

PHYLLIS NEWTON: TimeLost

A Swift Generations Novel

BY
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Made in The United States of America

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Chapter One: Arrival

The first sensation Phyllis experienced was the taste of dirt.

So her first comment was: “*Ptui!*”

Slowly raising her face off the ground she loudly smacked her lips, indecorously spitting and trying to remove the last vestiges of soil from her mouth. Meanwhile her mind continued to collect consciousness, managing to produce the thought: *so much for trying to be graceful.*

Gradually she grew increasingly aware of her immediate situation. She was lying face down in the dirt... no... she was lying on a dirt path...

Path?

Her eyesight rapidly clearing, Phyllis realized why she was feeling a breeze. She was on a wide dirt path within... “A forest?”

Groaning mildly she pulled herself into a sitting position, staring around in confusion. “I’m in a *forest?*”

Which, of course, should’ve been patently impossible. Technically... realistically... she knew she should’ve still been with the others in the chamber buried deep beneath the Arizona desert.

But, not only was she not in the chamber, she was definitely not in the Arizona desert. All around her stretched a green growth of cottonwoods and elms in what seemed to be a midday setting. The temperature was neither too warm or cool and felt rather pleasant, and Phyllis’ nose now picked up the faint trace of moisture somewhere nearby. A lake? A pond?

Instinctively she looked to her right, then paused.

“Now why did I do that?” she wondered aloud.

And the answer was because, for some reason, she expected a body of water to be in that direction. Feeling steadier now she moved up onto her feet, absently brushing dirt off of her as she pondered the issue. A twenty-nine year old woman possessing the build of a dancer, as well as brown eyes and a (currently disheveled) mass of curling brunette hair which fell slightly past the middle of her back. Dressed in a simple teal blue blouse, Navy blue jeans, her feet tucked into black leather

mesh shoes. Black was also the color of the belt around her waist, and a hand automatically checked to make certain her smartphone was still attached. On the hand, specifically on the ring finger, was a band of dark gray metal.

The more Phyllis looked around the more a sense of unease was growing inside her. Bad enough she wasn't where she was supposed to be. Even worse was the notion that there was something oddly familiar about her current surroundings. She had an idea of where she was...

But: "It's wrong," she murmured. "It doesn't look quite right."

But if I'm right, her mind continued and, bowing to a notion, she unclipped her phone from her belt, switching it on. The phone obediently came to life, but Phyllis frowned as the screen announced the lack of a signal. Pressing a few more buttons didn't change the situation. The phone's internal diagnostics reported all was well with the device but, as far as it knew, there wasn't a signal to be had anywhere.

Of course, Phyllis reasoned, both she and the phone might've been discombobulated by the journey they'd just taken. Regardless, however, the Swift Enterprises space station should at least be responding to her tracking signal. Someone... either Ken Horton on the station, or Sherman Ames at Enterprises... should be seeing the phone pop up on a screen somewhere. Everyone knew where she was going. One moment Arizona...

The next moment...

Phyllis looked around. "Tom?"

No answer and she raised her voice. "Tom? I'm here."

Because if she had accurately followed Tom's path, then she should be wherever he was.

And *here* was...

Phyllis shook her head. It was still impossible. Improbable. And, because of that, wholly expected considering that she was dealing with something Tom had his fingers in. But on the other hand, if Tom was as involved as Phyllis suspected he was, then her current location made some sort of weird sense. Even if there was something odd about her surroundings, she finally decided to bite the bullet and make the admission which common sense couldn't wrap itself around.

"I'm home," she said to the empty air. To be precise, she was in Steuben County, New York. The forest she was in looked very much like the Valigursky Woods, which meant she wasn't far from the southeastern shore of Lake Carlopa. Which also meant that the town of Shopton... and her house... was only five or so miles to the west. Phyllis knew that, if she walked on to the lake, she should be able to easily look across the water and see Swift Enterprises on the opposite shore.

Which would, of course, be where Tom would logically go, she silently reasoned. Shaking her head she started strolling down the path, heading west. She knew she'd eventually reach Anthony Road which would then take her on into Shopton and close to the front gates of Enterprises. With luck she might be able to hitch a ride with someone who had a working phone, letting Tom know she had followed him.

The more she thought about it, the more her situation seemed sensible. Neither she or the investigation team had any notion about the sort of work Dr. Roberts had been performing in the Arizona laboratory. Even Tom had been vague about it in his explanations. But if Tom had been assisting, and if Roberts' project did have something to do with advanced physics, then it was well within the realm of possibility that Phyllis would currently be walking through the woods towards home.

"So Tom helps invent a machine which teleports people from Arizona to Shopton," Phyllis remarked to herself. "Cute."

Except there was still something odd about her surroundings. And then it occurred to Phyllis that she had not seen any of the picnic tables which were evenly spaced along the main trail through Valigursky Woods. She also thought she was familiar with every path and trail through the woods, having ridden horses or walked through them countless times before with Tom, Sandy and Bud. But the path she was on didn't seem... usual.

Oh but wait. There *was* a trash can up ahead on the edge of the path. At least that was familiar, and Phyllis almost gave it a friendly pat as she strolled by...

And then stopped and peered back in. A newspaper. And still in readable condition. Reaching in, Phyllis retrieved it from within the can.

Unfolding it, her insides did a little flip flop. Yes, it was a copy of the Shopton *Bulletin*. Comforting, but... *So it's true.*

I've really been transmitted over two thousand miles through space.

Standing there, Phyllis couldn't make up her mind whether to hug Tom when she found him, or flat knock him out cold. Of course he had no way of knowing she would try to follow him. And the people who had accompanied her into Roberts laboratory complex *had* yelled at her not to enter the device.

“Maybe they should've yelled louder,” she muttered. She started folding the paper, preparing to toss it back into the trash can... and then she stopped, her heart suddenly racing as she once again unfolded the paper, her eyes returning to the item which she had glanced at without having it register at first.

The date on the paper. Just beneath the masthead.

“Oh God,” she moaned. “Oh God, *no!*”

May 17, 1980.

Which meant...

“Thirty-five years in the past,” Phyllis said, feeling the world spinning wildly around her.

Chapter Two: Fifty-Seven Minutes Earlier (Subjective)

“So,” Phyllis remarked. “Exactly where are we going?”

Which, admittedly from her, was a legitimate question. Only minutes earlier the *Sky Queen III*, the latest incarnation of Tom Swift Jr.'s famous Flying Lab, had touched down upon a flat and raw section of desert beneath a sun which baked down, hot and bright. The landing site was northwest of Phoenix, east of Lake Havasu City, southwest of Flagstaff and southeast of Kingman. The nearest official road in the area was U.S. Route 93, twenty miles to the east.

And it was the last recorded position of Tom Swift Jr.

“And *this* is a scientific research facility?” Phyllis had exclaimed after leaving the *Sky Queen*. She had been accompanied by the seven people hand-picked to travel with her, and the tone of her remark could be excused, seeing as how the gigantic plane had settled down next to the corroded and tattered shell of an ancient mobile home.

Her incredulity had been shared by Pico Jefferson. Second-in-command of Swift Enterprises formidable Security Section, he had accompanied Phyllis on her expedition. Rather than simply echo her sentiments, though, the heavysset man and his associates spent time closely examining the ground between them and the mobile home.

“Okay,” he finally reported to Phyllis. “To the casual observer it sort of looks like no one's been here in years.”

“Oh, color me surprised—”

“But... I've been working for the Shar—I mean, for Sherman too long to miss out on subtle clues.”

Despite herself, Phyllis smiled at Pico's reluctance to use the unofficial nickname of “The Shark” in describing Sherman Ames: Enterprises redoubtable Chief of Security.

“Such as?” she prompted.

“I'm seeing marks of landings made by atomicars or helicopters,” Pico explained. “Here, and here. Recent landings. And one other thing.”

Phyllis waited.

“Arliss used the *Sky Queen's* onboard retroscope to scan the area just before we landed. It picked up the tracks of what looks like a lot of heavy machinery.”

Phyllis looked around.

“You won't see the tracks,” Pico told her. “They show up with the retroscope, but not visibly. Not now.” His sad eyes gazed owlshly at her. “A lot of trouble's been taken to hide whatever's happened here.”

Continued study inevitably led to looking within the mobile home, with little being initially found with the exception of a slumbering Gila monster. But at the far end of the dilapidated structure was a horizontal freezer cabinet, seemingly just as worn and decrepit as the rest of the surroundings... at least until Pico and another member of the team managed to pry the lid open, at which moment the entire section of floor on which they stood smoothly descended downwards into the ground. Within moments they were all at the bottom of a gleaming metal shaft.

“Oh,” Phyllis remarked. “Well. This is special.”

The elevator opened, admitting them into an environment of more gleaming metal. Walls... doors... ceiling... all illuminated by lights which snapped on the moment they entered. Plaques on the doors featuring names such as CURVATURE ANALYSIS, EQUIVALENCE & SCALAR VARIANCE PLOTTING, CONFORMAL FIELD CENSUS/LIBRARY...

“Okay,” Phyllis had said. “This looks more like someplace Tom would be. But where is he?” She looked around. “In fact, where is everybody?”

More searching, continuing to find the surroundings just as deserted. Finally the group found themselves standing before a large metal panel, with a keypad on the adjoining wall.

Unfolding a small electronics toolkit from his belt, Pico went to work on the keypad. “We're obviously on the right track,” he said as he tinkered. “Why else were we getting all those government and military warning messages telling us not to overfly this area?”

Phyllis had her own suggestions for both the government and the military, but she buried the temptation to voice them. “How long do you figure we have before Official People show

up?” she asked.

“Long enough to hopefully learn something... ah!” Pico stepped back, and everyone watched as the metal panel smoothly slid aside, revealing the interior of yet another large elevator.

And it was in the elevator, traveling down, that Phyllis voiced her initial question about their destination. Not that she was nervous... or admittedly just a bit... but the elevator seemed to be traveling quite a *bit* downwards.

Pico didn't answer, but another member of the team stepped closer. Dr. Joseph Keough: a physicist whose presence on the team had been suggested by Tom Swift Sr. He had been frowning at the display of his computer and now spoke. “I'm picking up something interesting.”

Phyllis had spent practically all her life around scientists. Even so, patience was sometimes hard to come by. “‘Interesting’ as in helpful?” she asked, “or ‘Interesting’ as in we're all about to die?”

“Not dangerous,” Keough replied. “It's just that I'm getting readings which indicate an enormous amount of electrical power is being generated further down.” He looked into Phyllis' eyes. “Something large or powerful, or both, is operating below us.”

As Phyllis tried to swallow her concerns, her thoughts rushing back to just before her departure, to the conversation she'd had with Sandy. “I can't figure it out,” she had told her close friend (and sister-in-law to be). “I tell Sherman and Aunt Mary and Uncle Tom that I want to go to Arizona and find out what's happened to Tom. Sherman doesn't so much as bat an eye but immediately calls the Flying Lab hangar and has the *Sky Queen* prepped for immediate launch. Then he and Uncle Tom start organizing a team to accompany me out west.”

Sandra Barclay had smiled at Phyllis. “You sound surprised.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, no argument, no debate... just bang! Everyone at Enterprises seems to be rolling over to accommodate me.”

“And why not? You are, after all, the Consort Apparent.”

Phyllis opened her mouth, then closed it.

"You're on the verge of marrying my brother," Sandy pointed out. "How did Shakespeare put it? 'She that can lay hold of him will have the chinks'."

"Misquoted," Phyllis replied. "It's also from *Romeo and Juliet*, and I sort of wish you'd pick a different example."

"Sorry."

"And I could care less about the chinks. I just want your brother. At the altar. With me."

"So do I," Sandy declared. "So do all of us. Listen, if Dr. Bizzart... self-appointed Final Authority in the field of Obstetrics... wasn't currently keeping me under a bit of observation," and here she grimaced down at her ever-expanding stomach, "Bud and I'd be saddling up with you. We're just as worried about Tom, although I suspect you easily beat us out in that department."

"Yeah, well... you and Bud stay put and keep an eye on Whoozis. I'll fly out and drag Tom out of whatever captured his attention."

"Just be careful," Sandy now said, her voice all serious.

"Huh! That's real good coming from you."

* * * * *

Phyllis and the others had left the elevator and were now walking down a wide corridor.

"Best guess," she asked Pico. "How far down are we?"

Pursing his lips, Pico considered the question. "Ballpark figure? I'd safely say we're ten thousand feet underground. Thereabouts. And I'm suddenly reminded of something."

"Oh?"

Pico nodded. "A few years ago Tom leased one of his earth blasters to someone. A Doctor Thomas... Roberts. Yeah, that was the name. The details were sparse, but I remember Roberts saying he wanted to carry out some drilling in Arizona. Nothing more was explained, and we thought Tom was gonna turn down the offer. But he didn't."

Tracks of heavy machinery, Phyllis thought. "Did we ever find out anything about Roberts?"

Pico was already consulting his computer. "I remember it being not a whole heck of a lot. Just enough to make Sherman

wish we'd researched further. But Tom specifically ordered us to let the matter drop." Pico shrugged. "All of which meant Sherman investigated anyway. He just didn't tell Tom about it. Here's what we managed to dig up." Pico studied the screen. "Roberts was an old duffer. Started out as an electronics engineer. Got involved in intelligence work as a Major. Ah! Forgot about this. He assisted in smuggling Rudolph Popkiss into the United States during World War II. Drops out of sight after the war, but his name would occasionally appear in relation to this or that bit of top secret high energy physics."

Phyllis frowned, liking the matter less and less. Bad enough Tom was involved with some sort of government spook. A government spook with a penchant for secret physics projects... that sounded worse.

She shook her head. "A pair of clever Toms working together."

They were now reaching the end of the corridor. Ahead of them were a large pair of double doors not quite closed. Between them was a gap large enough for a person to easily step through. Through the gap also came bright flashes of white light accompanied by traces of a beckoning blue, and a howl of power which grew steadily louder as they approached.

Not trying to hurry, Phyllis quickly moved to the gap, peering inside, Pico practically at her back.

It took a few moments before Phyllis breathed a single, wide-eyed "Oh!"

Pico, as well as the others who managed to crowd in and get a look, found themselves inclined to agree. Ahead of them lay a seemingly endless chamber. Its actual dimensions were difficult to determine as there was little in the way of direct lighting, and the walls, if any, were lost in darkness. What could be seen was a circular space, the edges of which were lined with a variety of sophisticated-looking control consoles and related machinery. Beyond the circular space could be seen a row of latticework vertical towers, their interiors softly shining.

Dominating it all, however, was the Object in the left side of the chamber. Carefully stepping through the doorway, Phyllis saw that there was much more to it than initially thought. A series of enormous rings arranged in a line, stretching off into the far darkness. The rings were black on

the outside, white on the inside, and the inner sides were repeatedly pulsing with light. As Phyllis continued moving into the chamber she found herself gradually facing the open end of the first ring. Staring down the long line of rings it could be seen that the pulses were occurring in a sort of coordinated rhythm resulting in a continuous flow of bright ovals traveling far into wherever the other side of the Object was supposed to be. Phyllis found the overall effect rather hypnotic, and she had to make something of an effort to move her eyes.

In an attempt at distraction she tried spending time concentrating on the pale river of cloudy blue electricity which was flowing through the exact center of the tunnel. It reached no further beyond the edge of the first ring and, like the white pulses, seemed to stretch endlessly...

“No.” Phyllis shook her head briefly, roughly, closing her eyes in an attempt to lose the notion which tried to take root in her mind. It had to be some sort of illusion produced by the lights. The impression that she was standing at the end of a tunnel where the other end didn't exist. A path leading into infinity.

Turning slightly away she saw that Pico and the others were wandering around already at work; a few of the group closely examining the various controls. But all eyes were invariably drawn again and again to the Object.

Phyllis motioned Keough closer. Indicating the Object with a small wave she asked: “This is the machine you've been detecting?”

Keough nodded, his eyes trying to take in everything. “I'd say that was pretty obvious.”

“This blue light in the center of the... tunnel. What is it?”

In answer, Keough pointed a device up at the light. Phyllis recognized it as one of Tom's portable Damonscopes: a sophisticated radiation analyzer.

After a few moments, though, Keough growled in mild irritation. “I don't know, Miz Newton. I mean, you and I can clearly see the light. It's registering on our eyes, but not on our instruments.”

Another member of the group... *Okihiro*, Phyllis remembered... now came up. “I'm afraid it gets weirder than that,” he said.

Phyllis resisted the urge to moan. “Now what?”

Okihiro showed that he was holding an ultrasonic distance meter. “I’ve been trying to get an accurate measurement of the chamber’s dimensions,” he explained. “Now watch.” Walking away he stood beyond the edge of the nearest ring. “I point this *past* the outside of the rings, and I get a clear reading. The far wall is seventy-two feet away.” He walked back, passing Phyllis to stand beyond the opposite side of the near ring. “Same thing. Same reading. Seventy-two feet.

“Now,” he said, moving back to Phyllis, Keough and Pico. “Watch as I point this *directly* into the rings. See?”

Leaning closer, Phyllis could see that the readout on the small device was flashing, constantly trying to reboot and settle down, but failing.

“I don’t get a reading,” Okihiro said. “It’s like what would happen if I pointed this up into the sky. No bounce back of signal. On either side of the rings I get seventy-two feet. *In* the rings...”

Phyllis once again gazed down the tunnel. “So it *is* infinite,” she murmured.

“Patently impossible,” Keough said.

“Tom’s involved, so you should know better than that.” Phyllis continued studying the tunnel, trying not to lose herself in its visual lure.

“What about those?” she asked, pointing. “There and there. On either side of the tunnel, just beyond the second ring. Aren’t those projecting elements for Tom’s telejector system?”

“If they are,” Pico said, “then they’re the biggest I’ve ever seen. With them you could throw an image across the entire width of the ring.”

“But what’s all this for?” Phyllis turned to Keough. “Well?”

Accompanied by Okihiro, Keough had moved to examine a trio of stand-alone control consoles which were arranged so that whoever used them would be facing the open end of the tunnel.

“This entire machine... whatever it is... is obviously working on whatever it was designed to do,” Keough remarked. “These consoles might be central to its overall operation, and I want to study some of these instruments. Greg? Murray?” He called out to some of the others. “Come

here for a moment.”

Phyllis watched him work for a moment, then turned at Pico's approach.

“Still no sign of Tom,” he gently said.

“Oh he's here,” Phyllis murmured. “Or he's been here. Recently.” She slowly nodded at nothing in particular. “I know.”

Pico, having long ago learned never to question the logic of a woman in love, kept his own council. He thought of Phyllis as being the most level-headed member of what had been known as “Sandy Swift's All-Girl Ninja Team” and had faith that she would eventually find a road to logic.

But Phyllis wasn't relying entirely on her heart. She was buoying herself with memories of years which had been spent dancing on the edge of the Unknown. Mostly in the company of Tom.

And more. She realized she was idly rubbing the fingers of her left hand together and looked down at the ring she wore. The gray metal band which Tom had slipped on her finger immediately upon returning from his most recent adventure a few weeks earlier. Her engagement ring. To the uninitiated it seemed dull in appearance. Plain. But it was a piece of zeanite: the mutable “mystery metal” which Tom had brought back from the Nuclear World. He had gone to the stars for her engagement ring, the thought making Phyllis smile, and she would not exchange it for the largest diamond or shiniest gold available.

It had been later on, in the midst of a cuddle, that Tom had privately explained how zeanite possessed unusual qualities. “I still don't understand all of it,” Tom had whispered to her. “No matter how much I study it I may never understand all of it. Just like I may never understand all of you. No matter how hard and how long I study.”

“Oh, Tom...”

“It might be risky,” he went on, “but it might also be wonderful.” He had gazed into her eyes. “That pretty much describes the future I'm offering you, Phyllis.”

“It's what I want,” she whispered, and then realized she had just done so in the middle of Roberts' laboratory. Fortunately no one seemed to hear. But she was still

conscious of the ring as she once again stared into the pulsing length of the tunnel.

“Is he there?” she whispered to the ring. “Can you find him for me?”

“Miz Newton?”

Phyllis turned towards Keough. “Yes?”

He motioned her to join him at the consoles and she did so. “So far I haven't been able to directly access the computers,” he explained. “Until I do I can't lay my hands on any solid information, so a lot of this is guesswork. But we've been looking at these displays. The graphic representations on the screens. These indicators where the data is constantly shifting, seemingly setting and resetting new spacetime coordinates.”

“Spacetime?”

Keough nodded. “My best guess... my safest guess... is that this entire machine is producing anti-de Sitter space.”

Phyllis could feel a headache trying to find her. “All right,” she slowly said. “I know I'm a fool for asking, but huh?”

“It's a maximally symmetric Lorentzian manifold.”

Phyllis gave it five seconds. “Okay. Right now you're seeing the face I usually wear whenever Tom tries to explain something to me.”

“Fair enough,” Keough replied with a nod. “Hell, I graduated from Stanford with honors, and even I'm treading on eggshells. This is extremely blue sky.”

“Anti-de Sitter space,” she reminded him.

“Right, right.” Keough nodded again. “Well—can I assume you understand something of how spacetime is supposed to work in regards to general relativity?”

“I've dated Tom long enough to where I feel I've got a grasp of the Sunday supplement concept.”

“Promising. What de Sitter space normally provides is a... bridge linking competing geometries. Euclidean. Non-Euclidean. Anti de-Sitter space, on the other hand, produces curvatures opposite those of normal spacetime.”

Phyllis' mind was busily knitting, and dropping a stitch here and there. “And, this is a *good* thing?”

“I don't know about good,” Keough admitted. “But it's definitely interesting. Look here.” With a finger he indicated a display screen which was showing a slowly rotating graphic. To Phyllis' eyes it looked like a piece of abstract sculpture composed of grid lines.

“Again I really need to access the computers,” Keough told her. “But I *think* that this machine has established a temporal pseudosphere. A very tight superspace path through what we would consider normal spacetime.”

Long ago Phyllis had taught herself a breathing exercise which sometimes worked when listening to some of Tom's explanations. She knew she wasn't stupid, but she was now quietly employing the exercise. “And so...”

“So the reason we perceive that tunnel as being infinite is because, technically, most of it may not even exist in our universe.”

“A stargate?” It might be television science fiction, but at least she understood that.

Keough sighed. “Miz Newton I wish I *knew*. I've been stretching it as it is already. You could be right. I don't know. The only thing I feel safe in saying is that, beyond those first few rings, normal spacetime—*our* spacetime—doesn't exist.”

Phyllis once again stared into the pulsing tunnel. “And it's switched on? It's operational?”

“Yeah and, until we learn more about this setup, I'd just as soon not try adjusting any of the controls.”

Leaving the others, Phyllis took a few steps beyond the consoles, placing herself between them and the first ring. “And Tom?”

“We followed his trail to where we landed,” Keough said. “It led us down here. This is where the trail ends.”

Phyllis had slowly raised her left hand, staring through her spread fingers into the tunnel. Feeling the solidity of the ring on her finger.

“No,” she asserted. “The trail doesn't end here. There's one place Tom could've gone.”

“We would've already found it,” Pico was saying to her back. “There's no other way out of this room... *Phyllis!*”

But, she wasn't stopping and continued running on into the

tunnel. Hearing the shouts behind her becoming drowned out by the rising howl of power from all sides. The pulses of light reaching for her with invisible fingers. Grabbing at her. Brilliant blue flashes of light...

A cosmos ahead which was stretching out into something too vast to comprehend... shattering Phyllis into atoms. Transmitting.

Chapter Three: Phyllis Finds Tom (Well, Sort of) and...

Phyllis' head eventually stopped spinning. Admittedly not too much, but at least she was able to focus on her thoughts as she resumed walking down the path.

I'm back in time! Thirty-five years! Nineteen-frickin'-eighty for pity's sake. God! God, God, God...

1980? Let's see. The music was supposed to be better, and the television worse. Or was it the other way around? What do I know about 1980? Ah-hhhh... Ronald Reagan... Mt. St. Helens... U.S. ice hockey team... grain embargo... Iranian embassy... John Lennon got shot, or was that Paul McCartney? No, wait, he's still alive.

A time machine. That thing was a damn time machine, and I followed Tom here. So he's got to be somewhere in the area. It sort of makes sense. If Tom was handling the controls then, logically... logically?... he'd aim for Shopton in 1980.

Logically?

I am so gonna strangle Tom. After I kiss him.

A sigh. And this is what I get for being nice.

* * * * *

They had quarreled when Tom told her he was heading to Arizona for a few days.

Phyllis, her mind busily juggling eighty-two billion and a half wedding details, had looked up from her computer to give Tom what her mother referred to as the “hairy eyeball.” “Come again?”

Tom, expertly reading the tone of his beloved's voice, attempted to proceed as carefully as possible. “I received a call from a friend who's been running a government scientific project out west,” he slowly said. “I've been helping him off and on, sending him equipment and stuff. He's almost completed his work but he's encountered a little snag and wants my opinion on how best to correct it... and where're you going?”

“Stay right there,” Phyllis said, getting up from the desk

and going to her bookshelf. “*Stay*,” she ordered, glancing back over her shoulder.

Tom remained where he was, waiting as Phyllis returned.

“You see what I have in my hand here?” she asked Tom.

Tom nodded.

“Say it. Out loud.”

“It’s a calendar.”

“It’s this very year’s *Swift Enterprises* calendar,” Phyllis replied sharply. “Look. If I fold back the full color photograph of the diving seacopter... one of my best, I might add... what do you see?”

“Phyl—”

“Say it!”

Tom sighed. “This month.”

“*This* month,” Phyllis echoed. “See here? Here where my finger’s pointing? That’s Tuesday the 20th. Today. Now... if I let my finger move all-l-l-l-l-l-l-l the way over to the end, what do we have?”

“The 24th.”

“Which is...”

“Saturday.”

Phyllis waited.

“Our wedding day. Phyl—”

“Our wedding day,” Phyllis broke in. “You. Me. The Union Church. Three in the afternoon. That’s the kickoff time. That’s when I’m heading down the aisle on Daddy’s arm. That’s why I’ve circled this date so heavily I’ve almost torn through the page.”

“I like the little hearts and doves you’ve drawn in...” and, seeing the look in Phyllis’ eyes, Tom decided to shut up.

“I love you so very much, Tom,” Phyllis said, working to keep her voice steady. “I just want you to comprehend the situation, so please let me get through this. We’re really getting down to the wire here. Bingo, Ken and the baby are arriving tomorrow, and Bingo’s all set to work alongside Sestina on the wedding cake. I haven’t been given any specific details but, from what your Mom has passed on, it’s going to

be one for the record books. I'm getting a final fitting on my dress on Thursday. We still haven't heard back on all the invitations... not too surprising seeing as how some of them went out to various nations, as well as the Moon. Bud's been wearing an interesting look on his face the past few days, and Sandy suspects he has something really outrageous planned as regards a bachelor party for you. *I don't know. I've got my own organizational headaches to finalize,*" and here she indicated her desk with a broad wave of her hand. "I've been raised up as a Catholic, Tom. I'm a good Catholic girl—"

"The best Catholic girl," Tom said with a smile.

Phyllis tried to let the remark slide past. In all honesty she wasn't entirely successful and she forced her face to remain stern. "What I'm getting at is that I hope you'll appreciate it when I say that the absolute last thing I need right now is additional *schmutz!*"

Moving around the desk, Tom carefully took Phyllis into his arms.

Oh no, Phyllis panicked. Now he's going to hold me and kiss me and convince me to let him go.

She tried one last time. Weakly. "Tom..."

The blue in his eyes had an intensity she had been noticing more and more as the wedding drew closer. Touching her face with a hand he let his thumb brush softly against her cheek.

"Do you think I actually want to leave when I'm so very close to making you mine?" he murmured.

Oh crap, he's using that low intimate tone of voice. "I've... always been yours," Phyllis whispered.

"You know what I mean," he replied.

Phyllis was now trying to keep her knees from becoming weak.

"We've at least got all the honeymoon details worked out," he continued. "That isolated spot in Wabakimi Provincial Park. Just the two of us."

Ohhhh no. Here I go...

"I've fully programmed the HOW2 to handle all the driving. It'll get us there without either of us having to take the wheel." Once again he caressed her cheek. "We can both relax." A pause. "I could even instruct the HOW2 to make a

detour over to Oneida Lake.” A shrug. “Sort of a rest stop. My folks swear by it being a restful location.”

And this is why Aunt Mary always has that smile on her face when I ask what it'll be like being married to a Swift male, Phyllis thought, feeling her reserves draining away.

But from somewhere she found a reserve of self-control, and it bubbled out a bit roughly. “Oh, *go to Arizona,*” she said, turning away from Tom's arms and immediately regretting the emptiness she was feeling. “Just *go already.*”

And Tom moved to regain her, holding her closely from behind.

“I don't want to do this, Phyllis,” he said. “But, I can't stand it.”

Oh no, he's going to say something...

“The closer we get to the wedding the harder it's getting for me to say goodnight to you.” The press of his arms tightened slightly. “Watching you go away. Phyllis, I can't think straight anymore. I can't concentrate on anything but you. All of you.”

Her hands lifted to cover his, helping him hold her.

His whisper in her ear. “Come with me to Arizona. We could... you know. Elope.”

And the enormous temptation yawned before her. All the licenses and other details were in place. She knew it would be so easy to slip out with him, and she'd be in his arms by nightfall.

Oh but... “Tom,” she found herself saying. “Tom... we *shouldn't.* We...”

“You don't want to be robbed of your victory?”

She heard the smile in his statement and carefully turned back around to face him. Or actually to stare at his throat. “Do you really need to go to Arizona?”

He sighed, his hands fondling her hair. “For this, yes.”

She let a fingertip slowly travel down his throat to the edge of his shirt. “Do you really, really, *really* need to go to Arizona?” *And I can get my voice down low too, Thomas Swift Jr.*

Another sigh. Or maybe not. Tom just seemed to sound a little breathy—husky?—all of a sudden. “Phyl...”

Don't tease, Phyllis warned herself from somewhere deep inside. *We're so close. Just a bit more time.*

"This is a secret government research project," Tom said (was his voice a bit hoarse? Phyllis couldn't quite tell). "Otherwise I'd just handle the problem over a teleconference link. But the project's reached a stage where all adjustments should be personal and hands on."

She slowly raised her brown eyes to his blue ones.

"If I leave now," he said, "I can take a Tommycar out to Arizona, fix the problem and be back by tomorrow night. We can then take Ken and Bingo out to supper somewhere."

Her finger was still making little touching motions. "Would you really want company with us tomorrow night?" she murmured.

And this is why Uncle Ned always has that smile on his face when I ask what it'll be like being married to a Morton female, Tom thought. The only way he could respond was to pull Phyllis closer.

Neither of them kept track of how long the kiss lasted. But eventually they both surfaced for air.

Phyllis made one last try. "Tom, do you..."

And then the teachings of both her mother and Aunt Mary stepped in. *There may be rare times for playing the shrew*, they had both warned. *Very rare times. But definitely not before the wedding. Maybe not ever, but especially not then.*

Not only that, but Phyllis prided herself on being a clear-headed girl. She knew what she was getting herself into by marrying someone like Tom.

"Fly back quickly," she said. "Please."

He once again felt a need to feel her cheek. His eyes again drawing her in. "Even if it is the twilight of the world," he quoted, "before night falls I will sleep in your arms'."

"Oh, you! *Please* fly back quickly."

* * * * *

And now it was the 27th... somewhere else... and Phyllis was strolling through the woods. But "stroll" implied a casual enjoyable walk, and in Phyllis' case it was more a matter of trying to be steady on her feet while she figured things out. It wasn't that she felt particularly clumsy, but she was still a bit

shaky after her wild ride through the years.

