottom of all this.”

Tom sat there, one shoe still in his hand, reminding himself that, for all his dottiness, Mr. Damon occasionally demonstrated genuine insight. “I guess I’ve been pretty obvious about it,” he said. “It’s just that, if Andy was at the bottom of everything, then a lot of this would be explained.”

“Undoubtedly,” Mr. Damon agreed. “But please keep in mind the possibility that we may be faced with a wholly different adversary. If that is so, then you gain nothing by associating him with the same tricks Foger employed.”

Tom had finished undressing and laid back on the bed. “Yeah... you’re right.” Shutting his eyes he rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Mr. Damon?”

“Yes?”

“We don’t have to tell Mary about the plane being blown up. She’d only worry.”

A sigh from the other bed. “Tom... your wife is lovely, kind, endearing and a marvelous mother to your son. She is also not an idiot, and she knew what she was getting into when she married you.”

“Um, true. G’night, Mr. Damon.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The following morning, feeling refreshed and relaxed, Tom was more in a mood to pursue the mystery. With Cosma nearby, he and

Mr. Damon enjoyed a late breakfast while looking at the notes which Solis had left behind.

“So far nothing on why the *Winged Arrow* blew up,” Tom remarked. “Shouldn’t be surprised. An answer will probably take more time.” He sipped at his coffee. “I really want to concentrate on Professor Dempson’s disappearance, and also his work. Cosma?”

The woman looked up from her own meal. “Um? Yes?”

“Who was the last person to see the Professor?”

Cosma thoughtfully touched a fingertip to her lips. “That should have been Dr. Collosz. He and the Professor were discussing some historical information on perturbation figures involving Neptune.”

“I’d like to talk with him first if he’s willing.”

Cosma considered it then nodded. “He should be in his office right now, organizing notes for tonight’s work.”

Leaving the dining hall the trio strolled back to where the astronomers had their rooms. “Tell me about this Dr. Collosz,” Tom asked Cosma.

“Dr. Slavomir Collosz came to us from the Berlin Observatory,” Cosma explained. “The Professor invited him over to assist with the Planet X search. Dr. Collosz accepted the offer because working here at Yerkes gave him an opportunity to pursue his own project.”

“Which is...”

“Finding a more effective means for calculating the displacement characteristics of an undiscovered planet. Oh there he is!” Pointing down the hall Cosma indicated a slightly stoop-shouldered grey haired man who was briskly strolling in their direction.

At the sight of them the man smiled. “Ah, Cosma! Some of those investigator people downstairs are wanting to talk with you in your office.”

“I’d better go see what they want,” Cosma told Tom. “And you remember Mr. Swift from last night?” she added to Collosz.

“I’m certainly not likely to forget last night,” Collosz replied,



reaching out to shake first Tom's hand, and then Mr. Damon's. "I take it you're going to help with finding poor Lee."

"I'm looking into it," Tom told him as Cosma wandered away. "But apparently someone thinks I'm close enough to whatever's going on to try the sort of things which have happened. I just hope things don't get bad for the observatory because of my being here."

Collosz nodded, unlocking the door to his office and inviting his guests in. "Lee's disappearance has certainly been bad enough."

"Do you feel he's been kidnapped, Doctor?"

Following Tom and Mr. Damon in, Collosz pondered the question. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Swift," he said, closing the door behind him, "at this point I frankly would not be at all surprised. Oh... just move some of those books aside and make yourselves comfortable please."

Tom and Mr. Damon cleared away enough material from two chairs to allow themselves to take up position before Collosz's desk. The astronomer meanwhile went past them to take his own seat.

"Bless my Tibetan ragout," Mr. Damon said, settling in, "but I confess all this skullduggery and vicious dealings going on between scientists tends to leave me breathless."

Collosz sighed, rubbing a hand through his short iron-grey hair. "Unfortunately, Mister..."

"Wakefield Damon."

"Mr. Damon. Unfortunately this isn't the first time something like this has occurred in astronomical circles. There's a regrettable history of misdeeds associated with the search for new planets."

Mr. Damon became interested. "Oh?"

Collosz nodded. "When Neptune was discovered in 1846 there was something of a controversy over who would receive the actual credit. Professional jealousy is a disease which even astronomers are not immune to."

"Well. Bless my neoclassical period."

“Your English is practically flawless, Doctor,” Tom said to him.

Collosz nodded. “Thank you. You no doubt heard from Miss Hobby that I was attached to the Berlin Observatory. I received my doctorate from the Charles University in Prague but did post-graduate work at Stanford before accepting the Berlin post.”

“I see.” Tom leaned forward slightly. “You understand that I want to ask some questions regarding Professor Dempson’s disappearance.”

“Most certainly.”

“Cosma thinks you were the last person to see the Professor. Was she right?”

Collosz thought it over. “Early yesterday Lee mentioned how he had talked you into coming here to discuss assisting us with our Planet X work. He was very excited and, as he expected to be meeting with you later in the day... as well as preparing for the evening’s observing... he retired to his quarters to rest up.” Collosz shrugged. “That was the last time I saw him.”

“Had you noticed any strangers around? Anything unusual?”

A slow shake of the head. “You must understand,” Collosz told Tom, “that I usually spend my daylight hours also preparing for the evening’s work. There’s also a considerable number of people who tour the observatory grounds. I imagine questions are being raised concerning the visitors.”

Tom took it all in. “The notion that Professor Dempson was kidnapped... if he truly was... indicates that someone felt he was close to finding Planet X. As part of his research team how close do you feel you and he are to actually locating it?”

“That is a good question. We’ve been searching through the original coordinates which Lowell and Pickering worked out back in 1909. So far no result. We’ve been adopting a more or less common approach to finding a distant planet: studying areas of space at the opposition point relative to Earth and the Sun. As you might guess it’s been rather tedious work. As for actually being close to finding it,”

Collosz shrugged again, "that's really open to interpretation. I can't think of a single group or individual who can actually claim to be on the verge of discovery."

"Professor Dempson felt that I might be able to contribute to the search."

"Yes indeed. You see, we had been hoping for some cooperation from the Lowell Observatory. Five years ago they managed to acquire glass discs for the purpose of constructing a new thirteen inch telescope that would vastly improve their own efforts."

Tom frowned. "Five years ago? But Lowell died back in 1916. Why the delay?"

"There was a battle for financial control of the Lowell estate," Collosz replied. "Nothing further could be done until the matter was cleared up. The director at Lowell... Slipher... now receives funds directly from Lowell's brother.

"But back to your question. Lee came across a paper you'd written on using electrical currents to enhance optical lenses. He was wanting to see if your theories could be used to somehow improve the ten inch Cassegrain we have here."

"I see." Tom thought for a while. "Of course I'd have to examine the telescope personally. But if you're using a Cassegrain... a reflector... then there may be problems. And you've got to understand, Doctor, that this might not be something I'd be able to construct overnight. A lot of my work was still theoretical."

"I understand," Collosz said. "Lee knew it was a shot in the dark. Perhaps literally. But we decided to explore every option. Of course, now with his disappearance..." The astronomer spread his hands out.

"As far as you know, did Professor Dempson have any enemies?"

"Lee was well liked by all and maintained a friendly level of correspondence with the astronomical community. Frankly I'm astounded that someone would be desperate enough to cause him harm. Excuse me." He picked up the ringing phone on his desk and listened for a few moments.

When he hung up his face was concerned. “We had better go down to Miss Hobby’s office, gentleman. It seems she’s rather upset about something.”

## **Chapter Eight: News from New York.**

With Dr. Collosz in tow, Tom and Mr. Damon headed for the administrative offices on the first floor.

“Bless my glockenspiel,” Mr. Damon said, “I may need roller skates if I’m going to be of any help.”

Tom pushed aside a mental image of Mr. Damon trying to negotiate stairs while on roller skates and put on a bit more speed, wondering what had happened to Cosma.

The answer came when they arrived at the offices to see a small crowd of men and woman gathered around the visibly shaken woman. One of the women, who Tom recognized as another one of the observatory assistants, was helping her into a chair and gently trying to get her to take some water.

One of Solis’ FBI agents was nearby and he nodded as Tom and the others entered.

“What happened?” Tom asked.

“We were looking into the notion that someone might have broken into Miss Hobby’s files in order to copy Dempson’s notes,” the agent said. “We definitely found some scratches although they weren’t easily seen. We also found this.” The agent handed Tom a small white card.

Taking it gingerly, Tom had an uncomfortable feeling as to what was coming. His spirits sank as he saw a familiar looking falcon design on one side.

On the other side was a message.

**COSMA HOBBY YOU’RE NEXT!**

Tom grimly handed the card back to the agent. “Apparently our mysterious friend isn’t satisfied with just kidnapping Professor

Dempson and trying to scare me away from the Planet X project.”

The agent nodded agreement.

Meanwhile Cosma had noticed Tom’s arrival. “Oh, Tom...”

“It’ll be okay,” Tom assured her, trying to sound more convincing than he felt. “This ‘Falcon’, whoever he is, at least has the decency to advertise his moves. He’ll have a hard time getting through to you.”

“I’m going to have more agents assigned to Miss Hobby,” the agent told Tom. “I’m also going to put in a call for a few female agents so that she’ll have someone who can be even closer than we can.”

Cosma heard the remark. “But they’ll be in trouble too,” she wailed.

“Ma’am they’re paid and trained for that sort of thing,” the agent said.

Cosma still didn’t seem too happy with the notion but sat quietly in the chair, still trying to catch her breath.

Tom noticed some of the open filing cabinets near a desk which he presumed belonged to Cosma. “What have you learned?” he asked the agent.

“We’re dealing with a real professional,” the agent replied. “I mentioned that the scratches we found weren’t immediately evident. There wasn’t any of the usual damage associated with breaking into a cabinet like the ones here. We’re going to take fingerprints, but I’m willing to bet our friend was too careful to leave any behind.”

“Some of the files were moved,” Cosma spoke up. “If I hadn’t been looking for tampering I might not have noticed it, but some of the Professor’s notes were definitely misfiled.”

Mr. Damon had leaned closer to peer at the card. “A rather exquisite rendition of a falcon,” he said. “Distinctive. Whatever he may be, our skulking adversary is an artist.”

“If he did the drawing,” Tom murmured, his thoughts racing.

“Oh and we have some news on your plane,” the agent said.

Tom's face brightened with interest. "Oh?"

"I wish I could say it was something elaborate and traceable. But our study of the fragments we managed to recover is making it look as if someone just attached an ordinary time bomb to the part of the wing where the fuel tank opening was."

"Bless my Vitruvian Man," Mr. Damon murmured. "We live in a tragic period indeed when a time bomb can be referred to as 'ordinary'."

Tom was quietly inclined to agree. "You're continuing your research?" he asked the agent, receiving a nod in reply. Tom then gazed idly in Cosma's direction, still collecting his thoughts.

"Everything short of outright murder is being done to delay the observatory's efforts in the Planet X project," he commented half to himself. "I'm just hoping murder isn't on the menu."

He noticed the hooded look on Mr. Damon's face and felt he knew what the older man was thinking: the very real possibility that Professor Dempson could already be dead. Fortunately Mr. Damon knew when to keep such notions silent. At least until greater privacy allowed the airing of uncomfortable possibilities.

"We've had kidnapping, threats, bombings, break-ins and theft," Tom went on. "It occurs to me that the one thing we haven't yet considered is direct sabotage to the astronomical equipment." His eyes sought out Dr. Collosz. "Can you take me to where the Cassegrain telescope is?"

The astronomer nodded assurance. Giving a few more comforting words to Cosma, Tom, Mr. Damon and the FBI agent followed Collosz on a walk out of the main observatory building, going southwest on a curving path. Their destination was a modest structure featuring a pair of domes, smaller versions of their larger and much more famous cousins.

"Oh, and both the local and the Chicago press have been wanting statements," the agent told Tom.

Tom sighed.

“I agree, but admittedly it isn’t every day an observatory experiences this sort of thing.”

“I’d rather be kept in the background on all this,” Tom said.

The agent nodded. “Understood. We’ll deal with the press and handle the preparation of statements and such, although we’d appreciate you looking at anything before we release it.”

“Oh certainly.”

Reaching the smaller building, Dr. Collosz directed his guests to one of the domed enclosures. There the newcomers paused to take in the sight of the Yerkes 10-inch telescope.

A rangy-looking blonde man had been studying some notebooks at a nearby desk, but he looked up at the arrival of the visitors. “Hi, Slavomir... oh! You brought Mr. Swift and his friends with you.”

Collosz nodded. “I’d like to introduce you to Professor Leonard Abrams,” he told Tom and the others. “He’s the third member of the observatory Planet X team. Leonard? Mr. Swift wanted to take a personal look at the 10-inch.” Collosz went on to explain the reasons behind the request.

Abrams frowned thoughtfully. “The idea that someone would go that far to interfere with our work bothers me,” he said, “but I can see your point. Please. Feel free to look around.”

Tom did so, approaching the telescope while the FBI agent and Mr. Damon wandered nearby. “Professor Abrams, I’m assuming this building is locked when not in use,” Tom said.

“It is,” Abrams replied. “The maintenance crew and both Slavomir and I have keys. There are other keys but, if you want to use them, you have to sign for them.”

“Easily taken and copied,” the agent muttered to Tom.

Tom nodded, his eyes on the telescope and the frame which supported it.

Mr. Damon was looking curiously at the instrument. “Bless my cork lined bottle cap. To be honest, Tom, I thought they would be



using one of the larger telescopes for finding a distant planet.”

“It has less to do with size than it does with the ability to gather in light,” Tom murmured, peering closer at the telescope. “And remember that Professor Dempson wanted me to try and develop my electronic lens design to improve the light gathering ability of this scope... which is a fine instrument. But it’s a reflector. My work was centered around refractors.”

Abrams and Collosz looked pleased at the compliment regarding the telescope. “I read your paper,” Abrams told Tom. “Some extremely interesting work you put into it.”

“Mostly theory,” Tom confessed, although he was smiling. “I’d been corresponding with a gentleman out on the west coast who’d been working on something he called a ‘stroboscopic polarizing filter’.”

“Tyco Bass!”

“Oh you know him?”

Both Abrams and Collosz nodded. “I was wondering if you knew of his work,” Abrams said to Tom. “Both of you were researching ways to apply electrical currents to optical systems, although Mr. Bass seemed interested in entirely different results.”

“Yes. The impression I got was that Mr. Bass was more interested in canceling out interference produced by the Sun, and...”

Tom’s voice faded and the others seemed concerned.

“Bless my escaped solifugid,” Mr. Damon said. “What’s wrong?”

Tom raised a warning hand, his eyes fixed on the base of the telescope. “Professor Abrams,” he said sharply, “have any maintenance people been in here recently?”

“I’d... have to check the schedule,” the scientist admitted.

“Anyone at all besides yourself?”

“Not that I know of.”

Tom had knelt down and was now staring closely at the base.

Mr. Damon inched closer. “Tom?”

“Wait,” Tom said. Removing a pocket knife from his trousers he opened the blade. “Professor Abrams, is there any reason for twine to be wrapped tightly around the base?”

“Twine? Why... no.”

Mr. Damon sucked in his breath. “Is it...”

“I think it is,” Tom said, gently probing at the twine with the point of his knife. “I think I’ve seen this before. Especially since... yes!” He made a brief cutting motion with the knife. “Okay, I believe it’s safe to come close.”

Everyone went to stand around him, watching as Tom carefully pried something loose from beneath a flange near the bottom of the base.

“That’s part of the power system for the telescope clockwork,” Collosz said.

“It was going to be powering something else,” Tom explained, sitting back and exhaling noisily. “I need to use a laboratory and examine that twine. Or maybe the Bureau could do it,” he added, glancing up at the agent. “I’m betting a dollar the twine is treated with nitrocellulose. Not enough to damage the telescope or put anyone in danger... I hope... but enough to cause a panic when it ignited. There was a wire going from the twine to the clockwork power system.”

