

MARY SWIFT and the Cossack Gold

A Swift Generations Novel

By Michael Wolff

Cover by the author

A Wolff-In-Exile Publication

Dedication

To Charlie Campbell, for catching errors.

And especially to Scott Lockwood and Tom Nichol, for babysitting.

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The British Government uncovers a hoard of gold believed to have been lost by Russians during an expedition to Africa years earlier. With diplomatic relations between England and the Bolshevik government in Russia at a standstill verging on animosity, and with various unscrupulous elements targeting the treasure for their own gain, the British Home Secretary calls Sherlock Holmes out of retirement to advise on how best to protect the gold until a diplomatic solution can be reached.

Holmes arrives at a plan, and personally has it carried out, but dies before he can reveal what he has done.

Nearly a century later a mystery begun by the “World's Greatest Detective” falls into the hands of the World's Greatest... *Housewife*?

Yes! It is the mother of Tom Swift, wife of Tom Swift, Sr. and more than patient mother of Sandy who takes up the call ,whether she wants to or not!

Accompanied by Helen Newton, Mary Swift takes center stage in a "Swift Generations" adventure that sends our heroines racing across continents as they deal with death traps, devious masterminds, vicious assailants... and meatloaf.

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Chapter One: Unexpected Guests.

Helen Newton tapped at the door. “Mary? WOO-oooo! Are you here?”

“Upstairs,” called a familiar voice from within. “C'mon in.”

Opening the door, Helen cautiously stepped into the house, looking around at the collection of various sized cardboard boxes all about. She had never been in the house before ... hadn't really spent a lot of time at all on Ditko Street ... but this was where Mary had disappeared off to, so Helen shrugged off all sense of the unfamiliar and forged onward.

Much later she would recall her attitude with no small amount of irony.

Walking up the stairs she followed the sounds of activity, finally peeking around a doorway. “There you are.”

From where she was sitting on the floor, Mary Swift smiled up at her friend, her brown eyes sparkling. A pert, five-foot six inch woman in her late forties, her blonde hair bobbed as she continued with the task of busily sorting papers from one cardboard box to another. As with the parts of the house Helen had seen, the boxes were the only items present.

“I dropped by the house,” Helen explained, “and Sestina signed to me that you had come here.” Entering the room she crouched by her long-time friend. Compared to Mary, Helen was a woman almost the same age but a bit taller, possessing brunette locks and green eyes and a build which effortlessly blended the matronly with the curvaceous. “Where exactly are we and, if you can tolerate my usual penchant for nosiness, what the heck are you up to?”

A slight shadow passed across Mary's face. “Well ... this was the house of Dr. Larry Perov: an Enterprises scientist,” Mary making a reference to Swift Enterprises: the centerpiece of a globe (and space) spanning scientific and engineering research concern. Based in Shopton, New York, Enterprises was a joint creation of her husband and her son, and was an offshoot of the venerable Swift Construction Company.

Helen's ears caught the tense used in the sentence. “This 'was' his house?”

“Yes,” the shadow lengthened on Mary's expression. “Dr. Perov unfortunately died a week ago.”

“Oh dear!”

Mary shrugged. “Well, he was in his late seventies and, if I heard things right, in not the best of health. But he'd been working for Enterprises practically from the get-go, and so managed to acquire and live in this house.”

Helen looked around at the boxes, recalling the bareness of the house. “So his furniture and everything got moved out?”

A nod from Mary who had resumed examining the papers before her. “His will didn't stipulate any disposition for his furniture, but he had signed up for the Enterprises Employee Assist Plan, so the movers have been in and out, removing the furniture and taking it over to storage.”

“What? No family?”

“Apparently none whatsoever. And Sherman checked twice.”

Helen considered it. “That's sad.”

“It is. And, from what Sherman mentioned, Dr. Perov had been a top-flight research scientist here at Enterprises. A steady, solid employee.”

“Still sad.”

“I know.” Mary sighed. “All of his personal effects have been boxed up, and the movers will be back for it later. Once Legal goes over the will with a fine-toothed comb, Dody will tell us what to do with it.”

“Um. And what're you doing?”

“Oh! These boxes,” and here Mary nodded at the boxes which were flanking her, “were holding all of Dr. Perov's papers. Most of them were technical and they needed sorting through, and I volunteered to give them a look-over.”

Helen blinked. “And you can understand technical documents?”

Mary's eyes rose to meet Helen's.

“Not that you're a dummy,” Helen quickly assured her. “It's just—”

“Admittedly I'm not an honors graduate from MIT,” Mary replied. “But I've seen enough technical material from both Tom and Tomjay to where I recognize Enterprises code prefixes. I'm just making a rough sort, and the Metallurgy Department can go over them later.”

“Dr. Perov was a metallurgist?”

Mary nodded.

Helen looked around the room again. “I saw the pumpkin back at the house. I’m surprised you didn’t bring Jet along to help.”

“An admirable idea,” Mary said, considering another sheet of paper. “But I could either concentrate on what I’m doing now, or concentrate on Jet. I don’t think I could do both. And Jet has definitely inherited Sandy’s cannonball personality.”

“Can I at least offer help?”

“Please. You can keep me company and, if we get through the rest of this pile in a few hours, we can do lunch.”

Settling down on the carpet near Mary, Helen reached for a sheaf of papers and began frowning at them.

Mary figured out that she was looking at a requisition for lab equipment and put the document aside. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard from the Wandering Husbands yet?”

“Ned called,” Helen said. “He and your better half will probably be out in California for the rest of the week. We then engaged in a bit of mutual heavy breathing which, for the benefit of your innocent ears, I’ll refrain from detailing.”

“Many thanks,” Mary murmured. Both her husband and Helen’s were currently visiting the Enterprises Advanced Technical Concepts Facility ... better known as “SwiftTech” (and, less formally, as “Enterprises West”) ... located in southern California. “How’s it going?”

“Well ... Mr. Fido—”

“Phydeaux’.”

Helen blinked again. “You can hear the difference?”

“Yes. I can.”

“Well ... anyway, Mr. PHY-deaux,” and here Helen stuck her tongue out at Mary, “says he’d be more than willing to make that nice Dr. Benton a full-time assistant administrator. The problem, however, is that Dr. Benton seems to be spending more time solving mysteries, and getting involved in dangerous situations, than in research.”

“Um,” Mary remarked, reaching for another sheet. “Amazing how that sort of thing tends to infect people associated with Enterprises.”

Helen nodded agreement. Then her expression brightened. “Oh! And speaking of Neds, I almost forgot. I also got a call from Carson this

morning. Nancy's getting married.”

Mary looked up, delighted. “So Ned finally got around to asking her?”

“Yes. He's getting his MBA and'll be taking over the insurance business.”

“*That'll* be interesting,” Mary considered. “Nancy settling down to the life of a businessman's wife.”

“If she does settle down,” Helen pointed out. “I'm often surprised her and Sandy never got together on an adventure.”

“Please,” Mary said. “I've been running a slowly losing battle with gray hair as it is.”

Not that it's noticeable, Helen thought. “Well ... Nancy's been more the whodunit type, whereas Sandy usually leaves scorched earth in her wake.”

Mary produced a small whine.

“Sorry,” Helen said, although the small smile she wore belied it. “At least Sandy isn't in the habit of causing *too* many explosions nowadays.”

“From your lips to God's ears.”

Helen once again glanced up from her work. “They haven't decided yet?”

“Oh they've probably decided,” Mary said. “They're doubtless waiting for a decent opportunity to drop the bomb on me.” The current subject of conversation was the fact that Sandra, her grown daughter, was planning on accompanying her husband Bud on an expedition to help establish a permanent space station in orbit around Venus. An idea which, Mary had to honestly admit, didn't altogether sit too well inside her.

Sensing her friend's disquiet, Helen tried to stem a deflating mood. “Well, so you and Joanna'll get to arm wrestle over who babysits Jet while the ... kids are away.”

This time it was Mary who sensed a slight darkening of mood, and she suspected her and Helen were possessed by a similar thought. Namely: that it went beyond the possible departure of Sandy and Bud to Venus for half a year. The two women were sharing a much more mingled woe. Mary's son ... Tom Swift Jr... . and Helen's daughter Phyllis (now Mrs. Tom Swift Jr.) were currently with a scientific party on the Nuclear World of Zea: in actuality an enormous automated alien starship which made regular trips through the local stellar neighborhood.

Zea wasn't scheduled to return to the solar system for another sixteen months ... and the trip was giving Tom and Phyllis an opportunity to extend their honeymoon ... but such knowledge did little to lessen the ache both mothers felt.

“I swear,” Mary declared, perhaps a bit more grumpily than she intended, “when Tomjay gets back, I'm going to sit on him until he comes up with a working method of instantaneous interstellar communication.”

Helen quietly agreed, the two women suspecting how this one trip into the depths of space would hardly be Tom's last. And where Tom went ...

Helen then looked towards the open door, frowning. “You hear something?”

“Probably the movers returning,” Mary remarked, shuffling some papers into a neat stack. “They're going to try and get the boxes cleared out and in storage before evening.” Hearing the approaching footsteps she looked up to give a greeting ...

Only to see two people who were definitely *not* the movers. At least Mary hadn't seen the men before. And she instinctively felt that the movers wouldn't be pointing pistols directly at her and Helen.

“Helen—”

But one of the men fired, and Mary spun into darkness.

Chapter Two: Room with a View.

Mary slowly awakened, snuggling more within the sheets.

Then her eyes flew open and she sat up. She was lying on an enormous (and, a part of her admitted, rather comfortable) bed. The bed was part of a very nicely decorated wooden floored room, with a sofa and dining area to the left, and doors to the right which spelled out “Hotel” to her. And not a cheap one at that.

Letting out a groan she tiredly rubbed at her eyes.

“Fudgesicles,” she muttered. “I’ve been kidnapped. Again!”

Helen was blissfully slumbering on the other side of the bed, and Mary immediately noted that they were both still dressed in the casual outfits they’d been wearing while at Perov’s house. *Well*, her mind commented, *thank the Lord for small mercies*.

Reaching over, she poked at Helen’s shoulder. “Okay, Helen. Wake up. C’mom ... up and at ‘em.”

Helen squirmed away from Mary’s finger.

“C’mom, Helen.”

The only audible response was a small half groan/half growl, followed by a sleepy: “Tell Miss Perkman she can go take a flying leap at the—”

Mary dropped a pillow over Helen’s head. Sighing, she then swung herself out of the bed, pausing when she felt a slight itch at her hip. Reaching down, her fingers found something and she tugged at it, uncovering a slim black needle.

She grimaced at her discovery. *Drugged*.

Beyond the dining area were floor-to-ceiling curtains which stretched across the width of the room. Curious, Mary walked over to them and carefully parted them for a peek beyond.

And she promptly closed them.

“No. I don’t believe it.”

Slowly counting to five she parted the curtains again for another look.

It wasn’t her imagination. The curtains looked out onto large glass

doors which led to a generous balcony. Beyond that was a view of an extremely lush garden which was currently enjoying the light of a bright sun in a cloudless sky.

Beyond the garden was a glimpse of desert ... and the Great Pyramids of Egypt.

Mary replayed the thought in her mind. *The Pyramids of Egypt ...*

A small moan from behind, and she turned to see Helen sitting up in bed, rubbing at her temples. Two bleary eyes looked at Mary, and then examined the surroundings. “Oh, cry me a frickin’ river. Are we kidnapped *again*?”

“Looks like it,” Mary said. “And be careful when you move around. I found what I think was a knockout dart still stuck in me.”

Helen performed a quick self-examination, going “Ow!” when she discovered the dart, and then “Ick!” as she tugged it free of her, tossing it away.

Experiencing a sudden thought, Mary searched herself more thoroughly. Her phone was missing, and she hadn’t brought her handbag into Perov’s home. “Phone’s gone.”

“So’s mine,” Helen said. Getting up from the bed she joined Mary at the curtains. “Where are we?” she asked, reaching for them.

“You won’t believe it.”

“Oh nonsense, Mary. You’re as bad as San—”

She had opened the curtains and froze. “I don’t believe it.”

“Told you.”

“Egypt!” Helen exclaimed. “Those are the Great Pyramids.”

“Unless they’ve grown legs and walked out of Cairo.”

Helen was now giving the room a much more awake look-over. “Oh, I think I know this place,” she said. “We’re in the ... yeah. This looks like the Mena House Hotel in Cairo. One of their Pyramid View rooms.”

“You sure?”

“Well, two things tell me I’m right. The first is that it looks like the room Ned and I had when we stopped over in Cairo on our trip to Greece.”

Mary frowned. “You certainly don’t think Ned would—”

“Oh no,” Helen quickly assured her. “Ned never would. At least he wouldn't think of bringing you along.”

Let it lie, Mary said to herself. *Let it lie*. “You said there were two things which told you we're in the Mena House Hotel. What's the other one?”

“Well,” Helen said, moving to the nearby table, “there's this folder which says 'Mena House Hotel' prominently on the cover.”

“Oh. Yeah. Good one, Helen.”

Helen was leafing through the folder. “Oh nice. They still have *fatayer* on the Room Service menu.”

Mary, in the meantime, had spotted something on a bedside table and made a beeline for it. “Telephone!”

“If you're going to order,” Helen said, “I'd like *labneh* with olives, please.”

Closing her eyes only briefly, Mary grabbed at the phone, only to find no sound of connection. She poked at several buttons on the phone, but still no result. “It's dead,” she muttered, slamming the instrument down. “Should've figured.”

Helen was still leafing through the folder. “How long would it have taken to get us from Shopton to Cairo? I mean at a minimum?”

Mary frowned to herself. “This is where having Tom here would be even more useful than usual. But I guess we're about ... what? Five thousand miles away from home?”

Looking up at her, Helen raised an eyebrow.

Mary nodded. “Right. Right. Well ... one of our supersonic planes could get here in, I think, two hours? Wait! It was late morning when we got shot, and it's daytime here now. And I should know the time difference between Egypt and New York.”

“Actually, I can't imagine why you should know,” Helen replied. “The point I wanted to make, though, is that it won't take long for either of us to be counted as missing.”

“True. The question is how long will it take before we're tracked?”

“There is that,” Helen admitted.

First handled by the redoubtable Harlan Ames, and then later carried on by his son Sherman, security at Swift Enterprises had always been

something approaching the level of an art form, or an Olympic event. Especially when it came to protecting the members of the Swift family and their immediate associates. Electronic amulets had been tried, then electronic cards, and then subcutaneous microchips which featured both GPS tracking and medical telemetry. Each method had possessed clear advantages, and each had been subsequently rejected when this or that drawback had been uncovered.

Both women currently carried updated versions of the microchip system which, whenever they entered or left their homes, or Swift Enterprises, caused a radio frequency identification signal to be sent to the Enterprises Security Section. The security computers at Enterprises held constantly updated data concerning the usual destinations and travel habits of both women and, if a signal did not arrive within a certain amount of time, an alarm would then sound and a tracking instruction would be broadcast in all directions, including sensors on board the Swift space station and throughout the constellation of “Swiftsats” which orbited the Earth. The system was believed to be the best, as well as the least obtrusive ... and Mary was currently imagining Sherman Ames tearing his hair out.

“I give it about four hours before an alarm goes off,” she considered.

Helen thought it over. “Sounds right. Now answer me this.”

“Sure.”

“Why are we being so calm about being *in freakin' Cairo?*”

Mary stared at her.

“Sorry,” Helen said, closing her eyes and massaging her temples. “Slight panic attack.”

“Understandable,” Mary replied. “But, to answer your question, if we've learned anything from our husbands and the kids, it's that panic usually doesn't produce anything in the way of useful results. In the second place: we've been kidnapped before—”

“Really comforting thought, Mary.”

Mary's mouth snapped shut for a bit. “To continue,” she eventually went on, “at least our current abductors are following the usual pattern of putting us up in a decent hotel.”

“Good point.” Helen frowned. “You don't think it's the Germans again?”

“Why would they bring us to Cairo?”

“Mary ... I don't know how kidnappers think. We'll have to wait until they show up here and personally explain.”

It was at that moment the door opened, and four men quickly walked in.

Mary glared at Helen. “Well thank you, Helen.”

“Don't yell at *me*.”

But Mary's attention had returned to the newcomers. Two of them she immediately recognized as the gunmen at Perov's house. All four of the men were dressed on short sleeved shirts, slacks and what looked like leather shoes. They were dark haired, dark eyed, seemed to be the same age as Mary (or younger), looked to be in good shape and, to Mary's immediate relief, hadn't entered the room with guns blazing, or screaming profanities in her direction.

In fact, one of the newcomers, a wiry specimen possessing a Van Dyke beard, seemed genuinely surprised to see both Mary and Helen, and he turned to the other three and started rapidly speaking in a foreign language. Mary didn't consider herself a linguist (except for the French she had learned in school, having received an A- for her efforts), but decades of experience taught her to recognize an eastern European accent when she heard it.

Helen (who had barely squeaked by with a C+) moved closer to Mary. “Is that Russian?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” murmured Mary, still watching and listening, “but that sounds close.”

The agitated man now turned back to the women and took a careful step closer. “Please excuse me,” he said in accented English. “I have to be certain. You ladies are Mary Swift, and Helen Newton?”

Helen's mouth fell open. “You don't even know who you *kidnapped*?”

Turning back to the others, the man delivered half a minute more of invective. When he once again faced the women he seemed thoroughly upset, running a hand through his hair. “Ladies ... Mrs. Swift, Mrs. Newton ... I am absolutely and completely sorry and must sincerely apologize for all this. I had sent my agents to Shopton to pick up someone else entirely. They didn't find who they were looking for, and they felt that taking the both of you would be a reasonable substitute.”

A polite kidnapper, Mary thought. *That's a pleasant change.* "You were ... hoping to kidnap someone else, Mister ..."

"Oh! Please excuse me." The man straightened up. "I am Oleksiy Levchenko: Hetman among the Kaimanove Cossacks."

Helen's face brightened. "Oh! Like Yul Brynner in *Taras Bulba*?"

This rated a snicker from one of the other men, which was immediately silenced by a dark look from Levchenko. "Not actually quite, Mrs. Newton," he said, turning back to the women, "but I appreciate the reference. No, my tribe is rather ancient, yet small."

Mary slightly raised a hand. "Okay, let's get back to the here and now for a moment. Mister ..."

"Levchenko."

"Levchenko. Thank you. You, or your people, were trying to kidnap an American citizen?"

Levchenko appeared uncomfortable. "Yes, Mrs. Swift. And no. It's rather ... complicated."

Mary crossed her arms. "Imagine my astonishment," she said dryly.

"Yes," Levchenko agreed, albeit from behind a sheepish look. "We were wanting someone who is living in America. But he is definitely not a citizen."

A light dawned in Mary's head. "You were after Larry Perov."

"Again, Mrs. Swift, yes and no. The man you know as Larry Perov is, in reality, Lavrentiy Perov. And, despite what you might have thought, or been told, he entered your country under false pretenses almost fifty years ago."

Mary nodded. "Uh huh. And I'm still waiting for what this has to do with kidnapping Helen and me."

"Please," Levchenko pleaded. "Hear me out. I am sincere in my regret that you and Mrs. Newton have become involved in this. Please trust me when I say that my associates and myself mean you no harm. Perhaps I can begin making some small effort in amends if I explain to the two of you why these things have happened, and why Perov is so important to us."

"That'd be a start."

"It has recently been discovered that Perov was the guardian of a secret

which is vital to the future of my tribe. It involves the whereabouts of a missing fortune in gold.”

Chapter Three: Sherlock Holmes and the Problem of the Russian Gold.

Mary opened her mouth, closed it, then tried again. “In that case, Mr. Levchenko, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I have some very bad news. Dr. Perov died a week ago.”

Upon hearing the news, the expressions on the faces of Levchenko and his men became stricken (one of them whispering something to the other, who whispered back, a move which told Mary that not everyone in the group was well versed in English).

“He passed away from medical complications in a Shopton hospital,” Mary went on, deciding that a sharp knife cut quickest and healed sooner (or so she heard Katherine Hepburn once remark in a movie).

Levchenko looked especially tragic. “*Chjort!*” he murmured.

One of his men spoke to him, and Levchenko made a silencing gesture, the set of his body indicating that he was deep in thought.

“I'm sorry,” he finally said to Mary and Helen. “I'm ... sorry.” And then he seemed to suddenly snap out of at least the lowest levels of his mood and looked at the women as if seeing them for the first time. “And I have absolutely no talent as a host,” he said.

“Not when your technique begins with kidnapping,” Helen muttered.

Mary shsshed her.

“*May I at least offer you ladies some refreshment? A small meal?*” Levchenko asked.

“Ah, yes,” Mary replied. “That would be fine, thank you.”

“*Mary,*” Helen hissed.

Levchenko gave orders in Ukrainian to the two of his men who had been standing in the background, and they nodded and left the room. “I've sent them to bring up some food from Room Service,” he explained.

So the phones in the room are definitely disconnected, Mary thought. Then: “What?” she said to Helen, who was desperately trying to catch her attention.

“You're just gonna let the guys who kidnapped us bring us a snack?”

“Well I don't know about you, but I don't have any money with me, and can't afford Room Service—”

“I mean, these guys are *dangerous*—”

“Oh, pooh! Mr. Levchenko seems all right, plus he said he and his people mean us no harm. This has doubtless been something of a silly misunderstanding ...”

Helen stared at her.

“And I'd like to at least give him a chance to explain himself and tell us his story. Plus I'm hungry.”

Levchenko moved a bit closer. “Please, Mrs. Newton,” he said. “At least allow me a chance to explain. Naturally I'll make any arrangements you wish to insure that you and Mrs. Swift are safely returned home.”

Helen glared at him. “You realize, of course, that my husband is going to beat the crap out of you when he catches up with all of us?”

Levchenko didn't reply.

“He can do it, too,” Helen insisted. “He's got muscles. I know, I've counted each and every one of them. He'll go 'wham wham' all over you.” She emphasized her point by smacking a fist several times into her open palm. “And that's not counting what Mary's husband will do.”

“Helen—,” Mary began.

“I mean it,” Helen went on. “Tom Swift is a raging whirlwind of revenge when he wants to be. Just ask Mary. Go on ... ask her.”

“I will certainly hold myself answerable to both your husbands in regards to your safety, as well as for the consequences of my actions,” Levchenko solemnly said.

Taking Helen's elbow, Mary guided her friend over towards the dining area.

“Wham wham,” Helen repeated over her shoulder.

Sitting down at the table, the women arranged flatware and table linen to their liking (Mary watching to make certain Helen didn't try to hide a knife somewhere). She was about to ask Levchenko to begin his story when the two men he had sent out returned, pushing a cart before them.

“Well, say this for Cossacks,” Mary remarked, “they make great waiters.”

Helen sniffed and was silent as dishes were placed on the table.

“Look,” Mary pointed out, “there's *dakka*. At least I think it's *dakka*. You told me you liked it. And kebab ... and if this is that fried liver dish I once tried—”

“*Kebda*,” Helen muttered.

“—then I want some of that.” Mary began serving herself, with Helen eventually following suit. In the meantime the men arranged themselves on the spare chairs and the sofa.

“All right,” Mary finally said, pouring some *koshary* tea, “you're on, Mr. Levchenko.”

“Yes,” Levchenko replied, nodding. “It's something of an involved story, and it begins in 1889 when a Russian expedition arrived on the coast of what is today the country of Djibouti. You see ... for quite some time, Imperial Russia had desired a port of call located somewhere between the Black Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

“In 1888 an adventurer, one Nikolay Ivanovitch Achinov, convinced Tsar Alexander III that he had acquired a permanent lease for some property in Djibouti, courtesy of the Sultan of Tadjoura.”

Mary and Helen paused in their eating, both of them looking at Levchenko.

“I take it—” Helen began.

“The claim was not quite as legitimate as Achinov described,” Levchenko admitted. “Even worse, the area he had chosen for the colony was still pretty much under French control. That did not stop him, however, from arriving in Djibouti in 1889. With him were two hundred Cossacks. Most of them were Terek, but the rest were Kaimanove. With this force, Achinov occupied an abandoned Egyptian fort on the Gulf of Tadjoura.

“From the outset, Achinov ran into trouble. He experienced difficulty keeping the Tereks in line, and they repeatedly raided the surrounding villages. News of this spread, and the French soon became aware of the presence of a Russian fort in their territory. The incident created something of a considerable diplomatic strain between Paris and St. Petersburg. In spite of all this, though, Achinov tried to consolidate and legitimize his project and requested aid from Russia. He managed to interest enough backers to send him twenty-five thousand gold rubles. In the currency of your country that would be—”

“One hundred and twenty-four thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars,” Helen said.

She had the attention of everyone in the room and blinked. “That's assuming we're talking about the ruble that went into production in the mid-1880s. I'll admit that I may have fudged my exchange rate ...”

Everyone was still staring at her.

“Well, I watch The Discovery Channel,” she said.

Smiling, Mary nudged Helen's ankle with a foot underneath the table. “You're getting caught up in this, aren't you?”

Shrugging, Helen helped herself to more *dakka*.

“Regardless of your 'fudging', Mrs. Newton,” Levchenko said, “and that's a very nice term, I'll have to remember that ... it was still a great deal of gold which was involved. Gold which was collected and subsequently sent to Achinov.”

He once again had the attention of Mary and Helen.

“Sent'?” Mary asked.

“What about 'arrived'?” Helen added.

Levchenko sighed. “That is where the real problem appears. The gold left St. Petersburg on schedule, bound for Odessa where it was supposed to be placed on a ship heading for Alexandria. It has never been determined what happened, but the gold never reached Odessa.”

Helen went “Oops!”

“Another good term,” Levchenko said. “The disappearance of the gold was very unfortunate for Achinov, but even more unfortunate for the Kaimanove Cossacks.”

Mary frowned. “Why?”

“We know that the Kaimanove who had accompanied Achinov to Africa petitioned the Tsar for the right to safely escort the gold to Odessa. The Tsar agreed, and a group of my people accompanied the gold on its way. They were present when the gold disappeared—”

“Oh-hhhhh,” Mary slowly moaned, “and they were left holding the bag.”

“I'm learning quite a bit of interesting English today,” Levchenko considered. “But yes, suspicion immediately fell upon my people. Ever

since then the Kaimanove Cossacks have been persecuted, even hunted down by the Russian government; regardless of who was in power.

“The story now moves ahead to 1921. British Intelligence raided an establishment in London which was believed to be the headquarters for a clandestine group of international smugglers. They found no members of the group they were hunting for, but in their investigation of the warehouse they uncovered a hoard of Russian gold coins.”

“The missing gold,” Mary breathed.

“Even so,” agreed Levchenko. “Its origin was confirmed by a Russian expatriate who was living in London at the time, and was in the employ of British Intelligence. How the gold got to London from Russia was a mystery then, and it remains a mystery to this day.

“The British government made an immediate attempt to return the gold to Russia. By that time, however, the Bolshevik Revolution had already taken place, and diplomatic relations between Great Britain and the Soviet government were ... shall we say ... at a delicate level. While matters were being straightened out, the British government found itself with a fortune of gold on its hands. A fortune which was not only potentially embarrassing on a diplomatic level, but was also attracting the attention of criminal elements throughout Europe. Until a solution was found with Russia, the gold had to be hidden where it couldn't be discovered.”

“Neat trick,” Helen said.

“And then the British Home Secretary, Edward Shortt, came up with what he felt was a neat answer. He went to the one man he believed could arrive at a clever solution and called Sherlock Holmes out of retirement.”

Helen heard Mary's sharp intake of breath and closed her eyes. *Oh no*
...

“Holmes agreed to take on the problem and eventually devised a way to hide the gold until such time as it could be returned to Russia,” Levchenko continued. “When pressed for details on the plan, Holmes assured the Home Secretary that the gold would be quite safe from theft, and thoroughly out of reach of anyone.”

“Wait,” Mary broke in. “You said 1921. Holmes died in 1921.”

Levchenko nodded. “Yes, Mrs. Swift. Holmes passed away not too long after he started working on the problem. According to his notes he succeeded in making arrangements for hiding the gold, but he died before

he managed to pass the details on to anyone. Not the British Government, not British Intelligence, not even Dr. Watson knew what became of the coins.”

The Cossack leader sighed. “And that, Mrs. Swift, is where the trail has ended. Somewhere, in an area between London and Moscow and east Africa, a fortune in gold lies hidden. And it is a fortune which my people and myself wish very much to recover.”

Chapter Four: Mary Reaches a Decision.

Helen had known Mary longer than anyone else, and she recognized the enraptured look on her friend's face. *Time for quick action*, she thought.

She looked over at Levchenko. "You're not finished."

"Admittedly," Levchenko agreed. "What in particular would you like to know, Mrs. Newton?"

Helen took a breath. "Why has this search for the gold suddenly heated up, what was Perov's involvement, and why did you and your people feel it was necessary to kidnap him, and why were we grabbed instead, why are we in Cairo, and when can we go home or, more importantly, talk to our families and as soon as possible. *Whew!* I think that's it."

Levchenko nodded. "All right. To begin—"

"Ah, and could you maybe move the last few items to the front of the list?"

Mary tried to kick at Helen's ankle. "Let the poor man try to speak his piece," she hissed.

"I'll accommodate as best as possible," Levchenko said. He leaned a bit forward. "Eight months ago we discovered that one of the survivors of the Russian colony in Djibouti had corresponded heavily with his descendants. The survivor was Yefim Arzamatsev, and he was one of Achinov's closest lieutenants. We learned that Arzamatsev had acted as a liaison between Achinov and his backers in Russia, and had apparently kept precise records.

"Obviously we've made as close a study as possible of the remains of the colony, as well as any and all available histories. Arzamatsev's notes were never found. But, at the same time, we learned that he had sent many items to his family in Donetsk, and especially around the time that the gold disappeared. We've been researching Arzamatsev's descendants and finally came up with Lavrentiy Perov ... your 'Larry Perov'."

Now it was Mary who frowned. "That's ... sort of a long stretch."

"You would think so," Levchenko agreed. "But consider this: when my agents reached Donetsk and began looking for members of Arzamatsev's family, they learned that, over the previous months, each and every

existing member had been murdered. Discreet inquiries with the local police also revealed that the homes of the murder victims had been thoroughly vandalized.”

“As if they were looking for something,” Mary murmured.

“Even so. We, on the other hand, knew that a member of the Perov branch of the Arzamatsev family tree had escaped to America decades ago.”

Mary sighed. “Still a lot of conjecture, Oleksiy.”

Don't call him “Oleksiy”, Helen mentally moaned at her.

“I know it's Hobson's Choice,” Mary went on, “but you have no evidence that Perov would've had Arzamatsev's notes.”

“Hob-son's Choice,” Levchenko slowly pronounced. “Hm! But, to return, consider this, Mrs. Swift. Perov was a metallurgist. Interestingly enough, so was his father, and his grandfather. All of them held degrees in Mineral Processing and Metallurgical Engineering, and especially in the handling and processing of gold.”

Both Mary and Helen made O's with their mouths.

“I remember,” Mary slowly said. “When I was going through Perov's papers I noticed a few items where my son had Dr. Perov doing research into some of the gold from Aurum City.”

“But my associates and I found it particularly telling,” Levchenko said, “that some of Arzamatsev's descendants would start producing metallurgists who specialized in gold. And we were apparently not alone.”

Helen blinked. “Huh?”

“Remember the murders in Donetsk. We don't know the identities of the people responsible, but we have every reason to believe that they are still searching for something, and we suspect it is Arzamatsev's notes. What little information we've uncovered tells us that these people might be following the supposed trail of the gold, and could be heading as far as the colony site in Djibouti ... which explains why we're currently in Cairo.”

Helen lifted a hand. “Okay, but let's back up a bit. We know what happened to the gold. It ended up in London, and then it was hidden by Sherlock Holmes. Maybe I'm the dummy in this room, but it seems to me that the obvious step would be to try and research Holmes.”

Mary softly groaned.

“We have *tried*, Mrs. Newton,” Levchenko pointed out. “So has practically everyone who had some sort of interest in the gold, and that includes high-ranking members of the governments in both Russia and Great Britain. It's a question that's been pondered and researched for practically a century.”

“We're talking about Sherlock Holmes,” Mary patiently explained to her friend. “Up to the moment of his death he was still at the top of his game, even though he knew he was dying.”

“He knew?” Helen asked.

Mary shrugged. “Well, Watson and several other Holmes biographers ... including Baring-Gould ... suspected that Holmes, of all people, would've had prior insight that he was nearing the end. He had grown more reclusive; wanting to concentrate on tending his bees and trying to keep annoyances away. Watson had to deal more and more with outsiders who wanted some of Holmes' time. Frankly I'm surprised as heck to find out that the Home Secretary managed to get him involved in the gold business, although it answers a few questions.”

“Oh?”

“Watson wrote on how, very shortly before his death, Holmes seemed to shake off his reclusiveness. He started moving about: lecturing at a few colleges, meeting with fellow beekeepers and even spending some time with Sidney Paget.”

“Sidney who?”

“Paget. The man who did all the illustrations for Watson's accounts of Holmes' cases. He arranged for the photographic portrait of Holmes that hangs in the British Museum. One of the few ever taken of Holmes, and the last.” Mary's face grew speculative. “I wonder ...”

Helen's mind produced another moan.

“Now that we know why Holmes was so active in those last months,” Mary went on, “I'm wondering if all of that was somehow connected with Holmes' idea for hiding the gold?” She looked at Levchenko. “You've obviously done more homework on this. Do you have an itinerary of Holmes' final actions?”

You mean you don't? Helen sourly telegraphed at her. “Mary, Mr. Levchenko has already pointed out that Holmes plan had been examined from one end to the other. If there was anything to find then it would've surfaced by now.”

Mary pouted. “I suppose so.”

Helen decided to keep the ball in play. “So we know why you people are in Cairo,” she said to Levchenko, “and why you were interested in Dr. Perov. But why kidnapping? And why us?”

Levchenko sighed. “I shall probably be spending the rest of my life apologizing. But we were worried that whoever had killed the people in Donetsk might've found out about Perov. We wanted to move fast and make certain we would get to him before the murderers did, and so, once we realized he was in New York, I sent two of my agents with orders to bring Perov back. Voluntarily, if possible, but if not ...”

“Still waiting,” Helen said.

“Yes,” Levchenko replied guiltily. “I'm afraid I specified, perhaps too emphatically, that if Perov wasn't in Shopton, then my agents were not to spend too much time searching around, but to secure whatever they could find and return. *Unfortunately*,” and here he threw another severe look at his confederates, “my orders were taken too literally. They told me that not finding Perov, but finding you and Mrs. Swift, they ... decided that perhaps the two of you would know of Perov's whereabouts, or at least the chance that either of you knew about his notes.” He noticed the look on Helen's face. “And yes, Mrs. Newton, I understand that's hardly acceptable. Please believe me when I say that kidnapping isn't a method I prefer for getting results. And also believe me when I say that members and associates of the Swift family would be among the last people I'd consider bringing harm upon. I would've thought that my men would've recognized you from your pictures.” He shrugged. “Regrettably ...”

“You had pictures of us?”

“Oh, from the newspaper accounts of the marriage of your daughter to Mrs. Swift's son. It was carried in the *Gorod*.”

“We made the Cossack news?” Helen asked, thinking: *Cossacks have newspapers?*

“The story mostly focused on the Ukrainian delegates invited to the wedding,” Levchenko said, “but there were pictures of the ceremony as well.”

“Getting back on subject,” Mary broke in, “Helen and I were in the process of going over Perov's papers when we were ... taken. But before you get your hopes up, Oleksiy—”

Don't, Helen mentally pleaded

“—we didn't see anything involving Russian gold, Sherlock Holmes or anything like that. And those papers, including all of Dr. Perov's other personal effects, are probably in the hands of Swift Enterprises Security by now.” *Especially if Sherman and his munchkins are currently going over them to find a clue regarding our disappearance,* her mind added.

Helen quietly ticked items off a list in her head. “All right,” she said. “That sounds like about it, except for the Big Issue. Namely: can we call our families and go home?”

Levchenko started to open his mouth.

“Wait,” Mary suddenly said.

Helen stared at her. “Why?”

Mary didn't meet her eyes but, instead, was staring intently in the direction of the Cossacks. “Oleksiy, the people who did the killings in Donetsk.”

Levchenko waited.

“Do they know you're hunting for them?”

“We're not exactly hunting for them, Mrs. Swift. Rather, let me be accurate and say we're trying to determine their whereabouts and, more importantly, beat them to whatever goal they might be heading for. To answer your question, though, all I can say is that I hope not. I have many of my people currently searching through Cairo for any evidence of their presence.”

“Oh? It's not just you and your three friends here?”

“Not by any means, Mrs. Swift. I am fielding two platoons of my Cossacks on this mission. Including myself there are seventy-four men involved.”

Mary's eyes widened. “Wow.”

“Indeed. It was my hope that, with the arrival of Perov, and in anticipation of his possessing knowledge concerning his ancestor's notes, we could then move from here and go much closer to our goal.” Levchenko looked mournful. “Instead, I now have other considerations and must personally see to the safety of both you and Mrs. Newton.” Turning he gave instructions to his men, one of whom nodded and left the room. “I shall have your phones returned to you, and you may make contact with your families. Then we can escort you to Cairo International Airport, or to wherever you'd like.”

Mary stood up from the table. “Wait.”

“Stop *saying* that,” Helen told her.

“Mary ignored her. “I’d ... like to talk alone with my friend for a bit,” she said to Levchenko.

The Cossack leader raised an eyebrow at her. Then he stood up and, motioning to the remaining two men, led them on out of the room.

Now alone, Mary slowly turned to Helen.

Her friend was staring at her. “I’m really so not going to like what you’re about to say, aren’t I?”

“Helen, I want to help the Cossacks.”

Chapter Five: Daughters of the Rocksmund Young Ladies Seminary.

Helen now slowly rose from the table. "I'm not surprised."

"Then you understand—"

"I should've known," Helen sharply broke in. "You're calling Levchenko by his first name. His first *name*, Mary. Hell ... I didn't even know the names of the Germans who kidnapped us years ago."

"There was Franz and Ormand and Aldo and—"

"And then he went and brought Sherlock Holmes into the mix." Helen pressed a hand to her forehead, suddenly feeling tired. "Sweet Lord!"

"Helen—"

"You were a Holmes fanatic back at school. All those nights reading the cases out loud. And then the trips you'd take to England. Going to Baker Street and Sussex and everywhere else Holmes went. Even dragging poor Tom up and down the moors in Devonshire—"

"Which he thoroughly enjoyed," Mary said with dignity.

And almost ended up in a quicksand bog, Helen thought. "I know why you're wanting to do this, Mary. It's because of Holmes. He's been one of your idols for Lord knows how long. And now you're seeing a chance to become involved in one of his cases. His last case, in fact. You want to see if you're as smart as Holmes, or smarter."

Mary held onto her stubborn look. "Oleksiy and his friends need help, Helen."

"Look me right in the face and tell me it's just that, Mary."

Silent moments passed between them.

"All right," Mary finally said. "All *right*. I'll be honest and admit it's more."

Helen nodded in satisfaction.

"But can I at least try to convince you of my intentions?"

Something deep inside Helen warned *Mistake*. But she sighed. "Go ahead."

“All this time,” Mary said. “All these years we've stood by and watched Tom and Ned go running off and getting into trouble. Then it was the kids. What did we do?”

Helen produced a cautious reply. “We ...”

“Worried! Yes! Oh, we'd occasionally make a suggestion that the boys or the kids found helpful. And, of course, we'd be there when the boys came back to provide ... comfort.”

Helen couldn't help but smile slightly, recalling Ned's rather ... well, *enthusiastic* ... attitude whenever he came home from an adventure.

“I don't know about you,” Mary was continuing, “but I also felt sort of useless.”

It was a trap, but Helen couldn't resist. “Useless?”

“I know you and I aren't engineers. We're not brilliant, or clever. We're not scientists, or astronauts, or inventors or anything like that. Heck ... Phyllis is just a public-relations and marketing executive, and even she's gotten her hands dirty. She's traveled in *time*, for pity's sake. All we've done is bake pies. Wash clothes.”

“Provide comfort.”

Mary couldn't hold back a slight blush. “All right, so it hasn't been a total loss. But haven't you always wanted to do more?” Her normally sweet face grew gently predatory. “Haven't your hands been too clean?”

“Hmph! You've obviously never handled Ned's laundry.”

And you've never handled Tom's, Mary silently retorted.

Helen swooped in before Mary could recover the conversation. “All right,” she said, crossing her arms. “Just what do you think you could do to help Olek—the Cossacks?” Dammit, now she's got me doing it.

“Well,” Mary admitted, “obviously our personal resources are limited. But look at what we could provide. We have access to all of Swift Enterprises. Computers. Research labs. Equipment. We could offer quite a bit to the Cossacks and remain in the forefront.”

Helen didn't like the sound of how easy it seemed. “For a moment there,” she slowly said, “I was thinking your idea of help was more along the lines of becoming personally involved with the Cossacks on their quest.”