Phyllis suddenly stopped as something occurred to her. “Oh, *drat!*”

She had been heading for Anthony Road, which was the easiest route to Shopton. But if she was in 1980 then Anthony Road wouldn't be in existence for another five years.

Tapping a foot on the ground she considered her options. There was a more direct route to Shopton, and Tom's house, but it meant going through a particularly thick portion of the woods. But at least it would get her there much sooner and so, resigning herself to brambles and grass stains (or at least more stains than she already had on her), Phyllis left the path and started moving among the trees.

So intent was she on carefully stepping about that the sound didn't register at first. But then she realized she was hearing a motorcycle. Somewhere ahead of her and coming closer.

A motorcycle meant a rider. Someone who could possibly take her on into town or, even better, to Tom's house. Phyllis began moving faster towards the sound, prepared to call out...

And suddenly found herself falling as she encountered a ravine, tumbling head over heels through bushes and thick undergrowth. “*Yow!*”

* * * * *

“Are you all right, Miss?”

A concerned voice. And so oddly familiar. Opening her eyes, Phyllis found herself looking up into the face of...

“TOM!”

He leaned away slightly, the concern in his expression deepening. “Huh?”

“—OMMMMMmmmmmm,” Phyllis went on, stretching out the syllable as her mind kicked at her. *Idiot! This is 1980. Tom... your Tom... hasn't even been born yet. But this man is so like Tom, and this is the Shopton area, all of which means he's... he's...*

Omigod!

“Do you know me?” Tom Swift Sr. asked.

Phyllis' brain was cycling so fast she thought she could

smell smoke. "Ah-hhhh, no."

"It sounded like you said 'Tom'."

"I was going 'Ommmmmmmm,'" Phyllis replied, crossing every mental finger she could. "It's sort of a Zen Buddhist chant of thanks for you helping me."

"You had a pretty bad fall," Tom was saying. "It's lucky for you I was riding along."

"Yeah." Phyllis slowly tried to sit up, feeling a twinge which told her she had probably sprained an ankle.

"You okay?"

"Just... let me try to sit up here." *And give me a chance to sort things out.*

Damn, damn, damn.

Now that she was over the initial shock she could clearly see the differences between the Tom Swift who knelt near her, and *her* Tom. Not that there were that many to notice. She was seeing Tom Swift Sr. at the age of eighteen. Young and slender, or perhaps "wiry" was the best way of describing him. The familiar short-cropped blonde hair, and the blue eyes which were currently regarding her with worry.

What the hell else could go wrong today?

Experimenting with stretching out her leg, Phyllis suddenly winced. "Ow!"

Reaching out with a hand, Tom gingerly touched along her ankle. "Doesn't seem to be broken. But I don't think you should be walking on it." He looked around. "You got a car nearby?"

Phyllis shook her head. "I was... out hiking."

Still staring at her ankle, Tom seemed to arrive at a decision. "Well, I've got my motorcycle nearby. I can carry you on it, and my house isn't far away. We can get you fixed up there." Looking into her face he broke out in a smile. "Okay?"

"Ah-hhhh... sure." *Bad idea!*

His smile was fading a bit as his expression sharpened. "Have we met?"

NO! "No."

"It's just that you sort of look like my best friend's

girlfriend.”

Oh crap and damnation.

“And I’m sorry.” Tom extended a hand. “I’m Tom Swift.”

Phyllis took the hand. “I’m Phyll—*oh bloody hell!*—leeeeeeee. Lee!”

Tom was giving her an odd look. “Lee’?”

“Lee... Camembert.”

“Oh! Like the cheese.”

“Oh yes!” Phyllis nodded vigorously. “Just like the cheese. Ha ha ha ha.” *Stupid, stupid, stupid...*

“Well, let’s get you over to the bike. ‘Scuse me.” Reaching carefully with his arms, Tom scooped Phyllis up and moved to a standing position. Turning he began carrying her out of the tangle of bushes, holding her securely as she allowed herself to rest her head on his shoulder. Fortunately he was strong. Nicely so. His arms very comforting... *and Phyllis Marian Newton you will not, not, NOT fall in love with your fiancé’s father. That is so incredibly out it isn’t even funny. Stop it! Stop it right this instant.*

“You okay?” Tom asked.

“It’s just...”

“I know,” Tom said. “We’ve only just met. And I’m not normally in the habit of picking up girls I’ve just met and carrying them off. But, this is sort of an emergency.”

They were approaching the edge of another rough trail, and Phyllis could just make out the blue of Lake Carlopa beyond the further trees. Even more, she could see a familiar shape which made her heart jump. It was a Harley-Davidson “Shovelhead” Electra-Glide motorcycle: lovingly restored and maintained by Tom Sr. after he had acquired it from his friend Mr. Damon (*oh Lord, and that mean he’s still around*).

“Here,” Tom said, reaching the motorcycle and gently positioning Phyllis on the rear end of the saddle. “I’m not trying to suggest anything, but you might want to hang on to me while we’re riding. I’ll take it slow and it’s only a little ways to the end of the trail and my house.”

Keeping quiet, Phyllis steadied herself against Tom as he mounted the bike. Then she leaned close, allowing her arms to slip around his waist as he brought the cycle to life. They

began moving, making a careful turn on the path and starting on through the woods.

Tom was good at his word and, minutes later, Phyllis' heart made another leap as she spotted the well-known house where Tom lived with... *Omigod! His father's still alive at this time.*

Maneuvering among the various sheds where both Tom and his father worked at their projects, Tom brought the motorcycle to a halt near the back porch, shutting it off. "Still with me, Lee?"

Like you can't feel my arms around you. "Yes."

"Oh what's this?" a voice called out, and Phyllis looked up at a matronly woman stepping out onto the porch. Her mind made another time shift and she realized she was seeing Mrs. Baggert: the Swift housekeeper. Still apparently hale and hearty, *and years yet until she has to be moved to a rest home*, Phyllis thought with a pang in her heart.

The woman was taking a closer look, frowning. "Is that... Miss Morton?"

No it isn't, Phyllis' mind screamed.

"It's Lee Camembert," Tom told her. "Yes, like the cheese. She took a spill out in the woods, and I offered to bring her back here so she can soak her ankle or something."

"Oh! That was kind. It's just that," and here Mrs. Baggert glanced back over her shoulder, "your fiancée's here."

At that announcement, Tom's face broke into a wide smile. "Oh, good. She wouldn't mind helping out with Lee."

Mrs. Baggert shrugged. "If you say so." Appearing doubtful she turned to go back into the house.

With a firm hold on Phyllis, Tom eased off the motorcycle. "C'mon in. We'll get you settled, and you'll like my fiancée. She's really a sweetheart."

"O-kay," Phyllis murmured, letting herself be supported by Tom as she limped towards the porch. All the time her mind boiling with worry. The idea of meeting Mary Nestor was one which she found really disconcerting. Phyllis felt that she could hold up some sort of guard against the suspicions of both Tom and Mrs. Baggert. But Mary... her future mother-in-law... that was going to be another matter.

“Tom...”

“Almost there,” Tom replied. “Just mind this step. Oh, what?”

Phyllis chose her words as carefully as possible. “Have you met... anyone else in the woods recently? Maybe someone... I don't know. Like you, maybe?”

“Huh!” Tom frowned in curiosity. “I don't think so. Were you with a friend out there?”

“Just wondering—”

“Oh, and here we go. Hi, honey. I've brought an injured friend in.”

Raising her face, Phyllis looked at the woman who had stepped into the kitchen. Slender, beautiful, young and...

“YOU MURDERING WITCH,” Phyllis suddenly screamed, lunging at the newcomer.

Chapter Four: The Once and Future Menace

Raw unbridled shock gave Phyllis the strength to ignore the pain in her ankle. The newcomer was definitely *not* Mary Nestor. Rather, she was a young woman possessed of short dark auburn hair framing a sweet face, with brown eyes and a generous mouth set in a clear complexion.

It was a face Phyllis knew all too well.

“Ithaca Foger!”

For her part, the woman rapidly overcame her initial surprise and was trying to back out of harm's way, just narrowly missing her throat being tightly surrounded by Phyllis' hands. “Tom...”

And then Phyllis felt strong hands on her own shoulders, sharply pulling her aside. Her already tortured ankle gave way and she tumbled off balance, managing to clip the side of her head hard on the corner of the kitchen table.

* * * * *

The throbbing in her head, as well as her ankle, eventually worked to bring Phyllis back to consciousness. She immediately realized she was lying down somewhere, and most probably in a bed.

Carefully opening her eyes she looked around just long enough to recognize her surroundings. The furnishings were somewhat different, but she knew she was in one of the extra bedrooms upstairs in the Swift home.

She was also alone and, with a small moan, closed her eyes as the weight of reality began crushing her mind.

Ithaca Foger, she thought. *Of course. Who else would it be?*

* * * * *

Ithaca Foger had died three times already. The first instance had been years before (in what Phyllis considered to be normal history), when she had been caught in the explosion of an experimental car.

Phyllis would first meet her years later when she suddenly reappeared. Rebuilt into a cyborg in possession of lethal abilities, she attempted to thwart the Swift effort to capture the land speed record. Her plan ended in a high speed duel

between she and Sandy out on a Nevada desert, and Ithaca ended up falling into a quantum black hole. Her second death. Presumably.

But she would reappear once again; this time more robotic than human. Then she was assisting the alien Space Friends in their effort to destroy the Earth, revealing that she had originally been “saved” and “modified” by the extraterrestrials.

Sandy had been the last person to encounter Ithaca: meeting her on the Space Friends solartron redoubt on the surface of the Sun. According to Sandy, Ithaca had been struggling to throw off the control the aliens had over her, and Sandy had been part of her scheme. She ultimately succeeded: not only saving Sandy's life but losing her own as she destroyed the redoubt. Her third death.

And now...

* * * * *

“Ithaca,” Phyllis murmured.

She has to be the reason why I ended up in Shopton, in the past, her mind argued. I followed Tom here, and Ithaca must have somehow arranged matters so he'd be brought here. She survived a black hole, so why couldn't she survive being blown up at the Sun?

But what now? What's her plan?

Sandy had come to see Ithaca as a heroine, but it was admittedly something of a harder leap for Phyllis to make. Especially when given the current circumstances. Heroine or villain, Ithaca had always served as the source of chaos and trouble, and Phyllis had no doubt she was once again playing that role.

Her eyes snapped open at a sudden touch of sound to her ears. But she realized she was only hearing distant voices. People were talking downstairs. As carefully and as silently as possible (and ignoring the protests from her ankle), Phyllis slipped out of the bed and sidled up to the slightly open door to listen.

Ithaca's voice. “But she knew my *name*, Tom. She knew who I was.”

“Shhh,” Tom replied reassuringly. “I know. I'm mystified as well. I'm not certain, but I think she knew who I was as well.”

“But *why* would she try to attack me?”

“Honey, I haven't got a clue. I—”

“Could my family have sent her?”

Pause. “If they did then they picked a weird way to operate. We'll wait for Sheriff Nercy to arrive, and then he can handle this and get some answers.”

Sheriff!

Grimacing, Phyllis edged back a bit from the door, anxiously looking around. *I could just go downstairs. Explain everything and hope for the best.*

Yeah... right.

The window was nearby, beckoning to her, and Phyllis limped/walked to it. Looking out she could see the outer edge of Valigursky Woods. So near.

At least they hadn't tried tying her up or locking her in a closet or anything, and she was still dressed...

Damnation!

Her phone was gone, and Phyllis thought as rapidly as possible. No, she still had it after the fall into the ravine, and she remembered automatically feeling for it when Tom had helped her off the motorcycle.

So Tom had it. A piece of future technology in his hands. *Damnation squared and cubed.*

Phyllis had spent enough time swimming in the sea of theories which her Tom had often used in place of regular conversation. Not only that, she had read her fair share of science-fiction novels. As such she knew about the supposed dangers of altering the past. A telephone from 2015 in the hands of a man in 1980...

An intelligent man.

Biting her lip, Phyllis quietly considered the situation. She was buoyed by the fact that her phone... a top of the line Swift/Motorola SM40 “Stentor”... could only be accessed by her own thumbprint. Otherwise it was simply a hand-sized shell composed of near-unbreakable composite materials. Tom wouldn't be able to access its functions, or even turn it on.

But Tom was clever.

Weighing her options, Phyllis reluctantly concluded that

there was nothing to do but follow her initial plan, grateful that at least she hadn't taken her wallet into Roberts' lab. Gingerly touching the window she began slowly easing it up, thinking that if there was one advantage to being in the past, it was that she was in the Swift house long before it became wired with alarms.

Fortunately the window was also silent, and Phyllis was able to move out and onto the roof without making herself heard, biting her lip hard as she tried to ignore her ankle. There had been a trellis attached to this particular side of the house, and Phyllis' experienced a needed hug of relief as she spotted it in place...

And then she froze, flattening herself on the roof at the sight of an enormous man who had just stepped out from one of the sheds. *Omigod, he's bigger than Sestina!*

Dipping again into her memory, Phyllis realized she was seeing Koku: one of the handymen employed by Tom Sr. There had been another one, and Phyllis tried to recall his name. It had always made her think of a Mafia hitman...

Eradicate! Yes, that was it.

As still as death, Phyllis silently watched as the giant lumbered out of sight, seemingly headed for the front of the house. Only after he was completely gone did she allow herself to resume moving. *Okay, girl. Your ankle's gonna hate you for this, and your head doesn't feel too good either. But the cops are coming, and there's a giant loose on the premises. You gotta make it to the woods.*

Reaching the edge of the roof she established a good grip on the trellis. She then listened for nearby voices and, hearing none, grimaced as she worked to slide off the roof and onto the trellis. The move almost became a disaster, and she almost ended up falling, but desperation kept her fingers tight on the trellis and, her body screaming at her, she struggled to climb down as smoothly as possible. Only at the last moment did her resolve give way, and she slipped loose to end up sitting hard upon the grass. *Oh right! My head and my ankle hurt, so why not drag my rear-end into the deal as well?*

The desperation in her grew and, throwing all caution to the wind, she began moving across the yard. Aiming herself at the woods she managed to struggle upwards to her feet, the effort making tears leak from her eyes.

It was then that Fortune decided to throw Phyllis a bone,

and she spotted several lengths of bamboo leaning against one of the sheds she was about to pass. *Bamboo... fishing poles*, she thought joyously, reaching for one which was almost as tall as she was and immediately putting it to use as a crutch. It enabled her to move faster... not very much so, but certainly more than the shambling near-stumble she had been managing.

Behind her was the sound of a car pulling up to the house, and Phyllis' mind cataloged it as *Cops!* Which meant that Tom, Ithaca and everyone else would be going to the front of the house to greet them, giving Phyllis more of a window of opportunity to reach the woods. *It never occurred to them to have someone watching me, her mind considered. Wow. Does that make my generation more devious? Or have I just been hanging around Sandy too much?*

Reaching the woods her body's screams of protest could no longer be denied, and Phyllis collapsed behind a clump of blackberry laden bramble bushes, breathing hard.

Got to keep moving, she argued with herself. *They'll be after me in moments.*

Gritting her teeth she worked to pull herself back up on the bamboo, resuming her limping among the trees. *Where to go, where to go, where to go?*

Tom knew these woods like the back of his hand. Doubtless so did the Sheriff.

But so do I, Phyllis reminded herself (a shuddering yet toothy smile briefly appearing on her face). *And Mama Newton didn't raise any idiots.*

Much.

They would be after her very soon. They'd have the advantage of speed, making Phyllis realize she'd have to counter with smarts. Looking around she tried to kick her brain into high gear, finding herself glancing back towards the now semi-hidden Swift house.

Maybe I should've tried stealing a car, she thought, and just as quickly dismissed it. *Yeah: injured girl trying to hotwire an Eighties-vintage automobile, then driving away. I'd be in jail before I left the driveway.*

But the more she gazed at the house the more something tickled her brain.

They'd expect me to run away.

The thought grew louder in her head: *They'd Expect Me To Run Away!*

Keeping a careful eye on the house, Phyllis began limping her way towards the treeline, following a path which was allowing her to circle the Swift property. Those sheds... those workshops... usually locked.

Ah, but little Phyllis knows where the keys are hidden. Newton triumphant!

She quickly ducked down beneath a cottonwood as Tom, Koku and someone in a uniform... *Sheriff Nercy?*... appeared on the back porch. Phyllis couldn't hear what they were saying, but she saw Tom pointing off into the woods, and the three men began heading towards the trees, a good forty feet away from where Phyllis was hiding.

That's right, boys. I'm running off into the woods. Keep going.

In the meantime there was only about twelve feet between the tree she was hiding behind and the nearest of the workshops. Looking all around, especially making certain her pursuers were still moving away, Phyllis limped as quickly as possible to the wooden structure, grateful that its door was facing away from the house. Her breath coming in gasps, she was reaching for the space on the lintel where Tom (*her Tom*) had told her an emergency key was always kept.

Yes!

Knowing she was working against time, Phyllis struggled the key into the lock, her efforts finally rewarded as the door obediently opened, allowing her to quickly slip inside and pull the door shut (making certain she locked it from the inside).

Inside it was dark; the dim surroundings revealing shelves, a workbench and a small desk. Phyllis couldn't remember what Tom had used this particular shed for and, at the moment, she was unable to care. Letting her staff leave her grip she fell forward onto a pile of tarpaulins, her hands reaching to rub at her ankle, trying to soothe it.

I'm hidden, she exulted. I've won so far. At least for the moment.

As a reward for her cleverness she allowed herself the luxury of a small cry.

Chapter Five: Phyllis on the Move

With a bit of catharsis finally attended to, Phyllis felt calmer and (she hoped) more rational. A glance out the window showed that the day was falling into late afternoon and, as safe as the shed seemed to be, Phyllis didn't want to be tempted to remain for much longer. When Tom and the others failed to find her in the forest they'd put two and two together, and the workshops would be the obvious place to search.

But the shed also contained a working sink, plus some large metal buckets, and Phyllis decided to take the time to fill the largest one and use it to soak her ankle, sitting down in a chair to relax. The pain was already subsiding, and the swelling seemed to be less, but Phyllis didn't want to risk making another move until she was much more mobile.

As she tended to her ankle, occasionally peeking out the window, her mind worked to collect and arrange the questions which were teetering in her mind like a pile of blocks. She very desperately wanted to know more about Ithaca's background, and her current presence here as fiancée to Tom Sr., but couldn't figure out how to go about gathering such information.

Leaning back, Phyllis juggled what knowledge she had. Andy Foger had always been a sort of thorn in the side of the senior Swift. The son of a local prominent family, and something of a bully. Phyllis recalled how Uncle Tom would sort of sigh wearily on the rare times when he mentioned Andy Foger in her presence...

Phyllis' eyes, half-closed during her ruminations, now snapped open wide. *Wait a minute!*

She realized what was bothering her (or at least one of the things bothering her). It wasn't so much that Ithaca was in the here and now. But, as with Phyllis, Ithaca was also a stranger to this time period.

"So why this business with your family?" Phyllis murmured to the air. Had Ithaca been crazy enough to go to the Foger home and present herself as a member of the family? As Andy Foger's future daughter? Phyllis chuckled sharply at the thought. She recognized that her personal recollections of Ithaca didn't involve the kindest of situations, but whatever

her opinions of Ithaca were, being a complete idiot wasn't one of them.

“She has the Fogers hunting for her,” Phyllis mused, “and she ends up with Tom. Becoming engaged to him.” *But apparently not living with him*, she mentally added, *using the house as a refuge*. Mrs. Baggert had told Tom that Ithaca “was here” when Tom had brought Phyllis home.

“So where are you, Ithaca, when you're not 'here'?” Phyllis suspected the answer to that question could possibly go far towards fitting a few pieces together. But how to get that answer? For that matter, how to get *any* answers?

Taking another look out the window she concluded that remaining in the shed wouldn't help her down that particular path. Her ankle was feeling much better now, and Phyllis reluctantly concluded that she had no more reason to remain where she was.

She carefully dried off her ankle, adjusting her clothes back into place. Then, reaching for her bamboo staff, she experimented with moving back onto her feet. A bit of protest from the ankle, but at least it was no longer a screaming riot. Phyllis then looked around the shed, hoping to spot something useful, her eyes finally settling on a dark gray rain poncho. Not much, but at least she felt it would supply an extra bit of camouflage.

Easing it on she suddenly felt a stab of weariness... *God, has all this happened in just one day?* Leaning on her staff she allowed herself to close her eyes, knowing that whatever she accomplished in the next few hours, a place to sleep was high on the priority list.

But soon her eyes opened and she felt angry.

No, not quite. She realized what she was actually feeling was more along the lines of determination.

“All right,” she said to herself. “That's it! I know I'm not a scientific genius like Tom. I'm not as adventurous or resourceful as Sandy. Hell, I can't even cook as good as Aunt Mary. If Tom were here he'd simply invent a time machine and send us back. If Sandy were here she'd... find someone who could invent a time machine and send us back. I'm a public relations and publicity director.”

She straightened up. “Okay, so I'm not Tom, or Sandy. But I've been in space, I damn near drowned in the Arctic Ocean,

been hunted by killer robots, survived spies and saboteurs, and I threw myself into a time machine to find my man!” In a quick motion she performed a pastiche of a *bojutsu* move with the staff. “I’m Phyllis Marian Newton... and I guess that's gonna have to be good enough!”

* * * * *

Of course there was an enormous difference between feeling brave while in a locked shed, and trying to surreptitiously creep out of same. Phyllis' first move was to open the door just a fraction and risk a peek.

So where the hell is everybody? she thought. Certainly they weren't still searching the woods? But lights were visible from the house as the afternoon continued fading, and Phyllis thought that maybe Tom and the rest of her pursuers had managed to go back to the house without her spotting them.

It wasn't dark... yet... but the light was diminishing to the level where Phyllis congratulated herself on her decision to take the poncho. *Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, let's all watch how Phyllis drifts like a shadow unseen across the back yard.*

But where to go? Phyllis knew she didn't want to just blindly head out in any direction. The woods once again beckoned, but Phyllis wanted more in the way of a definite destination in mind before actually leaving the safety of the shed.

“Oh!”

And there it was. The perfect answer. A bicycle leaning against a nearby shed. Bright blue and oh so near. *My God, how did I miss seeing that the first time? Out there in plain sight?*

A bicycle was a much more sensible choice than trying to steal a car. It meant she could reach Shopton... *yes, Shopton...* after about thirty or so minutes of pedaling. Shopton meant more hiding places. More opportunities to find a place to sleep. Phyllis knew all she had to do was get to the bicycle, carefully circle around the outside of the hedge bordering the house, and then, upon reaching State Road 54, boogie like a maniac into town.

Giving the surroundings another careful look, Phyllis slipped out of the shed and, in a few steps, made it over to the bicycle. *Sneak, sneak, sneak, sneak...*

“Well! Bless my uncanceled 1882 twelve cent Malaysian blue!”

And froze. Phyllis then slowly turned to see the stout middle-aged gentleman who was standing on the other side of the shed she'd just vacated. “Gentleman” was the best description Phyllis could come up with, seeing as he was dressed like something out of a banking commercial, his calm finery topped with a homburg.

Seeing Phyllis' face the man now peered closer. “Miss Helen, is that you?”

Oh God, what to do? Phyllis briefly considered Plan A: bopping the man over the head and leaving him tied up in the shed.

Too messy. Which left Plan B: a whopping big lie. “Ah-hhhh... yes. It's me. Miss Helen. Right here.”

A bit of worry now appeared on the man's expression. “Bless my klystron. Are you all right?”

Oh! It's Mr. Damon! “Yes,” Phyllis replied, nodding. “Nothing wrong... Mr. Damon.”

“The reason I was inquiring was because of Tom, Ned, Eradicate, Koku and the authorities still nosing about the property.”

Oh golly, Daddy's here. “Authorities?” Phyllis asked, painting as innocent a look as possible on her face.

“Yes.” Mr. Damon looked around. “Apparently Tom found some sort of madwoman out in the woods. She tried to attack Miss Ithaca and slipped away just before the police arrived.”

Madwoman! “Oh my!”

“Yes. I was chosen to remain here and watch over Miss Ithaca and Mrs. Baggert while Tom and the others are out searching around Curtiss Point.”

Halfway over to the other side of the lake. “Why Curtiss Point?”

“After this mysterious woman escaped, Miss Ithaca told Tom she thought she heard a boat far away. Sheriff Nercy thought that Curtiss Point would be an excellent location for someone to either board a boat, or to perhaps spot one.” Mr. Damon once again focused his attention on Phyllis. “Did you want to join the others in the house?”

Not only no, but HELL no! “Ah, I'm just here to borrow the bicycle.”

A solemn nod. “Then I'll tell Ned you came by. And bless my orthicon tube, Miss Helen, but please take care while riding. Don't stop for anyone.”

“Don't worry,” Phyllis adamantly replied. “I don't intend to.” She gave Mr. Damon the cheeriest smile she had on hand. “Bye bye.”

“A bientot!”

Deciding that now wasn't quite the time to appear furtive, Phyllis carefully balanced the staff on the handlebars and then, praying no one was watching from the house, mounted the bicycle as casually as possible and began pedaling. Moving past the house she spotted the two police cars parked in front... *eep! And Daddy's old Corvette!*

Keep riding, girl.

Reaching the driveway, Phyllis began pumping madly, heading for the supposed open freedom of State Road 54 and Shopton. At any moment she expected to hear shouts or sirens, or the roar of pursuing cars.

What was that line from War of the Worlds? Bingo would've been able to quote chapter and verse.

Ah. “I felt an extraordinary persuasion that I was being played with, that presently, when I was upon the very verge of safety, this mysterious death—as swift as the passage of light—would leap after me from the pit about the cylinder and strike me down”.

“As Swift as the passage of light”. Hah! I made a funny!

What was that?

Nothing, but Phyllis had been briefly distracted. For a moment she felt she had seen three figures standing out among the cornstalks in the Swift field. Shaking the thought away she bent her head lower, concentrating on pedaling faster.

Chapter Six: Realizations and Meetings

Phyllis couldn't quite be certain, but when she awoke the next morning she suspected she was currently experiencing the absolute nadir of her life: wrapped up in a pile of old newspapers behind a dumpster in a back alley off of McCall Avenue. She tried to rationalize that she at least had slept, and that the weather in Shopton was currently mild (and rain free), and that she had awakened unmolested, alive, and with only a few stray cats for company.

“Go,” she instructed her sleepmates. “Go... shoo.”

With some tired *meows* of protest her evening companions slinked off as Phyllis stretched and groaned herself into a sitting position against the rear wall of... *where am I again? Oh. Yes. Behind the Fah Lo See Restaurant.*

“This is so unfair,” she complained to no one. *Right now I should be on my honeymoon, she thought sullenly. Tom and me up in the Canadian woods. No communicators, no surveillance. Just Tom and me doing... well... just Tom and me! I should still be brushing rice out of my hair for criminy's sake.*

The last thought managed to produce a small smile on Phyllis' face as she once again contemplated an interesting puzzle. Namely: who was going to catch her bridal bouquet?

* * * * *

The three of them had been drifting about in one of the smaller zero-g lounges on the space station. Phyllis, Sandy and Bingo. The original All-Girl Ninja Team. Beyond the wide viewport the Earth was slowly moving, and it was by its light that the girls were chatting.

Phyllis was floating in more ways than one. Only an hour ago she had spoken with Tom. *Challenger* was on its way back from the Nuclear World, scheduled to arrive at the space station in three days.

Then back to Earth, Phyllis purred to herself. *And then...*

“You guys should so get married up here on the station,” Bingo Winkler-Horton was saying to her. “I mean, it makes perfect sense. Your folks are here, Tom's folks are here... and Ken's the station commander. I bet he could do a legally bindin' ceremony.”

"There're also the honeymoon possibilities to consider," Sandra Swift Barton added with a smile. "Zero-g... Earthlight... the stars... zero-g... moonlight... zero-g..."

"Don't think I'm not tempted," Phyllis replied laughing, "because really, I am. We could possibly throw a wedding gown together in three days, and I could be waiting for him at the airlock."

Bingo was thoughtful. "The Medical Section's got some sort of semi-permeable antiseptic material that looks really satiny."

"And I appreciate all the thought and initiative," Phyllis said, "but no." Her expression became a shade more serious. "I'm wanting this to be a proper and official Swift wedding. Reverend Gordon. The Union Church..."

"Driving away in a House on Wheels," Sandy added.

"Well... yeah," Phyllis admitted from behind a slight blush.

"A pair of newlyweds in a robot vehicle which drives itself," Sandy commented casually to Bingo. "Rather convenient, one might say."

"One might," Bingo agreed.

Phyllis' blush deepened.

Sandy considered it. "So it looks like you and Ken'll be coming down to Earth," she continued to Bingo. "That only leaves the question of which of us gets to be Maid of Honor."

Bingo responded with an evil smile.

Phyllis coughed. "Ahem!"

When she had their attention she went on. "Not wanting to be indelicate or anything," she said, giving Sandy's bulging belly a very pointed look, and then doing the same to young Charles Horton, currently snoozing against his mother's shoulder, "but the best either of you can hope for now is Matron of Honor."

Sandy blinked. "Oh!"

"Oh!" Bingo echoed.

"And I am really sorry," Phyllis went on. "I guess it's sort of my fault. I mean, my God, it recently occurred to me that I'm the last girl from my high school class to get married... or something."

“Not entirely your fault,” Sandy said. “You were, after all, pursuing the Unattainable Man.”

Phyllis gazed out at the Earth. “Yeah.”

“But it's okay now,” Bingo chirped brightly. “Tom's coming back, and the wedding's definitely on. Everything's finally happenin'.”

“Yes,” Phyllis agreed, nodding firmly. “You're right. It's finally and positively happening. Absolutely nothing can go wrong now.”

* * * * *

Famous last words, Phyllis silently growled in her head.

She had very reluctantly left the bicycle leaning against a wall of the alley. It had certainly been useful, but she knew that Mr. Damon would blab, and the bike would make her that much easier to spot. The only thought which lifted her mood was that there was no way her fingerprints would be on file anywhere.

Hah, she thought from behind a small smile. *Solve THAT mystery, Tom Swift Sr.*

She was now carefully strolling down the sidewalk on Carlopa Street, still in the poncho, letting her staff aid in assisting her steps. Spotting a clock in a shop window she saw that it was almost nine in the morning. People were already up and about and, as Phyllis walked, she noticed that she was attracting more than a few looks.

Suddenly turning away she occupied herself with studying her reflection in a large window. Enough details were visible to where she inwardly moaned. After crash landing in the woods, falling and sneaking and crawling about through hither and yon, she was definitely in need of a thorough bath. Her clothes were filthy and grass-stained, and the addition of the poncho put her in mind of a European refugee fleeing World War II.

And my HAIR. Ye cats! With a low whimper, Phyllis reached up with a hand to pat at the tangled mess. *Okay... memo to myself: next time I travel through time I bring a hairbrush along.*

Still feeling eyes on her she felt that Carlopa Street was perhaps a bit too out in the open and decided to try and reach Peach Street as calmly as possible. *Move along people*, she

silently thought at the others. *I'm not the droid you're looking for.*

She realized she had been standing in front of the offices for the *Bulletin* and focused her attention on the front page of the latest addition which was featured in the window. The masthead read May 20.

Arrived on the 19th, Phyllis thought, frowning. *Wow, Mount St. Helens had just happened.* She continued reading, feeling that there was something about the date which was tickling the back of her head. But the only other item she noticed was a prominent announcement that Shopton was preparing for the annual Frontier Festival.

Looking back around she now noticed the banners stretched across the street:

**SHOPTON WELCOMES VISITORS TO THE
42ND ANNUAL FRONTIER FESTIVAL**

There were also posters here and there trumpeting the event.