“Sabotage the telescope,” Collosz breathed. “You called it, Tom.”

“But it’s nothing but pranks,” Tom declared. “A mixture of pranks and serious crimes. One moment kidnapping, the next moment a stage stunt.”

“Delaying actions,” Mr. Damon reminded him.

“I guess,” Tom muttered. He looked back up at the agent. “You’d better tell Solis to have a team go over this observatory with a fine-toothed comb. Dr. Collosz and Professor Abrams... both of you probably need to assist.”

The scientists nodded vigorously, with Abrams mopping his

forehead with a handkerchief.

It was at that moment that Solis entered the room, accompanied by another agent. At the sight of everyone gathered close around the telescope he asked: "What's wrong?"

Tom and the others quickly explained.

Solis softly swore. "I'll get more people here, as well as the ones I'll want watching Hobby. In the meantime, Tom, you'd better have a look at this. It's from the FBI main office in New York City."

In Solis' hand was an opened telegram which he now offered to Tom. Curious, Tom took it and read the message. "Oh no!"

STATE BUREAU OF PRISONS REPORTS ANDREW FOGER  
PAROLED SIX MONTHS AGO STOP. CURRENT  
WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN STOP.

## Chapter Nine: Fiery Fist Fight.

“This is what happens when I don’t pay attention,” Tom said, passing the telegram to Mr. Damon.

The older man studied it then sighed. “Bless my diamond studded spats.”

“Paroled,” Tom said to himself, looking off into the distance. “Why do I see Arlington Foger’s money behind all this?”

“But he was let out six months ago,” Mr. Damon pointed out. “If Andy is indeed the one behind all of this then why would he have waited so long?”

“Andy’s a lot of things,” Tom replied, “but he isn’t stupid. He wouldn’t have just rushed into getting back at me the moment he got out of prison. That’s if, like you said, he’s the one behind this.”

Mr. Damon quietly watched Tom, recalling their conversation of the previous evening.

Apparently Tom was doing the same. “It just doesn’t make sense, though. If it *is* Andy then he’d be concentrating on me. Why cause trouble here, and with Professor Dempson?”

“You’re still suspecting him, though,” Mr. Damon said.

“I am,” Tom admitted. Rising to his feet he faced Solis. “I’d better give you and your people a full description of Foger. Meanwhile, if you can somehow locate him it’d help.” Tom then explained the problem to Collosz and Abrams.

The astronomers looked at one another. “We don’t remember seeing anyone like that,” Abrams said to Tom. “But we get quite a number of visitors.”

“So Dr. Collosz explained.” Tom thought to himself for a bit. “All right. Cosma’s been threatened and she’s going to be watched. We just scotched a potentially serious attempt at sabotage here, and this observatory’s going to be thoroughly searched. We’re going to be on

the lookout for Andy Foger.” Tom stared at Mr. Damon. “What am I not thinking of? What am I missing?”

“We’ve concluded that the Falcon could well be in possession of Professor Dempson’s notes,” Mr. Damon said. “How much harm can he accomplish with them?”

“Um.” Tom looked over at Abrams. “Professor? Since I’ve already chatted with your colleague can you help Mr. Damon and I with that question? Dr. Collosz can start assisting Agent Solis and his people in looking over the observatory.”

“Sure,” Abrams said with a glance at Collosz.

“And I’d like to check up on Cosma and take another look at Dempson’s office.” Accompanied by Mr. Damon and Abrams, Tom left the dome to start walking back towards the main building.

“First off, Professor, what’s your background? I think you’re the youngest astronomer I’ve seen here.”

Abrams smiled a bit sheepishly. “Actually I haven’t been one for very long. I joined Professor Dempson’s teaching staff in Chicago after I received my doctorate and, from there, I soon got involved in research. Depending on how our efforts go here I hope to work up a series of seminars on deep sky astronomy.”

“I see. I also notice the lack of a wedding ring on your finger.”

Abrams seemed surprised at the question. “Well, being a research professor sort of cuts into one’s social life.”

Tom nodded. “I sort of understand that. The reason I asked is because I was wondering why you weren’t dating Cosma Hobby.”

“Oh...”

“I may be really out of line here, but she is admittedly rather pretty. And, to be honest, I was expecting more of a reaction from you when Dr. Collosz explained how she’d been threatened.” Tom gave Abrams a glance. “Of course, if you’re already seeing someone...”

“No-ooo,” admitted Abrams. “And I’ll confess that I’m quite attracted to Cosma. I wouldn’t be much of an astronomer if my eyes

couldn't notice her. Unfortunately I've got sort of a strike against me as far as she's concerned."

"I shouldn't get nosy---"

"No, no. It's all right. I don't want to tell tales out of school, but you might have noticed that Cosma is very dedicated to Professor Dempson."

"Clearly evident," Mr. Damon said. "Her rather intense level of upset in regards to his kidnapping hasn't escaped either Tom or myself."

Abrams took a breath. "Cosma is... *very* dedicated to Professor Dempson."

Realization dawned on Tom's face. "Ohhhh."

Abrams nodded. "Yeah. Admittedly it's been way much more on her side than on his. Not only is Lee much older than Cosma but he's been married before."

"'Been'?"

"He and his wife divorced twenty or so years ago."

Tom nodded. "Okay, so that's a few more pieces in place."

Abrams was staring at him, almost smiling. "You were suspecting me of being this 'Falcon' character?"

They had reached the main building and Tom opened the door. "I apologize," he said. "It's just that this whole business has me running into one brick wall after another. Admittedly I'd be closer to an answer if either you or Dr. Collosz were shifty-eyed rascals intent on stealing the credit for finding Planet X. But the both of you seem to check out okay."

"It bothers me too," Abrams said as he followed Tom into the building. "Not just Lee being missing, or everything else that's happened. We just can't figure out why Lee's been singled out for trouble. Why not any of the other Planet X researchers?"

Tom paused in the main corridor. "I asked Dr. Collosz his opinion on how close you and he and Professor Dempson were to finding

Planet X,” he said. “What’re your thoughts on the matter?”

Abrams nodded. “Yeah. It would make a lot of sense if people thought we were really close. To be honest, though, it’s still anyone’s race.”

“Dr. Collosz mentioned some trouble you were having with the people at Lowell.”

Abrams grimaced. “I’d call it more of an irritation than actual trouble.” He gave Tom a more intense look. “I hope you’re not suspecting---“

“I wish I could more than I’m doing,” Tom told him. “Once again I’m up against a lack of motive. Yes, I accept there’s a lot of competition out there to find Planet X. But I’m not hearing of any outright hostility or conflict anywhere within the astronomical community.”

Abrams’ look was still intense. “If there was anything which singled Lee out from everything else---“

“It was in his interest in my lens research,” Tom finished ruefully.

“Back full circle,” Mr. Damon commented.

“This ‘Andy Foger’ business,” Abrams said.

Tom let out an exasperated breath. “Once again I could understand Andy wanting to get back at me. But why this way? Why Professor Dempson and the Planet X search? If Andy is involved then it makes far less sense than any of the other astronomical groups getting vicious. And no one here seems jealous enough to do the sort of things that have happened.”

“But you do seem to be the mitigating circumstance,” Mr. Damon gently pointed out. “The attempts to scare you off. Then the blowing up of the plane.”

“Yeah,” Tom muttered. He resumed walking. “Professor Abrams---“

“Leonard.”

Tom smiled a bit. “Okay and I’m Tom. What could anyone gain

from Professor Dempson's notes?"

"Wow." Abrams thought it over as they climbed the stairs to the second floor. "Lee published fairly regularly. About the only thing we kept close to our chests were the coordinates for the exact areas of the sky that we searched. If anyone had those then all they'd gain were positions to eliminate from their own efforts."

"So all we really have here are attempts to delay your work." Tom shook his head. "Somehow someone thinks you're ahead of the pack."

Abrams snorted. "If we are then I wish someone would tell us how."

They reached Dempson's office and Abrams fumbled in his pocket for a key. When he inserted it, though, he suddenly froze. "Tom---

Tom saw it too: the door opening before Abrams had turned the key. Beyond it was darkness.

"Get the guards," Tom murmured to Mr. Damon, his eyes still on the doorway. "Or some of the FBI agents."

"I'll remain," Mr. Damon replied softly. "If worse comes to worse I'll produce a manly shout for assistance."

Abrams was peering into the office. "The window doesn't seem to be open, or broken. Of course the blinds are down so it's sort of hard to tell."

Tom took a cautious step in, his hand already reaching out for the light switch.

"Be careful---

But someone was already roughly brushing past Tom to get out into the corridor. Whirling about, Tom managed to see a lithe figure dressed in black from head to toe. What caught Tom's attention even more was the mask which completely covered the face. A sort of disguise one might find at Mardi Gras in New Orleans, or perhaps the Carnival of Venice. As black as the rest of the outfit, but featuring upswept holes for the eyes as well as a small curved nose which



clearly resembled a beak.

The apparition managed to pass Tom but slammed directly into Abrams, almost knocking the astronomer over. Abrams managed to maintain his balance and moved to hold the mysterious figure tightly.

It was then that a pair of arms grabbed Tom fiercely from behind. Moving instinctively Tom immediately slammed an elbow hard into whoever was behind him. With a grunt of pain the arms loosened just enough for Tom to turn and follow through with a fist. His opponent was quicker, though, and Tom managed only a glancing blow. Before the assailant stepped back to blend in with the office shadows Tom saw that, as with the man struggling with Abrams, his attacker was also dressed in black and sporting a beaked mask.

And now the man shouted from the shadows. "It's Tom Swift!"

At that the man Abrams was trying to hold on to burst into flames, fire racing over his entire body. With a shout Abrams immediately moved away, but didn't seem harmed. Just as immediately as it started the flames disappeared, leaving the man standing there with no sign of injury.

Surprised at the spectacle, Tom almost didn't see the other man re-emerge from the office. But he caught a movement from the corner of his eye and ducked just in time to avoid a direct blow to the back of his head. Spinning about, Tom responded with a fist, managing this time to knock the stranger thoroughly off balance.

Tom once again tried to find the light switch, his eyes searching the darkness.

"Go back to New York," the first man cried out, taking a few steps away, "or Dempson dies!"

Both Abrams and Mr. Damon moved towards him, but the man in black pointed a hand and a large gout of flame raced from his fingertips, holding the two of them at bay. A second later and he turned towards the nearest window, rushing to it and throwing himself through the glass.

Abrams and Mr. Damon quickly rushed to the shattered window

to look out. “No sign of him,” Mr. Damon said to Tom. “Completely vanished.”

Tom turned back to the office in time to face a blazing apparition of his own. As with the first man the flames quickly disappeared, but as Tom tried to lunge closer he found himself ducking just in time to avoid being incinerated by a jet of fire similar to the one which had stopped Mr. Damon and Abrams. A pause, and then Tom saw a shadow eclipse the window at the far wall. The blinds were thrust aside, and once again there was the sound of breaking glass as the figure escaped.

Running into the office Tom went to what was left of the window and peered out. A few people could be seen on the grounds, all of them staring curiously up at him.

Of his unknown attacker there was no sign.

## Chapter Ten: Stage Frights.

The commotion naturally attracted a crowd of people, including not only the police but also Solis. The FBI agent noticed the look on Tom's face. "Don't worry," he assured, "I've got my people and Collosz still giving the observatory the once-over. But this is something I had to see for myself."

A wide-eyed Cosma had also appeared, and Tom noticed how Abrams tended to gravitate in her direction as the story of the break-in was related.

"But all those flames," Cosma cried out. "Aren't any of you hurt?"

Tom shook his head. "Stage fire. A special effect used by magicians and similar performers. I've been encountering it a lot in the course of this business," and here he related the fire effect he had encountered at home, as well as the sabotage device he had found in the observatory. "I'm willing to bet that, if I examined the floor around here closely, I'd find traces of nitrocellulose."

"Maybe not," Solis remarked, glumly noticing the numerous pairs of feet shuffling about. "What about this vanishing act you mentioned?"

"More stage magic," Tom considered. "This touch of the theatrical , , , and that includes the get-up the men were wearing... makes me think we're looking for people with backgrounds in show business. Mr. Damon? You're looking rather thoughtful."

"Bless my Damaraland mole rats. Tom, the people who rigged your car. Neither Koku or Rad could track them, even with bloodhounds."

"More stage magic," Tom agreed. "I'm betting that our falcon-faced guests here, and the tricksters back in Shopton, are one and the same." Hands on hips, Tom turned back towards Dempson's office. "What were they looking for? Leonard? Cosma? Any ideas?"

The two people glanced at each other, and Cosma shrugged. “If my files were being robbed,” and here Cosma grimaced, “they they’d have everything Professor Dempson had in his office.”

Curious, Tom went into Dempson’s office, closely followed by the others. Switching on the light he paused. “Whoa!”

In his earlier haste to try and catch the intruder in the darkened office, Tom hadn’t had time to notice the surroundings. Now he did and he saw how the room had been worked over. Desk drawers had been pulled out, books and papers strewn over the floor and files opened.

Abrams peered in. “Looks like they were searching the place with a sledgehammer.”

“But why?” Tom murmured. “Cosma’s right. Unless... Cosma. Had you been up to date on the Professor’s notes?”

“I think so,” Cosma said, looking around mournfully at the damage. “I’d have to check closely with Professor Abrams and Dr. Collosz.”

Abrams seemed none too displeased at the idea. He then noticed how Cosma knelt down to gingerly pick a picture up from the floor and stare at it, her fingers brushing away the shattered glass in the frame.

Tom saw it too. “You really should be at home, Cosma,” he gently told her. “Agent Solis is arranging protection and you’d be safer.”

Cosma sighed. “I guess I was up to date with my notes,” she said, putting the picture on the desk. She turned away to leave, and Solis murmured for some of the police to follow her as an escort.

Tom resumed staring around the room. “Something,” he said to himself. Then: “Leonard? Did you or Dr. Collosz know if Professor Dempson was in the habit of hiding things? Notes or anything along those lines?”

Abrams had been watching Cosma’s departure but he now turned to Tom. “If he did then neither Slavomir or I knew anything about it. And I’d have to agree with Cosma. Lee’s notes included our findings

as well and it was all current.”

“We’re missing something, then.” Tom took another slow turn around the room. “And I’m obviously not seeing it.”

“You had wanted to come back here for something, Tom,” Mr. Damon pointed out.

“I was just hoping something new would jump out at me.” Tom ruefully smiled to himself. “And I guess it did. But what were our masked visitors looking for? What did they think was here?”

Solis produced a discreet cough. “Not wanting to muddy the waters more than they already are, but is it possible we’re dealing with more than one group? Maybe you have the disappearing falcon guys competing with someone else.”

“But there’s been a pattern to the methods being used,” Tom replied.

“Not quite,” Mr. Damon said. “The kidnapping of Professor Dempson, plus the bombing of our plane, could be considered much more violent and radical than the staginess of the two men we encountered here.” He saw the look Tom was giving him. “It’s only a theory.”

“I certainly hope so,” Tom told him. “And Agent Solis? I apologize. This crime scene is really messed up.”

“You want my honest opinion, Tom, this crime scene was messed up before we showed up. We’ll still go over it, though.”

“I’m glad,” Tom muttered. “I’m sure not getting anything.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Later in the evening Tom and Mr. Damon retired to their room after dining with the others. Solis reported that the observatory holding the Cassegrain telescope had checked out clear, and a female FBI agent had arrived to watch over Cosma. “And no sign yet of Andy Foger,” Solis added.

Mr. Damon was now reading both the *Lake Geneva Regional News* and the *Chicago Tribune*, but glanced over to where Tom was quietly working at the nearby desk. “Bless my Worry-cow, Tom. You seem particularly occupied.”