“Oh pish!” Mary replied with an airy wave. “You should know me

better than that by now.”

Uh huh. Helen nodded. “You’re right. I *do* know you better than that, Mary Shirlene Nestor. You’re being much too generous and forgiving towards these kidnappers.”

“Oleksiy explained all that,” Mary tiredly pointed out. “It was all a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding,” Helen echoed dully. “Uh huh. Now tell me this: would you be as accepting of their explanation if Jet had been with us? If they’d also kidnapped the baby?”

Mary’s mouth opened, then snapped shut.

“I thought so,” Helen smirked.

“Helen—”

“Which reminds me of yet another important point. You and I are certainly not decrepit, but let’s be honest with each other. We’re firmly in our late forties. We’re *grandmothers*, for pity’s sake.” Helen blinked. “Well, at least you are ... although I hope Tom and Phyllis are doing their best to rectify the situation while on their trip. We’re hardly the stuff adventurers are made of.”

“Are our kids?” Mary pointed out. “Are the boys?”

Okay, Helen privately admitted, that one was hot over the plate.

“Isn’t this a large part of why we wring our hands and worry?” Mary asked. “And yes, I’ll be the first to admit that Tom and Ned and the kids might be in better shape than you or I. Might. But, as you so rightly illustrated, we’re not decrepit. We may not be the girls we were in our teens, but at least we’re healthy enough to take Oleksiy and the others back with us to Shopton and give them help. Plus it’d be the quickest way for us to get back home safe and sound.”

Helen tried the taste of it in her mind.

“Please?”

Helen remained quiet.

“Pleeeeeease?”

Oh God. And now Mary was giving her the same look she used to produce on the rare occasions when she needed Helen’s help to sneak out of school after lights out and be with Tom. The Nestors would’ve gone into brilliant blazing exploding fits if they’d known Mary had ...

She roughly shook the memory away. *Water way the heck under the bridge.*

Besides, her conscience pointed out, who was it who practically pushed Mary and Tom together?

“Of course,” Mary said softly, “if it still bothers you a lot, I could stay here and make the arrangements with Oleksiy, and send you on ahead to get things ready back home.”

Helen suddenly snapped back to cold reality and she stared at her friend. “Oh yeah! Oh ... yeah! You want me to go on home, all by myself, and tell Ned and Tom and Sandy and Bud and Sherman ... and, with my luck, Tomjay would've found a way to make contact from space ... that I left you alone in Cairo with a crew of kidnappers.” Helen firmly shook her head. “Uh uh. I may be the only hell my parents ever raised, but I'm no idiot.”

Mary smiled. “So you're with me in this?”

Helen sighed. *Now I know how Phyllis feels.* “You know I am, Mary. Always.”

Mary's smile brightened. “Spoken like a true daughter of the Rocksmond Young Ladies Seminary.”

Despite herself, Helen found Mary's smile infectious. “We can cook a meal—”

“Or Virginia reel’,” Mary said.

“And the boys who kiss us’.”

“Can't resist us’.”

Both women jumped into the air, their palms slapping together at the apex of their leap. *“Whoop!”* they exclaimed.

“Okay,” Helen said when they were once again settled. “What's our first move, Kemosabe?”

Mary gave a speculative look towards the door which led out of the hotel room. “Well, first off, I'd like an answer to a question. It's obviously been more than four hours since we were taken from Shopton. Where the heck are the boys with Sherman and the cavalry?”

“Now I'm reassured,” Helen said. “Sort of scared, but reassured. That's a sensible question which I'm sorry I didn't think of.”

“So let's find out.” Going to the door, Mary opened it and peeked out.

“Oleksiy? Hi. You and the others can come back in.”

The women stood together, waiting, as the Cossacks trooped back into the room. Mary noted that Levchenko was now carrying a long object wrapped in a cloth.

“We were preparing to leave,” he explained. “We can be at the airport within the hour.”

“One thing,” Mary said to the men. “Has there been any indication of a group from Enterprises arriving in Cairo? The reason we ask is because, by now, there should've been a search, and we can be tracked.”

Dark eyebrows rose on Levchenko's face and he turned to ask questions to his companions. One of the men produced a hesitant answer, resulting in Levchenko delivering a sharp stream of words which caused Mary private relief in her lack of knowledge concerning the Ukrainian language.

“I find myself drowning in apologies,” Levchenko finally replied to the women. “When it was learned that Perov was involved with Swift Enterprises I expressly ordered my men to be as discreet as possible. Knowing the capabilities of your security system, my agents decided to equip themselves with radio jamming equipment.”

Great, Helen thought. Not only Cossacks with newspapers, but high-tech Cossacks as well. Bring back Yul Brynner.

“The equipment has not been switched off and is probably still blocking whatever signals both of you have been transmitting. I have given orders—”

But Mary's eyes had noticed movement beyond the Cossacks. The door to the room was left open and she could see all the way down the hotel hallway. She especially saw the opening of the elevator door at the far end, and the determined-looking men emerging from it.

Men who were, even now, leveling pistols in the direction of the Cossacks.

“Look out,” she shrieked, throwing herself at Levchenko ...

And, as a result, bringing her fully in the line of fire.

Chapter Six: Mary Locks Out.

In an instant Helen saw her dear, sweet, brave and totally stupid friend rushing to protect Levchenko.

Idiot ... idiot ... IDIOT ...

Meanwhile she was automatically lunging to grab Mary, oblivious to the notion that such a move was placing her in similar peril.

As it turned out, it was all wasted effort as Levchenko became a whirlwind, rapidly turning to face the hallway. His arm was swinging out, holding the object which had been covered in cloth, but was now a bronze-colored blur spinning between him and the gunmen who were opening fire. Three gunmen ... each of them shooting down the hallway into the room ...

But none of the bullets were making it through the doorway. Rather, they were coming into contact with whatever Levchenko was rapidly twirling about, each impact producing a spine-chilling sound rather like a sharp electronic cry. While this was happening, the other Cossacks had pulled out their own pistols and moving into firing positions, shooting past Levchenko. Their weapons were making distinctive coughs and, in an instant, the gunmen from the elevator were down on the floor ...

And Helen realized that only seconds had passed since the elevator doors had opened.

She and Mary were watching as Levchenko finally slowed to a stop, and the two women now saw that the object which the Cossack leader held was a slightly curved bronze sword. The hilt seemed well-worn, but the pommel looked to be as if made of gold and, as near as the women could tell, intricately carved. The weapon was sharp, sleek, and had somehow managed to deflect a hail of bullets from three different guns.

The jaws of Mary and Helen dropped open as the women remarked: "What the ..."

"Hell?" finished Helen.

"Heck?" finished Mary.

Levchenko threw them a look, his face flushed, his breathing heavy. "We must leave now," he commanded, working to gather himself,

continuing with a stream of Ukrainian to his confederates as he bent down to recover the cloth which had served to sheathe the sword.

Mary silently had to agree with Levchenko's assessment of the situation. Whereas the Cossack pistols had been silenced, the guns used by the attackers weren't, and other doors in the hallway were being cautiously opened, concerned eyes peeking out from around the edges.

“Mrs. Swift ... Mrs. Newton , , , please come.”

Touching Helen's wrist, Mary began closely following the men, trying to keep as calm as possible. *I've seen worse things than this ... I hope.*

She nonetheless gulped as she saw two of the Cossacks kneel down by the gunmen and quickly start searching. But then she noticed: “They're not bleeding.”

“My men were firing the same anesthetic darts they used on you,” Levchenko said, still working to guide the women down the hall. “Please. Hurry.”

Ushering them into the elevator, Levchenko held the doors just long enough for the rest of his troop to catch up. One of the men was speaking rapidly into a phone as the elevator began descending.

The other man was grim as he said: “No identification on them, *Komandyr*. But we found these.” He held out two pieces of paper.

Levchenko accepted them and, after a moment of study, his face grew dark with a scowl. “*Ebat kopat*,” he cried out.

“What's wrong?” Mary asked.

In answer, Levchenko handed the papers over. Taking them, Mary (with Helen peering over her shoulder) found herself staring down at pictures of the both of them.

“The pictures from the wedding,” Helen murmured.

Mary's expression was matching Levchenko's. “We've been made. Good one of you, by the way, Helen.”

The elevator opened, and the Cossacks surrounded the women as the group rapidly walked through the lobby, trying to ignore the shouts being made from the front desk (some of the clerks listening to phones).

Two men, wearing uniforms which shouted *Police* in any language, were purposefully advancing toward the group.

“*Strelyat*,” ordered Levchenko.

A pistol reappeared in the hand of one of the Cossacks, coughed twice, and the policemen fell to the ground. The Cossacks never broke stride, but continued guiding the women on through the lobby and out into the sunshine of Cairo. Even then they didn't slow down but, as sirens were being heard and whistles were being blown, smoothly escorted Mary and Helen into a minivan which then immediately pulled away from the curb.

Mary spent a moment noting that the vehicle was being driven by a man who possessed the same look as the Cossacks, then turned to face Levchenko. "Where—"

"The airport," Levchenko replied, his eyes searching through the windows. "And safety for the both of you."

Helen was searching her memory. "The airport's way over on the other side of Cairo. It'll take us about an hour to get there."

"Unless my men have spotted any of your family or friends from Enterprises," Levchenko replied. "Which, so far, hasn't been reported." He thought for a moment. "We'll be passing close to the American Embassy on this route. If you would prefer ... oh, and please excuse me." Reaching into a pocket he produced two phones which he offered to the women. "These are yours. Please contact help if you wish."

Helen gratefully began reaching for hers, but Mary was faster. "*Gimme* those," she declared hotly, quickly grabbing both phones.

"Mary?"

But Mary was busily jabbing at both phones, an intense scowl on her face.

"Mary, I could try—"

"Shut up," was the curt reply. Shocked, Helen continued watching as Mary kept on angrily using her fingers on the small screens. When she stopped there was a pause, and then the screens of both phones flashed once, brightly, then became dark.

Mary nodded in satisfaction. "There," she said, letting the phones drop to the floor of the van.

Helen looked down at the phones, then back up at her friend. "What did you—"

She was shocked again by the determined venom in the look which Mary gave her. "A little trick Sherman taught me some years ago," Mary declared. "A destruct signal which would render the phones useless in

case of a possible severe security breach.”

“Mary!”

“I also used a trick Freida told me about,” Mary went on. “I’ve switched off the tracking chips in both our bodies.”

Helen was staring at her as if seeing her for the first time. “But *why*—”

“*They* know who we are,” Mary broke in, with a vague nod back at the direction of the hotel. “That means *they* also know about Enterprises. About our families; and I am not ... Not ... *NOT* giving them a chance to go back and harm them.”

“Mary—”

“No, Helen. *Never!*”

Most people knew of Mary Swift, and before that, Mary Nestor, as a sweet and gentle person. Helen was as surprised as she felt she could be, but she also knew that Mary’s shy exterior harbored a demon which, on rare occasions, could rear its determined head. And, as Helen thought back, she remembered that such occasions took place when her family was threatened. She had been angry during Ithaca Foger’s first appearance, and had practically raged when Sandy had traveled to the Sun to confront the Space Friends. Helen understood that some people lived for the sake of their loved ones.

Mary Swift would die for the sake of hers.

Helen still felt an obligation to make another attempt. “Mary, at Enterprises—”

“I said *NO*, Helen. And that’s final!”

And Helen also knew that an emphatic *No* from Mary was firmly carved in stone. Or at least immune to further debate. For the time being, anyway.

She sat back in the seat, her eyes still on Mary. “All right,” she slowly said. “So now what—”

Mary suddenly directed her gaze at Levchenko, who had been silently witnessing the exchange between the women, his hands wrapped around the hilt of his sword.

“Forget the airport,” Mary told him. “Where are you going?”

Levchenko took a few moments before slowly answering. “Mrs. Swift, although I fully appreciate your sentiment, I personally feel that your

safety—”

Helen briefly closed her eyes. *Mistake.*

“Where ... are ... you ... *going?*” Mary firmly repeated.

Levchenko's eyes were searching Mary's as he spoke. “Still towards the airport,” he carefully replied. “My men have been using rooms at the Hotel Novotel as a base of operations. I have sent word that they should begin evacuation procedures and prepare to move to our next destination.”

Mary gave a nod. “And where is that?”

Another pause before the Cossack hetman answered. “Mrs. Swift—”

You better hope that sword is tasty, Helen silently warned him, because you're about to eat it.

“*Where?*” Mary repeated. *Once. Firmly.*

Levchenko was suddenly mindful of his mother: a sweet and loving woman from Skadov'sk who, even at a young age, could outshoot, out ride and, when necessary, out stubborn anyone in the tribe.

He felt that his mother and Mary Swift would immediately understand each other.

“Based on what has happened,” he said, “we need to carefully examine what information we have before deciding where to move. We have an assembly point in a warehouse in Al Masid, some five hundred kilometers south of Cairo. All my men have orders to regroup there.”

Mary nodded in satisfaction. “Fine enough,” she said, leaning back against the seat and letting her eyes close.

Levchenko was feeling some concert with Helen, and wanted to try and carefully dissuade the woman from her intentions. Collecting what words he felt would be useful he began opening his mouth ...

And then sharply stopped, his eyes focusing on something he only now noticed. “Mrs. Swift!”

Mary squirmed a bit, a frown slowly reappearing on her face. “Um?”

But Helen saw it at the same time and shrieked. “Mary! You're *bleeding!*”

Chapter Seven: Breaking Up Is Hard to Do.

“*What?*” Mary began quickly twisting about, examining herself. “Where ... *oh!*”

It wasn't frighteningly large, but a red stain was gradually growing more and more visible within Mary's pale blue blouse, just above her right hip. And a horizontal tear was now evident in the cotton material. “*That's* why I've been feeling an ache there,” Mary said.

“One of those bullets must've grazed you,” Helen said, reaching to gingerly touch a fingertip to the torn section of the blouse, her eyes wide. “*Omigosh!*”

Mary was peering down at the wound. “I must've been in shock or adrenaline or something. It's only now starting to hurt.” She looked around. “Is there a first-aid kit available?”

“Forget a first-aid kit,” Helen argued. “Is there an Emergency Room available?”

“Ladies,” Levchenko broke in. “Please. Permit me.”

As the women watched he carefully moved his sword until the flat of the blade point was drawing closer to the wound.

Mary was slowly sucking her breath in. “*Oleksiy ...*”

“It will be all right,” Levchenko gently promised her. “*Watch.*” He continued moving the sword to the blouse, slipping the tip into the tear and allowing it to lightly press against the wound.

And Mary suddenly had the brief sensation that she was composed of the same bronze colored metal as the sword. The sensation passed as quickly as it had arrived, along with a tone like the striking of a crystal bell deep within her mind. Then Levchenko was easing the sword away. The blood stain on the blouse remained, as did the tear ...

But the wound was gone.

Helen's eyes were as large as saucers. “A Cossack Excalibur! Wow!”

“It works better on some occasions than on others,” Levchenko admitted.

Mary felt at the place where the wound had been. “I feel fine. But what —”

Levchenko was holding the sword so that the women could see it clearly. “This is *Zirka Rissshenya* ... the Star of Judgment. It is a *shashka*, like most Cossack swords, but it is so much more. It is the source of the power for the Kaimanove, the heart and soul of my tribe, and has been carried by generations of Kaimanove hetmans. It has tasted the blood of countless enemies in defense of the tribe but, as you've now seen, it can also heal.” Levchenko's expression had become serious. “To wield the *Zirka Rissshenya* it is not enough to be the hetman of the Kaimanove. It is said that only the virtuous can use the full abilities of the sword, and it must only strike in the name of Justice.”

The other Cossacks, even the driver, reverently pressed fists to their foreheads.

If people in Ukraine and Russia talk like that, Helen was thinking, then why is their television so boring?

“Well,” she went on audibly, “as glad as I am that Mary doesn't need a bandage, and as happy as I am that the Come On Over Cossacks have a magic sword ...”

Mary closed her eyes. *Helen ...*

“... I'd like to know how we're gonna get to this Al Masid place? Kilometers or miles, it sounds like at least six or seven hours traveling on the road, and if there're people shooting at us I'd just as soon pick up the pace.”

“We have a plane waiting for us at the airport,” Levchenko explained, carefully wrapping his sword back in its cloth sheath. “It will carry all of us to an airstrip in Al Masid, and the trip should only take a few hours.” He paused to listen as one of the Cossacks sitting in the rearmost seat, who had been listening to a phone, now leaned over to murmur something. Nodding, Levchenko issued commands in Ukrainian to the driver. “My men have already left the hotel,” he then explained to the women, “and we'll be gathering at the airport.” He then looked directly at Mary. “I cannot fully approve of what you're doing, Mrs. Swift,” he said solemnly. “But I cannot argue with your motives.”

Helen felt a brief impulse to kiss the Cossack leader.

* * * * *

The minivan eventually left the lushness of the city, entering the more arid area of eastern Cairo. More and more planes were visible overhead (Helen anxiously searching for the Swift Enterprises logo on them), and then the minivan was turning to move alongside a high fence surrounding a huge airfield.

“Cairo International Airport,” Levchenko announced, after a KLM flight had roared above them. “We’ll be heading for the Cargo Village. Specifically: the International Exporters Center.”

Helen was staring out the window. “Certainly you people simply didn’t just fly into Cairo announcing yourselves as a troop of Cossacks?”

A brief smile skipped across Levchenko’s face. “Oh, hardly. We have an ... arrangement ... with UIA.” At the blank looks from the women he added: “Ukraine International Airlines. Once we began planning this operation we made an obvious show of stepping up cargo flights to various European capitols, including Cairo. Officially we’re part of an effort involved in transporting equipment to the Egyptians which will help in our energy export program throughout this region. Ah ... ladies? Please duck down low.”

Mary and Helen noticed that the minivan was drawing close to a guarded checkpoint, and both women immediately clambered down onto the floorboard, upon which they were hastily covered by a blanket. “Please remain still,” Levchenko ordered.

Moments passed. The women felt the minivan coming to a halt. Some words were exchanged, and then the van resumed motion.

It took a little while longer before the blanket was pulled away. “Thank you, ladies,” Levchenko said. “You may sit up again.”

Mary and Helen did so, noticing that they were now following a road which ran past a line of hangars and buildings.

“And I apologize,” Levchenko was continuing. “So far the news of the shootout back at the hotel hasn’t reached the guards at the airport. That was fortunate, but I didn’t want to complicate the matter by having the guards wonder why we were escorting two attractive women into the cargo area.”

Well, Helen mused, points for “attractive”.

Mary was frowning. “What time is it?”

“9:11 AM,” Levchenko said.

Helen noted how Mary glanced at the position of the sun, filing the observation away until later.

The minivan swung into the entrance of a numbered hangar. Helen's heart leaped as she recognized a Swift Enterprises “Hannibal” cargo transport aircraft waiting in the hangar, but her elation was short-lived as she saw the plane was carrying identification marks she didn't recognize, as well as the words “Ukraine International” stenciled on the side. For the first time in her life she silently berated her daughter for being such an excellent salesperson on behalf of Enterprises.

The hangar was filled with several men who were now moving closer to the minivan as it slowed. Others were standing nearer to the plane, and Helen noticed that a few of them were carrying what looked like rifles. She suspected that these weapons didn't shoot anesthetic darts.

Whatever the Ukrainian term for “deep kimchi” is, she thought, we're definitely in it.

When the minivan came to a halt Levchenko climbed out, immediately being surrounded by several of the others. A rapid exchange of Ukrainian took place, and then the group went into motion, with most of the men heading for the plane.

The Cossack leader then walked back, holding out a hand to help both Mary and Helen exit from the minivan. “So far there has been no report of any of your family or associates in Cairo,” he said. “It may simply be that they are here, only being circumspect.” A shrug. “We have, of course, heard of the reputation and skill of your Sherman Ames and his people.”

Helen spoke up. “If it'd help, I know some of the Enterprises emergency codes—”

“No!” Mary said.

Helen shut up. At least vocally.

“We've also been monitoring local police frequencies,” Levchenko went on. “The men who attacked us in the hotel have been taken into custody. Depending on how much the police learn, and that includes information from the hotel staff concerning us, we may have to be in a hurry here. We'll be leaving for Al Masid within a few minutes.”

“And after that?” Mary asked.

Levchenko frowned, looking away as he pondered. “We're hoping that

we can hear something over the police frequencies that would tell us who our attackers were. They carried no identification, and that tells me they were professionals. We'll figure it out once we're safe at Al Masid."

"Who'd be attacking you, Oleksiy?"

"Another good question. My first guess is it'd could be the people who've been behind the killings in Donetsk. They might think we have Perov, or at least we know what he knew."

"And who would these people be?"

"And a third good question." A deep frown appeared on Levchenko's face. "A question I would very much like an answer to."

An electrical whine could now be heard slowly rising from within the plane.

"We'd better board," Levchenko said, motioning towards the plane. "You'll find accommodations a bit bare, but we'll only be in the air for a little while. But, then again," and now he gave the women a smile, "both of you have been into space."

Mary decided it would have been impolite to mention that the passenger cabin on a Swift Enterprises "Titan" transport spaceship, along with the rooms on board the Swift space station, were considerably more comfortable than what she suspected awaited them inside the plane. She and Helen accompanied Levchenko.

"I've always wanted to travel into space," Levchenko mused. "I wanted to go work for Khartron, and perhaps join the SSAU, but ..." He shrugged. "My tribe needed a hetman more than it did an astronaut."

Mary immediately recognized the little boy look on Levchenko's face. She had seen it often enough on her son, her daughter, on Bud and on her husband. "You'll be heading for Djibouti after Al Masid?"

Another shrug. "Possibly. But, once again, we need to consider options. And that means Al Masid—"

A sudden BOOM came from the hangar entrance, and everyone looked to see smoke billowing around the opening.

"*Ebat kopat,*" Levchenko swore, staring at the smoke. He then began shouting commands, finishing in English with: "Mrs. Swift ... Mrs. Newton ... get on the plane *now.*"

Mary and Helen automatically quickened their steps in the direction of

the plane, and even more so as they noticed several of their Cossack escorts unlimbering their rifles, their attention still focused on the hangar door. Following their look, Mary could now see men dressed in black moving out of the smoke. Also armed with rifles, and accompanied by an armored car which was conspicuously topped with a machine gun turret.

Helen was about to leap into the plane when she felt Mary's hand on her wrist. "What?"

"C'mon," Mary said, tugging at Helen ... and in a direction conspicuously away from the plane.

"What the—*Mary?*"

"*This way,*" Mary insisted, half-pulling/half-dragging Helen away from the passenger door. They both began running across the hangar floor, away from the plane.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" Helen shrieked.

"Testing a theory," Mary snapped back. Glancing over her shoulder she saw how a large part of the black-garbed men were suddenly moving in their direction. Not only the men, but the armored car as well. "Thought so."

"What?" Helen cried out.

"Those guys aren't after Oleksiy and the Cossacks. They're after us. That's the good news."

It's also the bad news, Helen thought, increasing her speed.

Chapter Eight: Mary and Helen Have An Argument.

“Keep running,” Mary called out to Helen.

I've got a choice? Helen wildly thought, finding an opportunity to praise a capricious God that, when she and Mary had been kidnapped, at least they hadn't been wearing heels. She was practically neck and neck with her friend as they headed for the far end of the hangar. Shots were being fired, but Helen managed to notice that the gunfire was taking place between the Cossacks and the newcomers. No one ... *still thanking you, God ...* was shooting at them.

Yet.

But their pursuers were in as good a shape as the women, if not better, and the armored car was speeding up. It would only take a minute ...

“Here,” Mary declared, diving for cover behind some barrels. Helen was practically at her shoulder, and the women found themselves in a narrow space between the barrels and the hangar wall.

There was also a door, and Mary didn't pause but, instead, kicked hard at it, causing it to open. Still moving, she raced out into the sunlight, Helen still at her heels.

Pausing, Mary looked around rapidly. “Where, where, where ... *oh!*”

A truck carrying what looked to be official markings in Arabic was bearing down on the hangar. Waving her arms excitedly, Mary flagged the truck to a halt, rushing to the driver's side just as the man behind the wheel was rolling down the window.

“Hi,” Mary said, reaching for the door handle and yanking the door open. “And sorry,” she continued, grabbing at the surprised driver and pulling him out of the vehicle. Still in motion, she clambered in behind the wheel. “Helen, *c'mon.*”

“Coming on,” Helen replied, running to get into the passenger side. “*Really* sorry,” she added to the still-surprised driver, climbing into the truck.

“Peas and *carrots,*” Mary was grumbling.

“What's wrong now?” Helen asked. On top of everything else?

“You'd think Egyptian airport people would drive trucks with automatic transmission.” The tip of her tongue poking out in concentration, Mary managed to get the truck in reverse, turning as quickly as possible. “Still ...” Putting her foot to the throttle, Mary put the truck into forward motion, pulling away from the hangar.

Helen glanced over her shoulder, spotting several of the black-garbed men moving out of the door they had passed through. The men didn't resume running but stood there, watching the truck drive away. Fortunately (at least from Helen's point of view), the armored car wasn't smashing through the wall.

“I can drive a stick,” she pointed out to Mary.

“I know,” Mary said, her eyes on the road. “Start working it and help me speed up some. I just want to get lost among all the other cars and stuff here.”

Reaching for the stick shift, Helen cooperated with helping Mary build up speed. Sirens could be heard increasing behind them, and both women glanced back to see vehicles with flashing lights starting to converge on the hangar.

An even larger and deeper sound then appeared, and the women saw the Hannibal slowly nosing its way out of the hangar. As they continued to watch, the plane began moving faster, avoiding the approaching cars and managing to maneuver onto a runway. A roar from the engines, and the Hannibal was racing on down the tarmac.

In the opposite direction from the women.

“Well,” Helen said as the plane lifted off into the sky, “so much for your Cossacks.”

“They had to get to safety,” Mary replied through tightened lips.

The women instinctively ducked as a pair of helicopters raced overhead, both aircraft apparently trying to pursue the departing Hannibal. But it was rising from the runway, traveling faster as it lifted into the sky. The women then ducked again as two more cars with flashing lights and sirens suddenly appeared from around a corner, speeding past them and heading for the hangar.

Helen looked at Mary. “You *do* know that the guy you stole—”

“Borrowed,” Mary corrected.

“Borrowed' the truck from is gonna tell the cops about us?”

Mary nodded. "We'll be getting out soon."

"Where ... are ... we ... *going*?"

"I think the main terminal's just up ahead—"

"You think?"

"—*and we can abandon the truck and hopefully—*"

"Hopefully?"

"—*lose ourselves in the crowd. I'm trying my best, Helen.*"

"I know, I know." Helen absently patted her friend's knee. "I'm just having a case of nerves here."

"You think I'm *not*?"

"Well, you hide it better than me."

Mary continued driving, trying to present nothing more than a perfectly normal picture of an airport service truck casually following the road which was bordering the hangars and terminal buildings.

"Ah-hhhh, hate being Jenny Raincloud here," Helen said. "Just letting you know the VIP Terminal, where types like us are more likely to be seen, is way the heck over on the other side of the airport."

Mary blinked. "Types like us?"

"You know. Elegant Western type women."

"Oh. Okay. Let's try to play two perhaps not-so-elegant Western women who're visiting Egypt on a budget tour. Is there a cheaper terminal nearby?"

"Um. Sorry. Ned and I usually travel First Class. Oh, but the airport has one of those automated train thingies which carry people from terminal to terminal."

"That'll work," Mary said. "Annnnnnd this looks like a good place to dump the truck." She rapidly pulled into a parking space alongside similar-looking vehicles. To their right were buildings featuring connecting jetways to passenger planes bearing markings such as EgyptAir, Air France, Aeroflot and British Airways.

Giving the planes a longing look, Helen followed Mary out of the truck, the two of them striding towards a nearby door in the side of a building.

"Just act casual," Mary instructed. "If anyone says anything, we just got

separated from our party.” A shrug. “It's sort of the truth.”

I'll try and act casual when they stand us up against a wall and shoot us, Helen's mind growled.

There were some men in airport outfits appearing on the scene, but they seemed to be more interested in the departing Hannibal, as well as whatever was happening at the now distant hangar, and Mary and Helen managed to open the door and slip into the building.

Beyond the door was a utilitarian corridor, with signs in Arabic posted about.

Memo to myself, Mary thought. Next time we get kidnapped I want to be taken to France. At least I can read the signs there.

At the sound of rushing footsteps they immediately ducked through a door, ending up in a small closet filled with cleaning materials. They waited, listening, as an unknown number of men bustled by, all of them chattering in Arabic.

“Eight ... nine ... ten,” Mary counted to herself. “Okay. Let's go.”

Re-entering the corridor they scampered to a nearby flight of stairs, climbing as stealthily as possible (Mary certain everyone could hear the beating of their hearts). At the top was a door, but it didn't contain any of the usual “Touch This and An Alarm Goes Off” style of notices, and Mary cautiously pushed it open a bit.

Then wider, grabbing Helen's hand. “C'mon.”

They entered a broad curving room filled with construction equipment and related gear lying about. Some men were at work with some paneling, but they were far away, and some of them had their faces pressed to a large window. Perhaps (and hopefully) more interested in the goings-on at the hangar where the Cossacks had been.

The women pressed themselves back against the wall. “So where ...” Mary began.

“Oh,” Helen said. “I think I know. This is Terminal Two. It's been undergoing renovations. When Ned and I were in Cairo they were trying to get this in shape for taking the larger Airbus planes. But since Tom offered the passenger version of the *Sky Queen* they also wanted to be able to accommodate that, so there's been a delay.” She nodded over at a nearby escalator. “The automated train's in place, though, and I think that'll take us there.”

Taking several deep breaths the women slipped over to the escalator and rode it, crouched down low. Reaching the surface they immediately moved to the safety of a pillar near the People Mover station.

“So far so good,” Mary said.

Helen nodded. “Yeah. When your friends cut out on us they drew a lot of attention—” and then she paused as she noticed the frown on Mary's face. “Sorry.”

“All right,” Mary muttered, although Helen couldn't hear any sincerity in the remark.

An automated train obediently pulled up to the station, and the women entered, finding themselves alone on the vehicle as it resumed motion. To their relief the overhead map panels were labeled in various languages.

“Terminal One's just a few stops further on,” Helen said. “It's mainly Egyptian air carriers, but there's been an influx of European airlines as well. We don't want to get off at Hall Four, which is dedicated to private jets. And the VIP Terminal's beyond Terminal One.”

“We'll settle for Terminal One,” Mary replied, settling down on the long plastic bench and sighing.

Helen gazed at her. “When we get a chance,” she slowly said, “don't you think it'd be a good time to call in the boys—”

“No!”

Helen took a breath, then continued. “Mary, I was perfectly content to go along with this when we had the Cossacks riding shotgun. But they're gone, and *we're* being chased. We have *no* money, *no* phones ... *nothing*.”

Mary sat there, her face set in determined lines.

“There'll be phones in the terminal. Not everyone in Egypt's on cellphones.”

“Helen—”

“All we have to do is dial the emergency number Sherman set up, and he's probably listening for it now. We don't even have to get the boys involved. Just have them wire us some money, and we can go somewhere safe where we can be picked up at a transit lounge or something.”

Mary tiredly rubbed at her face.

“You've done all you could.”

Mary looked away. Sighing, Helen sat next to her, remaining quiet as the train approached a building which appeared to be thoroughly in use. The train made two stops, and several groups of people ... both male and female and mostly of Egyptian appearance ... got on board. A few curious looks were sent in the direction of the women, but the trip continued on without incident and the train finally reached a stop where a recorded voice began announcing, in several languages, that they were now at Terminal One.

Mingling in with the crowd, Mary and Helen entered the bustle of the terminal, trying to appear as if everything was normal. The surroundings were filled with the sounds and activities common to major airport terminals the world over, even to the ubiquitous presence of McDonald's and Starbucks (Helen briefly wondering how many dishes she'd have to wash to rate a Filet O'Fish and some coffee).

The peaceful setup was marred by the presence of numerous guards and police strolling and staring about, as well as the wall speakers making multi-lingual announcements. The English version said: "Cairo International Airport apologizes for the inconvenience. An incident has taken place, and the Airport's security level has been heightened. Please be prepared to show documentation when boarding aircraft, or when leaving the Terminal".

Pausing near a piece of decorative sculpture, Mary seemed to reach a decision. "All right," she said.

Helen waited.

Mary turned to her. "You go on and try to contact the boys. Let them know where you are and where you can be picked up."

Helen's jaw dropped. "And where are you—"

"I'm going on to Al Masid," Mary firmly announced. "Possibly Djibouti as well."

"Ack! *How—*"

Mary was no longer meeting Helen's eyes. "I'll find a way."

"Mary—"

"I said I wanted to help the Cossacks. And I will."

"Mary ... *goddamm—*" Suddenly remembering who she was talking to (and suddenly remembering the cultural niceties of the region), Helen forced herself to swallow the profanity and struggle for control. "You little

idiot,” she hissed.

Mary's brown eyes were hard as they once again met Helen's.

“You cannot ... *cannot* do this,” Helen insisted in as loud a whisper as she felt she could manage. “You won't make it three steps out of this terminal.”

“I can try.”

“Mary! God ... I oughta slug you and drag you off with me.”

“Tell Tom I love him.” Mary's expression now had a slight tremble to it. “Tell the kids I love them as well. You go and tell them what's happening, and what I've done.” She reached to touch Helen's elbow. “Please. Be safe.”

“Mary ...”

“Take care, Helen.” Leaning over she brushed her lips against Helen's cheek, then suddenly turned and began moving into the crowd: a blonde woman alone.

Her hands clenched into fists, Helen watched her go. A brief turn of her head revealed a line of phones waiting only twenty steps away. She could go over, rapidly punch in a series of numbers, and get in contact with Enterprises. It'd be so easy. So easy that her heart ached.

And her mind was going back.

She had a rough time delivering Phyllis. Labor came ahead of schedule and, what was worse, Ned had been off with Tom on a project. It was going to be at least two hours before he'd be at the hospital, and it was touch and go with the baby.

Mary had been there the whole time. Holding her hand all through the ordeal, sharing in the laughter and happy crying when a healthy Phyllis was finally laid in her mother's tired yet eager arms. Helping her get herself presentable when an anxious Ned finally burst through the door.

Helen's feet began moving. In a few moments she was walking in step alongside Mary.

“Thank you,” Mary murmured, staring straight ahead.

“I will *not* be at your funeral,” Helen insisted. “I will *not* be standing at your grave, getting looks from Tom and the kids.”

Mary managed a small smile. “But you'd look so nice in black.”

Helen growled. Then she jumped as she felt a touch on her shoulder. *Yikes! We didn't even make it to the McDonald's.*

But she and Mary turned to find themselves looking at Levchenko, as well as five of his Cossacks.

Levchenko sighed. “Mrs. Swift, you are definitely a problem.”

Chapter Nine: Mary and Helen on the Lam.

“Where the heck did *you* guys come from?” Mary asked.

Helen looked at her. “Oh I bet you felt really lame asking that, didn't you?”

“Yeah,” Mary admitted. “Pretty much. But you guys left on the airplane,” she continued to Levchenko.

Helen wasn't sure, but she thought she heard an undercurrent of accusation in Mary's words.

“When the attack happened and the two of you ran away,” Levchenko replied, “we knew the situation couldn't be saved and had to change tactics. We sent the airplane off and told the authorities that the attackers were unknowns who had come to steal it.” He shook his head. “I've never liked improvisation.”

“Sent the airplane off?” Mary frowned. “But how—”

And then she felt the unmistakable sensation of a penny dropping inside her. “The Hannibal had a cybertron, didn't it?”

Levchenko nodded. “Before we abandoned the plane we set the cybertron to fly it away from the airport and out over Port Said in the general direction of Cyprus.” He sighed. “Fighters from the Egyptian Air Force shot it down over the Mediterranean.”

“So now what—”

“Mrs. Swift, we're sort of racing the clock here.” Levchenko was looking around as he spoke. “The police, as well as agents from the *Mukhabarat*, have been handling the initial inquiries regarding the shootout at the hangar. It won't take them long to realize how flimsy our story is, so we've got to leave the airport and get out of Cairo as quickly as possible.”

“Oh,” Mary said. “Okay.”

And Helen threw a final look at the telephones. Further away now.

“This way,” Levchenko instructed, motioning with his arm and directing the women to the top of a stairwell. He and his men continued glancing about as everyone started moving down to the next level.

Mary was also looking around, trying not to spend too much time

staring directly at the uniformed men who were looking in their direction. “Ah-hhh, Oleksiy? If the authorities are questioning you about the plane, then shouldn't you—”

“We should,” Levchenko agreed. “Officially we've been released into the transit lounge until further officers from the *Mukhabarat* arrive, so we're making an escape before that happens. Plus there's your safety to consider. And more.”

“More?”

They had reached the bottom of the stairs, stepping onto a broad plaza which wasn't as heavily crowded as the floor above. “Airport security is also questioning one of the workers here,” Levchenko said. “He was near the hangar when the shooting started and is reporting how he was attacked by 'two dangerous Western women'.” He gave Mary and Helen a look.

“I did *not* attack him,” Mary insisted. “I ... needed his truck.”

Helen sighed. “Do prisons in Egypt allow for conjugal visits?” she asked Levchenko.

“Here,” Levchenko said, indicating a door on the opposite side of the plaza. It was being held slightly open by another of the Cossacks.

Mary noticed the rather severe looking Arabic notices on the door. “Shouldn't there be an alarm?”

“There should,” Levchenko agreed. “But we've managed to jam it for a bit. Hopefully it'll be long enough.”

“Hopefully,” Mary echoed, noticing how two uniformed men had been watching their movements and were now moving quickly towards them, one of the men speaking into a microphone. Following the others she found herself on a loading dock in a parking garage. A line of vehicles stretched off to the right and left.

Levchenko barked an order to the Cossack who'd been holding the door, and the man nodded, shutting it then attaching a small object between the handle and the jamb. He then quickly backed away.

“Turn your eyes,” Levchenko told the women, and they did so as the object suddenly burst into a hissing bright light which lasted a few seconds.

“Come,” the hetman now ordered, nodding towards a gray van which waited nearby. Several of the Cossacks had already moved to it, opening

the side door and getting in.

Mary had glanced back to see that the door now carried an ugly black stain where the handle had been. “Wh-what—”

“Thermite welder,” Levchenko explained. “It’ll delay the guards long enough.”

Under his breath he muttered a few words which Mary hoped weren’t the Ukrainian equivalent of *I hope*. Entering the van alongside Helen she found the interior rather bare, the only seats being forward, with the one on the driver’s side now being occupied by a Cossack who was starting up the engine as another Cossack slid the door shut.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t arrange for something more comfortable,” Levchenko said, as he and the others squatted down on the floor. “This should only be temporary.”

“S’alright,” Mary murmured, sitting down alongside Helen on the side opposite Levchenko. She felt the van starting to move.

“The majority of the airport security forces are still concentrated on the hangar where we were,” Levchenko told her. “*Hopefully* that will mean we’ll face little resistance as we leave the airport.”

“But those guards spotted us. And they’ll know you welded the door shut.”

Levchenko nodded. “Yes. That’s why I said ‘hopefully’.”

He now drew something close to him, and Mary saw that it was the wrapped *Zirka Rishennya*. “I was wondering where that was,” she said. “I didn’t think you’d be allowed to carry it into the airport.”

“We ... acquired the van,” Levchenko told her, “and moved most of our equipment into it before going in search of you.”

Mary clearly heard the pause before “acquired”. “So I guess that, along with all its other capabilities, the sword doesn’t tell you where enemies are.”

“Oh Mary, be realistic,” Helen tiredly said. “That only works with orcs.”

“Oh. Right.”

One of the Cossacks had been listening to a phone and he now spoke to Levchenko, who nodded. “With the exception of ourselves and an extraction team, my men have already escaped the airport and are currently moving out of southern Cairo in separate vehicles,” he told the

women.

Also “acquired”, Mary thought.

The van drove up onto a ramp, heading on out of the parking garage. Mary would have had to get up on her knees to peer over the driver's shoulder and see out, and she prudently decided that whatever happened wouldn't hurt so much if she didn't know it was coming.

With equal prudence she mentally crossed her fingers.

They had been moving for several minutes when the driver suddenly called out “*Derzhat'sya*”. The van picked up speed ... there were some distant shouts and alarms ... Mary swore (but couldn't be certain) that she heard a gunshot ... and then there was a very definite CRASH which shook everyone in the van.

Matters soon smoothed out, but the van was still proceeding rapidly.

Helen managed to reacquire her squat. “Ah-hhhh—”

Levchenko had moved to where he could stare past the driver and on out the front window. “We've made something of a rather dramatic exit,” he said simply.

I'm definitely getting my own lawyer, Helen silently concluded.

* * * * *

Mary had no way of knowing if minutes or hours passed until the van finally slowed to a halt and the door was thrown open to show two more Cossacks.

“Let's go,” Levchenko said. “They're looking for this van, so we now switch transportation.”