Oh yeah... it's that time of year. The Festival would take place this weekend at the park and campgrounds near the Sternbach Inlet. Not too far away, in fact, from where Phyllis currently was.

She resumed walking, still aiming for Peach Street while collecting her thoughts into some sort of plan. But she also couldn't help noting her surroundings. It was one thing to see pictures of Shopton in 1980. But to actually walk its streets...

No atomicars, she realized. In fact, domestic atomic power was still waiting for Tom Sr. to get it started. Power and propulsion was still fossil fuel based. Also: *no robots... no satellites or space station. No people on the Moon.*

Phyllis recalled that, during her mad dash for Shopton, she had passed the broad vacant land bordering Lake Carlopa where, years later, Swift Enterprises would emerge. *Have Daddy and Uncle Tom started the Swift Construction Company yet?* she wondered. *Or is that still yet to come?*

Something was definitely bothering her memory, though, and the more she thought she more she felt it had something to do with the Frontier Festival. Which was strange. The Festival had always been fun. She'd enjoyed attending it with Tom and Sandy and Bud...

And then she froze on the sidewalk, feeling as if she'd been struck head on by a bus.

May 1980...

The Frontier Festival...

Oh my God, Phyllis' mind roared. OH... MY... GOD!

Phyllis would've been the first to admit that her head for historical minutiae wasn't the most complete in the world. But there was one story she knew stone cold by heart. May 1980! The Frontier Festival. It would be just days before when the young Mary Nestor would be out in the Valigursky Woods, practicing for an event in the Festival. She'd be driving a horse-drawn wagon, and the horse would suddenly become skittish and gallop. Mary would be struggling for control, and would only succeed with the help of Tom Swift appearing on the scene on his motorcycle, bringing the horse under control.

Uncle Tom and Aunt Mary! Their first meeting!

But Tom was engaged to Ithaca. Had he missed out on meeting Mary?

And then a second figurative bus struck Phyllis.

Tom and his motorcycle found ME in the woods. Did I prevent him from going on and meeting Mary? Did I mess it up? WAS IT BECAUSE OF ME?

Leaning on her staff, Phyllis struggled to catch her breath. No, she insisted to herself. *Things were already messed up.* Ithaca had been here for a while. Something was hideously wrong with history, and Phyllis was only the latest disaster in the mix. *I may have contributed something... but I didn't arrive here by accident.*

Still feeling sweaty, Phyllis hobbled on down the sidewalk, trying to fit things together. She was living in one of the worst nightmares out of practically every time travel story she'd ever read. Something... or SOMEONE... was interfering with this point in time. *And I have a pretty good idea why, as well as an idea of who could help provide answers,* Phyllis believed.

Ithaca Foger, you and I are gonna have words. Oh yes!

Phyllis tried to add more determination to her pace, but the weight of the thoughts were pressing down on her, actually making her creak. Then she realized that she wasn't hearing creaking, but an insistent growl from her stomach. She hadn't eaten at all yesterday, and there'd been no food

during the trip to Roberts' laboratory.

As if to punctuate the situation her stomach growled again. *No money, Phyllis' mind whined, pausing again. I'm tired, dirty, aching, the world I know is being torn apart, and now, to top it all off, I'm hungry.*

A broad pit of despair was opening and fought to keep it down. *You're still on your feet, girl. You're still in the game. Keep going.*

"I'm hungry," she admitted. *I want to eat. I want to rest and think. I want...*

She then realized she was standing where Carlopa Street met Peach, and she had paused because to her left was the familiar sight of St. James Church, and to her right Carlopa Street continued on towards the campgrounds. To the left was refuge and comfort...

To the right, however, some very tempting odors were drifting within range of her nose. She remembered that the Festival featured dozens of food booths, as well as scheduled cook-off events. A good deal of the cooking began first thing in the morning.

Food!

"I'm sorry, God," Phyllis murmured and, with a sigh, turned to the right. Her mind was trying to remember which of the booths featured free samples and, if she moved around as quickly and as quietly as possible, could she acquire enough for a meal?

What was that phrase? she tried to remember. *Enough is as good as a feast?*

Reaching the fairgrounds Phyllis realized she had actually made a smart move. The Festival hadn't officially opened, and nothing was going on except for a few preliminary events. Most of the people wandering about were dressed for setting up booths and running errands and such and, in her current state of dress and appearance, Phyllis felt as if she were blending in.

So intent was she on following the scent of something which smelled buttery and freshly baked that, when her ears first heard the voice, it didn't immediately register.

"Well brand my diced cactus spines," the voice boomed. "All these other chuck wagons, and ain't no one's got

armadillo tails to spare.”

Then the neurons clicked in Phyllis' head and, once again, she came to a sudden halt.

“It can't be!” she whispered, turning to stare at the source of the remark. “It just *can't* be.”

Oh, but it was! It was!

“Chow Winkler!”

Chapter Seven: Home, Home on Derange

At the sound of his name the man turned around in search of the speaker. Phyllis, in the meantime, had been all prepared to drop her staff and fling herself at him, sobbing uncontrollably in relief, when her brain rebooted from its emotional shock and she brought herself up short. Mental circuits were firing madly in her head. *Wait a minute...*

It had been Chow's voice. No one else in the world sounded like that. And Chow was one of two people in the world Phyllis could identify from afar simply because of the shirt he wore (her Tom being the other one), along with perhaps being the only human being in existence who could locate a cowboy shirt colored lime green and electric fuchsia.

But the Chow Winkler she was facing looked different, and Phyllis realized she had to once again perform a time shift in her memory. She knew Chow as a man in his sixties. *This* Chow, on the other hand, wasn't nearly that old. There was still the pudginess (perhaps not as well defined as she remembered), and he also had more hair on his head.

Phyllis rapidly performed some mental arithmetic. *I'm now in 1980, which means...*

Holy Magoo! Chow's only a few years older than me here.

In the meantime Chow was still staring at her in polite interest. "You know me?"

I've SO got to stop reacting like this, Phyllis silently yelled at herself. "Ah-hhhh... I've heard of you." *Lame, lame, lame...*

Chow's expression immediately brightened. "Oh! You saw that piece on me in the special 'Chuck Wagon Cookin' edition of *Sunset*."

"Oh yes!" Phyllis quickly replied, her head bobbing rapidly.

Smiling, Chow returned to his task of stirring something in a bowl. "Glad you did. I guess it's partly 'cause of that I decided to try for some of the northern cookin' trophies this year. See how my stuff stacks up 'gainst some others outside the usual crowd I compete with at the ACWA meets. 'Sides," he added with a shrug, "I made it to the cookoff in Hartford, and this here Festival seemed like not that much further a trip. Don't have to return to the Rockin' D Spread 'till August

anyway... and no 'fense, ma'am, but *someone's* gotta teach you Northerners that yaller BBQ sauce just ain't proper."

Phyllis simply stood near and listened, feeling as if she could drown in the familiar comfort of that voice forever. It also put her deeply in mind of Chow's niece: the as-yet unborn Bingo.

All my friends are so not here, she mourned. *But I'm not alone at the moment. Not now.*

"An' listen to me just jaw on," Chow said, turning his attention (and a smile) back to Phyllis. "All this talkin' an' I ain't even asked who you were."

This time Phyllis engaged her brain before opening her mouth. "Lee Camembert."

"Like the cheese!"

"Yeah." *Another memo to myself: pick a more sensible sounding cover identity on my next time trip.*

"Don't quite use it much myself," Chow mused. "Always manage with good ol' American rat trap," and he punctuated his opinion by turning to a nearby counter and, producing a knife, removing a slice from a large wedge of cheese which he then offered out to Phyllis.

Staring at it, Phyllis tried not to allow the sudden ache in her stomach from becoming too visible on her face. With as much calm as she could muster she accepted the offering, barely managing not to gobble it up too quickly, and offering a murmured "Thank you" to Chow.

Watching her face, Chow said: "Course it tastes really best when in a bowl of genuine Texas Red. Hold on." Turning to one of the pots simmering on his outdoor stove he busily ladled chili into a large bowl. Adding some diced onion, and then several slivers of cheese, he turned back to Phyllis. "Now there're *some* thoughtless an' loose talk folk in the world who claim my chili's too hot to handle," he remarked. "I'll admit I toned down the spice a bit for this batch, but that's because I'm still gettin' ingredients together for the chili cookoff. Lemme know what you think, Miz Camembert."

Trying not to tremble too much, Phyllis leaned her staff against the table, accepting the bowl, along with an offered spoon, and beginning to eat. The rich scent was threatening to

enslave her and she concentrated on getting the chili down into where it'd do the most good.

Too late she realized she was gulping it down far too fast and she tried to slow down, glancing up at Chow.

He was returning her look with a small smile. "Tastes all right, does it?"

"S'wonderful."

Chow continued staring at her, his expression gentling. "Miz Camembert... mebbe it ain't really none o' my business, but are you in any sort o' trouble?"

And here's where I calmly put the bowl down, Phyllis thought, *then turn and run like a thief for the tall timber.* She knew she could so easily do it.

But running and hiding and lying hadn't produced anything in the way of clear results and, gazing down into what remained of the extremely good chili, Phyllis silently considered taking a different course of action.

Slowly putting the bowl on the table she raised her eyes to meet Chow's. "Mister Winkler—"

"Chow."

"Chow." Phyllis took a careful breath. "I don't want to lie to you. Yes, I'm in a lot of trouble."

His eyes continued studying her. "'N I take it it ain't anything the police can help with?"

Phyllis shook her head. "In fact, the police are very much after me. I'm telling you this because I don't want to get you into trouble by getting involved. I do thank you for the food, and I'd better go." She turned to leave.

"Miz Camembert."

Phyllis stopped, remaining under the powerful microscope of Chow's gaze. Silence for a few moments.

Then: "Step into my office," Chow offered, turning.

Phyllis followed mutely, moving around the table. Chow's "office" was a buckskin colored camper van. The side doors had been opened wide, and from them stretched a canvas awning which presented the look of a covered wagon. Shelves, boxes, pots, pans and coolers crowded one inner side of the awning, while the stove merrily worked just outside the

awning's entrance. Stretching from the stove was the work counter, and then the main table which bent sharply away from the counter to form a serving area for visitors.

Such as myself, Phyllis mused.

What she could see of the van beyond was a collection of more boxes and cookware, and she guessed Chow made do with sleeping in the forward end of the vehicle. From somewhere in the van the distinctive music and singing of Bob Wills could be heard.

Briefly leaning out of sight into the van, Chow switched the music off. Then he perched in the doorway, motioning for Phyllis to sit on a stool near a large aluminum basin filled with soapy water and several pots and dishes.

Chow waited for her to settle on the stool before continuing. "Miz Camembert... I've been 'round people in trouble before. Good people as well as bad. I ain't no sigh-kee-at-trist, but good people in trouble act different from bad people in trouble, and I think I'm a savvy 'nough hombre to know the difference."

Phyllis evenly met his eyes. "Trouble from good people is just as contagious and dangerous as the kind from bad people."

"There's that," Chow admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "But lemme get you some milk to wash down that chili with." Rising up he moved past Phyllis, heading for one of the coolers.

Phyllis watched him, still trying to sort things out in her head. *Been doing a lot of that lately.*

She looked across to where several Mason jars of what looked like pickled something-or-other sat on some newspaper stretched out atop a box. She was about to return her attention to Chow when some words on the newspaper caught her eye.

Getting up she leaned over the box, stretching out the newspaper page to read more closely. It was a page from today's edition of the *Bulletin*. A page she hadn't read in the window.

**SHOPTON POLICE SEARCHING
FOR MYSTERIOUS ASSAILANT.**

Trying to read as much of the news item as she could without upsetting the jars, Phyllis was able to learn enough to realize that she was very much the target of the police search.

Oh my!

She suddenly became aware of Chow standing there and staring at her, a glass of milk in one hand. The man's expression was one Phyllis believed should be in the dictionary next to the word "inscrutable".

Phyllis also noticed one other particular. Namely: the matched pair of classic Colt Peacemaker .45's holstered on either side of Chow's leather belt. She hadn't paid conscious attention to them before, because they had often been a part of Chow's usual regalia. But Phyllis knew that the guns were far from ornamental, and that their owner was a dead shot.

Somewhere in the distance a bird chirped.

"Yes," she finally said.

"Don't let the secret get out," Chow replied, "but there're some of us chuck wagon wranglers who read." He extended the glass to Phyllis who accepted it.

"I ain't quite changed my mind 'bout you, Miz Camembert," Chow went on, moving on past her to resume his place on the edge of the van's doorway, "but you don't rightly strike me as a dangerous character."

"Oh I'm very dangerous," Phyllis murmured, swallowing some of the milk.

"Um. A very dangerous person might'a tried grabbin' one of my guns as I went by."

Phyllis almost smiled. "Chow... I may have done some stupid things in my life. But I hope I never get so dumb as to try and grab a pistol out of someone else's holster."

There was no almost in Chow's responding smile. "Smart move." He settled into a comfortable lean against the van doorway, his eyes still on Phyllis. "Why don't you start tellin' me 'bout it?" he asked.

What would you say to the truth? Phyllis wondered. Finishing the milk she placed the glass in the aluminum basin, sloshing it in the water a bit while using the pause to assemble the facts into a sane and careful pattern.

Silently wishing herself luck she looked back up at Chow. “My fiancé's missing.”

Chow nodded at her left hand. “I noticed the ring. Looks kinda different from the usual sort. Can't place the metal.”

Not surprising, Phyllis thought, *seeing as how the source of the metal's warping through interstellar space thirty-five years in the future*. “I've spent the last few days tracking him down, and the trail's led here.”

“Any reason for it doin' so?” Chow asked.

Careful, Phyllis warned herself. “He knows people out in this area. I've spent time here as well. It was sort of a logical move.”

Chow nodded.

“I... had an accident out in the woods south of town,” Phyllis went on. “A local found me and took me to his house.”

“This Tom Swift hombre the paper's talkin' 'bout?”

Phyllis nodded. “And then everything went downhill. There was a woman at the Swift house, and I *thought* she was a woman who had caused trouble in the past. I sort of... well, I lost it and tried to attack her, and ended up getting knocked out. When I came to I heard the police were on the way, and rather than have to deal with them I escaped from the house. I've pretty much been on the move since then.”

Chow studied her for what seemed to be several long seconds.

“Couple things wrong with your story,” he finally said.

Just a COUPLE? “Oh?”

“Well, mainly only one,” Chow admitted half to himself. “I mean, Miz Camembert... and please let me know if I'm gettin' too pers'nal here... but even though you right now look like someone who just drug herself in off a six-month cattle drive, I can see that you're really purty. And, bein' honest right now, if *I* was your fiancé, I sure as heck wouldn't be wanderin' away from you. Sorta the opposite, in fact.”

This time Phyllis couldn't help but smile. *Why Charles Winkler, you silver-tongued horndog!* Maybe all the interesting rumors she'd been hearing in the present about Chow and his lady editor friend were true.

“Some special reason your man's wandered out o' the corral?” he asked.

Phyllis' ears caught the slight emphasis on *special*. She sighed. “He's... complicated.”

Chow grew quiet, his expression slowly becoming distant.

“Don't,” Phyllis gently warned. “Whatever else you might think, he loves me. I know this for a fact.”

“I wasn't thinkin' that,” Chow answered (perhaps a bit too quickly for Phyllis' tastes). “I was wonderin' 'bout this other woman you mentioned. Was she and your man...”

“Oh no!” Phyllis replied emphatically. “*Please* don't ever think that. Ever again. She...” and here Phyllis took a large mental gulp of charity, “wasn't evil. She was just the sort of woman who caused trouble everywhere she went.”

“Ummm.” Chow nodded a bit. “Sort'a knew women like that.”

I'm beginning to believe that, Phyllis thought.

Chow was once again gazing off at nothing in particular. “You gotta figure out the reason why he strolled off,” he said. “You gotta figure out what brought him here, put all of it together, and *then* you'll pick up the scent again.”

“Yeah,” Phyllis agreed. “And, while I'm doing all of this I've gotta watch out for the cops and find some sort of dependable hiding place.”

Chow considered it. “Well,” he slowly said, “this here Festival's sort of bigger and complicated than I thought it'd be.” He idly scratched his chin. “I could sort of use an assistant over the weekend. 'Specially someone who knows the area.”

Phyllis smiled. “Call me Lee.”

Chapter Eight: Shopping (and Finding)

“First thing we gotta do,” Chow decided, “is try 'n get you to look a little less like a member of the Wild Bunch.”

Gee thanks, Phyllis' mind muttered. But, she understood.

Reaching into a pocket, Chow produced a green plastic tab which he offered to Phyllis. “This's a pass which lets us Festival exhibitors use the wash facilities the campground set up. It's down over past that RV owned by the Yankee who don't understand the dif'rence 'tween flour and corn tortillas.”

Mutely accepting the tab and taking her staff, Phyllis started to get up and walk off, but turned back at the awning entrance. “You sure you don't mind this, Chow?” she asked. “I really mean it when I say this could cause trouble for you.”

Chow grinned. “Heck, Lee, I faced worse trouble in Bandera County on Friday nights after payday. You don't worry a tick and go on. I hear they gots good soap and stuff at the ladies' end.”

A diplomatic suggestion that I could use some soap, Phyllis reasoned. But she could drum up little in the way of an argument and began wandering through the trees of the campground, passing several other vehicles whose owners were in the process of setting up or maintaining booths in preparation for the Festival.

Once inside the long shed which held shower facilities (as well as soap and... *blessed be...* shampoo), Phyllis couldn't help but yield to aching instinct and scrubbed herself as thoroughly as possible all over, groaning in relief. With her stomach filled with Chow's chili, and the grime being removed, Phyllis' mind was setting up clearer and more solid paths.

Not that anything definite was coming through. *But at least I have a base of operations*, she reasoned. *If I don't have to worry about where to sleep, or finding food, then I can devote more time to systematically making things right.*

Yeah, and while I'm at it why don't I wish for a pony?

Bathed, scrubbed and shampooed, Phyllis felt tons better (her mellow being mashed only slightly by having to climb back into her filthy clothes), and her step was admittedly lighter as she returned to Chow's van.

He was carefully spooning dough into a skillet filled with hot oil, but smiled up at her. "Well now," he commented. "I sort'a thought you'd shine up real nice."

"I feel human again," she confessed, "but do you know if there're any washing machines close by?"

"Ummm. We usually mosey over to the washateria in town," Chow replied, giving Phyllis' clothes a look. "I could get you some change 'n you could head on there. Or..."

As Phyllis watched he bent down and picked up some items off a chair. "Or you could change into these."

"These" included a Western shirt, its pink and teal checkerboard pattern making Phyllis rear back slightly. Along with the shirt was a pair of Levis.

"Figgered you might want to change into something which'd make you blend in more 'round here," Chow said.

Yeah, Phyllis agreed, still eying the shirt. *Especially if I want to take up a career standing on airport runways and helping to guide planes in on foggy nights.* Nonetheless she reached out and took the clothes...

And took a closer examination of the jeans. "Chow..."

"Ummm?"

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but you just happened to have a pair of woman's jeans in my size?"

Moving the bobbing pieces of dough around the skillet, Chow shrugged. "Not as such. But while you were out washin' I went over to the clothin' booth cross the way and picked those up."

And did a fairly accurate job of guessing my size, Phyllis thought, wondering if she should blush. "Oh, Chow..."

"Now don't carry on," Chow insisted. "You workin' for me, and I gotta look out for my people." He nodded back towards the van. "Y'can get yourself changed in there, and I'll busy myself with these here *sopapillas*."

Phyllis moved around the table, heading for the van.

"Oh, and Lee?"

Phyllis looked back.

Chow was still at work at the stove. "Whatever you think you might've done, you're innocent."

She turned back to him fully. “Not that I'm ungrateful for your vote of confidence,” she said, “but how'd you arrive at that conclusion?”

Another shrug. “I been givin' you every pos'ble opportunity to cut and run. You haven't. My Mom reads the Bible out loud on occasions. She sort'a likes that verse about the bad hombres gettin' the hell outta Dodge when there ain't no posse out after 'em.”

From the Gospel according to Hoot Gibson. But Phyllis smiled. “I do thank you, Chow.”

“An' you also ain't tried to run off with my cashbox,” he added.

Phyllis decided not to admit she didn't even know Chow had a cashbox out where she could've grabbed it and, instead, went and crawled into the van. Finding a reasonably uncluttered corner she managed to change into her new outfit, the process making her feel as if she were sprouting wings.

“Didn't think of gettin' you shoes,” his voice boomed from outside.

Phyllis silently didn't berate Chow for the lapse. Most men of her acquaintance seldom bothered to look that far down.

“But I gots some moccasins in there that'd possibly fit.”

He did and they did and, after patting her hair into place, Phyllis emerged from the van.

“N there she is,” Chow said with a smile. “The Queen of the Rodeo!”

The smile faded a bit as he noticed something in her expression. “Lee?”

“I'm sorry,” Phyllis said. “I'm real grateful and all. It's just that...”

Chow waited.

“Right now I should be somewhere else. *With* someone else.”

“Whups! I take it your fella was cuttin' it pretty close, huh?”

Phyllis nodded.

“Well don't you worry none,” he said, offering her a still warm *sopapilla*, already sugared. “Ain't a critter walkin' ol'

Chow hadn't been able to lasso. We'll get you down that aisle yet."

Phyllis took the morsel. "You know so little about me for being so nice," she said.

"I know you're in trouble," he replied. "'N you're in need." He tilted his head slightly. "You ain't got folks you can call? Someone else who can help?"

All so far away. "Everything's happened to make sure I do this alone."

Chow thought it over. "Ain't right," he concluded, turning back to his stove. "Just ain't right. But like I said, Lee, don't worry. We're pards now, 'n I got your back."

Yielding to an impulse Phyllis moved closer, giving him a hug from behind.

"Mm, careful," Chow warned.

"Oh! I didn't upset the skillet, did I?"

"Not as such. But your man might've picked that moment to pop up, 'n I bet he's the mean, strong type."

"Well," Phyllis replied, licking sugar off her fingertips, "if that's all it took to get Tom to show up, I'd hug you again."

"That's his name?"

"Yeah." *And rein in that mouth,* Phyllis warned herself for the umpteenth time. *Loose lips!* "In the meantime, though, I'd better start earning my keep around here. Do you need me to wash out the dishes? Chop vegetables? Watch the stove while you handle something?" Her expression grew cautious. "Brand a steer?"

Chow opened his mouth, then closed it and thought for a few moments.

Then: "Can you fry chicken?"

Phyllis knew Chow as one of the three best fried chicken cooks in the world. Chow's niece, Bingo, was another. *And I've been taking lessons from the third,* Phyllis thought. Namely: Mary Swift, giving her future daughter-in-law a crash course in what they both called "Care and Feeding of the Swift Male". "Sure can. You need me to start?"

"Well-lll, what I needs at the moment, though, is buttermilk, paprika and some more cookin' oil. Do you know

the grocery store just off the campgrounds?"

Phyllis nodded. "Yeah. Pesek's, on the corner of Bonestell and Freas."

"Great. Watch this last batch here and I'll get some money. Oh, and if you can bring home another two dozen eggs that'd be nice." Making room for Phyllis at the stove, Chow wandered back into the awning, eventually returning with some money in his hand.

He was also pulling a two wheel cart behind him. "Can use this to bring the groceries home with," he said.

"Better than a cowbell," Phyllis said, looking at the cart.

"Beg pardon?"

"Nothing," Phyllis suspected that Chow would no more be without cooking oil than a fish would be without water. She didn't mention it out loud, but privately suspected he was testing her again.

Well... I'd do the same if I were him.

Pocketing the money she took the handle of the cart, then her staff. "Pesek's is close enough to where I guess I don't have to worry about being spotted," she said.

"Ummm. Hold it a minute." Chow quickly went back to the van, and just as quickly returned. In his hands was a sombrero. "Here. Mebbe this'll make you stand out less."

With a small smile Phyllis accepted the hat, balancing it on her head. "Now I feel like Jennifer Jones in *Duel in the Sun*."

"Sorta look like her, too," Chow observed. "Can't really imagine any cop not noticing a pretty brunette in a sombrero. But mebbe they'd think if you were who they were lookin' for, then you wouldn't be dressed so obvious out in the open."

Phyllis considered there was some sort of weird logic in Chow's reasoning and, with a shrug, she once again took the cart and began for the store.

And once again stopped. "Chow?"

"Hm?"

"How long have you been here in Shopton?"

"Ah-hhhh... arrived Sunday."

So you got here a day before me. "Have you noticed

anything... unusual?"

Chow was handling the last of the *sopapillas*, but he gave her a look which held a hint of caution. "I'm just wonderin' what you'd call 'unusual'? Once in Juarez I saw a snake with three heads."

"Well, I'm thinking more about stuff like weird lights. Stories of people suddenly appearing out of nowhere. Things like that." And Phyllis was wishing she could make her comments sound more casual.

Chow thoughtfully tapped his spatula against his shoulder. "Can't recollect anythin' like that."

"How about a man? A bit taller than me. Well-built. Short blonde hair." She grimaced. "Wearing a white t-shirt with black stripes."

Chow smiled a bit. "By the tone o'your voice when you described his build and hair, I take it we're talkin' about your Tom."

Phyllis nodded.

"Well, wish I could say I spotted him. Can't say as I have, though."

Phyllis looked a bit crestfallen.

Chow noticed it. "Lot of us here tend to chat and stuff. I'll keep my ears open and sorta ask 'round, 'kay?"

"Thanks."

* * * * *

Phyllis was immensely surprised that she wasn't immediately surrounded by police cars the moment she left the campgrounds. Tom Sr. would've obviously had passed on her description, and as much as she appreciated Chow getting her a new outfit, she felt as if she were carrying around a large blinking neon sign reading *HERE I AM*.

But she had spoken correctly about the proximity of Pesek's Fine Groceries to the campgrounds, and she wasn't the only one wandering the aisles in what she classed as "colorful Western attire".

"Eggs," she murmured to herself, taking two dozen and carefully placing them next to the gallon of buttermilk. The picture of perfect domesticity... *yeah, with a man other than my husband, and looking as if I escaped a radioactive*

Mexican wasteland. Where in HELL does Chow find these colors?

Was her Tom here? she wondered. Time travel seemed so very slippery in itself. Maybe it was possible that she could've arrived ahead of him. If he *was* going to arrive here.

But Phyllis reasoned that this had to be Tom's destination. Why else did she end up in Shopton? And even if this whole business was some sort of vast, time altering plot, the fact that she arrived in Shopton still meant that, if Tom had entered Roberts' machine, then he'd be here as well.

Paying the woman at the checkout counter, Phyllis tugged the cart along, her mind still trying to piece things together. If Tom were here then where would he go? Would he have tried to contact his father?

Phyllis shook her head. *No. Tom's probably more worried about continuity than I am.*

He'd try to lie low. But where? Sighing, Phyllis felt that all she needed was one hard clue. One juicy piece of information.

So intent was she on her thoughts when she stepped out of the store that she almost didn't realize she was about to try and walk through someone. " 'Scuse me," she murmured, looking up...

And finding herself face to face with Ithaca Fogger.

Chapter Nine: A Call For Help

“...that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan.”

—Melville—

Later... much, *much* later... Phyllis would be grateful for the fact that Chow's shopping cart was designed not to tip over when released. Otherwise all the groceries would've spilled out.

Now, however, her only thought was of the woman before her. Phyllis automatically moved into a defensive stance, whirling her staff into position between them. Meanwhile she was thinking: *Here it is! The battle for cosmic sanity taking place on the sidewalk of Bonestell Street. Outside the grocery store. And I'm wearing a sombrero.*

But there was no malice in Ithaca's face (although her eyes widened at the sight of Phyllis swinging up her staff). Instead her expression carried wonder. And determination. “It is you,” she said. “I thought I'd find you if I looked hard enough.”

“Yes,” Phyllis hissed. “Here I am!” Then “Excuse me,” she automatically said to a woman brushing past them, leaving the store with a bag of oranges.

“You don't know how worried I've been,” Ithaca told her. “I was so afraid you'd disappear and I wouldn't have another chance with you.”

“Well you have one now,” Phyllis replied. Then she added “Scuse me,” to a woman leading two children out of the store.

“I need your help,” Ithaca insisted.

A man and a woman were pushing a loaded shopping cart out of the store, and Phyllis stepped aside, muttering “Sorry.”

Then: “C'mere,” she said to Ithaca, grabbing the woman's hand and pulling her aside (just barely remembering to go back for her own groceries).

“All right, Ithaca,” she said, rejoining the woman a few feet beyond the door. “What are you up to?”

Ithaca blinked. “Up to?”

“Don't play innocent with me,” Phyllis declared. “I know you better than that.”

Shock and relief bloomed on the other woman's face. “Oh! You *do* know me. You *do!*”

Phyllis found her wire-tight caution beginning to drain away. “Huh?”

And then she received an even more incredible surprise as Ithaca rushed to hug Phyllis tightly. She was producing muffled sounds which Phyllis realized were sobs, and, wonder of wonders, Phyllis began feeling wetness on her shoulder.

“Back at Tom's house,” Ithaca gulped between sobs. “You acted as if you knew who I was. I hoped you were telling the truth, and you... you weren't someone sent by my family. But you're not. You know. You *know!*”

“A'right, alright, all right,” Phyllis rapidly said, idly patting Ithaca's shoulder while, at the same time, noticing the looks the two of them were attracting. *Yeah! Demon alien cyborg crying on La Cucaracha's shoulder in broad daylight. Take a picture, people. It'll last longer.*

“C'mon,” she told Ithaca, trying to move the both of them (and everything else) a little further down the sidewalk (and more out of sight).

Near the back of the store Phyllis gently pushed Ithaca against the wall. “Okay,” she said. “From the beginning.”

“That's what I hoping to ask you,” Ithaca said.

“What?”

“Who *am* I?”

It took Phyllis all of nine seconds to produce an answer. “Are you kidding? You're Ithaca Fogger.”

“I know that—”

“Then why did you just ask—”

“And that's *all* I know.”

Phyllis stood there, trying to get her head back into the scheme of things.

“Okay,” she finally said. “Let's once again try and take this from the top.” A breath. “*What* do you mean that's all you know?”

“Three months ago I woke up in the woods near Tom's home,” Ithaca said, looking all of ten years old. “All I had was a name... Ithaca Foger... but nothing else.” With a hand she lightly smacked at the side of her head. “Empty! Nothing!”

“Then Tom came along and found me—”

Boy definitely has a predilection for finding girls in the woods, Phyllis thought.

“—and he took me home. I... he helped me and then, over the weeks, he... helped me.” A blush slowly grew on Ithaca's face.

Yeah, those Swift men can be really helpful at times. “Go on,” Phyllis prompted.

“But he didn't know who I was. No one knew who I was. Tom had the police try and trace me through my fingerprints, but nothing. He told me about the Fogers, and I... went to try and find some answers—”

“And probably got chucked out on your hiney for your troubles.”

“They threatened to put the police after me,” Ithaca said, her eyes automatically glancing about. “So I've been spending more and more time with Tom, where it was safe.”

Phyllis, having had some experience with feeling safe around Tom Swift, found herself understanding the sentiment. “You totally have no memory of who you are?”

Ithaca sadly shook her head. “And then you showed up. You obviously have some... feelings about me. Not the sort I'd necessarily hope for. But it meant you knew more than either Tom and I did, and I so wanted to talk to you and find out. I wanted to help you, but you managed to get away before I could try to convince Tom not to get the police involved.

“But you later on came back, and I managed to help you get further away.”

“Get further...” Phyllis murmured, frowning.

Then the loose change clattered to the bottom of her head. “It was you,” she slowly told Ithaca. “*You* left the bicycle out by the shed.”