“Ummm.” Tom didn’t look up. “Just doodling with some figures on making a lens for the Planet X search. I’m afraid I may have to ultimately disappoint everyone here.”

“Oh?”

Tom nodded. “The problem is that Dempson and the others are using a reflector. Reflectors depend upon mirrors rather than lenses. When Dempson first contacted me I thought he was going to be using the big refractor.”

“Could that have helped?”

“Yeah. Maybe. Y’know, if I could somehow affect the refractive index of a lens I might be able to radically improve its resolving power. Sort of like an echo enhancing sound.”

“Could you do that here?”

“Maybe if the observatory switched to using a refractor for trying to locate Planet X.” Leaning back, Tom tapped at his notes. “An ordinary glass lens might do the trick. I think, though, I’ll need to be looking for some other substance. I really ought to think about eventually building my own telescope, but that can be for later.” He looked over at his friend. “Anything interesting in the newspapers?”

“Well, in *The Katzenjammer Kids*...”

*Tom stared at him.*

“Bless my Catalan sign language, Tom. I know the situation is dire, but you should really strive for an occasional sense of levity.”

Tom sighed. “You might be right. I’ve been tinkering with the lens idea because I felt if I put my mind somewhere else for a while then an answer might occur to me.”

“Has your mind considered perhaps calling your wife?”

“I should,” Tom admitted. “I’m surprised Mary hasn’t been

ringing the phone off the wall. What about your own missus?"

"Tansy... my dainty little dumpling in the chicken dinner of romance... has long since become accustomed to my gallivanting here and there," Mr. Damon replied, his eyes having returned to studying the newspapers. "She would worry, but allowing such an emotion would greatly interfere with the social whirl of her immediate circle. All she requires is that I wear a clean suit in the event I'm found dead somewhere."

Tom decided not to try and find out if Mr. Damon was kidding. "I hope Mary or Helen have told Ned where I was."

"You seem to be managing well without his presence."

Tom considered it. "Well, Leonard Abrams is pretty effective in a scrap. I still wish Ned were here, though. But seriously, though, are you looking for anything in particular in those papers?"

"Some sort of news," Mr. Damon replied. "I'm perusing the entertainment news on the off chance that I might spot information on a performing magic act somewhere nearby."

"Oho!"

"So far, though, I have been unsuccessful. On an even more off chance I'm looking for any mention in the social news about the presence of anyone from the Fogger family."

Tom's admiration for Mr. Damon's efforts became clouded by the reminder that his old enemy was possibly near. "I would think Andy would be more careful about showing his hand."

"Why?" Mr. Damon casually asked, turning a page of one of the papers. "If Andy is outwardly engaged in innocent enjoyment of the fleshpots of Chicago, Williams Bay, Rockford or points between, then wouldn't it be natural for the society editors to mention his name?"

Tom conceded the point. "Andy would want to be circumspect and appear as innocent as possible. A nice trick for Andy." He thought for a moment. "Would bombing the plane be enough for him, or do you think he'd remain in the area and try for a lot more?"

Mr. Damon seemed thoughtful. "A rather good question. He

thinks of you as the person responsible for his spending time in Federal prison. There's also the matter of his rather established streak of nastiness. Do you feel blowing up the plane would make things even for him?"

"Maybe I'd better go call Mary," Tom said, rising from his seat.

"Laudable idea."

But as Tom reached the door he paused, then turned back to Mr. Damon. "You smell something?"

Mr. Damon looked up with a slight frown. "Bless my Julio-Claudian Dynasty, but I do."

Curious, Tom opened the door and stepped out to find the corridor filled with smoke.

Not only that, but an enormous black snake was slithering in his direction.



## Chapter Eleven: Picturesque Mystery.

Tom instinctively stepped away from slithering menace, but slowed as he stared more closely.

“Tom?” Mr. Damon asked.

“It’s okay,” Tom replied, going over to remove the fire extinguisher from the wall. Aiming carefully he began thoroughly spraying the snake.

Mr. Damon appeared in the doorway, his eyes wide. “Bless my baby sawfish!”

“This is really beginning to get annoying,” Tom muttered, still spraying. As Mr. Damon watched, and as people began to gather about, the “snake” was revealed to be a long length of black ash the thickness of a man’s arm. At the far end of the ash was a corroded spot on the floor.

Dr. Collosz was one of the onlookers. “What in the world...”

“It’s sometimes called a ‘glow worm’,” Tom explained with a sigh. “They’re usually not this big. When we check the remains we’ll probably find that this was produced by burning baking soda with sugar, or even by using mercury salts. It’s a cheap firework trick.”

“I was about to head out to the observatory for work,” Collosz said.

“You might want to hurry on out there,” Tom advised. “But make sure you take some company with you.” He looked around. “Where’s Leonard Abrams?”

“Went ahead with some notes.”

Tom nodded, still looking around. “Now why did... what was the reason?”

A man Tom recognized as one of Solis’ agents came up. “A diversion?”

“Maybe,” Tom said. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Mr.

Damon there isn't anyone sneaking through the window into our room while we're out here, is there?"

Mr. Damon immediately whirled around in the doorway. "Bless my burst akee pods, I don't see anyone. You shouldn't put a scare like that into me, Tom."

"Sorry." Tom realized he was tapping a foot on the ground and stopped it. "Blowing up my plane was serious. Threatening Cosma Hobby and kidnapping Professor Dempson was serious. This," and he waved a hand at the damp remains of the snake, "is actually sort of useless."

"Maybe not," the FBI agent said. He was standing at the burned spot where the "snake" had originated and was pointing at the floor.

Going over to him Tom saw that, among the soot and residue, a message had appeared on the floor.

## I MEAN BUSINESS, SWIFT AFTER COSMA HOBBY IT'S YOUR TURN

Beneath the message was a crude sooty reproduction of the falcon picture Tom had seen on the warning cards.

His hands on his hips Tom stood over the message. "Well that answers two questions. The Falcon had threatened Cosma as his next action. I guess this is just a preview of coming events."

"But he's not following his own script," the agent pointed out. "After threatening Miss Hobby he tried to sabotage the observatory. Then there was the break-in at Dempson's office."

"I think the Falcon is still following a schedule," Tom replied. "He probably didn't expect us to find the sabotage device on the telescope until it was detonated probably much later. I'll bet the break-in was also something we weren't meant to see." Tom nodded at the message. "This is probably his way of letting me know he's still in charge."

“You said two questions were answered.”

“Yeah. This sort of shoots down Solis’ theory that we’re dealing with more than one group. Our trick playing friends are definitely in with the Falcon.”

“I’ll let Agent Solis know about this, and we’ll take some of the residue for examination.”

“And how’s Cosma?”

“Being closely watched.”

“Ummmm.” Tom was lost in thought for a while.

Then: “Okay, I guess that’s all the excitement for now.”

“One might hope,” Mr. Damon murmured.

Still in thought, Tom was wandering back towards the room.

“Mary,” Mr. Damon reminded gently.

Tom automatically turned back in the direction of the telephone.

\* \* \* \* \*

“But we were supposed to go visit your father,” Mary said plaintively.

Tom wished mightily that Yerkes Observatory had a photo telephone. He so much wanted to see Mary. Also the baby, but especially Mary. It was late at night, and Tom imagined Mary’s appearance in his mind...

“It’s Thursday, honey, “he told her. “I can still fly back tomorrow, or early Saturday morning---“

“How? They blew up your airplane.”

Tom winced.

“You thought I wouldn’t know about that,” Mary accused. “A plane blowing up in a Wisconsin lake is news, even in Shopton.”

“Mary---“

“Come home.” A touch of wifely pleading entered her voice. “Please?”

To be honest Tom felt nothing would be better than to rush home. And it wasn't as if he was getting anything accomplished in regards to the mystery. Not only that, but he felt that even if Dempson was here he couldn't really do anything to help the Planet X project.

“I'll tell you what,” Tom said. “I'll talk it over with the people here tomorrow and then call you with my decision. Okay?”

“Tom---“

“I love you, honey.”

A breathy sigh over the phone. “And I love you. And we'll very definitely talk about this tomorrow.”

“Yes'm.”

Which, of course, led to a few more minutes of lovely conversation before Tom and Mary assured each other of a good night. Mr. Damon quietly heard the slight humming Tom was making as he returned to the room and closed his own eyes, satisfied that things were right with the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

After breakfast the next morning Tom and Mr. Damon decided to check up on Dempson's office once again.

They met Collosz and Abrams returning from their night's efforts. “How goes the battle?” Tom asked.

“Our coordinates are correct,” Abrams said through an enormous yawn. “We just have to re-study our figures on where to concentrate the search.”

“Leonard here wants to go over the old observatory records,” Collosz added. “This isn't, after all, the first time Yerkes has looked for Planet X. He wants to compare the old search patterns with what we're doing now.”

Tom nodded. “Sounds good. And speaking of good, good night guys.”

With the astronomers wandering off to their rooms, Tom and Mr. Damon continued on their own course. They found a trio of FBI agents carefully picking through Dempson’s office.

Tom paused in the doorway. “I guess you guys got it pretty much covered.”

“Feel free to come in,” said an agent who Tom remembered Solis had referred to as “Monroe”. “We’re checking a few more places for prints so just be careful.”

Stepping gingerly into the office Tom slowly looked around. “I really don’t know what I expect to find,” he said to the agents and Mr. Damon. “Something keeps escaping me and I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Mr. Solis was thinking of putting extra men on you and Mr. Damon,” Monroe told him. “Especially after that business last night.”

“Well,” Tom muttered, “we might be saving him the trouble by going home today. My father’s sort of ill and I need to look in on him, and to be honest I can’t see what I’m accomplishing here.” He glanced back over his shoulder. “Remind me to check train schedules for a possible overnighter to Shopton,” he said to Mr. Damon. “Or, better yet, catching an Airline Express home from Chicago.”

“I feel bad at the idea of us giving up on this,” Mr. Damon said. “But of course you have to consider your family.”

Tom quietly agreed, once again looking around. The overall damage to the room was still pretty much in evidence, especially as the Federal agents wanted things left as originally as possible for their research. Tom considered that, between the damages being inflicted on the offices, and the false “snake” last night, the only real enemy he was possibly making was the observatory’s cleaning staff.

On a whim he reached out for a framed photograph (checking first to make certain he wasn’t smudging any fingerprint powder). Looking at it he realized it was the same one which Cosma had picked up off

the floor, and Tom quietly resolved to make certain the young woman was doing well.

Meanwhile he studied the photograph. A group of men gathered together in front of a building, all of them smiling for the camera.

Mr. Damon was at his shoulder. "Something interesting?"

"Oh just a photograph of..."

And then Tom paused. "Oh, that's so strange. So odd."

"Bless my Vienna waltz, Tom. What is it?"

Tom pointed to one of the men in the photograph. "This is Professor Dempson."

At Mr. Damon's look of curiosity Tom went on. "Mr. Damon I've never met or seen Professor Dempson. No one here has bothered to describe him to me. So why do I know this is him?"

Monroe had moved closer. "Let me see."

Tom showed him the picture and Monroe nodded. "That's him. Or at least that's what he was some time ago. We were shown more current pictures. You probably glanced at one or maybe overheard a description."

"I don't think so," Tom said, staring again at the photo. "Oh I feel like a goose has passed over my grave."

"Bless my Winged Victory of Samothrace," Mr. Damon remarked. "You're beginning to disturb me."

"I'm feeling none too good myself," Tom admitted.

## Chapter Twelve: Tom Discovers a Link.

As Mr. Damon watched, Tom continued quietly regarding the photograph. Mr. Damon couldn't help but notice a rather speculative gleam appearing in his friend's eyes.

"Tom?"

Still looking at the photograph, Tom spoke. "Agent Monroe?"

The agent had been preparing a camera and he looked up. "Yes?"

"May I borrow this for a while?" Tom indicated the photograph.

"Mmmm... we've already examined it and cataloged the results. I personally have no problem."

"You should have it back within a few hours."

Monroe nodded absently. "Agent Solis should be around by then."

Satisfied, Tom turned to leave the office.

Mr. Damon was close behind. "Bless my Lost Crazy Russian Pitchblende Mine," he said to Tom's back. "Have you thought of something?"

"Maybe," Tom admitted. "It might be a piece to the puzzle. Not necessarily a big piece, but I think I have an answer to a question. I've got to go down to the office and check up on a few things first."

Mr. Damon recognized the signs. Tom was definitely on the trail of something. "Do you need me to help?"

"Well... go ahead and look into those travel schedules back to Shopton. Don't reserve any tickets yet but meet me in the office when you're done."

\* \* \* \* \*

After a half hour worth of telephone calls and taking notes, Mr. Damon went to the observatory office to find Tom talking with a few

members of the staff. “We would definitely have better luck if we took a bus to Racine,” Mr. Damon reported. “That’s where the nearest train station is located. From there we can arrange transportation directly to Shopton, or we can go to Chicago and take advantage of air travel.”

Tom nodded absently. “I want to say goodbye to Cosma first. She wasn’t in today.”

“Bless my Apperson Chummy Roadster, Tom. Could she be in danger?”

“No-oo... one of the girls here just got off the phone with her. She and her FBI watchdog are spending a day at home. After all that’s happened I really can’t say I blame her too much. I’ll tell you something interesting, though.”

“Please do.”

“Cosma’s personnel file is missing.”

Mr. Damon’s eyes scrunched in confusion.

“Now I can understand the Falcon copying Professor Dempson’s notes,” Tom said. “But in the first place, why would the Falcon be interested in Cosma’s personnel file? And why take it? Why not just copy the file like he did the others?”

“Something in her file the Falcon didn’t want us to see.”

Tom was thinking something over. “And I may have an idea what it could be. C’mon.”

“Where to now?”

“Well, I wanted to say goodbye to Cosma before we left for home. And I’ve still got a little piece of a mystery I want to clear up. If I’m right, then we can kill two birds with one stone.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Getting Cosma’s home address from a fellow worker, Tom and Mr. Damon took a taxi from the observatory into the community of



Williams Bay, traveling among the bucolic streets until the driver reached Congress Street, announcing “Here we are, gents”.

They had stopped in front of a pleasant-looking two story house surrounded by a carefully maintained lawn. A small sign sitting in a window nearest the front door announced that they had arrived at “Mrs. Otonashi’s Boarding House”.

Beneath the sign someone had scrawled an additional message: *no actors*.

A knock at the door soon produced an Oriental woman who smiled shyly at them and bowed. “Hello,” she said in softly accented English. “I am Kyoko Otonashi.”

“I’m Tom Swift,” Tom told the lady, “and this is Mr. Wakefield Damon” (Mr. Damon removing his hat and bowing slightly). “We’re friends of Miss Hobby and wanted to speak with her.”

The woman’s face brightened. “Oh yes! Miss Hobby has mentioned her friends from New York with the plane that blew up in the lake. She is with her FBI friend up in her room at the moment. Please come in, gentlemen, and I will announce your arrival.”

Entering the parlor Tom and Mr. Damon waited while Mrs. Otonashi, followed closely by a large Samoyed dog, pattered up the stairs.

“Bless my sharpened Fallbeil,” Mr. Damon murmured, looking about. “This is certainly a charming place.”

Tom quietly agreed, his eyes studying the rather rich looking rug beneath his feet.

“Mr. Swift?”

Looking up Tom saw Mrs. Otonashi beckoning to him from the second floor landing. “Miss Hobby says you and your friend may come up.”

Heading upstairs Tom and Mr. Damon moved past the smiling Mrs. Otonashi and knocked on the opened doorway to one of the rooms. They could see Cosma sitting on a couch while, closer to the door, a trimly dressed woman about Cosma’s age gave the men a

polite smile.

Cosma looked slightly drawn but she rose to beckon them in. “Please excuse the mess.”