The women followed the Cossacks outside, finding themselves in what seemed to be the parking lot of a shopping mall. Looking around, Mary saw the airport on the other side of a highway. The sight wasn't improved by the presence of helicopters hovering about like a distant cloud of hornets. A cloud which was gradually drifting in their direction.

“Our erstwhile enemies at the hangar have apparently made something of a stand,” Levchenko said. “Bad for them, but momentarily fortunate for us. Ladies? Please.”

He was indicating a nearby “stretch” limousine: an attractive vehicle all

in white, with chrome trim, four windows to a side and nearly as long as an Enterprises House on Wheels II. Mary couldn't recognize the make, but she knew it wasn't an Enterprises "Pleasure Dome" class atomicar (which Helen tended to refer to as the "Usurper", seeing as how the few Pleasure Domes which were marketed had been sold to people who tended to offend Helen's moral compass).

(Admittedly, Mary didn't quite care much for the usual Pleasure Dome customer either.)

She did manage to catch a glance at the rear license plate, though, before allowing herself to be herded into the air-conditioned and richly upholstered interior. The Cossacks also made themselves at home inside and, with the doors shut, the enormous car began moving away from the van.

Levchenko nodded in satisfaction. "There."

Mary frowned. "Ah ... I'm not usually up on the sort of identification used for foreign cars, but was this limo marked with official Egyptian government plates?"

Levchenko was slow in answering. "Yes."

"The little Egyptian flags on the hood sort of gave it away to me," Helen added.

Mary was gaping at the Cossack leader. "You stole an *Egyptian government car*?"

"That reminds me of something," Helen said to her. "Did you leave the keys for the truck in the ignition when you parked it?"

"Helen!"

Helen's face was the very picture of saintliness.

"Few people will think of stopping and searching an official government car," Levchenko explained. "The windows are also darkened, so no one outside will get a clear look. By the time the theft is discovered we should be well on our way, and one of my men is monitoring official Egyptian radio traffic."

Mary decided that now wasn't the moment for a lecture on integrity. Not only that but, as Helen (*drat her*) had so properly pointed out, her own hands were hardly clean. *I'm being lectured on behavior by Helen. Talk about the world turning upside down.*

She glanced out the window, noting that the car seemed to be heading south. “The gunmen at the airport,” she said. “They were after us, and not you.”

Levchenko nodded again. “We realized that after they broke off their initial attack to begin pursuing you and Mrs. Newton. And I'd dearly love to know how they managed to smuggle that armored car onto the airport.”

Mary turned her eyes to his. “Putting aside, for the moment, the question of who they are, why would they be interested in Helen and myself?”

“They were members of a slave ring,” Helen declared. “They spotted two drop dead gorgeous American women and decided—”

“I don't think so, Helen.”

“Well ... at least one drop dead gorgeous American woman. Don't hide your light under a bushel, Mary.”

“To be honest, Mrs. Swift,” Levchenko said, “that's been on my mind quite a bit as well.”

“It has something to do with the search for the missing gold,” Mary went on. “That's the only thing I can think of. The gunmen at the hotel had our picture. Helen and I are the targets, not you and your Cossacks.” Her expression hardened. “Why?”

Levchenko was matching her glare for glare. “Someone feels you and Mrs. Newton know something.”

“Someone' obviously hasn't seen my school records,” Helen muttered.

“What could we know?” Mary asked Levchenko.

The Cossack leader considered it. “You and Mrs. Newton were going through Perov's papers—”

“Technical documents. Nothing Helen or I would understand.”

“—and those papers are probably now in the hands of Sherman Ames,” Levchenko went on. “Leaving you and Mrs. Newton as the only free source of information available.”

Helen slowly spoke. “Despite a personal penchant for what *some* people would consider a smart-alecky attitude,” and here she glanced at Mary, “I would like to offer what I think is a sensible answer.”

She had everyone's attention. “Not fishing for compliments, you understand,” she continued, “but we *are* Mary Swift and Helen Newton

and, as such, quite a considerable blip on the radar screen of anyone whose intentions are ... dare I say it? ... less than pure.”

Levchenko looked from her to Mary. “Well?”

Mary sighed. “I’m too tired to argue that she might have a point.”

“‘Might’ have a point?”

“What you’ve told me so far,” Mary said to Levchenko, “and what we’ve experienced, leads me to believe that your opponents in this business are very dangerous people. They’d stop at nothing to prevent you from achieving your goal. Kidnapping us would definitely throw a monkey wrench in your operation.”

“And would also get the boys and Enterprises on their case,” Helen pointed out.

“Dangerous and desperate,” Mary amended, running a hand across her forehead. “They’ve learned that we’re with you, so we’re a liability.”

So we get sent home, Helen’s mind soared hopefully.

Levchenko seemed to be turning the notion over in his mind. “I know I’m not standing on the firmest ground right now,” he said, “but I feel that the safest place for you and Mrs. Newton is with us.”

Helen’s mind boiled with an obscenity.

“I agree,” Mary murmured.

The obscenity in Helen’s mind gave birth to twins.

“But not for the same reason.” Mary once again met Levchenko’s eyes. “By seeing how far your enemies will go to stop you will go a long way towards determining how close they think you are to working all of this out. That would be something worth knowing.”

“These guys are *murderers*,” Helen insisted, stressing the last word.

“So what else is new?” Mary once again glanced out the window, noting how the sun was quite low in the sky. She sat back against the upholstery, feeling it embrace her. “Somebody wake me when we get to Al Masid.”

Helen made a brief choking sound. “You’re going to *sleep*?”

“I’m tired.”

“Ack ... Mary, we could be killed at any moment.”

“If so, we’re behind schedule.” Mary closed her eyes.

And, on that note, the first day in Egypt came to a close.

Chapter Ten: Al Masid.

It was the stopping of the limo which awoke Mary, her eyes fluttering open to discover that Helen had also managed to fall asleep. Sitting up she saw that night had definitely fallen, and the limo had pulled up close alongside a bulky shadow in the darkness which Mary managed to figure out into the shape of a warehouse.

Levchenko noticed Mary. “Ah, good! I was trying to determine how to gently awake you. We're here.”

Mary gave Helen a nudge. “Helen? Potty stop.”

“Mmmrmmmrrhhh.”

“They got pecan logs here.”

Helen was suddenly wide awake, looking around in expectation. Then: “Okay, Mary, that was a dirty trick.”

“Sorry.”

Helen pouted. “Probably don't have buffalo jerky here either.”

Mary noticed Levchenko giving them a quizzical look. “On road trips, Helen is our designated rest stop junk food aficionado.” She blinked. “Or should that be 'aficionada'? Anyway, wave a Little Debbie's donut at her, or a bag of candy orange slices, and she's your devoted slave.”

“Am not.”

Opening the doors, the women accompanied the Cossacks out into the night air. To the west were the lights of what seemed to be a town. Mary was mildly surprised at the smell of growing things and concluded that they were probably within walking distance of the Nile.

A door at the warehouse opened, admitting bright light from within, and several men approached the group, chattering excitedly at Levchenko in Ukrainian. The hetman responded, clapping some of them on the shoulder and smiling.

“I guess the gang's all here,” Helen murmured.

Cossack leaders were apparently blessed with good hearing, and Levchenko smiled over at her. “Yes, Mrs. Newton. With our arrival my two platoons are once again together.” Turning back to his people he gave

what sounded like orders. One of the men nodded, heading for the limo.

“Arriving in darkness gave us something of an advantage,” Levchenko explained to the women. “Nonetheless, I feel we should hide the car. It wouldn't do to have locals wondering why a government limousine is parked at an old warehouse.”

As the limo was moved towards an adjacent shed, Mary and Helen followed Levchenko into the brightness of the warehouse. They saw a crowd of men milling about; some of them working with a variety of vans and trucks. There seemed to be no pattern to the vehicles and, as Mary stared closer, she saw that the men were carefully engaged in removing signs and such.

Acquired, her mind reported.

Other men were gathered around a long makeshift table consisting of planks placed on sawhorses. At the far end of the table a portable computer/field phone was sharing space with several other pieces of portable equipment.

Helen's hands were on her hips as she frowned at the collection of gear. “Maybe I'm being an incurable romantic,” she said to Mary. “But all this doesn't say 'Cossack' to me.” She began looking around. “On the other hand, I *do* insist on indoor plumbing, and someone did mention potty stop.”

Which reminded Mary that she was overdue in attending to her own ablutions. “Porta-potties over there,” she said, indicating a pair of the universally familiar shapes with a nod. “Be right back,” she called out to Levchenko, receiving a distracted nod from the Cossack leader who was listening to one of the men standing near the computer.

When the women returned, Levchenko beckoned them over. “We're continuing to monitor official Egyptian radio traffic,” he said. “The entire discussion seems to be focused on the attack at the hangar. The attackers who didn't manage to escape were killed in the battle, so the government hasn't yet been able to determine their identity.”

Mary's eyes narrowed. “No mention of us?”

“If by 'us' you also mean my Cossacks, then the answer is no.”

“So that's a good thing,” Helen said. She looked from Mary to Levchenko, then back to Mary. “Isn't it?”

“Actually,” Levchenko replied, “I'd be happier if we were also being

discussed.”

“Either the Egyptian government has forgotten us,” Mary added to Helen, “which I seriously doubt ... or they're playing their cards close to their chest for some reason. Which I don't like.” She slowly moved over to where several maps had been stretched out on the table. Along with a map of Egypt there was one showing the Mediterranean, one which combined eastern Africa, the Middle East and eastern Europe, and a map which presented a much more general view of Europe.

Levchenko moved to stand next to her, his eyes also on the maps.

“So what's next?” Mary asked.

Levchenko sighed. “I shouldn't really be making decisions when I'm as tired as I am. Hopefully we can spend the rest of the night here and rest, but we can't stay much longer. Some of my men are preparing some food ...”

Mary inwardly shuddered at the thought of hastily cooked rations.

“... but, regardless of what we decide, it would be best if we abandoned this place as soon as possible.” His eyes were moving over the map. “Right now I'm thinking that my original idea of continuing on to Djibouti would be unwise.”

Mary glanced at him. “Because people are after us now.” It wasn't a question.

“Exactly,” Levchenko replied with a nod. “This brings in an entirely new complication. Despite the fact that I've got two platoons with me, I had hoped we were moving in enough secrecy to mask our progress. It would now seem that I am in error.”

“Refresh my memory. What were you hoping to find in Djibouti?”

Levchenko tapped a finger on the map of eastern Africa. “The site of the original Russian colony. I was sort of hoping against hope that a clue of some kind could still be found there, and was also theorizing that our unknown adversaries might be heading in the same direction.” A shrug. “Their presence in Egypt tells me I might be right. But, if they know about us—”

“Then they might be in Egypt because they want to follow us, hoping we'll lead them to the treasure.”

“That's the way my mind's working. And if it's true, Mrs. Swift, then they're grasping at the same straws that I am.” With a weary wave of a

hand he indicated the maps. "It's a veritable needle in a haystack: searching for the lost gold in an area composing millions of square kilometers."

"Nine million, seven hundred and twelve thousand, five hundred and seventy-eight square miles," Helen said, coming over to join them. "In square kilometers: twenty-five million, one hundred and fifty ... " She stopped as she noticed the looks Mary and Levchenko were giving her. "Ah-hhh, I should point out that my estimate of total Middle East area is admittedly a guess—"

"And *this*," Mary declared, turning to Levchenko, "from the same person who repeatedly flunked several math courses at school. Or, at best, made a C. It drives me *crazy*."

Helen looked contrite. "I'm sorry."

Mary shook her head.

"It would be a miracle if a clue could be found in Djibouti," Levchenko remarked, returning his attention to the maps. "But we literally have no idea where the gold disappeared to."

"But at least you're being thorough." Mary pointed at several marked areas on the maps. "I take it these indicate places where you've been operating."

"More or less," Levchenko replied. "A lot of those markings show the locations of equipment depots and emergency contacts. Here, for instance." He pointed to a spot on one of the maps. "On the southeastern border of Turkey. We've left a cache of equipment at an abandoned airfield north of the town of Cizre. In three days time," and here Levchenko peered closer at the scribbling on the map, "at 4:30 PM, an airplane from our organization is scheduled to land at the airport, collect the equipment and return it to Ukraine to await further instructions. That's unless I issue counter orders. To try and insure secrecy, Mrs. Swift, we're constantly shifting our resources about."

Mary felt that Sherman Ames could use a leaf or two from Levchenko's book. "A pity we can't organize the locating of the gold with equal efficiency."

Despite herself, Helen smiled at Mary's use of *we*.

"Holmes was indeed clever," Levchenko said. "I believe he managed to succeed in hiding the gold. But he must have left some way for the gold to be recovered."

“He knew he was dying,” Helen added. “Obviously he wouldn't take the secret with him to the grave.”

“But no notes,” Mary murmured. “No clues. Nothing.”

“Watson didn't know anything?”

Mary shook her head, her eyes on the maps. “If he did then he never mentioned it. And, if Holmes trusted anyone, he would've trusted Watson.” Her expression grew distant. “There was also his brother, Mycroft, and he was a high-ranking official within the British government. But if he knew where Holmes hid the gold then certainly he would've told others. At least the Prime Minister, or the Foreign Office. Fudgesicles.”

“What's wrong?”

Mary sighed. “I *need* to get in touch with Rosen, or maybe even Douglas-Hyme.”

Helen frowned. “Who?”

“Members of the Baker Street Irregulars.”

“Oh-hhhhh.” Helen nodded. “Those guys.”

“The Baker Street—?” Levchenko began.

“It's a society with branches throughout the world, made up of Holmes enthusiasts,” Helen explained. “They named themselves after a group of investigators Holmes employed during his career. Mary's been a member since God knows when.”

“Loretta Rosen and Jonathan Douglas-Hyme are members who've done the most research into Holmes' final days,” Mary added. “They've written extensively on the subject, both together and separately. If I could somehow access the BSI archives in London,” and here she gave a look towards the computer.

Levchenko followed her look. “That could be arranged,” he slowly said. “We do have internet access.”

Web surfing Cossacks, Helen thought. Okay, I give up.

Mary was thoughtfully tapping on her chin, and she now turned to Levchenko. “I know the basic story about Holmes' last days,” she said to him, “but you know more about the handling of the gold. Do you have any information, no matter how slight, on how Holmes hid the gold?”

“Only that Holmes personally promised Edward Shortt the gold would

be guarded.”

Mary's eyes widened a bit. “Huh.”

“Eww,” Helen murmured.

Mary looked at her. “Something?”

Helen was looking rather uncomfortable. “Maybe Holmes did take the secret of the gold to the grave. You don't suppose, when Holmes was buried ...”

“Oh eww, Helen. That's gross.”

“Sorry.”

“And anyway, Holmes would've hidden the gold while he was still alive. If I were him then I wouldn't have risked hiding the gold in my coffin, where anyone could filch it.”

“Okay,” Helen said. “I guess you're right. It was just an idea.”

“Not a bad one,” Mary assured her. “Just a gross one.” Her look became dreamy once more. “Holmes personally assured Shortt the gold would be guarded. Now how could he ...” Her voice faded away, and Levchenko appeared to be ready to say something, but Helen touched his arm and gave a quiet shake of the head.

“I have to hide twenty-five thousand rubles in gold coins,” Mary eventually began murmuring, gazing off at nothing in particular. “I also suspect I'm dying, so I don't have a lot of time. *How* do I arrange it? He gave the Home Secretary his personal assurance that the gold would be guarded.” She lightly tapped at her lips with a fingertip. “Guarded.”

She looked over at Levchenko. “Holmes said 'guarded'? That was his exact term?”

Levchenko shrugged. “That was what we learned from the documents involving the original investigation into the whereabouts of the gold.”

“Oh! You have those with you?”

“Naturally. We downloaded the file for use in our project.”

“Wonderful! I'll study those first off ... wait. Are they written in Ukrainian? Russian?”

Levchenko smiled. “They're a download of the original English text.”

“Goody!”

“But perhaps you and Mrs. Newton should eat first.”

“Ummm, yeah. Good idea.”

“It's instant borscht,” Helen pointed out. “I saw one of the men stirring it up.”

Mary's stomach did a flip-flop. She had eaten several strange things before, but would be the first to admit she preferred decently cooked food. “Maybe I'll save it for a breakfast,” she said, breaking into a yawn. “Like you said, Oleksiy, it might be good idea to catch up on rest and get a fresh start tomorrow ... no, later on today.”

The Cossack leader nodded. “The limo is parked in an adjacent enclosure, through that door past the table. You and Mrs. Newton can sleep in it.”

Which solved one unspoken problem for Mary: how was she and Helen supposed to comfortably sleep while surrounded by seventy-four Cossacks? “We can plan better once we've all rested and eaten,” she said, rubbing at her eyes and trying not to dwell on the notion of instant borscht. “I also want a chance to look at your downloaded files before we decide which way to go. We need a more definite plan of action, which we obviously can't do standing here right now.”

Levchenko was grinning. “*Ja rozumiju, Polkovnyk Swift.*” With a cheery wave he moved off to join his men.

Mary looked at Helen. “Should I be worried at what he just said?”

Smiling, Helen shook her head.

“We'll have a better idea of what to do once I've seen the file on the missing gold,” Mary went on, lightly patting the maps. “I wish I could find out more about who's chasing us, but I'll bet lunch ... with real borscht ... that it's the same people who've been doing the killings at Donetsk. I'd just as soon avoid them, and *why* are you smiling at me like that?”

“Just that it's true what they say. The apple doesn't roll far from the tree.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

“I swear, Helen, the older you get the weirder you get. And that's saying a lot. C'mon, let's find the limo and try to snooze.”

Chapter Eleven: Magic Sword.

Mary had slept in cars before. Quite comfortable ones, in fact (up to and including both the House on Wheels and its successor: the HOW2). Admittedly, however, there was something luxurious in awakening upon the sybaritic upholstery of the limo, and she allowed herself a stretch on the seat.

Who actually sleeps in a limousine? she wondered, finally deciding that she really didn't want to speculate on the answer.

“Mmmm, Helen? Morning.”

A “rrmmmmhhrrrr ...” was produced by the figure on the opposite couch.

“Ahhh, Helen ...”

“Before you get started, Mary, that trick won't work twice.”

“Sorry.”

Helen turned and stretched, grimacing as she sat up. Mary knew her as an absolute bear when it came to leaving a bed. “Let's get going,” she said.

“Sure,” Helen muttered. “Never too early to get shot at.”

Leaving the limo, the women re-entered the warehouse. The Cossacks, what of them they could see, were also awake and already attending to the sort of chores normal to a military force engaged in a covert operation on foreign soil. Mary, who had occasionally observed Sherman Ames' security people on maneuvers, found the scene oddly familiar.

Looking around she couldn't see Levchenko and went over to where one of his lieutenants ... *what was his name? I've got to start learning that ...* was speaking to two of his fellows at the map table.

At her approach the man smiled and came to attention. Or at least that's what Mary's still slightly drowsy mind imagined. “*Polkovnyk Swift. Dobroho ranku.*”

Mary nodded. “Ah-hhh ... Levchenko?”

“Certainly,” the man replied in accented English. “He's outside exercising.”

Mary and Helen went to the warehouse door, letting themselves out, their eyes blinking as they encountered the early sunlight. Drawing on her camping experience, Mary estimated that it was around eight or so in the morning.

All thoughts of time were rapidly quashed by the nearby sight of Levchenko. The Cossack leader had stripped to the waist and, as the women watched, he was slowly weaving about with his sword, making sudden thrusts before shifting again to another position to repeat the thrusts. His movements were as lithe and as fluid as his body, his muscled chest glistening with sweat.

“Oh ...” Helen murmured

“My ...” Mary finished. There was obviously no denying that Oleksiy Levchenko was a handsome man. Watching him, Mary remembered how he had wanted to be an astronaut (*or would that have been “cosmonaut”?* she wondered). Levchenko seemed so natural out there, practicing with the sword (*kata*, Mary reminded herself), but Mary was equally able to imagine him at the controls of a spaceship.

Or a starship. Mary found herself recalling a conversation she and Helen had concerning Harrison Ford's portrayal of Han Solo in the *Star Wars* films. “He was quite nice,” Mary had opined, “but I swear, the way he sometimes treated Leia. I really don't know why she put up with him.”

Helen had sighed. “Oh, Mary. Haven't you ever loved a Bad Boy?”

Mary had actually heard the capital letters in the statement.

Helen had gone on. “Oh, that's right. You never have, being married to Tom. He's a complete gentleman.”

Mary now smiled secretly. *At least in public*, she thought, feeling a sudden deep yearning for her husband. She needed him so much now, and especially since she suspected he was probably in a raving fit of worry wondering where she was. She wanted to at least hear his voice, and recalled how even Sandy managed to get word out when she had been deep in her own exploits. She also knew how Tom could and would tear apart heaven and earth ... quite literally ... to find her.

She suddenly steeled herself. No! I have to see this through without endangering him.

Forcing her attention back on Levchenko (no difficult task), Mary found herself wondering if the man was married? Was there currently a Mrs. Levchenko anxiously waiting for word of her husband? Or at least

some Ukrainian maid (or perhaps not-quite-maid, she allowed herself to speculate) going about her chores and gazing longingly for some sight of his approaching figure?

Mary then found herself wondering about Levchenko's mother, and immediately felt a desire to spend an afternoon with that worthy unknown woman: sharing tea and exchanging notes and commiserations about their respective wayward children.

She then became aware of Helen's breathing. "Down girl."

"I know," Helen said, her eyes still fixed on Levchenko. "I just ... yeah, I know."

Levchenko noticed his audience and stopped to smile at them. "Good morning."

"Didn't mean to interrupt you," Mary apologized.

"Not at all," Levchenko assured her. "It's just been a while since I've had the opportunity to do some practice." He hefted the *Zirka Rishennya*. "As you might suspect, this requires a considerable bit of handling and working with."

"It heals," Mary said, gazing at the sword. "It also seems to deflect bullets. Obviously it's not what one would call a normal sword. What else can it do?"

In answer, Levchenko looked around, finally spotting a large rock at the edge of the driveway to the warehouse. "Watch," he instructed, moving to it, and then swung the sword at the stone. To the eyes of the women it smoothly passed through, meeting no resistance whatsoever.

"Keep watching," Levchenko said, and reached out with a foot to nudge the stone. To the surprise of the women the stone neatly fell apart into two halves.

"Wow," Helen murmured.

Mary's sentiment was similar, and she and Helen exchanged a look, a thought briefly passing between them.

Levchenko raised the sword before his face, regarding the blade. "The *Zirka Rishennya* has an edge unlike that of any in existence anywhere. It will cut stone, steel ... it can even slice a diamond in two. And the edge has remained eternally sharp."

Mary held out her hand. "May I?"

Levchenko held the weapon out to her, hilt first. "Please be careful."

Gently accepting the sword, Mary examined it closely. She then placed her hand firmly upon the hilt before suddenly going into an advance which became a lunge, then a move back to perform a parry, completing with a riposte before standing straight again.

Watching this, Levchenko appeared to be impressed.

Helen coughed slightly. "I should mention in passing," she said to Levchenko, "that my friend here was third-seated sword in our school's fencing team. Took second place in epee one year in the All-State Women Fencing Championship."

"Surprised she didn't take first," Levchenko murmured.

"Well, the first place girl had a thing going on with one of the judges ..."

Mary was once again examining the sword, noting the pommel. It did seem to be made of gold, but Mary suspected that the gold was simply a veneer overlaying a more durable substance. The end of the pommel was marked with an emblem which Mary presumed was some sort of Ukrainian or Cossack symbol, but something about it was making her frown. Shaking it away for the moment she carefully handed the sword back to its master, who accepted it with a slight bow in her direction. "Where did the sword come from, Oleksiy?"

Helen felt a frown growing upon her face.

"According to Kaimanove legend, the *Zirka Rishennya* began as a piece of metal which God hurled down to Earth ages ago," Levchenko explained. "It was sent to our tribe to be used in the cause of justice. Quite literally: the Star of Judgment. The metal was formed into a sword which has been handed down from hetman to hetman throughout the generations."

"And what do you think?" Mary asked.

Levchenko once again regarded the sword. "I have carried this ever since becoming hetman, Mrs. Swift. I know better than to challenge its qualities, or perhaps even its origins.

"And now," he added in a brighter tone, "we should get to work." From his belt he removed the sword's wrapping, beginning to cover the weapon. "But first: some food."

Helen moaned, thinking of cold instant borscht.

"We have eggs."

“Oh,” Helen said, immediately brightening.

“Powdered.”

Helen moaned again and began wearily following Levchenko back to the warehouse, but found herself stopped by a touch from Mary. “Helen and I want to have a bit more fresh air and sun,” Mary explained to the Cossack. “We’ll be in shortly.”

Nodding, Levchenko continued on to the warehouse.

Helen recognized the look on Mary’s face. “All right,” she said. “We’re alone for the moment, and no one can eavesdrop, so we’re free to talk about what I suspect is on your mind.”

Mary nodded, turning away from the warehouse.

“I don’t have to guess, do I?” Helen asked. “It’s the sword.”

“That sword,” Mary agreed.

Crossing her arms, Helen sighed. “Do you want to say it, or should I?”

Mary didn’t answer.

“An indestructible blade,” Helen went on. “It also heals wounds and possesses some sort of power which turns aside bullets.”

“You heard Oleksiy’s description,” Mary said, meeting her eyes. “An edge unlike that of any in existence anywhere’.”

Another sigh from Helen. “Go ahead and say it. You know you want to.”

“Alien technology.”

“Yeah. Was afraid that was it.” Helen shook her head, also looking away from the warehouse. “There just isn’t any end to it, is there? *Dammit!*”

Mary was also wondering how long she and those she loved would continue to be touched by the stars. By now it was common knowledge that, throughout its history, Earth had been visited by extraterrestrials. Collectively known by the now-ironic name of the “Space Friends”, the aliens came from Cassiopeia-A, over eleven thousand light years away. Unable to survive alongside humans, the majority of the Space Friend visitations had been in the form of artifacts hurled to Earth which carried out various functions. Mary’s husband and son had just barely inaugurated Swift Enterprises ... with Tom Jr. putting the final touches on his first big project: the Flying Lab ... when a Space Friend artifact crash-

landed on the Enterprises grounds. A sort of Rosetta Stone which enabled two-way contact between humans and aliens.

For Mary, though, it had begun much earlier. Her father-in-law, Barton Swift, had been involved in a crash-landing in Ecuador years before. He died, but not before coming into contact with an artifact which recorded both his genetic pattern and his memories. A computer-generated alien simulacrum of the man was currently in existence on the Nuclear World of Zea.

Mary's son and daughter had experienced the brunt of human involvement with the Space Friends, with Sandy finally managing to drive the aliens away from the solar system before they could carry out a threat to destroy the Earth. The recollection made Mary shudder. Sandy had almost died then.

And now ...

“What do we do?” Helen was asking.

Mary pushed the bleak thoughts out of her head. “I don't know,” she replied. “I mean, do we go in and tell Oleksiy that the symbol of his tribe is actually a UFO?”

Helen snorted in agreement. “Not the best of ideas.”

“No.” Mary looked back at the warehouse. “I wish the boys or the kids were here. They have all the experience. So far, all we've got is the fact that Oleksiy's sword seems benign. If we're right, and the sword is actually an alien artifact, then at least it seems to be on our side.”

“For the time being,” Helen pointed out.

“Thanks for brightening my morning.”

“Well—”

And then they heard it at the same time, both of them looking towards the north. Seeing the five helicopters quickly bearing down on them.

“Oh Lord,” Mary moaned, turning and beginning to rush towards the warehouse. “*Oleksiy!*”

But the helicopters had already fired, sending a stream of rockets which crashed into the warehouse and all around the women. Rockets which were releasing thick clouds of greenish vapor when they exploded.

Neither Mary or Helen made it to the warehouse.

Chapter Twelve: Hanging Around.

When Mary began waking up she found herself wishing she wouldn't. She felt sore, with aches all over her body. Not only that, she was dizzy as well. In fact she felt completely disoriented ...

“MA-REEEEEE ...”

Her eyes suddenly snapped open. “Yes, I'm ...”

And she immediately realized that she actually wasn't.

A few moments of stark blind panic passed before she realized what was going on. The world was okay, it was just that she was currently upside down. Mary automatically tried to re-orient herself, only to discover that she couldn't. She was somehow suspended in the air.

She looked down (*no, up. No ... down. Up. Whatever*), realizing that the top of her head was a few feet above a cement floor. Looking *up/down/up* she saw that her ankles were shackled to a chain which were hanging from one of several beams crossing a metal ceiling. She was in a dimly lit room; rather like a large shed of some sort .

And Helen was hanging head down next to her.

“I have been shouting and shouting *forever*,” Helen now called out, her voice streaky with emotion. “I didn't think you'd *ever* wake up.”

Mary wriggled some, managing a gentle spin which she wished she hadn't started. Her head was pounding. “Where ...”

“I don't know,” Helen replied. “I've only been up a little while and found myself like this.”

Mary's arms were free (their current awkward position going a long ways to explain part of the soreness she was experiencing), and she waggled them about some, trying to restore circulation. She noted Helen's arms were equally free. “We—“

“No one's come by,” Helen said. “Nothing.”

Mary was having a problem clearing her head. “The helicopters ... the rockets ...”

“I guess they were carrying some kind of knockout gas or something.”

“Oleksiy! The Cossacks.” Mary’s eyes widened. “They were *killed*—”

“Mary, I don’t think so. Maybe they were just knocked out, like we were.”

“Ohhhhhh ...” Mary gave her head a shake, immediately regretting it as it only served to increase the pounding in her head. “I wonder ... I wonder how long we’ve been like this?”

“It has to be less than a day.”

Curiosity managed to bore its way through the discomfort and she peered over at her friend. “Huh?”

“You usually can’t hang upside down longer than twenty-four or so hours, on the average, without risking serious medical side-effects.”

Mary stared at her.

“I just know,” Helen replied simply. “I’m not feeling too good as it is. But I bet we could be feeling much worse.”

And probably will, Mary mused, desperately looking around for something, anything, which could possibly help. At least, God be praised, she and Helen hadn’t been wearing skirts when they’d been grabbed by the Cossacks. Things were bad enough. “*Why* are we hanging upside down,” she asked aloud, “who’s done this, and where are they?”

“First off,” Helen said, “there’s no sense in looking around. I’ve already done so. To answer your middle question: I don’t know. As for the rest, I suspect the reason for our being like this is due to our ... whoever they are ... not being around to supervise us.”

“They could’ve just ... tied us up.”

Helen shrugged. Or tried to. “Maybe this is how they do it here. Wherever ‘here’ is.”

“Jahannam,” Mary suddenly said.

“What?”

“Jahannam,” Mary repeated. “One of the Islamic Hells. The upside-down one. Wherever we are we’re still probably in the Middle East.”

“I’ll pick ‘Obscure Religious Ephemera’ for two hundred dollars—”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. I’m just trying not to think about what’s going to happen to us. I’m sorry, Mary, but I’m not all that brave right now.”

“Neither am I,” Mary replied. “Plus I need aspirin. And a potty.”

Helen sighed.

“What's wrong now?”

“*Wish* you hadn't brought that up.”

“Sorry.” Mary tried to concentrate on ignoring her discomforts, and wasn't succeeding. “If whoever gassed us wanted to kill us then we'd probably be dead by now.”

“Maybe,” Helen began. “Maybe they're setting up something ... I don't know ... *special* for us.”

“What?” Mary asked, immediately regretting the question.

“Snakes,” Helen replied crossly. “Boiling oil. Roasting alive. Taking away our credit cards. *I don't know.*”

Mary was silent.

Helen sighed, closing her eyes briefly. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean—”

“Yes you did, and I don't blame you. I got us into this and it's all my fault.”

“Your intentions were good, and your heart was pure.”

“Helen?”

“Umm?”

“I'd feel a whole lot better if you didn't refer to me in the past tense.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry.”

Mary was trying not to shake her head too much, torn between a desire to throw off her hurts and a similar wish not to add to same by making sudden movements. “Maybe this hanging business is what these people want.”

“Well *durhhh*, Mary—”

“I *mean* they want us to get more and more uncomfortable and in a position where we'd cooperate with anything in order to get free.”

“Well then I wish whoever they are would show up. They're way overdue.”

“You don't mean that.”

“In about another five or so minutes I think I'm going to very much

need a long, hot shower.”

“Oh-hhh ...” Squeezing her eyes shut, Mary tried to rack her brain towards something which could take the form of a solution. Their husbands or the kids could do it ... *why can't I? Why can't I?*

“These might be the same people who've been following and attacking the Cossacks,” she said out loud.

“All right,” came the numb reply from Helen.

“They took us for the same reason Oleksiy's people took us: an idea that we would know where the gold is.”

“Ah, Mary? This place might be bugged, and they might be listening to what you're saying.”

“Well, then, maybe they'll realize we don't know anything about the whereabouts of the gold.”

“And *maybe* they'll then realize they don't need to keep us alive.”

Mary immediately shut her mouth.

What did she and Helen know? What? Closing her eyes tighter, Mary resumed her concentrations. The location of the missing gold was a secret which apparently only Sherlock Holmes had known. But if Holmes knew he was dying, wouldn't he have left a clue somewhere? Something which could've led the rightful people to the gold? A fallback ... something helpful.

The helicopter attack took place before Mary had the opportunity to look at Levchenko's files. There had to be something there she could use. But then she questioned herself that, if an answer was there, then why hadn't the Cossacks or the British or anyone else found it in all the years that the mystery had been investigated?

Focus on where Holmes could've left his clue, she ordered her mind. Between the time Edward Shortt had given Holmes the assignment, and the time when Holmes had died, he had not left England ...

Or at least not *officially*.

Mary's inverted frown deepened. Could Holmes have secretly traveled elsewhere in the few months remaining to him? Could he have trusted the secret to someone else besides Watson? *Could* a clue have been planted somewhere outside of Great Britain?

“Djibouti!” she cried out.

“What?”

“The place where the Russian outpost was in Africa,” Mary said. “The place where Oleksiy had thought of looking for a clue.”

“What about it?”

“Now I know why it's been bugging me all this time. I just remembered Djibouti was where Tomjay went to carry out his Core Cannon project.”

“Oh.” Helen blinked. “That's right. I should've remembered that, too. Why'd we forget?”

Mary coughed. “Well, let's see. We've been kidnapped, shot at, chased by practically everyone in Egypt, gassed by rockets and strung up like turkeys. I *guess* it just sort of slipped our minds.”

“True.” A pause. “You don't think the Core Cannon project is a part of all this?”

Mary shrugged, the movement making her wince. “After he finished the project, Tomjay turned the site over to the Djibouti government for geothermal development. I don't see a connection, but that doesn't mean anyone else wouldn't. I don't even think the project site is anywhere near where the Russians had their fort, but I'd have to look at a map.”

“Which is not likely to happen anytime soon. Mary, whoever's doing this is definitely after something else, and I don't like thinking about what's gonna be done to us to try and get it.”

“I agree, but maybe we can think of ... Helen, *what* are you doing?”

“Trying something.” Helen had raised her arms (or lowered them, depending on one's perspective), seeming to reach for the floor and was slowly but firmly swinging them back and forth, the action causing her to move like a pendulum at the end of her chain.

“Helen—”

“*Shh*. I'm concentrating.”

Mary could see that Helen was biting her lip as she worked to increase the amount of swing she was producing. Back and forth, back and forth, and Mary felt her head throbbing more as she watched.

“Don't know 'bout you,” Helen said, “but I'm not dressed for being tortured. Annnnnnd ... *heyooop!*”

Reaching the end of her arc, Helen suddenly swung her arms up, managing to bend a bit forward. In the next instant she had grabbed her

ankles.

Mary moaned. “Oh ... that looks so painful.”

“It is,” Helen hissed through gritted teeth. This was followed by a series of gasps and cries as she managed to edge her hands further along her ankles, her grip finally reaching the bottom of the chain. Then the method in Helen's madness became clear as, slowly but steadily, she slowly started climbing her chain hand over hand.

Soon, after a period of what seemed like hours, Helen was once again upright, her hands and feet wrapped around the chain.

“Once again,” Helen gasped, “Miss Morton demonstrates the flawless technique which caused her gymnastics instructors to smile.”

“Helen—”

“Sh, Mary. Please. Just give me a moment to get my breath back, and the blood to its proper places.”

“kay.”

Helen was slowly rubbing her forehead back and forth on the chain, her eyes closed. Then, taking a deep breath, she started climbing. “Our chains are on hooks in these beams,” she said as she shimmied upwards. “If I can reach the beam I can unhook myself and make it back down.”

“But your ankles're still shackled.”

“Look again. Our ankles aren't shackled, but are simply in snug cuffs which can be removed.”

Glancing *up/down/up*, Mary realized Helen was right.

“I'd try to unshackle myself now,” Helen was saying, “but I'm worried I'd lose my grip and end up falling and, right now, strappado is *not* on my list of desired experiences.”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“I mean, I'm happy you're doing this, but impressed. I didn't know you knew so much about hanging upside down and stuff.”

A sigh. “Not now, Mary.”

“Yeah, but I'm just—”

“Mary! Drop it!”

Mary elected to quietly watch as Helen finally reached the top of the chain, but was thinking *with our sort of luck this is where gunmen will now enter and start shooting*. Fortunately, nothing of the sort happened and, after pulling herself up onto the beam with a definite “*Oof*”, Helen gingerly reached down, unfastening her ankles from the cuffs.

“We will now,” she said when she was finished, “see a demonstration of Miss Morton's technique for shimmying gracefully to the floor from a height of ... looks like almost twenty feet.”

“Be careful.”

“Oh, Mary. You're so funny.” Moving with as much prudence as possible, Helen eased herself off from the beam, letting her ankles curl around the chain, then grabbing tightly at it and starting to slither back down. Mary felt herself crossing her fingers as she watched.

“OW! Ow, ow, owwwwwww ...”

“You all right?”

“I could listen to you all day, Mary. Really, I could.” Back on the ground, Helen straightened up, staring at the ceiling and breathing hard. “Climbing down a chain is not the same as climbing down a rope. I don't think I really hurt anything, but I'm just not as limber as I used to be. No matter what Ned says.”

“Ah ... Helen?”

Helen nodded. “Yeah. I see a ladder over there and'll get you down in a jiffy.” With a groan she started shuffling towards where an aluminum stepladder was leaning against a work table.

It was then that Mary's earlier nightmare came true. Or at least partially as the door to the shed opened and a man walked in. Upon seeing Helen his eyes widened and his mouth began opening ...

And Helen swung into action, her hand moving to grab a large wrench from the table, bringing it about in a wide arc, letting the end of it catch the man fully in the face and causing him to fall to the floor as if pole-axed.

“Okay,” Helen announced. “Just got an adrenaline boost. Heart's racing. Circulation going.” She gingerly approached the man, bending over him.

“Is he dead?”

“No.” A pause, then Helen looked up at Mary. “Do you want me to hit him again?”

“I want *down*.”

Nodding, Helen moved to where she could close the door (but not before taking a peek outside), and then, as an afterthought, pushed what to Mary's eyes seemed to be a bulky box half her size against the door. Leaving the chain on a nearby table, Helen then went to the ladder, dragging it over to where Mary was and, after unfolding it, climbed up to where she could reach her friend.

“You going to unhook my ankles?”

“Think about it, Mary. I can't possibly unhook both at the same time and, in your position, it'd be awkward to free one ankle and then try to do the other. Here. Take my hand.”

Mary did so, and Helen pulled her closer. “Now grab the ladder and use the rungs to pull yourself upright.”

“Oh. Yes!” Following Helen's instructions, Mary began inching herself up the rungs, giving Helen time to climb lower. Once she was right side up, Mary clung to the ladder, taking a deep breath. “So much better now.”

She remained there, feeling Helen removing the cuffs, then she followed Helen down to the ground. Once there she bent down to rub her sore ankles. “*Woof!* And many thanks,” she said to Helen.

“*No hay problema,*” Helen said, going back to kneel next to the man who had entered.

Mary watched her. “Y'know, we're both going to feel pretty stupid if he was part of a Cossack rescue team.”

Helen was going through the man's pockets. “Yes, well, if that's the case, he knew the job was dangerous when he took it.”

Moving to her feet, Mary headed for the door. “What was outside?”

“Hallway. No one else. Didn't feel like examining further.” Straightening up she joined her friend. “What now, B'waness?”

“Well obviously we can't stay *here*.”

Helen considered it. “Sensible.”

“That man probably has friends who'll either A: come into the room any moment now, or B: wonder what happened to him, which brings it back to A.” Mary looked around the room again. “No phone, no gun. You

see anything?”

“I found a phone in the man's pocket,” Helen said.

Mary's heart jumped. “Good. But let's not hang around and try to make a call here.”

Helen retrieved her chain from the table. “Let's roll.”

Pushing away the box-doorstop Mary cautiously inched the door open to peek out. As Helen had noted there was little to see other than a section of dingy corridor.

She glanced back at Helen. “Okay. On tiptoe.”

“I swear, Mary, you've never been so hilarious.”