Ithaca nodded. “I couldn't risk having the police get you before I had a chance to talk with you. You had to get away, and that was the best thing I could think of.”

Phyllis stared at her.

“*Help* me,” Ithaca insisted in a whisper.

Phyllis continued staring at her. Ithaca Foger was asking her for help. The person who had tried to kill several people at Swift Enterprises, including Sandy. Who had damn near caused a cosmic catastrophe out in Nevada. Who had been assisting aliens in their attempt to destroy the Earth...

Asking *her* for help.

The hand Phyllis had on Ithaca's shoulder was starting to grow tighter.

But another memory was appearing.

* * * * *

She was sitting at her mirror, staring into it with a mixture of grief, resignation and... call it by its name... insanity.

It was falling apart. Everything. Tom was still broken and despondent over the loss of people who had been on the phantom satellite of Nestria when the Space Friends recalled it. The growing complex of solartrons on the Sun were all set to release a massive eruption which would incinerate the Earth. The only hope remaining for everyone, or at least a very select few, was to climb into spaceships and make for the supposed safety of the outer solar system...

And Sandy was dead.

Phyllis found there was no end of her supply of tears whenever her thoughts returned to Sandy. Her best and dearest friend had stolen her brother's fastest spaceship and flew it to the Sun in some wild attempt to bargain with the Space Friends for the lives of everyone on Earth. Phyllis and the others had tracked Sandy's progress as she reached the Sun... losing her as her ship fell further into the seething hell of flames.

Then no more word. Nothing. Sandy had thrown her life away on a gamble, and now she was gone.

Phyllis continued looking into the mirror. Soon it would be time to leave Earth and escape what was going to destroy the millions who had no choice but to remain behind. Escape, and hopefully manage to elude the Space Friends.

I could be a blonde.

Phyllis idly ran her fingers through her brunette locks,

contemplating a color change. Perhaps become as blonde as Sandy. Some sort of bizarre memorial to her friend. The Lord knew there wasn't going to be a grave, or a memorial service. There was nothing left to bury, and events were moving far too fast to mourn. Too fast for anything other than the tears leaking from Phyllis' eyes.

“Phyllis Newton!”

Turning away from the mirror, Phyllis looked up in surprise.

She was there! A ghostly image hovering in the air above her. Gazing down at her with an imperious look. Purposeful.

Ithaca Foger!

The transparent figure spoke again. “Your sister calls.”

My sister...

SANDY!

And everything inside Phyllis was suddenly pushed aside by a blazing wave of hope. Sandy was alive! Alive, alive, alive! Against all possible odds she had made it.

Of course she did. She's Sandy!

And now...

Phyllis stood up. “I'm ready.”

* * * * *

“Chow-www,” Phyllis sang out. “I'm home. I'm ho-ooome.”

Chow had been chatting with a few people who were standing near his table, but he turned and smiled. “You certainly are.”

His eyes naturally glanced at Ithaca, and Phyllis indicated her with a nod. “Chow, this is Ithaca Foger. She's come by to visit.”

“I oughta come to these northern meets more often,” Chow observed. “Pretty girls just appearin' ever which way here.” He favored Ithaca with a smile.

For her part Ithaca was looking a bit cautious. “This is Chow,” Phyllis assured her. “Don't worry. His heart's bigger than his skillet, and it's made of solid gold.” *And the years won't tarnish it one bit*, she silently added.

“Hello,” Ithaca shyly said.

"We'll get the groceries put away," Phyllis told Chow in a tone which she hoped would also carry the message *We need to talk quietly*.

Fortunately Chow was as quick on the uptake as he was on the draw, and he nodded. "Go on 'head. I'll help in a bit." He then resumed talking with his visitors while Phyllis quietly led Ithaca around the table and on into the awning.

Moments later he moved to join them, finding Ithaca sitting nervously on the stool while Phyllis was arranging her purchases into place on the shelves.

"Miss Ithaca you're welcome," he said to the newcomer. "C'n I offer you something in the way of refreshment?"

"I think we could all use something in the way of a drink," Phyllis replied. "But something soft, please."

Nodding, Chow went to one of the coolers and opened it, revealing a selection of canned sodas nesting in ice. Selecting three colas he brought them back.

"Thanks," Phyllis told him, taking one of the cans.

"Thank you," Ithaca whispered, gingerly accepting another can.

"The reason Ithaca's acting the way she is," Phyllis explained, turning to face Chow, "is because... and here I've got to say it plain... she's the woman I mentioned to you earlier."

Chow's eyes grew a bit larger. "Oh! So *she's* the one..."

Opening her soda, Phyllis nodded.

Ithaca looked from one to the other. "I'm the one *what? What* am I?"

"In a bit," Phyllis promised her. Gently touching Chow's arm she turned him slightly away from Ithaca. "It seems," she explained in a low voice, "that Ithaca's experienced a total case of amnesia."

"Well!" Chow glanced back at Ithaca. "Brand my prairie dog cutlets!"

Phyllis was then reminded that, among Chow's other talents, he was an excellent judge of people. "Listen to her with me for a bit," she told him, lowering her voice even more. "Let me know if you think she's telling the truth."

“Or fakin' it?”

Phyllis nodded. Turning back to Ithaca she moved to sit in the van's doorway.

“I promised you an explanation when we got here,” she said to the other woman. “And you're right, Ithaca.” Phyllis took a deep breath. “I *do* know you.”

Ithaca inhaled sharply.

“But here's the problem. There are many things about you I still don't know.”

“But you do know *something*—”

“Something,” Phyllis agreed. “Just not everything. You see, you've been a mystery to me and my... friends. You've disappeared several times before, only to show up again at the most unexpected moments.”

Ithaca nodded. “And...”

And you've been a world class menace who managed to redeem yourself at the end. “I know *what* you are, Ithaca. I just don't entirely know *who* you are.” Phyllis blinked. “Or maybe that would've made more sense the other way around.”

“But my name,” Ithaca insisted. “Am I part of the Foger family?”

I should become an Olympic class skater with all this experience being on thin ice. “You are,” Phyllis slowly said. “But then again you aren't. I know,” she went on, seeing Ithaca's expression. “It's confusing. But it's been one of the ongoing mysteries about you. I wish I could just wave a magic wand and hand you all the answers”... *especially since it'd help me a lot with my own problems...* “but all I have are bits and pieces.”

“Still more than I have,” Ithaca murmured half to herself.

And then the soda can dropped from her hand. As Phyllis and Chow watched, Ithaca remained sitting on the stool. But there was something different about her. She seemed frozen in place.

Phyllis leaned closer. “Ithaca?”

No answer. Phyllis carefully waved a hand back and forth in front of Ithaca's eyes. No response.

Looking back at Chow, Phyllis said: “*Now* what?”

And then her eyes quickly looked beyond Chow and out onto the campgrounds.

Nothing. But, for the briefest moment, Phyllis thought she had seen some people staring at her. Three people.

Nothing was there.

Chapter Ten: The Missing Part of The Equation

Phyllis returned her attention to Ithaca, joining Chow who was now kneeling close in front of the unmoving woman.

“Well now brand my roadrunner pie,” he murmured.

“Yeah,” Phyllis agreed. “This is spooky.”

Reaching out she touched a spot on Ithaca's throat. “Oh I can't feel a pulse.”

Chow blanched slightly. “She's dead?”

If she's a robot then she was never alive to begin with, Phyllis thought. “Her skin's still warm. For the moment.” Looking around she spotted a fork in a nearby box of utensils. Taking it, and hoping she was doing the right thing, she suddenly jabbed the fork into Ithaca's right hand.

“Hey!” Chow said, rearing back.

“Just checking,” Phyllis replied steadily. There was no reaction from Ithaca, but blood appeared at the wounds which the fork made. *Probably makes no difference,* Phyllis thought. If Ithaca was indeed a robot then she was a product of alien technology. The Space Friends doubtless would've had ways of duplicating basic human functions.

Chow had produced a first aid kit and had carefully cleaned the fork marks. He was now bandaging Ithaca's hand. “Y'know *some* people might've tried pinching her or something,” he pointed out.

“I'm sorry,” Phyllis said, sighing. “You don't know all her story; and, believe me, if you did then you'd've thought I was being overly cautious.”

Chow glanced up at her. “She's that dangerous?”

“She's that unpredictable.” Phyllis once again peered into Ithaca's face, trying to read some sort of sign there. “She wasn't living with Tom Swift but was going somewhere at night. I'm now wondering if she wandered off and... shut down at night?”

“People don't 'shut down'.”

“I know,” Phyllis murmured.

“And another thing,” Chow went on. “She was with this Tom Swift feller?”

Phyllis nodded. "Engaged to him."

Chow was staring at her for a moment. "Lotta girls engaged to guys named Tom 'round here," he muttered. "But anyways: if this Swift hombre was engaged to Ithaca and all, you'd think he'd be curious where his girl went off at nights."

"That's something else that's been bothering me." Phyllis told Chow the story Ithaca had given her outside the store. "I just can't see Tom accepting all of that without looking into it more."

"So Miss Ithaca just up and mysteriously appeared in the woods some time back?"

"Yeah."

Chow scratched his head. "You seem to know a lot about her. Was she always doin' that sort of thing?"

"Unfortunately, yes. This is the first time, though, that she's ever been found with no memory."

"Oh, 'bout that? Haven't had much of a chance to listen to her, but I 'spects she's tellin' the truth about her amnesia."

"Damn it," Phyllis said, scowling. "This is going to sound bad, Chow, but things would be a heck of a lot easier if she were lying."

"Well, sorry, but I feel she ain't." Chow gave her another contemplative look. "Somethin' else. You sorta seem to know a lot about how Tom Swift thinks. I know you said you're all familiar with Shopton..."

But I've been flapping my big mouth again, Phyllis silently finished. She looked down at her feet.

"I ain't tryin' to pry into your pers'nal bizness, Lee," Chow went on. "I'm just sayin' that the more I know you the weirder it gets."

Still staring at her moccasins, Phyllis sighed. "I warned you it'd get like this."

Chow nodded. "Yeah. You did."

She looked up. "I can go ahead and leave right now. I'll even take the Problem Child along with me. Somehow."

Chow quickly lifted both his hands, palms forward. "Whoa up there, Lee. I ain't said nothin' 'bout turnin' you out. You're in as much trouble as she is. Mebbe more. I said I'd help and I

will.” He shrugged. “Sides: if word got back to the boys at the ranch that I let two pretty girls go I’d never be ’lowed back in Texas.”

Phyllis produced a small smile. “Tell me something, Chow.”

“Sure.”

“Do all cowboys flirt?”

Chow grinned. “W’all y’see, Lee... some of us do. After all, there’s Texas cookin’, and then there’s Texas *cookin’*.”

“I’m beginning to find that out,” Phyllis said, her smile growing.

“Don’t have to worry ’bout me none, though,” Chow assured her. “You’re already spoken for. And I gots me an ironclad rule ’gainst poachin’.”

“I’m surprised, though, no Texas girl hasn’t tossed a rope around you.”

“Wel-lll...” Chow grew speculative. “Some’ve tried. But you gotta understand I’m a rovin’ trail cook. Been my ’sperience that wimmen like to have their menfolk in the corral most nights.”

“You won’t get an argument from me,” Phyllis told him. She looked again at Ithaca. “I wish I knew how long she was going to stay like that.”

Chow glanced outside. “Gettin’ close to evenin’. Mebbe she’ll wake up in the mornin’. I’d feel better if I knew *what* was happenin’ with her.”

“Self-induced stasis,” Phyllis replied. “Perhaps automatic. She might be doing this instead of sleeping as a means of conserving power.”

Chow stared at her. “Wow. I sorta didn’t catch all of that, but it kinda sounded like you were callin’ Ithaca a machine. Or, a plant.”

“It’s the company I keep. Sorry. Chow, what’re we going to do?”

Chow again scratched at his head. “Well, Ithaca can’t really be seen clear from the outside. I’d suggest throwin’ a blanket over her and crossin’ our fingers. But she might wake up and scream holy murder.”

Phyllis nodded. “I would.”

“We can keep an eye on her 'till it's bedtime. If there ain't no change then I can put a cot up near the front, and let you sleep in the van—”

“Huh! Speaking of turning people out—”

“It's a comfortable cot,” Chow quickly assured her. “I might not be doin' you any favors lettin' you sleep in the van. 'Tween the two of us we can keep Ithaca in the middle and, that way, we'd know if there'd be any trouble.”

Phyllis considered it. “True.”

The rest of the day passed as uneventful as possible, taking into account that both Phyllis and Chow constantly had to move back and forth past Ithaca's still form. Phyllis kept mainly to the background, keeping one eye on Ithaca and another eye peeled for any wandering policemen or (worse) Tom Sr. Chow, in the meantime, chatted with passersby, offering samples of his culinary skill.

When night fell the grounds were a collection of lights from the various campers and other vehicles. Chow threw together a meal of *queso flameado* with tortillas that Phyllis suspected would've put Bingo to shame, and they ate near the entrance, sharing small talk. Afterward, with the lights lowered, Chow sat near the entrance, strumming on a guitar and singing songs about the West, and Phyllis ached with homesickness at the scene which she had experienced so many times in her past.

I'll get back, she silently promised herself. *Somehow, I will.*

She managed not to let Chow see the tears in her eyes, and soon climbed into the forward end of the van to sleep.

* * * * *

In the morning she woke to find a pair of clear brown eyes gazing closely down at her. “*Whoa!*”

She had squeezed herself against the driver's seat before recovering. “Dammit, Ithaca, don't *do* that.”

“Sorry,” Ithaca said, moving back. “I... woke up and didn't immediately remember where I was. Did I sleep on that stool all night?”

Peering past Ithaca, Phyllis saw Chow stirring on his cot. “I guess so,” Phyllis told her. “You looked so comfortable,” she went on, mentally crossing her fingers, “Chow and I didn't

want to disturb you.”

“Oh.” Ithaca thought it over. “One thing I know is that I seem to sleep really deep. I don't remember any dreams, and I can't help but wonder if that's a good sign or a bad one?”

Phyllis began stretching the kinks out of herself. “But you do know about dreams?”

Ithaca nodded. “I guess I know the things everyone else does. I just don't know about me. Oh, and what happened?” She lifted the still-bandaged right hand.

“Ah-hhhh... you sort of slipped and caught yourself on a sharp corner.”

Chow, sitting up in the cot, gave Phyllis a slightly disapproving look.

“Surprised that didn't wake me up,” Ithaca said, poking lightly at the bandage.

“Me too,” Phyllis muttered.

“Breakfast'll be ready in a bit,” Chow announced, already heading for the stove.

Moving herself out of the van, Phyllis noticed Ithaca seemed anxious about something. “Hm?”

“I've got to go to Tom,” Ithaca told her. “He'll be expecting me. But I don't want to leave you.”

“Well, for better or worse, I'll be here.” Standing up, Phyllis performed some stretching exercises. Her ankle was feeling tons better this morning.

“I won't tell Tom about you or where you are,” Ithaca declared. “I promise.”

Pausing in her movements, Phyllis looked into the other woman's eyes and believed her. “Well, just be careful. We've got a lot to work out and I don't want anything happening to either of us.”

“So you *are* going to help me?”

Phyllis nodded, and Ithaca almost deflated with relief. “Oh, thank God.”

So now I've got my very own Ninja Team, Phyllis realized. A Texas range cook and an amnesiac who's possibly a robot of alien manufacture. Wonderful. Top that, Sandy. “Oh, and Ithaca?”

“Yes?”

“I just remembered. Tom has something of mine.”

Ithaca's face dawned with memory. “Oh! Yes! That flat thingy you had on your belt. Tom's been trying to figure out what it is. One side looks like it's some sort of reflective surface, or screen, but he hasn't been able to make heads or tails of it.”

And he wouldn't unless I applied my fingerprints, Phyllis thought, almost impossibly grateful that the smartphone's logo didn't appear until it was activated. “I need that back. It's very important.”

Ithaca nodded to herself. “I can do it. But—”

“This isn't a buttable, Ithaca. It's unconditional. I must have it back.”

“All right,” Ithaca said, nodding half to herself.

“Soup's on,” Chow announced.

“Soup” turned out to be scrambled eggs with toast, accompanied by both milk and orange juice, and Chow sternly watched to make certain both his guests got every morsel down. His worries were unfounded, though, as both Phyllis and Ithaca ate as if starving.

“After a start like that I could wrestle a tiger,” Phyllis announced.

Making her farewells, Ithaca wandered off to head for Tom's house.

Chow watched her go. “You certain it's safe?”

“It'd be less safe to keep her here,” Phyllis reasoned aloud. “Tom'd get suspicious if Ithaca didn't make an appearance, and the waters are muddy enough as it is.” She blinked. “And I think your Texas accent's rubbing off on me.”

Chow smiled, helping Phyllis gather up the breakfast dishes. “Considerin' that you were s'posed to be the big fierce mysterious attacker, I'm surprised Tom let her wander out on her lonesome. I'd've expected at least some police following or somethin'.”

“Me too,” Phyllis agreed, glancing back at the direction Ithaca had taken. “If you think it's getting weird having me around, then I'll tell you you're not alone. Everything's weird from where I'm standing, and getting moreso all the time.”

Chow followed Phyllis to the wash basin. “Any ideas on how you're gonna tackle this?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“'Afraid'?”

Phyllis squirted detergent into the wash water. “When Ithaca brings back my smar—my thing Tom took away from me, there's an avenue of inquiry I want to examine. And I guess I'd like her company.”

“Well brand my porcupine burgers, *that* sounds like a plan. But why're you afraid?”

“Because,” Phyllis said with a sigh, “it means I've got to take something of a risk and try to get close to someone that I really didn't want to meet while I was here.”

“That bad?”

“I know I'm piling on another mystery, Chow, and I do apologize. But there're some people here I don't want knowing I'm in Shopton. Actually, Tom Swift was on that list, but it couldn't be avoided. If I do what I feel I have to do then I not only risk meeting one of the others, but quite possibly two.”

“But you feel it's important to try?”

Phyllis nodded. “So far she's been the one element missing in this equation. I've got to find out if she's where I think and hope she is.”

“She'?”

Another nod. “Mary Nestor.”

Chapter Eleven: The Girl In The Corner

Ithaca returned just after Phyllis was finishing up a lunchtime sandwich. As promised she had the smartphone which she dutifully handed over.

“Well, I don't see Tom or the police right behind you,” Phyllis commented, “so I'm presuming you had no trouble. Tom not suspicious or anything?”

Ithaca shrugged. “He's busy with some modifications on his motorcycle. I think he wants to try and market some of them. He *did* seem a bit put out by my leaving a little earlier than I usually do.”

But he didn't pursue, Phyllis silently finished, pocketing the phone. Another item on her growing list of “Things Totally Wrong with This Timeline”.

“Needin' some lunch, Miz Ithaca?” Chow asked, coming out from the awning.

“Not right now,” Ithaca replied with a small smile for Chow. “I had a meal before coming back out here.”

Phyllis rapidly quashed a mental image of Ithaca's body bristling with solar panels.

“Okay, Legs,” she said, “c'mon. In the words of our boss: we got some moseyin' to do.”

“Oh? Where?”

“About eight miles north of town,” Phyllis said, hands on hips as she thought. “Out near the vineyards. I guess we can try and somehow grab a taxi there and back.”

“C'n do better than that,” Chow spoke up.

“Oh?”

Nodding, Chow moved around to the back of the van. Moments later he returned, pushing a blue Vespa Rally 200. To Phyllis' eyes it seemed no larger than a postage stamp, but the saddle looked as if it'd carry two people.

“Keep this pinned to the rear of m'van in case o'trouble,” Chow announced. “It's already gassed up n'ready to go.”

“Chow you're a girl's best dream,” Phyllis said.

“And he can cook, too,” Ithaca added.

"I've noticed." Phyllis continued eying the scooter. "Well... we're burning daylight. Ithaca? You can hang on behind?"

"Sure can."

"Hopefully this won't take long," Phyllis told Chow as she moved onto the scooter, edging forward to make room for Ithaca. "In the best of all possible worlds"... *God, what a phrase*, she thought... "we should be back in a few hours."

"Just be careful," Chow replied.

"I won't drive too fast," Phyllis assured him, bringing the scooter to life and making a careful circle before heading out towards Shopton, Ithaca clinging to her.

"Wasn't exactly talkin' 'bout your drivin'," Chow murmured, watching the girls ride off. With a shake of the head he returned to his stove.

* * * * *

"*Where we going?*" Ithaca cried out as Phyllis turned the scooter onto Rudaux.

"*The first circle of Hell*," Phyllis called back.

"*Huh?*"

"*That's what my Mom called it*," Phyllis explained, smiling in spite of herself. "*Limbo. Also, her roommate once referred to her as a 'virtuous pagan', so it sort of fit.*"

"*Her roommate?*"

"*You had to have been there.*" And with luck, Phyllis silently added, *so will we.*

They continued motoring north on Rudaux: Phyllis in her cowgirl finery and Ithaca in a white, short-sleeved dress. Shopton was eventually left behind and the girls began entering Finger Lake wine country; fields stretching out on either side of the road.

Eventually, though, the trees returned to hem the road in, and Phyllis soon slowed the scooter to a stop alongside a high brick wall. Before them was an open and ornate iron gate.

And beyond the gate...

"Wow," Ithaca said.

"Indeed," Phyllis murmured, also looking.

The grounds were immaculately tended, providing a park

like setting for the girls and older women who strolled about. The green of the lawn and the trees, as well as the blue of the sky above, provided a colorful frame to the structure which commanded any and all attention. A large, three-story brownstone mansion designed in the Italianate style. Columns and towers and balconies clustered all over the building, and the windows reflected the light without revealing any details of what lay within. It looked as stern as a dowager's jewelry box.

Looking up, Ithaca saw a sign on the wall just alongside the gate.

ROCKSMOND YOUNG LADIES SEMINARY

"You have *got* to be kidding," Ithaca said.

"Nope," Phyllis replied. "Last bastion of professional virginity in the Western Hemisphere. Degrees in modesty, shyness, girlish deportment... with minors in embroidery and pianoforte."

"And your Mom went here?"

"Not *quite* by choice," Phyllis muttered, remembering the stories her mother had related (usually after one or two Rum Collins'). Restarting the scooter she carefully drove through the open gateway, following the wide gravel path (also carefully maintained). Their progress was noted by the young girls who were on the lawn, all of them arrayed in various combinations of white dresses, white starched blouses and white shoes. The sight of them made Phyllis much more conscious of her own clothing.

Well, at least Ithaca'll pass muster.

Pulling up near the wide brown wooden doors Phyllis stopped the scooter. Rather than immediately getting off, though, she paused to give the Seminary another slow look.

"My Mother swore she'd sell herself into slavery before seeing me in this place," she murmured.

"Then why're we here?" Ithaca asked.

"Chasing a white rabbit."

"Pardon?"

Shaking her head, Phyllis climbed off the scooter. But the thoughts of her mother caused a concern to suddenly surface. "Ithaca..."

Ithaca was also dismounting from the scooter. "Um?"

Phyllis turned to her. "You know Tom's friend Ned, right?"

A nod. "Oh yes."

"You've seen his girlfriend? Helen Morton?"

"Oh. I've been forgetting to mention that," Ithaca said. "Tom and Mister Damon both thought you looked like her." A tilt of the head. "And I have to say you do favor her."

Rats. Phyllis considered the problem for a bit, tapping a foot on the ground. "If you should happen to spot Helen Morton while we're here, make certain I know about it before she sees me. Okay?"

Giving her a curious look, Ithaca nodded.

And that's another problem, Phyllis thought as she climbed the steps to the doors. *Mom didn't start dating Daddy, didn't even know about him, until after Tom had met Mary. It's not so much the timeline's been altered... it's the very peculiar gaps I keep finding.*

Knocking once on one of the doors, Phyllis opened it to enter. With Ithaca behind her she found herself standing in a circular foyer. Ahead stretched a wide corridor which seemed to reach to the other side of the building...

"May I help you?"

. . . and to the immediate left was a open recess in the wall. It contained a desk, a small filing cabinet and a dragon. Or at least that was Phyllis' immediate impression until she realized the dragon was really a looking matron who was glowering at them from her small domain.

Trying to be more confident than she felt, Phyllis approached the concierge (her mind almost grabbing at the term "wardress"). "Good afternoon. I'm Lee Camembert."

Perplexity briefly skipped across the woman's face. "You mean like the cheese?"

I give up. "Yes," Phyllis replied.

The woman gave Phyllis' wardrobe a slow burning expression. "And do you have business here?"

I'll just bet you'd like to give me the business, you old... "My friend and I came here to ask about one of your... students." Phyllis realized she had almost said "inmate".

"I see." The woman reached for a Rolodex. "And the

student's name?"

Phyllis took a breath. "Mary Nestor."

"Normal visiting hours are..." The woman suddenly fixed Phyllis with a stare. "Did you say 'Mary Nestor'?"

Phyllis nodded.

Still staring at her, the woman picked up the phone on her desk and, after dialing a number, murmured a few words. "Director Bivalvia will be with you shortly," she then told Phyllis, putting the phone down.

Feeling eighteen hundred different kinds of dread, Phyllis moved to where Ithaca was, and the two of them waited until, a minute later, a tall and slender woman appeared in the foyer. She was wearing the requisite severe black outfit sported by the concierge, and her hairstyle would've given justice to a legal definition of the word "bun", but her face carried a look of open curiosity, the eyes widening even a bit more as she first spotted Phyllis, and then Ithaca.

"I'm Della Arlene Bivalvia," the woman murmured. "Director of this Seminary."

Phyllis carefully extended a hand. "Lee Camembert. And this is Ithaca..." *whoa up, Phyllis.* "This is Ithaca."

The woman allowed her fingertips to brush lightly against Phyllis', the curiosity in her face dampening not a whit. "And you've come to see Mary Nestor?"

Giving Ithaca a glance, Phyllis looked back at Director Bivalvia. "Yes. Is there a problem?"

The woman seemed to be weighing several thoughts in her mind. "I'm not certain, Miss Camambert. It is 'Miss', isn't it?"

Get on with it, Phyllis mentally ordered the woman. "Yes."

Bivalvia seemed to reach a decision. "Please come with me," she said, turning and walking down into the corridor. Phyllis and Ithaca immediately began following.

"Understand that this is all most unprecedented," Bivalvia was saying. "We had so hoped the Nestors would personally come down from Mansburg to pay Mary a visit. Of course we were made acutely aware of the... circumstances... surrounding the need to have Mary attend the Seminary. But I confess it hasn't been easy."

Something bad was churning in the bottom of Phyllis' stomach. "Oh—"

“It's just that you and your... friend... are really the first visitors who've wanted to see Mary since she arrived. As I said, we would've preferred a close member of her family. But just to have anyone express an interest... ah!”

They had turned a corner and were now facing a rather stout looking door at the end of a short hallway.

From the folds of her dress Bivalvia produced an old-fashioned iron key. “So bad having to take measures like this,” she murmured, fitting the key into the lock. “So unfortunate...”

The key clicked in the lock like a shot, and the woman tugged at the door, making it open on hinges which, to Phyllis' ear, were begging for some oil. Slowly, pushed by intense curiosity, Phyllis entered the room.

It attempted to be cheerful. Sunlight, or at least a fraction of it, poured in a pale yellow shaft from a small window. There was a sink beneath a mirror, a chest of drawers really too small to hold much in the way of anything, and an ordinary looking bed against the far wall. The bed looked as if it had escaped years ago from some condemned hospital.

The girl was crouched in a tight ball against the far left corner of the room. She was wearing a white muslin gown which managed to hide practically all of her (the crouch she maintained assisting in the effort). Her position kept her mostly in shadow, with only a sliver of the sunlight succeeding in bringing a tiny percentage of her into clear view.

As Phyllis took a step closer the girl turned her face. Phyllis saw stringy blonde hair which reached just beneath the shoulders. The hair tried to curtain the girl's face, but the attempt wasn't successful enough, and Phyllis could make out a bleary brown eye above thin and trembling lips. The overall image was barely a girl. It was barely a ghost of a girl.

The uncovered eye gave Phyllis a cold, shivering appraisal.

The lips opened. “Go 'way,” they whispered. Almost a sob. “Go 'way!”

Phyllis turned back to Bivalvia. “I don't understand. Who is this?”

“Why... that's the student you've come to see. That's Mary Nestor.”

Chapter Twelve: Made

Phyllis had seen movies... especially Hitchcock's *Vertigo*... which featured scenes involving everything suddenly pulling away from a character. It was one thing to appreciate the cinematic artistry from the perspective of an audience.

It was another thing entirely to experience the sensation directly. To feel as if the walls, ceiling... the entire world was pulling away, threatening to take your mind along for the ride. To be reaching for the last safe rung on the ladder, only to find nothing but thin air.

“Go *‘way,*” the girl pleaded again.

From somewhere else she dimly heard Ithaca telling Bivalvia about “Severe shock and surprise”, and “I think it'd be best if I took her home”. Then a touch on her arm, and numbly letting Ithaca lead her out of the Seminary.

It was only when they were back outside that the world once again settling comfortably around her. *But this ISN'T my world,* her mind shrieked. *NOTHING here is MY WORLD!*

Another touch, and she became aware of Ithaca carefully studying her. “You going to be all right?”

Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry... “No!”

“Director Bivalvia mentioned how Mary Nestor had been admitted to the Seminary after apparently suffering some sort of intense mental breakdown—”

“That... is... *NOT... MARY... NESTOR,*” Phyllis yelled, throwing a pointed finger hard in the direction of the building.

Her face darkening, Ithaca stepped closer. “STOP SCREAMING! YOU'RE ATTRACTING ATTENTION!”

“Mary Nestor is vivacious, bright, shy and utterly...” Phyllis was struggling to keep her voice even. “She is *not* that... that *THING* in that room!”

“Bivalvia says she is.”

Phyllis began walking towards the gate, stopping and turning only when she heard a sharp whistle.

Ithaca indicated the motor scooter with a nod. “I don't know how to drive this.”

For several moments Phyllis stood there, trying to deal with an enormous weight pressing against her chest. Then she silently walked back and climbed on the scooter, along with Ithaca.

* * * * *

Chow was busy putting together a chuck wagon classic, vinegar pie, while also keeping an eye on the sourdough starter he had assembled some time earlier, but he heard the sound of the girls returning and watched as the scooter pulled up near the table. Phyllis said not a word, walking on past Chow and heading straight for the interior of the van where she promptly threw herself into a huddle, hugging her knees together tightly.

Murmurs reached her ears. Especially Ithaca explaining to Chow about how Phyllis became “unglued” at the Seminary.

“I can HEAR the both of you out there,” she said to the interior of the van.

Silence. Then she sensed, rather than heard, footsteps cautiously coming closer.

Chow's voice. “Lee?”

Sighing, Phyllis looked back to see Chow extending a glass carrying a bit of amber liquid. Wordlessly she reached out for it and tossed it down her throat...

And, a minute later, was still trying to recover from what she felt was one king hell seizure rocking her entire body.

“Should'a sipped it,” Chow said. “Sorry.”

“Mother Mary and Joseph!” Phyllis managed to gasp. “What *was* that?”

“Corn mash,” Chow replied innocently. “M'own recipe.”

Phyllis made a mental note that, should things be put to right, she could tell her Tom where to get a new formula for rocket fuel. “Thanks,” she said weakly, handing the glass back to Chow and turning more towards him and Ithaca. “I guess I needed the shock.”

“Ithaca told me 'bout what happened.” Chow's eyes were steady on her. Ithaca's as well. “Guess things didn't quite work out.”

“Understatement of the year,” Phyllis muttered, once again contemplating her toes (faintly realizing that she'd spent a lot

of time studying her feet during this affair).