Entering the room Tom couldn’t see any evidence of a “mess”. Everything was tidy: a whatnot shelf carrying an assortment of porcelain bric-a-brac, several filled bookshelves and a few pieces of simple but well-kept furniture. The walls held some framed prints (as well as, Tom noticed, a star map). There was also a closed door which Tom presumed led to the bedroom.

“This is Agent Peggy,” Cosma said, indicating the other woman who nodded and stood up to shake hands with the guests. “Her and Agent Florence take turns making certain I don’t end up kidnapped or shot at or attacked by mask wearing flaming hoodlums.”

“So far it’s been working,” the agent added, moving to sit next to Cosma on the couch, leaving her chair and its companion for use by Tom and Mr. Damon.

“I’m glad,” Tom said, sitting down. “There’s really seems to be no rhyme or reason to the Falcon’s methods other than a flair for the dramatic. After being warned by him I wanted to make certain you were all right.”

Cosma’s eyes grew large and she exchanged a glance with Peggy. “*You* received a warning?” she asked Tom.

Nodding, Tom related the message which had accompanied the “glow worm” last night.

“But this is terrible,” Cosma declared. “I know of course that you and Mr. Damon have been in danger ever since this whole affair started. But this is more direct.”

Tom shrugged. “Yes, well... if the Falcon follows his schedule you’re supposed to be next on his list. Mr. Damon and I wanted to check up on you before we left for home.”

Cosma blinked. “You’re leaving?”

With a sigh Tom explained how he needed to go visit his ailing father. “Besides,” he added, “even if Professor Dempson was here and

safe there isn't much I can really accomplish. The FBI is handling everything."

He watched Cosma's expression, noting how she appeared placid but with a touch of sorrow in her eyes. Tom was taking enormous pains to study her face without appearing overly curious.

"And you're not coming back?" she murmured.

Another shrug. "It's getting on to the middle of February," Tom said. "I'll certainly check back with all of you to hear of any progress. If I need to return for any particular reason then I'll certainly do so."

"But what about this 'Andy Foger' person you were looking for?" Cosma asked. "You haven't found him yet."

"I've only had suspicions and glimpses," Tom admitted. "In spite of myself Andy may not even be here. Solis and the others are keeping their eyes open for him, though."

Cosma seemed to withdraw a bit into herself.

"I know I sound like a rat---"

Cosma shook her head. "You have to see to your father," she replied, her eyes elsewhere. "There's no reason for you to be in more danger than you already are."

Tom was silent for a few moments.

Then: "Your file is missing from the observatory office."

Cosma sharply looked up from her melancholy. "What?"

Tom nodded. "Before I came here I learned that your personnel file has turned up missing. It's another reason I was worried and wanted to personally check on you. I was afraid there might be something in your file that the Falcon wanted."

Cosma shared a concerned glance with Agent Peggy. "What could the Falcon possibly find in my file?"

"I was actually hoping you could tell me, Cosma."

The woman's dark eyes grew wider and her hands came together in her lap. "Wh-what do you mean?"

“I mean the more I look at you the more a notion inside of me becomes clear,” Tom said to her. “Ever since I first visited Dempson’s office I had the feeling there was something of vital importance there. Something which I couldn’t immediately see. Earlier today, though, I went back and found something which I think was the item I’ve been looking for.”

Tom withdrew the photograph from the pocket in his jacket, raising it to show Cosma. “You know this of course.”

Cosma made an O with her mouth.

“One of the men in this group picture is Professor Dempson. I recognized him, which was peculiar because not only have I never met him personally, but I’ve never been given a description of the man or have seen any pictures which identified him. Now... how was I able to recognize him?”

“Tom...” Cosma whispered.

“I’ve never met Professor Dempson.” Tom said, his eyes steadily staring across the room at Cosma. “But I think I’ve met his daughter.”

## Chapter Thirteen: The Astronomer's Beautiful Daughter.

Mr. Damon's mouth dropped open. "Bless my Treaty of Buda!"

Agent Peggy didn't add a remark, but the expression on her face registered genuine surprise. Tom, in the meantime, continued watching a very shaken Cosma.

"Tom," she repeated.

"I should've noted the resemblance earlier," Tom said, "but quite a lot of you obviously tends to favor your mother. There were other clues, though. Your deep sense of worry over Professor Dempson. And then there was your name. Who but an astronomer's child would take the name 'Cosma'?"

Cosma was mournfully shaking her head, looking down.

"Leonard Abrams explained to me how Professor Dempson divorced twenty years ago. Give it a few years after the birth of a child and you'd be at the right age." Tom continued staring steadily at the woman. "Twenty years ago there'd still be a lot of stupid stigma attached to a divorce. Dempson was safe within the enlightened atmosphere of the academic world. But you..."

Peggy reached over in womanly sympathy and patted Cosma's shoulder.

"The question I have," Tom went on, "was whether or not your father knew about you? Were the two of you working together quietly? If so I can't understand why. Was he even able to recognize you after twenty years? Despite the visible traces I see of him in you did you decide to keep your identity secret from him? Was this a way of being close to him after all this time?"

Cosma slowly lifted her face to him, trying to control her breathing. "I..."

Tom waited.

"As far as my... father knew, my mother and I both died of

typhoid fever years ago,” Cosma whispered. “My mother did, but I survived and decided not to change the news that went out to him. Instead I made plans to move to Chicago and become his assistant.”

“Without telling him who you were.”

“He... didn’t want my mother or me,” Cosma replied, looking away. “Or rather, my mother left him. It was all so confusing. But he was so settled. So happy. He was all the family I had left so I wanted to be near him, but I didn’t want to disturb his world. I eventually managed to be taken on as his assistant after assuming a new identity.”

Peggy frowned. “So ‘Hobby’...”

“My mother’s name was Cynthia Staehle,” Cosma said to her. She sighed. “There was no ‘Staehle fortune’ to fall back on so I was pretty much on my own. And desperate.” Her eyes turned to Tom and there was now a whisper of defiance in them. “I’m Cosma Hobby now.”

Tom silently returned her gaze for several moments. Then: “Your secret is safe with me, Cosma. And I’m certain I can count on both Mr. Damon and Agent Peggy to also keep it under wraps. There’s no sense in causing any additional trouble by revealing things. But I’m still left with one last question.”

Cosma quietly waited.

“Is all of this the reason you took your file from the observatory office?”

“Oh,” Peggy whispered.

For her part Cosma looked as if she was about to be sent to her room without any supper.

“You deserve your reputation for cleverness,” she murmured.

“You were afraid the Falcon would figure out the same thing I did,” Tom said. “There might be enough information in your file for him to add two and two together.”

Cosma nodded.

“But how can it matter? It’s been twenty years, Cosma.”

“I didn’t want to risk being held over my father’s head,” Cosma argued. “That is if he’s... still alive. I don’t want to end up a bargaining chip to insure his cooperation. Maybe he wouldn’t care. I don’t know. But I don’t want to take the risk.”

Tom glanced at both Mr. Damon and Peggy before looking back at the woman. “All right,” he finally said. “I can understand your reasoning.”

Cosma wearily moved a hand across her forehead. “I really need to lie down for a while,” she said.

“My apologies,” Tom said. “I didn’t mean to cause stress.”

“It’s all right,” Cosma told him as she stood up. “Actually I’m surprised my secret’s survived this long. If someone had to find it out then I’m glad it was you. At least you’ll help keep me safe... oh! But you’re going, aren’t you?”

“I guess,” Tom murmured, feeling Mr. Damon’s eyes on him. “But I’ll very definitely be keeping my eyes on developments here. And you or anyone else is free to call on me.”

Nodding dully, Cosma shuffled off to her room, closing the door behind her.

Agent Peggy carefully watched her, then silently motioned for Tom and Mr. Damon to join her out in the hallway.

“She’s been having trouble sleeping ever since this whole affair began,” she quietly explained to the men when they were out of the room.

“Can you blame her?” Tom asked. “And especially now that we know about her real identity.”

“She has a prescription for chloral hydrate,” Peggy explained. “Apparently she needs it more than she lets on because she’s been going through her supply rather quickly.”

Mr. Damon frowned. “Bless my clepsydra! I hope, Miss Peggy, you’re keeping a close watch on her consumption of that substance.”

Tom nodded agreement. “That stuff can get pretty slippery.”

“Florence and I check up on her regularly. We try not to disturb her privacy too much, not poking around in her bedroom or anything. And maybe things will quiet down now that Mrs. Otonashi’s thrown those idiots next door out.”

“Idiots?”

The FBI agent nodded in mild irritation. “Some actors or something who were making all sorts of ruckus and cooking bizarre things in the room next door. They were disturbing everyone here, but especially Cosma and, since Cosma’s one of the oldest residents here, Mrs. Otonashi took steps and had the marshal escort them out.”

She nodded past Tom and Mr. Damon, and both men turned to notice the door to the room just beyond Cosma’s. The door was slightly ajar.

“Mrs. Otonashi didn’t even let them pack their gear,” Peggy explained. “The marshal said he’d get his deputies to pack everything and send it off.”

Curious, Tom walked to the room, his nose detecting a faint odor which he was finding oddly familiar. As carefully as possible he eased the door open.

The room which appeared before his eyes seemed smaller than the one Cosma enjoyed. Or perhaps it was the effect of the clutter within. Boxes and trunks seemed to take up most of the available space. A large steamer trunk sat partially opened, suits of clothes draped over the top.

Behind him Mr. Damon poked his head around the doorway to peek in. “Bless my didgeridoo. Was this a department store?”

Tom was lightly fingering an assortment of thin metal rings hanging from a doorknob. His eyes picked out other details: several different decks of cards on a table, sealed bottles and jars on the windowsill. He also noticed how some of the clothes were cut from obviously expensive material but also decorated with spangles and trimmed in purple. “I think it was more like a magician’s closet,” he murmured.



“I wasn’t sure,” Peggy said as she came closer. “They were entertainers of some sort. Two brothers.”

Peering into the steamer trunk Tom noticed what seemed to be an assortment of wands. The odor he had been smelling was more definite, and the connection finally arrived in his mind. “Mr. Damon!”

“Yes, Tom?”

“That smell,” Tom said, straightening up. “That’s the same smell---“

“When that false snake appeared last night,” finished Mr. Damon, snapping his fingers. “Of course!”

Peggy seemed confused. “False snake?”

Tom began searching through the room more earnestly. “All the time and they’ve been next door to Cosma. It’s too much---“

“Tom.”

Turning around, Tom saw that Mr. Damon was studying a large poster-sized piece of paper. Several rolls of similar sized paper were nearby in a corner.

Moving closer, Tom studied the poster. It was rather richly done, the artwork depicting two dashing and well-dressed young men surrounded by flames and clouds of smoke. According to the text “*I Fratelli di Mulvowney... Maestri Dell’illusione di Fase*” were to perform the year before in Milan.

“‘The Mulvowney Brothers’,” Tom translated.

“‘Masters of Stage Illusion’.” Mr. Damon finished.

Tom’s eyes flicked over the smaller text, pulling up his knowledge of Italian. “If I’m reading this correctly, the Mulvowney Brothers have an act which specializes in illusions involving flames, smoke and disappearing into thin air!”

Mr. Damon pointed at a spot on the poster where one of the Mulvowney Brothers was making a dramatic gesture, causing a flock of birds to appear out of thin air.

“Notice the artwork, Tom. Those birds. Haven’t we seen this sort

of avian virtuosity before?”

“The image on the Falcon’s calling cards.”

“So either one of the Mulvowney Brothers is the Falcon---“

“Or they know who he is,” Tom said, his heart racing. “Next door to Cosma all this time.”

Mr. Damon turned a worried look to him. “Could this mean the Falcon is indeed aware of Cosma’s secret?”

“It’d be too much of a coincidence if it didn’t.” Tom thought for a while, then turned back to Peggy. “You’d better get in touch with Solis about this. And try to contact the marshal or Mrs. Otonashi and see if anyone knows where the Mulvowney Brothers are at present.”

Wide-eyed, Peggy scooted away.

“And I need to talk to Cosma again,” Tom decided. With Mr. Damon in tow he quickly went back to her room.

“Delicacy,” Mr. Damon suggested as Tom went to the closed bedroom door. “Remember, she’s been through a lot.”

Tom nodded and rapped sharply on the door. “I just hope she hasn’t taken any chloral hydrate yet.”

But the door opened a fraction and part of Cosma’s face became visible. “Yes, Tom?”

“Sorry, Cosma, but you’d better know about this.” As carefully as possible Tom explained how her next door neighbors had very possibly been part of the Falcon’s gang.

“Oh my Gosh!” Cosma cried out, opening the door fully.

“Oh!” Mr. Damon said, quickly turning about. “Bless my Red Sealing Wax Palm.”

To her credit Cosma was still very much dressed. But the garment she currently wore was certainly more suited for an afternoon of quiet repose by a lady, rather than something intended for public viewing. Looking at her Tom felt a genuine flush move through him, but he didn’t want to totally embarrass Cosma by suddenly turning away and further pointing out the situation.

For her part Cosma quickly realized the consternation she was causing. “I’m sorry,” she said, easing the door back modestly before her. “But your news... the Falcon’s men right here in Mrs. Otonashi’s house! Right next to me!”

“How long were the Mulvowney Brothers here?” Tom asked Corma, his head having turned slightly away.

“Was that who they were?” Cosma’s voice answered. “They called themselves ‘The Jimbob Twins... Matt and Lucas’... while they were here.”

“Another thing to investigate,” Tom considered aloud. “Wow! And all the fingerprints that have got to be there. If only Agent Solis can manage to collect some real clues.”

“But if the two men were working for the Falcon,” Mr. Damon’s voice came from the hallway, “would they have so easily left behind so much potentially incriminating paraphernalia?”

“A good question,” Tom said. “Maybe they didn’t want to make too much of a fuss when Mrs. Otonashi and the law came by. It would’ve drawn more attention to them.”

“Then they might come back,” Cosma said, once again opening the door. She had added a wine-red robe to her ensemble. It certainly provided more in the way of polite decorum, but Tom couldn’t help but notice that the overall result did little to disguise the woman’s charms.

Not that Cosma seemed in a particularly flirtatious mood. Far from it, she seemed considerably worried. “Tom they might know about my real name and all.”

“Mr. Damon and I were thinking the same thing.”

“And they... they might know where my father is being held! Oh, Tom...”

“Agent Solis will get you more protection,” Tom assured her. “Of course it might mean having to reveal your secret to more people... oh!”

Cosma had impulsively moved forward and was holding herself

closely against Tom, visibly trembling. Taken rather definitely by surprise Tom found himself unable to do anything but perhaps try to calm the woman down with some gentle pats to the back.

“You’re going to be taken care of,” he promised Cosma. “Now you’re even more of a key to all this than before, so you’ve become much more precious---“

“Tom!”

Tom looked in the direction of Mr. Damon’s warning cry and saw him standing in the doorway. And he wasn’t alone.

“Oh! Mary! Hello!”

## Chapter Fourteen: Mary Sees Stars!

Mary smiled at her husband. “Hello, Tom dear.” She remained standing in the doorway, as pretty as a picture.

And Tom realized he still had a rather indecorously dressed Cosma Hobby in his arms. As quickly and as innocently as possible he moved away a bit. “Um... oh! Why are you here?”

Mr. Damon closed his eyes, groaning softly.

“Silly question,” Mary replied, entering the room and going over to plant a kiss on Tom’s cheek. “I just wanted to be with you.”

“Okay. I think I meant to ask ‘how’ did you get here?”

“I think so too,” Mary considered half to herself. “But, to answer your question, I took the ‘Falcon’---“

“You took the Falcon?” Tom exclaimed.

Mary raised an eyebrow.

“I believe Mary is referring to the ‘Falcon’ which makes the Long Island to Chicago run,” Mr. Damon softly pointed out. “One of your Airline Express planes.”

Mary nodded brightly. “I was tempted to drive the House on Wheels out here,” she told Tom, “but I knew you’d worry about me being on the road, and taking the plane was a much faster alternative. Besides,” and here her voice lowered a bit as she dimpled, “the House on Wheels isn’t quite as enjoyable without company.”