“I meant—”

“I know. Sorry. Lead on, but if we find anything looking like a bathroom I am making a pit stop, bad guys or no.”

Mary could sympathize. She was still aching from her ordeal and knew she looked, felt (and smelled) like week-old death. With longing memories of the Mena House Hotel, she began slipping through the doorway, anxiously looking about. No sign of anyone, but faint voices could be heard from one end of the corridor, causing the women to agree on an unspoken opinion and head in the opposite direction.

“Well at least we now know the room wasn't bugged.”

“Huh,” Helen whispered back. “How do you know?”

“Because if it were, we wouldn't be getting out this easy.”

Reaching a wooden door, Mary once again cracked it open, suddenly blinking at the flow of sunlight from the other side. “Let's go, but turn immediately to the right after stepping outside.”

Helen nodded assurance, and Mary slipped out into open daylight, turning and ducking behind some crates piled alongside. Helen followed suit, glancing around only long enough to see some very familiar helicopters parked on a tarmac surface nearby.

“Help me get this crate over,” Mary said, tugging at one of the containers. “If we move it here we'll have a bit of a hidey-hole. Anyone who searches for us won't think we'd still be hanging around.”

Mainly because we've hung around enough already, Helen thought, but helped Mary in arranging the crate so that their location would be

shielded from curious passer-byes.

The women then crouched low within their makeshift shelter. “Okay,” Mary said. “See if you can get a signal and call someone.”

“Preferably long distance? As in Shopton?”

Mary sighed. “Whatever.”

Pulling out the device she had taken from the man, Helen stared down at it, then delivered a stream of salty invective.

“Helen!”

“I’m sorry, Mary, but I’ve really messed up this time.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I *can’t* make a phone call.”

Chapter Thirteen: (Don't Be Too Surprised, But) Mary Comes Up with a Desperate Plan.

“What do you *mean* you can't make a phone call?”

In answer, Helen wordlessly showed the device to Mary. It looked like a cell phone ... it was the same shape as a cell phone ... but ... “Oh, peas and carrots!”

“I'm sorry.”

“That's a GPS device!”

“I *know*,” Helen wailed.

Both women then suddenly ducked as the nearby door burst open and several men (including the one Helen had smacked with her wrench) ran out, talking desperately among themselves in Arabic (one of them yelling into a hand radio). They quickly passed the boxes where the women were hiding, rushing out in all directions.

After a few moments the women cautiously peeked out.

“Good for us,” Mary said.

Helen stared at her.

“They obviously think we ran for it.”

Obviously, Helen thought, because I sure as hell was thinking of it.

“*We've got a bit of breathing room,*” Mary went on, *rubbing a hand across her forehead and settling back down against a box. “We need to think of something.”*

“Other than screaming.”

“Yeah. Ah, wait.”

Helen blinked. “Like we have a choice?”

“Use that thingy and find out where we are.”

Her tongue poking against the inside of her cheek, Helen began pressing buttons on the GPS, managing to work it out. “Okay, getting something now. Um, let me back up here a bit. Yeah ... yeah. Ah! Here we go. We're in ... I think it's pronounced 'Kharga'.”

Mary leaned over to peer at the small screen. “That's ...”

“Wait a minute.” Helen's fingers played on the buttons. “We're about a hundred and fifty miles from Al Masid. Way on the other side of the Nile.”

“Rat bite!”

“Mary, it's just us. You can go ahead and use stronger language.”

“*Two* rat bites!”

Helen stared at the screen, her lips pursed thoughtfully. “So what do we do now?”

Mary was frowning down at her feet. “Well we can't stay here.”

“Granted.”

“And we've lost Oleksiy and the Cossacks.”

“Granted part two.”

“And we can't get in touch with anyone. That is, of course, unless we try to sneak back in and find a radio or something.”

“Let's ... put that one aside for the time being.”

“Yeah.” Mary continued frowning. “Search around the area. Is there a police station or something we can get to?”

A police station in an Egyptian desert town, Helen thought. *And us on the run from the authorities. Right.* None the less she dutifully studied the area immediately surrounding them. “Well, we seem to be on the edge of an airport.”

“Oh.” Mary glanced up. “That would explain the occasional plane going over.” She sighed. “We need to find the Cossacks. Or a way to contact someone.”

Helen watched her, keeping silent. She felt she could actually hear the circuits clicking in her friend's head.

“Let's say you're right,” Mary said, “and the Cossacks are still alive. Hopefully they would've escaped as well.”

Helen bit her lip, trying hard to keep her doubts from leaving her mouth.

“I mean these guys took *us* alive,” Mary pointed out.

Helen briefly considered a mental image of the adult Mary Swift spending Christmas Eve still waiting for Santa Claus to appear. “Mary—”

“I *know*. I know.” Mary lightly rocked back and forth. “But it would definitely help if we had some way of finding the Cossacks.”

“Would they be here?”

Mary sighed. “If they were then I think we'd know by now.” She peeked up again, making certain no one was coming near their hideout. “Think, think, think ...”

“If we could somehow contact someone,” Helen pointed out, “then how would we find the Cossacks? It's not like we can find 'Dial-A-Cossack' through directory assistance or anything. And I don't think Ukraine has an embassy in this town.” *Nor, unfortunately, the United States*, she mentally added.

Mary's face suddenly brightened. “Oh. Wait!”

“Mary, I really don't think I'm going anywhere.”

“We *can* find the Cossacks,” Mary declared. “Or at least some of them.”

“Huh! How?”

“Let me think just a moment. Wait.”

“Mary—”

“Sorry.” Mary was concentrating. “Force of habit. Now what was that he said? Something about ... yeah. Does that thing have a date and time reading?”

Helen looked at the device. “Ummm, yeah. Oh! It's later in the same day when we arrived at Al Masid. Getting close to evening”

Mary became thoughtful. “That gives us three days.”

“Huh?”

“Listen.” Mary leaned closer. “Oleksiy mentioned something earlier this morning. Find ... ah, I think he called it 'Cizre'.”

“'Cizre',” Helen repeated dully, once again working the GPS. “Is that c-i-z-r-e?”

“Uh huh.”

“In southeast Turkey?”

“*That's* it,” Mary said. “Oleksiy said his people had hidden a cache of supplies at an abandoned airstrip there. Now, in three days, at four-thirty in the afternoon, a Cossack aircraft will arrive at the airstrip and remove

the cache. All we have to do is be there to meet the plane ... and wow, I wish I had a picture of your face right now.”

Helen was struggling to collect herself. “Well congratulations, Mary. That’s the craziest idea I’ve ever heard from you.”

“Helen—”

“Crazier than that time you wanted to surprise the boys with a special getaway weekend at Pine Cone Lodge.”

“Helen ... look. It wasn’t my fault Tom and Ned got the room numbers mixed up, okay?”

“Yeah—”

“And I certainly had no idea Ned was such a leaper and grabber in the dark.”

So was Tom, Helen thought, quickly pushing the memory aside. “Mary ... look. Stay with me for a moment. We’re in Kharga. You’re wanting to get to Cizre. In three days. That’s,” she did some work with the GPS, “oh Lord, that’s almost a thousand and seventy miles. In three *days*, Mary.”

“I know—”

“So you’re talking about averaging well over three hundred miles a day. On foot.” Helen let out a breath. “I know I can move pretty fast when I’m scared. But not *that* fast.”

Mary produced a smile which caused ice to form in Helen’s stomach. “And who said anything about going on foot?” she asked.

“Oh? We have an alternative?” Helen now made a peek over the edge of the box. “Yes, there’re helicopters around. But you and I can’t fly anything unless it has a cybertron. And none of those copters are Swift models.” She sighed. “Swear to God, if I make it out of here alive, the first thing I’m gonna do when Phyllis comes back from space is tell her to increase sales of Swift aircraft to the Middle East.”

“You said we’re near an airport.”

“Yeah. But it’s not Cairo International, or New York, or Atlanta, or Chicago. It’s not even Shopton. It’s a little weenie airport. Kharga Weenie *Not-International* Airport.”

“There has to be *something*.”

“So you and I manage to sneak into it. How in the heck do we pay for —” And Helen suddenly paused. “Oh!”

“What?”

“I’m so probably gonna regret bringing this up, but hold this a moment.” Passing the GPS to Mary, Helen rummaged through her pockets, producing a wallet. “Also took this from the guy I hit.”

“You boosted his wallet?”

“Mary—”

“No, no. I could kiss you. What’s in it?”

Helen was already studying the contents. “Well. Now I’ve seen everything.”

“What?”

“Egyptian kidnappers have Visa Platinum cards. Can you frickin’ believe it? Oh, and there’s this.” She produced a large fistful of bills. “First time I’ve ever mugged someone, and it turns out he’s loaded.”

Mary’s eyes widened at the sight. “Wow. That’s a lot of—”

“Egyptian pounds. I think.”

“Wonder how much that’s worth? Dang it, where’s Sun Ohm Erato when you need him?”

Shot to death due to Sandy, Helen thought, suspecting now wasn’t the time for a voicing of the sentiment. As it was, Helen felt Mary didn’t miss Sun Ohm Erato all that much, and was personally comforted with knowing that the man’s remains had been cremated and scattered throughout the Turkish wilderness.

“Wonder if that’s enough to buy us a plane ticket out of this place?” Mary mused aloud.

Helen snorted. “Yeah. Sure. We just waltz into the airport, waving stolen money around, and try to buy two seats on the next Weenie Egypt Air flight out of town. Mary, we have no *passports* or anything.”

“I know. But hey, the airport would be safer than here, right?”

This is why Phyllis sleeps for a week after one of her adventures with Sandy, Helen thought. “True, but—”

“*And I bet they got bathrooms at the airport.*”

“Urrrghhhhh!”

“Well?”

It ain't easy being your friend sometimes, Helen mentally grumbled. "Let's see what I can work up here," she said, once again working the buttons on the GPS.

* * * * *

Fortunately their unknown captors weren't the neatest people in the world, and the women managed to slip from one collection of crates to another, or making it to the safety of a line of fuel tanks, expecting at any moment to hear a warning shout, or to feel themselves being riddled with bullets.

"Remember, they want us alive," Mary pointed out.

Helen's fingers were aching from the effort of being crossed. But even she had to admit they were making pretty good progress. "They must really think we headed into the town proper."

"Good. As long as they think we're stupid American females, that's a boost for us."

You really don't want my opinion, Helen thought. But then a thought occurred to her. "Ah, Mary?"

"Um?"

"That comment you made about Sun Ohm Erato has reminded me of something."

"I'm sorry."

"I suspect you'll feel sorrier in the next few moments. Assume, for the moment, that we somehow make it to Cizre."

"Be positive."

"If I was the positive type, Mary, I would've made the cheerleading squad. Especially with my figure. But anyway, Cizre's in eastern Turkey, right?"

Mary was peeking around a fuel storage tank. "Uh huh."

"You do realize that's putting us awfully close to Kranjovia?"

"That's a bit further north on the Turkish border."

"Close enough for me. The Kranjovians are sneaky, dangerous and inscrutable, but one thing they're definitely not is stupid. If they get any sort of wind that you and I are in the area—"

“One crisis at a time, Helen.”

That'll look good as the title to my memoirs, Helen's mind muttered.

Between their current location and what (according to the GPS) was the terminal building for the airport was an open field of several hundred feet. Both women crouched low, contemplating the distance. “What do you think?” Mary asked.

“My sense of survival says 'no'.”

“Yeah.”

“But my bladder says 'yes'. I'd chance it.”

“You've never been squeamish about ah ... relieving yourself outdoors in certain locations.”

“Find me a bush or something, Mary. Preferably without desperate kidnappers in the area, and I'd agree. However—”

“Yeah.” Mary nodded reluctantly. She peeked around again. “Well, it doesn't look like they've come back yet. Let's move.”

Both women began scurrying out into the open, making a beeline for the terminal, their thoughts focused in unique variations of endearments to the Almighty. This was accompanied by quick looks back as they anticipated pursuit.

“Got another bad thought,” Helen said.

I do love you, Helen, Mary thought. I really do. But ... “What?”

“Maybe the guys who caught us want us to escape.”

Mary almost stopped. “Huh?”

“Think about it. You've got an idea they think we know something about the missing gold.”

Mary nodded. “Okay.”

“So they let us go and are watching to see what we do and where we go.”

“Ummmm ...”

“Well, that's an improvement over expecting them to shoot us, isn't it?”

“See? You *can* be positive.”

Helen found herself wondering if she could run and deliver a kick at the same time. But, in spite of all their worries, the women found

themselves reaching the terminal and slowed down.

“Ladies Room,” Helen was breathing. “Please.”

Mary agreed. “Priorities first. Ladies Room, and then the ticket counter.”

“We still don't have passports.”

“Helen ... please. *Work* with me a bit.”

* * * * *

If they had been asked to fill out a customer survey on the facilities at the Kharga airport, both Mary and Helen would've given severe bad marks in regards to the available female bathroom accommodations.

But at least there was running water. Sort of.

Relieved, and as bathed as they could manage, the women then made their way to what seemed to be the ticket counter.

“We're being stared at,” Helen murmured.

“Ignore it. And I heard that.”

“Sorry.”

Fifteen minutes later, both women were slowly walking away from the counter.

Mary noticed the way Helen's arms were crossed, and the expression on her face. She sighed. “Go ahead and say it. I know you want to.”

“I won't,” Helen said. “But I knew not having identification would trip us up. Plus we're really sort of standing out in this place.”

“I know ... I know.”

Helen was looking around. “I bet the word's already being sent out about us. We'll get transportation soon. Maybe not to Cizre, but someplace undoubtedly picturesque.”

Mary was also looking around. “And not a sign of a telephone anywhere.”

Helen suspected that public communication in Kharga was limited to a muezzin shouting from a tower somewhere, and briefly berated herself for being nasty, even if she felt entitled.

“Excuse,” a voice said.

Both women jumped, then looked back to see a smallish dark-haired mustachioed man standing behind them. “Is it me?” Helen asked Mary, “or are people in Egypt just more easily sneaking up behind us?”

The man was regarding them curiously. “You going? Cizre?”

“Ah, yes,” Mary said.

The man's expression brightened. “I go to Cizre.”

“You do? I mean, you are?”

“Ma-reeeee,” Helen warned.

“In plane,” the man said, indicating a direction out of the terminal with his hands. “I make plane to Cizre. Deliveries. Cargo.”

Mary's mind was whirling. It was too good to be true. Yes, the man was a stranger. But they were still getting looks from quite a lot of people in the building. Whatever clock there was had to be ticking ...”You can take us?”

“*Aiwa*,” the man replied, nodding excitedly. “Yes. I mean yes.”

“Ma-reeeeeeee!”

“*Shush*,” Mary said, still staring at the man. “We don't have any passports. But we need to get to Cizre. Soon.”

“I take you,” the man assured them. “In plane.” A touch of worry appeared on his face. “Need *flus*. Ah ... money. Yes?”

Mary chewed on her tongue a bit. “Not here,” she said, looking around. “C'mon. Over here.” She led Helen and the man over to a slightly secluded alcove, arranging themselves so that she and Helen shielded the man from everyone else. “Give him the money, Helen.”

Helen gaped at her. Two crazy ideas in one day. This has to beat even Sandy's record.

Mary gave her a determined stare. “Do it!”

With a sigh, Helen handed the man the money taken from the wallet. He accepted it, seeming to consider the amount.

“Give him the credit card, too.”

This will end in tears, Helen predicted, passing the card to the man. He apparently found this acceptable.

“Yes,” he murmured. Then: “Come with me. Plane out there. Come. Please.” Motioning for the women to follow he moved past them and around a corner, heading for the end of the building opposite the entrance.

Helen tried again. “Mary—”

“We're desperate.”

“Ack! Really, Mary? *Really?*”

“We're getting out of here.” Mary set her face in resolute lines.

“I'll weep at your funeral,” Helen muttered. “That's assuming I'm not being buried at the same time.”

Following the man the women found themselves stepping out into the light. Their hearts sank at the sight of the man's destination: a rather weathered C-47.

“Oh,” Helen said. “That's ... remarkable.”

“You're the one who was going on about Weenie Egypt Air,” Mary replied. “Now hush.”

Reaching the plane, and looking all around, the man quickly pulled open the side hatch, entering the plane and motioning for the women to follow. They did so, finding themselves surrounded by a wide variety of tied down packages, bundles and crates.

Pulling the door tightly shut, the man turned to the women. “No ... ah, chairs,” he said apologetically. “You two ...” He made a sitting motion with his hands. “Be safe. Hold on. *Fadleki*.” He then indicated the forward part of the plane. “I go. We ... go.” He walked towards the door to the cockpit, entering and closing the door behind him.

Mary and Helen settled themselves down on the plane floor, reaching for nearby straps.

“All right,” Mary finally admitted. “This is insane.”

“I didn't say a word.”

“We've probably just been robbed.” Her expression then lightened as the women heard the engines begin roaring into life. “Or maybe not.”

They felt the plane beginning to move, and Mary smiled at Helen. “See? We're taking off. If he was going to rob us then we wouldn't be taking off.” A pause. “Would we?”

“Not saying a word,” Helen replied, looking away.

* * * * *

They had been airborne for six hours. Through the small windows in the compartment they noticed the evening growing. But the GPS was telling them they were definitely heading northeast. In the proper direction.

But Helen was soon frowning ... or at least much more than she had been. “Ah, Mary?”

“Um?”

“According to this we'll be flying over the area of Cizre soon.”

“Goody.”

“Okay, so maybe I haven't flown in this sort of plane before. But shouldn't we be slowing and losing altitude somewhat?”

The thought didn't cheer Mary and she bit at her lip. “Maybe he has to make a slow approach or something. He *is* flying in the dark.”

So are we, Helen thought. “Mary—”

“I'll go check,” Mary said, pulling herself up onto her feet. Using other straps as guides she managed to make her way to the cockpit door, hesitantly knocking on it. “Ah, sir? Mister?”

No response. Mary had been involved with planes ever since meeting Tom, and it had been thoroughly drummed into her that disturbing the pilot was very much frowned upon. But she kept in mind the fact that Helen was worrying (*well, so am I*, she thought) and, as cautiously as possible, she cracked the door open. “Ah ... sir?”

The pilot was alone at the controls and he now scowled at Mary. “Go back!”

“Sir? I was just wondering—”

And she suddenly found herself staring into the muzzle of a pistol.

Chapter Fourteen: Mary and Helen Take a Dive.

For more years than she cared to remember, Mary had listened to the exploits of her husband and children. In several instances she herself had been a part of them. It had always intrigued her how Tom, Tom Jr. and Sandy always seemed to have something witty or courageous to say when directly confronted by danger.

Now, with the pilot's pistol pointed right at her face, the best Mary could come up with was "Eek!"

Quickly closing the door (an action which, blessedly, wasn't immediately followed by the appearance of bullet holes), Mary quickly went back to where Helen waited.

"I saw the whole thing," Helen said, her eyes wide and her face pale. "I ... guess we aren't landing in Cizre."

Mary clung to a crate, catching her breath. "No, we're not. Oh dear. Helen, you may have been right about us having been captured and then let free so that whoever captured us could see what we'd do."

"Mary—"

"Only *now* they've recaptured us, and are taking us somewhere else. Did we not do something they wanted us to? They didn't learn enough?"

"Mary—"

"And where're we being taken to now? If not Cizre, then where're we going to end up? And what'll happen when we get there—"

"Mary!"

Mary's mouth snapped shut and she looked at Helen. "Sorry. Panic attack."

"For which I fully sympathize," Helen said. "Believe me, I do. I'm just holding on ... barely ... to the notion that, if whoever these people are who've arranged this had wanted us dead, we'd already *be* dead."

"From your lips to God's ears."

Helen had been in Rapid Continuous Prayer Mode every since she saw the pilot point a pistol at Mary. She now left God a callback message, devoting her full attention to her friend. "So what do we do now?"

Mary had been taking several deep breaths and now seemed a bit calmer. “I don't know. I do know we obviously don't want to go wherever it is the pilot is taking us. So we've got to somehow land.” She began peering about the crates, gradually moving past Helen.

“What're you looking for?” Helen asked.

“Something ... I don't know. Maybe a radio we could use.”

“How about we force the pilot to land the plane?”

“He has a gun, Helen.”

Helen considered the problem.. “We could maybe overpower him. He is, after all, busy flying the plane.”

“Uh huh.” Mary paused in her searching. “Go back over what you just said. Then ask yourself if you or I could fly and land this plane?”

“Ummmm ... no,” Helen replied, silently adding *take pilot lessons* to her mental to-do list.

Mary continued rummaging about among the crates and other items piled into the compartment. Her attention was then drawn to something. “Oh!”

“What?”

Mary continued staring at her discovery, her expression growing cautious. “Ah ... Helen?”

“Yeah?”

“You said we were approaching Cizre.”

“Yeah.”

“Just how close are we?”

Helen was having a bad feeling about the way Mary was phrasing her comments, but she retrieved the GPS and consulted it. “Mmmmm, we'll be making our closest approach to Cizre in about forty-five or so minutes.”

Mary seemed to reach a decision. “Yeah,” she murmured, starting to tug at something.

“What are you—” And then Helen saw what Mary was producing. “No! OH NO!”

“Helen—”

“NO, NO, NO, NO, NO ...”

“Shhhh,” Mary warned. “Don't get the pilot suspicious.”

“Mary, I am absolutely *not*—”

“You put this parachute on. Then I put this other parachute on—”

“Mary—”

“Helen, come on. Look, we both had parachute training, right? The boys insisted on it when we started riding in Tom's airplanes.”

“Yeah, and I lost my lunch all over Ned. Remember?”

“Helen ... look. I love and trust Tom and Tomjay, and I have absolute faith in their aircraft. But do you think I would've allowed myself to be a passenger on anything they designed without at least considering safeguards?”

“Huh! Says the woman who rode on one of her son's spaceships.”

“Oh, c'mon. Sandy went along, and she was pregnant.”

“Yeah. *Sandy* went along. That's hardly a glowing recommendation for product safety.”

Mary sighed. “Do you want to stay on this plane?”

Helen was working her mouth, but nothing was coming out. In the meantime, Mary was already bundling herself into a parachute harness and, trying to recall if she had updated her will, Helen reached out for the remaining pack.

“Parachuting,” she grumbled. “*In* the dark. *Over* a foreign country.”

“I'm sorry,” Mary almost snapped. “I can't arrange miracles. I can only work with what's available.” She gave her harness a final tug. “There.”

Moving to the side hatch she struggled a bit with the locking lever, finally managing to tug it loose and, with both hands, she pulled the hatch aside. The wind from the starry darkness beyond began howling into the plane.

“Now remember,” Mary said to Helen. “Count to ten and then pull your release ring.”

Helen had adjusted the parachute harness to her satisfaction, and was patting the large metal ring near her waist. “Wait,” she said. “Don't we have a whatchamacallit ... a static line ... to pull the chute open—”

But Mary, having been gripping both sides of the hatchway with her hands, was already launching herself out into the dark.

“Oh ... *hell*,” Helen said and, closing her eyes, followed Mary.

* * * * *

“One Mississippi,” Mary was saying. “Two Mississippi ... *three* Mississippi ...”

* * * * *

For Helen the process was a bit different.

“Onefoureight*TEN!*”

* * * * *

Land and go sideways, Mary's mind was screaming as she saw the ground approach. *Land and go sideways*.

“Oof!”

A part of her was reasoning that the landing wasn't letter-perfect. But, as she found herself rolling about, Mary concluded that at least she hadn't broken anything (or so she hoped, waiting for the adrenaline surge to die down), and she at least managed to land on a dune composed of fairly loose sand.

Ignoring the aches throughout her body she struggled to work herself upright, trying to untangle herself from the shroud lines. She was also looking about. “Helen?”

No answer and, even though there was plenty of starlight and moonlight, Mary couldn't see any sign of her friend. “Helen?” *Oh where has she gone?*

“aaaaAAAAAAHHHHH!”

Following the scream from above, Mary looked up in time to see Helen floating downward, reaching the ground about a hundred feet further away, the woman's legs kicking wildly as she settled beneath a slowly descending cloud of parachute.

Her heart in her mouth, Mary wriggled free from the parachute pack

and began running towards the other chute. “Helen? *HELEN?*”

No answer, and Mary scrambled closer, reaching the still billowing chute and wildly pushing it aside ... “*Oh!*”

Helen was lying on her back, her hair unkempt and her eyes open and fixed upon the sky above.

“Helen!”

“*m-Mary?*”

Mary rushed to her side. “Is anything broken, Helen? Can you move?”

“I ... I don't know,” Helen whispered, still gazing skyward with unblinking eyes. “I feel ... I feel ... oh! The stars. They're so pretty.”

“Yes,” Mary sobbed, falling to her knees. “Yes, they are. They really and truly *are.*”

“Mary?”

“I'm here, Helen.”

“Tell me about the rabbits.”

A pause while several very heavy things went KLUNK inside Mary's head. “Oh, Helen! Oh *you ...*”

Helen began giggling.

“That wasn't funny, Helen. Really! THAT WASN'T FUNNY!” Scooping up a handful of sand, Mary flung it at Helen.

For her part Helen turned in time to avoid receiving sand in her face. Still giggling she managed to sit up, her hands reaching to pull herself free from the harness. “I'm sorry,” she said. “Really and truly I am. I'm just happy to have made it down to the ground. My hiney's sore, and I think I landed bad on a shoulder here, but otherwise I feel okay.”

“*Not* funny, Helen,” Mary declared hotly. “You ... you ... that really wasn't *funny.*”

“I'm *sorry,*” Helen repeated. “Here. Help me out of this.”

Grouching, Mary roughly pulled at the lines of Helen's chute, punctuating her efforts with barely audible comments that Helen suspected she didn't really want to hear. It wasn't until the final line was pulled free that Mary finally reached over and caught Helen in an enormous hug.

“Don't *ever* do that to me ever again,” Mary's muffled voice said into Helen's blouse.

“Promise,” Helen replied. Easing herself free of Mary's arms she made a few experimental twists. “Ooh! I think I definitely did pull something in my shoulder. All things considered, I'm surprised I'm not in a zillion pieces on the ground. Mary? This hasn't been the best day for me.”

“Same for me,” Mary said, looking around. “I don't see any city lights nearby. The Sun should be coming up in a few hours, though. You still have the GPS?”

To her surprise, Helen found that the device was still where she had pushed it into her belt and she reached for it, switching it on. “Figures this'd take a better pounding than me.”

Mary was searching the sky. “Don't hear the plane coming back for us. Good. We can make it to town and then—”

“Oh, Mary.”

The tone of Helen's voice immediately caught Mary's attention. “What?”

“Oh! Oh ... Mary.”

“What's *wrong*?”

“What's *wrong* is that we've missed Cizre by about fifty miles.”

“Fifty—” and then Mary shut up, thinking back. “Okay, so the wind was a bit fierce when we were coming down. Plus the plane didn't exactly pass over Cizre.” She worked numbers in her head. “I guess we can make fifty miles.” *How hot is the Sun going to be?* the back of her mind wondered.

“Mary.”

“Huh? What?”

“That's not all. We've landed about fifty miles south of Cizre.”

“Fifty miles south ... “ Mary suddenly felt cold as she recalled the map she had seen. “Then we're in ...”

Helen nodded. “We're in Iraq.”

Chapter Fifteen: Mary of Arabia*.

(*Well, not *quite* Arabia. But you get the general idea.)

“Iraq.”

Helen nodded. “About halfway between ah-hhhh ... Tal Afar and Sinjar.”

“And Cizre?”

Helen peered at the screen. “Well, there's a piece of Syria currently between it and us. 'Bout thirty miles worth.”

“Fudgesicles!” Getting to her feet, Mary slowly looked around before finally sighing. “Well. I guess there's nothing to it but to start walking.”

“Fifty miles,” Helen dully said as she moved herself up, still feeling the aches from her landing. *What I wouldn't give for a BIG tube of ointment right about now?* “Through the desert. Through northern Iraq and eastern Syria.”

“Well, we could stay here,” Mary replied, a touch of sarcasm entering her voice.

“No,” Helen tiredly said. “I really don't care for the alternative myself. Let's go.” Pointing north she began strolling, feeling the aches respond in concert to her steps and suspecting she was going to be utterly miserable by the end of the day. If not sooner.

Mary was moving alongside her, but glanced back at where the abandoned parachutes still billowed in the wind. “Wonder if we should bury those?”

“Huh?”

“Well, in all the movies I've seen, the good guys hide their parachutes after making a clandestine landing.”

“First off,” Helen said, “we've got no tools to dig with. Any hole we make in the sand would be uncovered by the wind.”

“True,” Mary agreed.

“Second: it doesn't really matter, does it? There are only two kinds of

people who'd parachute into northern Iraq. Commandos and crazy Shopton housewives. And we're obviously not Commandos. I think the Quran forbids the killing of crazy Shopton housewives.”

Mary looked at her friend.

“Sorry. Wish I had an aspirin.”

“Wouldn't mind one myself,” Mary muttered. “But we're in northern Iraq, right? If I recall Sherman's last lecture—”

Which I slept through, Helen thought.

“—*this is friendly territory.*”

“Huh. You really want to gamble on that?”

“Well—”

“With *our* luck?”

Mary shrugged. “We've done good so far.”

Yeah, Helen thought. We're unarmed, sore, alone, no water, no means of communication, about to face a desert sun. Yeah, we're doing whiz-bang, “We'll also be trying to cross Syria,” she pointed out. “I don't think that's on anyone's list of fun vacation spots.”

She noticed Mary was gazing up into the sky.

“The sky's clear here,” Mary said. “And, by the way, I did hear you. I was just thinking that Ken and the others on the space station are also probably looking for us. I wonder if we could write a big message in the sand?”

Helen reminded herself that Mary had always been voted “Miss Optimism” while at school. “Well, seeing as how we're already on our way, why don't we leave that for a last resort?”

“Kay.”

* * * * *

The Sun began peeking over the horizon four hours later.

“Walk through the Outback',” Mary was singing. “Walk, walk, walk. Too tired to sleep, and too dry to talk—”

“Don't want to be Mrs. Buzzkill,” Helen remarked. “But I think four recitations of that particular tune are more than enough.”

Mary considered it. “All right. How about this? Sing with me. ‘The seeeeecret life of Arabiaaaa—’”

“I can't do David Bowie.”

“You used to do David Bowie.”

“I know this might be difficult to believe, but I also used to wear a size eight until Mother Nature decided she had other plans for me in the upstairs department, as you've doubtless noticed.”

Me and a lot of other people, Mary thought, recalling the first time Ned Newton saw Helen, and the automobile accident which had almost happened as a result. “Sorry. Just trying to be pleasant.”

“And I appreciate it,” Helen said. “Truly, I do. Oh, by the way, you see this empty stretch of road we're about to cross?”

“Uh huh.”

“According to the dingus that means we're about another hour or so from the Syrian border.”

No response, and Helen looked over at Mary. “Well?”

“Oh. Sorry. Just didn't want to drive you insane with my boundless enthusiasm.” Mary closed her eyes briefly. “And that really came out wrong, didn't it?”

“No. It's just ... you remember that thing Bud once said about how civilization is only three missed meals away from armed revolution?”

“Ummm, yeah.”

“Well, with you and me I think it's more like forty-eight hours from a long hot bath and clean clothes.”

“Amen. I'm in the mood to shampoo my hair until it's transparent.”

“I won't argue.” Shading her eyes, Helen peered up into the sky. “That idea about writing a message for the space station is actually becoming more attractive.”

“Yeah,” Mary agreed. “But could we afford the time it'd take to make a message that'd be big enough to be spotted?”

Helen decided not to pursue the question, imagining potential rescuers arriving to find their dead bodies lying on a large and unfinished note in the dirt. “It's just that we're really and actually alone now.”

“I know.”

“I mean, I'm thinking of all the people the boys and Sherman have possibly flogged into looking for us. Not just the space station, but also the State Department, the Pierce Library ... heck, I bet Sherman's even considered calling the Supercar people out in Malaysia.”

“Oh?” Mary glanced at her. “You think they'd get involved?”

“Well-lll, I know that Freida Ames' been corresponding with that little German girl who handles the computers for Team Supercar.”

“Really?”

“Umhm. Talking shop and stuff.”

“I'll bet Sherman's already got Freida working on some sort of program to assist on the search.”

“Well-lll, Sherman might be being careful with Freida.”

“Why's that?”

“Forgot to tell you, but I've noticed how Freida's been looking out of sorts recently.”

“Sick?”

“Could be the sort of sickness which a lot of married women go through,” Helen said pointedly.

“Ohhhhh ...”

“Understand it's just conjecture on my part. But you had the same look just before you learned you were carrying Tomjay.”

Mary was shaking her head. “Sort of hard to imagine Sherman as a daddy.”

“That'd be one well-protected baby.”

Mary chuckled, the two of them continuing to walk along. Hours later, however, both women were finding less and less reasons for smiling as they tried not to notice the Sun, but it was well on the way towards evolving into the literal eight hundred pound gorilla in the middle of the room. For her own part, Helen was also trying not to dwell on the reality that, between them and Cizre, the GPS was showing a scattering of Syrian villages. Would they be as difficult to ignore as the heat increased? And the thirst?

“Let's stop for a moment,” Mary said

Good idea, Helen thought. She then saw Mary hopping about slightly.

“What's wrong?”

“Don't laugh, but I've got sand in my shoes.” Mary then noticed the look on Helen's face. “Really.”

“Oh, I believe you.”

Mary was also taking the opportunity to make an assessment of her friend. Helen's pace had already been less than its usual steady nature, and Mary had been spotting a limp more and more over the past few hours. Not that she was in any better condition, and she suspected she was a mass of bruises and that, by this time tomorrow, she would be fortunate if she could move, much less walk.

It had also occurred to her that the long-abandoned parachutes might have provided material from which to make shading with. But, as neither of them had anything in the way of cutting tools, Mary quietly elected not to mention it aloud.

She did, on the other hand, decide to try and reintroduce conversation into the situation. “How're we doing timewise?”

Perhaps it was her imagination, but Mary thought she saw irritation in the way Helen consulted the GPS. “Ten fifteen in the morning,” Helen announced. “Which means we've got ah-hhh ... thirty-one or so hours to make our rendezvous.”

And you look really beat, Mary was thinking. I know, because I am too.

Unbeknownst to Mary, Helen had also been carrying on an appraisal, and the only thing which was helping to keep her mind off her pains was the sight of Mary's bedraggled state.

Try and keep it going, she thought. “Apropos of an earlier comment,” she said in what she hoped was a lighter tone of voice, “why are you always putting yourself down in the buxomness department?”

“Ack! Well, standing next to *you*—”

“You're as zaftig as the best of them, Mary, and you know it.”

Giving a small snort, Mary resumed walking.

Helen followed after her. “I happen to be in a position to know that Tom has boasted of your appearance quite often, and in considerable detail I might add.”

Were those spots of deeper red appearing upon Mary's already sun-tainted cheeks? Helen couldn't be certain. “And Bud's certainly been

grateful for what Sandy's inherited from you," she went on.

"Helen—"

"And I once heard from Sandy how, if it hadn't been for the genetic traits you passed on, she wouldn't have had a big enough slingshot which she used to get out of a tight situation." Helen blinked as she recollected. "Those weren't her *exact* words, mind you, but—"

"All *right*," Mary shot back over her shoulder. "Your point's made."

"You don't have to get all huffy. It's just you and me here."

"I know." Mary was wrapping her arms around herself. "It's just you know how I feel about ... personal talk."

"Hah!"

"I know you and Ned are more ... sophisticated."

Helen crossed her arms. "Don't go and get all hoity-toity with me, Mary Nestor. You forget who I am."

"No I haven't."

"Everyone else might buy into this Eternal Virgin routine of yours. But I know better."

Mary's pace increased, her chin raised a fraction.

"Getting all those praises from Miss Perkman and Miss Bivalvia when you started wearing those blouses with the high collars. Everyone thinking you looked so pretty and proper, when all along you were wearing the blouses because you needed the collars to hide the bite marks from Tom—"

"Those were *accidents*," Mary replied with as much frosty dignity as she could manage.

Helen snickered. "Uh huh. It's accidents like that which make us a world of seven billion people."

Mary shook her head. "Really, Helen—"

"Ned and I couldn't for the life of us figure out why you and Tom didn't marry much sooner. Not the way you two were acting."

"Tom was a gentleman," Mary argued, looking back at her. "He didn't want to complicate his life and mine with a ... deeper relationship. Not until we were ready. We wanted to make sure we were *ready*."

“Yeah. All cool and collected and rational.”

“Yes.”

“And that's why Tom rushed to propose to you after that business with Floyd Barton—”

Mary moaned.

“I'm sorry. I promised never to mention his name again in front of you. But c'mon, that's why Tom did what he did. And that's why you so quickly accepted.” Helen shook her head. “Floyd Barton. Really, Mary. There are times when I can't figure you out, and that was one of them.”

“He seemed nice.”

“Nice? Mary, he produced enough oil to join OPEC.”

“I meant nice at the beginning.”

Helen nodded. “Uh huh. Y'know I've sometimes wondered if you gave Floyd some encouragement just to get the reaction you got out of Tom?”

Mary suddenly stopped, whirling to face the other woman. “*Helen Morton! You take that back!*”

An eyebrow lifted on Helen's face. “My, my. Touchy, touchy.”

“I never ...” Mary sputtered. “I would never ... oh-hhhhhhhhhhhhh.” Turning she began stomping further away.

Helen was trying to keep up. “Mary—”

“Something like that was more *your* line.”

No answer, and Mary finally stopped to look back. Helen was standing still. Solemn. Eyes glistening. “Oh, Helen I—”

“No.” Helen shook her head roughly. “No. You're right and I deserved that. I was that sort of girl back in school. You knew it, Miss Perkman knew it, everyone knew it. I had the ... reputation.” She looked away mournfully.

“Ned fell in love with you,” Mary pointed out.

“I know.” Helen raised her hands to her cheeks, absently rubbing at her face. “I *know*.” She squeezed her eyes shut for a bit. “He hung out with Tom, and Tom was with you a lot, so naturally he ended up spending a lot of time with me. He ... learned to believe in me. He ...” She gave Mary a desperate look. “I wanted to be so decent with Ned. I started going back to church, started dressing less like a—”

“You weren't dressing like a—”

“I tried being more like *you*, dammit.”

Responding to a sudden impulse Mary moved closer, hugging Helen who responded by wrapping her own arms around the smaller woman.

“You know I really envied you?” Mary asked Helen.

Helen replied with a word which Mary forced herself to ignore. “I did,” she went on. “You were Helen Morton: the sophisticated and worldly woman. You always looked so sleek and incredible, you dressed like a—”

Helen inserted a word.

“No,” Mary said angrily. “No! Not that! Never that! Stop it! Stop it right now!”

Helen gazed into her friend's eyes, a crookedly sad smile on her face. “Dear Mary. You always stood up for me back at school.”

“And I always will. And not just at school.”

They hugged again. “And I really couldn't be like you,” Helen told Mary. “No matter how hard I tried.”

“You didn't have to be—”

“It wouldn't have worked,” Helen went on, letting Mary go. “It's not just this thing I bitchily called your Eternal Virgin act. As many things as you've been through, and you still manage this ... oh, I don't know. Innocence, I guess.”

“Innocence?”

Helen shrugged. “Maybe it's purity. Chastity of the spirit or something. You've been in space, in foreign countries. You've married and raised scientific geniuses. You call me sophisticated when, in fact, we both know you're as knowledgeable about the world as I am. But you also constantly manage to hold onto this sense of ... oh, I don't want to call it simplicity. Maybe guilelessness is the word I'm trying to think of.”

“Hmph. I'm not as pure as you put me up to be, Helen. Get a few drinks into Tom sometime and ask him for details.”

“I don't mean about *that*,” Helen said (her mind crossing mental fingers). “Or maybe that's why Tom refers to you as his angel. His sweet angel. Sometimes he makes it sound as if he's married the Blue Fairy.” She slowly shook her head. “I sometimes envy that in you while, at the same time, being totally amazed. You've always managed to surprise me,

Mary. And you always will. But especially back when we were at school.”

“Get along with yourself.”

“No, I’m serious. Heck, this ... this virtue you and Tom managed to put into your relationship. Back then you and he weren’t dating, you were *courting*. It was practically chivalry.”

Mary snorted.

“That’s the main reason Ned and I decided to promise each other to wait until you and Tom married before we did.”

“And that was so stupid,” Mary said. “The both of you. Really, Helen.”

“Well, at the time it seemed like a good idea. Rather romantic, actually. Course, if Ned and I had known that it was going to take the two of you so long to make up your minds about it, we wouldn’t have been so ... so ...”

“Chivalrous?” Mary suggested. “Virtuous?”

Helen made a low response which she hoped Mary wouldn’t hear. “The way Mrs. Applepound wrote about it, she was making me out to be as” ... she immediately swallowed *bad*, as well as *stuck-up* ... “virginal as you.”

With a chuckle, Mary turned to resume walking.