Giving Ithaca a glance, Chow moved a bit closer to Phyllis. “Mebbe you better tell us 'bout it.”

Looking up, Phyllis slowly opened her mouth.

“All of it.”

And closed it. *God...*

I'm on your side, Lee,” Chow calmly said. “You know that. 'N I know that, ever since I met you, things've been gettin' purty durn weird.” Here he gave Ithaca a sideways look. “I can see it tearin' you apart, and I want to help. Ithaca and me both.”

Ithaca nodded.

“One thing I do know,” Chow went on, “and that's no one rides herd alone.”

Juggle facts... choose words... be so very careful. Because he was Chow. He was a friend. And he was right.

Slowly. Smoothly. “Chow... imagine you go back to Texas —”

“As I'm intendin' to do soon.”

“And imagine that, when you do get home, everything has changed. The people and the places might look and sound the same. But everything's different. And other things are happening. Big things. People disappearing, and people suddenly appearing out of nowhere.”

“Oops,” Ithaca murmured.

Chow was frowning. “Okay, Lee, I hear what you're sayin'. And I've seen what's been happenin'. But I'm just a rollin' fry cook. This sorta thing's not somethin' I'm used to.”

Give yourself twenty or so years, Phyllis thought. “Chow... okay, let's do this. Try telling me what you think, and I'll try to fill in the empty spots.”

Chow nodded to himself. “That might work.” Settling down on a cooler he nodded for Ithaca to take the stool. “Wal-lll... what I *think* is that somethin's taken what you think is real, and shook it all apart.”

“But you don't think I'm crazy.”

“I've seen crazy,” Chow admitted, “and I've seen worried.”

You're worried.”

Phyllis glanced at Ithaca. “Ithaca and I have fallen into a situation beyond our control,” she told Chow. “We've arrived from entirely different paths, and to our way of thinking nothing is right.”

Puzzlement grew on Chow's face. “Sorta sounds like you're sayin' you're a Martian or something.”

“Believe me, that would make a lot more sense.” Phyllis took a breath. “Chow... do you ever have dreams that you think are so real that you're surprised when you wake up?”

Chow's face brightened. “Brand my gopher brownies, I sure do. One time I was dreamin' I was in Amarillo, dancin' with Barbara Jo Purdue, 'n she 'n I ended up—”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Phyllis quickly broke in. “So you know what I'm talking about.” Another slow breath. “Now imagine that everything's switched around, and the dream is the real life.”

Chow thought it over. “So you're sayin' you come from a dream? Or we're all in a dream now?”

“No,” Ithaca slowly said. “Lee's talking about dimensions.”

Oh it WOULD be you mentioning that, Phyllis silently moaned.

Chow looked from one to the other. “Dimensions?”

Well... it was better than nothing. “There are other worlds, Chow,” Phyllis gently tried to explain. “They're not just out in space.”

“Huh?”

No, this isn't going to be easy. “I'm saying that Ithaca and I are from here. But from a very different here. We've both taken sort of a wrong turn and are now in a Shopton that looks the same as the one we knew, but it's a Shopton which isn't ours. The whole thing has wiped Ithaca's memory, and it's taken my fiance from me.”

Chow was shaking his head. “Tryin' to get m'head 'round it, Lee. But it's... it's too wild.”

“Um! Welcome to how I've been feeling the past few days,” Phyllis said, standing up. “Everywhere I go I face something that's so not a part of what I remember or have experienced. And yes, the situation's wild. Maybe too wild for me to fix.

Maybe too wild for anyone to fix,” she added, looking away.

“I need more information,” she concluded. “I need background. Solid facts.”

“Wish I had some to give you,” Chow said.

“So do I.” Phyllis thought for a while. “What time is it?”

Chow looked at his watch. “Comin' on two fifty.”

Phyllis made a decision. “Then the Library's still open.”

“Library?”

“Uh huh. I need to find out if anything strange took place recently around here. And yes, I know that, in my case, 'strange' covers a lot of territory. The Library's just a few blocks beyond the store, so I should be able to make it there safely.”

Ithaca stood up. “I'll go with you.”

“Ummm, yeah. You might want to take the opportunity to head back to Tom.”

Chow remained where he was. “I can't rightfully say I understand everythin' you've been tellin' me,” he said to Phyllis.

“I don't blame you.”

“But I'm still on your side. At least I understand that.”

Phyllis gave Chow a grateful pat on the shoulder. “You're a good man, Charles Winkler. I'll be back in a little while.” With Ithaca in tow she started walking away.

“Lee.”

Pausing, Phyllis looked back.

Chow's expression was reaching beyond her eyes. “You didn't really see that article on me in *Sunset*.”

Phyllis returned the forthrightness of his gaze. “No. I didn't.”

“I see. So... I guess in this other world you say you come from, there's another me.”

Despite herself, Phyllis smiled. “Believe me, Chow. You're definitely unique.” She and Ithaca resumed strolling out of the campgrounds.

After a few minutes Phyllis realized Ithaca was very quiet.

"It's okay," she assured the other. "I'm still upset, but I'm trying to channel it into useful effort."

Ithaca stared straight ahead. "When you first saw me you attacked me."

"Ummm... yeah. Sorry."

Silence for a few more moments.

Then: "What was I in this other world, Lee?" Still looking ahead. Still not meeting Phyllis' eyes.

"Ithaca..."

"I never saw such hatred in a person's eyes before." Ithaca now looked at Phyllis. "What *was* I?"

Phyllis tried working on an answer.

"That's why you've been so close-mouthed on my background."

Phyllis tried working faster.

"Did I hurt people, Lee?"

"Ithaca—"

Her hand suddenly reached out to take Phyllis' shoulder, turning the both of them so that they faced each other. "Did I *kill* people?" Ithaca demanded. "Is *that* it?"

She saved all of us, Sandy had told Phyllis after her return from the Sun. *It was really Ithaca all along.*

All over the world, monuments had risen to commemorate Sandy. Praises had been sung.

Ithaca Foger had a lonely little memorial in a Rochester cemetery, tenderly and privately cared for by Sandy.

And those brown eyes were waiting for an answer.

"Things happened whenever you appeared," Phyllis finally said.

Ithaca's mouth drew into a thin line.

"Bad things. Good things. Many of them you couldn't control."

"*Especially* the bad things." Ithaca's voice was insistent.

Phyllis found she couldn't immediately answer. Ithaca saw the hesitation, then sighed and turned away, walking off.

“Ithaca!”

The girl looked back.

“I still want to help,” Phyllis said to her.

A simple nod in return. “For what it's worth,” Ithaca said, “thank you.”

* * * * *

Phyllis knew she probably could've found the information she had been looking for over at the offices of the *Shopton Bulletin*. But the downside of that approach was that the *Bulletin* had also been trumpeting the news of her recent assault on Ithaca, and Phyllis suspected that strolling into the newspaper's offices wouldn't have been the sharpest of moves.

Which made the Steuben County Library, with its archives of *Bulletin* issues, an even more sensible choice.

Microfilm, Phyllis was now thinking as she sat before the viewer, scrolling through the pages of *Bulletin* back issues, Once again the gap in technology between her time, and the time she was currently occupying, was looming enormously before her eyes. *My God, I'm actually using microfilm. What next... smoke signals and Pony Express?*

Well, she contemplated that maybe there were places in her time that still kept records on microfilm. She was so used to pulling out a computer and accessing what she needed. And, in her time, the County Library's proximity to Swift Enterprises probably guaranteed its total computerization.

Still...

Relentlessly searching the *Bulletin* issues for the previous two weeks, Phyllis finally admitted to herself that there was nothing useful to be found. No bright lights, no weird sounds or apparitions, no usual appearances. *Rats!*

But she was hardly in a mood to throw in the towel. *I just need to refine my search*, she told herself. Perhaps she was asking the wrong questions, and looking for the wrong information.

On an impulse she began searching further back, this time paying close attention to the “Society” section. But it wasn't there. Absolutely no mention of the engagement between Ithaca and Tom.

Phyllis slowly sat back in her chair. *Oh now this is*

interesting.

The *Bulletin* usually didn't miss news of a betrothal or a wedding. Sandy and Bud's wedding received front page coverage. When Phyllis and her Tom returned from the space station, and formally announced their engagement, it rated a front page notice. The *Bulletin* even ran an announcement when Bingo and Ken had eloped.

But no news of Tom and Ithaca. Was it because of problems with the Foger family? Phyllis reminded herself that, in this time, Tom hadn't begun receiving the notoriety he would eventually assume. Meanwhile the Fogers were the Big Noises in the county.

Thinking of Tom and Ithaca immediately reminded her of Mary Nestor, and the frown on Phyllis' face deepened.

"Mary suffers a mental breakdown," she murmured. "So why put her in the Seminary of all places?"

Phyllis remembered the Nestors as being social climbers (although not quite enjoying the heights occupied by the Fogers). "Proper" and "well-to-do" families throughout central New York routinely sent their daughters to the Seminary, so sending Mary there was the obvious step.

"But sending her there *after* she suffers a breakdown?" Phyllis asked. Did the Nestors think the environment of the Seminary would somehow snap Mary back into normalcy?

A shake of the head. It certainly explained why Mary hadn't made her rendezvous with Tom out in the woods. But it just didn't make sense.

"What *caused* the breakdown?" Phyllis wondered. And again, why the Seminary?

"Excuse me."

Phyllis looked up to see a librarian bending close. "Yes?"

"Well I just noticed that you've been sitting there for quite some time, intently studying the *Bulletin*," the librarian asked with a smile. "Was there something I could perhaps help you with?"

Phyllis considered it. "The library wouldn't happen to have a brochure about the Rocksmoond Young Ladies Seminary on hand, would it? Or a copy of the application form?" *And that sound I hear is Mom having conniptions thirty-five years in the future.*

“Oh we might,” the librarian said. She seemed to be making an effort to look closely into Phyllis' face. “Give me a moment, dear, and I'll check.”

Nodding, Phyllis returned to her work as the librarian trotted off. There was something not out in the open about Mary's breakdown, and why she had been sent to the Seminary. Of course, Phyllis' mother wasn't shy about openly declaring the Seminary staff as being “nuts”. And that was one of her kinder descriptions.

Mary failed to meet Tom, and Ithaca stepped into her place.

“I think I just found my new investigation point,” she murmured.

It was then that something made her glance up, and she could see the librarian at her desk busily speaking to two men.

But two additional aspects suddenly sent adrenaline pumping through Phyllis' body. In the first place: the librarian was pointing directly at her.

In the second place: the two men were police officers.

Chapter Thirteen: Phyllis' Blonde Ambition

Upon spotting the policemen Phyllis muttered a word which, if the adult Mary Swift had been within hearing, would've resulted in Phyllis suddenly finding a bar of soap pushed into her mouth.

“I'm sorry, Helen. I *know* she's your daughter. I just... reacted.”

They were firmly positioned between her and the library entrance and were now moving purposefully towards her. Deciding not to waste further time Phyllis carefully rose from the chair, and then broke into a run, bolting deeper into the library.

“Hold it,” came the call from behind. Which, of course, was the signal for her to pick up speed. *Shopton cops would never shoot anyone in a library*, she was reasoning to herself. *Never ever ever...*

Or so Phyllis hoped.

She clung to the two advantages she knew she possessed. The first was a pair of legs ramped up to “blind panic” speed.

The second was a working knowledge of the layout of the County Library (Phyllis silently thanking God that the venerable building hadn't undergone revision in thirty-five years). Skidding to a very brief halt in the Adult Fiction section (authors A-L) she made a hard left turn into a short corridor. Her destination were the matching doors on either side at the corridor end.

Without pause she slammed through the one marked MEN.

First rule of evasion, Sherman Ames had taught her. Choose the unexpected direction.

Whoever was currently minding the store up in Heaven was still smiling as Phyllis found the bathroom empty. But she knew she'd only have a few extra moments. First the police would instinctively pause at the door marked WOMEN. Then, when they worked up the professional gumption to peek in, they'd quickly realized she'd given them the slip. Thirty seconds. Tops.

Phyllis didn't pause but raced to the other side of the room,

her hands reaching for the latch holding the narrow frosted window shut. A brief fumble and the window was pushed open. Her ears straining for the sound of the door behind her she jumped up and began wiggling through the small opening (having to pause only a bit to ease certain of her attributes cleanly through).

Beyond the window she tumbled rather ungracefully into the alley which connected with Pietronigro. From there she knew she could reach Bonestell and the campgrounds...

And, in a few moments, the area will be swarming with cops, Phyllis told herself. Not only that but they've seen the clothes I'm wearing. Damnation!

She had to move fast, and she had to get far away... and then she suddenly ducked low behind a dumpster as she heard voices from the open window. "She climbed out."

Damnation squared and cubed!

She knew by the time she reached the street it'd be too late. Quickly looking around, Phyllis felt her heart racing. The alley was certainly cluttered, but nothing realistically useful immediately presented itself. *What to do, what to do, what to do...*

And then an idea suddenly hit her like a brick. It was crazy. It was insane.

But she was remembering Sherman's second rule of evasion. *Make desperation work for you.*

Sighing she quickly began unbuttoning her shirt.

Less than two minutes later the policemen had entered the alley and began searching.

One of them suddenly pointed. "Look over there. That's the shirt she was wearing."

"Yeah," the other said, bending down to pick up something, "and here's her pants. She must've had something ready back here and changed clothes on us. C'mon." Dropping the pants the officer followed his partner as both of them rushed back out into the street. A minute passed. Then two.

And then a somewhat less than fully dressed Phyllis emerged from her hiding place within the contents of the dumpster, sputtering and trying to brush away the debris clinging to her. Keeping her eyes open for passersby she quickly recovered her jeans, slipping them back on, following

this by grabbing the shirt and, reversing it, managed to get it adequately buttoned back on. The reverse side of the shirt, while still a riot of colors, was slightly less bright than the outer part, and Phyllis felt that at least she was slightly less noticeable. Not a whole lot, but she accepted the fact that she was grasping at straws.

Sneaking up on the opening to the alley she cautiously peeked about the street.

Whups! A Shopton Police black-and-white was within view. But it continued moving on, and Phyllis worked at bringing her heart back under control. That's when she spotted the pickup truck, its rear section loaded with boxes and bags, heading in her direction. It had out-of-state plates, and Phyllis calculated that its course would take it the rest of the way down Pietronigro, then onto Bonestell and hopefully to the campgrounds.

Which only left the question of...

Phyllis' survival instinct rapidly switched from Sherman to Bud Barclay. Especially to a stunt which Bud mentioned he had indulged in during his "more carefree younger days".

Talk about desperation...

She waited until the truck had almost passed her hiding place, bracing herself, and then sprinting out into the street. It was close but she managed to grab onto the tailgate, swinging her feet up onto the rear bumper and hanging on for dear life, hoping that whoever was driving the truck didn't spot her, or wouldn't notice the sudden shift of weight in the rear. Not that she had to hang on for very long. She just needed enough speed and distance to make it to where Pietronigro and the Stapp spur of the railroad track both crossed Phillips Creek.

Oh God, is that a police car back there?

Phyllis would've preferred more in the way of distance from the library, but the growing concern over being spotted by rear traffic (especially that of the uniformed variety) provided the spur for her to take several deep breaths, and then jump off her perch, trying to roll gracefully off of the street and onto the grass bordering the railroad track.

Trying to roll gracefully.

"OW, Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, owwww..."

At least she managed to make it onto the grass, ending up

near the tracks. Trying to keep low (no difficult task, given her present state), Phyllis limped down a slope, making it to the culvert where the creek passed beneath both the track and the street, quickly ducking inside.

Was that car going to stop?

Rather than indulge in idle curiosity, Phyllis began sprinting... stumbling, actually... on through the culvert, splashing through the water and trying to keep close to the edge so as not to produce a silhouette for any Nosy Parkers who might be following. She definitely felt as if she had picked up some bruises, the right knee of her jeans were torn (along with the skin of said knee), and she felt as if she had a cut on her forehead.

Well, at least the blood stains will help in the disguise.

Easing out of the far side of the culvert she took her bearings, then aimed for the nearest section of treeline which, she knew, would eventually line her up with Bonestell. With luck, and with keeping to the bushes and the thicker part of the forest, she hoped she could sneak back into the campgrounds.

* * * * *

“Wal-lllll,” Chow was singing as he stirred, “I had me a dawwwg, 'n his name was Blue. Mighty fine dawwwg, and damn good... brand my copperhead pancakes, girl. What the heck have you been doin'?”

Been spending too many years hanging around Sandra Swift, Phyllis' mind muttered as she limped into view. “Just took a different route home,” she said. “Grabbing hold of some new directions in the investigation.”

“Looks more to me as if the new directions done grabbed hold of you... what?” The last was directed at Phyllis as she quickly ducked down low behind the stove. Following the set of her eyes, Chow turned to see a police car slowly driving past.

When it moved out of sight he turned back. “Yeah, we been seein' more of those here the past hour or so, and after lookin' at you I'm sort of suspectin' I know the reason why.”

Crawling around the stove, Phyllis slipped into the greater security of the awning. “Have the police been asking any questions?”

“Seen some of them talkin' to some o'the others, as well as the Festival organizers. They ain't got 'round to me yet.” Chow's eyes narrowed. “Y'got the posse up after you?”

“Looks that way,” Phyllis said, opening a cooler and reaching for some ice to apply to her knee.

“Good Lord honkus above, Lee, lemme help with that.” Moving past her, Chow rummaged around in the van, eventually producing a first aid kit. Squatting down next to Phyllis he opened it. “Just sit backs a bit here.”

“She finked on me,” Phyllis complained, moving herself up against the cooler. “The librarian finked on me to the cops. What the heck kind of world is it when a librarian of all people turns grass? *Ow!*”

“Yeah, bet that stings. Sorry.” Chow continued dabbing antiseptic to the knee. “I'll get that cut on your head next.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Phyllis said through gritted teeth. She glanced around. “Ithaca hasn't come back yet?”

“Not yet. Gettin' on late, 'n it might be time for her to shut down for the night.” He shook his head. “That story you told earlier might've affected her some.”

Phyllis recalled Ithaca's words before she left. “Yeah.”

“Affected me some too.”

Phyllis studied the man as he applied a bandage to her knee. “But you haven't run for the police.”

A shrug. “Ain't my territory. 'Sides, as I said, we're pards.” He glanced up at her. “Gotta say, though, looks like you really beat the snakes outta the sagebrush.”

“If I'm translating that correctly, you're saying that I've attracted too much attention, and now the police are focusing more on the Festival grounds.” A sigh. “And you'd be right. And, unfortunately, I've definitely been spotted in my outfit, so that'd naturally cause them to think about searching around this place. Don't get me wrong, Chow. You're a darling, wonderful man who's very adept at rescuing distressed damsels—”

“Thank'ee!”

“—but your idea of inconspicuous clothing sort of, well...”

“Sorta not too conspicuous?”

“Wel-lll...”

Squatting back, Chow gave Phyllis a sheepish smile. “Well, I do 'spect it's sort of 'n acquired taste.” He became silent for a few moments.

Then: “Okay. I guess we gotta try somethin' different.” He passed the antiseptic and a bandage over to her, straightening up onto his feet. “You take care of your forehead and stay out of sight for a while.”

“Where you going?”

“Goin' to plan B for disguising you. Be back in a jiffy.”

“Kay.”

Chow paused. “Lee. Just how des'prate are you to hide out from the cops?”

“Pretty desperate. Radically desperate.”

“Uh huh.” Chow nodded to himself. “Just remember that when I get back.”

* * * * *

The sun had just set when Chow returned on his scooter.

Phyllis was nowhere in sight. “Lee?”

“Back here.”

Entering the awning, Chow spotted Phyllis peeking out from the van. “Some of the Festival people were wandering around close, so I hid.”

“Prob'ly a good idea.”

Phyllis noticed the bags Chow was carrying. “What did you go and do now?”

“Well... 'gainst my nature to lead a girl away from what I consider natural clothin', but... “ Setting the bags down, Chow reached into one, producing a pair of black denim jeans. “Should stand out less in these.”

“Oh, Chow...”

“Then there's this.” From the same bag Chow pulled out a short-sleeved Navy blue pullover shirt. “I know it's dull, but—”

“But I have to blend in more,” Phyllis said, nodding. “Yeah.” She frowned. “But people have seen me really up close.”

She was surprised to see a nervous look on Chow's face. "Well, that's sorta what brings me to this," he said, reaching into the other bag. "This is what took me the longest to find. And Lord the look the saleswoman up and gave me.

Phyllis' eyes widened. "Oh my!"

Chow was holding a wig of long, straight blonde hair.

"Well," Phyllis finally said. "That'd definitely do the job of changing me, all right. It's just... it's just..." One of her hands rose to touch her own rich length of brunette curls.

Looking even more uncomfortable, Chow reached over to the utensil shelf, pulling out a pair of scissors.

Phyllis' eyes widened even more. "Oh!"

Chapter Fourteen: You're Innocent When You Dream

It took just over an hour (due mainly to hesitation. "Hairdresser just ain't my usual line," Chow muttered), but matters eventually reached enough of a conclusion to where the wig would fit smoothly and snugly on Phyllis' head.

Taking a step back, Chow examined his handiwork. "Huh."

Phyllis was trying to read the reaction on his face. She was also struggling not to look down to where she could feel her hair piled down around her feet.

Producing a small mirror, Chow passed it over to her. "What d'you think?"

Steeling herself for the worst, Phyllis took the mirror and saw the new person in it.

"Well?" Chow asked.

"Actually... this really isn't too bad." Standing up, Phyllis tried to take in the overall effect (*don't cowboys ever need full-length mirrors?*). "Seriously. All I need is a slinky, form-fitting gown and a cigarette holder." She experimented with a pout at her reflection. "Not bad."

Chow breathed a slow sigh of relief.

"All right, Mister DeMille," Phyllis huskily addressed the mirror. "I'm ready for my close-up." She gave the mirror another pout.

"That's the spirit."

"And this should definitely throw the hounds off my scent."

Except the ones hot for blondes, Chow privately considered. He glanced out beyond the awning. "It's late. And we've both had a pretty full day. I reckon it's time we turned in."

"Definitely agree," Phyllis said, letting out a yawn. "I'll let the stuff in my head percolate overnight, and we can get a fresh start tomorrow."

"Good idee." Chow watched as Phyllis climbed deeper into the van, waiting until she was thoroughly out of sight before quickly and surreptitiously sweeping up the fallen hair.

Curling up into the snugness of the reclined driver's seat, Phyllis carefully removed the wig, putting it aside. She then turned so that her back was to the opening. Not that she expected Chow to peek in, but she didn't want to risk letting him see her expression slowly fall.

She had loved the way her hair had grown out. And so had Tom. He often ran his fingers through the thick, curly fall while murmuring to her. Phyllis had even considered going down the aisle to her wedding without a veil. Just decorating her hair with baby's breath.

Now...

"The things I do for my man," she whispered, trying to ignore the wetness in her eyes.

* * * * *

SLAM!

Looking up, Helen Newton saw her daughter storming through the living room. Or at least storming as much as a five-year-old girl could manage. "I thought you were playing over at Sandy's."

"Tom is a poopyhead," Phyllis declared, resolutely heading for the stairs. "I don't want to play over there again. Not ever!" Up the stairs. Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp. "Tom is a BIG POOPYHEAD!"

SLAM!

Helen reached for the phone, dialing a familiar number.

Mary Swift soon answered. "Hello?"

"I've sort of got an upset girl here," Helen explained.

A sigh over the line. "Yeah. Phyllis and Sandy were trying to get Tom involved in a game, but he was busy with his father's old Erector set and couldn't be distracted. Now he's confused as to what happened."

Helen tiredly pinched the bridge of her nose. "Well, we both knew this wasn't going to be easy."

"I know. Fortunately we've got time. Let's just keep our fingers crossed."

* * * * *

Eleven years later.

Helen leaned against the doorway to Phyllis' room. "Going

to the movies with Tom?”

Phyllis continued poking at her hair. “Yeah.” She finally glanced at her mother. “Why? Tom and I go to the movies all the time.”

“True, but you seem to have been spending a lot of time dressing and getting ready for this one.”

A shrug. “Just a movie, Mom.”

Turning, Helen left her daughter to her ministrations.

Several hours later, Ned Newton looked up from some reports he was studying to see Phyllis entering the house. “Hi, Sugar. Nice movie?”

“Uh huh.”

He continued watching her. “Think maybe your Mom and I would like it?”

“Uh huh.”

A pause. “You know you got an alligator biting your ankles?”

“Uh huh.”

Ned watched as Phyllis seemingly floated on up to her room. He then looked over to where Helen had been standing, witnessing the entire scene. With a smile at her husband she sauntered over. “Pay up.”

Ned dutifully handed over five dollars.

Meanwhile, Phyllis had entered her room, closing the door and then moving to her bed, languidly stretching out upon the sheets.

He kissed me, her mind was singing. He kissed me, he kissed me, he kissed me...

* * * * *

A year later.

“Are you out of your little *mind*?” Tom roared.

Phyllis drew back. “Tom...”

“You can't just walk in here when I'm *working*,” Tom went on. “*Dammit*, I've been trying to accurately reproduce the fuel mixture the Germans used in the V2.” He waved a hand at the tools and materials gathered on the nearby workbench. “Hydrazine hydrate and methyl alcohol. Do you *know* what that stuff could do if you had knocked over that container?”

Are you that much of an *idiot*, Phyl?"

She was crying now. "I just thought..."

"You DIDN'T think," Tom declared. "You could've created a serious ACCIDENT." He bore down on her. "You could've been HURT. BLOWN UP."

Phyllis found herself backed up against the workshop door.

"You could've... you could've..."

And then, to her utter amazement, he was holding her tightly.

"Dammit, Phyl," he whispered brokenly. And then, in a lower whisper. "I love you. I *love* you. Don't you know that?"

Phyllis was unable to formulate an immediate answer, what with Tom's lips preventing any sort of verbal reply. For the moment, though, she had little in the way of a reason for complaining.

* * * * *

Ithaca arrived at the campgrounds the middle of the following morning, noticing that the Festival was beginning to enter a full swing.

Reaching Chow's booth she looked around. "Hello?"

"Zo!"

Ithaca jumped at the sudden appearance of the blonde woman who was severely regarding her from within the awning.

"I haf chosen you for an important assignment," the woman explained imperiously. "It's purpose is to give false information to der Enemy. If you complete it successfully, you will be promoted." She stepped closer, menace in her eyes. "Der Consulate Security Man must not know dot I am in Istanbul. Zis is classified far above his level. If you say anythink you will be SHOT!" She emphasized the last point with a firm whack of a long wooden spoon against her thigh.

Ithaca peered closer. "Lee?"

Phyllis allowed a giggle to escape.

"She's been doin' stuff like that all morning," Chow remarked, returning from a shower at the camp facilities. "Hi, Ithaca."

“Hi.” Ithaca continued staring at Phyllis. “That’s really... fabulous.”

“It’ll do,” Phyllis admitted.

Chow distributed *huevos rancheros* and the threesome settled down to eat. “So I guess you were needing more of a disguise,” Ithaca said to Phyllis.

“Pretty much,” Phyllis replied, deciding not to go into too many details of her misadventures at the library. “I just need to be mobile without always worrying about the police hunting for the Crazy Brunette Assailant.”

“With great legs,” Chow added.

“With great legs,” Phyllis echoed absently. “We went to the Seminary,” she told Ithaca, “and all we accomplished was heaping more questions on the ones we already had.”

Ithaca looked at her.

“All right,” Phyllis conceded. “We went to the Seminary and I broke like a cheap watch.”

Nodding, Ithaca returned to her meal.

“But that’s one avenue of inquiry closed, which means we should concentrate on another.”

“How ‘bout the folks of this Mary Nestor person?” Chow asked.

Phyllis frowned. “The Nestors live in Mansburg. Even with my new looks that’s way further than I’d care to risk traveling. Lord knows I’m tempted, though.”

“I’d go myself,” Ithaca offered, “if I knew who to talk to and what to ask.”

Phyllis privately felt that was damned decent of Ithaca. But: “No. You saw what happened to me yesterday at the Seminary. I hope I don’t fold again like that but, if I did, I’d want you along for moral support.” *My God, I’m actually thinking of Ithaca Foger as a partner.*

“Really feel bad ‘bout not helping you girls more,” Chow commented, helping himself to more coffee, “but I’m sorta expected here. An’ today’s the start of the Barbecue Sauce Competition.”

“And the honor of Texas must be upheld,” Phyllis said with a smile. “Chow... truly, you’ve been doing aces, and I mean it.

Without your help I'd probably be wearing an orange jumpsuit right now, and picking up trash on the side of the road." Growing thoughtful again she slowly forked the remainder of her breakfast into her mouth. "Ithaca I'd like to ask you some personal questions, if you don't mind."

Chow quietly looked up in Ithaca's direction.

"Sure," Ithaca said, finishing her juice, "if I can ask you a question first."

Phyllis nodded.

"At the Seminary yesterday you wanted me to keep an eye out for Helen Morton."

"Uhhh, yeah."

"In this other world you mentioned," Ithaca calmly asked, "are you Helen?"

Chow's eyes shifted to Phyllis.

"You *do* resemble her," Ithaca pointed out. "Maybe not as much today as you did yesterday."

Phyllis slowly dabbed at her lips with a napkin. "That would certainly go a great deal towards explaining matters. But no, Ithaca. I'm not Helen Morton."

For several moments Ithaca gazed steadily into Phyllis' eyes.

Then: "I believe you," she said simply.

I hope so, Phyllis thought. *That's the straightest answer I've given to a question yet while being here.* "Ithaca..."

"Umm?"

"What happens when you sleep?" As casually as possible.

Ithaca frowned, appearing as if the question was new to her. "I... sleep."

Phyllis nodded. "But *where*? You don't sleep at Tom's. You've only slept here once. Where do you go at night?"

"Uh oh," Chow muttered.

Phyllis saw it too. For a moment Ithaca looked as if she was once again in a frozen state. But then the girl resumed motion. She blinked at Phyllis. "I'm sorry. What was the question?"

"Ah-hhhh... doesn't Tom ever wonder what happens to you at night?" Phyllis asked.

Ithaca seemed about to answer, but she suddenly grew still

again. And, just as quickly, she recovered. "I love Tom," she said as if nothing had happened. "And he loves me."

Phyllis knew she was staring at Ithaca in a strange way and tried to appear calm. "Riiiiight," she replied. "I had no doubt of that. Well," she went on, trying to brighten her voice. "That'll do for starters. I guess. And now that we've finished eating I guess we can give my disguise a real workout and head somewhere different."

"I'll take the dishes to the wash," Ithaca offered, reaching to collect the plates.

Phyllis and Chow watched her head back into the awning, and then they were gazing at one another, Phyllis silently mouthing *What the...*

"I don't know," Chow whispered. "But that is really the ding-dangedest thing I ever saw." He let his glance flick at Ithaca. "You sure you feel okay travelin' 'bout with her?"

"I want to keep an eye on her," Phyllis murmured back to him. "Besides, I promised to help solve her mystery as well as my own."

"So," Ithaca was saying as she walked back, "where're we off to now?"

"I don't want to travel to Mansburg," Phyllis said. *And, as much as I'd like,* she silently added, *I don't want to get closer to Tom Sr. than I absolutely have to.* "There's one other destination been on my mind, however, that I'd like to explore."

"Oh?"

"Yes." Phyllis turned to look up at her. "The Fogers."

Chapter Fifteen: Sudden Disappearance

"This isn't going to work," Ithaca was yelling.

"Sorry," Phyllis called back from the front of the scooter. *"I'll try and use a hair clip next time."*

"I MEANT us going to the Fogers."