“True,” Tom admitted. “But where’s Junior?”

“After talking with you I packed up Rad, Koku, Mrs. Baggert and the baby and we drove out to my parents who’re currently watching over the crew. From there it was easy to catch the ‘Falcon’. Once I got to Chicago I took a bus and a cab the rest of the way here. One of those nice FBI agents at the observatory told me where you were and so... here I am.”

Tom placed a modest kiss on Mary’s lips.

She was searching his face. “I did all right, didn’t I?”

Tom couldn’t deny that having Mary so near was definitely brightening his day, and he mightily wished for far less company in order to demonstrate to Mary just how much he approved of her decision.

Her expression became a touch more serious. “And you had told me that you and Mr. Damon would be returning home today, or early tomorrow. I thought I’d come and... help.” With this her eyes flicked in the direction of Cosma.

Mr. Damon was humming a song which, to Tom’s ears, sounded like “Young Man’s Fancy”.

Slipping what he hoped was a rather devoted and husbandly arm around Mary’s waist, Tom indicated Cosma. “Mary, I’d like to introduce Miss Cosma Hobby: a member of the observatory’s staff. Cosma, this is my wife Mary.”

“Of course she is,” Cosma said sunnily, extending a hand to Mary who accepted it with a warm smile.

In spite of all the friendliness Tom couldn’t shake the feeling that he was trapped between two masses of explosives. “Oh, Peggy! Peggy!” he said as the FBI agent wandered back into the room. “Mary? This is Agent Peggy with the FBI. She’s Cosma’s---“

“Chaperone,” Mr. Damon quickly said.

“---bodyguard,” Tom went on.

“I see,” Mary replied, offering a smile to the agent.

“Hello,” Peggy said to Mary. “I just finished talking with Agent Solis at the observatory,” she said to Tom. “He’ll be coordinating with the local authorities concerning the Mulvowney Brothers. So far no one knows where they are. Not even Mrs. Otonashi.”

Tom considered the situation (the fingers of one hand drumming lightly on Mary’s hip). “I guess we can wait to hear from Solis then,” he considered. “And, since you and Agent Florence are watching Cosma and now know about the Mulvowneys---“

Peggy nodded.

“---I guess she’s pretty safe for the time being.”

Mary was looking up into Tom’s face. “So. We’re going home?”

Tom made a decision. “Let’s have lunch first and we’ll talk.”

\* \* \* \* \*

After a brief taxi ride Tom, Mary and Mr. Damon located an Italian restaurant on East Geneva Street.

Everyone had just given their orders to the waitress when something occurred to Tom. “Solis obviously knows to check for fingerprints in the Mulvowney’s room.”

Mr. Damon was helping himself to some Amarone but he nodded. “One would presume.”

“I want to ask him to keep an eye out for that nitrocellulose twine. It would definitely help to build a case against the brothers. ‘Scuse me.” Giving Mary’s hand a squeeze he excused himself from the table to look for a telephone.

Mary helped herself to a slice of *bruschetta al pomodoro* from the plate the waitress had left with them. “Mr. Damon?”

“Um? Mary?”

“How much trouble is Tom in?” She nibbled at a corner of the appetizer.

Mr. Damon sighed. “Bless my unfinished symphony. Well... it’s rather like this.” He explained the events of the past few days to Mary, deciding to also let her in on the recent discovery of Cosma Hobby’s secret background.

Mary chewed thoughtfully. “Cosma Hobby certainly seems to be in a rather severe fix,” she said.

Mr. Damon nodded.

“And this is why the little hussy was clinging to Tom?”

“Mary---“

“I’m sorry,” Mary went on. “That was extremely un-Christian of me. And I certainly wouldn’t be any sort of a wife if I didn’t have proof of how ardent Tom was in regards to me.” Here she produced what, to Mr. Damon’s eyes, seemed a rather secret smile. “Yes, I think ‘ardent’ is the proper word. I suppose I would feel truly relieved, though, if Cosma Hobby was much less...”

“Beautiful?” Mr. Damon offered.

Mary nodded. “And if she didn’t seem so interested in Tom.”

Mr. Damon filled a second glass with wine. “Mary... I’ve always been impressed by your clear-headedness and your instincts, and especially when Tom is involved. Please don’t disappoint me now. I think you were originally correct in believing the intensity of Tom’s feelings towards you.” With a hand he nudged the glass towards her.

Mary looked at it. “Oh, I don’t know...”

“You don’t want wine?”

“But I’m having sea bass and this is...”

“Oh! Bless my thirty-two gun Spanish frigate! Would you like a Pinot gris brought to you?”

“Maybe,” Mary said, still eyeing the wine. “Oh, but here comes our food. And Tom!”

“Agent Solis says he and his people will turn the Mulvowney’s room completely over,” Tom reported, sitting back down alongside Mary. “So far, though, no further news.”

The three of them began eating, and Tom was amazed at how Mary tucked into her *branzino cileno*.

“So,” she finally managed to say. “Are we going home?” She turned her head, looking directly at Tom.

Tom was working on his pasta, and Mary noticed how he was slowing down. She had been married to Tom long enough to know...

“We’re not going home.”



“Not... immediately,” Tom said.

“Oh Tom! But your father...”

“We can still leave tomorrow morning,” Tom assured her. “In fact I’ll call Dr. Roeber and ask about talking over Dad’s condition with him when we arrive. I just want to see if the Mulvowney’s are found today. And, speaking of today...”

As Mary and Mr. Damon watched, Tom reached into his pocket. “Found a rather nice little shop next door,” he explained to Mary, withdrawing a slender silver chain which featured a trio of star sapphires. “Solved a problem of what to get you.”

Mary gazed wide-eyed at the necklace. “Oh Tom!”

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” Tom murmured, carefully slipping the gift around Mary’s neck and fastening it. “Our second one together.”

The restaurant was filled with lunchtime customers, but Mary couldn’t refrain from moving her arms around Tom’s neck and bringing her lips to his.

Across the table from them, Mr. Damon lightly raised his glass to the young couple, and especially to a woman who never disappointed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later on the trio returned to the observatory.

Throughout the trip Mr. Damon had spent some time in thought, and he now spoke up. “Bless my Polynesian hedge toad, but something of a thought has occurred to me.”

Tom and Mary had been holding hands, rather lost in each others eyes, but Mr. Damon’s remark caught their attention.

“When I was inquiring about air fares home,” Mr. Damon told them, “I learned that several of the astronomers here play several intense rounds of acey-deucey before attending to the evening’s observations. If we’re not immediately leaving then I believe I’ll invite myself into the game. Should be a good way to spend several

hours,” he added somewhat pointedly.

Mary blushed.

“What about later... arrangements?” Tom asked.

“You and Mary will doubtless have turned in,” the older man replied airily. “For myself I can probably move a few chairs together in Dempson’s office and relax.”

“But---“

Mary pressed a finger to Tom’s lips. She then went over and kissed Mr. Damon on the cheek.

“The card game will also put me in an enviable position to receive and relay any messages to you concerning the investigation.” Smiling, Mr. Damon strolled off, leaving Tom and Mary to continue towards Dempson’s office and sleeping quarters.

“He’s an old dear,” Mary murmured.

“Yes,” Tom agreed. He glanced over at her. “Honey...”

“Dearest?”

“You’re... okay with this?”

Mary looked at him curiously.

Tom was feeling his face grow warm. “I mean, it’s not as if we’re at home.”

Mary smiled. “Was I shy that first night? Camped out by Oneida Lake?”

“No,” Tom admitted, his thoughts going back. He squeezed her hand. “No, you certainly weren’t.”

“Well then.”

Moments later they standing close together in the bedroom Tom and Mr. Damon had been using.

“Tom,” Mary whispered.

“Beloved?”

“I didn’t give you your Valentine Day’s gift yet.”

Tom smiled. "Oh, I suspect an idea will occur to you."

"I mean I *did* get you something."

"Oh?"

"Oh yes! It's... it's... oh!"

"Mary?"

"You're busy right now," she said, moving closer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Considerably some hours later, Tom and Mary were awakened by a rapid knocking at the door.

"Tom," Mr. Damon's voice cried. "Oh Tom!"

Tom was sitting up, Mary close alongside him. "What is it?"

"Your father."

"What?"

"*He's in terrible danger.*"

## Chapter Fifteen: Tom Receives an Invitation.

Tom barely had time to reach for a shirt as he rushed for the door. “Mr. Damon, what---“

“I took a call from the police in Gloversville. Armed gunmen tried to break into the clinic where your father’s staying.”

Tom cracked the door open to look into Mr. Damon’s face. “Dad?”

“Supposedly unharmed,” the older man said. He had apparently run at full speed to the room and was still trying to catch his breath. “But the police say that the gunmen are still at large in the area.”

A whispered “Tom” and he turned to catch some clothes which Mary tossed at him. “Are the police still on the phone?” he asked Mr. Damon while trying to dress.

Mr. Damon nodded. “I asked them to please hold.”

“I’ll be there in a moment. Tell them to hold on.” Pulling himself together, Tom tried to hurry, shaking his head.

Mary was also moving to make herself publicly presentable. “Hurry on, Tom,” she told him. “I’ll be behind.”

Nodding gratefully Tom didn’t bother with his shoes but rushed on out of the room on bare feet, heading for the observatory office.

Reaching it he found Mr. Damon part of a concerned crowd waiting around the switchboard. Among the people were several of the scientists as well as local police, FBI agents and Cosma with her protectors.

Agent Solis came forward. “Tom, I’ve already called the Albany office. They’re only fifty miles from where your father is.”

Tom responded with a curt nod, reaching for the phone. “This is Tom Swift.”

The distant voice crackled over the line. “Mr. Swift, this is Captain Jeff Trowey with the Police Department---“

*“Captain Trowey what’s going on?”*

“So far what we have is the clinic where your father is staying coming under attack from several unknown men. There’s been several injuries but, so far, no fatalities. We don’t even know yet if your father was meant to be the target---“

*“And they’re still at large?”*

“We have men at the clinic. So far we’ve received no threats or demands, but other shots in the area have been reported.”

*“Hold on, please.” Lowering the phone Tom relayed the situation to the others.*

Solis nodded. “Tom I can get you a Federal pass for transportation priority back to New York.”

Tom responded with a grateful look, then glanced over to see Mary entering the office.

He returned his attention to the phone. “Captain Trowey had you been expecting any trouble concerning the clinic?”

“Mr. Swift this has surprised us as much as anyone else. But since your father was a high profile patient we decided you needed to be immediately informed.”

*“Yes, thank you. Please hold on again.” Covering the phone with a hand he stood there, his mind ticking over.*

“This might be a move by the Falcon to get you to leave the observatory,” Solis pointed out.

“I agree,” Tom slowly said, his expression growing speculative. “Perhaps in more ways than one.”

“I don’t understand.”

Motioning for him to wait, Tom raised the phone back to his mouth. “Captain Trowey? Have you spoken with my father’s attending physician?”

“Yes. He’s all right.”

*“Did Dr. Carlyle report on my father’s situation?”*

“Yes.”

*“And your men are all around Jefferson Street?”*

“They’re all in position.”

*Tom let out a sigh. “Thank you, Captain Trowey. I’m getting ready to come back to New York and I hope to meet you there very soon.”*

“We’ll be waiting, Mr. Swift.”

*Tom hung up the phone.*

Mary was frowning. “Who’s Dr. Carlyle? And what was all that about ‘Jefferson Street?’”

“Exactly,” Tom replied.

Solis was looking from one to the other. “I don’t understand.”

Tom turned to him. “Please get your men to the clinic as soon as possible. And contact the police in Gloversville and inform them of the situation.”

The FBI agent seemed slightly confused. “But wasn’t Captain Trowey---“

“My father isn’t a ‘high profile patient,’” Tom told him. “Our doctor in Shopton recommended the Gloversville Clinic because it was the best and nearest facility for treating my father’s condition. No special arrangements were made. And my father’s physician is Dr. Fred Roeber. There’s no ‘Dr. Carlyle’ on the staff.”

Solis’ eyes narrowed.

“And there’s no ‘Jefferson Street’ in Gloversville. The clinic’s located on Broadway.” He looked over at Mr. Damon. “You said you were speaking with the Gloversville police.”

Mr. Damon nodded.

“Did Trowey specifically identify himself as being from Gloversville?”

Mr. Damon’s mouth opened, closed, then opened again. “He didn’t. I just assumed...”

Tom sighed, closing his eyes briefly. “Decoy.”

“Then someone definitely was trying to get you to go back to New York,” Solis said.

Tom nodded.

“Bless my bamboo fungus,” Mr. Damon murmured. “Tom, I---“

Tom lifted a hand, silencing him. “It’s okay. I should’ve been expecting something like this. I just hope to God you didn’t mention Gloversville in any of your responses.”

“Tom I swear---“

“We’ll definitely have men at the clinic,” Solis promised.

Tom nodded, taking a glance at the clock. “I know it’s late, but I want to call the clinic. Speak to the night staff and make certain everything’s all right.”

“I’ll send an update to Albany,” Solis said before he moved off to find another phone.

Tom instructed the observatory operator to try and reach Gloversville, then leaned back against the wall, rubbing at his face as the call was being put through.

Mary rested a hand on his arm.

“The Falcon’s getting desperate to pull a stunt like this,” Tom said.

“You’re obviously frightening him more and more,” Mr. Damon pointed out.

“But how?” Tom asked, lowering his hands. “What am I doing that’s driving him to take these steps?”

Mary’s touch on his arm grew a bit more firm.

“Do we need to pack?” she gently asked.

Tom gazed at her, once again drowning in the soft brown of her eyes. “You’re giving me all I need right now,” he whispered, the words eliciting a smile from his wife.

“Solis’ people will be in Gloversville shortly,” he said in a more normal tone. “Let’s wait and hear what they say. And Agent Solis has

promised priority travel back to New York if we need it.” He put his hands on Mary’s arms, his thoughts still whirling about. “I have an answer somehow,” he told her and Mr. Damon. “The Falcon believes I know something, so an answer is dangling in front of me. But what is it? What’s the Falcon’s game?” Tom moved his eyes elsewhere. “Cosma!”

The young woman seemed surprised. “Yes?”

“It’s been quiet at your place? No trouble?”

Cosma shook her head.

“Everything’s been peaceful,” Agent Peggy added.

“Um.” Tom gave Mary’s arms a brief squeeze. “Well, one nice thing about being in an observatory is that the cafeteria has late hours. Let me talk to the clinic and then we’ll have coffee and wait to hear from Solis about what his people find.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The three of them relaxed in the cafeteria, nodding at some of the astronomers who popped in and out in the course of their shifts. Tom was feeling somewhat more relieved after being assured by the night director at the Gloversville Clinic that everything was indeed peaceful.

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of the crowd,” he confessed to Mary and Mr. Damon, “but my next concern was that the Falcon would try something against Junior and the others at the Nestors.”

Mary paled. “Oh, Tom...”

Tom patted her hand. “I’m certain your father has quite a few precautions in place at the homestead. And both Koku and Rad are there.” He thoughtfully blew at his coffee. “Besides, that phone call specifically mentioned my father. The Falcon found out that Dad’s currently in a clinic in New York.”

“Bless my leading actress,” Mr. Damon said. “The man’s a devil.”



Tom privately considered that Mr. Damon's "blessings" were his friend's way of clearing the cobwebs from his mind, and the more elaborate or unusual the item being blessed the greater the concentration Mr. Damon was applying to a situation.

"We shouldn't drift away from the focus of all this," he pointed out. "This observatory's part of a concentrated effort to locate Planet X. This 'Falcon' person has developed an idea that someone here... and probably Professor Dempson... had a very good chance at finding it. Professor Dempson contacts me for assistance, and the Falcon becomes even more concerned, going to enormous lengths to keep me away, and then to drive me away when I arrive." Tom shook his head. "I don't understand what the Falcon's trying to accomplish."