“One thing I’ve always wondered about,” Helen said as she followed. “Lord knows we’ve discussed this before, but it still puzzles me that you wanted to be my roommate at the Seminary.”

Mary shrugged.

“Everyone else treated me as if I were pond scum. Radioactive pond scum.”

Another shrug. “I wasn’t all that better off,” Mary pointed out.

“Oh baloney: two for a dollar, Mary. When I arrived at the Seminary you were already the reigning princess. If those fossilized hags running the place were upset at taking me in, their knickers got into even more of a twist when you offered to room with me.”

“I had issues,” Mary insisted.

“Name one.”

“Well ...” Mary waved a vague hand in the air. “You heard the rumors. The story about me having had a nervous breakdown or something.”

Helen nodded. “Uh huh. I remember. Rumors. You could never

remember it, no one at the school knew any details, your parents never brought it up. There was just this little story that sometimes got loose, but no one could ever produce facts.”

“True.”

“And, when Phyllis time-traveled back to Shopton, she never heard anything either.”

“Um.” Mary reached up to absently tug at her lower lip, then she gave Helen a sideways glance. “*Would* she have mentioned anything?”

“Good question,” Helen replied. “She hasn't even told Tomjay everything about what happened to her back in the past, although I've sometimes caught her with a secret little smile on her face when she's been asked about her experiences.”

“She wouldn't tell,” Mary concluded. “And that only makes me wonder what she's carrying inside her.”

“Well, as long as she eventually carries a grandbaby inside her, I won't mind.”

“Phyllis'll come through.”

Helen nodded, then stumbled forward. “*Ow!*”

“You all right?” Mary asked, moving to her.

“Fine,” Helen muttered. “Just tripped. Stomach's sort of queasy too.”

Mary's mind was already taking in how Helen's breath was seeming a bit ragged, and how her skin was becoming flushed. “You got a headache?”

“Yeah,” Helen admitted. “Big one.”

Mary was forcing herself to recognize the signs of heatstroke appearing within Helen. Even more so because she could feel them in herself as well.

* * * * *

“Sherlock Holmes,” Helen said.

They were still walking, but it was seeming to Mary that they were hardly moving at all. Or at least that's how it felt. The desert ahead of them was doing strange things, and the gooey knots in her stomach were making it difficult to focus on their progress.

She looked over at Helen. “What?”

“Sh-Sherlock Holmes,” Helen repeated. “Think. Where'd he leave the clue?”

Mary had been devoting herself to spotting a place ... any sort of refuge ... that she and Helen could struggle to reach. But she allowed herself to focus on the mystery, hoping it'd help keep Helen conscious as well.

“The G-great Hiatus,” she murmured.

“What?”

“That period when Holmes went on his own for a while. Undercover.”

“Oh. After Moriarty died at that waterfall.”

Mary tried to chuckle, was finding it difficult.

“W-what's so funny?”

“Moriarty.”

“Well? Helen insisted. “He's *dead*.” A pause. “Ain't he?”

“Not accordin' to Gardner n'several others,” Mary replied. “If Holmes was smart enough to survive Reichenbach, then Moriarty was smart enough to do t'same.”

“Oh, Mary. You're not sayin' *Moriarty's* involved with t'stolen gold?”

Mary shook her head, wincing at the pain. “No, no. But Holmes visited a lot o'places durin' the Hiatus. Someplace he might've thought of later for hidin' the gold.” *Oh God*, she thought, *I gotta lie down*.

But she knew if she did ...

“Like you said,” she struggled to force out, “we're completely on our own. Our only hope is with the Cossacks, and we've lost them. The rendezvous in Cizre's our only chance to reconnect with them.” She tried to swallow something. Anything. “If Oleksiy and t'others are alive then they're worrying 'bout us. But they need to find that gold.” She tried to swallow again. “There has to be a connection between Holmes' last days and the location of the gold. There *has* t'be.” Her voice lowered. “Our only hope.”

She looked at Helen, and realized that the two of them had hardly made any sort of headway over the desert in the past hour. Were they still in Iraq? Were they in Syria? Had they been traveling in circles?

Mary shook her head again, trying to clear a slowly growing roaring sound. “I gotta go over ever-where Holmes went. *Somethin'* he did gave

him an idea of a place to hide d'gold.”

“Mary—”

“It's in front of me. I see it.”

“I see it too.”

And Mary realized Helen was referring to something else, and she turned and realized that the sound growing in her head wasn't part of a delirium. It was, rather, a dark spot on the horizon which soon grew into a truck that was barreling across the sand towards them. “Oh!”

They both stood there, waiting as the truck finally came close enough to reveal the four uniformed men who were in it.

“We're *SAVED*,” Helen shouted.

The men suddenly produced rifles which they pointed at the women.

We're NOT, Helen silently finished.

Chapter Sixteen: Imprisoned (Again).

Piled, practically carried, into the truck. Then driven for minutes, or perhaps hours. Mary could no longer tell, falling in and out of a hot haze of mindlessness to which she finally succumbed to.

When consciousness finally started to slowly creep back in she thought she was having a hallucination. Somehow she was feeling coolness on her. It was blessedly wonderful, and it absolutely had to be some sort of heat-crazed delusion.

Her eyes fluttered open, then closed, and then opened again. Yes, it was all quite real. She was lying on the floor in an air-conditioned room of some sort ...

“Helen!”

Struggling to sit up she saw Helen laying close by. Absolutely wretched looking, filthy and four-fifths baked. But there was the sign of breathing, and Mary crawled over to touch her shoulder. “Helen? Helen?”

A small moan, and Helen's eyes opened to meet hers. “Oh. We're not dead.”

“No.”

“If we were dead,” Helen whispered, “you'd be in clean clothes.” Her hands slowly moved over herself and she grimaced. “Ugh. And so would I. You're a mess, Mary.”

“Well, you're no fashion plate yourself.”

“Thanks,” Helen replied ruefully, moving to sit up and look around. “*Now* where the heck are we?”

Which, of course, provided Mary with the impetus to give their surroundings a more thorough examination. They were in a room which, as near as Mary could calculate, was a cube measuring twelve feet in all directions. The floors, walls and ceiling were composed of dark gray metal. Indirect lighting was being provided from a source hidden by a thin seam bordering the ceiling, and cool air was appearing from an equally unseen source. There was no furniture, no doors ... nothing.

“Well,” Mary said, “at least we're alive.” Something then occurred to her. “Hey! I feel better.”

“We still look horrible.”

“Yeah, but ...” Mary felt about herself. “I don't know about you, but I feel much better than when we were out on the desert. More hydrated.”

“You're right.” Helen frowned. “My headache's completely gone.”

“Uh oh.”

“What?”

Mary had discovered a small bandage on her left arm which she carefully peeled back. Underneath ... “Oho!”

“I got one, too.”

“And I haven't spent all these years with Tom, Tomjay and Sandy in and out of hospitals without learning a few things. We've been needled.”

Helen was also examining her own arm. “Intravenous feeding? Fluids?”

“Maybe.” Mary lightly poked at the wound. “I wonder how long we've been out?”

“On a more direct point, *who's* been needling us, and why?” Helen looked around. “Hello?”

No answer.

Mary nodded. “Okay. We were baking out on the desert. Some guys with rifles showed up in a truck, and that's pretty much the last thing I remember. Now we're in a room.”

“Hello?” Helen tried again.

“No sign of speakers,” Mary said. “No phone, no door handle, no light switch.”

“No bathroom,” Helen added. “What's really scary is that I don't need one right now.”

“Yeah, that pretty much punctuates it.”

“We're the ones who've been punctuated.”

We're definitely doing better, Mary thought as she unsteadily moved to her feet. *Her humor's returning*. Moving to the nearest wall she gently touched it. “Cool.”

“Thank the Lord for small mercies. Now if only He'd provide another one and get us out of this room.” She paused, then sniffed. “You smell

something?"

Mary considered what her nose was telling her. "Uh huh."

"It's faint. Smells sort of like the same odor in the treatment chamber where Sandy was laid up for all that time after her fight with Solomon."

Wish you hadn't brought that up, Mary thought. She slowly began moving around the room, tapping on the wall.

"Maybe, along with the intravenous whatever it was, we're being given some sort of drugs in the air. Can you cure exposure to the desert that way?"

Mary shrugged. "Don't knock it if it works. And, at the moment, it doesn't look as if neither of us can do anything about it."

"Speaking of knocking, what the hell are you doing?"

"Trying to find a hidden switch or something," Mary replied.

Helen muttered something.

"And I am *not* an eternal optimist. I'd just feel silly if there was some sort of secret control somewhere and we never found it." She resumed her rapping on the wall.

"Someone put us here, and someone has to know we're here."

Mary nodded to herself. "True."

"Hey! You don't think the boys have found us and we're in some sort of recovery place?"

"Well ... first off, I don't think the boys would've sent armed locals in a truck to grab us."

"Um. Point."

"Second: I'd like to believe that, if the boys had found us, they'd be bending over us and holding our hands, with anxious looks on their faces."

Helen considered it. "Reasonable."

Mary noisily exhaled. "So we're trapped somewhere."

"Again. Y'know, Mary, we're really getting into something of a rut here."

"Well, look on the bright side. At least this time we're not hanging upside down. And I am *not* Miss Mary Sunshine."

“Sorry,” Helen said. “I mean yeah, you're right. I'd just rather we were somewhere else.”

“Back out on the desert?”

“Okay. So scratch that thought.” Helen idly looked around again. “So. Best guess. Friend or foe?”

“A toughie,” Mary admitted, having completed a circuit of the room. “On the one hand, whoever put us here has obviously gone to the trouble to somehow make us feel better.”

“On the other hand, we're rats in a trap.”

“Possible.” Putting her hands on her hips, Mary turned to Helen. “Now consider this. If you were the person responsible for us being here, why would you do what you've done?”

Helen's eyes widened a bit. “You're asking me to be devious?”

“Well, you'd be better at it than me.”

“I'll go along with that.” Helen rocked back and forth a bit. “I'd feel better if we had a more definite clue as to our surroundings. Preferably from the outside. But there doesn't seem to be any apparent way of leaving. At least not on our own.”

“So far.” Mary was peering at the wall, trying to spot any discoloration, or other area of interest, and finding nothing. “Well ... if Tom were in here he'd try to build a motorcycle or a speedboat. If it was Tomjay he'd stick a repelatron somewhere. And if it was Sandy she'd simply blow something up. We're a mite low on resources.” She gave the wall a few more taps. “Helen?”

“Haven't gone anywhere, Mary.”

“You remember that Dr. Seuss book where the three princes were placed in a tower and had to figure some way to escape?”

Helen frowned to herself. “Was that the one with the cats that had to keep the birds away from pecking at the trees which were holding the water back?”

“Ahhh, no. You're thinking of *The King's Stilts*.”

“You're right.” Helen thought again. “Oh. Wait. You're thinking of *The King's Wish*.”

“That's the one.”

“That wasn't a Dr. Seuss book, Mary.”

Mary turned to her. “Oh, you big fibber. That was *so* a Dr. Seuss book.”

Helen sighed. “Mary, it wasn't—”

“You and I got the sets for the kids when they were growing up. I very clearly remember the Cat in the Hat on the cover.”

“All of those books were part of the Beginner Books series,” Helen patiently pointed out. “Some of them were by Dr. Seuss. Some of them weren't. Think back. *The King's Wish* didn't have Dr. Seuss artwork. Not all of those books did. Some of them were written and illustrated by other people.”

“Oh.” Mary blinked. “You're right.”

“Remember? You told me Tomjay still has *You Will Go to the Moon* and *You Will Live Under the Sea*. Those weren't written and illustrated by Seuss.”

“Yeah.”

“And I remember you telling me about Sandy for years practically sleeping with *Ann Can Fly* under her pillow.”

“And Tom still has Look Out for Pirates!”

“Really?”

Mary shrugged. “He likes the story. And the art, and yeah, that wasn't Seuss' work.”

“Huh.” Something then occurred to Helen. “And what were we talking about?”

Mary had to think back. “Oh. Yeah. Anyway: in *The King's Wish* the princes came up with a way to escape from the tower. They pretended to have measles and ended up being carried out.”

“And this is relevant because ...”

“Well, I was just thinking that we could ...”

“Oh.” Helen made a show of examining herself. “Sorry, Mary, but I've misplaced my fake measles kit. And I am *not* a Gloomy Gussie.”

“Sorry.” Mary was gazing at the floor. “But maybe I am. It just occurred to me that whoever has us here might be part of the group that's competing with Oleksiy and the Cossacks to find the missing gold.”

“Ah, Mary?”

“Um?”

“If that's true,” Helen slowly said, “and if they designed this room, then does it occur to you that they *might* be listening in on us right now?”

Mary grimaced. “Oooh. Ouch!”

“Yeah, it's sort of like before. We're captured, and still alive because our unseen host thinks we know where the gold is.”

Mary shrugged. “Well? We might.”

“Huh?”

Moving closer, Mary sat down near Helen. “Maybe my thoughts needed some time to bake out in the desert. I don't know. But my head's a bit clearer. Just before we deep sixed we were talking—”

“Rambling incoherently, actually.”

“—about the missing gold, and about Holmes' involvement. I still think there's something he did in his last months that's crucial to this whole megilla. But I've been going back and forth over what he did, and nothing pops up.”

“Yeah, but you as much said that even Watson and the others who were close to Holmes didn't know his entire movements.”

Mary nodded. “I've been trying to remember the exact places we know he went to. The colleges. The beekeepers. The real clue we have that Holmes knew the end was near was when he was making arrangements with neighboring beekeepers in the South Downs to care for his hives. That and the memorial business.”

“Memorial?”

“Oh yes. Late in his life, Holmes was being bugged to allow some sort of memorial to be created in his honor. The requests got on his absolute last nerve.” Mary's lower lip extended slightly. “Even on his best days, Holmes couldn't tolerate interruptions. And, if he knew he was running out of time ...” She shrugged.

“But you're definitely convinced Holmes hid the gold.”

“Yes.” Mary grew thoughtful. “He didn't like being bothered, but he did enjoy puzzles.” The look on her face deepened. “He left a clue somewhere, and I really need to see Oleksiy's file on Holmes.” She once again studied her surroundings. “Not that we'll be getting an opportunity anytime

soon.”

“You’ll come up with an answer.”

“Thank you, I already have. But you won’t like it.”

Helen sighed. “Then, for God’s sake, don’t describe it like that and keep me hanging. What’s the bad news?”

“Don’t know if it’s really bad news. More like an uncomfortable thought. We were heading for Cizre, right?”

Helen nodded.

“Think about all the villages and settlements between us and Cizre. Typical indigenous Middle Eastern communities, right?”

“Yeah?” Helen answered slowly.

“Adobe homes? Huts? Maybe not even electricity?”

“Yeah.” Much more slowly.

Mary waved a hand about. “Does *this* room look natural for such places?”

“Oh dear.”

“So here’s my reluctant conclusion. Wherever we are, we’re in the hands of someone in possession of sophisticated resources.”

“I’ve got a sinking feeling—”

A brief vibration was suddenly felt, and then both women were actually experiencing a sinking feeling.

“Oh, me and my big mouth,” Helen moaned.

“We’re in an elevator,” Mary realized. “We’re going down.”

Both women clambered to their feet, looking around anxiously. The sensations continued for a few moments more, then stopped.

“I know I’m asking for trouble,” Helen murmured. “But what now?”

In answer an entire wall of the room smoothly slid aside. Beyond it was a brightly lit corridor of curving metal.

Standing in the corridor were three men. Two of them were large and muscular, wearing matching gray jumpsuits and unsmiling expressions.

By comparison the man standing between them was taller than Mary, shorter than Helen and possessed of twinkling blue eyes, a faint covering

of brown hair on his head, and a pleasant smile. Unlike his companions, he was dressed in a casual business suit.

He now bowed slightly at the women. “Mrs. Swift. Mrs. Newton. Welcome. I am Dane Zito Skiron.”

Mary's ears caught the faint accent, and only one group of people on Earth had names such as the one the man had given. She could feel her stomach trying to twist into a knot.

Dane Zito Skiron was a Kranjovian.

Chapter Seventeen: The Irregular Kranjovian.

What Emilia Kranjov accomplished was wholly unprecedented in the annals of social psychology. Her graduate thesis, "Organizational Structure of A. mellifera As a Template for Urban Growth", was initially dismissed by all but a few in her field. But the breakup of the Soviet Union provided her with the perfect opportunity to implement her theories into a form of practical reality. Her critics have accused her (perhaps with some justification) as struggling to reduce individuality in the human animal. But, studied objectively, she was actually working to take people and socially rebuild their identities into a form she believed would be more productive for civilization as a whole. The first "Kranjovians" were people who allowed their old selves to be replaced by a disguise and, with that as a foundation, create a more focused purpose in defense of the Whole. The children of these people would be guided ... shaped ... educated to develop individual skills with an eye to serving the common good of the Oligarchy. In the space of less than a generation, Kranjov managed to construct a society which many have passed off as a "hive of human insects". A hive it may well be; and it certainly cannot be denied that Kranjovia has exhibited behavior not entirely harmonious to the outside world. But the Oligarchy's critics should keep in mind that a hive, whether it's composed of bees, ants or humans, carries with it a proven potential for survival as well as success. Kranjovians may collectively appear to be humans bound to a society based on the insect, but under no circumstances have they allowed themselves to sacrifice individual talent or ability. Kranjovia could survive if one Kranjovian fell ... and each individual Kranjovian is disciplined to carry the potential for raising the Oligarchy to undreamed of heights. That is Emilia Kranjov's legacy: making certain every link in the chain is strong; and those who dismiss the Oligarchy as a mindless horde do so at their peril.

—Excerpted from "The Bee in Russia's Bonnet": a private address delivered to the Political Section of the Pierce Library.—

Mary could manage little more than a slight bobbing of her head.
"Dane Zito Skiron."

Helen kept silent.

“By now the two of you have fully recovered from your ordeal out in the desert,” the Kranjovian said. “Doubtless you have many questions, and I’ll be more than happy to accommodate you.” His kindly eyes swept over the women. “But, equally doubtless, you’d like to feel more refreshed and, through that, more in a mood for pleasant conversation. If you’ll follow my associates, you will be taken to personal quarters where you can thoroughly bathe—”

Helen broke her silence with a moan of relief.

“—and, in the interim, your clothing will be laundered and returned to you. Of course, you can be supplied with other and equally fresh garments —”

“We’d appreciate you cleaning our clothes,” Mary quickly said. “As well as the rest of your offer.”

Dane Zito Skiron’s expression brightened. “Splendid! When the two of you are ready you’ll be brought to my study where we can sit and chat. Until then.” With a nod he turned to stroll back down the corridor.

The men in jumpsuits silently motioned for the women to follow, and they did so, their steps taking them to a nearby junction with another corridor which their ... *Guides? Guards? Captors?* ... led them into. It never entered the mind of either Mary or Helen to try and make an escape.

Or, if it entered their minds, they decided not to act on it.

* * * * *

“I’ve got a bad feeling,” Helen remarked from within the shower cubicle which she was taking every advantage of.

Mary, in the meanwhile, had already bathed and dried herself, and was in the process of pulling her outfit back on (silently impressed by whatever Kranjovian technology managed to wash, dry and press clothes in under fifteen minutes). As far as she could determine, the clothes hadn’t been tampered with in any way. Their hosts had even returned the GPS device.

She had heard Helen’s question. “You mean a bad feeling on top of the fact that we’re in an underground Kranjovian hideout in Syria?”

“Well ... yeah. It just occurred to me that maybe our hosts have placed hidden cameras in this shower.”

Mary briefly closed her eyes. “I know you don't mean to be a pessimist, Helen. But Dane Zito Skiron didn't strike me as being that sort of person. And yes, I'm reaching here.”

Helen was entering the room, drying herself off. “Yeah, well, if pictures of me in my birthday suit start appearing on the Internet, I'm gonna tell Ned to carpet bomb Kranjovia ... ooo wow! Clothes all ready.”

“I know,” Mary said. “If the Kranjovians have a catalog then I'm ordering a washer dryer set for myself.”

Bathed, and in clean clothes, both women felt tons better than they had in quite a while. “Now,” Helen said, “do we wait for someone to collect us? Or is there a button we push or something?”

Mary looked around. “Y'know, I'd become suspicious about listening devices if someone showed up at exactly this moment.”

A minute passed in silence.

“And I guess no one's going to show up.”

“Either that,” Helen pointed out, “or they heard your remark.”

“Mmm. True.”

“But I suppose there's no future in piling paranoia on paranoia.” Walking to the door, Helen opened it a fraction, peeking out. “Oh! Hello. There's someone standing watch out here,” she continued to Mary.

“Is he armed?”

“No, but he's about as big as Sestina ... and he just gave something like a smile and is making a little 'come on' motion.”

“Then I guess that's our cue.” Making a detour at the bed, Mary scooped up the GPS device. At Helen's raised eyebrow she said: “More than once I've heard Sandy say that her worst moments occurred when she forgot to take along both a computer and a Snooper. This is as close as we've got.”

“Not arguing.”

Stepping out of the room, the women followed the rather large man who silently led them back up the corridor and down another branch.

“Refresh my memory,” Helen whispered to Mary. “Do most

Kranjovians simply not talk or what?”

“Why ask me?”

“Who else is there?”

“Maybe he doesn't speak English.”

“A 'grunt' or a 'harumph' would at least be something.”

“Maybe he thinks that'd offend us. Don't annoy the very large tour guide, Helen.” They continued following the man until, about half a minute later, they all paused before a blank wall at the end of the corridor. At an unseen signal (delivered by the guard, or from somewhere else), the wall smoothly slid aside, the guard indicating with an arm that the women were to enter. They did so, the wall sliding shut behind them.

“Wow,” Helen said.

Mary was quietly of a mind to agree. Apparently Kranjovians in charge of underground lairs did rather well for themselves. Or perhaps it was just this one particular Kranjovian. She and Helen had entered a large circular room paneled in both wood and what looked to be slabs of black onyx. The design of the room put her in mind of sets from some of the classic James Bond films: sloping walls beneath a low ceiling, and Mary briefly found herself trying to remember who the designer had been.

Quality beige carpeting was beneath their feet and, between the floor and the ceiling, several comfortable chairs and couches were arranged in a loose circle. Dane Zito Skiron had been smiling at the women from within the circle and, at their entrance, he stepped closer. “Mrs. Swift ... Mrs. Newton ... welcome. Please, be comfortable.”

Mary took a step and then paused as she spotted something familiar.

Yes! A framed portrait hung on a nearby section of wall; one that Mary knew almost intimately. It was Paget's photographic portrait of Sherlock Holmes, and Mary walked closer to get a better view. Her eye was then drawn to a glass case sitting atop a table near the portrait. Curiosity tugged Mary's attention closer, and she gasped as she saw that the case contained a magazine opened to the story “The Man with the Twisted Lip” by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (as transcribed from Watson's notes).

From behind her came Dane Zito Skiron's voice: “Yes, Mrs. Swift. That's an original copy of the December 1891 issue of the *Strand Magazine*, where Watson's account first appeared. And no, it didn't cost as much as you might suspect. But it is a favorite among my collection,

and I felt it deserved a place of honor in this room.”

Mary turned to the man. “You're also a Holmes fan?”

“Oh, quite,” Dane Zito Skiron said, nodding. “Very much so, and for a long time.”

Helen moaned softly.

“Something wrong, Mrs. Newton?”

“Not yet,” Helen muttered.

With a continuation of the smile (which was slowly beginning to get on Helen's nerves), Dane Zito Skiron motioned that the women should take advantage of the chairs and couches. “I happen to be a member of the Silver Blazes: the Kranjovian scion society of the Baker Street Irregulars,” he said, busying himself at a coffee service which was resting on a cart. “And I believe you're also a member of the Irregulars, Mrs. Swift.”

“Yes, I'm with the Baker Street Underground, based in New York,” Mary replied, sitting on a couch next to Helen.

“For reasons which I suspect might be obvious, I haven't been able to attend any of the recent meetings,” Dane Zito Skiron said, “so you can imagine how pleased I am to meet another Holmes enthusiast. Tea, Ladies? Coffee?”

“Coffee,” Helen declared. “Black. And answers.”

“Helen,” Mary gently admonished. “I really have to apologize for my friend,” she said to Dane Zito Skiron.

“And I have to apologize for mine,” Helen replied, her eyes trying to bore through the Kranjovian. “I adore Mary immensely. She's my best friend in the entire world. But her artlessness tends to frighten me.”

“She is fortunate in her friends,” Dane Zito Skiron murmured, turning to pass a cup of coffee to Helen. “Mrs. Swift, I've had little time to review your file, but I believe you have a preference for jasmine tea.”

“Thank you,” Mary replied, smiling as she accepted a cup.

“And there's no need for either of you to apologize.” Dane Zito Skiron settled into a chair facing the women. “Mrs. Newton is properly correct and we should face the honest reality of the current situation. The two of you are obviously in need of explanations, and I want to convince you that I am more than willing to go the extra distance necessary to put both of you at ease.”

An eyebrow lifted on Helen's face. "A Kranjovian? Wanting us at ease?"

Mary swallowed the rebuke she wanted to give Helen as, admittedly, the question had been high in her mind as well.

Dane Zito Skiron looked apologetic. "As I said: honest reality." His eyes flicked over to Mary. "After all, it cannot be denied that you, Mrs. Swift, are the mother of two people who have given the Oligarchy considerable reason to despair. And one of them is married to your daughter, Mrs. Newton. By all rights ... by all measurable lengths of scrutiny ... it would be obvious to expect me to rejoice at having the two of you so close at hand. So available upon which to apply ..." this time it was he who lifted an eyebrow ... "revenge?"

Helen's cup was paused halfway to her lips. "And?" she prompted.

"But, if I wanted the both of you harmed, the sensible thing to do would have been to leave you out in the desert. Instead?" With a shrug, Dane Zito Skiron sat back in his chair, taking a sip from his own cup. "Let me offer some background which will hopefully clarify my position.

"As you may have realized, the Oligarchy maintains numerous hidden installations such as this along its border. Our mission is both defense and the gathering of intelligence. These stations are, for the most part, staffed by Kranjovians, but we also employ a handful of locals who provide necessary support."

"What ranking are you?" Mary suddenly asked.

"I am 475th within the Oligarchy," Dane Zito Skiron replied. "It is known that both you and Mrs. Newton are familiar with Orry Moe Moses, third within the Oligarchy—"

"Not quite familiar," Mary pointed out. "My daughter did the talking."

"Ah! I am corrected. And, of course, there was Sun Ohm Erato, who was eleventh."

"I ... would just as soon not reminisce on him," Mary said.

Dane Zito Skiron produced an understanding look. "I quite sympathize. Whereas the Oligarchy admittedly benefited from the research Sun Ohm Erato produced from his base in Mexico, I am certain I don't have to explain to either of you how his subsequent actions made him something of a problem. His death was concluded to be more of an asset than a liability."

“I’ll have to pass that along to Sandy,” Mary said dryly. “But Helen and I have noticed how large some of your people here seem to be, and I was wondering if perhaps Sun Ohm Erato’s biod research was being continued?”

“Not as such,” the Kranjovian replied with a reassuring wag of a finger. “They are the result, rather, of the accelerated physical conditioning program which is employed in our schools, and which is mandatory for most field workers.”

Somehow, Mary thought, *I have absolutely got to get this information back to Sherman*. “You’re being rather free with details I’d ordinarily think you’d wish to keep secret.”

“And your thought is that I am casually explaining all of this because none of you will leave this installation alive. Far from it. Right now, Mrs. Swift, both you and Mrs. Newton are far more valuable to Kranjovia alive than dead.”

Right now, Helen’s mind dully echoed. “I’m, of course, happy to be alive,” she said. “As well as bathed, recovered and currently enjoying some admittedly good coffee—”

“But there is still the reason why,” Dane Zito Skiron finished. “Which brings us further along in my story to the point where it neatly dovetails with your own. For some time now we have been monitoring increased levels of Cossack activity within the region.” A shrug. “Naturally it’s not unusual to find such people from Ukraine and related parts of Russia within the Middle East on an occasional basis. But these were Kaimanove Cossacks and, as such, of particular interest.”

An *uh oh* surfaced within the minds of both Mary and Helen.

“All our outposts were alerted, and we’ve been following the Cossacks as they moved about. Particularly in Egypt.

“Then, a few days ago, an additional and much more serious alert was released. Our intelligence division reported that the two of you had been spotted in Egypt. Not only that, but you were quite possibly accompanying the Cossacks.” Dane Zito Skiron sipped from his cup. “It shouldn’t be surprising that the presence of a Swift in the region... plus a close companion,” he added with a nod at Helen ... “is sufficient cause for concern within the Oligarchy. Orders were given for all outposts to be on guard and to prepare to take necessary action.

“You can well imagine my surprise when news came to me that an

aircraft carrying 'two unidentified American women' had been reported leaving Kharga with a filed destination of an airfield located within southern Ukraine."

One mystery solved, Mary thought.

"I sent word to have the plane intercepted, or at the very least watched upon landing. The plane was observed, and there was no evidence of women ... American or otherwise ... on board. Out of concern I immediately ordered patrols to make a search along as much of the plane's flight path as was under my jurisdiction."

"Out of concern'," Helen murmured. "Many thanks."

"Call it defensive, Mrs. Newton," Dane Zito Skiron replied. "Consider the Kranjovian point of view. If the two women had indeed been you and Mrs. Swift, and had it come to pass that the both of you had come to some serious harm ... or worse ... so close to the border of the Oligarchy, then we would've been facing repercussions too uncomfortable to consider."

"True," Helen conceded.

"So imagine my relief when one of my patrols found the both of you out in the desert. Very much the worse for wear, but still alive. You were brought here, positively identified and placed in medical isolation where you were each given injections of hydration assist nanobots." A thin smile appeared on the Kranjovian's face. "One of Sun Ohm Erato's lesser known inventions. You were also treated with healing sprays to correct other damage brought on by exposure. It was only then a matter of waiting until consciousness returned.

"And now? Here we all are."

Dabbing at her lips with a napkin, Mary placed her cup down on its saucer. "I very much appreciate all you've done on our behalf," she calmly said. "But you're not telling us everything."

"See?" Helen pointed out. "You can be suspicious when you put your mind to it."

Mary ignored her.

Dane Zito Skiron put his own cup aside. "You're quite correct, Mrs. Swift. I have taken personal initiatives which might not set too well with my superiors. For instance: I have not yet reported your presence here to Navsegda Adin."

Mary's expression hardened. "I imagine it's too much to ask that you've

reported our whereabouts to our families either.”

Here Dane Zito Skiron looked slightly uncomfortable. “No.”

Mary sighed.

“Hear me out first. I mentioned how the both of you being so close to Kranjovia is a delicate issue. I did not want to take any actions I personally considered to be rash until I had all the available facts at hand. Trust me, I have your interests at heart, as well as my own.”

Mary exchanged a long look with Helen before turning her attention back to the man. “All right. Continue.”

“First, I am rather curious as to the overall lack of response from your people concerning your situation.” At the looks the women produced he quickly went on. “There are indeed people from Swift Enterprises searching throughout the Middle East. At last report, your son's Flying Lab has been spotted overflying Saudi Arabia. And our instruments have detected greater than usual scanning activity from your space station.” Here Dane Zito Skiron frowned. “It has been presumed that both you and Mrs. Newton would be fitted with sophisticated tracking devices which would aid your people in their search. Our own examinations located such devices, but they seem to have been rendered inoperative.” His frown became one of curiosity. “Why?”

Another sigh from Mary. “It's ... complicated.”

“Um.” The Kranjovian seemed to think it over for a few moments. “Which brings the matter back to the subject of the Cossacks. Not to mention some rather interesting comments which you and Mrs. Newton made concerning Cizre, as well as Sherlock Holmes and some missing gold.”

Mary gaped at him. “You *were* listening in on us.”

“Mrs. Swift—”

“You sneak!”

Dane Zito Skiron raised a placating hand. “Please, Mrs. Swift. I meant no harm. It was all standard operating procedure. And, as it turns out, a large contributing factor towards my not contacting my superiors. Bear with me, please.”

“As if we've got a choice,” Mary muttered, flouncing back against the couch, her arms crossed.

“In fact, it might interest you to know that you're currently in Quesirdib, five miles southwest of Cizre.”

Helen swore she could see Mary's ears pricking up.

“How long have we been here?” Mary asked in as innocent a voice as she could muster.

Dane Zito Skiron thought for a moment. “It is about four in the afternoon on the 27th.”

Mary's mind raced. They had about one-half hour in which to make the rendezvous with the Cossack plane. And the airfield was only five or so miles away. *Dear God.*

“Mrs. Swift ... as a fellow devotee of the exploits of Mr. Holmes I am, of course, familiar with the details surrounding the events which occurred during the last days of his life. Which means I know about the situation concerning the missing Cossack gold.”

Mary was silent.

“It is about the gold, isn't it?” Dane Zito Skiron's expression became intense. “That's the reason the Kaimanove Cossacks have been so active in this area. They believe the gold is somewhere near.”

Mary's mouth remained shut.

“There was the Cossack base in Djibouti,” the Kranjovian was saying to himself. “But that area had already been thoroughly investigated. Why ... where?” His attention narrowed back to Mary. “Certainly the Cossacks don't believe the gold is located somewhere in Cizre?”

“The gold is not in Cizre,” Mary said.

“Then may I ask what interest you and Mrs. Newton have concerning Cizre? No Cossack activity has been noted there.”

Not for another half hour, Mary thought. “It's personal.”

Dane Zito Skiron suddenly stood up and began pacing about. “You could be planning a rendezvous with members of your family ... no. Your tracking devices were inactive, and you had no way to set up such a meeting.” He went to where the portrait of Holmes hung on the wall, gazing at it for about a minute.

Then he turned back to the women. “Mrs. Swift, please understand that, above and beyond my being a Kranjovian, it would be a considerable personal achievement if I were somehow able to help locate the missing

gold. You certainly recognize it as one of the great unsolved mysteries of all time.”

“I have an interest,” Mary slowly said to him. “But that's still not all of the story.”

The man paused, blinking. “Oh?”

“You mentioned how your superiors in Navsegda Adin have a particular interest in the Kaimanove Cossacks,” Mary continued. “Why is that?”

Good one, Mary, Helen thought.

“Um.” Dane Zito Skiron rubbed a hand over his head. “Yes. I suppose there's still some explaining to attend to.” He strolled back towards the women. “During your recovery, Mrs. Swift, you had mentioned an 'Oleksiy'. May I presume you were referring to Oleksiy Levchenko: the Kaimanove hetman?”

“You may.”

“I take it you've personally met him.”

What the heck. “Yes.”

“Then you might already suspect the reason my people are interested in the Kaimanove Cossacks in general, and Oleksiy Levchenko in particular.”

“The sword,” Helen said.

“The sword,” Dane Zito Skiron agreed, pouring himself more coffee. “All observations and details which Kranjovia has made concerning that sword has led to the conclusion that it is a rather remarkable object.” He sipped at the coffee. “Rather remarkable indeed.”

Another silent exchange of looks between the women. “Helen and I have already speculated about the sword,” Mary said. “You might as well throw in your thoughts.”

“And I believe we are all on the same wavelength, as it were.” Dane Zito Skiron resumed his seat. “The *Zirka Rishennya* is of extraterrestrial origin.”

“That ... is our belief as well.”

“I may as well tell you, although I doubt you'd be surprised to learn this, that there is a standing order throughout the Oligarchy to acquire any alien artifact whenever an opportunity presents itself.” The

Kranjovian gazed down into his coffee. “Any opportunity at all.”

“You're going to hold us captive and try to get Oleksiy to hand over the sword in return for our release,” Helen suddenly declared.

Dane Zito Skiron suddenly looked up. “No—”

“Has Kranjovia been responsible for pursuing the Cossacks, and for the killings in Donetsk?”

“No, Mrs. Newton. I assure you. Although,” and here he looked away, his voice dropping, “if they had, then I haven't been informed of it.”

“It wouldn't take much, though, for Kranjovia to have arranged things, such as the shootout at the airport in Cairo.”

Dane Zito Skiron took a slow breath. “Admittedly no, Mrs. Newton. Let us continue to be honest in all things. The Inner Hive could quite easily order such a move. But, even if they did, I have no knowledge of it, nor have I done anything which could have contributed to such an action. My activities up to now have been simple intelligence gathering, monitoring and, most recently, rescue.”

“And if your superiors asked you outright if you have knowledge concerning us?” Mary asked.

“I ... don't know.” And indeed, Dane Zito Skiron seemed uncertain. “Such information would indeed be of importance to those in Navsegda Adin. But, above and beyond that, there is the matter of Holmes' mystery concerning the Cossack gold. And whether or not it might be connected to the sword which the Kaimanove possess.”

“Apparently your superiors believe this,” Mary pointed out. “That is, *if* they're the ones responsible for the attacks upon Oleksiy.”

“I would think ... I would like to believe they would move much more carefully than this.”

“But you're not certain,” Mary pressed on. “That's another reason you're withholding information from your superiors.”

Dane Zito Skiron steadily regarded Mary's. “And you're withholding information from your family and friends,” he slowly said. “It would seem, Mrs. Swift, that you and I are of like minds, albeit from different directions.”

Mary opened her mouth, then closed it. Next to her, Helen had closed her eyes and was mournfully shaking her head.

Dane Zito Skiron was nodding. "Both of us have obligations, Mrs. Swift. But I also believe you and I are also driven by a consuming desire towards a higher goal."

Mary was finding it difficult to speak. "I ... it would seem so."

Helen groaned. "Mary ..."

Mary, her eyes still on the Kranjovian, motioned for Helen to be silent. "You're obviously heading for something," she said to the man. "Please speak freely."

"Cooperation," Dane Zito Skiron replied. "A pooling of knowledge."

"And then?"

"Reaching a mutually satisfying conclusion."

Mary suddenly stood up and, for want of a reply, wandered back to the framed portrait of Holmes. "So far, I haven't been able to determine much of anything," she said after a few moments of staring at the picture.

"But you've established contact with Levchenko and his Cossacks," Dane Zito Skiron pointed out. "You and Mrs. Newton are an important conduit for further information."

"You want us to meet up with Oleksiy and pass on news to you?"

No immediate answer, and Mary turned to see a calm expression on the man's face. "Well?"

Rising from his chair, Dane Zito Skiron went to an antique wooden cabinet located against the wall opposite the room from the portrait. Opening a drawer he reached in, removing a folder.

"This contains every bit of information I've managed to acquire on the missing gold," he said, walking towards Mary and holding the folder out to her. "I want you to study it, think it over, and then we can discuss matters further."

Mary wordlessly accepted the folder, staring at it.

Helen tried again. "Mary—"

"I'll look it over," Mary said. Her face lifted to steadily meet the man's eyes. "I'll make a decision then."

Dane Zito Skiron was all smiles. "Splendid! In that case, I'll leave you to your reading. Please signal for more refreshments if you wish." With a bow to her, followed by another one to Helen, he strolled out of the room,

the door opening and then sliding shut behind him.

Helen was immediately off the couch, storming over to Mary. “Are you out of your little *mind*—”

“Shhh,” Mary hissed, clutching the folder to her. “I’m willing to bet our host is listening in to everything we say. Keep it down.”

“Making a *deal* with him? A *Kranjovian*?”

“I *said* hush!”

Helen’s eyes slowly narrowed. “I know that look. Lord knows I’ve seen it on Sandy’s face plenty of times. You’re thinking—”

“I’m thinking we’ve got only thirty minutes or less to make it to the rendezvous. Somehow ... *somehow* ... we’ve got to break out of here and get to Cizre.”

Chapter Eighteen: Border Race.

Helen crossed her arms. "All right. I'm curious to hear how you intend for us to escape from an underground Kranjovian installation. Whatever your plan is, I'm betting it's a corker."

"I said *somehow*," Mary hissed back. She was looking around the room, tapping the edge of the folder against her chin. "Y'know, some ideas from you would be appreciated."

"If I come up with any, then you'll be the first to know."

"Only one door," Mary observed. "No other door to the room. No ..."
She suddenly nodded to herself. "C'mon." She began walking to the door, Helen silently following."

"No buttons or anything," Mary said, studying the door and surrounding wall. "Perhaps it's controlled by something Dane Zito Skiron and others carry with them. Still ..."

She gave the metal panel a rap. "Hello?"

After a few moments the door soundlessly opened and the women were facing one of the guards.

"Hi," Mary said to him in her sunniest voice. "Ah ... my friend and I need to go to the bathroom."

No response from the guard.

"Bathroom," Mary repeated. "Ah-hhh, facilities. Potty. Little girls room."

The guard remained impassive.

"Oh, heck. Helen, what's the Russian for 'bathroom'?"

Helen raised an eyebrow at her. "I know *toilette*. That's French."

"We really took the wrong courses back in school."

"Huh! Say that a little louder. Maybe the Seminary will hear us."

"Tinkle," Mary tried to the guard. "Relief. Criminy ... wait! How were we supposed to signal for refreshments if we needed them?"