Phyllis didn't want to admit that a small part of her agreed with Ithaca. However: *"I'm the designated blonde on this expedition. And we need answers."*

She could sense Ithaca preparing a rebuttal. *"Just as important,"* she went on, *"YOU need answers."*

No reply and Phyllis continued heading northwest on Lomborg. Actually she almost wished Ithaca had gone ahead and offered a reply. Technically the Fogers had already removed themselves from the playing board by denying Ithaca (*and when did I start using game metaphors?* Phyllis wondered). But all she knew about the Fogers, mostly from stories told by her parents and the Swifts, made her feel that the Fogers simply wouldn't have let the situation drop entirely.

A stranger shows up at a house, Phyllis was reasoning to herself. The stranger claims to be part of the family. The family rejects the stranger, threatening her with the police.

"But no curiosity?" Phyllis murmured. It didn't make sense to her. Doubtless there were those who tried to somehow worm their way into the Foger household... and its fortune... but Phyllis felt that Ithaca would've represented an undeniable mystery. According to her parents, and the Swifts, Ithaca *did* carry a resemblance to the Fogers. Surely that would've been noticed.

The Fogers weren't curious about Ithaca. The Tom Swift of this time period apparently wasn't concerned about where his fiancée disappeared to at night. Phyllis wondered if Tom had ever witnessed Ithaca's "pause" routine.

She shook her head. *Too many questions.*

And another one surfaced as Phyllis turned off of Lomborg and onto Carroll. The Fogers lived eight miles out of town. How did Ithaca manage to travel that distance? Did she take money from Tom for taxis? Then again, granted she seemed

to be a healthy girl, and an eight mile walk probably wouldn't faze her. But was she always walking to and from Tom's house (or wherever she hibernated during the night)?

Phyllis wasn't comfortable with the one answer that was trying to wedge itself into her mind. Ithaca had possessed the power to teleport from one location to another. With such an ability it would be easy to cover large distances.

Once again Phyllis shook her head. It was bothering her that, on the one hand, she was becoming more and more accepting towards the idea of Ithaca as an ally. Even a friend. On the other hand, though, Ithaca's occasional "fade-outs", plus the other question marks she carried along with her, made Phyllis edgy about keeping her close. Phyllis wanted answers, not more mysteries.

But, so far, Ithaca was the one cooperative mystery in the whole affair, and Phyllis wanted to cling to that.

They were now driving past a large wrought-iron fence. Through it Phyllis could easily see a sprawling wooden mansion crouched on the summit of a low hill. Frowning in memory, Phyllis soon recalled that it was an example of "Queen Anne" architecture built in what was called "shingle style". Never having been inside the home, Phyllis nonetheless knew that it contained twenty-two rooms and had been built in 1886 at a price of... *oh, what was that figure?*

Yes! \$16, 975.

It was called "Reason Hill" (the name bringing a small, twisted smile to Phyllis' face). The "country retreat" of the Fogers of Rochester.

Bringing the scooter to a halt, Phyllis continued looking at the house.

"Well," she said to Ithaca. "Home again, home again, jiggety-jog."

"Not funny," Ithaca muttered, climbing off the scooter.

Phyllis watched the set of the other girl's body. The slumped shoulders. The way she held her arms tight around her. "I'm sorry," Phyllis said. "I'm usually more sympathetic than this. I've had bad influences."

Ithaca had walked closer to the fence and was looking through it, her back to Phyllis.

"One question," she said.

Phyllis waited.

Ithaca suddenly turned around to stare at her. "In the other world, was I married to Tom?"

Uh oh...

She willed herself to keep firm eye contact. "No."

Other than a faint widening of the eyes, the news didn't seem to affect Ithaca. "Were you?"

Phyllis felt her hands tightly gripping the scooter's steering yoke. "No, Ithaca," she slowly said. "I was not married to that Tom."

Ithaca took a few steps closer, silently regarding Phyllis' face.

"I believe you," she finally said. "But there's something you're not telling me."

You mean like how you're trying to be my future mother-in-law in this timeline? "I'm engaged to be married to a man named Tom," Phyllis let herself reply. "But he isn't the Tom from this world, or from my own."

Ithaca's eyes narrowed, and Phyllis could almost imagine them sorting through the deepest portions of her mind. She tried not to be overly bothered by the knowledge that the aliens who had modified Ithaca's body had also possessed the ability to read thoughts.

"You're still telling the truth," Ithaca murmured. "But there's still something else." Turning away she went back to studying the Foger home.

"I'm happy with Tom," she said to the air. "I love him, and he loves me."

"For the Colonel's Lady an' Judy O'Grady are sisters under the skin", Phyllis' mind quoted. She decided to remain silent.

"So," Ithaca went on. "We're here. What do we do next?"

"Well," Phyllis said, "obviously it wouldn't be the smartest idea in the world to march you up to the door and try to personally meet with the Fogers."

"Obviously."

"I could maybe try to perhaps pass myself off as a private investigator, making inquiries about you."

Ithaca turned, showing Phyllis a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, I'm winging it,” Phyllis admitted. *How the hell did Sandy make things work out?*

“They ain't answerin'.”

Both girls jumped at the new voice.

“Sorry,” the man apologized, emerging from the pin oak forest across the street and walking closer. He seemed to be in his late forties, dressed in jeans, a cotton shirt and denim overalls. “Didn't mean to frighten ya. Been back in d'trees, looking for wilt for d'County. I was headin' back for m'truck, saw ya's ridin' up and thought maybe ya was tryin' ta get in to see d'Fogers.”

Phyllis now noticed a battered brown pickup truck parked some fifty feet or so further down the road.

Taking a step back she stood closer to Ithaca. “Read him,” she murmured

To her credit Ithaca didn't look confused or mystified at the request. Instead her eyes narrowed. “He's telling the truth.”

Allowing herself to breathe a bit easier, Phyllis addressed the newcomer. “The Fogers aren't answering the door at all?”

A shrug. “Not's so I c'n tell. I been workin' up and down 'long d'street for just over a week,” he went on, glancing back at the trees. “So far I ain't seen no one come out'a d'house.”

Phyllis briefly thought how it was amazing she knew so much about the background of the Reason Hill house, but so little about the personal habits of the Fogers. “Is that... usual?” she asked both the man and Ithaca.

Ithaca shrugged.

So did the man. “Seen cars've drivin' up and such a few times,” he said. “People get out, but no one's opened d'door. Maybe they're out at night, after I leave.” Another shrug. “Ain't seen cars comin' by the last coupla days.”

Turning back around, Phyllis saw what looked like a white Lincoln Continental parked near the entrance of the house.

“Been there coupla days now,” the man commented, noticing Phyllis' attention. “Ain't seen no one near it. Mebbe whoever drove it's with d'Fogers.”

Phyllis and Ithaca moved closer to the main gate. “No

police or anyone like that's come by?" Phyllis asked, staring closely at the mansion.

"Nope. Least none I could see."

"If I was the sort to use flowery language," Ithaca began in a low voice.

Which you are, Phyllis thought.

"I'd describe this as a situation fraught with enigma."

"No lie, b'wana," Phyllis murmured back.

From behind them: "Gate's unlocked, though."

Phyllis and Ithaca slowly looked into each other's eyes.

"And how would he..." Phyllis whispered.

"Do we want to know?" Ithaca replied.

Phyllis decided that, if it was another mystery, it could take a number and wait in line with the others. Reaching out she gingerly touched the cold metal of the gate, giving it a small push. Despite its outward appearance of mass, the gate began moving aside on silent hinges.

Not even a creak, Phyllis thought. *Now THAT'S upscale.*

"Maybe he just leaned against the gate and it opened," Ithaca said.

Phyllis considered it. "I like that theory." Her eyes still on the mansion she stepped past the gate. No alarms, no guard dogs racing out from the stand of oaks over to the right. Nothing. Locating and swallowing an ounce of the confidence she hoped was in her she began strolling up the driveway.

A motion, and Ithaca was alongside. "I thought you didn't want to see the Foggers," Phyllis asked her.

"I don't, but I also don't want to be left alone with Creepy Tree Guy."

"I wouldn't worry."

Ithaca looked at her. "Oh?"

"You're not carrying money."

"Gee, thanks!"

Which, of course, meant that the man appeared from behind, falling into step alongside them.

"Ah-hhhh, we're good actually," Phyllis told him.

Ithaca made a noise which Phyllis barely made out as “Speak for yourself”.

“This's been sorta worryin' me all week,” the man admitted. “I mean, d'Festival's goin' on an' such. Ol' Arly Foger's d'Master of Ceremonies, and Miz Foger's d'Parade Queen. They ain't been spotted.”

Phyllis knew any remark she made would be judged as unkind.

“An' Arly's payin' for the limos in d'parade.”

Gotta love a man with priorities, Phyllis thought.

“An if d'two o'you find somethin'...”

“Which is what we're sort of hoping for,” Phyllis told him. “My friend and I also have an interest in the sudden reluctance of the Fogers to show themselves.”

“Huh!”

Phyllis nodded. “It has a bearing on similar... events which I've been investigating over the past few days.”

The man's face brightened. “Oh! Y'mean like d'Weird Sisters?”

Phyllis and Ithaca stopped in their tracks.

“The *what?*” Phyllis asked him.

The air was suddenly filled with a high keening sound. At the same time the man jerked as if he were a puppet; his arms and legs stiffening out, his body bending and his face rising to the sky. His mouth was open as if he were trying to scream, but the all-encompassing sound would've hidden any such attempt. As the girls watched he rose a few inches off the ground... and then, in rapid succession, his body glowed red, yellow, bright blazing white...

Then disappeared completely.

Chapter Sixteen: Time Storm

It took a full four seconds to the shock to subside to where reaction set in.

“WHAT JUST HAPPENED?” Ithaca yelled.

“I DON'T KNOW,” Phyllis shot back. “DID YOU DO SOMETHING?”

“NO! DID YOU?”

“NO!”

“WHAT DO WE DO?”

Sandy would say: “Confront your danger”, Phyllis thought. Sandy would say: “Stand your ground.” Sandy would say: “Strike back at the adversary.”

“RUN,” Phyllis yelled.

Both she and Ithaca scrambled as fast as they could, running so blindly that it didn't immediately occur to either of them that they were heading for the Fogger home. Nothing near reason sunk in until Phyllis had pushed open the front door and, with Ithaca practically at her shoulder, stumbled into the house (Ithaca immediately slamming the door behind them).

They stood in the entrance hall to the house, catching their breaths.

“Wow,” Phyllis finally breathed. *And I'll never accuse Tom of understatement ever again.*

Ithaca was cautiously peeking through the curtains of a narrow window adjoining the door. “Nothing out there,” she said. “There isn't... anything where the Tree Guy was.” She looked back at Phyllis. “What *happened?*”

Phyllis was engaged in trying to slow her heartbeat. “The way things have been going on, who knows? You never saw anything like that before?”

Ithaca shook her head. “And I take it—”

“It makes two of us.” Phyllis found she now possessed enough state of mind to start examining her surroundings. The Fogger house. Tasteful wooden walls and floors. Expensive looking rugs. Artwork on the walls. Nice furniture. A curving staircase nearby...

So what's wrong here? she thought.

“No people,” she murmured.

Ithaca had been taking another look out the window. She turned back again. “Huh?”

“A guy gets... disintegrated... on your front lawn,” Phyllis explained. “Two panicked girls, including one who has already been here under suspicious circumstances, run full tilt boogie into your house.” She waved a hand at the interior stretching out before them. “So where *are* you during all this?”

Ithaca moved closer to Phyllis, also looking around. “No one here.”

“And no one's been here for some time now,” Phyllis answered. She was feeling surrounded by the sort of emptiness usually sensed when entering a room or apartment or place which hadn't been occupied for days. Perhaps even a week. “Of course, the Tree Guy hadn't always been around. Maybe the Fogers just up and... left.”

“You don't believe that any more than I do,” Ithaca said.

“No,” Phyllis admitted. “I don't.” She slowly began moving across the entrance hall. Stairway to the right... open doorway to what looked like a large library. *Huh! The Fogers actually read. Age of miracles!*

Phyllis was slightly tempted to enter the room and look at the titles on the books, but her ears caught a faint sound and she froze, her head suddenly snapping towards a closed pair of doors to her immediate right, just before the stairway.

Ithaca's stance told Phyllis she had also heard the sound. It sort of sounded like...

“Rattlesnakes,” Ithaca breathed.

The sound was faint, but persistent.

“I wish Chow was here,” Ithaca said.

Phyllis nodded. “Yeah. He knows about rattlers, and he's got guns.”

“And he can cook.”

“Yeah. Good point.” Phyllis began edging closer to the doors.

“Leeeeee...”

Raising a comforting hand, Phyllis continued moving, leaning forward to listen better. “Huh! *Now* it sounds more like electricity. What do you think?”

Ithaca shrugged. “I don't know. I've never listened much to electricity.”

And you want to marry Tom, Phyllis thought. *That'll change in a hurry*. Cautiously reaching for the doors (and ignoring the sharp intake of breath from Ithaca), Phyllis pulled them apart a fraction. Just enough to allow her to peek in.

“Oh... wow!”

Ithaca moved closer. “What?”

In answer, Phyllis pulled the doors fully opened, and they stood there gazing into the room beyond. She had no idea what the original function of the room as it was totally devoid of furniture and decoration.

The Thing floated in the center of the room, almost touching both the floor and the ceiling. A roughly spherical mass of what seemed to be bolts of lightning. Blue, green, red, gold... circular jagged arcs of multiple bright colors pulsing, flowing and crackling, casting dancing shadows everywhere. There was no apparent source to the energy; it seemingly existed and maintained itself.

Moving into the room, Phyllis began slowly circling the crackling mass, keeping herself close to the wall. She could stare into the... *energy cloud* was the best description she could find... seeing through it to the other side. “Understand I'm not an authority on artwork purchased by upscale families,” she said, realizing it was a hell of an admission for a professional graphics artist to make, “but I'm guessing this doesn't really belong here. You didn't see it on your visit?” she asked Ithaca.

“I didn't even make it through the front door.”

“Uh huh.”

Phyllis suddenly noticed Ithaca slowly stretching out a hand towards the energy cloud. “Oh I would so not do that.”

“Don't worry,” Ithaca murmured. “Just checking. There's no heat.”

And I should've thought of trying that, Phyllis berated herself. This is what came of years of being with Tom, and

having him immediately pull some sort of analytical device out of a pocket. Looking around she searched for something with the notion of perhaps tossing it into the cloud. She then realized that it probably wouldn't have been a good idea.

“Oh, Lee! Don't move!”

Phyllis froze. “What?”

“I can see you on the other side. But it's *not* you. It's...”

Phyllis was struggling with holding still. “What?”

“It's you with your original hair. You're wearing different clothes. And... and...”

“*What?*”

“You're holding a baby.”

Unable to stand it any longer, Phyllis unfroze and stared into the cloud. “Oh, God!”

“What?”

She could see Ithaca through the cloud. But... “I see you, too. You're different as well.”

“I *am*?”

Phyllis nodded. “You're wearing a wedding gown.” *And you look so incredibly happy.* “There's someone just off to one side. Standing near you.”

“Lemme see.” Through the cloud the bridal Ithaca moved away, and the image vanished as the girl came around to stand next to Phyllis. “I don't see...”

“It went away when you moved,” Phyllis explained.

Ithaca was anxiously peering into the cloud. “The other person. Was it Tom?”

“Honestly? Oh, I don't know. Truly. What sort of baby was I holding?”

“A baby baby. I'm sorry, but I couldn't tell much.”

Me with a baby, Phyllis thought wildly. *Ithaca getting married.*

“What is this?” she wondered aloud.

“Maybe the way we came here,” Ithaca murmured.

“But we were seeing things that aren't happening here, or where we came from,” Phyllis pointed out. “Or at least I don't

have a baby." *Not yet, anyway.* "Were you married?"

"I don't remember," Ithaca said mournfully. "Oh, but what if I was? What if I *am*?"

Phyllis absently gave Ithaca's shoulder a reassuring pat. "We'll get it figured out somehow. In any case, this is definitely something."

Illusions? she was thinking. *Alternate realities?*

"What do we do now?" Ithaca asked.

"Was afraid you'd ask that." Phyllis pushed out her lower lip in thought, one foot tapping on the floor. "I don't think this can be moved. Even if we wanted to move it—"

"I don't think we should try."

"—and I'm suspecting this is connected with the missing Fogers. Maybe even with the Tree Guy's disappearance."

"Do we tell the police about this?"

Phyllis snorted. "Oh, yeah. *That'd* be nice. Wanted crazed female attacker reports bizarre energy cloud in the Foger home. Which she broke into. Even worse, whoever comes to investigate this ends up disappearing."

"*We* didn't get zapped."

"Yeah," Phyllis agreed, nodding. "And this'll sound weird, but that sort of bothers me." Giving the cloud another hard look she reached a decision. "For the time being we'd best just leave things alone and get back to Chow."

"*That's* when we could get zapped," Ithaca pointed out.

"I... don't think so. And don't ask me why. But I don't think it'd be healthy to remain here until we figure out more. C'mon."

Leaving the house Phyllis felt that, despite her outward bravado, she was halfway expecting to end up like the Tree Guy. Which was perhaps the reason why she and Ithaca were moving at a nervous trot back across the lawn to the gate. But nothing mysterious or threatening occurred, and the girls reached the scooter which they promptly turned back towards Shopton.

* * * * *

"You're probably going to shoot this idea down," Ithaca said as she and Phyllis got off the scooter back at Chow's

camp, “but I could ask Tom about the thing at the Foger house.”

“And you're right,” Phyllis replied. “But I'm shooting it down for a reason you probably didn't think of. If I read your Tom correctly,”... *and honey, I got a lot of those chapters memorized...* “he'd want to race out to the Foger home and see for himself.” She gave Ithaca a steady look. “You really want to risk him out there?”

“Umm, no. You're right. But we've got to do something.”

You in a wedding dress, Phyllis thought. *And me with a baby*. “I agree,” she admitted. “But we shouldn't make a move without thinking it over. This is getting way out of hand.”

“LADIES!”

The booming voice was familiar, but both girls still jumped.

“Darn it, Chow,” Phyllis chided gently. “Don't *do* that.”

“Sorry!” Chow was moving out from the awning, an enormous smile on his face. “Just thought you fillies'd want to know that you're consortin' with one o'the finalists in the BBQ Sauce Competition.”

“And on the first day of the competition,” Phyllis said with a smile.

“It seems you northerners do know quality when you see it,” Chow replied loftily.

“Congratulations,” Ithaca said.

“Thank'ee, thank'ee. And, to celebrate, I'm fixin' the three of us my very special barbecued chicken. Featurin' one o'the *finalist sauce in the competition*,” he cried out in a louder tone of voice delivered to the surrounding camps and booths.

From somewhere a Bronx cheer floated back.

“Need some help getting' things ready,” Chow went on. His eyes became searching. “You girls have a nice time?”

“Ah-hhh, I'll help,” Ithaca said, giving Phyllis a glance.

“I'll be there in a bit,” Phyllis promised. “I'll put the scooter back up.”

“Don't bother tyin' it up,” Chow remarked. “I 'spects you'll be needin' it again soon.”

“At least to put gas back in the tank.” Watching Chow and Ithaca move into the awning, Phyllis guided the scooter out of the way and nearer to the van. Part of her was wondering what sort of story Ithaca was going to give about their adventures at Reason Hill. Mostly she was still trying to collect her thoughts and theories as to what had happened and what she and Ithaca had seen.

Was it a boy? Phyllis wondered. A girl? Did it look more like Tom, or me?

With a sigh she realized that such speculation only hammered home the fact that she was nowhere nearer to finding the whereabouts of her Tom. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was somehow closer to an answer. But what?

She had told Ithaca not to risk her Tom going over to the Foger house. But what about *her* Tom? Had he gone there? Had he...

Phyllis gulped, recalling what had happened to the Tree Guy.

She suddenly became aware that she had been fingering her engagement ring, and she raised the hand to stare at the zeanite band.

“I thought you could help me,” she murmured.

“Oh, but I can,” the ring replied.

Chapter Seventeen: “Ithica Foger Does Not Exist”

Later on Phyllis would think: *The problem with adventures is not so much the bruises, or even the life threatening situations. It's the emotional shocks one experiences.*

At the time, though, she was trying to keep herself from keeling over in a dead faint.

“Wh... wh... what?”

“I can help,” the ring repeated in a soft, calm voice. It sounded male, but Phyllis couldn't quite be certain.

“You can *talk*,” Phyllis said, immediately feeling stupid because of the remark.

“Yes.”

Phyllis took several deep breaths, glancing over her shoulder to make certain she was still alone. “All right. Why... *what* are you?”

“Your engagement ring.”

Ask a stupid question... “Why are you able to talk?”

“My contact abilities are limited to verbal response.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Phyllis tried to assemble something along the lines of an intelligent question.

“Lee,” Ithaca called out. “Chow's had collared greens simmering for a few hours and wants to know if you'd like some? He's also making cornbread.”

“In a minute,” Phyllis snapped back. She returned her attention to the ring. “You're obviously more than just a ring,” she said to it. “More than just an ornament. What are you exactly?”

“A section of Zea,” the ring replied. “As such I possess the same characteristics as the substance Georg Rehkopf has christened 'zeanite'. I should add, however, that my range of available functions are severely limited.”

“*Why* haven't you talked before now?”

“You have not asked me.”

Well... yes. That was obvious. “But Tom had you for a while and you were silent.”

“But I have been in physical contact with you, Phyllis. I am tuned to you.”

“Lee,” Ithaca called. “Some help here.”

“Coming,” Phyllis said. “Listen,” she told the ring. “Keep quiet for the time being. We'll talk later.”

“Certainly.”

Lowering her hand Phyllis went to join Ithaca and Chow, her body rapidly filling to the brim and beyond with curiosity and a host of questions. *If this ring turns out to have had the answers all along, her mind railed, I will kick myself black and blue.*

* * * * *

Chow's cooking was to its usual impeccable southwestern standards. Socially, however, the meal was a travesty. Ithaca and Chow initially did most of the talking while Phyllis sat off to one side, picking at her food. All she wanted was more of a chance to be alone with the ring.

But the conversation soon reached a point where becoming involved was an undeniable obligation. “We're running against time,” Phyllis explained to the others. “Eventually the absence of the Fogers is going to cause people to enter the home.”

“Then it'll be 'Jenny bar the door',” Chow remarked. “So this dingus... this thing you girls saw... is that part of this 'other world' business?”

Phyllis was about to answer, but suddenly frowned. “I thought it was 'Katie bar the door'.”

Chow shrugged. “Knew a girl named Jenny.”

“Yeah. Well... anyway, Ithaca and I feel that whatever is in the Foger house is very definitely associated with our presence here and now.”

Chow idly chased some barbecue sauce with a piece of cornbread. “Would sorta like to see that thing for myself,” he mused.

“No you wouldn't,” Ithaca said.

“Ithaca and I got away safely,” Phyllis added, “although we don't know why. Everyone else, on the other hand...”

“Whoever drove that white car,” Ithaca pointed out to

Phyllis. "That person's gone too, huh?"

"I'd be willing to bet on it."

Chow looked from one to the other. "But what's it *doin'*?" he insisted. "Why's it here?"

Phyllis shook her head while silently wondering what images of Chow would appear in the energy cloud.

"What about what the Tree Guy said before he disappeared?" Ithaca asked.

Phyllis was shaken from her reveries. "Hm? What?"

"Something about 'Weird Sisters'?"

Phyllis was forced to admit to herself that, what with everything else that had happened today, the Tree Guy's last remark had completely slipped her mind. "He made it sound as if it was something both recent and strange," she said, "which would be par for the course around here. Have you heard anything, Chow?"

"Wal-lll, not as such," Chow replied, scratching his head a bit. "Not less you mean those three old women who keep showin' up."

Ithaca nodded. "Yeah."

Phyllis gaped wide-eyed at the both of them. "Wait! You've *seen* them?"

"It ain't that easy," Chow explained. "I mean, I sorta catch a glimpse of 'em now n'then. But when I turn to give 'em a better look they ain't there."

"Been seeing them all over town," Ithaca added. "Three old women. Dressed sort of alike and always standing close to one another. It's like Chow says: they just appear out of the corner of your eye, and aren't there when you want to try and look directly." She helped herself to more milk. "Really fast."

"Oh, *God*," Phyllis said, exhaling loudly.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought I was losing my *mind*. Every so often I've been spotting three people... like you said, out of the corner of my eyes. But when I turn I see no one."

"That's them," Ithaca said.

"And it never occurred to you to mention this to me?"

Ithaca looked mildly surprised. “Lee... I'm a stranger here myself. For all I knew they were part of the local landscape.”

Like an energy cloud in a local mansion, I suppose. But Phyllis decided not to press the point. “Okay. So! That's one more thing on our to-do list. Keeping our eyes open for these... ladies, you said?... and getting a good look at them.”

“That's just it, though,” Chow said. “You can't get a good look at them. Usually I've been so busy that I just 'sumed they moved before I could see them better. I c'n ask 'round the camp, though. See if anyone else's had better luck. Don' worry, Lee. We'll get some answers.”

On Phyllis' finger the zeanite ring was a very definite weight. “Please.”

* * * * *

Ithaca left for Tom's house later on (Phyllis watching her go, wondering if she'd just fade into thin air when she'd wandered far enough away).

Chow explained to Phyllis that the Festival judges would be coming by to sample his sourdough biscuits and gravy as part of the ongoing cooking competition. Phyllis promised Chow she would go into the van, closing the doors and keeping out of sight, explaining that she wanted an opportunity to relax and think things over.

Which wasn't a total lie.

Once comfortable in her snug corner of the van, Phyllis removed the wig and, once again, raised the ring to her face. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, Phyllis.”

Phyllis had spent a lot of time trying to work out a sensible line of inquiry. She now suspected she'd have enormous trouble sticking to it. “You know me?”

“I have your genetic structure on file, Phyllis, plus numerous samples of your voice which I've analyzed and cataloged by tone and emotional content.”

Great, Phyllis thought. *An interstellar mood ring.*

“Are you a computer?” she asked. “Or some form of intelligent life?”

“I am a fraction of Zea,” the ring explained. “Unfortunately I am still trying to analyze your language, so I am not certain

how best to answer your question. I know what you mean by a computer, and I believe I understand your notion of intelligent life, but I am not comfortable trying to fit myself to either definition.”

Zea was the name of the Nuclear World which Tom had recently visited. Rather than being a planet, though, Zea was part of a vast network of enormous intelligent starships roaming along carefully established routes, providing a method of travel to various races throughout the galaxy. “Zeanite” was the name given to the substance which formed most of the starship's structure, and Tom had explained how it possessed numerous abilities.

The ring was still talking. “You have to understand, Phyllis, that Tom perhaps unintentionally violated a Network regulation by removing me from Zea—”

“Oh!”

“—but a judgment was made in his favor. As a new entry into the Network's route system, your species requires careful study. You would call it 'market research'. By allowing me to travel to Earth I am able to record details surrounding language, customs and history which Zea, as well as the Network, can use to provide better service.”

“Wait! Are you in contact with Zea?”

“Unfortunately, no. It was understood that I would be out of contact during the period when Zea was elsewhere on its route. Once it returned to your star system I would re-establish contact and transmit what I know. That option has now been closed due to the current situation.”

And here we go, Phyllis thought, taking a deep breath. “What can you tell me about the current situation?”

“Unfortunately not too much, Phyllis. Once again I must emphasize that my range of available functions are severely limited. But to try and answer your question: I have been encountering examples of energies which are not in my available catalog. This includes what I experienced when you took us into Roberts' machine.”

“Oh, right. Dump on me now.”

“Phyllis?”

Phyllis shook her head. “Nothing. Where is Tom?”

A pause. “I am aware of how your emotional state is linked

to the subject of Tom—”

“Where is he?”

“I have not found him.”

Phyllis squeezed her eyes shut, her hand closing into a tight fist as she spent several moments working to bring herself back under control. “*Could* he be here? Do you know that much?”

“I do not know.”

Right, Phyllis forced herself to think. *Do not get mad at the magic ring, no matter what. It's trying.* “Could you locate him if he were near?”

“Yes. I shall presume you want me to inform you if I do.”

“Yes. *Yes!* Emphatically yes! No matter what's going on.”

“Understood.”

“Now. Let's get back to what we can find out. Were you close enough to the... phenomenon in the Fogger house to take any sort of reading?”

“I was close enough, Phyllis,” the ring dutifully reported. “The phenomenon appears to be composed of energy. But, as with the energy which was produced by Roberts' machine, it does not correspond with any known form of electromagnetic radiation: either natural or artificially modified. Perhaps the Network is familiar with it, but I am not.”

“Ring, can you see?”

“Yes.”

“So did you know about the images Ithaca and I were noticing in the energy? They appear to be... oh, I don't know... pictures from what might be alternate universes. Do you understand the concept?”

“To an extent,” the ring said. “If the images indeed represent some sort of glimpse into an alternate universe then it would go far towards explaining why I cannot provide an accurate identification of the energy. Rather than visualizing a form of energy, Phyllis, I'm perhaps visualizing a manifestation of an entirely different universe.”

“So we're not so much seeing a 'what' as we are a 'where',” Phyllis mused.

“An interesting exercise in semantics.”

Phyllis had to privately agree and, if she weren't currently involved in trying to solve a cosmic mystery, she would've loved to engage in an extensive conversation on the subject. But vegetables before dessert.

Especially given the ring's next statement. "You have not stated a request, Phyllis, but I feel obligated to inform you that we are currently being scanned."

Phyllis sat up. "*What?*"

"This location is the target of a low frequency energy beam. The nearest equivalent I can find from your technology is monopulse radar."

Phyllis looked around, expecting something to reach out at her through the walls of the van. "Can you tell me who's doing the scanning?"

"Identity unknown. Location... converting to your system: currently three hundred and eighteen feet away."

Phyllis struggled to keep down the immediate urge to burst out of the van and follow the ring's guidance to whoever (or whatever) was doing this. She also toyed with the notion of peeking out the van's windows, but elected to stay put. "This scanning. You said I would think of it as monopulse radar?"

"Yes."

Here's where dating Tom all these years finally pays off. "Have you ever encountered this sort of scanning before?"

"No, Phyllis."

Fat rat! "But the scanning is harmless?"

"The beam is not adversely affecting you in any way, even if it were able to penetrate my shield, which it is not."

"Wait! Whoa! You have a shield?"

"During the course of being brought to Earth, and while in contact with you, I surmised enough of the feelings between you and Tom to the extent that I felt obligated to surround you with a minimum protective shield."

Phyllis recalled Tom telling her how zeanite could be "taught". If, for instance, one sample was subjected to a laser beam, subsequent samples would "learn" from what had happened and develop a protective immunity.

A thought occurred to her. "So that's why I wasn't zapped

at the Fogger house. Like the Tree Guy. You were shielding me?”

“I doubt that I would've been able to fully deflect whatever struck the person you refer to as 'the Tree Guy',” the ring confessed, “but perhaps I was able to prevent you from being tracked and targeted.”

“Um. Oh, but wait. What kept Ithaca from being zapped?”

No answer, and Phyllis yielded to temptation and gently shook her ring finger. “Hello?”

“I understand what you're asking,” the ring slowly said, “and I know who and what you refer to as 'Ithaca', but I have to report that she does not appear anywhere in my active memory.”

“What?”

“I have heard you speaking to Ithaca, Phyllis. But I only experience gaps where she is concerned. Ithaca Fogger does not exist.”

Chapter Eighteen: Unwanted Appearance.

“Okay, stop right there,” Phyllis said, automatically thinking it was a stupid remark to make. *But how often do I have conversations with an engagement ring?* “Ithaca is real. I've touched her.” *Stabbed her, even.*

“I accept that you and others are in contact with a person you refer to as 'Ithaca Foger',” the ring patiently replied. “But you must accept that this person does not register with me. I do not perceive her physical presence, nor do I hear her voice.”