Mary frowned. "But you just said--"

"I know, but his plan's essentially worked. Professor Dempson is missing. No one here seems close to finding Planet X. I certainly can't offer any real assistance. Even if the observatory allowed me to modify the big refractor to help in the search, I wouldn't be able to have an electronic lens ready for months. But in spite of all that the Falcon still considers me a threat."

"You're a clever man," Mary said with a small smile.

Mr. Damon nodded. "Indeed."

Tom suddenly saw Solis enter the cafeteria and waved him over.

The agent came to the table. "Special agents are at the clinic," he said. "We've also made contact with the local police who don't, I assure you, have a 'Captain Trowey' anywhere in their ranks. The clinic reports there's been no problems, but I'm assigning some men to personally watch your father for the time being."

Tom nodded gratefully.

"Do you need help in getting to New York?" Solis asked.

"I... don't know," Tom muttered, feeling Mary's eyes on him. "If I could just figure out why I'm a big threat to the Falcon then I could throw it all in your lap and leave a happy man. But..."

Solis nodded sympathetically. "I'm going to make the rounds of

my people here then call it a night.”

“Watch Cosma Hobby,” Tom told him. “If the Mulvowneys are still on the loose then she’s very much in danger.”

Solis assured Tom that he was on top of the situation and then wandered out. As he left he passed one of the night shift workers from the main office who went straight to Tom.

“We found this on the counter,” the girl said, passing an envelope to Tom.

Taking it Tom noticed his name neatly handwritten on the envelope. Curious he opened it and removed what was inside.

“Oh!”

It was a single card which bore a message:

MEET ME AT THE MARINA, SWIFT. COME ALONE.

On the opposite side of the card was the now familiar drawing of a falcon.

## Chapter Sixteen: A Familiar Face.

Throughout the years Tom had seen numerous wonders and unusual sights in the course of the various adventures and discoveries he had experienced. All of it was topped, however, by Mary's reaction to the message from the Falcon. He had never seen her eyes go so large, her jaw drop so far... and he would swear all her hair was trying to stand on end.

"Thomas Aeneas Swift," she said, her voice chipping each syllable out of stone. "You are not... not... NOT going out to the marina."

"Mary---"

"And don't 'Mary' me."

Tom blinked. "But it's your name."

Mary gulped like a fish. "Mr. Damon..."

"I must agree with your bride," Mr. Damon told Tom in a severe tone of voice. "This is so obviously a trap---"

"That it can't possibly be one," Tom replied, trying to mollify the others. He could see that he wasn't enjoying any sort of success so he went on. "Look. The Falcon has henchmen who can shoot fire and disappear. He's been able to lay out cunning explosives all over the place."

"He threatened your father," Mr. Damon said.

Tom paused then continued. "A sham. A decoy to get me to leave."

Mr. Damon frowned. "Bless my ninth circle of Hell, Thomas. Certainly you don't believe this fiend is harmless?"

"I don't," Tom said. "But please listen. The point I've been trying to make is that the Falcon has so many resources at his disposal that he could strike me down at any moment. The fact that he wants to meet with me might be a sign he's willing to talk."

"Or a sign he's willing to draw you closer into his sights."

"I'm not stupid---"

“I wonder,” Mary said harshly. “Tom, you have responsibilities. You have me. You have Tom Jr. You have---“

“I’m not just wandering out there on my own, Mary,” Tom said, trying to remain calm. “Please listen for a moment.”

Her eyes still on him, Mary worked to close her mouth.

“The Falcon will be expecting you alone, Tom,” Mr. Damon pointed out. “He’s clever enough to know if you violate that detail.”

“I want to try and outfox him,” Tom explained. “I can go to the marina while Agent Solis could have some of his men and some police officers stationed at George Williams College.”

“But---“

“Let me go on, Mary. Please. This close to Williams Bay, and with so many woods around, I know the local police should have flare pistols handy. I can take one with me and, in case of trouble. I can send off a signal which will attract the authorities.”

Mary didn’t seem at all happy and reached out for his hand.

“If this is really the Falcon,” Tom said, “then I owe it to everyone else to try and get a good look at him and hear what he has to say. It might help us learn what happened to Professor Dempson.”

“But Tom---“

“Let’s try and catch Agent Solis. I just hope he hasn’t gone to bed yet. Let’s see what he has to say.”

The three of them managed to locate Solis just before the Special Agent was about to go to the room he enjoyed on Parkhurst Place near the observatory. Although tired at first, he became alert and interested when Tom related his story.

“I can have two dozen men at the marina immediately,” Solis declared.

“And that would only scare the Falcon away,” Tom argued. “If I make an effort to go to him alone then we can perhaps learn a great deal.”

“Making yourself really vulnerable,” Solis replied, earning him a

grateful look from Mary.

“I know it might be dangerous,” Tom admitted. “But I’m willing to take the chance.”

“You shouldn’t be. I mean, the idea of the flare is nice. But it’s still too much of a considerable risk.”

Tom was wavering between willing to argue further and the despairing look on Mary’s face. Any sort of choice between the two however was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a breathless Agent Peggy.

“She’s gone off,” the harried young woman announced.

All eyes were on her. “What?” asked Solis.

“Cosma,” Peggy told him, gasping for breath. “She must have overheard a message or something about the Falcon being nearby. She’s slipped away.”

“Bless my mashie niblick!” Mr. Damon cried out. “She might’ve seen the envelope on the counter and read the card.”

“And the Falcon would know the whereabouts of... Professor Dempson,” Tom said.

Further discussions on how best to deal with the Falcon’s message was totally abandoned as Tom, Solis and Peggy immediately headed for the door.

“Tom,” shouted Mary.

“It’s no use,” Mr. Damon told her. “Bless my *pasodoble*, Mary, but Cosma may actually be in far more danger right now than Tom will ever be.” He was already breaking into a trot to try and catch up with the others. Behind him Mary sighed, quietly considered a few thoughts not usually meant for polite company, and began running (soon catching up with, and surpassing, Mr. Damon’s efforts).

The little group, with Tom and Agent Peggy in the lead, soon reached the eastern end of George Williams College. Tom slowed to a stop, his eyes peering ahead as Solis caught up.

“Students still out at this time of night,” Tom said to the FBI

agents. “If I were the Falcon I’d have some of my people, maybe even the Mulvowneys, in place here on campus and watching out.”

“Nothing to do for it now,” Solis said. “The marina’s just up ahead.”

Tom nodded, fearful now that Cosma’s impulsive action might have put her in grave jeopardy. Not only that, but if Cosma had indeed tried to reach the Falcon then he would doubtless be suspicious that Tom would try something untoward. The Falcon would get clean away.

And Cosma...

They were cautiously wandering among the trees of the campus, passing the Administration Building and keeping their eyes open. Because of the recent destruction of Tom’s airplane the marina was still closed off while repairs were being attended to, and no lights were on. Tom and the FBI agents instinctively tried keeping to the shadows.

“To-ommmmm...”

Tom turned about. “Mary!”

“Over there,” Solis suddenly pointed.

Tom whirled back to see what Solis had discovered. He could clearly see a figure cautiously moving out of the darkness at the marina, heading more into the light afforded by a nearby parking lot lamp. She was walking backwards...

Cosma!

She was keeping her eyes on a tall, rather sturdily built man who was steadily bearing down on her from out of the darkness. He seemed to be dressed all in black and, from where they were standing, Tom and the others could see the figure holding something like a gun on the young woman.

Tom heard Solis whisper a harsh word and, from the corner of his eye, saw the agent producing his own gun. “Careful,” Tom warned. “He’s too close to Cosma.”

Panting, Mary finally reached Tom. A quick glance ahead told her all that was happening. "Oh no!"

"Keep back," Tom softly advised her, spotting Mr. Damon approaching and motioning for him to stay close to Mary.

"I can rush in from the left," Agent Peggy whispered to Solis. "When he focuses on me---"

Tom could tell that Solis was impressed with the female agent's nerve, but was also reluctant to take such a course of action.

The plan became woefully academic, however, as the man made a sudden lunge for Cosma, catching one of her wrists in his free hand. Before Tom or the agents could react, the man had turned to face them, one arm firmly holding Cosma in place before him and the gun pressed very close against her head.

"THAT'S CLOSE ENOUGH," the man shouted.

Tom frowned. The man's voice came out rather oddly. Almost as if he were speaking through some sort of electronic device. But there was something about it...

Nothing could be gained through closer examination of the man. His face was entirely covered by a black mask. Below the eyeholes could be seen a rather distinctive beak.

Both Solis and Peggy had their service pistols drawn.

Tom made a careful motion with his hand, his eyes still on the mysterious figure in black. He took several steps.

"It's me you want," he cried out.

"Maybe so," the man replied. "But you were supposed to be alone."

"Cosma Hobby came out here without my say-so," Tom explained.

"Perhaps," the man slowly said. "And perhaps she'll be very useful in helping me get out of this situation."

Tom was still slowly advancing, holding his arms out to demonstrate that he wasn't carrying a weapon. "Let her go," he

promised, “and you and I can talk. The others will go away if you let them take Miss Hobby with you.”

He wasn't certain, but Tom felt he heard a brief and rather feminine wail from behind.

But Cosma's face suddenly twisted into a snarl and, with one movement, she plunged an elbow hard into her captor's stomach.

“Cosma!”

Still moving, the woman struggled, trying to break away fully. Then she was free, the man's mask in her hand...

And Tom was looking straight into the face of...

“Andy Foger!”

“Hold it right there,” Solis shouted.

Foger gave Tom a look filled to the brim with venom. The hand holding the gun wavered slightly, and Tom was preparing himself for a jump. But then Foger made a quick move with his remaining hand, throwing something down to the ground. In the next moment the entire area was lit with a blinding burst of white light.

When it cleared, Foger was nowhere to be seen.



## Chapter Seventeen: Diversion.

Within a half hour a crowd had gathered within the marina Chandler. Along with Tom, Mary, Mr. Damon, Solis, Cosma and Peggy there were several more FBI agents, local police and some of the observatory staff as well as officials from George Williams College.

Cosma was the center of attention. "I'm sorry," she said again, huddling at a table and accepting some tea from Peggy. "I just... saw the message from the Falcon and had to come out here to find out about my... about Professor Dempson. I ruined everything."

Tom could see that Solis was looking rather suspicious over the pause in Cosma's statement, and he realized with slight satisfaction that Agent Peggy had so far kept the secret of Cosma's relationship with Dempson.

On the other hand Solis seemed prepared to inquire further, but was interrupted as two members of the Williams Bay police came to him, beginning a whispered conversation.

"We've just searched up and down the lake shore," Solis told Tom. "No sign of Foger."

Tom thought it over. "He was standing pretty close to the shore when he set off that flash. I'm willing to bet that, in all the confusion, he turned and moved into the water to swim away. He could've reached one of the adjacent docks and hidden under it, waiting for the excitement to die down before making his move." He saw Solis about to give orders. "You can have people search and such, but I imagine he'll be gone by now. Andy's a lot of things, but stupid isn't one of them."

"In any case we'll have a lookout for him with every policeman in this part of the state," Solis promised. "Now we know who to look for."

Tom nodded dully. He was sitting on a chair near a window which

allowed him to look out into the darkness over Geneva Lake.

“I’d better get you on home,” Peggy said to Cosma, the tone of her voice suggesting that, this time, she was going to stay very close to her charge.

Looking at them Tom was struck by an inspiration. “Mary.”

Throughout the proceedings his wife had been quietly standing near Mr. Damon, giving her husband a slightly severe look. She now came closer, her arms crossed.

Tom looked up at her. “Go with Agent Peggy and Cosma.”

Surprise bloomed onto Mary’s face. “Why?”

“Besides Mr. Damon and myself, you’re the only one around here who understands Andy. He seems to have picked up some new tricks, but you’d know what to look for and could sound an alarm if something happened.”

Mary considered it, her look becoming thoughtful. “I guess,” she said, glancing over at Cosma and Peggy. “But Tom, I’m now wondering if I really know Andy so well. I mean, he’s always been a rascal...”

“Yeah,” Tom nodded. “But this is out of bounds even for Andy.” He reached out to take one of her hands in his. “That’s why I want you to be careful and keep your eyes open.”

“I will,” Mary declared. She then bent down and quickly planted a kiss on the top of Tom’s head. “And you be careful too.” With a wave at Mr. Damon she went off to follow Peggy and Cosma.

Mr. Damon watched her go. “Bless my crumbling tholos,” he murmured. “Well played, Tom.”

Tom looked up at him.

“Mary was seeming rather put out at what she perceived to be an inordinate amount of attention towards Cosma on your part,” he explained. “By involving her intimately in your plans you’ve convinced her of the esteem you have for her.”

“And the good part is, I was sincere.” Rising from the chair Tom

let out a stretch. “Hell of a night,” he muttered.

“You don’t seem too overjoyed over the irrefutable proof of Andy Foger’s complicity in all of this.”

Tom turned so that the others couldn’t see his face, and so that his words would be for Mr. Damon alone. “You were right, by the way.”

Mr. Damon waited.

“I’ve obviously wanted to have Andy at the bottom of this scheme.”

“Which brings me back to my earlier statement,” Mr. Damon gently prompted.

“This doesn’t fit Andy’s way of doing things,” Tom said emphatically. “Mary’s noticed it as well. Yes, Andy’s a creep and a bully and he’s deserved everything that’s happened to him. But a scheming criminal mastermind? Andy as the Falcon?” Tom shook his head. “Half of me wants to grab Andy and punch his lights out. The other half wants to force him to explain what’s going on. Interfering with Professor Dempson’s work. The Mulvowney Brothers.” Tom shook his head again. “It’s not adding up.”

“As you’ve pointed out,” Mr. Damon said, “it’s been a hell of a night. Perhaps if we managed to get some sleep the facts will arrive.”

“True,” Tom agreed. He then sighed. “Only one problem, though.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Don’t take this the wrong way, Mr. Damon, but my plans for sleeping involved company other than yourself.”

“No doubt.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was around ten-thirty in the morning when Tom finally awoke.

After attending to his morning rituals the first course of action was to call Mary at Mrs. Otonashi’s boarding house. The bright sound of

her voice provided Tom with an enormous sense of relief.

“Been missing you,” she breathed over the phone. “What with you being so close and all.”

“Miss you too,” Tom assured her. “I’m sorry I couldn’t think of a better solution.”

Mary surprised him with a slight giggle. “Wasn’t too altogether bad. Peggy and Florence and I sat up and sort of let our hair down and chatted for a while before going to bed. Did you know Peggy has a small crush on Agent Solis?”

“I do now,” Tom said, smiling. “What about Cosma?”

Mary’s voice grew more serious. “Tom, I really think she needs... I don’t know.” Her voice lowered a bit. “Professional help.”

“Oh?”

“She had a very bad night. Of course what with all that’s happened I can easily understand why she would. But we heard her occasionally moaning. Peggy and Florence told me that she’s done that every so often, and that would usually be the time she’d take the choral hydrate.” A pause. “Tom she’s in a very bad way.”

“Is she awake?”

“Not yet. Florence will check in just a bit.”

“Best guess, Mary. Do you feel Cosma’s protected enough, what with Peggy and Florence there?”

“She seems to be, unless of course she gets another impulse to slip away and try to meet Andy alone. Which reminds me, I described him to Mrs. Otonashi and she doesn’t remember seeing anyone like him. Same with Peggy and Florence.”

Tom mulled it over.

“So what next?” Mary asked.

“Well... I really feel like a heel for missing out on visiting Dad like I said I would. Andy’s not only interfered in an astronomical research project, he’s messed up my family life.”

“That doesn’t remove the fact that my husband is the sweetest man in all the world.”