"Oh!" Helen looked behind her at the room. "I don't see anything like a phone, or buttons. Wait." She raised her voice. "Hey! We'd like to go to

the bathroom.”

“Please,” Mary prompted.

“Please,” Helen added automatically. “Now we'll test your theory about us being listened to.”

The guard's head suddenly moved slightly, as if he was hearing something, and the women could now see a tiny metal square pasted just below his left ear. Making a following motion to the women he turned and began walking down the corridor.

“So far so good,” Mary murmured.

“Uh huh. This is a definition of 'good' I've never encountered.”

“Baby steps. Can you remember the way back to the uh-hhhh vator-eletay?”

“Ah, um ... the room where we we showered is down this upcoming corridor to the left. Which means the hm-hm-hmmm is at the far end of this corridor.”

“Yeah, and it looks as if we're being led back to our room.” And indeed, the guard had turned left at the branching corridor, moving to where the women had relaxed before their meeting with Dane Zito Skiron. “I'm suspecting we're not supposed to see more than a little bit of this installation.”

Helen nodded. “You do realize,” she said, her voice lowering almost to inaudibility, “that our large friend here will still be standing guard?”

“One headache at a time, please.”

Reaching the door to the room, the guard turned and pointed to it, assuming a position which, in any language, declared he wasn't going to budge for anything. Giving him as disarming a smile as possible, Mary opened the door, and she and Helen both entered.

Closing the door, Mary took the GPS device and tossed it onto the bed. “There.”

“Okay,” Helen said. “Obviously I'm missing something here.”

Pulling Helen close, Mary began whispering into her ear. “I don't think we're bugged. But I'm betting the GPS has been tampered with and might tattle.”

“Oh-hhhh. C'mon.” Grabbing Mary's hand, Helen pulled her into the bathroom, closing the door behind them. She then turned the sink faucets

on full, then went and turned on the shower. “I knew watching Turner Classic Movies would come in handy someday.”

In spite of the noise from the running water, the women stood very close. “But why would Dane Zito Skiron tamper with the GPS?” Helen asked. “Unless, of course—”

“He means for us to escape,” Mary replied.

“He ... *huh?*”

“Maybe I’m wrong,” Mary admitted, “and maybe he hasn’t had us bugged or anything. But think about it for a moment. He wants to solve the missing gold mystery same as us. He thinks we can help with the Cossacks. But he’s a Kranjovian. Not only would the Cossacks never cooperate with him, but the Inner Hive would hang him out to dry. So answer this one, old roomie. How does Dane Zito Skiron get what he wants and still save face with his superiors in Navsegda Adin?”

Realization flowed onto Helen’s face. “He lets us break out.”

“Exactly!”

“Yeah, but ... first off: we don’t know for certain that this is what he wants. Second: even if it is what he wants, how do we manage to escape in a way that would convince Navsegda Adin that Dane Zito Skiron didn’t allow it?”

“If we were ordinary people then yes, that’d be a problem.”

“We’re not ordinary?”

“Remember: I’m the mother of both Tom Swift Jr. and Sandy Swift. And you’re Tom Swift Jr.’s mother-in-law.”

Helen snorted. “*Real* frightening, Mary. I’m quivering in my shoes here.”

“Okay, but regardless of who we are, keep in mind that the Kranjovians have sufficient reason to be concerned. Remember that just the fact you and I were in the area was enough to put the border stations on alert. I’m not saying that all of the Inner Hive are shaking in fear, but I’m willing to bet at least Orry Moe Moses would advise caution, and probably thinks there’s more to us than just matronly good looks.”

Helen thought it over. “Okay. So, back to square one. How do we get out of here?”

Mary was already giving the bathroom a thorough examination. She

then looked up. “Huh! Standard light bulb. I would've thought the Kranjovians would go in for fluorescent lighting, or something more efficient.”

“Let's play Consumer Reports later, Mary—”

“No, no, no. *This is good.*” Mary thought for a moment., then she began shoving the folder down into her blouse. “Helen, you stay here and grab the shower attachment. When the guard comes into the room, I want you to spray water at the light bulb.”

“Yeah, but that'll ...” And Helen's eyes widened. “Oh ho!”

“I'll be by the door, letting the guard in. When he goes down (*I hope*, Mary's mind added), you start running out of the room as fast as you can.”

“And what'll you be doing?”

“Believe you me, I'll be running like crazy for the elevator. You just follow.” Leaving the bathroom, Mary pulled the blanket off the bed, then moved to a position by the door.

“HEY,” she shouted. “WE'RE IN TROUBLE HERE.”

The door immediately opened and the guard entered. At the same moment, Helen sprayed the light bulb with the water from the shower attachment. As expected, the hot bulb burst with an audible POP, and the guard automatically froze, his hand reaching for his belt. This gave Mary an opportunity to quickly throw the blanket over the man, giving him a solid push from behind. Caught unawares, the man tumbled to the floor.

“C'mon,” Mary said, already leaving the room and running down the corridor, the sound of rapid footsteps telling her Helen was close behind. Reaching what was considered to be the main corridor, both women skidded to the left, regaining their pace and heading for the door which they knew led to the elevator.

“That won't keep him down long,” Helen argued.

“Long enough,” Mary replied, adding another unspoken *I hope*.

Reaching the metal panel at the end of the corridor they skidded to a stop.

“Oh, good,” Mary said. “There're buttons here ... and rats, they're in Russian.”

“Mary! Numbers in Russian are the same as numbers in English.”

“Yeah, but the important things ... like 'open' and 'close' ... are in

Russian!”

With a choking sound, Helen lunged out with an arm, her fingers stabbing at a button. The panel smoothly slid aside.

“You read Russian?”

“That was a *guess*, Mary. C'mon.” Poking the button marked '1', Helen half-pushed Mary into the room beyond, following her.

Inside, the door slid shut, and there was the immediate sensation of the room rising.

“I think you're right,” Helen said. “This was way the heck too easy.”

“Be nice. We made it this far.”

Helen stared at her. “You okay? You're breathing sort of hard.”

“So are you. And it's just adrenaline. Don't worry.”

“You serious?”

“*Bear with me.*”

The room soon stopped and the panel once again slid open, the women suddenly facing a blast of heated air from outside. They were at one end of a dirt floor corridor, the walls and ceiling made of what appeared to them to be either stone or thick adobe. At the other end of the corridor they saw daylight, and an adobe wall on the opposite end of what seemed to be a narrow street.

“No guards,” Mary noticed. “No alarms either.”

“I know,” Helen replied. “Frankly, I'd be happier with both.”

“You're really difficult to please, you know that?”

“Mary, this has 'set up' written all over it. In both Arabic and Russian.”

“C'mon.” Leaving the room, the women moved quickly down the corridor, pausing at the opening to peek about. To either side an alley could be seen, with the left end spreading out into some sort of plaza.

“So far, so good,” Mary said.

Helen was struggling to swallow the comments flooding her mouth.

“Now all we've got to do is find some transportation to get to Cizre.”

“A taxi? A bus stop?”

“I don't think we'd be that lucky ... ah!”

Helen peered in the direction Mary was looking. “I don't see—”

“Those motorcycles and bikes parked at the other end of that open area.”

“Those ... oh, Mary. You're not *thinking*—”

“I am. C'mon. And just act casual.” Mary began walking towards the plaza.

“Just act casual',” Helen was muttering behind her. “Sure. We're probably the only two white women for a thousand miles, wandering around in a Syrian backwater town, casually going to swipe some motorbikes. I'm so casual right now I'll fall apart at any moment. Mary, even Dane Zito Skiron couldn't arrange anything like this.”

“We're improvising. Hush.” With a happy little chirp, Mary picked up her pace, managing to ignore the gradually increasing number of stares from the people in the area as she trotted towards what she recognized as a Swift Enterprises Barton 2400.

“Mary—”

“Casual, Helen. Casual.” Making it to the motorcycle she slowed her pace, letting a hand idly pass over the sleek black metallic finish of the vehicle. At the same time she gazed about, smiling pleasantly at the people. “Helen. There's a—”

“*Don't* say it.”

“—Honda Super Blackbird right next to this one.” Her voice lowered. “And the key is in the ignition.”

“I *told* you not to say it.”

“You know how to ride a motorcycle.”

“Yeah! I can ride Ned's scooter.”

“Fibber! You've ridden bigger bikes than that.”

“And what the hell do *you* know about riding motorcycles?”

“Please. I'm married to Tom.”

Moving closer to Mary, Helen mentally conceded the point. “We're attracting *attention* out here,” she hissed.

“Which is why we're going to move as quickly as possible.”

“As quickly as' ... Mary, can't I just ride piggyback with you?”

“We can't take the chance. One of us has to make it to the rendezvous. Now! While they're watching me.” With a smooth movement, Mary mounted the motorcycle, her hand pressing down on the electronic palm reader (praying that Tom had kept his word and had continued arranging to secretly install the handprints of the family members into the ignition system of all Swift vehicles).

To her intense relief the cycle immediately roared into life, and Mary guided it out from its resting place, already picking up speed away from the plaza.

“Oh, look,” Helen stage screamed. “My crazy friend is on a runaway motorcycle. Help!” This while the locals were shouting, a few of them unsuccessfully trying to follow Mary on foot.

Others were looking in Helen's direction, their expressions darkening..

So I stay here and try to find a sympathetic Syrian lawyer, Helen thought. Or ... and, beginning a line of desperate prayers, swung herself onto the Honda, one hand reaching for the key. The motorcycle started, and Helen felt as if an explosion was occurring below her as she clung to dear life, forcing herself to try and guide the vehicle in the direction Mary had taken (missing becoming a part of a nearby building only by the narrowest of margins, and just managing to avoid being grabbed by several pairs of hands).

The only good thing, she reasoned, was that the sound of the motorcycle was drowning out the shouts and cries from behind.

The second good thing, she soon realized, was that Quesirdib was a small town, and she eventually coaxed the bike along the dirt road, swiftly catching up with the cloud of dust that was trailing behind Mary.

“You made it,” Mary shrieked happily as Helen maneuvered alongside.

Swear to God, Helen thought, if I didn't need both hands to drive this thing ... “We're gonna be followed by cops,” she yelled back.

“Small town Syrian cops,” Mary said over the noise. “What could they possibly have?”

In answer there was a series of pops too distant to be engine sounds. Much closer was the rather disturbing sound (and sensation) of small projectiles whizzing by. Glancing behind her, Helen could see two jeeps in what the films she loved usually described as “hot pursuit”. “They're shooting at us.”

“Weave!”

“What?”

“*Weave!*” By way of explanation, Mary put her motorcycle into a series of swerves.

Dear Miss Bivalvia, Helen wildly composed in her mind. Just letting you know your prize pupil is a biker chick! None the less she attempted to follow Mary's example, finding the effort of weaving easier than thought, and suspecting it was due more to blind panic and inexperience rather than skill. The two women continued racing down the road, trying to put as much distance as possible between them and their pursuers.

“At least we've got speed on them,” Mary managed to say.

“Ah, Mary ...”

“And maybe they're just trying to stop us, rather than kill us—”

“Mary!”

“*What?*”

“Ahead,” Helen shrieked, directing Mary's attention to what was growing nearer. A simple white hut on one side of the road. There were two flags fluttering from poles. The nearer one bore the black, red and white with green stars of Syria. The further one carried the white crescent and star on the red background, indicating the Republic of Turkey.

Three uniformed men could be seen coming out of the hut. All of them had rifles.

And a simple wooden barricade was across the road.

“What do we do?” Helen cried.

She saw Mary's face become a study in gritted determination, her friend bending lower upon the bike. “*Keep going.*”

“Keep—”

“Don't stop!”

Moaning, and surprised at finding herself possessing fond memories of their Kranjovian prison, Helen also bent down, opening up the throttle. At the border the guards were beginning to unlimber their rifles, and the women were now close enough to where they could see the sign on the hut. Words in Turkish which Helen prayed translated to

read: Welcome to Our Peaceful and Non-Violent Country. Insane American Women Welcomed!

Logically this was the moment where both women should have slowed to a stop to present passports. But the guards were still in the process of raising their rifles as the two motorcycles rocketed past, smashing through the barricade and barreling on down the road.

“Turkey,” Mary announced. “And we're in Cizre!”

This time the women definitely heard the sounds of shots from behind, and they resumed weaving as they raced further into town.

“With luck,” Mary said, “they'll stop the jeep following us and question them.”

With luck, Helen's mind moaned. “Ow!”

“What's *wrong*?”

“Nothing. I think a shot clipped my bike.”

“Keep going. Head through the town and watch for the airfield.”

Racing through crowded streets at a hundred some odd miles per hour, Helen's mind added. But the twisting nature of the Cizre streets made it necessary to slow down. Slightly. The good news was that the constant turns were helping to hide them from further gunfire.

The bad news were the screams and shouts from the people they were speeding past. Even more troublesome was the growing collection of police sirens.

“They radioed ahead,” Helen called out.

No answer from Mary.

“Mary, they know the roads here better than we do. They'll be setting up *roadblocks*.”

“*They* don't know where we're going.”

The women eventually reached what seemed to be a highway and picked up speed. It occurred to Helen that they were possibly passing by several picturesque and quite historically interesting points in the city. Her usual tourist instincts, however, were thoroughly buried.

“*Lights*,” Mary shouted.

“Huh?” Helen glanced behind to see two cars following in the distance; their purpose easily identifiable by the flashing blue lights. “*Yikes!*”

“Keep going!”

Did Cizre have an American embassy? Helen wondered. Closer to the point she wondered if she and Mary could get Christian burial here? She was tasting blood and realized she had been biting her lip. Upping the level of her litany to Heaven she worked to coax more speed out of her bike. Around them Cizre had thinned out, and they were entering open country.

“There,” Mary cried.

“What *now?*”

“Airfield!”

Helen saw that they were indeed approaching an airfield to their left. To be honest, though, the site hardly qualified the name. An airstrip which was more of a horse trail, and a sheet metal hangar which would've done justice to a ghost town. But both women could see an aircraft parked near the hangar, and Helen let out a joyous whoop as she recognized the vehicle as being a Swift “Whirling Duck” VTOL transport. “It's the boys!”

Mary didn't answer but, instead, rapidly swung her motorcycle off the highway, racing for the plane. Helen followed, her earlier hopes sinking as she noticed the aircraft was bearing faded Cyrillic lettering, and didn't seem to be as clean as Swift airplanes usually were. Even more disheartening was the sight of the dark-haired and bearded man who had been loading crates into the plane, but was now pausing as the women roared towards him.

Mary practically fell off her bike, letting it sputter on wildly out of control as she managed to stumble back onto her feet. Helen's fall from her own bike was much more honest and she landed roughly on her side, busily pushing the noisy machine away from her with an effort.

“*Shcho?*” the man was saying. “*Damy?*”

“Hi,” Mary said, rushing to him. “We need help.”

The man's frown intensified, one hand reaching for a pistol he was wearing in a holster at his belt. “*SHCHO?*”

“I'm Mary Swift. This is Helen Newton.”

The frown didn't lessen, and both women could now hear the sirens faintly in the distance, the sound steadily rising.

“Ah-hhh ... Kaimanove? Oleksiy Levchenko?”

Curiosity was now growing on the man's face. “*Komandyr Levchenko?*”

“Yes! Yes! I'm ... oh heck, Helen. What was that word? Oh!” She indicated herself. “*Polkovnyk Swift—*”

But realization had suddenly dawned on the man's face and he was nodding eagerly. “Ah! *Polkovnyk Mary Swift! Tak! Tak!*”

Helen had limped up to them. “The cops are gonna be here any moment.”

Mary nodded, her attention still on the Ukrainian. “We ... *need* ... to ... get ... *out* ... of ... here ... *Now!*”

The man was now hearing the sirens, his eyes narrowing at the sight of approaching blue lights still miles away. “*Tak!*” he said emphatically and, continuing with a stream of Ukrainian, indicated that the women were to climb into the plane. The women immediately obeyed, and the man quickly followed, slipping into the pilot's seat and closing the hatch while Mary and Helen settled into the passenger seats behind him.

To give the man credit his moves were fast, and the ducted fan rotors of the Whirling Duck spun into life, the plane lifting from the ground in a cloud of dust as the police cars were racing onto the airfield. The occupants of the cars were boiling out from the doors, their pistols already aiming, but the pilot immediately spun the plane away, settling the engines into vertical flight and heading away as fast as possible.

Mary sat back against her seat. “*Whew!*”

She then noticed that the pilot was speaking into a headset. “Ah—”

The pilot glanced back at her. “Flying,” he managed in heavily accented English. “Flying ... *Ukrayina*. Ukraine!”

“I ... guess that's good,” Mary said to Helen.

Helen was staring at her stonily. “I so love you, Mary. And that's the only thing which is keeping me from knocking you into the middle of next week.”

Chapter Nineteen: The Last Days of Sherlock Holmes.

The Whirling Duck was speeding through the Turkish sky, maintaining a fairly low altitude; skimming over hills, desert and, as near as the women could reckon, trying to keep between two nearby mountain ranges.

“I sort of miss the GPS thingy,” Helen said, peering out the window. “I mean, I presume we're heading towards Ukraine, which would be to the northwest. If my memory serves, we'll be crossing the Black Sea.”

“Sounds right,” Mary said.

“Forgive me for being nervous—”

Mary almost smiled. “I think we're entitled.”

“—but, if I were a Ukrainian pilot, I'd look for an alternative to cutting across Turkish airspace.”

Mary shrugged. “I imagine Turkey has made arrangements for foreign airlines to cross their airspace. Plus, consider our pilot's situation. His alternatives are to either turn to the west, and fly over most of Turkey, or turn east and try to overfly Kranjovia. This direct route's the safest. Besides,” she added with a glance at their pilot, “I suspect they'd rely on one of their best and sneakiest pilots to do this sort of thing.”

Their pilot had been keeping up a fairly constant chatter into his headset, his attention on his instruments.

Helen was watching him. “I'd give a nickel for a flash course in Ukrainian right now.”

She then noticed Mary grimacing as she carefully removed the Holmes folder from the depths of her blouse. “Oh, eww.”

“Yeah,” Mary agreed. “Somewhat a bit worse for wear. But still in one piece.” Reaching up to turn on an overhead light she opened the folder and began frowning over the contents. “Interesting that Dane Zito Skiron would just happen to have this sort of information printed in English.”

Helen opened her mouth.

“But, then again, he had time to make preparations while we were recuperating.”

Helen closed her mouth.

Mary continued reading through the folder. “A lot of this pretty much confirms what's already known about the missing gold, plus what we learned from Oleksiy.”

“Nothing new?”

“That's what I'm looking for. Seems to be substantial information on what Holmes was doing between the time he took on the assignment, and the moment of his death.” Mary's lower lip pushed out thoughtfully. “Um! Interesting.”

“Ah, over here, Mary.”

“Yes. Sorry. Remember that Holmes spent part of the time lecturing at some colleges?”

“Yeah.”

“Dane Zito Skiron provided a list. That might be useful. Oho!”

“What?”

“Holmes turned down an invitation to meet with Leonid Krasnin. That's never been mentioned elsewhere.”

“And Krasnin was ...”

“Unaccredited Soviet Union ambassador to Great Britain.”

“I thought England hadn't recognized the Soviet Union back then—oh! You said 'unaccredited'.”

Mary nodded, turning a page. “Apparently Krasnin had instructions from Moscow, and he was desperate to meet with Holmes.”

“So we can presume that, by then, Holmes already knew where he was going to hide the gold..”

“Would seem so. Anyway, he wasn't in a mood to meet Krasnin. According to this, the Russians sent agents to spy on Holmes, but they accomplished nothing.”

“Was the gold already hidden by then?”

“I ... don't know.”

Leaning back against her chair, Helen sighed. “Okay, so we're back at the first verse. Where is the gold?”

Turning her head, Mary gazed out the window at the scenery passing below.

“According to Oleksiy, Holmes had personally assured the Home Secretary that the gold would be guarded,” she eventually said.

“Could the gold be in Sussex?”

“I imagine that, by now, every inch of Sussex has already been worked over. And you're probably not the first person who's theorized that Holmes might've hidden the gold in his grave. That idea has probably been examined and is now as thoroughly buried as Holmes.” Mary gently leaned her face against a fist, still staring out the window.

Helen watched her. “You're trying to put yourself in Holmes' shoes.”

No response.

“Don't you think that better heads than yours have been doing the same thing all these years?”

“True,” Mary said to the window. “But there's something dangling in front of my mind. There's a detail I haven't been able to connect.”

“Yeah, but what puts you in a better position to solve this than anyone else?”

Mary turned a mildly surprised face to her. “I'm not saying you're an idiot,” Helen pointed out, perhaps a bit too quickly. “But we've been pitting ourselves up against ambassadors, Cossacks, government officials and even Kranjovians. Which reminds me.”

Mary waited.

“I've been thinking it over ever since we left Cizre. Dane Zito Skiron.”

“What about him?”

“Mary ... didn't it strike you as odd that the *one* Kranjovian we meet in this whole business just *happens* to be a Sherlock Holmes fan?”

“You're thinking that the Oligarchy set up this situation, and we're part of their plan to find the gold. Or maybe to get Oleksiy's sword.”

“You yourself pointed out how Dane Zito Skiron had enough time to put together that folder. He could've also arranged to have Holmes-related items put up in that meeting room. And let's not forget how incredibly easy it was to escape from his base. Yeah, so maybe Dane Zito Skiron arranged for us to escape because he claimed to be curious about where Holmes hid the gold ... and maybe he had orders from his superiors to let us escape.”

Mary was tight-lipped.

“You've got to admit my theory makes more sense.”

Mary turned her attention back to the scenery.

“I'm not saying you're wrong,” she said to the window. “But there're other things to consider.”

Helen conceded the point. “Such as ...”

“If this has all been a Kranjovian plot, then who was responsible for bringing us to Kharga?”

Helen blinked. “Oh! Yeah. That.”

“That',” Mary echoed with a nod. “It's not just a matter of the Cossacks and the Kranjovians. There's someone else in play, and I suspect that, whoever it is, he's right in the middle.”

“Okay,” Helen granted, “but why? What does this person want? The gold? Oleksiy's sword? Where's the benefit in doing all of this? What's the profit?”

Mary thought it over. “There's been a considerable effort made to follow the Cossacks,” she said. “And then we were identified, and an equal effort's been made to follow us. The Kranjovians. Whoever took us to Kharga.”

“I can't believe that, even with the reputation the kids have, the bad guys would think we're that important.”

“Not unless they felt we could be used as bargaining chips to force the boys into throwing in the full weight of support from Enterprises.” At Helen's look she went on. “Sit there and tell me that the boys and Sherman and everyone else aren't also researching the missing gold right now.”

“Um! True.”

Mary resumed leafing through the folder. “I would so love to know the exact words Holmes used when he assured the Home Secretary that the gold would be guarded.”

“It's not in there?”

Mary shook her head. “If it is, I haven't found it yet. But somewhere in all this hooraw there should be a transcript of the conversation, or conversations, that Holmes had with Shortt.”

“Yeah but, if there was a definite clue in whatever Holmes said, certainly it would've been uncovered by now.”

Helen could see that Mary was growing gloomier, which was a condition she would just have soon not wish on her friend under any circumstances. Something had to be done.

“How did Holmes die?” she suddenly asked.

Mary's expression seemed to experience a small brightening from the change of subject. “Ah, his housekeeper in Sussex ... also named Mary by the way ... found him in his bed. The official cause of death was simply 'old age'. Holmes was sixty-seven years old and, despite steady exercise, as well as a diet that included royal jelly, he just ... gave out.”

“Weren't there complications due to drug use? I know Holmes is a hero of yours,” Helen sped on, intercepting the look Mary was about to throw at her, “but c'mon.”

“True,” Mary reluctantly admitted. “He really had no excuse for that, but I guess I shouldn't be judgmental.”

Helen silently kicked herself for bringing up the issue of drugs. Mary's daughter, Sandy, had been an amphetamine addict for a few years. Curing her of the condition was a matter of love, but it also carried along some rough moments which no one wanted to dwell upon.

Time to try again, Helen considered. “Holmes faked his death once,” she began.

This time Mary actually smiled. “I don't think that was the case here. *This* time the authorities were able to make quite sure.”

“Yeah, but, didn't you tell me that Holmes left a will?”

Mary nodded.

“So did Holmes make out a new will after he took on the gold assignment—”

“—and leave a clue in it?” Mary finished. She shook her head. “Nice try, Helen. But a lot of people have beaten you to it, including Watson and Mycroft, and nothing was found. No,” she said, once again looking out the window. “The solution is in something else. Something basic. Something that we're suppose to notice. It all falls to abductive reasoning: the process Holmes used to arrive at answers. We need to consider all that we know and, from that, determine where the gold is.”

“Do we know everything?” Helen asked.

“A good question.” Another thoughtful frown grew onto Mary's face.

“Larry Perov was a metallurgist specializing in the processing of gold. As was his father and grandfather. Mineral processing and metallurgical engineering.” She looked at Helen. “What does that suggest?”

Helen matched Mary's frown. “Are you asking me if either Perov or his father knew how Holmes hid the gold?”

“Just throwing things around, seeing how they fall.”

Helen considered it. “Well, whoever carried out the murders in Donetsk certainly thought the Perov family was important enough to hunt down. And Oleksiy's Cossacks had tracked Larry Perov to America, In fact, Oleksiy told us that Perov knew a secret concerning the gold.”

“But we didn't see anything while going through his stuff. Although,” Mary considered half to herself, “I don't think he would've had such a secret just lying around. But I'd be willing to bet the boys and Sherman might've found it by now.”

“Well, I sort of agree with what Oleksiy told us back in Cairo: it's a bit too much of a coincidence that the Perovs were knowledgeable in the processing of gold.”

“I feel the same way.”

“Are you thinking that maybe Holmes somehow had the gold melted down? Somehow changed to make it easier to hide?”

“Tempting,” Mary murmured. “But it would be more like Holmes to keep the gold in its original form. Much less of a chance for the Russians to pitch a fit when they got the gold back.”

Or if, Helen thought, deciding to keep that notion to herself.

“I'm needing some extra information,” Mary decided. “I'm also needing to go over everything we've learned up to now. Something in my head tells me I've already seen something important—”

“What?”

“Well,” Mary said, gently rubbing her forehead, “first I still need to come down after a few days of hanging upside down, jumping out of an airplane, crossing a desert, being held by a Kranjovian, getting into a running chase with armed police ...”

“Um. Point taken.”

“It'll come to me. After all, we're enjoying a nice quiet flight ...” She paused at the expression on Helen's face. “Well, much nicer and quieter

than more recent flights.”

Helen smiled.

“Some rest and we'll be as right as houses. Oh, and Helen?”

“Hm?”

Mary took a slow breath. Released it. “When we get to wherever we're going, I'm calling the boys.”

“You giving up?” Helen softly asked.

Mary shook her head. “No. I just need a hug. Preferably from my husband.”

And the aircraft crossed the northern Turkish coast and was now flying over the Black Sea. Ukraine lay several hundred miles ahead.

Chapter Twenty: Kamainovgorod.

Almost two hours later the women were looking through the windows as the aircraft slowed to a hover above an airfield. To one side could be seen the buildings, roads and other items which made up a town nestled close against a range of wooded hills. It could've been any small town anywhere which featured the services of a small airstrip.

But, even though the sun was almost set, Mary and Helen could clearly see rows of trucks and aircraft painted in the shades of olive drab, tan and related camouflage seemingly universal to military forces the world over. Among them troops of men were rushing about in the sort of formations which didn't automatically suggest "ice cream social".

All concerns experienced something of a lessening when, after the plane had landed, the pilot shut off the engines and, looking back, gestured to the women. "*Sliduvaty*," he said kindly. "*Bud' laska*."

"Hopefully that doesn't mean do we have any last words," Helen remarked as she stepped out of the plane onto the landing pad.

Mary followed Helen, looking around and noting that there didn't seem to be a fence surrounding the area, although there were fenced-in enclosures visible here and there, and she tried to get a closer look ...

"MRS. SWIFT!"

Turning towards the shout, Mary found herself swept into a fierce hug courtesy of ... "Oleksiy!"

The Cossack leader lifted her off the ground, seemingly determined to crush her as he spun around.

"Oof! I'm glad to see you too, dear."

"As usual, no hugs for the sidekick," Helen remarked dryly.

"It's good to see you as well, Mrs. Newton," Levchenko said, putting Mary down. A pause, then he impulsively moved closer to give Helen a hug.

"Okay," Helen smiled. "Much better."

"I had been so worried," Levchenko told the women. "We searched everywhere, and I was on the verge of contacting your families and tell

them we'd ... lost you."

"Hold that thought," Helen suggested.

Mary laid a hand on Levchenko's arm. "We really need to talk, Oleksiy. There's a lot we have to tell ... *oooooh!* Horses!" Leaving Levchenko she made a beeline for the nearer of the enclosures.

"Thus interrupteth the discussion," Helen observed, watching her friend.

"Mrs. Swift!" Levchenko called after her. "Be careful. They're not used to strangers—"

He then felt another touch on his arm and looked to see Helen smiling and shaking her head. "They're purebred Russian Dons," Levchenko insisted.

"And she's Mary Swift," Helen replied. "Watch."

"Hel-*loooo* babies," Mary cooed, reaching the fence. "Oooh, yes," she continued to the nearest horse. "You're a pretty boy, aren't you? *Such* a pretty boy. Yes! And you're a very pretty girl," she said to an approaching mare. "Aren't you a sweetie? Yes you are. Yes you *are!*" To the amazement of Levchenko, as well as several of the Cossacks standing nearby, the enormous and well-formed animals were moving closer to the fence to be petted and fussed over by the petite woman.

"*Neymovirnyy*," Levchenko breathed.

"How long have you been riding?" Helen asked him.

"Ahh ... all my life."

"Well, I suspect Mary's got about twenty years on you in the saddle thereabouts. Sometimes I think she would've gotten married sooner if Tom had learned to walk on his arms and legs, and developed a taste for oats."

Mary was now having her cheek nuzzled by one of the mares.

"Oh yes," she said softly. "Oh yes, sweetie. I love you with all the love. Yes I do!"

"Well," Helen said, looking around, "in an attempt to keep the conversation going, exactly where are we?"

"Kamainovgorod," Levchenko replied. "Ancestral home of our tribe. About forty one kilometers north of the Black Sea, and eighty three kilometers south of the Dneiper."

Which would be helpful, Helen thought, if I had a map. Oh, well ...

“Eight hundred and fifteen people.” Levchenko shrugged. “We’re small.”

“Try visiting Shopton someday,” Helen told him. “Even with Swift Enterprises and the Swift Construction Company, we’re not that much larger. Ah! I lose a bet with myself.”

“Pardon?”

Helen nodded to where a smiling Mary was walking back to them.

“She didn’t come accompanied by at least half your herd. Hi, Mary. We’re in Kaimanovgorod: Cossack Capitol of Ukraine.”

“Actually—,” Levchenko began.

“That was a joke, Oleksiy.”

“Oh.”

“You have some beauties, Oleksiy,” Mary was saying happily. “I want to hear all about the care and feeding, what sort of saddles you use ... and I guess I’d better get back on track here, if the look on Helen’s face is any indication.” The glow of her smile dimmed. “You said you were about to contact our husbands. We’d been gone for days. What kept you from making contact earlier?”

“We were scattered after the attack at Al Masid,” Levchenko explained apologetically. “It took over a day for us to regroup at Quseer, keeping up a combination running and diversionary battle with our pursuers. After we acquired an aircraft—”

Acquired, Helen’s mind echoed.

“We spent time searching for the both of you. Also listening for news.” A shrug. “We arrived here a half hour before you. I decided that we could coordinate search efforts better from here and, if nothing was found, I’d make contact with Mr. Swift and Mr. Newton. Then we heard our pilot had made a pick-up in Cizre, and that it was the two of you, but I didn’t hope until you appeared.”

“We ended up in Kharga,” Mary explained.

Levchenko frowned. “Kharga?”

“My God,” Helen exclaimed. “You mean you *don’t* have all of Egypt memorized?”

“It was way over on the other side of the Nile,” Mary continued.

Levchenko's frown deepened. “We should get comfortable somewhere and talk. There's quite a bit of ground to cover ... are you all right, Mrs. Newton?”

“Just swallowed wrong,” Helen apologized. She and Mary followed Levchenko away from the landing pad, walking towards the nearest of a line of low wooden buildings. The building was topped with an arrangement of antennas and satellite dishes spelling out the apparent importance of their destination.

As they walked, Helen noticed how the Cossacks they passed pressed fists to their foreheads in salute, the gestures returned by Levchenko.

Entering the building, the women found themselves in a setting which was half comfortable den, half military situation room. Maps covered walls and tables while men sat before computers, communication equipment and radar scopes. These shared space with couches, reclining chairs, bookshelves and a fireplace.

Oleksiy had paused to exchange words with some of the technicians sitting at the consoles when a female voice cried out: “*Dorohyy!*” He turned in time to meet the impact of a slender dark-haired girl who immediately wrapped her arms around his neck, offering him a glowing smile.

The girl then noticed Mary and Helen and dimpled, suddenly seeming shy. “Oh! *Chort zabirai. Laskavo prosimo.*”

“*Ne khviliutesia,*” Levchenko gently assured the girl, his arms slipping around her waist as he gave her a fond look. “*Vy najkrash'a zhinka u sviti. Tse Mary Swift i Helen Newton.*”

“Oh!” The girl's eyes widened at the women. Releasing herself from Levchenko she went into a deep curtsy. “*Polkovnyk Swift, i Pidpolkovnyk Newton!*”

“Huh,” Helen said. “I'm a different *polkovnyk* than you, Mary.”

“Ahem,” Mary said to Levchenko, then indicating the girl with a nod.

“Ah, this is Ionna,” Levchenko replied, something of a faint blush appearing on his face. He lightly poked at the girl's shoulder, indicating that she should rise. She did so, standing close to him.

“And how are you, dear?” Mary asked, smiling.

Ionna blinked at Levchenko who, indicating Mary, softly said: “*Tak te pozhivacsh?*”

“Ah!” The girl beamed at Mary. “*U mene vse garazd, diakuiu.*”

“I take it, Ionna doesn't—”

“Only a few words,” Levchenko said to Mary. “She ... hasn't traveled as much. *Moye serce bye tilky bia Tebe,*” he continued in a tender murmur to the girl, touching her face. “*Pobachimos.*” For a moment it seemed as if the two of them were about to kiss, but they then remembered that they had an audience and, with a few more whispers, they parted; Ionna drifting away with many a soft yearning look at Levchenko.

“So-oooo,” Helen said, watching the girl's departure. “When's the big day?”

Levchenko's attention had been on the girl, but his mind finally registered the question and he turned back to Helen. “Pardon? Big day?”

“Oh, please,” Helen said tiredly. “Mary and I both have daughters who were recently married. Well, mine's more recently married anyway. Ionna's wearing the same sort of expression our girls had as the wedding date grew closer.”

Levchenko's face colored again. “Well,” he murmured, running a hand through his hair. “Well ... yes, it is true that Ionna and I are engaged.”

Helen crossed her arms. “Uh huh. So why the stall?”

“I'm ... waiting until after the gold is located,” Levchenko said lamely.

Helen nodded acceptance, but Mary could hear her going *bock-a-bock-a-bock* under her breath. “She seems a very sweet girl,” Mary said to Levchenko.

“Oh she is,” Levchenko quickly replied. “She works the weather office at the base, having taken correspondence courses in meteorology from Dnipropetrovsk National University.”

“Oh I can't *wait* to hear how you two crazy kids met,” Helen said with a smirk.

“Later,” Mary said, still smiling. “We do have a lot to discuss.” Gradually growing more serious, she began explaining to Levchenko the adventures she and Helen had been through, the three of them wandering over to a nearby map-encrusted wall which Mary used to point out the course she and Helen had taken. For his part Levchenko listened, nodding

and asking an occasional question.

When Mary had completed her story, he let out a slow breath. “Kranjovia.”

“It's confusing,” Mary admitted. “All the things we would usually expect from being prisoners of the Kranjovians, but we never thought we'd just be set free.”

Levchenko was regarding the women with hooded eyes. “Are you certain you were set free? You are both resourceful.”

Helen snorted. “We're good, but we're not that good.”

Mary was shaking her head. “No, Oleksiy. Dane Zito Skiron let us go on his own volition, or he released us on orders from the Inner Hive in Navsegda Adin. Either way, we were meant to leave the Kranjovian base and make it look as if we cleverly escaped.”

“But why the deception?” Levchenko asked. “Why would it be important to the Kranjovians to make it look as if you and Mrs. Newton escaped?”

“I could understand if it had been just Dane Zito Skiron,” Mary said. “He was, after all, another person with a keen interest in Holmes. But because I can feel my best friend frowning at me, I'll provide a reason why the Inner Hive could have also arranged it. There's still the matter of our mysterious other party.”

Helen's eyes widened. “Ohhhh ...”

“Other party?” Levchenko asked.

“The people who locked Helen and I up in Kharga,” Mary replied. “The people who were responsible for the attack at Al Masid and, I suspect, the killings at Donetsk.”

“You don't suspect the Kranjovians?”

Mary was gazing at the maps on the wall, not entirely seeing them. “The Kranjovians aren't weaklings,” she said. “If they wanted your sword, Oleksiy, then they just could've come in at any time and grabbed it.”

Helen noticed how Levchenko's hand immediately went to the hilt of the *Zirka Rishhenya* which was hanging from a belt at his waist.

“If they were after the missing gold, they could ...” and Mary's voice faded. A few moments, and then she once more shook her head. “And I can't figure out why the Kranjovians would want it. Even Dane Zito

Skiron's more interested in simply solving the mystery, rather than possessing the gold. You're right, Helen. I can't figure out the motive or profit. But when I do I suspect I'll learn quite a bit. I'm thinking the Kranjovians let us go to provide a show for whoever grabbed us and took us to Kharga."

"If they did that," Helen pointed out, "then they'd know who grabbed us. Why didn't Dane Zito Skiron tell us?"

"I ... don't know. But here," Mary said, handing over to Levchenko the folder which Dane Zito Skiron had given her. "Here're all the notes the Kranjovians have collected on the missing gold."

Levchenko eagerly accepted the folder, opening it. "Ah!"

"And I remember something I wanted to ask you. Can you access your Holmes files here?"

"Mary, we were going to make a phone call," Helen pointedly said.

"I know, I know. But this won't take long. I just want to find out what it was Holmes said to Edward Shortt when he promised he'd hide the gold."

Nodding (and still studying the contents of the folder), Levchenko led the women to where several unoccupied computer terminals waited. "You're looking for a transcript of what Holmes and Shortt discussed?"

Mary nodded, watching as Levchenko caused information to appear on the terminal screen. "That should be ... *tak!* Here!" Moving away he let Mary study the screen closely, and she did so, scrolling back and forth.

A few minutes later she sighed, straightening up. "Peas and carrots!"

"That doesn't sound good," Helen remarked.

"Holmes' exact words," Mary announced, "and I quote: 'I will keep the gold very close to me'."

The gold *is* in his grave," Helen breathed.

Mary shook her head. "No, it's not. Holmes would never have made it that easy." Hands on hips she exhaled hard. "It's obviously a direction, but not the one everyone would automatically think it is." Her brow furrowed. "What, what, what ..."

Reaching over, Helen lightly tapped Levchenko on the shoulder. "Ah, we were going to get in touch with our husbands," she said.

Levchenko nodded. "I understand. We can contact them from here."

Mary found her attention drifting over to the *Zirka Risshenya*, and it was on the tip of her tongue to ask Levchenko if she could have a closer look at it. But a technician had come up and was murmuring to a frowning Levchenko.

“Interesting,” the Cossack leader said to the women. “We’re picking up a strange transmission.”

“Oh? From where?”

“From somewhere on this base.”

Mary frowned. “But how—”

Her question, whatever it was going to be, was suddenly interrupted by a series of loud WHUMPS which seemed to come from all directions outside. These were accompanied by the shaking of the ground, and the rising sound of a siren.

“*Shcho?*” Levchenko cried out. Then: “We’re under attack.”

Chapter Twenty-One: Attack from Within.

It came as something of a small surprise to Helen that, instead of panicking, her immediate reaction was to think: *What the heck is it NOW?*

“We've got to get outside,” Levchenko instructed the women.

“But that's where the explosions are,” Helen pointed out. “Is that smart?”

All of a sudden the lights went out.

“Outside's a good idea,” Helen declared, aiming for the direction of the door, joining Mary, Levchenko and the technicians who were already leaving. Not only had the lights gone out, but the computers and radar scopes were dark, and the siren was no longer being heard.

There was much more noise and activity outside, with squads of armed Cossacks rushing about. Some were carrying portable lights, and Mary noted how many of them were wearing what appeared to be night-vision goggles. She also heard the nearby roar of various aircraft and saw several helicopters (as well as the Whirling Duck she and Helen had arrived in) rising into the air to hover above the encampment.

One of the Cossacks rushed over to Levchenko, quickly saluting and delivering a stream of Ukrainian.