A thought popped into Phyllis' head. “Are you familiar with the race that we refer to as 'The Space Friends', 'The Senders' or 'The Green Orb'?”

“Yes.”

“There is a chance that Ithaca might be a product of that race.”

“Even if she were,” the ring replied, “it would make no difference. I would be able to sense Ithaca, but she does not register.”

Phyllis was struggling to work it all in. “But you do register me,” she pointed out. “And I'm just as displaced as Ithaca.”

“True, but I am connected to you.”

Back in my court. “Are you registering anything where Ithaca is supposed to be?”

“No.”

“Are... you encountering any other readings similar to Ithaca?”

“Not as such. But keep in mind, Phyllis, that there are energies at work in this area which I cannot identify. As such my ability to take accurate readings may be compromised.”

“All right,” Phyllis said, closing her eyes. “When Chow or I or anyone else talks to Ithaca, do you have a notion of where her position would be if you were registering her?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now we're getting somewhere. You say you do not register Ithaca. But are you registering any... oh, I don't know. Distortion? Interference? Anything?”

“I sense no discernible phenomena, Phyllis.”

Phyllis swallowed a bad word. “Does the fact that Ithaca is being perceived by myself and others indicate that, in spite of your lack of sensing anything, there is *something* there and, as a result, we must conclude that, whatever Ithaca is, she is producing something which hides her from you?”

“I do not enjoy making suppositions—”

Dammit!

“—but I must conditionally accept your reasoning.”

Phyllis decided not to browbeat the ring further. “All right. Okay. So at least we're finding common ground. Can you try and locate some form of blocking? What I mean is, can you study what abilities you have and determine whether or not any form of interference is present?”

“I will give the problem every consideration.”

“Thank you... say! What do I call you anyway?”

“I am a section of Zea, Phyllis.”

“Oh, come on. You've got to be called something.”

A pause. “As close as I can get to your language, I am officially labeled Fragment 81929B sub RS slash 32 rho 8594. As I am currently tuned to you I am sub-designated 'Phyllis node'.”

Well, I asked for it. “You sort of sound male. Do you think of yourself in masculine terms?”

“I am a ring, Phyllis.” This delivered with what Phyllis felt was a trace of amusement.

“Well,” she finally decided, “I'm going to call you Chaucer. I once had a pet with that name.” Phyllis decided not to bring up the fact that the pet had been a Chilean rose tarantula, the first sight of which had made her mother shriek in holy blue terror.

Well... it had been a gift from Tom.

“Thank you, Phyllis.”

“No problem. In fact, 'no problem' is a term I'd like to hear more of in this situation. You continue doing what you do and report on any findings, and I'll... continue stumbling along.”

* * * * *

"This whole thing's really sorta gettin' to you," Chow remarked the next morning.

Phyllis was rubbing sleep out of her eyes. "Um? How d'you mean?"

"Didn't want to say or bring up anything," Chow replied, "but there were times I could hear you talkin' to yourself."

"Oh. Yeah, I do that sometimes when I have a problem."

Chow continued moving onions and garlic around in a skillet. "Do the same myself when I'm ridin' with a herd. Sometimes helps workin' things out. Breakfast'll be ready in a bit."

Nodding, Phyllis patted her wig, making certain it was still in place. Then, selecting the least visually assaulting of Chow's shirts, along with a pair of jeans, she trotted off for her morning shower. Around her the Festival was entering full swing, and Phyllis' ears caught the music of a nearby carousel starting up, her attention being drawn to it. Being a connoisseur of such things she wished she had enough time and peace of mind to take a ride.

The thought reminded her of a promise she had made to herself. Namely: when her fiftieth wedding anniversary was approaching she planned on leaving Very Pointed Hints to Tom on how she'd like a genuine carousel horse.

I'll sit on it, holding my grandchildren and telling them stories about how their crazy grandmother fought killer robots and the Russian Fleet. And also traveled through time.

The line of speculation caused her shoulders to slump. *Miles to go before I sleep*, her mind muttered.

In the shower she picked a stall remote enough to where she could safely remove her wig in privacy, but her self-consciousness remained at a peak until she realized it was because of Chaucer.

"Ah-hhhh, you said you could see me," she said to the ring. "Just how well does this apply visually?"

"I have been making a study of human morals and rituals for the Network's Anthropology and Customer Relations Section," Chaucer replied.

"That's... not really answering my question."

"I respect your need for privacy, Phyllis, and am not

visually active on your level until called for.”

The remark helped to address a worry which had been rising within Phyllis ever since she became aware of Chaucer's existence: would the ring be monitoring her during her wedding night?

“First things first,” she muttered. “I've got to *arrange* a wedding night.”

Keeping an eye open for other bathers who might notice her unwigged state, Phyllis mentally reviewed all that had happened, plugging in new information. As usual she was faced with what she believed were significant facts. Equally as usual, she was thoroughly convinced she lacked the one important item she needed to connect the dots.

Chaucer was a new source of help, but so far the ring had simply caused new mysteries to surface. What was this unusual energy Chaucer couldn't identify? Why couldn't it detect Ithaca's presence?

And who... or what... was scanning her?

The “Weird Sisters”? And who were *they*? Were they somehow connected to the energy cloud at the Foger house? Phyllis could feel a frown climbing onto her face. Regardless of who they were, they had risen to the top of her list of People To Talk To.

The frown was very faintly fractured by a chuckle. First she had targeted Ithaca for interrogation. But, instead of answers, she had gained an ally. And what *was* Ithaca? Robot or human she obviously possessed an ability to perceive falsehood in others. It was something Phyllis hadn't encountered before with Ithaca... or, rather, if it had been present it had been lost among Ithaca's other abilities (mass conversion, teleportation, shape changing, casting lethal bolts of electricity as well as crescent-shaped blades).

Fully cognizant of the leap in reasoning she was making, Phyllis allowed herself to suspect that the answer she was seeking lay somewhere between the Weird Sisters and Chaucer's inability to see Ithaca. And the energy cloud was smack dab in the middle of it all.

All I need now, she concluded, is a spot to put Tom into.

“Phyllis.”

“Yes, Chaucer?”

“Scanning.”

Phyllis automatically grabbed her towel, wrapping it around herself. “Where?”

“One hundred two feet away.”

Which, of course, placed it squarely outside the bathing shed. “Can you return scan and get a definite fix?” *Great. Now I sound like an episode of Star Trek.*

“Trying.”

Drying off as rapidly as possible, Phyllis reached for her clothes and the wig, wishing she had decided to hold onto the sombrero Chow had given her. “Keep at it, and get ready to guide me to wherever the scanning originates.”

“Yes.”

Almost tripping as she slipped her feet into the moccasins, a still damp Phyllis managed to stumble out of the shed. “Okay, Chaucer. Where?”

“Turn... twelve degrees to the left. Range: sixty two feet away.”

And Phyllis almost saw them this time. *Yes!*

They had been there. Clearly in sight for a fraction of an instant. Three brown shapes standing close together at the edge of the lake. Not close enough to make a clear determination of their identity, and they had faded into nothingness at the moment Phyllis' eyes had fully turned upon them.

Holding a hand upon her wig (worried that it wasn't on tight enough), Phyllis rushed to the spot where the strangers had been standing. “Chaucer, can you detect them?”

“No, Phyllis.”

Realizing that she was probably looking odd to anyone who would've been watching, Phyllis waved her hand back and forth over the ground. “Chaucer? Any readings?”

“Only a spike in the sort of unknown energy form which is prevalent throughout the area. I'm sorry, Phyllis.”

But it was something. “It's the Weird Sisters,” Phyllis said. “They're scanning me.”

“I could not get a clear reading as to their nature. Only that they represented the source of the scanning.”

Phyllis was looking around, her mind boiling. “Brand my bacon bits. *What... is happening?*”

“I am still processing information.”

Which helped to take the sting out of the situation. “I know you're trying, Chaucer,” she said to the ring with a sigh. “We're all trying. We just need to make some sort of progress.” Giving the surroundings another look she headed back for Chow's camp.

The Weird Sisters know me, she was thinking. Somehow... some way... I'm in their sights. I'm significant to them.

“Well girlies,” she muttered, “bring it on! Aunt Phyllis is loaded and waiting.”

Coming within sight of the van she suddenly froze. Ithaca had returned...

And with her was Tom Swift Sr.

Chapter Nineteen: Phyllis Attempts Communication

Chow Winkler demonstrated how utterly cool he was, immediately spotting Phyllis while still talking to Tom, but nothing showing on his expression. Ithaca meanwhile casually glanced back over her shoulder, and then just as casually returned her attention to Chow.

Easing behind a tree, Phyllis watched the proceedings from a distance, waiting until Tom and Ithaca wandered away. Even so she didn't automatically move, staying where she was for several minutes before closing the remaining distance to the van, trying to radiate casualness while working to ignore the trembling rocking through her.

She didn't even bother speaking to Chow until she had reached the safety of the awning, whereupon she exhaled loudly. “*Woof!*”

“The posse's closin' in,” Chow announced.

“So I gathered. What happened?”

“Ithaca shows up with her fella in tow,” Chow explained, keeping a watch on the outside. “To hear tell of it, they'd been wanderin' about the Festival. Seems there's been more and more suspicions that th' mysterious brunette attacker's hangin' somewhere 'round the premises.”

Crap-a-mighty, Phyllis mentally moaned.

“Ithaca and Tom finally stroll over here, an' I gotta give Ithaca credit for stayin' calm while, all th'time, I'm figurin' she wants to fold over and lie down. Tom asked me some questions.” Chow shrugged. “I tells him I've seen lots of people here. That's all.”

Rummaging around in the van, Phyllis finally located a poncho and draped it over herself. *Should've thought of this earlier*. “Chow, I've got to go get my 'disguise' clothes washed, and I'm sort of scared to venture back out.”

“I got some free time before the baking runoffs.”

“I appreciate the offer,” Phyllis replied, pinching the bridge of her nose as she closed her eyes, “but suspicions are running high enough around here without people wondering why you're washing women's clothing.”

Chow turned to her, thinking it over. "There is that."

Opening her eyes, Phyllis peered closer at him. "You okay? You look a little down. If it's me—"

"Ain't you, Lee." Chow sighed. "My biscuit gravy came in fourth in the competition."

"Ack! You're *kidding*. Your gravy's rich enough to rate a Swiss bank account."

"Well, thank'ee for that," Chow replied from behind a small smile. "My sourdough biscuits are still holdin' their own in the judgin', and keep your fingers crossed concerning my BBQ sauce. But let's get back to you."

"Chow, I saw them. The Weird Sisters."

Wonder blossomed on Chow's face. "Brand my tater tots! For certain?"

Phyllis blinked, thinking that, to her knowledge, Chow had never cooked up tater tots. Was she missing out on something?

Anyway... "They vanished into thin air, but I managed to get a glimpse of them. They're hanging around the Festival as well."

Chow looked about, one hand reaching down to brush against the handle of one of his pistols. "Really wish this was somethin' I could handle more personally."

Makes two of us. "Did Ithaca give any notion that she'd be back?"

A shrug. "She didn't say, which ain't too surprisin' seein' how that Tom feller was there. He seems t'be a pretty sharp hombre."

Wait until you meet his son. "What was he saying?"

"Didn't seem too angry or anythin'." Chow scratched a bit at his cheek. "I think he's just considerin' this somethin' of a mystery."

"Did he mention anything about the Foger house, or the Weird Sisters?"

"Nope."

Phyllis held back the urge to kick something. Were she and Ithaca and Chow the *only* people who knew what was happening in Shopton? Or (worse thought) were she and Ithaca and Chow the only people who knew something and

hadn't been zapped?

Reaching for the shopping cart she put her “disguise outfit” into it. “Does this poncho help hide me?” she asked Chow.

“Purt much,” Chow observed. “Take the sombrero.”

“Oh yeah. Right. I'm going to go wash my outfit,” she said, settling the hat on her head. “Should be back in an hour... good Lord willing and the cops don't grab me.”

Chow located some change. “Keep your eyes open,” he advised, passing the coins to her.

“Thanks. Don't let your biscuits burn.”

“Not a chance.”

Strolling to the laundromat allowed Phyllis time to think. And also consult with her other partner. “Chaucer.”

“Phyllis.”

“Something else for you to consider. This whatever it is that keeps you from seeing Ithaca. Could it be affecting other people? Preventing them from investigating what's going on?”

The ring was silent for a few moments. “Apologies, Phyllis, but not enough information to form an immediate conclusion. From what I know of human physiology, however, I do know that your senses are more vulnerable to deception than mine.”

“Ummm. Granted.”

The laundromat was blessedly lightly occupied and, while her clothes tumbled about, Phyllis sat in a corner chair, leaning back against the wall. In her mind's eye she was setting up each item of the situation, pondering it separately in search of a possible connection.

Maybe Tom Sr. *did* know about what was happening, she considered, and he was simply playing his cards close to his chest. But the problem with that was Phyllis knew Tom... both the older and the younger... to be men of immeasurable curiosity. If either of them had the least inkling of the energy cloud in the Foger home they'd be there like a shot.

But... “Chaucer.”

“Phyllis.”

“You say you don't know about this unusual energy you've been detecting in the area. True?”

“Yes.”

“Were you able to look at the energy that was being

produced by Roberts' machine? Was it the same energy?"

"Yes, Phyllis."

And the people who had accompanied her to Roberts' lab hadn't been able to identify it either. "This is a long shot," she said to the ring, "but did you understand enough about Roberts' machine to know whether or not it was producing the energy, or was the energy a result of the machine's operation?"

"Unfortunately, Phyllis, I cannot answer that question."

"Best guess."

She almost thought she heard a sigh from the ring. "Phyllis I am not even certain that the phenomenon I am observing qualifies as energy. I only use that word because it provides the closest fit. It appears to possess characteristics similar to electromagnetic radiation, but it escapes definition. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Phyllis murmured, frowning. Thoughts of Roberts' machine was causing something to rise from her memory. She tried not to force the thought, wanting it to develop naturally... "Omigod!"

"Phyllis?"

Phyllis was leaning forward in the chair, vividly recalling a detail of Roberts' machine she had forgotten up until now. "The telejector projecting elements."

"Phyllis?" repeated Chaucer.

"Roberts' machine had two enormous telejector projecting elements located just inside the tunnel," Phyllis said, her excitement rising. "Someone... maybe Tom... meant for the tunnel to provide visual *images*."

If the Swift Enterprises people back at Roberts' lab were still in place, and studying the control layout of the time machine, then they might have worked out a way to use the telejector. And if they did...

* * * * *

Phyllis scampered back to the van, her laundry still slightly damp from their interrupted drying cycle. "Chow?"

Chow straightened up from the search he had been making within his vegetable bin. "Lee?"

"Have you got like... oh, I don't know... a large piece of

white paper? And a black marker pen or something?"

Rummaging among the items in the awning, Chow pulled out a large white cardboard square. "Thought of using this for a sign," he told Phyllis, handing it over. "Didn't need it, though."

"You're an angel." Taking it, as well as a black felt tip marker, Phyllis began busily scribbling.

Chow watched her. "You come up with somethin'?"

"Maybe," she told him. "Some people I know. Left behind in my 'other world'. They might be able to see me."

Chow began staring around.

"But I can't guarantee they'd be able to *hear* me. There!" She studied her handiwork: a message written on the cardboard.

CURRENT COORDINATES: SHOPTON, THIRTY-FIVE
YEARS AGO IN MAY.

UNUSUAL ENERGY FORMATIONS PRESENT. COULD
BE SIMILAR TO WHAT THE MACHINE IS PRODUCING.

POSSIBLE UNKNOWN INTELLIGENCE IN VICINITY.
SUSPECT ALIEN.

"Okay," she said, moving out of the awning. "This is probably going to look strange," she told Chow. "Just bear with me."

As Chow watched, Phyllis held the sign high over her head and began slowly turning around (feeling like Sally Field in *Norma Rae*).

"C'mon guys," she muttered. "Connect the dots."

"You *do* know everyone's watchin' you," Chow remarked.

Oops! "Well, I had to try and get the word out." Lowering the sign, Phyllis folded it as she noticed Chow trying to get a closer look at the message. "Just a cry for help," she continued, walking back into the awning. "Don't even know if it'll work."

"At least it's somethin'. You seem really up about it."

Phyllis kept folding the cardboard, not necessarily wanting to shut Chow out, but mindful of the adage about sleeping dogs.

Besides, another thought was occurring to her. "Chow."

"Yeah?"

"I know you're still having trouble with the explanations Ithaca and I have been giving you—"

"Wal-lilll..."

"But work with me for a moment here. I need to bounce something off of you for a bit."

Chow nodded. "Shoot."

"If what I say has been true," Phyllis began, "then you could imagine that the borders between different worlds are like walls. Unbreakable walls."

Chow thought it over, nodding again.

"But someone in my world manages to build a door in the wall, and I fall through."

"O-kay."

Phyllis frowned. "No, that doesn't quite work. It doesn't explain the Weird Sisters. Or the energy cloud at the Foger place. They weren't originally here."

Chow was frowning to himself. "Wait a minute."

Phyllis became quiet.

"It's a door," Chow finally said. "It opens up into this world. *My* world."

Phyllis nodded. Was she seeing sweat on Chow's forehead?

"But Lee," Chow went on. "Did the door have a lock? Or could just anyone else step through it into this world?"

Phyllis could no longer resist, and she leaned over to plant a firm kiss on Chow's cheek.

Chapter Twenty: Ghost Lasers

Chow turned beet red. “Well brand my rattlesnake tacos,” he mumbled. “If’fn I’d known you were gonna be that grateful I’d have been doin’ more hard thinkin’ earlier.”

“It’s *something*,” Phyllis declared. Her mind was racing ahead so fast she felt she was becoming breathless. “I’ve been so hung up on thinking that maybe this tim—this world... *your* world... had been deliberately invaded.”

“Invaded?”

“By the Weird Sisters, or the energy cloud. Or whatever. Ithaca and I end up here as a result of this invasion. But what if, instead of an invasion, everything was just a result of a door *accidentally* being opened between the worlds? If Ithaca or I could end up here, then why not others?” *Including*, her mind added, *people from the other worlds seen in the energy cloud?*

But then she shook her head. “No. It still doesn’t explain everything. Why *here*? Why Shopton? Now?” *And why is Mary Nestor a mental train wreck?* “There’s still a lot of unanswered questions.”

“Like where’s your fella.”

Phyllis nodded, sighing. “Yeah. That too.” She absently tugged at her lower lip, her mind still whirring.

“Do I have to give back the kiss?”

Phyllis almost smiled. “Save it.” *Kiss the bride at my wedding.* “I wish I was a physicist, or a mathematician. Someone who could really sit down and figure this out.”

“Sumptin’ I been wantin’ to know, Lee,” Chow said. “Just what are you in this other world?”

Now Phyllis smiled. At least a little bit. “I’m in advertising and public relations. Not really the sort of stuff adventurers are made out of.”

Looking thoughtful, Chow returned to the vegetable bin. “Don’t know,” he remarked. “Seems to me adventures don’t care an awful lot who they happen to.”

“Hm!” *I’ve got to remember to tell that to Sandy.*

Peeling off the poncho, Phyllis went to the cart and began

removing her laundry from it, hanging the clothes from one of the awning support rods so that they'd dry just a bit more.

“Lee.”

“Um? Chow?”

Chow was at his stove, carefully adjusting the heat beneath a pot of water. “I've seen 'nough weird things happenin' to put much believe this 'other world' story of yours.”

“Believe me, I'd understand any doubts you'd have.”

“Yeah, well... what I don't understand is *why* create a door between worlds in the first place?”

Yeah, Phyllis mentally agreed. *Like by now I should be an expert in how Tom's mind works.* “It's like this. My fiance' is a sort of scientist. He and some other scientists were working on a machine in a special laboratory. I don't know if they *intended* to create a door between worlds, but that's what they ended up with...”

And Phyllis' voice faded as a new thought occurred to her. “We never found them.”

“Huh?”

“The other scientists who were working with Tom. There was no one at the laboratory when I showed up, but the machine had been switched on.” *Did they all follow Tom into the tunnel? And why?* “You still haven't heard any talk about people just... appearing out of thin air around here?”

Chow shook his head.

“Rats.” Phyllis gazed out the awning at the Festival, watching the visitors stream past. *Oh my... there's a funnel cake concession this year. Funnel cake and a merry-go-round.* “Chow, don't you have to get something ready for the Festival people?”

“You betchum. Right now I'm throwin' together some gen-yew-wine sonofab—ahhhh, I'm throwin' together some stew which I'm gonna offer 'longside my biscuits and also my barbecue beef sandwiches.”

“Oh-hhhh, so you're part of the Sample Trail this year.”

“That's right.” Chow smiled back at her. “You have been here before.”

Holding hands with Tom and occasionally strolling off

into the shadows bordering the Festival in the evenings. Sandy and Bud doing the same somewhere nearby. “Yeah. Do you need help?”

“If you're offerin', you could finish choppin' some of those vegetables for me. I'd ask for help with the BBQ, but my sauce's a trade secret.”

Phyllis knew all too well how Chow closely guarded his sauce recipe. Tom had even subjected a sample to intense chemical scrutiny (after a surreptitious request from his mother), but even Tom's equipment had been unable to break down the exact components. “It's also a matter of heat and stirring time,” Tom explained to his mother later on. “I bet it also involves the exact number of stirs, as well as when to add the spices.”

“Dang it,” Mary Swift had replied... the closest she had ever come to using profanity.)

Taking a chopping board, Phyllis sat alongside the vegetable bin (and mainly out of sight of anyone passing by), beginning a steady job of converting onions, carrots and related items into offerings suitable for a Winkler stew. In the meantime her mind was dwelling on similar instances when she had watched either her mother or Mary Swift busy in their respective kitchens. Such thoughts shared head space with further speculation on what was happening in the here and now.

Cabbages and kings, her mind whispered.

* * * * *

Chow's stew turned out to be an enormous hit, and the bubbling pot was practically exhausted as evening fell.

“Now why didn't the Yankees runnin' this hoedown have a stew competition?” Chow muttered.)

But of even greater interest was the appearance of a solemn-eyed Ithaca.

“So,” she said upon spotting Phyllis. “You made it to safety okay.”

Phyllis was at the van, trying to choose between Patsy Cline or Roy Acuff for Chow's music player, but she looked back at Ithaca and nodded. “Did Tom say anything?”

Ithaca opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again. “Tom wants to move up the wedding date.”

Straightening up, Phyllis stumbled for a reply. “Oh.”

Sensing the rising tension between the girls, Chow quietly decided to move to the other side of the table. Close enough to keep an ear on the proceedings, but out of the potential line of fire.

“I love Tom,” Ithaca declared. “I do. So very much. I...”

“Ithaca...”

“Is this *right*, Lee? Is all this *right*?” Her eyes narrowed. “I’m pretty certain you’ve been trying to spare my feelings about me being some sort of... oh, I don’t know. An agent of chaos or something. Is it happening *again*, Lee? Am I causing some sort of enormous *mistake*? TELL ME!”

Phyllis could see Ithaca’s eyes glistening with moisture. And, truth be told, her own eyes were also feeling a bit damp. “Ithaca—”

“No more lies. No more evasions.”

“I’m just as confused as you are,” Phyllis replied, trying to keep her voice from rising. “I feel that I know this world. Remember how I reacted when I first saw you? A lot of that was because I knew you weren’t a part of this... location.”

“I love Tom,” Ithaca repeated. “Please believe me when I say that means I don’t want to hurt him. I *never* want to hurt him. Tom... he’s... just so very easy to love.”

“I sympathize,” Phyllis murmured.

“In the energy cloud,” Ithaca went on. “You saw me being married, but you couldn’t tell if it was Tom I was marrying.” She seemed to be having trouble breathing. “I... I want to be happy, Lee, but I also don’t want to hurt Tom. If marrying him means hurting him, I... oh God!”

Phyllis moved to slip her arms around Ithaca, holding her close, feeling her shaking as the other girl sobbed. *Well here’s one for the record books. Ithaca Foger crying on my shoulder.*

“We can still work this out,” Phyllis whispered. “We can. Shhhhhh.”

“I almost immediately said ‘yes’,” Ithaca gulped. “You can’t imagine how much I wanted to say yes.”

Believe me, honey, I do.

“But it'd mean he'd find out 'bout me that much sooner.” Ithaca lifted her head from Phyllis' shoulder. “You seem to take me all in stride. You know I'm not really like everyone else. You accept me, even though I'm a freak.”

“You're *not* a freak,” Phyllis insisted, her voice hard.

“THEN WHAT AM I?”

“Girlies,” Chow warned, nodding at the passersby.

Phyllis guided Ithaca closer to the van, wondering where Chow kept his corn mash. She was also struggling to find an answer, suspecting that “alien killing machine” was one of the last things Ithaca wanted to hear.

At the van doors she once again faced Ithaca. “You've been... changed so many times.”

The sorrow on Ithaca's face was being replaced with curiosity.

“Circumstances allowed you to fall into the hands of others who gave you gifts and talents, hoping to use you as a tool. You've spent much of your time trying to fight their control.”

Ithaca took it all in. “And this fight is what produced the chaos. All the trouble I caused.”

It was as good an answer as any. “Yes,” Phyllis replied, mentally crossing her fingers.

Ithaca continued thinking it over. “And these 'others'? Are they responsible for me being here?”

Phyllis sighed. “I wish I knew. If they were then it would certainly answer a hell of a lot of questions. Not only that, but I'd have a clear motive for everything that's happened. But it just recently occurred to me,” and here she gave a glance in Chow's direction, “that all of this might be far more accidental than any of us realize. No one may be in control here, and that really worries me.”

“Much more chaotic that way.”

Phyllis nodded. “Exactly.” She lightly patted Ithaca's shoulder. “We're good. You and Chow and I. But we need more brain power on our side.” Once again her thoughts went back to the message she had tried to send to Roberts' lab. *C'mon, guys, where are you?* “It would also help if there was less complacency around here.”

Ithaca frowned. “Complacency?”

“I don't want to hurt... your Tom either,” Phyllis said. “I don't want to put him at risk. But I'd feel better if I knew his mind was somehow in the loop on this problem. Hell, this whole place needs some sort of shaking up, if only to warn everyone about the danger up at the Fogger house. If more people start disappearing, like the Tree Guy or the Foggers, then... what?”

The last was directed towards the sudden shouts which were being heard, and Phyllis saw Chow staring up at the evening sky.

“Brand my bullnettle jelly,” he said.

Moving out from the shelter of the awning, Phyllis and Ithaca could see that people everywhere were following Chow's example: looking and pointing up into the sky. Which, of course, led them to do the same thing.

“Oh my golly,” Ithaca breathed.

The trees grew thick in the section of the campgrounds where Chow had set up shop, and was well lit. In spite of all that, however, it was still easy to see what was going on. The darkness high above was filled with thin lines of bright green light. These were accompanied by glowing spheres of bluish white which were rapidly speeding across from one end of the sky to the other. Looking up at the phenomenon, Phyllis almost thought she could hear an electrical whisper accompanying the light show.

Chow was still agog. “What is it?”

And Phyllis was surprised at how calm she felt. “It's a reminder.”

“Huh?”

“A reminder that I need to be careful what I ask for.”

Chapter Twenty-One: Sacrifice Play

“Fireworks,” someone said.

With both Chow and Ithaca still staring up in wonderment, Phyllis quietly slipped away, moving towards the back of the van. “Chaucer?”

“Yes, Phyllis,” the ring replied. “I’m seeing it as well.”

“*What* are we seeing?”

“The green beams are emissions similar to what would be produced by what you would describe as a solid-state Nd:YAG laser. I cannot establish the exact energy characteristics of the beams because of interference from the energy globes that are accompanying them. They are composed of—”

“The same mysterious energy that’s been popping up everywhere,” Phyllis finished. “Can you determine the source of the beams or the globes?”

“No, Phyllis. I cannot.”

Looking around, Phyllis oriented herself. If she put Lake Carlopa to her right then she was facing north, and with that she was able to determine that the energy globes were racing in the general direction of...

“The Foger house,” she muttered. “Color me unsurprised.”

Ithaca now rushed up. “Lee...”

“Yeah,” Phyllis said, nodding up at the lights. “They’re targeting the Foger place.”

“Oh, God. If people go there—”

“Trouble.” Phyllis went over to where Chow was standing, chatting excitedly with some of his Festival neighbors. But he noticed the set of Phyllis’ expression and went to her.

“I gotta get to the Foger place before people figure out where those lights are heading and end up zapped,” Phyllis told him.

Chow produced the sort of look that, up to now, Phyllis had seen in only two places: classic Western movies, and on Sandy’s face. “You gonna need backup,” he said, moving away. “Hold on a tick.”

“Wait—,” but Chow had already rushed off. “Fudgsicles!”

“What's wrong?” Ithaca asked.

“Something's happening *now* and we've got to get moving.”

“Everyone still seems to be just looking at the lights.”

Looking around, Phyllis saw that Ithaca was correct. No one at the Festival was doing anything more than gazing up at the laser beams and racing globes (too late Phyllis was reminded of Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*).

Oh well... “True, but I'm sort of worried about Tom finally getting ideas.”

“Oooooo...”

“And we've got to beat him to the punch.”

There was the sudden sound of a motor, and a Chevy pickup truck roared up with Chow at the wheel.

“Borrowed this,” Chow called out. “Get in.”

Phyllis and Ithaca immediately obeyed, and Chow slammed his foot on the gas, causing the truck to race on through the campgrounds, heading for Shopton.

Leaning close to Phyllis, Ithaca whispered: “Chow said he borrowed the truck. Did he mention if he had permission?”

“Shhh,” Phyllis whispered back.

“Where to?” Chow said.

“Follow the way the globes are heading,” Phyllis instructed. “Make a right onto Rudaux and follow it until you reach Lomberg. If I'm right we'll then be making a left onto Carroll. I'll show you.”

Chow nodded. “What if we see the police?”

Phyllis had been afraid he'd ask that. “We need to try and beat everyone else to where the globes are heading,” she said. “Use your best judgment.” *Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here...*

She was sitting between Chow and Ithaca and leaned forward to look up at the lights. The laser lines were still shining, but there seemed to be less globes passing overhead.

“Tom,” she suddenly breathed.

Ithaca looked at her. “What?”

Phyllis shook her head. *Not your Tom*, she thought, *but mine*. Did the light mean her Tom had surfaced at last and

was somehow trying to send out a signal? Thinking it over, Phyllis was able to come up with at least three ways Tom could arrange such a display. If he could lay his hands on the right equipment.

But there was still the matter of the “unknown energy”. *But Tom had been working with Roberts' machine*, Phyllis tried to reason. *Maybe he was able to harness the energy.*

Grabbing at straws here. I really and truly am.

They were turning onto Lomberg when Chow shouted. “Lee!”

Phyllis saw it at the same time. A police car, its lights flashing, was fully blocking the street ahead of them. “Whoa!”

Fortunately, in this instance, Chow's perception of “best judgment” was to slam on the brakes, bringing the truck to a complete halt. Phyllis mentally blessed him but, as a policeman began approaching the truck, it also occurred to her that not only was Chow armed, but that everyone was currently in a rather tense situation. “Let me out.”

“I got a permit,” Chow said, immediately understanding.

“So does he,” Phyllis pointed out, scooting past Ithaca, “and so does his equally well-armed partner.”

The officer paused just a fraction as Phyllis stepped out from the truck, and Phyllis tried her best to herself appear as harmless as possible.

“Scuse me, ma'am,” the officer said. “This road's closed.”