“Why thank you, dear.” Tom was smiling again. “It occurs to me we haven’t flirted over the phone like this in a while.”

“Well, for one thing my father isn’t here to give me rather pointed looks.”

“Mmm, true.”

“Tom, I need to tell you...”

Tom waited for a few moments. “What?”

Silence. Then: “Oh, it’s not the sort of thing I’d want to talk about over the phone. I’ll let you know later on. Should I come there? Are we going to leave?”

“Good question.” Spotting Mr. Damon, Tom waved for him to come on over. “Do me a favor. Say hello to Mr. Damon for a bit while I go hunt up Solis or someone and find out what’s what. Then we’ll get together for lunch and make plans.”

“Certainly.”

Holding the phone out to Mr. Damon, Tom explained what he wanted to do. Mr. Damon was cheered at the prospect of talking with Mary, and Tom went in search of Solis. He soon found the FBI agent chatting in the observatory office with Collosz and Abrams.

Tom strolled up. “Any luck?”

The astronomers shook their heads. “Considering the perturbation figures,” Collosz said, “you would think Planet X would stand out like a sore thumb. It should be large enough to see clearly.”

Tom exhaled noisily. “I know I’m getting a reputation for gloomy thoughts around here, but what with all that’s happened is there any way your proposed search areas could be the result of sabotaged information?”

The astronomers exchanged a look. “That... never occurred to us,” Abrams slowly admitted. “Most of our figures were developed by Professor Dempson before he disappeared. After he vanished we had

Cosma give us everything he'd written down."

"Would Cosma know if the notes had been jimmied?"

Abrams shook his head. "She's soaked up a lot of astronomy since working here, but she couldn't do that."

"Would any of you know?"

Abrams scratched at his head. "Now I wish you hadn't brought that up, Tom. You see, a few degrees can mean the difference between finding something and looking in the wrong place. A slight change of an item here or there could really mess us up."

"We'll know more when we find Foger," Solis promised.

"What I'd like to know," Tom said, "is why Andy became so involved with this project. He has more of a grudge against me than against anyone here at Yerkes. If he wanted to get back at me he's had plenty of chances to do so in the six months he's been free. Why would he try to sabotage things here?"

"Maybe there's a connection between him and Dempson that we haven't uncovered," Solis pointed out.

"I guess," Tom replied. He then turned as he spotted Mr. Damon running excitedly towards him.

"Tom! Tom!"

Dread rose up within him. "What?"

"I was speaking with Mary," the older man breathed. "All of a sudden, the phone went dead..."

Tom was already throwing a look at Solis.

"Let's go," the agent declared.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tom, Solis and Mr. Damon (accompanied by two more FBI agents) doubtless violated many local laws on the way to the boarding house. But no one in the car was in much of a particular mood to care.

As it was, when they arrived they found themselves too late. Passing a weeping Mrs. Otonashi they rushed upstairs to Cosma's room to find both Agent Peggy and Agent Florence unconscious on the floor.

Mary and Cosma were gone.

## Chapter Eighteen: Ornithology.

Mr. Damon immediately noticed how Tom's face whitened, almost seeming to give off a heat all its own. He had seen that look before: the mixture of concern and raw anger which appeared only when Mary was in danger.

Everyone knew Tom to be a kind and generous fellow with a hearty smile and a warm nature. But Mr. Damon knew the animal which lurked deep inside the young man. He had seen it slowly grow ever since Mary entered his life, seen it emerge whenever Tom felt that Mary was in some sort of trouble.

He remembered last year, back when Tom had been working on the House on Wheels and it had been stolen. Tom was serious enough in his attempts to recover his invention. But the incident had also put Mary into close contact with Floyd Barton: a loathsome man whose intentions concerning Mary were far from honorable. Matters worked themselves out to a satisfactory conclusion... including a wedding for Tom and Mary... but Mr. Damon remembered when Tom had caught up with Barton, and he personally felt that only the immediate presence of Mary had prevented him from literally tearing Barton in two.

Mr. Damon now reached over and touched Tom's shoulder, trying not to draw back when he suddenly found himself staring into the hot blue eyes of the younger man.

"Tom."

"He's got Mary," Tom breathed, his hands bunched into fists. "The Falcon's got Mary."

*No mention of Cosma*, Mr. Damon thought.

Solis and one of the other FBI agents were kneeling close by the unconscious female agents.

"No sign of marks or anything," Solis was saying. "They're both breathing regularly. Right now I'm thinking drugged."



Mr. Damon let his hand tighten slightly on Tom's shoulder. "Tom!"

Tom drew in a breath, visibly trying to calm down. "Chloral hydrate," he spat out. "Peggy and Florence told me Cosma Hobby was using chloral hydrate. If... if the Falcon had got hold of that---"

Solis looked up at one of the agents. "Check out Miss Hobby's bedroom," he said, nodding at the closed door.

"Focus," Mr. Damon was gently insisting to Tom. "You won't be able to help her otherwise."

"I know," Tom replied with a strained whisper. "I *know*. It's just that..."

"I understand," Mr. Damon assured him. "The Falcon's struck you in your most vulnerable spot. You have to strike back. Quickly, and hard!"

Tom nodded, taking in several deep gulps of air. His eyes were already searching about the room.

The FBI agent who had forced his way into Cosma's bedroom came back out. "You'd better come see this," he said.

Everyone rushed in, with Tom and Solis in the lead. Not that there was a lot of available space for a large gathering. Cosma's bedroom was rather small, putting Mr. Damon in mind of a garret from the Middle Ages. Overly snug but at least comfortable looking, containing little more than a bed, a chifforobe and a long, tall bookshelf.

The bookshelf had been pulled aside, and everyone could see that it had been mounted on hidden hinges. Beyond it was an open space, and the leather loops which were firmly attached to the walls and floor were clearly visible.

"I thought the dimensions of the room were a little off," the agent explained, "and did some searching around. Apparently this was supposed to be a closet, but it was hidden by the bookshelf."

Solis moved closer, letting a hand lightly touch around the edge of the space. "What in the world..."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "The room which the Mulvowney Brothers used would've been on the other side of that wall."

"Check it out," Solis ordered an agent. "You," he said, indicating another. "Get a medical team up here fast to take care of Peggy and Florence."

Tom sidled up next to Solis, peering into the hidden space. "None of this is making sense," he said.

"If Cosma knew about this space," Solis pointed out.

"She knew about it," Tom replied, nodding down. "Look at the marks on the floor. She tried to use the small rug to cover them up, but it got pushed aside when the room was searched." A thought occurred to him. "Peggy told me that she and Florence never looked into Cosma's room."

"So what was going on in here?" Solis asked.

Tom knelt down. "Look at this," he said. "These stains." His nose wrinkled as he picked up a rather sharp odor. "Someone's been vomiting in here, and more than once."

"Nausea and vomiting are among the side-effects of chloral hydrate poisoning," Solis said.

"Agent Solis!"

Everyone went out into the hallway where the FBI agent who'd been sent to examine the room used by the Mulvowney Brothers was waiting. Nearby was a still very much upset Mrs. Otonashi.

"Nothing so far in the room the Mulvowneys used," the agent reported. "But Mrs. Otonashi---"

Everyone looked at her.

"When I made this into a boarding house," the landlady whispered brokenly, "the rooms which Miss Hobby and the Mulvowneys used were originally one larger suite with a connecting hallway. I had the hallway sealed off to create two rooms out of one."

"Bless my Islets of Langerhans!" Mr. Damon exclaimed. "Then it's possible the Mulvowneys---"

“But the Mulvowney end of the hallway was still sealed,” Solis said, frowning deeply. “We can check it out more thoroughly, though.”

Tom turned to the landlady. “Mrs. Otonashi, did you see anything of Mary being taken away? Or Cosma Hobby?”

“Nothing,” the woman insisted. “All has been quiet, Mr. Swift. No one went up to the room until you gentlemen showed up.”

A siren was growing steadily louder, and members of an ambulance team were soon entering the boarding house. Solis and the other agents directed them up to where Peggy and Florence still lay.

Tom was pacing about, and Mr. Damon could practically hear the wheels spinning inside the younger head.

“Could Cosma had been under some sort of coercion by the Mulvowneys?” Tom mused aloud. “Could they have been forcing her to do something?”

“If not the Mulvowney Brothers then perhaps Andy,” Mr. Damon pointed out. “But Tom... Cosma was under the protection of trained Federal agents.”

“And the Falcon was desperate,” Tom said. “And resourceful.” He sighed. “And no demands or a note or *anything*.”

“It’s still early,” Mr. Damon gently pointed out.

“I know,” Tom replied. “But if the Falcon has Mary... Mrs. Otonashi!”

The landlady looked up attentively.

“Did Cosma have any other friends or acquaintances besides her co-workers at the observatory? Any other visitors?”

Mrs. Otonashi thought it over. “No. No one that I can recall. She did send occasional messages to a lawyer who was handling her late mother’s affairs.”

Tom and Mr. Damon looked at each other.

“Cosma told us that her mother’s death left her practically penniless,” Mr. Damon murmured. “What sort of affairs could there

be?”

“Outstanding debts,” Tom considered. “Maybe that’s the coercive angle we’re looking for. Mrs. Otonashi, you wouldn’t have any of the messages she sent out, would you?”

The woman slowly shook her head.

Tom and Mr. Damon returned to Cosma’s room, stopping and stepping aside as the still unconscious Peggy and Florence were taken out on stretchers.

Solis was watching them leave. “They’ll be out of it for a bit,” he told Tom. “I’m having the police escort the ambulance to the hospital just in case.”

“Good idea,” Tom said. “Agent Solis, have you or anyone else found any sort of letters that Cosma was sending out, or receiving? Something from maybe a lawyer?”

“We’re still picking up the pieces here,” Solis admitted. “Come on.”

Re-entering Cosma’s room the men looked about, searching about the shelves and under the couch as well as making a close examination of the bedroom. Meanwhile something seemed to occur to Mr. Damon and he got up and left the room.

“Look for something maybe bearing the name ‘Staehle’,” Tom pointed out.

Solis looked at him curiously. “Staehle?”

“The maiden name of Cosma’s mother,” Tom told him, not wishing at the moment to go deeper into the woman’s personal background.

It was then that Mr. Damon returned. “Look here,” he said.

In one waving hand he was holding a bundle of envelopes and papers. “I played a hunch and found these in the back of the big steamer trunk the Mulvowneys had in their room.”

Tom eagerly reached out for them, looking them over. “Cosma’s return address,” he said, leafing through the envelopes. “She was

sending letters to some place in... Delavan.”

“That’s a town some ten miles northwest of here,” one of the FBI agents said.

“Contacting someone... someone named...” Tom frowned. “‘F. Hypotriorchis’.”

Solis also frowned. “Greek?”

“Maybe more like Latin.” Tom looked at one of the sheets of papers. “Just some numbers. Some sort of code maybe.”

“Oh, Tom...”

Tom looked to see an uncomfortable expression on Mr. Damon’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s *wrong*,” Mr. Damon replied, “is that bird watching is one of my many interests.”

“I know, but---“

“Let me finish,” Mr. Damon insisted. “‘Hypotriorchis’ is a subgenus of a particular type of bird.”

Tom drew in a breath. “The Falcon!”

“Much more than that, I’m afraid. The ‘F’ in that name could very well stand for ‘Falco’... and *Falco Hypertriorchis* is a species of falcon more commonly known as the Hobby!”

## Chapter Nineteen: On the Trail of the Falcon.

The raw anger and concern which Mr. Damon had seen in Tom's face was replaced by a more well-known expression: the sense that information was being coolly calculated within the young man's mind.

Tom frowned. "But that's..."

"Incredible?" Mr. Damon finished. "More incredible than, say, Andy Foger being involved in all this?"

Tom lifted a hand, motioning for silence. "A lot of things would fall into place if it were true," he considered. "All except an answer to the most important question. The why."

"Perhaps the answer is in Delavan," Mr. Damon suggested.

"In any case, Mary's there." Tom turned to leave the boarding house, Mr. Damon at his heels.

Solis and several of the FBI agents were following. "I can have police there in a matter of minutes," he promised.

"I'm going to be there," Tom declared. "If I find the Falcon I'm going to offer whatever I can to get Mary back safely." He threw a smoking glance over his shoulder at Solis. "And if Mary's been hurt, then the Falcon will still receive something from me... with interest!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The address on the envelopes indicated a place in northern Delavan. According to the FBI agent who had earlier identified Delavan the location was a wooded area near the southwestern shore of Comus Lake.

It was a fifteen minute trip, which gave Tom more than enough time to fret as well as ponder the latest development.

He was also coordinating a plan with Agent Solis. "I don't want a

lot of police and other people there,” he said.

“But---“

Tom shook his head. “If Mr. Damon’s theory is wrong, then the Falcon is far too dangerous to risk having anything happen to Mary and Cosma.” He slowly exhaled. “And if Mr. Damon’s right, then we’re dealing with a totally unpredictable person, which is even worse. No. Just this car and the one with the other agents should be enough.”

As they traveled the agents checked their weapons. The sight of the Colt Official Police handguns worried Tom, but he was interested to see several of the agents producing the latest model of his electric rifle.

Solis noted Tom’s interest. “We’ll have the rifles set for ‘stun’,” he promised, “and they’ll be the principle weapons used.”

Tom looked at him gratefully.

“Besides,” Solis added, “we’d stand a better chance of getting answers out of live people than dead ones.”

The cars finally reached their destination and, following Solis’ instruction, drove casually past the simple one-story home which was partially hidden by some trees. No markings or signs indicated who the house belonged to.

“Turn onto the street ahead,” Solis ordered. “Franklin Avenue. When we’re out of sight we’ll stop the cars and proceed to the house on foot.”

Tom was in a mood to leap out a window and rush the house, but he felt a touch which turned out to be a comforting hand from Mr. Damon.

“It’ll be all right,” the older gentleman said.

Finding a secluded lot the cars came to a halt. Tom, Mr. Damon and the Federal agents then climbed out and began trotting back towards the house. As it came into sight Tom was surprised to see a sedan pull up, and then he was even more surprised at the figure who emerged from it.

“Bless my funicular,” Mr. Damon gasped. “It’s...”

“Professor Abrams,” Solis exclaimed. “But surely he isn’t---“

“He isn’t,” Tom declared. “At least not in the way either of you are thinking.” In a louder voice he shouted: “Leonard... don’t!”

Abrams was halfway across the lawn to the house when he paused and noticed the approaching group. At that moment he was suddenly surrounded by geysers of flame which formed a circle about him.

At the same time a figure appeared on the front porch of the house. As before he was dressed all in black, his face hidden by a now-familiar beaked mask.

In one hand he was holding a revolver which was pointed in the direction of Tom and the others.

“That’s close enough, Swift,” the distorted voice cried out. “One step closer and Professor Abrams will be incinerated.”

“I doubt it, Andy,” Tom shouted back. “You’ve never been a murderer. At least not yet.”

A black gloved hand reached up to pull the mask away, revealing Andy Foger’s hate-filled face.

“Where’s Mary?” Tom asked him.

“Safe,” Foger said. “For the time being. Much safer than Abrams is at the moment.”

Tom was giving the lawn a quick examination. “The area’s probably been salted with booby traps,” he said to Solis. “No doubt courtesy of the Mulvowney Brothers. Try and stun Andy and we can get Leonard out of that fire circle.”

But then there was a movement on the porch. Seemingly from out of nowhere two more black-clad and masked figures appeared and flanked Foger.

“Speak of the devils,” Mr. Damon said.

The newcomers suddenly gestured with their hands, and clouds of flaming gas rushed out in the direction of Tom and the others, causing



them to scatter. At the same time geysers of multicolored flame erupted from various places in the yard.

“Smoke and mirrors,” Tom shouted to the agents. “Stun them.”

Two agents with electric rifles aimed their weapons and pulled the triggers, sending hissing bolts of energy in the direction of the porch. A chorus of moans, and both Foger and his masked companions fell unconscious.