“Bombs have been set off inside the compound,” Levchenko quickly translated for the women, his voice tight. “The main generator was among the targets.”

“Don't you have a backup generator?” Mary asked.

“Also targeted,” Levchenko snarled. Accepting a field phone from the officer, Levchenko began barking orders into it, then delivered another string of instructions to the officer who, throwing off another salute, ran off.

“*Choho?*” he muttered to himself, looking around. “Why now?”

Watching him, Mary suspected that his mind was more on the condition of a certain girl than it was on the attack. “Is the weather office okay?” she asked.

Levchenko nodded. "Should be. And there's a shelter nearby."

His stance was telling Mary that he was in a sudden mood to find out personally. "Maybe we should all go there if it's safe—"

"*Dia'kuyu*, Mrs. Swift. But I have ... things to do." His hand was tightly gripping the hilt of his sword.

"Then Helen and me will go. Point the way."

Levchenko shot her a look of gratitude. He then called out to a group of armed men who were running past. "Mykhaylo ... Bohdan ... *Vzyaty Polkovnyk Swift i Pidpolkovnyk Newton mene Bezpeku Shist. Pospishaty!*"

The two men saluted, indicating that Mary and Helen should follow. The women did so, Mary glancing back to see Levchenko rushing to join a group of men, catching a pair of night-vision goggles which one of them tossed.

Flanked by their escort, the women were guided towards a concrete bunker which was standing near a building sporting a mast festooned with all types of meteorological equipment. Four men were standing on the roof of the bunker; each of them holding a tube-shaped device that Mary recognized as a hand held rocket launcher.

Inside, several men and women were milling about in the glow of a portable light. Among them was Ionna who immediately rushed over, accompanied by a questioning flow of Ukrainian, the content of which Mary suspected she understood even though she didn't know the language. Before she could try to formulate an answer, though, one of the men who had accompanied her and Helen to the bunker rapidly spoke to the girl, who seemed to deflate in relief.

Mary turned to him. "Do you speak English?"

The man came to attention. "*Tak, Polkovnyk Swift. I am Leytenant Bohdan Herzi ... Sluzhba Bezpeky Kaimanove. Kaimanove Special Forces.*"

Cossack Green Berets, Helen thought. Why am I surprised?

"*And you told Ionna that Oleksiy is all right?*"

"*Tak, although he is ... occupied.*"

"Well, that's something." Mary looked around. "Is there a radio here? Or a radio telephone or something? I'd like to contact our husbands."

Helen silently praised God.

Herzi thought it over. “Come with me, *Polkovnyk* Swift.” He began threading his way through the crowd, Mary and Helen (and Ionna) following.

Helen plucked at Herzi's sleeve. “Excuse me, but I've really got to know. What does '*polkovnyk*' mean? It's been driving me crazy.”

“Ah ... you would say 'Colonel'.”

The women almost paused in surprise.

“Then I take it '*pidpolkovnyk*' is ...”

“Lieutenant Colonel.”

Helen silently mouthed a few words which she felt Mary didn't need to hear.

The group reached a far wall where a battery-powered lamp sat on a table next to a satellite radio the size of a briefcase. It was being operated by a woman who, as Herzi spoke to her, shook her head, giving several short replies.

Herzi frowned. “All outgoing transmissions are being jammed,” he said to the women. “Our frequencies no longer seem to operate.”

Helen noticed the look on Mary's face. “You're not surprised.”

“Why should I be,” Mary replied. “Someone managed to set off bombs here without Oleksiy or anyone else being the wiser. It'd be obvious that such a move would include jamming the radios.” She sighed. “Go ahead and say it.”

“Say what?”

“Say that I was a complete idiot for switching off our tracking chips.”

“Spilled milk, Mary.”

“Most of all,” Herzi said to the women, “we're concerned that the attack was designed to blind our radar defenses. We use a phased-array system which should be difficult to jam, but we're not receiving information. Whoever planned this is very sophisticated.”

Mary and Helen looked at each other, with Mary mouthing the word *Kranjovians*. “But I agree with Oleksiy,” she continued audibly. “Why now? Has Kaimanovgorod been attacked before?”

His eyes still on the radio and its operator, Herzi shook his head.

“Never. We've sent out occasional missions and raids, but nothing's ever come back here.”

Mary was about to ask another question when Herzi suddenly raised a hand, seemingly listening to something. And then Mary heard it as well: a slowly rising drone of numerous engines.

Rushing back to the door, Herzi opened it to peer out.

“*Hivno!*” he snarled.

Mary had followed and, looking over Herzi's shoulder, saw what he had spotted: a large group of helicopters approaching the base; the aircraft caught in the lights being shone from both ground-based searchlights as well as beams sent from the base's protective screen of helicopters.

As she turned to Helen, Mary was perhaps the one person who spotted the movement of a man who suddenly threw something to the floor. Whatever it was began producing a thick cloud of smoke which rapidly rose to fill the room.

Choking, Mary tried to reach out for Helen while, at the same time, attempting to dodge the rush of people being driven out of the bunker by the smoke. But a figure was moving out of the cloud towards her.

Not Helen but, rather, the man who had thrown the smoke bomb. He was aiming a pistol at her which suddenly coughed.

And Mary felt a sharp prick in her shoulder.

Not again, she moaned as she lost consciousness.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Real Estate.

When Mary awoke she actually found herself assessing her latest experience. This made ... *four?* ... times she'd been unconscious since this entire affair begun, and it was becoming monotonously wearing on her nerves. It also didn't help that she was feeling nauseous from whatever she'd been dosed with. That and she had the sensation of being rocked back and forth.

No ... actually she was being prodded by Helen. "Okay," she said, forcing her eyes open. "I'm awake." Groaning she tried to sit up, almost failing to do so as her stomach started twisting.

Helen was squatting next to her, looking a touch green herself. Turning her head, Mary discovered they were in what looked like someone's bedroom. And not a very furnished one at that. A bed which was little more than a mattress, a bare table, a folding chair and a window. There were two doors on opposite sides of the room, with one being open just enough to reveal a small bathroom beyond. Not quite a cell, then, but certainly not anyplace Mary would consider as homey.

She and Helen were on the bare floor, and Mary pressed a hand to her head. "Ow!"

"Yeah," Helen said. "My skull's splitting as well."

"Helen—"

"I woke up only a few minutes ago."

Groggily helping each other to their feet, they first half-walked/half-stumbled to the closed door, finding it locked. They then went to the bed, climbing onto it to get a better look out the window. Nothing of particular interest was visible except for a tall pair of utility lights illuminating some sort of construction work going on outside. Or at least that was the impression given by the sight of ladders, piles of lumber and the slightly raised wooden platform standing in what seemed to be a walled courtyard.

"I know we're both getting tired of this question," Mary mumbled, "but where are we *this* time?"

"I'm getting tired of it, too," Helen replied. "Lord, I can't figure out how the kids put up with this all these years."

“Well ... to be fair, I don't think neither the kids or the boys really wanted to end up in the messes they fell into.”

“True.”

Unsteadily stepping off the bed, Mary managed her way into the bathroom, reaching for the sink and turning on the water which she began splashing on herself, trying to ignore the sensation of wanting to kneel down by the toilet and let nature (and her stomach) take its course. Helen was close behind, and Mary made room for her at the sink, straightening up to open the medicine cabinet, finding nothing more than soap and a tube of toothpaste. Nothing which immediately screamed “Useful” to her.

“Feeling better?” she asked Helen.

Helen shook her head. “Well, maybe a bit. But what happened? Are we still in Kaimanovgorod?”

“I somehow doubt it,” and Mary explained what she saw back at the bunker. “I'm willing to bet we were carried off in one of the helicopters that arrived at the base ... wait!”

There was a rattling at the other door, and it now opened to admit a tall and trim blonde-haired man dressed in a long-sleeved gray shirt with matching trousers. His whiplike build and lean face was set off by eyes which were green and gentle, and neither woman believed them for an instant. Especially because two men dressed in similar outfits had accompanied him and were now standing outside the room on either side of the door, both holding rifles at the ready.

“Good,” he said in accented English, closing the door behind him. “The both of you are awake.”

“Is it good?” Helen muttered.

Mary slowly left the bathroom. “And you are ... “

At first it seemed that the man wasn't going to answer. But then he appeared to reach a private decision. “I am Petruso Seletsky.”

“Let me guess,” Mary sighed. “It's about the gold.”

Seletsky nodded. “Quite correct, Mrs. Swift. And I ... apologize for the accommodations. Ever since our tracking system traced you to Kaimanovgorod, we've had to move quickly to acquire both you and Mrs. Newton. It became necessary to improvise, the two of you being kept in this spare officer's room. But I wouldn't worry. Neither of you will be here for very long.”

Somehow Mary couldn't work up the wherewithal to think *goody*. "Well we may as well get it over with," she said tiredly, moving to sit on the edge of the bed. "What's your part in all of this, and why are we here?"

"An excellent choice of words," Seletsky considered. "We shall indeed 'get it over with'. I personally congratulate both you and Mrs. Newton for having slipped through our hands in Kharga, as well as managing to escape the Kranjovians—"

A penny suddenly dropped inside Mary's head. "Tracking system'. You mean *we* were sending out the signals from Kaimanovgorod?"

Seletsky nodded. "Very good. You and Mrs. Newton deserve your reputations. After Kharga I looked for an opportunity to keep closer tabs on your whereabouts, and have only recently been able to take advantage of our efforts."

Helen had been moving to sit beside Mary, but she froze and glared hotly at the man. "You were responsible for having us strung up in Kharga."

Another nod from Seletsky.

"I'd kick you in a very bad place if I could walk better." She sat down next to Mary.

"I won't insult either of you by sounding contrite," Seletsky said. "We are all involved in a very serious business, and there's much I need from the both of you."

Mary felt her hands clenching into fists. "Listen! Helen and I do ... not ... *know* where the missing gold is."

"Neither do the Kaimanove, the Ukrainian government, the Russian government, the British government or anyone else who's been studying the problem all these years," Seletsky replied. "However, with Perov dead, you and Mrs. Newton are the last remaining hope I have for locating the gold."

Something was tickling Mary's consciousness and, to her amazement, she realized it was curiosity. "Perov was a metallurgist," she said. "Yes, it's true that Helen and I were looking over his papers, but there was nothing about the gold."

Seletsky considered the remark. "But Perov was descended from Yefim Arzamatzev," he pointed out. "Regardless of what the two of you believe ... or anyone else for that matter ... I am satisfied that Arzamatzev knew

something about the treasure, and he passed this information on to his descendants.”

“Huh! Are you sure?”

“*Mary*,” Helen hissed. “Why are we even talking with this goon?”

Seletsky turned his blue eyes to her. “Mrs. Swift, you might want to convince your friend that a positive exchange of information could be very useful. Especially in view of your personal circumstances.”

“Which means you're gonna string us up from the ceiling again?”

Mary laid a hand on Helen's knee, turning her attention back to Seletsky. “Let's back up a bit,” she said. “We understand why Oleksiy and the Kaimanove are interested in the gold. But what's your interest in it?”

“That is of no concern to you.”

“You might want to reconsider that.”

“And you might want to consider being more cooperative,” Seletsky said, stepping closer. “Neither of you are in a position where stubbornness would be advantageous. Remember Kharga.”

“You were the one behind the attack at Al Masid.”

Seletsky didn't answer.

A slow breath left Mary. “And you were responsible for the massacre in Donetsk.”

“How else could I be certain that Arzamatsev possessed useful information?” Seletsky smoothly answered. “I didn't order the deaths of all those people simply out of spite.”

Mary snarled a word which made Helen stare at her in wide-eyed amazement. Omigod! Mary actually said a cuss word. It's official. The Apocalypse is finally here.

“You murdered those people,” Mary declared.

“And I also successfully infiltrated Kaimanovgorod, and have had agents in place carrying out a variety of assignments,” Seletsky shot back. He sighed irritably. “Do you want me to protest, Mrs. Swift? Would you like me to claim some sort of sainthood? This hunt for the gold has been going on for a century, and I am only the latest link in the chain of those among who've been trying to find the answer. When I find the treasure, then all Ukraine will revere my name.” He took a step closer, towering over the women. “Now. Once again. Tell me about Perov's notes.”

Mary made a suggestion which Helen considered would've been physically impossible for Seletsky to carry out, even given the apparent vigor of the man. *Someone's about to get seriously backhanded*, she thought.

But Seletsky simply stood there, glowering. "You have been treated with reason," he slowly said in a low voice. "You've been shown generosity. You've even received what I would have believed impossible: hospitality at the hands of the Kranjovians. I, on the other hand, have a tendency towards less pleasant forms of persuasion."

"Whatever you may think Perov had, neither he or his family had contact with Holmes," Mary pointed out to him as calmly as possible, "and only Holmes knew where the gold was hidden." At the growing storm on Seletsky's face she continued a bit more rapidly. "Perov's papers were, for the most part, work related. Technical documents dealing with the research he carried out while at Swift Enterprises."

It looked as if Seletsky was on the verge of producing another threat, but then his attention snapped sharply at a piece of Mary's comment. "You said 'for the most part', Mrs. Swift. What else was there?"

Me and my big mouth. Mary frowned, trying to remember, quietly damning the muddled state of her mind. "Nothing really special. Just a few pages dealing with real estate."

Seletsky leaned closer, his expression intense. "Real estate?"

Mary nodded. "He must've been wanting to buy something because all he had was the house in Shopton—"

"*What* did the papers say?"

Mary drew back. "I didn't read too closely," she insisted. "I was mainly focusing on sorting the technical documents for Enterprises ..." And her voice faded as Seletsky suddenly began pacing back and forth across the room, his brow furrowed as he muttered to himself in Ukrainian. Mary took advantage of the opportunity to try and think back to when she and Helen were in Perov's home ... *God, was that only a few days ago?*

Why is Seletsky so interested in real estate? her mind was screaming. There's no relationship between whatever that means and the missing gold. And only Holmes knew where he hid the gold. Neither Arzamatshev or the Perovs knew ...

I'm really missing something important here. I just know it.

She decided to try again with Seletsky. "Why is the gold so important to you?"

He paused in his pacing, shooting her a look, his mouth opening. "I know you feel it's no concern of ours," Mary quickly went on. "But you're searching for an answer. You won't get it by keeping us in the dark."

At first Seletsky seemed ready to argue the point. But then he spoke, his voice more even than it had been. "The gold is more than just money, Mrs. Swift. The hidden gold represents power. Genuine power. Power which you can't possibly understand. That *duren* Levchenko probably knows it, and that's why he and his damned tribe have also been hunting for it."

"The Kaimanove are trying to clear themselves of the charge that they were responsible for the gold being missing in the first place," Mary said.

Seletsky barked out a laugh. "And you *believe* that? You're an even bigger fool than Levchenko. He doesn't truly appreciate what finding the gold means. If he found it he'd squander the treasure throughout the entire Ukraine."

"And you can make better use of it?"

"Let us say I understand the maximum use which could be made of it." Once again Seletsky moved closer to the women. "Now. What happened to Perov's papers?"

"Right now they're probably in the hands of the security people at Swift Enterprises. If you let us contact our families—"

But Seletsky was walking to the door, opening it and murmuring to the guards outside. Closing the door once again he stood there, quietly staring at it.

"I am sorry for this," he finally said to the door. "Or perhaps not. After all, examples have to be made. There are people who need to be convinced how serious my intentions are. And who knows? I might even benefit. A move such as this would be welcomed in certain quarters."

Mary looked at Helen, then back to Seletsky. "I don't understand—"

"You will," Seletsky said, turning to her. "Both you and Mrs. Newton. Unfortunately. If Perov's papers are indeed with Enterprises security, then I see no further sense in dealing with either of you."

"What do you mean?"

In answer, Seletsky glanced over them. In the direction of the window. Curious, both Mary and Helen climbed back up onto the bed to peer out. They saw two men working on the wooden platform, throwing ropes over the crossbeam.

Each of the two ropes ended in a noose.

“Tomorrow at dawn,” Seletsky announced, “both of you will hang.”

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Measles Gambit.

Matters proceeded to move rapidly, with Seletsky abruptly turning and leaving the room, the door being closed and firmly locked behind him. A few minutes of wild pounding on the door, accompanied by a great deal of yelling, produced nothing in the way of results for either Mary or Helen. Equally fruitless was the attempt to open the window; both women discovering that not only was the window firmly secured in the shut position, but that the glass was quite unbreakable.

With all immediate options a failure, Mary and Helen had little in the way of keeping despair at arms length. Helen flopped down to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, while Mary unconsciously slid lower, settling on the floor. Neither woman spoke, the both of them engaged in nothing more than breathing and staring ahead at absolutely nothing.

In Mary's case, her silence hid the rapid drumbeat of her thoughts. We're not going to die. We're not going to hang. I won't accept it. I won't allow it. We've made it this far, and that's too far to end up hung in some Ukrainian backwater ...

"We're gonna die," Helen murmured.

"No!" Mary shouted, getting to her feet. "Get that out of your mind, Helen, and get it out right now. You and I are *not* going to die."

Helen's eyes squeezed shut, her lips a thin line on her face. "It may have escaped your notice," she slowly said in a tight voice, "but the both of us are currently locked in a room, and they're getting a gallows ready outside."

"Helen—"

"And don't go playing heroic with me, Mary. I know you're just as scared as I am."

Mary's mouth was opening for an argument, but Helen looked up at her with open eyes, and Mary found herself swallowing further dispute. "Yeah," she finally admitted in a low voice. "I am."

Nodding, Helen once more closed her eyes, her lips now silently moving.

Mary noticed it. "Praying?"

“Mhmm.” A pause. “Asking God to forgive me my sins.”

Mary snorted. “What sins?”

“That should be my line for you.” Helen gulped a bit. “I ... I really wouldn't mind it so much ... no. That's not the truth, and I shouldn't lie while talking to God. But Ned's gonna feel so lost without me. And I wish I could've lived long enough to see Phyllis and Tom's baby. Or babies.”

Mary shook her head, not so much out of disagreement over their situation, but making an attempt to keep the fear at bay. Turning away from Helen she also decided not to look back out the window. She knew seeing the gallows would only make things worse.

“Tomorrow at dawn, both of you will hang.”

Mary wondered how far away dawn was? Seletsky had said “tomorrow”, but the sun had already set by the time Kaimanovgorod was attacked. If this was the same night, then how many hours did they have left?

Wrapping her arms firmly around herself she tried to squeeze away the knowledge that a noose was waiting for her. And that wasn't the only horror. Mary knew she wasn't perhaps as “sophisticated” as Helen, but she was an avid bookworm. As such she knew that the gallows outside wasn't designed to break the neck cleanly. She and Helen would slowly and painfully strangle to death.

She was feeling a sick coldness and she hugged herself tighter. “No!”

“Mary?”

“This is insane,” Mary said, turning to Helen. “This guy ... this 'Petrucco Seletsky' just comes out of nowhere, asks us some questions and then leaves, telling us we'll hang. It doesn't make sense.”

Helen was gaping at her. “You want it to make *sense*? Mary, we're gonna *hang*!”

“*Why*?” Mary cried back. “What's the point of it?” At Helen's growing amazement she raised a quieting palm. “Okay. I know. But work with me a bit. Why go to the point of taking us alive, only to kill us later?”

“We're useless to Seletsky. He wanted us to help with finding the gold and we couldn't.”

“Then why ...” Mary stared off into space, her mind working on an answer. “Why wait until dawn to hang us? What does Seletsky gain? And

yes, Helen, I'm babbling. I'm sorry."

"I'm not blaming you," Helen said, knowing she was on the verge of tears and wondering why she was fighting it. "I ... I just ... if they don't hang us together, then I hope I go first."

"Helen!"

"I don't want to see it happening," Helen gulped out. "I don't want to watch you die. I want them to ... to blindfold me here, then take me out and just do it."

So Helen had also guessed the way they'd hang. "Oh, Helen—"

"I don't want it to happen, Mary."

"It's not going to happen," Mary said in what she hoped was a reassuring tone of voice, suspecting she wasn't doing a good job of it. Her mind kept circling the problem, and she could see nothing to prevent her and Helen from being marched outside to have ropes placed around their necks.

No! Keep talking, Mary's mind firmly ordered. *Don't think about it.*

And a cold, clear notion managed to fight its way to the top. "Seletsky's waiting," she murmured half to herself.

"Huh?"

"That's the only answer. He could hang us anytime he wanted, but he decided to wait until dawn. The question is why. The answer is: he's waiting for an audience."

Helen was totally confused now, and Mary considered that to be an improvement over being scared and fatalistic. "Seletsky needed us alive because he thought we would know where the gold was," Mary went on. "If he's waiting for a particular time to kill us, then maybe it's because he expects someone to arrive and witness the hanging."

"Who?"

"That I don't know, but boy I wish I did." Mary's hands were on her hips, a set of fingers tapping against her waist as she once again stared off at nothing. "Whoever it is, he'll show up just before the hanging. We'll get a good look at him then."

"You *really* don't want that, Mary."

Mary sighed. "True. But who would it be? I know the boys and the kids have made enemies, but who did we cheese off?"

“It has something to do with the gold.”

Mary had already arrived at the same conclusion, and she was happy to see Helen's mind working on something else besides what the morning would bring. “Not necessarily Seletsky, then. But someone just as involved ... and you're right. I really don't want to be here long enough to find out. I may be curious, but I'm not crazy.”

Helen had her own opinion as to the last remark, but kept it to herself.

Mary stared around the room. “Think, think, think. How do we get out of here?”

“Alive.”

Mary nodded. “Yeah. Alive.” She quietly considered that Seletsky and his people probably wouldn't even bother with a decent burial. Just dump their dead bodies out somewhere.

DON'T think about it, she harshly reminded herself.

But it was difficult. She was struggling to keep from looking towards the window, but the thought of what was out there was securely wound around her brain. Her throat could already feel the rope suddenly tightening. “Oh!”

“Mary?”

“Go ahead and yell at me, Helen,” Mary said, turning towards the bathroom door. “I insisted on getting involved. I switched off our tracking devices. I got us into a whole lot of trouble and now, because of me, we're both going to die.”

“Mary, I could've left anytime I wanted—”

“And you should've.” Mary was slowly walking to the bathroom.

“I mean, yeah,” Helen said to Mary's back. “The whole thing was crazy and stupid. But you always stood by me, and I couldn't just ... I don't know ... leave you to do this on your own.”

Unbidden, a fragment of poetry swam up from Mary's memory. The last part of Kipling's “The Thousandth Man”. *But the Thousandth Man will stand by your side/To the gallows-foot, and after!*

And close behind this was a vision of her and Helen at the dawn, and Mary blinked away hot tears, retreating further into the bathroom and making a show out of turning on the water, hoping the sound would hide any noise she made.

No, she argued with herself. *This will NOT happen.*

Only, a smaller part of her mind added, *I don't know how to prevent it.*

Oh, God, I need Tom so bad.

With a sudden angry movement she yanked open the door to the medicine cabinet, in a mood to rip the door off and throw it hard at someone. Of course that would probably shatter the mirror, which meant seven years of bad luck ...

Mary almost laughed. *What seven years?*

And then she stopped, her ears no longer hearing the splashing water. Staring through the dimness into the medicine cabinet. "Helen!"

"Yeah?"

"We're not going to hang."

"Huh?"

Mary nodded at the open cabinet. "We're too sick to hang."

"Huh?"

"In fact, we're gonna get the measles. And stop saying 'huh'."

"What?"

* * * * *

He had been informed that the helicopter was a half-hour away, and so Seletsky concluded that there was little reason to delay matters much longer. Everything would have to be ready and, with a tired sigh, he left his quarters to go to where the women were kept, giving an order that the men should assemble in the courtyard.

As he walked he wondered, for the umpteenth time, if the women would cause a great deal of trouble when they were led out? He admitted that they had both been very clever. More so than he cared to dwell upon. Their escape from Kharga had been particularly (and personally) embarrassing.

But this was different. This time the women would be brought out under the care of sufficiently observant armed guards. Seletsky privately hoped both women would be resigned to their fate and allow things to happen quietly. He didn't need further difficulty.

Perhaps, he silently considered, if the women were brought out and noosed as quickly as possible ...

Giving the waiting gallows a quick look in passing, he reached the building where the women had been placed, entering it and nodding at the two guards, one of whom immediately unlocked the door. Stealing himself for the ordeal which was to come, Seletsky opened the door ...

And froze.

Both women were lying on the floor, their eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling. Their bodies were contorted into positions which indicated they had suffered some sort of extreme pain. Worst of all, an obscene cloud of white foam was dripping from both their mouths.

“*Vybliadok!*” he swore. How did the women get hold of poison? Had they been carrying it with them all this time?

Ordering one of the guards to go fetch the medical officer, he rushed into the room, accompanied by the other guard. Both men bent over the prone forms of the women ...

And Mary's foot quickly rose to strike Seletsky hard in a place where men didn't enjoy being struck. Next to her, Helen administered the same treatment to the guard. As both men instinctively bent over, groaning, the women rolled out of the way, moving to their feet.

“*C'mon,*” Mary shrieked, rushing to the open door while, at the same time, working to spit out the toothpaste she and Helen had used to create the foaming effect in their mouths.

Helen paused just long enough to kick the guard one more time, grabbing at the AK-47 he had held. “*Now I'm coming,*” she announced, hefting the rifle and also spitting.

From the start, both women knew the plan had been desperate. But Mary had reasoned, and Helen had eventually agreed, that it was better than simply waiting to be hanged. On the other hand, running out of the building into the slowly growing morning, and immediately facing several ranks of armed men standing near the gallows, admittedly did little to improve the overall situation.

For a few seconds the women and the men simply stared at each other.

Helen found herself raising the rifle. “A plan would *really* help right now, Mary.”

Tragically, as hard as her mind was slamming into overdrive, Mary

wasn't able to come up with anything that would stop several dozen rifles from being pointed at the two of them. Not to mention what would probably follow soon afterwards.

But then there was the roar of a motor, and everyone looked to where a fenced gate stood at one end of the walled enclosure. Specifically they were looking as a black and rather classic looking automobile smashed through the gate, racing into the enclosure.

Some of the armed men possessed the presence of mind to turn their rifles in the direction of the car. But it quickly swerved hard to the right, raising a thick cloud of dust. Mary and Helen were able to see a rather thick-barreled pistol emerging from the left-side window. Rather than being aimed at the women, however, the pistol was pointing at the crowd of men. The gun fired and, in another moment, the men were in the middle of a cloud of white gas.

The right-side door to the car opened and a man rose up into view.

“Mrs. Swift,” Dane Zito Skiron called out. “Mrs. Newton. Please! Get in.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: Return to Kaimanovgorod.

All things being equal, neither Mary or Helen were in a mood to argue and they hotfooted over to the car, reaching the passenger side, pulling the door open and squeezing in alongside the Kranjovian. Dane Zito Skiron barely waited for the women to get settled before his foot pushed the accelerator, swinging the steering wheel over hard, and the car turned to race out of the broken gate and on down a wide dirt road.

“Are the two of you all right?” Dane Zito Skiron asked. He took a second glance over at them. “Both you have white stuff on your mouths.”

“Toothpaste,” Helen said, turning her head to the open window and going *ptooey*, wiping at her mouth afterwards. “Part of our brilliant escape plan. The hardest part was lying still in the positions we were in.”

Dane Zito Skiron shook his head. “I must change my opinion of American women. Then again, I must remember that I'm dealing with Swifts.”

“And Newtons,” Helen added.

“And,” Mary broke in, “considering that we weren't really getting too far anyway, your arrival was rather timely. And I thank you.”

Dane Zito Skiron nodded. “Excuse me,” he said, dividing his attention between driving and reaching for a set of switches on the dashboard. “Radar and signal scrambling on ... thermal camouflage engaged ... decoy transmitters ejected.” He once again glanced at the women. “There's a helicopter in the area that I'd rather didn't see us. Not to mention the people we left behind back there.”

“Are we in Kranjovia?” Mary asked.

“Oh no,” Dane Zito Skiron assured her. “The place we just left is outside the village of Moroz. We're in Ukraine, just over fifty kilometers from Kaimanovgorod.”

Helen's jaw dropped open. “*Wait* a minute. You drove all the way from Kranjovia to Ukraine in this ... this ... what the heck is this car, anyway?”

“Oh, Helen, you've been in Tom's study plenty of times,” Mary said to her. “You've seen all his car pictures and models. This is a Hispano-Suiza ... J12, I think. A luxury sports car from the 1930s.

Dane Zito Skiron nodded. “Not quite originally restored, however,” he said. “It’s been ... I think the expression you Americans use is 'tricked out' ... with some necessary customized accessories, including, I might add, a Swift Enterprises Barton-XIX 1200 horsepower engine.”

“But Helen asked a legitimate question. If we’re near Kaimanovgorod, then you must’ve driven quite a bit. Your base in Syria’s got to be several thousand miles away.”

“One thousand nine hundred and sixty-two kilometers.”

“Just over one thousand two hundred and nineteen point one three miles,” Helen automatically calculated.

“Yeah, but either way—”

“I did not entirely drive all the way here,” Dane Zito Skiron explained. “When your tracking signals suddenly diverted from Kaimanovgorod, I had my car loaded into a robot suborbital rocket transport and launched myself here.”

So Kranjovians make use of rocket shuttles, Mary thought. Sherman’s so going to love knowing this.

But another thought suddenly pushed into her head. “Whoa, whoa, whoa ... you said something about tracking signals?”

Dane Zito Skiron looked a bit sheepish. “Yes, well ... now is where I should confess that the both of you were fitted with tracking devices while at my base.”

“But how ...” Mary began, and then became quiet as the answer fell into place. “The nanobots you injected us with.”

A nod. “I mentioned how the hydration assist nanobots were an invention of Sun Ohm Erato. Of course, along with everything else he invented—”

“He naturally included a way to keep tabs on things.” Mary groaned, closing her eyes.

“I do apologize, ladies.”

“Let’s ... keep the temptation to toss accusations around down to a minimum,” Mary said to him. “And keep in mind that Helen’s still got a rifle.”

“Yeah,” Helen agreed, “and with a pointy bayonet. I’d use it, too, except for two reasons. The first being that it’s not really considered smart to

bayonet the driver.”

“Right,” Mary agreed. She then looked at Helen. “What’s the other reason?”

“I’m really hungry, Mary. We haven’t eaten since Cairo.”

Mary realized that Helen was correct. “Lord, we’ve been running on adrenaline, knockout drugs and coffee for days. No wonder I feel dragged out. Ah-hhh, I don’t suppose you have Kranjovian snacks packed in here?” she asked Dane Zito Skiron.

“Or if there’s a Ukrainian version of an Exxon or a Sonic nearby?” Helen added. “I could really go for a double order of chicken with some onion rings.”

“The nanobots also provided the both of you will a full multivitamin dose,” Dane Zito Skiron explained.

“Yeah,” Helen said, “but I really need the four basic food groups. Fried chicken, potato chips, onion dip and Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups.”

Dane Zito Skiron shrugged. “Hopefully we can take care of everything when we reach Kaimanovgorod.”

“So we *are* going there?” Mary asked.

The Kranjovian gave her a questioning look. “You’re surprised?”

“Frankly, and especially after the last few days, I am. Don’t get me wrong, Helen and I are grateful to you. But it’s been reaching the point where we haven’t been able to take a step without being threatened or kidnapped—”

“Or both,” Helen broke in.

“—so you’ll excuse us if we tend to be more than usually on our guard.”

“I understand,” the man said. “I suppose, if I were in your situation, I’d feel the same way. It’s been a surprising time for me as well.”

“Well,” Mary slowly said to Dane Zito Skiron, “as long as we’re on the way back to Kaimanovgord—”

“And not getting fed,” Helen muttered.

“—perhaps we should start comparing notes.” She frowned as something occurred to her. “You said there was a helicopter you wanted to avoid.”

Dane Zito Skiron nodded. “Members of the Inner Hive who’re heading

for Seletsky's base.”

Things began rushing together in Mary's head. “So Kranjovia sent someone to witness our hanging,” she said dully.

“Mrs. Swift, I had no idea you and Mrs. Newton were about to be killed.”

“But you came here—”

“By rights, and as far as Navsegda Adin knows, I am still at my base in Quesirdib awaiting further orders,” Dane Zito Skiron said, nodding. “I ... am somewhat in dereliction of my duties.”

Mary gazed at the man. “I know enough about Kranjovia,” she said, “to understand that you're now in rather serious trouble.”

“The Inner Hive does take a rather dim view of disobeying orders,” Dane Zito Skiron admitted, his eyes on the road. “But it also allows occasional latitude for personal initiative. It's a rather difficult tightrope. Sun Ohm Erato, for instance, was given a fairly free hand as long as he produced results. It was only when his actions became ... erratic ... that he was banished from the Oligarchy.” A shrug. “Due in part to your daughter, he paid the price for his mistakes.”

Mary sat back in the seat. “Maybe you'd better start from the beginning.”

“As you might know, the Oligarchy makes use of outsiders if they appear to offer some sort of useful service.”

“Yeah,” Helen said. “It's like those old movie serials where the Martians or something arrive, and then hire local gangsters to help them take over the world.”

Mary gave her a look. “We'll get you a cheeseburger as soon as possible.”

“Ooooo ...”

“After you and Mrs. Newton ... ah ... escaped my base, I did some research on my own and found information about Petruso Seletsky. For some time now the Oligarchy had been supplying him with financial backing and equipment.”

“The stuff he used at Al Masid and, later on, at Kaimanovgorod.”

“Exactly.”

“But why ...” and then Mary let out a slow breath as her mind caught

up. “Oh! He's a Ukrainian, and you said the Oligarchy was interested in both Oleksiy's sword and the missing gold.”

“Even so,” Dane Zito Skiron agreed. “It seems Seletsky has been the Oligarchy's point man in that regard. He's not a Cossack but, rather, a part of the separatist movement within the Ukraine. A rather radical part. He felt that, if he helped us out, we would give him enough support to make his move against the Ukrainian government. A move which was fully supported by some within the Inner Hive.”

“That's why the Inner Hive decided to hide their intention to let us escape from you. They didn't want Seletsky to realize they were playing both sides of the field.” Mary's eyes narrowed. “But are you saying the Inner Hive really wanted Helen and I killed?”

“No! The Inner Hive occasionally makes rash decisions, as you well know. But you should also know that, due to our respective histories, the Oligarchy would never casually order the death of a member of the Swift Family.”

“Or the Newtons,” Helen chimed.

Dane Zito Skiron glanced at the women. “Both myself and the Inner Hive had been tracking your signals while the both of you traveled to Kaimanovgorod,” he said. “We were expecting you to arrive there and re-establish contact with Levchenko and his Cossacks. But, soon after your arrival, your signals suddenly diverted to Moroz. I received no instructions from Navsegda Adin and decided to research on my own, which is when I learned about Seletsky.

“Once again, I believe the Inner Hive had no intention to see either of you harmed. I suspect that the helicopter heading for Seletsky's base is carrying representatives intending to interview you directly concerning the missing gold. But the more I found out about Seletsky, the more concerned I became, and so I took matters into my own hands.” Another glance at the women. “He was actually planning on hanging the two of you?”

“You may have noticed the gallows,” Mary said.

Dane Zito Skiron shook his head. “Seletsky was operating on his own. He knew just enough about the Swifts ... and the Newtons ...”

Helen closed her mouth.

“... to where he realized that you were technically enemies of the Oligarchy.”

“Thank you for the 'technically',” Mary muttered.

“I suspect he felt that he would gain enormous favor by hanging the both of you; an action which, I'm certain we all realize, would've resulted in catastrophic consequences for the Oligarchy. I also suspect that it was his intention to keep any information concerning the gold strictly to himself.”

“He wanted leverage to use against the Oligarchy.”

“That's my belief.”

Mary sighed. “So what happens when your representatives arrives and learns that Helen and I are no longer there?”

“A good question,” Dane Zito Skiron replied. “There is another American expression: spin control. I suspect the Inner Hive will bend over backwards to reassure your families that they had no intention of harming either of you, along with the fact that the both of you managed to escape.”

“Oh!” Helen said.

Mary and Dane Zito Skiron looked at her. “That's why you brought this car with you,” Helen went on. “The Inner Hive would've put two and two together if you'd landed your rocket directly in Seletsky's base. I take it your bosses can't connect you with this car.”

“And the transport I used automatically destroyed itself after I drove away.” Dane Zito Skiron shrugged. “Standard operating procedure.”

“I think I know the answer,” Mary told him, “but I'll ask anyway. Why wouldn't you tell the Inner Hive your intentions?”

“Because, like you and Mrs. Newton, I'm not entirely certain of the situation. I *presume* the Inner Hive doesn't want you harmed. But, until I'm very sure of it, I intend to play my cards close to my chest.”

“What will the Inner Hive do about Seletsky?”

“Another good question. Once again I have only presumptions. But I suspect that, as with Sun Ohm Erato, Seletsky will have exhausted his usefulness.”

“Couldn't happen to a nicer fellow,” Helen growled.

Mary was once again studying Dane Zito Skiron's face. “So. You're personally delivering us back to Kaimanovgorod? To Oleksiy?”

A nod. “There are different agendas at work here, Mrs. Swift. Seletsky, the Inner Hive and myself all want to know where the missing gold is. But

Seletsky also wants to kill you.”

“He sure does by now,” Helen said.

“And I want to know the answer to this mystery,” Dane Zito Skiron went on. He briefly met Mary's eyes. “Well, Mrs. Swift?”

“Well' what?”

“Has your reunion with Levchenko, albeit brief, provided any new insight into the whereabouts of the gold?”

Mary had been in the process of opening her mouth, but she quickly closed it. While she realized that Dane Zito Skiron had personally put himself at risk by rescuing both Helen and herself, she was replaying the Kranjovian's comment about how there were different agendas at work. An apt turn of phrase, seeing as how she and Helen had been stepping into a lot of them since being taken from Shopton.

She felt she needed one or two more items of information concerning the gold and, as helpful as Dane Zito Skiron had been, Mary believed that, for the time being, she should copy Seletsky's action and play the cards she held close to her chest. Very closely.

“We'll see when we get to Kaimanovgorod,” she told him.

Silence in the car for a few moments.

“Wow,” said Helen. “All this time and I just now realized I've been carrying this rifle with the safety off.”

Chapter Twenty-Five: *Polkovnyk* Swift.

The sun was rising above the trees by the time Kaimanovgorod came into view; and Mary, Helen and Dane Zito Skiron could clearly see the Cossack encampment ahead.

Mary's mouth formed an O.

“Merciful God,” Helen whispered.

Apparently the attack had produced more damage than the destruction of the main generator. Many of the buildings were wrecked and, even though no fires could be seen, a thick cloud of smoke hung over the base. Demolished vehicles were everywhere, and several of the fenced enclosures had also been broken (Mary noticing that several Cossacks were busy rounding up the horses).

“Gentle Jesus,” moaned Helen.

The approach of the car had been noticed, and a troop of armed Cossacks were already moving to intercept it.

“Go park over there,” Mary told Dane Zito Skiron, pointing to a spot near one of the less damaged structures. “And one more thing.”

“Oh?”

“For the time being you'd better let me do most of the talking.” She noticed the look on Dane Zito Skiron's face. “I *don't* think it'd be smart to reveal that you're a Kranjovian. At least not at this time.”

“Um! Logical.”

The car had barely come to a halt before both Mary and Helen were moving out of it, standing and making themselves visible. “It's us,” Mary shouted, waving her arms. “Lieutenant Herzi? Lieutenant! It's me.”

Herzi had pushed himself to the forefront of the group. “*Polkovnyk* Swift!” he breathed in relief. “*Slava Bogy*. Both of you are safe?”

“Yes, thanks to ah-hhhhh ... a friend who managed to rescue us.” She gave a nod to Dane Zito Skiron as he emerged from the car. “What *happened*? Or God, should I ask?”

Herzi came closer. “The attack continued after you and *Pidpolkovnyk* Newton were taken. In fact, it was intensified. Our defenses managed to

destroy several of the attacking helicopters, but they maintained a continuous rocket bombardment. You can see the results,” he added, morosely looking around.

Mary was also staring at the carnage, remembering a time, years earlier, when Swift Enterprises had been attacked by the Cyclone Gun terrorists. At the time the attack happened, she and Helen had been kidnapped and held elsewhere, but Mary suspected she now felt the same way Tom, Ned, Tom Jr. and Sandy felt when they witnessed the destruction.

Another memory: New Mexico, and the towns of Tenderly and the Zuni Pueblo during the war with the rogue supercomputer Solomon.

“No,” she breathed hollowly.

She forced herself to turn her attention back to Herzi, forcing herself even more to say what she dreaded. “And ... casualties?”

“Forty-nine dead.”

Helen closed her eyes, her lips moving in silent prayer.

Mary quietly sent up a few prayers of her own. Then: “And ... Oleksiy?”

Herzi seemed reluctant to answer.

“Leytenant Herzi!”

Herzi automatically snapped to attention at the tone of her voice. “He has taken a team to try and locate you and Pidpolkovnyk Newton.”