Phyllis gave what she hoped was an innocently concerned look at the lights overhead and tried to appear scared (admittedly not too difficult a feat). “We're trying to get to Carroll Road,” she said, wringing her hands. “All this... stuff,” she added, giving the sky another look.

The officer nodded sympathetically. “Yeah, but there's been something going on here, and we're keeping people off the road until it gets sorted out.”

“An accident?”

“Not quite.” The officer glanced back over his shoulder, and Phyllis was suddenly struck by the notion that he was the one who was truly scared.

“Chet!”

It was a call from his partner who had just stepped out of the car. Chet turned and, looking beyond them, Phyllis saw what had caught their attention. Further on down the road a curtain of pale rippling white light was slowly heading in their direction. It was shifting about, floating slightly one way, and then the next, as if it were caught in a mild breeze... or, rather, as if Phyllis was seeing it distorted through water.

By now Chow and Ithaca had left the truck (Chow having possessed the mental wherewithal to leave his guns behind). Noting this, Chet said: "You folks just stay back." As Phyllis watched he opened his holster and began walking back towards the car to join his partner.

With Chow and Ithaca's attention locked on the approaching apparition, Phyllis raised her hand to her mouth. "Chaucer?"

"Mysterious energy... oh!"

"What?"

"Registering a sudden spike."

But Phyllis could already see what was happening. Just as the policemen were beginning to draw their guns the "light curtain" was contracting, coalescing into a single form. A ghostly figure of a man who was reaching out towards them...

And Phyllis recognized him. "Oh my *God*..."

She barely heard Chow and Ithaca calling out as she began racing towards the creature. "Don't shoot," she insisted to the policemen.

Chet was looking back. "Ma'am, don't—"

"*Don't shoot*," Phyllis yelled, managing to run past both men and their car, putting herself between everyone and the spectral image.

"Dr. Okihiro," she said to the drifting ghost. "It's me... it's *me!*"

Okihiro didn't seem to notice her, but he continued gesturing outwards with his hands, his face pleading as his lips moved.

"It's all right," Phyllis said to him, trying to believe it herself. "It's me. It's all right."

The man was trying to say something, repeating it slowly... carefully... and Phyllis was struggling to read his lips.

“Close’,” she whispered. “Are you saying ‘Close?’” Then her voice rose. “What’s close, Dr. Okihiro? Are you near? Is Tom with you?”

Close, the specter tragically cried out. *Close*.

A hand on her shoulder. The other policeman. “Miss—”

“No,” Phyllis said, pushing his hand away. “Don’t get in the —”

It happened all too quickly. One of the energy globes from above had drifted down to where it was hovering just over the police car. The police car suddenly blazed with light, then faded into nothingness.

The policemen had turned towards it, their guns leveling at the globe. Phyllis screamed “*Don’t*”, but it was too late. Hissing bolts of blue energy leaped from the globe, striking both officers, and then they also glowed brightly before vanishing. Just like the car.

Just like the Tree Guy.

The globe then vanished, leaving Phyllis staring towards Chow and Ithaca.

Chow’s mouth was slowly opening. “Brand mah—”

Phyllis suddenly remembered Okihiro and turned back around just in time to see the figure fading away. “No! Oh *no...*”

And then behind her, a sudden shout. “NO!”

Once again Phyllis turned, seeing that another energy globe had fallen from the sky to hover close behind her. Close enough to where she could see deeply into it, seeing a blue nimbus of power rapidly forming.

But Ithaca was quicker and, as the globe fired, she threw herself between it and Phyllis. A bright burst of light... and both Ithaca and the globe were gone.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Verb Instead of Adjective

Phyllis never noticed Chow driving the both of them back to the Festival; and if she had been in a condition to do so she doubt she would've cared. She remained firmly in the hold of a shock that only began loosening its grip as she saw Chow rummaging about in the van, finally producing the bottle which carried his home brew. In numbness she watched as Chow allowed an amount of the liquor to fill the bottom of the glass, and then pause before taking a long swig directly from the bottle.

Noticing Phyllis' attention he blushed (or perhaps it was a result of drinking the whisky). "Ain't got no more doubts, Lee," he murmured, holding the glass out to her. "Not one at'tall. Nope."

Phyllis accepted the glass but didn't drink. Instead she gazed at the oily liquid, gently sloshing it back and forth.

Chow was pacing about. "Gotta get th'police," he was murmuring to himself. "Th'army... some of that there air force. Gotta get *somehin'*. Gotta... gotta..." He paused, staring blindly at the material of the awning. "O Lord, Lee... Ithaca..."

"I know," Phyllis said, her voice low. *All the times I wished for something horrible to happen to Ithaca. All the doubts I had when Sandy was declaring her to be a hero.*

Sandy got Bingo and me into danger many times, but she never lost either of us. Me, on the other hand... with a single harsh motion she drank down the whisky, forcing herself to swallow it in one gulp, relishing the raging fire which tore through her throat, squeezing her eyes shut as tears leaked from them.

"Ithaca's gone," Chow said. "Dead."

"She's been dead before," Phyllis muttered.

"Lee!"

"She's used to it." Suddenly standing up she moved out of the awning. Above her the sky was clear of both lasers and energy globes. She could hear voices all around; people still discussing what had happened. Looking down she noticed a local news truck from WHCU.

"Bad."

Chow moved up beside her.

"The fat's definitely in the fire," Phyllis went on, still staring at the truck. "There's no way everyone's going to be out of it now. More questions are going to be asked, more people are going to search..."

"And more o'them's gonna end up like Ithaca," Chow whispered. "Lee, we gotta do something."

And there's the summation to end all summations, Phyllis thought. Scientists... the military... the civil authorities... and she knew it was all going to come down to a public relations specialist armed with a talking engagement ring, and a chuck wagon cook.

Chow glanced at her. "That feller back there. That ghost you talked to."

"Someone from my world," Phyllis said. *My God, have Pico and Keough and all the others been taken? Is that what happened to Tom and Roberts and his people?*

"Close," she murmured.

"Huh?"

"Close," Phyllis repeated, turning to him. "Dr. Okihiro, the person from my world. I think he was telling me 'close'."

Chow frowned. "Close to what? Home? The answer?"

"I wish I knew." She moved back into the awning, reaching up to adjust her wig. "At least he's alive. Or I hope he still is." *Because that might mean Tom's also alive.* "I've got no answers, Chow. I'm... I'm totally confused."

Behind her, Chow's voice became low, edged with a hint of determination. "Mebbe we ought to go find this Tom Swift feller."

Phyllis stood there, staring at nothing.

"He... needs t'know 'bout Ithaca anyway. He's gotta right to know."

Yeah, Phyllis' mind jeered. He needs to know that Ithaca's gone, and the road's now open for him to become involved with Mary. Except that Mary Nestor's a mental vegetable.

"It's all *wrong*," she said.

"Don't I know it! And the danged thing is, we gotta move fast before it gets wronger."

“I *know!*” Phyllis tried to shake herself free of what she felt were the attempts of the whisky to spin her mind around. “I didn't mean to sound callous about Ithaca back there, Chow. I just...”

“You're upset. Confused. Like you said.”

And Phyllis' eyes suddenly widened. She was still staring at nothing, only now it was a nothing which was giving birth to a notion.

She slowly turned back to Chow. “Confused.”

For want of an answer, Chow simply nodded.

“Ithaca and I end up in this world,” Phyllis said to him. “We're both confused. Disoriented. What have we been doing?”

Chow thought it over. “Tryin' to find answers.”

Phyllis nodded. “Yes! Think back to what we talked about earlier today. If the others... whoever's responsible for all this... also ended up here accidentally, then wouldn't they be just as confused? Wouldn't *they* be trying to find answers?”

A frown deepened on Chow's face. “Yeah.”

“They may have limited resources, just like Ithaca and I had. We fell through a door into this world, and they fell through the same door. We've been working at cross purposes when, instead, we should've been working together...”

And then she paused as something exploded in her head. “Oh... my *God!*”

“Lee?”

“Verb instead of adjective,” she declared.

“Huh?”

“What Dr. Okihiro was saying. Not 'close', as in we're close to something. Clo-oo-se... as in 'to close'. *That's* what he was telling me. Close the *door*.”

And a light dawned on Chow's face. “Oh-hhhhh.”

“We don't need a scientist, we need an English teacher.”

“Close the door. Y'mean that cloud thingy you n'Ithaca saw at the Foger place?”

Phyllis nodded, still grappling with the idea.

“But how?”

Which slammed on the brakes in Phyllis' head. "Yeah," she muttered. "How? How in the hell did Okihiro expect me to do this?"

"Mebbe he's desperate. Mebbe he hopes you'd think of somethin'."

"But what?" Phyllis realized she was tapping her ring finger against her hip (*was Chaucer trying to communicate subvocally?*). "What? I can't... I'm not..."

And then she realized she was hearing a gradually growing sound. A hum which was rising from all directions.

She started to ask Chow if he was hearing it, and saw that he had also been turning as if to try and figure out where it was coming from. But as she watched he seemed to be moving slower. As if the air was growing thicker all around him. "Chow?"

No answer, but he was continuing to freeze in place. And now a sort of radiance was starting to appear. A pearly light...

Like the energy globes.

Like Okihiro.

"Oh *no!*"

She automatically reached out for him, and then paused before she could touch the surrounding glow. "*Chaucer!*"

"Spikes all around, Phyllis. Everywhere!"

Her heart in her throat, Phyllis moved past Chow, heading out of the awning.

It was happening all over the campgrounds. People who had been moving about were starting to freeze in place, their bodies also beginning to glow. Here and there the glow grew into a bright intensity, becoming an energy globe which then sped off into a night sky once again filling with green laser light. As Phyllis watched, more and more people were becoming globes and flying away.

"Chaucer?"

"Phyllis I am detecting a widespread emission of the mysterious energy. It's an enormous bubble with an estimated diameter of six and three quarter miles. It's center is—"

"I *know* where the center is."

Phyllis turned in the direction the globes were traveling.

Reason Hill, and the Foger house.

Phyllis' mouth set into a thin line.

“Cross purposes,” she muttered.

* * * * *

Whatever the phenomenon was it didn't affect machinery, and Phyllis was on the scooter, riding at full speed through the night, guided by the lasers and the new flow of energy globes.

“Chaucer? Are you shielding me? Is that why I haven't ended up like the others?”

“Not enough information, Phyllis. But I can report that the intensity of the energy is gradually increasing.”

Phyllis hunkered down lower, trying to coax more speed out of the scooter. She met no one, passed no moving cars, and in the bottom of her heart she was asking herself if she was the only person left in Steuben County?

How far will this expand? her mind agonized. And what can I do? Dammit, I'm NOT a scientist. I'm NOT a hero!

Seems to me adventures don't care an awful lot who they happen to, Chow had said.

And that's why I'm the one doing this, Phyllis yelled at herself. *I'm not crazy. I'm not heroic or brilliant. I'm the only one left. I'm Phyllis Marian Newton... and I guess that's gonna have to be good enough!*

The memory of the image Ithaca had seen. Her with a baby.

Phyllis gunned the throttle. “Mommy's coming.”

Despite the darkness the lasers and the globes were providing enough light as she reached Reason Hill. More than enough light in fact. Pausing the scooter at the gate Phyllis could see that the house was now glowing with the same radiance as the globes. Green laser beams were converging on it from all directions, stopping just short of actually touching the mansion. The globes, on the other hand were colliding with the house, effortlessly passing through the walls. As with the lasers they were also now approaching from all directions.

Should've had more whisky. It'd help right about now.

Taking a breath, Phyllis began driving at full speed through the open gate, racing up the driveway, aiming at the front

door. For one wild moment she contemplated trying to crash through the door, but felt the mansion's entrance could easily deflect a determined brunette on a motor scooter. At the last moment she swerved to one side, tumbling off the scooter and managing to remain on her feet as she continued moving, stumbling up the stairs and pushing the door open, entering the house.

And stopping. "Oh!"

The entrance hall was now filled with energy globes. Globes were also drifting about the stairway, the halls... everywhere she could see. They were not quite as bright as they had been, looking more in fact like the sort of pale luminescence Okihiro had been turned into.

As she continued to stare she could make out the faint forms of people within the globes. They were drifting about within their enclosures, moving as if they were slowed down video images.

Or insects caught in amber, Phyllis thought.

To her right the electrical sound of the energy cloud was heard. Louder now. More intense, and Phyllis surprised herself by determinedly marching up to the double doors of the room, throwing them open wide.

The cloud was still there, the sphere of multicolored electrical arcs crackling brightly before her. There were no globes in the room but, as Phyllis slowly approached, she could see images appearing and fading, shifting about. Not just all sorts of people, but scenes as well. Cities... landscapes... crowds of people and herds of animals... oceans... forests. An entire library of images being presented.

"Phyllis!"

"Chaucer?"

"They're here."

Phyllis continued staring at the cloud. "I know," she whispered.

She slowly turned about, staring at the room. Searching.

"No more hiding," she said out loud. "I know you're scared. I'm scared too. I've been scared, and I've been confused, and now I'm *angry!*"

No answer.

“You're taking *everything* from me. Everything I love and care about, and it has to stop. *Now!* No more hiding. No more staying in the background, sneaking around. No more deception. No more *disguises!*” With a single furious motion Phyllis reached up, pulling off the wig and revealing the short brunette frizz which remained on the top of her head.

“FACE ME!”

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Weird Sisters

Before Phyllis' eyes a figure materialized, and her heart suddenly sang as she saw the familiar lean shape, blonde hair, blue eyes... even the ubiquitous t-shirt. She automatically began moving towards him, her arms reaching...

And then she froze, scowling.

“No!” she said. “That won't work. Not now, not ever. Show yourself as you really are.”

The welcoming smile faded from Tom's face. Then he blurred into wavy light which then split into three slowly flickering and gradually darkened shadows. The shadows tried to establish forms and, for a moment, Phyllis thought she was seeing three old women dressed in simple brown coats. But the moment quickly passed and the shadows settled into wavering ovals of pale gray light possessing brown centers which flowed like liquid.

For almost a minute Phyllis quietly stood there, staring at the shadows, the energy cloud crackling and flickering to their right.

“What are you?” she finally asked.

What she heard was a collection of voices: a gentle symphony which didn't quite harmonize, but which carried the weight of a population in its words.

—There is no name for us. Names are temporal—

“You have to be *something*,” Phyllis pointed out.

—Philosophical concepts are temporal—

“The Weird Sisters.”

—For want of a better answer that is acceptable—

“Wait... you understand my language? My words?”

A pause. Then: **—Understand that this form and this presence is difficult for us. We are unaccustomed to this frame of existence, but it is necessary. We have listened and studied and we can communicate. It is difficult, but it is necessary—**

“What...” Phyllis paused, collecting her thoughts. “Are you alive? Are you a life form?”

—We have been pondering your concept of 'life'. Our concept of life is based on the eternal, the collectively immutable. Your understanding of life is based on the individually temporal. Understand that we exist in Time just as you exist in Space—

“Ohhh...”

—We move freely in Time just as you move freely in Space—

“Time creatures,” Phyllis whispered.

—This is the nature of our difficulty—

“I'm beginning to sympathize.”

—Your time is our space, just as our space is your time—

Her eyes on the Sisters, Phyllis addressed the ring. “Chaucer?”

“We must presume it is possible,” Chaucer replied. “Understand, Phyllis, that we are entering totally unfamiliar territory here. What you are referring to as 'The Weird Sisters' are manifestations of the unknown energy. If this energy is, indeed, fixed expressions of Time, then it explains why analysis has been eluding me.”

“Why are you here?” Phyllis asked the Sisters.

—Our presence is accidental. Exploration of this frame of existence has, to now, existed only on a purely theoretical level. But our universe was punctured. A breach occurred which brought us here

—
“Curvatures opposite those of normal spacetime,” Phyllis murmured.

—We do not understand—

“Don't make the mistake of thinking that I do. At least not completely.” Phyllis took a careful breath. “A scientist... scientists in this world, my world... created a machine which established a connection between universes. Possibly burrowing through yours.”

—Creating damage on a monumental scale—

“Not consciously. Not intentionally. The breach was accidental—”

—Regardless, it has resulted in difficult and potentially lethal steps on our part to try and survive and repair what has been damaged—

Phyllis knew that this was the wrong time (!) to lose patience. “But you're making an even bigger mess of it.” *Careful*, she warned herself.

She took a breath, working to calm herself. Tried again. “In trying to adapt to this world and repair the damage you're disrupting things as badly as they've been disrupted in your world.”

—We are not explorers. We are not scientists. We must make an attempt as best as possible and take a risk—

“But you don't *have* to,” Phyllis shouted.

—We must do something—

I'm taking the wrong approach, Phyllis' mind wept. *I'm gonna screw everything up if I don't watch out.* “What exactly are you doing to repair the damage?” she slowly asked.

—Collecting fragments and available elements. Attempting to knit them into a workable construction in the hopes that this will seal the breach. Notice the agglomeration to your left—

Phyllis looked at the energy cloud.

—A storm composed of available possibilities and potentials— the Sisters explained. **—It feeds upon Space and is the center of the breach. It is from this we shall construct a new and stable space—**

“Oh, God!” *Just as confused...* “But you're going about it the wrong *way*,” she tried to explain. “You're taking elements from different time periods. You're trying to fit together things that don't belong here. You can't do that.”

—We are familiar with Time. We are not familiar with Space—

“You're only aggravating the problem—”

—We must do what we can. We do not have access to all the answers—

My worst nightmare confirmed, Phyllis mentally moaned. *The Cosmos is in the hands of telemarketers.*

Once again she took a breath. Tried again. “Then at least let me try to help. I’m familiar with Space. *This* space. I can guide your work.”

Even though the Sisters were essentially without form or expression, Phyllis felt as if they were exchanging a look.

—The breach was due to your scientists—

“I can shut off the machine,” Phyllis promised. “If you can send me back to where I came from, then I can shut off the machine.”

She knew the Sisters were staring at her. “Okay,” she went on. “I admit I’ll need help. You’ve... taken the people from my time—”

—Incorrect. The storm fed upon them. Is feeding upon them. Will feed upon them—

“Whatever. You’ll have to somehow gather them together and send them back with me. I can explain to them what happened and they can switch off the machine. I... wait!”

—We are Time. We are Waiting—

My even worst nightmare. The Cosmos is in the hands of Zen telemarketers. “Why hasn’t the storm fed upon me?”

—The storm feeds upon living Space. You are different. You purposefully brought yourself through Time. The storm has smelled the scent of us upon you
—

So I actually did something smart. “Can you separate the others from this... collection?” Including Tom? “Can you send us back to the other end of where the breach occurred?”

Once again a glance between the Sisters. **—It may not be enough—**

“Ack... *why?*”

—We understand your explanation of the machine. But it does not represent the entire source of the breach. There is an even more unstable condition at work—

“What?”

A pause. **—Ithaca Foger—**

“Ithaca...” and then Phyllis closed her eyes. “Oh, *no!*”

Ithaca had fallen into a quantum black hole during the affair of the land speed record. And the Lord only knew whether or not she had been entirely destroyed when she had blown up the Space Friends solartron redoubt upon the Sun. If Phyllis' blind theorizing held water, and if Ithaca had been suspended in a state of time flux, then she was like gasoline thrown on a blazing fire. If she had somehow crossed the path formed by Roberts' machine—

“That's why you haven't been detecting her,” she told Chaucer.

“I am considering that possibility,” the ring replied.

—Ithaca Foger has been eaten by the storm. But she is an unstable element of Space. There is a chance the storm could detonate and destroy both your universe and ours—

Phyllis thought it over. “Can you remove her from the storm?”

—Yes. But that would only delay the inevitable. The storm would feed upon her again. That is why we must proceed—

Phyllis was waving a hand about. “Wait, wait, wait... and yes, I know you're Waiting. Remove her from the storm and send her somewhere else.”

—We do not understand—

Phyllis nodded at the storm. “You call this a collection of possibilities and potentials. You say that Ithaca is dangerous in this world. I appreciate that you don't comprehend space, but can you select a possibility... a world... where she wouldn't be dangerous? Where she'd be beyond the storm?”

—We do not know. As you pointed out, we do not understand Space—

“But I do. Or at least more than you. This is what I meant by letting me help. The storm exists only here, correct? In this world?”

—We are Time. We cannot presume—

“Which is my advantage, because I can. If you send Ithaca somewhere else, and if you send me and the others from my time back to where we belong and can shut off the machine, *then* would the storm dissipate?”

—We are Time. We cannot presume—

Enough! “Dammit, MAKE AN ATTEMPT! I possess knowledge. You possess ability. Between the two of us we can fix all of this, but you've got to try and reach out as much as I am. Show some courage. Show some initiative.”

—Time is not Courage. Time is not Initiative—

“And Time is gonna get a big kick in the butt if Time doesn't cooperate.” Phyllis took a breath. “Will you at least try? With all that's at stake between our two universes, will you at least do *that*?”

A pause which stretched long enough for Phyllis to feel her heart thumping in her chest.

—We will try a link of our mutual understandings

For all You have permitted, Thank You God! “Can you move objects through Time?”

—We are Time—

Right. “Can you restore the 'eaten' people?”

—Yes until the storm feeds on them again—

“Which, if this plan works, will hopefully dissolve the storm when the breach is closed.” Phyllis thought rapidly.

—Understand that it will be easier to move the Eaten Ones while they're in that state—

Phyllis nodded. “Right... right. Will they be restored at the other end? In my world?”

—Unless the storm reaches out and feeds on them again—

“Got it! Ah-hhhh...” *Think, think, think.* Phyllis suspected she wasn't going to get too many chances at this. “Do I... have to be eaten in order to travel back?”

—No—

“Good. So can you arrange an opening between this time and my time?”

—We are Time—

“Time sucks at conversation,” Phyllis muttered. “I'll need Ithaca restored. I'll need her to leave with me.”

—Acceptable—

Keep juggling the plates, girl. “Ah-hhhh... when the breach heals, will you be here long enough to make some changes?”

The Sisters shared another look. —**Describe the changes**—

“The breach, and the subsequent presence of both Ithaca and myself here, has caused damage to the existing timeline.” *Tom, I hope I’m describing this right,* Phyllis prayed. “Certainly you understand that.”

—**We do**—

“Good. Then, once the breach is healed, I want you to reset this universe.”

—**Describe reset**—

“Ah-hhh, put everything back... oh, I don't know. Yes! I do! Put everything back to a point eight or so months previous.” *A good while before Ithaca arrived.* “Can you do that? Do you understand my concept of time?”

—**It is crippled, but readable. The reset is acceptable**—

“Do you promise?”

—**We are Time. We cannot lie**—

Which takes care of Tom, Chow and... “Omigod!”

—**We do not understand**—

Phyllis was biting her lip. *Oh Lord...* “Do you understand Mary Nestor?”

—**We understand what you are describing**—

“She's not a *what*, she's a...” Phyllis closed her eyes, collecting herself. Tried again. “Is it possible,” she slowly asked, “that she's been somehow... damaged... by the breach?”

No immediate answer. Then: —**Not known**—

Dammit. “I need her restored,” Phyllis insisted. “Healed. Changed.”

—**We do not understand**—

Phyllis wasn't certain she did either. “I need her... *different* from the way she is now. Especially when the reset occurs. I need her...” *But how? But how?*

Her eyes fell on the storm. “Can you manipulate conditions within the possibilities in the storm? What I mean is, can you

extract or copy certain elements and transfer them to others?”

The Sisters seemed reluctant. —**Possible**—

“Okay,” Phyllis said. “Show me possibilities of Mary Nestor here in the storm.”

Images began flickering within the energy cloud. Watching, Phyllis saw various aspects of Mary Nestor. Saw her laughing... smiling... blushing...

“A bit of that,” she said. “And some of that. And yeah... some of *that* would be nice.”

—**We can only collect so much**— the Sisters reported.
—**There is the risk of further breach**—

Phyllis continued staring into the storm. “Are you familiar with the elements I've been pointing out? Can you identify them in others?”

—**Yes. They are admittedly interesting**—

Phyllis took a breath. Let it out. “Take a sample from me.”

No answer, and she looked at the Sisters. “Well?”

—**We understand the request, and it is possible.**
We understand the need to preserve your timeline—

“Will it hurt me? Reduce me?”

—**We do not believe so. You are describing what you refer to as 'spirit'**—

“Mmm... maybe.”

—**Then we understand. 'Spirit' is infinite**—

“Then what's the problem? Go ahead and do it.”

—**We do not recognize if you have the authority**—

Phyllis blinked. “There's Authority in Time?”

—**You are trying to heal your timeline. But you are also possibly interfering with your timeline's normal development by doing this. Surely you understand**—

Phyllis was afraid she did. Deep down inside her was the troubling thought that what she considered as being *her* timeline was actually wrong. Perhaps, in the actual scheme of things, Mary Nestor was meant to spend her days cowering fearfully in a dark corner.

She turned to face the Sisters. “I'm going to give you a

lesson in how people in my world operate.”

The Sisters seemed to indicate interest.

“I am not authorized to make such changes,” Phyllis slowly explained. “But I will accept responsibility for them.”

Moments passed.

—So be it—

A flash of light, and Ithaca suddenly appeared beside her.

She looked around, blinking her eyes. “Hi,” she said to Phyllis. “Wow! Did I miss everything?”

Smiling calmly, Phyllis touched the girl's shoulder.

—Phyllis Newton—

Phyllis looked back at the Sisters.

—Your plan may succeed. It may not. Our cooperation may save our respective universes. It may not. Please understand—

Phyllis' smile remained in place. “Have faith.”

—We do not understand Faith. Faith is temporal. So is your overriding motivation for all this. You do not call it Survival. You call it 'love'. Love is temporal —

Phyllis slowly shook her head. “And that's where you're mistaken. Love is eternal.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: "...This Parting Was Well Made."

Phyllis initially felt a twinge of guilt at stealing the Cadillac Seville out of the Foger's garage. She managed to bury her concern by reminding herself that, if the Sisters did their job properly, then everything would be sent back eight months, and the theft would never occur.

"A runabout," she remarked. "I'll steal it. NO ONE WILL EVER KNOW!"

Not even an odd look from Ithaca, which made Phyllis wonder if the joke had gone over the girl's head. Had Ithaca ever watched cartoons?

Phyllis dominated much of the conversation during the ride back to Shopton, relating her meeting with the Sisters and what had been planned.

"So these... creatures... exist in Time?" Ithaca asked.

"As near as I could determine," Phyllis replied. "I'm still trying to figure it out, and I bet I'll be doing so when I'm old and have gone gray." *Presuming my hair grows back out.*

Ithaca was frowning. "One thing, though. I can understand what you told me about how all this happened. But why here? Why Shopton, and at this time?"

"I think for that," Phyllis said, "I can blame T—my fiance'. He was working at an installation in Arizona. I'll bet my last nickel that he had sensing instruments set up here in Shopton and was going to use them as targets for the transmissions from Arizona. The fact that the transmissions ended up producing a time warp was probably one those accidents he's occasionally famous for."

Ithaca was gazing out the window. "So you're a time traveler."

Phyllis kept quiet.

"And that's how come you know so much about me." She kept staring out the window. "You knew what sort of dangerous person I was."

"Ithaca—"

"You knew I wasn't ever married to Tom." In a softer voice.

Phyllis tried to concentrate on driving down Carlopa Street. The wetness in her eyes was making it a bit difficult.

“Is Tom happy? In your world?”

Thoughts of Tom Senior, and Mary. The two of them together. Phyllis had seen them argue on occasion. But, more often than that, she had seen the smiles and the laughs and the closeness between them. *And all because of me*, her soul cried. *Gentle Jesus, everything in my life has been due to improvisation. I've constructed my mother-in-law from scratch!*

I've gambled so much. So much. Please, Jesus, let it have been the right decisions.

“He's happy,” Phyllis said in as steady a voice as she could manage. “He's very happy.”

Ithaca sat back in her seat. “Then I'm happy.”

No more conversation until Phyllis parked at the edge of Valigursky Woods. Leaving the car behind, she and Ithaca began strolling into the dark forest, heading for the spot where the Sisters explained their departure point would be waiting. Phyllis thought it a rather appropriate touch.

“I still find it sort of amazing that you had a talk with Time,” Ithaca murmured.

“It sort of blitzes me out, too,” Phyllis admitted. “I don't know what worries me more: that the Sisters weren't able to speak our language literally, or that they could. I mean, I've thought of all the cliches I've ever said or heard. 'Time waits for no one'. But it's wrong. Time *does* wait. Time *is* waiting.”

“And Time doesn't lie.”

Phyllis nodded, praying it was so.

“M'sorry I missed it.”

“Kind of sorry you did, too.” *Or maybe it was for the best*, Phyllis thought. Maybe she wouldn't have been able to make the choices she'd made if Ithaca had been present. Glancing over at her, Phyllis noted the serious thoughtfulness on the girl's face. “Sorry that it's coming to an end?”

A shrug. Then: “Thank you.”

“You're welcome. For what?”

A sigh. “For all the help you've given me.”

Phyllis snorted. "Not all that much." And I've still held so much back.

"You hated me," Ithaca pointed out. "But we managed to work together. You were afraid of me. To your way of thinking, I was something horrible. Destructive." Ithaca looked at Phyllis. "You don't anymore."

"You were chaotic," Phyllis said.

Ithaca's eyes were cautious. Searching.

"Here you're interesting." Phyllis managed a smile. "A considerable improvement."

Ithaca copied Phyllis' small smile. "That's something at least."

"I've changed, too," Phyllis pointed out.

"Oh?"

"I like you."

Ithaca's smile grew, but with a shade of wistfulness. "And now we're going to be heading in different directions."

"Very possibly."

"Um. Pity. I think I could use a friend wherever I end up."

Phyllis thought it over. "We've both looked into the possibilities awaiting us. I can't say with any firm guarantee, but I suspect that you'll find friends wherever you go."

"I hope so."

So do I, Phyllis fervently thought. She crossed her fingers, hoping that Ithaca's next stop wasn't at the beginning of the land speed record adventure. Or worse: at the beginning of the Space Friends solartron threat. It'd be so unfair. "Ithaca..."

"Um?"

"I suspect that, wherever or whenever you or I go, we'll be meeting again."

"On good terms?"

"I'd like that."

Ithaca once again studied her face. That penetrating reading look. "So would I... Lee." This followed by an enigmatic smile.

Phyllis was about to form a reply, but her attention was

suddenly drawn to a blue flicker of light among the trees. Accompanied by Ithaca she walked towards it, eventually reaching a small open space surrounded by cottonwoods. Within the space was an oval of shifting blue light. Taller than a man, and about twice as wide, the oval serenely floated, fires dancing within it like sparkles from a diamond. The fires seemed to reach out towards the girls, beckoning.

“So,” Phyllis said. “Our ride home.”

“Our ride elsewhere,” Ithaca murmured. She suddenly looked back.

Phyllis caught the look. “He’ll be all right,” she said.

“I loved him.”

“I know.”

Ithaca turned her face to Phyllis, her eyes mournful now. “I’m tempted to remain,” she said. “But the Sisters will begin their work after you leave. Everything will change. He’ll no longer love me. He might not even *know* me.”

She then looked at the oval. “There’s a chance on the other side of that. You said you saw me being married. You saw me happy.”

“Yes.” It was the only thing Phyllis knew to say.

“You’ve got to go home and get married. I’ve got to go and... take a chance.”

“Just because I’m getting married doesn’t mean I’ll stop taking chances,” Phyllis pointed out. *Especially with Tom.*

“But you’ll be happy.” Ithaca gazed thoughtfully at the oval for several moments, then she looked back at Phyllis. “Do you think I’ll ever be happy?”

“I think so,” Phyllis said, believing it. “After all, we have time.”

Reaching out she took Ithaca’s hand in hers. Then, together, they leaped into the oval and promptly vanished.

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