Which left the problem of the flames, but Tom quickly moved among the geysers, digging hard into the ground with a shoe. A few moments of this and he went “aha” as he uncovered what appeared to be a grey garden hose.

“Supply source for the fuel feeding the flames,” he said, reaching down and grabbing the hose, ripping it apart. Immediately two of the geysers disappeared.

“There should be a central hose feeding the flames around Leonard,” Tom explained, going over to one of the agents and reaching out for the electric rifle he held. “Get him out of there and take Andy and the others into custody. I suspect they’re the Mulvowneys.” With the rifle in one hand Tom began trotting around the left side of the house, followed closely by Mr. Damon and Solis.

Turning a corner Tom spotted the garage. He also saw a figure running to it from the house. “Cosma!”

The woman stopped and spun around to face Tom. She was dressed in a blue floral blouse above an ankle-length black skirt. Her expression immediately melted into hopeful concern as she approached, her arms outstretched. “Oh, Tom...”

Tom quickly brought the rifle up. “Stop right there, Cosma.”

The woman did so, surprised. “But Tom---“

“It’s over, Cosma. We know you’re the Falcon.”

A slow breath left Cosma’s mouth as she stood straighter, her eyes narrowing. In the next moment her arms swept up, then down, and she was suddenly engulfed in a dark cloud shot through with flames. Within the cloud Cosma was a faint silhouette.

The silhouette was slowly raising its arms, producing an effect that, in accompaniment to the smoke, made it appear as if she were extending enormous black wings.

“Give it up, Cosma,” Tom pleaded. “We’ve got Andy and the Mulvowneys.”

“But you haven’t got your wife,” Cosma’s voice cried out from within the fiery cloud. “And I wouldn’t dream of using that rifle on me. You’re correct in that I have Mary. She’s very much nearby. But, unlike everything else you’ve seen, Mary isn’t facing stage fire and illusion. She’s surrounded by a large quantity of explosives which are set to go off unless I escape. Drop the weapon, Tom. All of you drop your weapons and do it now... or Mary dies!”

## Chapter Twenty: Deadliest of the Species.

Tom stopped.

In front of him the flames and smoke were gradually fading, leaving a frowning Cosma staring at all of them.

She lifted a hand. “The weapons!”

Keeping his eyes on the woman, Tom let the rifle fall to the ground. Next to him Solis slowly released his pistol.

Cosma nodded. “All of you are being cooperative. Very wise.”

“Let Mary go,” Tom said to her.

“Eventually. Once my escape is assured. You’ve managed to be in my way quite a bit, Tom Swift, but I still hold all the cards.” She now took a step back towards the garage. “I’ve managed to succeed and, if I have to blow up your pretty little wife in order to make my plans complete, then I’m afraid that’s a choice I’ll have to make.”

Tom moved closer.

“Stay there!” Cosma demanded. “I can detonate the explosives from where I am. Or perhaps the explosives are linked to a timer, and I’m the only one who knows how to shut it off.”

“Cosma, whatever your reasons for any of this you’re not a murderer. I can’t imagine you harming either Mary... or your father.”

At this he had the attention of both Mr. Damon and Solis.

“Her father?” Solis asked.

Tom ignored them. “If you’re the Falcon,” he said to Cosma, “then you’ve been the one who’s been interfering in the observatory’s Planet X project. Up until now I couldn’t figure out why the Falcon wanted to do that.”

Cosma took another step back. She was now pressed up against the garage door.

“Everything you’ve done against the project has been smoke and

mirrors. Sometimes literally. Your first move was your original objective: the kidnapping of Professor Dempson.”

The anger on Cosma’s face was slowly being replaced with desperation.

“But you were with him, Cosma,” Tom insisted. “That’s what I couldn’t understand. The two of you were together again. What you’ve always wanted.”

“Not entirely,” Cosma shrieked. “It was still the stars. All the damned stars and planets! My mother... she left him because she didn’t want to share him with the stars.”

“And neither did you,” Tom murmured. “I understand now. I had assumed you told your father who you were. But I remember now what you said when I managed to identify you. As far as he knew you were dead from typhoid.”

“And fathers always have trouble recognizing their children as adults,” Mr. Damon whispered. “Bless my Holland Tunnel ventilation building!”

“Not only that,” Cosma shot back, “but he was so absorbed in his work he couldn’t take the time or make the effort to recognize me. I thought he would come around, but he didn’t. He forced me to take drastic measures.”

“You could’ve confronted him with the truth,” Tom said to her.

“I *tried*. Throughout all our time together I gave him every possible opening for recognizing me. I even went so far as to wear my mother’s cologne. Anything to try and bring back the past. I’d ask questions about whether or not he had a family... or what he’d do if he found out he had a living relative.” She fiercely shook her head. “Nothing! His work was all that mattered.” Her breathing was becoming ragged, her eyes glittering. “Exit Cosma Hobby...”

“And enter the Falcon,” Tom finished. “And that was the only way?”

“I’m not letting him go,” Cosma said. “Not ever. Not again. We’ll always be together from now on. *Stay there!*”

Tom hadn't realized he had moved closer and he froze in place. "Cosma, your father is a dedicated scientist. But he's also a good and decent human being. Even in spite of his obsessions. Do you think he's going to want to stay with you after all you've done?"

"He won't have a choice... *stop and drop your weapons!*"

She had screamed this to her right, and Tom realized what had happened. "Your agents," he told Solis. "They were sneaking around from the other side."

Cosma threw him a warning glance. "Tom, if you value Mary's life..."

"Everybody put down your guns," Solis shouted out. "No one makes a move."

More and more Cosma's expression resembled the name she had given herself. "I knew you'd be trouble," she said. "I didn't really begin worrying about my plans until Daddy came up with the notion of contacting you concerning Planet X. I knew of your reputation and tried to stop you... drive you away. You and your interfering..."

"Me," Tom agreed quickly. "It's been me who's been interfering, Cosma. Not Mary. Not anyone else. It's me you want to get back at."

"Yes," Cosma slowly said, the glitter in her eyes seeming to increase. "Only Tom Swift could counter the Falcon. And only Tom Swift could still defeat all my plans. Perhaps I will spare Mary's life after all. Take her with me. Keep her close with a knife always at her throat. That would be the only safe way to insure that you no longer stand in my way."

"No---"

And then a new voice said: "Cosma!"

Everyone turned as a figure slowly stumbled out from around the corner of the garage. He was a gaunt man, his cheeks hollow and his posture bent. He was holding on to the side of the garage as if for dear life, the clothes he wore stained and unkempt.

In spite of his appearance he was immediately known to Tom. "Professor Dempson!"

The man was slowly trying to stumble in Cosma's direction. "Don't do this," he croaked at her. "Please."

Cosma's eyes were wide and, to everyone who watched, she seemed to be five years old. "Daddy!"

"It is not... Tom Swift's fault," Dempson continued, struggling to get the words out. "I was the one who ignored you. I denied you."

"But I can fix it now," Cosma pleaded. "It's going to be better. I have you with me."

"We were already together," Dempson said. "You were a wonderful and attentive assistant. I never told you before, because back then I felt it would've been improper, but I was finding myself thinking of you as the daughter I would've wanted. My daughter and I... working together."

"It can still be that way," Cosma told him. "You and I can still work together. The Falcon, and Professor Dempson."

"That's not what I want," Dempson argued, the effort seeming to take everything out of him. "I paid a price of loneliness for losing your mother. I don't want to pay a greater price with you. I want my daughter, not the Falcon."

"You didn't love your daughter," Cosma said. Her voice was calm and steady now as she started to open the garage door. "You can leave with me now and we'll start over again. You and I. Neither of us will be alone ever again, but you need to learn how to love people. You need to learn how to be a father--"

A small fist suddenly lanced out from behind the garage door, catching Cosma squarely across the jaw and knocking her to the ground.

In the next moment Mary stepped out of the garage.

"You need to learn how to tie better knots," she told Cosma.

Feeling like a hound let off the leash Tom rushed to Mary, sweeping her into his arms. "Sweetheart!"

Solis and the other agents were quickly bearing down on Cosma.

But Dempson was nearer and he collapsed down onto the ground at his daughter's side, reaching out for her.

The young woman was sobbing brokenly, clutching at her father.

"Daddy," she squealed softly. "Daddy..."

"It'll be all right," Dempson was murmuring to her, stroking the dark hair. "I'm here now. I'll fix everything and make it all right."

Solis gently cleared his throat. "Professor..."

"I know," Dempson said, still holding on to Cosma. "But I also know the reasons behind what she did. If anyone's guilty of all that's happened then it's me." He turned pleading eyes up to Solis. "Whatever happens I'd like to take care of her."

Leonard Abrams had joined the group and he was now staring down at Dempson and Cosma.

"I'd like to help," he said to Dempson.

Tom had barely followed the exchange, most of his attention being focused on Mary. "You're all right? Really all right?"

"Of course," Mary told him. "Who else did you think untied Professor Dempson?"

"Oh! But who taught you to hit like that?"

"Who do you think?"

"Oh." Tom nodded sagely. "Helen Morton."

"Exactly." Mary cuddled closer to him for a bit.

Then: "*Now* can we go home?"

## **Chapter Twenty-One: The Announcement of a New World.**

For reasons all her own, Mary was never comfortable with being around the Adirondacks. But she was happy enough to finally give Tom a chance to spend time with his father, and she couldn't deny that the Gloversville Clinic was a pleasant location to spend an afternoon.

As far as Tom was concerned, the visit was a mixture of trepidation and pleasure. Dr. Roeber had privately taken Tom aside and informed him that, whereas his father still had several years ahead of him, Tom had to accept the fact that there'd be shifts in mood as the man's mind continued to age.

There had been an uncomfortable bit of distance between Tom and his father in the first few moments of their meeting, but the old man's mood lifted considerably from an opportunity to dandle Tom Jr. on his knee, and Tom smiled enormously at the sight of his father trying his best to make the baby giggle. Barton Swift's temper was also mollified as he found himself involved in an explanation as to what had happened at Yerkes Observatory.

"So this Cosma Hobby," the older Swift said. "She was mad?"

"She suffered a complete mental breakdown," Tom told him. "I'm nowhere near being a psychiatrist... and understand that Cosma's still undergoing examination... but the way it was explained to me it seems that what happened was Cosma believed she had been thoroughly rejected by her father. She wanted to be near to him, but couldn't reconcile the feeling of rejection. For her, the answer was to assume a different identity. Becoming 'Cosma Hobby' gave her enough opportunity to be near Professor Dempson. When it came time to try and possess him completely, however, Cosma went one step further and produced the identity of the Falcon."

Barton Swift slowly shook his head. "Incredible."

"What's incredible is that Cosma had poor Professor Dempson hidden in that secret room in her apartment," Mary said, "and no one realized it. Not even Peggy or Florence."



“Cosma was keeping Professor Dempson sedated with chloral hydrate,” Tom told his father. “He would occasionally awaken and make noises, and those were the sounds the FBI agents were hearing.”

Mr. Swift, no stranger to medication, seemed concerned. “Is he all right?”

“He’s still in the hospital, last I heard. The doses he had received were putting him at severe risk of heart failure and the doctors are keeping him under observation.”

“What will happen to his daughter?”

Tom sighed and exchanged a look with Mary. “That’s... a very good question. Cosma’s guilty of having committed several crimes. On the other hand there’s no denying she wasn’t of sound mind. And the person with the greatest complaint against her, her father, isn’t in any mood to prosecute. Professor Dempson wants Cosma to receive medical help and try to get better. So does Leonard Abrams. We’ll just have to see what happens.”

“And what about Andy Foger? And those magician fellows?”

“Yeah,” Tom said, grimacing. “Andy’s probably on his way back to jail after violating the conditions of his parole. Once she realized her father was determined to get in touch with me she instructed the Mulvowney Brothers to come to Shopton and recruit him. They were also the ones who made the initial attempts to dissuade me from going to Wisconsin.”

“That’s something I don’t understand,” Barton said. “I certainly don’t have any sympathy for Andy, but I felt he was tough. What did these brothers do to get him to fall in with them?”

“Well... apparently the Mulvowneys were not only experienced illusionists and stage magicians, they were also a few steps ahead of the law. The details are still being collected, but it looks as if Cosma somehow stumbled onto the seamier details of their past. She blackmailed them into assisting her, not only providing her with a pair of useful agents, but giving her a crash course in the art of illusion. Afterwards she sent them to Shopton and, using their skill as illusionists, they managed to find evidence that Andy had already

been in violation of his parole over a few things. With this knowledge they coerced Andy into joining their scheme, providing a sort of diversion to keep us from learning the truth about Cosma. Not only that, Andy was genuinely looking for a chance to get back at me and, unfortunately, he got involved. By the way, he was definitely the one who blew up my airplane.”

“All those lives ruined,” Barton said regretfully.

“Including Cosma,” Tom pointed out. “She had me pegged as a threat to her scheme but, ultimately, she was her own worst enemy. In her own way Cosma was as much a victim of the Falcon as all of us were.”

“So it was never about Planet X at all. All the things Cosma did at the observatory were just distractions to draw everyone’s attention from her real plan.”

“Yeah,” Tom said, reaching into his pocket, pulling out a piece of paper. “Ironically she managed to succeed in giving the Planet X victory to someone else.” He passed the paper over to his father. “That telegraph caught up with me here.”

Barton accepted the item and studied it. “Oh my!”

Tom nodded. “It’ll be in all the newspapers tonight. Planet X has been found by the Lowell Observatory in Arizona. Someone named Clyde Tombaugh discovered it. He had just been hired by the observatory.”

Barton sighed. “The people at Yerkes probably want to lynch Cosma Hobby.”

“I don’t think it’ll come to that, but admittedly it’s something of a blow. On the other hand it’s definitely put the bug into me to build a telescope of my own. I’ll continue corresponding with Dempson on the subject.”

“At the same time inquiring about Cosma’s progress.”

“True,” Tom admitted. “Not that I mind working on problems. But there are some I’d rather keep at arm’s length, if not further.”

Later on Tom and Mary took a stroll over the grounds of the Clinic, giving Tom's father a chance to show off his grandson to the staff.

Holding Mary's hand, Tom glanced over at his wife. Mary had seemed preoccupied over the last few days and he felt he knew the reason.

"I'm sorry you had to get mixed in with all of this," he said to her.

Mary looked up at him. "Um?"

"You've been kind of moody. Or maybe distracted is the word I'm looking for."

"It's not because of what happened," Mary said, giving Tom's hand a squeeze. "Or maybe it is. I've ended up in trouble before---"

"Which I don't like."

Mary smiled. "Well... as long as I have my stalwart knight to defend me, I should be okay."

"I don't mind defending you," Tom confessed. "I'd just rather you were safe all the time."

"And I'd like the same for you. I guess, even though we're married..."

"I honestly didn't try to get into trouble in Wisconsin."

"I know," Mary softly insisted. "I just hope that Cosma's the worst person you'll ever have to face. I know she was ill," she quickly added, "but I hope you'll forgive me for saying I'd rather my loved ones weren't ever involved with insane masterminds ever again."

"Well, hopefully Cosma will represent the low water mark of this sort of thing."

"Hopefully," Mary mused.

Then: "Actually, though, Cosma didn't strike me as being altogether clever."

Tom looked at her. “Oh?”

“All this running around and parlor tricks,” Mary said. “She couldn’t have kept that sort of thing going for very long. Admittedly you had an easy time in figuring her out once you picked up a few facts.”

Tom chuckled. “Your faith in my intelligence is heartening.”

“Well, I’m just saying that Cosma wasn’t as smart as she tried to appear.”

“True. She certainly didn’t know about the dangers of chloral hydrate and was risking her father’s life.”

“She also didn’t know you’re going to be a father again.”

Tom nodded. “Yeah, she didn’t know I... *Mary!*”