“Ach! Does he even know where we *are*? Or were?”

Herzi raised a placating palm. “Apparently. We were getting the fires under control when a message finally arrived over our radio. A group in the town of Sutinky claimed to have the both of you in custody. They knew of your involvement with us and wanted to arrange a delivery of the ... hostages.” He gave a frown in Dane Zito Skiron's direction.

Mary caught the look. “No, he's not one of them,” she said, feeling two of her fingers cross. “Herzi, ah ... Bohdan. Where is Sutinky?”

“About five kilometers from Moroz,” Dane Zito Skiron murmured.

Oh God, no! “And who sent the message?” Mary asked Herzi. “Did he identify himself?”

Herzi nodded. “Someone named Seletsky.”

Helen moaned.

Mary wasn't too far behind. "Bohdan, Seletsky is a killer. He's the man who's been after us all this time. He's the one who ordered the attacks at Al Masid and the Cairo airport, as well as organizing the killings in Donetsk!"

"*Hivno*," Herzi breathed darkly. "*Komandyr* Levchenko had a suspicion, and it was only because of that he decided to leave the base and personally handle your rescue."

"Oleksiy's heading into a trap," Mary declared. "Seletsky was going to kill us, and he'll do the same to Oleksiy and whoever accompanied him. I think he's also planning to double-cross the Kranjovians who've been supplying him."

"The Kranjovians?"

Mary nodded. "He's not only after the gold, but I'm willing to bet he's also after Oleksiy's sword." She could feel Dane Zito Skiron's eyes on her.

And that caused a realization to arrive. "Oh, *crap!*"

"What's wrong?" Helen asked.

"Seletsky told us he had been recently able to track us," Mary explained. "I bet he was referring to the nanobots that Da ..." and she suddenly caught herself, "... we were injected with."

"And if he's managed to recover ..."

"Then he'll know where we are."

"Not quite," Dane Zito Skiron broke in. "The signal jammer in the car would've been covering your movements."

Mary breathed in relief. "Well that's something. Still ..." and she looked back at Herzi.

"Seletsky will not get his hands on the *Zirka Risshenya*," Herzi solemnly said.

"I'm really not going to like asking why, am I?"

"*Komandyr* Levchenko had a suspicion that the *Zirka Risshenya* might possibly be a target and he ... left it behind."

Mary felt a sudden sickness. Levchenko without his sword, and heading for a place where he'd probably need it. "Seletsky will take out both Oleksiy and the Kranjovian officials who're on their way to meet him," she said. "It's the move he wants to make."

Dane Zito Skiron slipped into the car. A few moments, then he leaned back out. “No signals from the ... Kranjovian helicopter,” he announced. “I am picking up the 'General Emergency' call sign from Navsegda Adin. I suspect that whoever was in the helicopter is now in Seletsky's hands.”

“How long ago did Seletsky leave?” Mary asked Herzi.

“He took a fifteen-man team to Sutinky over a half-hour ago.”

Too late, Mary's mind wept. *Too late*. “And where is his sword now?”

“Come with me,” Herzi said, turning and, with the women, Dane Zito Skiron and the other Cossacks following, led the way to a large tent which had been set up near what remained of the command building. The interior of the tent was part kitchen, part field hospital, and people were milling about hard at work, either distributing food or attending to the wounded who were lying on cots or pallets.

Guiding his way through the crowd, Herzi soon came upon Ionna. The girl was quietly sitting on a small wooden box. Her face was dirty, her eyes wide and mournful, and the streaks of tears were easily visible. She was holding the *Zirka Risshenya* in its cloth scabbard, her grip tight and protective.

She looked up as the group approached, her eyes immediately finding Mary.

And Mary found herself gazing into a mirror. Years ago, back when Tom was constantly throwing himself into danger. *Oh, yes*, Mary thought. She knew the look on Ionna's face. She knew it very well.

Still staring at Ionna, Mary spoke to Herzi. “Seletsky had people in place here when the attack started. I'm surprised they didn't try and take Ionna and the sword.”

“They did.”

Mary turned to Herzi and caught his glance. Following it, she looked beyond the far end of the tent, through an opening which showed some of the trees that bordered the encampment. It took her only a few moments of spotting the forms dangling from the branches before she quickly turned away. *Oh, my Lord ...*

“We found them,” Herzi said simply.

Mary's eyes were squeezed shut, and she could hear choking sounds from Helen. Struggling to keep her stomach under control, she directed her attention back to Ionna. As gently as possible she reached out,

touching a still-moist cheek on the girl's face. One of Ionna's hands swept up, clutching at Mary's fingers. The girl's expression was pleading.

"I know," Mary murmured. "Yes, sweetie ... I know." As carefully as possible she pried the *Zirka Risshenya* from Ionna. There was no resistance, but something new seemed to enter the girl's expression.

"I'll try," Mary whispered, her words just for Ionna. "I'll do what I can."

Quickly bending forward, Ionna took Mary's hands in hers, kissing them.

Mary then turned back to the others. Seeing her, Helen felt her stomach starting to bottom out. *Oh no ...*

Mary looked at Herzi. "Does your radio fully work?"

Herzi sighed. "We have only been able to receive the messages from Seletsky. We cannot transmit out."

Dane Zito Skiron sidled up alongside Mary. "My people have equipped Seletsky with jamming devices," he murmured. "This place is easily within range of them."

Touching his arm, Mary led the Kranjovian aside, out of earshot of the others. "Your car. Can the radio in it break through the jamming?"

After a moment, Dane Zito Skiron nodded.

"Contact Navsegda Adin." At the look on the man's face, Mary spoke quickly. "The Inner Hive has to be told about Seletsky. You've got to tell them that a situation is developing which could mean serious trouble for both Kranjovia and Ukraine."

Dane Zito Skiron sighed. "I'll tell them. They're probably wondering what happened to whoever they sent to Seletsky. But whatever explanation I give might not be enough to make them exercise caution."

"Then tell them a Swift is involved." Mary then went back to Herzi. "You have any aircraft? Any vehicles that could get to Sutinky?"

Herzi shook his head. "With the assistance of his spies here, Seletsky's assault force managed to take out all our vehicles."

Mary frowned. "Then how did Oleksiy plan to reach Sutinky?"

"He and his team left on horseback. And ..."

Mary noted the pause. "Well?"

"*Komandyr* Levchenko specifically ordered us to remain behind and

attend to the base.”

“Ordered you.”

Herzi nodded.

Mary angrily shook her head. *Men.* “Then who's in charge here?”

Herzi looked around, then back at Mary. “Ah ... I suppose I am.”

After a moment or two in thought, Mary strode out from the tent. Looking around she headed for a saddle rack located near where the horses had been kept. Reaching the rack she began moving down the line, uncovering saddles before finally selecting one.

Herzi had followed her out. “Mrs. Swift—”

Mary turned to him. “*Leytenant Herzi!*”

Once again, years of training and discipline brought Herzi to attention. “*Polkovnyk Swift!*”

“Get me a horse,” Mary ordered in as calm a voice as she could muster. “Preferably one who can make the best time between here and Sutinky.”

For a moment, Herzi seemed ready to argue. Then, with a fist pressed to his forehead and a “*Polkovnyk Swift!*”, he moved away, barking orders.

Helen now came up to her. “Mary—”

“Oh, don't start with me now. If Sandy can be an Admiral in the Brungarian Navy, then there's no reason I can't be a Cossack Colonel ... *yow!*”

Helen had grabbed Mary's shoulder, roughly turning her to bring them face to face. “What ... the ... *HELL* ... are ... you ... *doing?*”

“You know my methods, Watson',” Mary intoned darkly.

“Goddammit—”

“*And you're using profanity pretty easily for someone who, earlier this morning, was getting ready to meet her Maker. You know that?*”

“Mary!”

“*You want an answer?*” Mary shot back. “*I'll give you one. Go back and look at Ionna. Go on! Look at her and tell me you don't know what I'm planning.*”

“Mary, dammit—”

“*And using bad words with me really won't work.*”

Helen struggled for control. “Dane Zito Skiron,” she forced out. “He can take us in his trick car—”

“No he can't,” Mary replied. “He has to talk sense to the Inner Hive. That, and one other thing.”

“Huh? What?”

Mary's face calmed. “You know the personal codes,” she said. “Let Dane Zito Skiron get in touch with the boys. Tell them where we are and get them here as quickly as possible Oooooohh. Hel-lo, Precious,” she said to a chestnut mare which Herzi was bringing up. “And what's *your* name?”

“Mamiy” Herzi replied.

Mary began rubbing her cheek on the horse's face, eliciting a fond whicker from the animal.

“You'll be riding on a Cossack saddle,” Herzi was explaining. “This means you'll have to control Mamiy more with the bridle, and with body shifting, rather than with the legs.” He gave Helen a glance. “If you'll excuse me a moment, *Polkovnyk* Swift.”

Mary continued nuzzling the horse.

“Sweetie,” she was whispering. “Sweetie ... Sweetie ...”

“Mary,” Helen said from behind her.

Mary closed her eyes, breathing in the warm smell from Mamiy.

“What do I tell Tom?”

“Tell him ... tell him I'm doing what's right. He'll understand that.” With a single fluid motion she swung herself up into the saddle.

Helen was staring up at her. “If you could only see yourself,” she said, her voice a soft wail. “About to ... about to do I don't know what.”

“That makes two of us,” Mary replied. Then she looked away. “Now what?”

Turning, Helen saw that Herzi was coming back. He was accompanied by fifteen other armed Cossacks, and all of them were mounted on horseback.

“What is the meaning of this, *Leytenant*?” Mary asked.

“I had told the men I am disobeying *Komandyr* Levchenko's orders,” Herzi said. “I told them I would be accompanying you as a guide to

Sutinky.” He glanced over his shoulder at the other men. “It seems I have something of a mutiny on my hands.”

Mary regarded the men with Herzi. “Do they all speak English?”

“No, *Polkovnyk* Swift, but they are all with the *Sluzhba Bezpeky Kaimanove*.”

“Then please translate for me.” She rose up slightly in the saddle, looking at the men. “None of you have to do this,” she called out (her words repeated in Ukrainian by Herzi). “Oleksiy ... *Komandyr* Levchenko left specific orders. But his orders didn't include me, and I plan to try to rescue him.” Mary swallowed hard. “I told my friend, and now I'll tell all of you. If you follow me you'll be disobeying orders. You'll be breaking a sacred trust.” Her hands gripped tightly at the reins. “But if you follow me, you'll be riding ... oh, God ... you'll be riding for what's right.” Without a look at Helen, Mary flicked the reins and, with a shout, started Mamiy into a full gallop.

Behind her, Herzi raised his rifle into the air. “*Kaimanove!*” he shouted, sending his horse into a gallop to follow Mary. The others echoed his shout and, within moments, they were all thundering down the same path out of the encampment.

Helen stood there, helplessly watching Mary go off into the distance. Shaking her head, she rushed over to where Dane Zito Skiron was sitting in his car, speaking into a microphone. The Kranjovian looked up as she approached, and Helen started giving him instructions on how to get in contact with Ned and Tom. Or, if necessary, either the Swift space station, or Sherman Ames back at Enterprises.

A motion caught the corner of her eye, and Helen turned to see Ionna approaching the car. The girl was on horseback and, with her free hand, she was holding the reins of another horse, saddled and without a rider.

“Oh, God,” Helen moaned.

Ionna solemnly waited.

Helen absently patted Dane Zito Skiron's shoulder. “You wouldn't happen to know the Ukrainian for 'frickin' idiot', would you?”

“Ah-hhhh ...”

“Never mind,” Helen said, reaching over Dane Zito Skiron to grab the rifle she had left in the car, and then turning to head for the horse.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Star of Judgment.

Mary was thinking: *I'm going to ride right into where Seletsky's hiding and force him at sword point to give up Oleksiy and his men ...*

Mary was thinking: *Me and the Cossacks will overrun Seletsky's camp and free everyone ...*

Mary was thinking: *We'll surprise Seletsky with a sudden charge ...*

* * * * *

“Okay,” Mary asked. “So what the heck is this?”

She and Herzi and the rest of the Cossacks had been riding for about three hours, heading along a road which Herzi had claimed would take them to a junction between Sutinky and Moroz. The road ran within a thick forest of oak and elm, and Herzi was not only working as guide, but as a lookout for possible forward installations which Seletsky might have placed. He had explained to Mary how, upon reaching a place known as Hnizdo Creek, it would be best to leave the road and make the rest of the way through the trees. Their progress would be slower, but they'd have better cover.

Now, however, everyone had stopped, and were staring at what was before them. A strip of bare ground about sixty feet long, stretching out of sight on either side.

Next to her, Herzi looked grimmer than usual. “Mines,” he muttered.

“Sonja Henie's Tutu!” Mary exclaimed. “A real minefield?”

Herzi nodded. “This was done very recently. Trees were here at least a week ago. Apparently *someone*,” he went on in a tone which said he knew who was responsible, “removed the trees along this area and seeded it with mines.” He leaned forward in his saddle. “I think I can see some of them. They look like Kranjovian *'prizrak'* anti-personnel mines.”

Mary was trying to see where Herzi was looking. “If you can see them,” she slowly asked, “then couldn't we ...”

Herzi was shaking his head. “*Nemaye, Polkovnyk* Swift. *Prizraks* are tricky. The visible mines are bad enough. They're equipped with proximity

fuses and will detonate at our approach. But for each visible mine there are, at the most, five other mines which burrow in and link themselves electronically to a visible mine. The visible mines can act as command centers for the burrowed mines; setting them off individually, or in groups.”

“Peas and carrots!” Mary slumped slightly in her saddle. *Well, so much for the speedy charge.*

Something occurred to her. “Wait a minute. Wouldn't Oleksiy and his people have spotted these mines as well?”

“I suspect so,” Herzi considered. “They would've taken the most direct path.”

“Okay. I'm no military strategist; but, if Seletsky thought Oleksiy had his sword, he wouldn't risk killing Oleksiy by doing something like this, would he?”

“No.” Herzi was looking around, trying to peer up through the forest cover. “My guess is that the mines were laid to slow down and stop just the sort of thing we're doing. Not only that, but give Seletsky's people time to zero in on us.”

Mary looked about, expecting to see snipers hiding in the branches. “Well thank God Helen's calling in the cavalry. With luck the boys should be arriving soon ... *Helen!*”

“Yeah,” Helen replied, moving closer on her horse. “Finally caught up. Darn it, Mary, you know I can't ride at a gallop as well as you can.”

“We weren't galloping all the time. And what are you doing here? You're supposed to be—”

“I *know* what I'm supposed to be doing,” Helen snapped, bringing her horse alongside Mamiy. “I got drafted.”

“Drafted?”

“By the future Mrs. Levchenko,” Helen said, nodding back over her shoulder to where Ionna was now approaching the others.

“But the boys. Did you—”

“Being taken care of. Get off your high horse. Or, rather, stay on it.” Helen was peering at the bare ground of the minefield. “Are we there yet?”

“No,” sighed Mary. She gave a limp wave at the ground ahead of them. “Mines.”

“Yours?”

“No, no, no. *Mines*. Minefield.”

Helen blinked. “Oh! Well ... pastafazool. Now what?”

“I don't suppose you waited for a reply from the boys?”

“No.” Helen gave Ionna a glance. “I was sort of dragooned rather quickly. In fact, I suspect Ionna's a bit put out with me for not being as much an Amazon as you. Thank God you managed to stay on this road.”

“Yeah and, if Bohdan's right, I think we'd better get off this road and move into the trees. Bohdan? How far are we from this junction we were looking for?”

Herzi consulted a GPS. “Halfway between Kaimanovgorod and where Moroz and Sutinky are located. *Polkovnyk* Swift, we'd best move.” Using his reins he began guiding his horse into the trees, ordering for the Cossacks to follow, and with Mary, Helen and Ionna managing to keep up with Herzi.

“It is like this,” Herzi was explaining to the Americans. “If these mines were intended to be a defense, then Seletsky would've placed them closer to his base. *This* sort of deployment puts me more and more in mind of a trap.”

“For Oleksiy?” Mary asked.

“For perhaps anyone,” Herzi replied. His eyes were shifting everywhere, and he had removed his pistol from its holster. Mary noticed that the other Cossacks, and Ionna, had also become silent and were also looking about.

“This is how General Custer ended up,” Helen muttered. “I just know it.”

“Shhh!” Mary hissed. Not only for silence, but because she thought she was hearing something. “Are we anywhere near this creek we were looking for?” she whispered.

“Another kilometer or so,” Herzi murmured back.

They were deep within the forest now, the horses gradually spreading out as they weaved in and out among the trees. Mary could feel a thin icy trail growing along her spine, and she noticed that Helen was keeping one hand gripped tightly on her AK-47.

And what did you do, Gran'ma? Mary imagined Helen's grandchild

someday asking. And Helen would reply: Well, I followed my very stupid friend into a Ukrainian forest, holding onto a Russian assault rifle.

Wow, Gran'ma.

Mary realized she was definitely hearing something, and she unconsciously brought Mamiy to a halt, letting the others drift pass. So intent were they on keeping an eye open for trouble that they didn't notice as Mary sat on Mamiy, straightening up and trying to place the sound. What the ...

It was coming from all around. Not wind moving through the trees, or anything which immediately sounded natural. Rather, it was like an insistent humming. And, as she continued concentrating, she eventually realized the source of the sound.

Oleksiy's sword. The *Zirka Risshenya* was somehow producing the humming; and Mary began to realize that she was the only one hearing it. She had been holding onto the sword since taking it from Ionna, and she now curiously raised it closer, hearing the humming growing inside her. Yielding to an impulse which she had earlier tabled, she stared at the weapon's hilt.

“QED,” she murmured.

Looking up she suddenly realized that she could no longer see Helen or the Cossacks. Even stranger, there was something odd about the way her surroundings looked. The trees, the ground ... everything seemed out of focus. Almost as if the ripple of a heat wave was moving about her. “Hey!”

No answer. “Helen? Bohdan?”

Still silent. And then the visual distortion disappeared as if turned off by a switch, and everything was clear once again. There was still no sign of anyone. “Guys?”

Flicking at Mamiy's reins, Mary urged the horse forward. The humming from the sword had now stopped, but there was still something odd, and it took a few moments before Mary realized there was a difference in the way the sunlight was coming down through the trees. Almost as if the sun had ... jumped ahead a bit.

What the heck? “Helen?”

And then she quickly pulled Mamiy to a stop, her heart going up into her throat. “Omigod!”

Ahead of her, scattered among the trees, the fallen forms of horses

could be seen on the ground. Ashen-faced, Mary slipped off of Mamiy and rushed toward the animals. “Oh no ... oh no, no *no* ...”

Reaching one of the horses she knelt down, feeling for signs of life and finding them. The horse was clearly breathing, but seemed unconscious. Looking around, Mary could now see that the other horses were in the same way. All of them, and they had been the horses ridden by Helen and the Cossacks; a fact confirmed by the sight of Helen's rifle on the ground nearby.

“Oh, *God!*”

Mary's heart was racing as she anxiously looked around. But there was no sign of Helen or Ionna or any of the others ...

Wait! Mary's eyes could now see the tracks of tires winding here and there. Raising her eyes she followed the tracks as they led out of sight through the wider gaps between the trees. *How did ... what happened?*

Trying to swallow, Mary returned to Mamiy, getting back into the saddle. Keeping her eyes on the tracks she began guiding the horse to follow them.

And what did you do, Gran'ma? she could hear Jet asking sometime in the future.

“Good question,” Mary whispered.

* * * * *

Seletsky was slowly pacing back and forth in front of his hostages, his eyes fixed on the bound and kneeling form of Levchenko.

“I have never despised anyone as much as you,” he spoke to the Cossack leader in Ukrainian. “You, in possession of so much power, and literally squandering it away on keeping your little tribe intact.”

A shrug. “At least I thought I never despised anyone as much as you. But then I met Mary Swift.” His lip twisted into a vicious sneer. “Mary ... *Swift!*”

He looked over at where the three members of the Kranjovian Inner Hive were similarly trussed up. “I admit to having always wondered why a nation as supposedly powerful as the Kranjovian Oligarchy had for years cowered in fear of the Swifts,” he said to them. “But perhaps now I have an idea as to the reason. The Swifts aren't particularly strong, nor as

believably clever as many people imagine them to be. But they are definitely irritants. Insects who, if not dealt with as quickly as possible, can sting.”

Seletsky was standing outdoors in a clearing, semi-surrounded by a collection of tracked military vehicles and armed men. Between them and him his hostages knelt: not only Seletsky and the Kranjovians, but Helen, Ionna and the Cossack forces which had accompanied both Levchenko and Herzi. All of them tied up.

One of the Kranjovians now spoke. “You underestimate the Swifts.”

Seletsky snorted.

“A family possessing the means to turn both our countries into a wasteland, if sufficiently provoked. We've dealt with both the younger Tom Swift, as well as his sister—”

“That pretender,” Seletsky scoffed.

“That ... *pretender*,” the Kranjovian insisted, “possesses a particularly venomous sting, as we well know. Plus she drove off an alien invader.”

“Pah!” Seletsky turned away from him. “But we're dealing with the mother now. A *housewife*!”

“A housewife,” Levchenko calmly replied, “who managed to escape you. Twice. Three times, if we count the ambush in the forest.”

“And where is she *now*?” Seletsky insisted. With the sweep of an arm he indicated Levchenko and the others. “I have you ... your woman ... your men. I have these Kranjovians. Where is this infamous Mary Swift? Does she have your sword? Eh?” He shook his head. “Your greatest asset, and you threw it away.”

Moving to Helen, he switched to English. “Where is she?” Seletsky insisted. “Your friend?”

Helen responded with a string of words which she knew would rate a sharp response from Mary. And she hoped she'd live long enough to hear it. She was immediately rewarded with a sharp blow across the face from Seletsky, an action which caused a growl and struggling movements from Levchenko and the Cossacks.

“I still have rope enough for a hanging,” Seletsky told Helen. “Or perhaps an old-fashioned firing squad would be more convenient, even if part of me enjoys the thought of you dancing at the end of a noose.”

“You may underestimate the Swifts,” another of the Kranjovians called out. “But we’re much nearer, and much more geared for reprisal. The Oligarchy—”

“Will do nothing,” Seletsky declared. “I took special care not to have you harmed, making use of the stun weapons your government so generously supplied. As long as the Oligarchy understands you’re alive only because of my current whim, their hands will be just as tied as yours.”

“We can be sacrificed if necessary.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Seletsky replied, moving closer to him. “Some of the Inner Hive know I’m very close to placing my hands on a piece of information which will prove vital to both Kranjovia and Ukraine.”

The Kranjovian who had first spoke scowled. “Yes. We were told of this mythical ‘treasure’ you’ve been searching for. That’s why we were sent. *Not* to witness you murdering the Swift and Newton women. We never would have sanctioned that.”

“But it would have taught you that I can accomplish what the Oligarchy never achieved. A knife in the heart of the Swift Family. With that, and with the treasure, I will achieve a position of supreme authority in the eyes of Kranjovia. Enough authority, I think, for your country to support me in assuming control over Ukraine.”

“Claim after claim, and yet you have nothing.”

“Except all of you.” Seletsky turned back to Levchenko. “Where is your sword, Cossack? What have you done with it? Surely you didn’t leave it behind?” He reached out to brush his fingertips against Ionna’s hair. “Or should I perhaps rely on other means of persuasion to make you tell me?”

Levchenko fairly screamed, trying to launch himself at Seletsky, only to have one of the guards slam him back into place with a rifle butt.

Seletsky towered above him. “*One* last time, Cossack. Then I tear both your woman and Mrs. Newton apart bit by bit. *Where is Mary Swift?*”

Silence. Then Seletsky gradually realized that everyone’s attention wasn’t on him, but on something behind, and he spun around.

She had not been there ... and then she was. Mary slowly riding Mamiy towards the group. Solemn-faced, her eyes on Seletsky. Approaching until she was about fifteen feet away from the man, then she moved off the saddle and took a few steps closer.

Behind Seletsky a crowd of rifles were suddenly raised and clicked. He waved a hand. “No,” he ordered, his eyes on Mary. “She’s mine.”

Mary stood still, one hand holding the *Zirka Risshenya*.

Seletsky gave her a nod. “You surprise me.”

“Hm,” Mary considered. “Interesting. My husband said the same thing on our honeymoon.”

“Of all the people gathered here, I owe you something most of all.”

Mary’s eyes remained on the man. “Helen?”

“Y-yeah?”

“Did he hurt you?”

“I think I lost a tooth.”

“Oleksiy? Bohdan?”

“We were only stunned,” Levchenko said. “But—”

Seletsky was slowly moving towards Mary, a hand raising a pistol. “So kind of you to bring the *Zirka Risshenya* along, Mrs. Swift. Now please. Hand it over.”

In answer, Mary raised the sword, holding it in both hands before her.

Seletsky almost smiled. “Come now, Mrs. Swift. Consider your position. You’re alone. Outgunned. And the full powers of the sword can only be unleashed by the genuinely virtuous.”

Behind him, Helen suddenly barked with laughter.

“Oh, boy,” she said. “Are *you* in trouble.”

* * * * *

Mary was feeling the touch of bronze growing all over her. She could taste the sharp flavor of metal on her tongue as she held the blade steady. The humming had reappeared and was growing stronger in her mind, her attention fully focused on Seletsky. He still had the pistol pointed at her, doubtless with every intention of pulling the trigger.

But everything was suddenly slowing down all around. Once again her vision was being distorted by a peculiar haze. The haze expanded, enveloping not only her, but Seletsky, and then growing to take in Helen, Levchenko and the others. Even the guards and the vehicles.

The *Zirka Risshenya* was ringing in her mind as she felt herself becoming as bronze as the blade before her; her hair shimmering with coppery highlights and her brown eyes becoming metallic. Inside her was a desire to scream; but as she did she felt the sound falling into tune with the humming of the sword. All around her the haze was spinning, distorting the view of the world beyond into nothingness. Each beat of her heart was being reflected in pulses of light sweeping outward from her body.

Seletsky's finger was starting to tighten on the trigger, and Mary began with that, forming words which she threw at him in ringing tones. "Stop ... Stand *Still* ...

"BEHAVE!"

And Seletsky was now frozen in place.

A cauldron was boiling in Mary's mind. You tried to kill me, she silently screamed at him. You tried to kill Helen. You've killed so many ...

It was within her power to reach in and squeeze Seletsky's heart to a dead pulp. It was so easy ... the temptation flowing like champagne in her soul. Mary knew she wanted to kill, wanted to crush the man before her into something immediately rancid and forgettable.

Her hands started tightening around the sword, readying it to deliver the blow. And then, at the last moment, something small inside her rose to its feet and shouted. Mary listened, and then remembered.

Star of Judgment! In the hands of the virtuous.

Judgment!

Focusing on Seletsky. Finding the pitiful shriveled center of the man.

"Petruso Seletsky," she ordered. "GO TO SLEEP!"

And the man slowly collapsed to the ground like a deflating balloon.

Mary's eyes now went to the hostages. To the bindings keeping them helpless.

Untie, her mind ordered. Release!

And Helen and the others suddenly found themselves free to move as the ropes curled away from them like frightened snakes.

Beyond them, to the guards. To the parked vehicles. Mary once again focused.

“BEHAVE!”

The guards were swept back as if pushed by an enormous hand. Behind them the guns and cannons of the vehicles were bent out of shape. The three helicopters which were also in the area were knocked over, blown aside in the wake of an unknown storm.

A few of the guards were still managing to maintain some sort of control, and one of them was swinging his rifle at Helen.

Helen, Mary sent out. With my speed.

And Helen was now caught up in the same time sense as Mary, easily reaching out and grabbing the rifle from the guard. Then Mary gasped as she saw Helen turning the rifle about, aiming it at the man. Her finger at the trigger.

NO!

Everything suddenly slowed to a glacial crawl as Mary rushed towards Helen, the sword already swinging out in a wide arc and, before Helen had a chance to fire, the blade swept down, slicing the gun neatly in half ...

Then everything snapped back to normal time, and Mary was breathing hard, one hand on the shoulder of a surprised Helen who was turning wide and fearful eyes to her.

“Mary! I almost ... oh God, I wanted to ...”

“You couldn't,” Mary told her softly. “I wouldn't let you. I know you, and maybe better than you know yourself.”

“You ... what did ...”

Mary noticed she was once again flesh-and-blood. Her heartbeat was returning to normal, and the *Zirka Risshenya* was once again just a sword. Looking around she saw Levchenko and the other Cossacks quickly moving among the guards, securing them and removing the last of their weapons (Levchenko's efforts being somewhat hampered by the close hugs from Ionna). Mary couldn't help but also notice that she was the recipient of several questioning looks and numerous fists pressed to foreheads.

“I don't know what you did,” Helen finally breathed, getting her voice back together, “but I'm really glad you did it.”

“So am I,” Mary murmured.

“So. Now what?”

Mary thought it over. “*Really* hungry now. I wonder if there's a kitchen somewhere nearby?”

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Meat Loaf.

“Is this enough onion?” Herzi was asking.

Mary peered at what the man had in the bowl. “Yes, but we’ll need more for the next three pans. Has anyone found any more mustard?”

“Our people have gone back to Kaimanovgorod for more, and it should be here in time. We’re also searching a warehouse in Moroz. Oh, and we’ve got more eggs.”

Mary nodded. “Wonderful.”

“The bread crumbs are coming along,” Helen reported. “I’ve got five more guys helping.”

Mary smiled.

Levchenko came up, carrying two large containers of milk. The *Zirka Risshenya* was once again at his side. “You really don’t have to do this,” he said to Mary.

“Put those down by Helen,” Mary instructed. “And pish-tush, Oleksiy. Helen and I are durn near starving, and, after all that’s happened, I think we deserve a feast.”

“Yes, with the both of you in places of honor. Not doing the cooking.”

“Oleksiy, I’ll put up with a lot from you and your people. But I’ll be switched if I let any of you attempt meat loaf while I just stand around.”

It was well into the evening. Mary and the others had traveled to Seletsky’s base outside of Moroz. There they found a field kitchen with large ovens, and Mary had smiled brightly, immediately organizing both the Cossacks and the Kranjovians into putting together a large meal. The Kranjovians did at least some of the work (the sight providing no small amusement for Mary), but mainly they had been in conference with Dane Zito Skiron (recently arrived from Kaimanovgorod), switching off Seletsky’s jamming devices and entering into direct communication with the Oligarchy.

“This may not work with these onions not being Vidalias,” Helen was pointing out.

“I’ve considered that.” Mary glanced at her friend, noting the rather

prominent bruise on her face. “But we’ll make do, oh ... hello, dear.” The last was directed at Ionna who was coming up to the table where Mary and Helen were working, a shy smile on her face. As Mary waited, Ionna spoke to Herzi (looking over her shoulder to make certain Levchenko had moved away).

Herzi listened, then translated. “Ah ... Ionna wants to know if you would provide her with the recipe for this dish?”

“Most certainly,” Mary assured him. “I’ll write it down, and you can translate it later on into Ukrainian.” She gave Ionna a sunny smile. “This’ll definitely help keep Oleksiy close to home, sweetie. After that, you’re on your own.”

Helen snickered.

Mary was continuing to knead spices into a large mound of ground beef, wondering if the local equivalent of hot chili sauce was going to be up to snuff (and did they even *have* Worcestershire sauce in Ukraine?). Then she tilted her head up. “Oho!”

Helen was also listening. “Is that a familiar engine sound?”

“At last.”

The women continued working as the sound grew louder, then began fading. A few minutes later, and a pair of men entered the kitchen. Tom Swift was a tall, wiry man whose blonde hair was shot through with gray. Ned Newton was also tall, and his dark hair was equally carrying some silver, but he was more stockily built.

Both men immediately headed for their wives.

“Careful,” Mary warned Tom. “My hands are covered in paprika. We’re making meat loaf for about a hundred or so Cossacks, with more probably on the way from Kaimanovgorod to join in.” She gave a nod in the direction of the other end of the kitchen. “The ones who’re not helping us cook are outside in the courtyard, setting up tables.”

Curious, Tom began walking towards a window.

Mary watched him. “No kiss?”

Tom automatically changed course, returning to Mary and, mindful of her hands, leaned over the work table to press his lips against hers.

Okay, Mary thought. Now I’m all right.

“Umm,” Tom murmured, taking another kiss. “Y’know, I rather like

you flavored with paprika.”

“Later,” Mary whispered.

Nearby, Ned was gaping at Helen. “*How* did you get that bruise?”

“Well! Hello to you too, ohhh ... mmmmmm,” Helen said as Ned wrapped his arms around her, practically pulling her across the table as they kissed.

“Mind the eggs,” Mary warned Helen. Then: “Hello, sweeties. Hi,” she said as other newcomers entered the kitchen. The group was made up of a brown-haired, brown-eyed man accompanied by a blonde-haired and blue-eyed woman who was carrying a toddler in her arms. Behind them loomed a seven foot tall woman with a perpetually sad face, and a build like a NFL linebacker. In order they were Bud Barclay (Mary's son-in-law), Sandra Swift Barclay (Mary's daughter), Joanna Barclay (Mary's granddaughter, better known as “Jet”), and Sestina: a product of Kranjovian science, and currently the cook for the Swift Family.

Upon spotting the child, Mary immediately held out her arms. “*There's* my angel pie. Come to Gran'ma.”

Sandy was about to pass her daughter over, but then she suddenly drew the child back, giving Mary a suspicious look. “I don't know,” she told her mother doubtfully. “I'm not sure I should be exposing Jet to a bad influence.”

“Bad influence?”

“Say 'bye-bye' to Gran'ma,” Sandy instructed Jet.

“Buh-bye?” Jet replied.

“Yes. Gran'ma's going away to prison for an extra special long time.”

“Pi'son?”

“That's right. You see, Gran'ma's a notorious international desperado.”

“De'spado?”

“Absolutely. Crossing international borders illegally ... being involved in an airport riot ... getting into shootouts at hotels ... theft ... assault ...”

“You left out skydiving without a license,” Helen added.

Sandy looked at her. “Huh?”

Mary once again held out her arms. “Hand her over,” she said firmly.

Sandy obediently allowed the child to enter her grandmother's arms; Jet giggling and squirming about, managing to get paprika all over her outfit.

“This is what Gran'ma needs,” Mary cooed. “Missed my sweet pea sooo much.”

“Ga'ma de'spado?”

Mary sighed. “Yes, dear. Your Grandmother has been very naughty. Remind me when you get a bit older, and I'll tell you about the time your mother blew up Ecuador.”

“I did *not* blow up—”

“*What* has been going on?” Tom suddenly exclaimed. He had been looking around and was once again staring at Mary. “Ned and the rest of us have been going nuts searching all over the Middle East for the both of you ever since you turned up missing. Then we just find out ... from the *Kranjovians* of all people ... that you and Helen have been hip deep in something about stolen gold and a magic sword. We've only been getting bits and pieces.”

Levchenko had taken the opportunity to come closer. “Mr. Swift ... Mr. Newton ... I'm afraid I've been responsible for a lot of this, and I apologize.”

Tom looked at him. “And you are ...”

“Oh he's the nice Cossack who had us kidnapped,” Helen chirped.

Tom's jaw fell open.

“Did *he* hit you?” Ned asked Helen, indicating Levchenko..

“Oh, no. That was an insane Ukrainian megalomaniac who was going to hang Mary and me. Real early this morning, as a matter of fact.”

“*What?*” from Ned, Tom, Bud and Sandy.

“But we managed to escape with the help of a friendly *Kranjovian*.”

Tom was pressing hands to his temples. “I can see there's going to be a lot to go over here.”

“And you'll have plenty of time to catch up during supper,” Mary assured him. “Sestina? Sestina dear? Can you check the far oven over there? See if it's hot enough for this meatloaf.”

With the nod, the giant trotted over to examine the oven.

Tom stared bleakly at his wife. “Mary—”

“Later,” Mary replied. “First, kiss me a bit more. Then, when the rest of the meatloaf gets cooked, we’ll all sit and eat, and Helen and I will provide the entire story. Not that it’s quite over yet. Which reminds me, was that the *Sky Queen* I heard landing outside?”

Tom nodded.

“Good. I want to use the onboard computer for some further research.”

“Research?”

“Umhmm. Just a few loose ends. Oh, and if I’m right, can we make a brief stop in London on our way home?”

“London?”

Mary nodded. “Oleksiy?”

“Polkovnyk Swift?”

“I would like for you and a few other Cossacks to accompany us.”

Levchenko looked at her curiously. “Certainly.”

“Ah ... Dane Zito Skiron?”

The Kranjovian came over. “Mrs. Swift?”

“You and your associates might want to come with us while we make a brief trip to London.”

“Any particular reason why?”

Going over to where Helen was working, Mary dipped a spoon into the sauce that was currently under construction. “I know where the missing gold is,” she casually remarked, taking a taste.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The End of the Trail.

“What is so rare as a day in June?” Mary asked.

Especially, she considered, a day in June casually strolling along London's Marylebone Road. Regent's Park was only a few blocks to the north, and the venerable entrance to the Landmark London was just being passed. It was a beautiful day, and Mary felt thoroughly in her element. Also tingly with the anticipation of what could happen in the next few moments.

“Mary,” Tom said in a warning tone.

“Sh,” she replied, smiling at him and giving his hand an affectionate squeeze. “Shshshshhhh. I promised all would be revealed soon.” *And speaking of tingles*, she thought, recalling the previous night, being in Tom's arms in one of the *Sky Queen's* living quarters.

Of course there was, however, a bit of requisite sternness.

“You are never, ever, ever, *ever* again to cut yourself off from me,” Tom had said to her in the darkness. “You hear me, Mary?”

“Yes, sir,” Mary had replied meekly. “But ... I really had to do this.”

“Yeah,” Tom reluctantly agreed. “And, after all these years, I guess I needed my nose rubbed in it. But Mary—”

And Mary had interrupted with a kiss, managing to get the subject very nicely back on its original track.

Now she was bright and cheerful, completely bathed and in clean clothes, her stomach full and she felt absolutely glorious. Almost, in fact, as if she were leading a parade which, to a considerable extent, she was. She and Tom were at the front of a group composed of Helen, Ned, Sandy, Bud, Sestina, Jet, Levchenko and four of his Cossacks, as well as Dane Zito Skiron and the three Kranjovians from the Oligarchy's Inner Hive.

The geography of the group had produced some silent giggles within Mary. There was the small but suspicious distance existing between the Cossacks and the Kranjovians. And the Kranjovians were also keeping a wary eye on Sandy (Mary recalling the whispered “*Sandra Swift*” among them when she had appeared with Bud and the others).

“Mary,” Tom repeated, this time a bit more emphatically.

Mary sighed. “I want to milk this moment a bit.”

Behind her, Sandy snorted. “For God's sake, Mom, we've got enough milk to open a dairy.”

“You're just upset,” Mary said to her daughter, “because, unlike *some* people I could mention, I didn't end an adventure flat on my back in a hospital bed.”

Sandy muttered something.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, Mom.”

“Ga'ma de'spado?”

“Yes,” Sandy assured her daughter, who was riding piggyback on Bud, “and Momma's gonna spank Gran'ma if Gran'ma doesn't deliver the goods soon.”

Bud knew better than to add a comment, but privately suspected that the image of his mother-in-law being spanked by Sandy would provide quite a memorable sight. At least to the Kranjovians.

And, thinking of them ... “We should also consider, Momma, that there are some of us in this group who aren't exactly in this country legally. We entered England rather cavalierly—”

“Not to worry,” Mary airily assured him. “Before we landed at Heathrow I contacted Sherman, and he told me he'd be in touch with Kiev, Navsegda Adin and the Home Office here concerning the smoothing out of diplomatic problems regarding our arrival.”

After, Bud mentally added, several minutes of Sherman expressing some rather loud and pointed opinions of you and Aunt Helen going off the grid for the past five days.

The dressing down from Sherman had been a cherry on top of the details Mary had been obliged to wander through in the last twelve hours. There was, for instance, the final disposition of the still-sleeping Seletsky and his men, with Levchenko arranging to have them turned over to agents from the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

There had, of course, been some dissension. Tom and Ned had wanted to deliver an extreme bit of “personal opinion” upon Seletsky. Ned, in fact, openly offered to take a crowbar and make certain Seletsky slept for an extremely special long length of time, and it took a substantial bit of

cooing attention from Helen to calm him down (although Helen secretly agreed with Ned).

Then, at one point, Mary had taken Dane Zito Skiron aside. “Ah ... that guard who ... ummm ... was involved in our rather silly escape from your headquarters.”

“Yes?” the Kranjovian asked.

“Was he ah-hhhh, I don't know. Embarrassed or put out by what Helen and I did?”

Dane Zito Skiron smiled thinly. “He knows how to follow orders.

“Well, I really don't feel too good about what I did. Maybe I should bake him a pie. Would he like a pie?”

* * * * *

Then, of course, there was the delivery of the main bombshell.

Sandy had gaped at Helen. “Mom *cussed*?”

* * * * *

Helen's voice now broke in. “Okay, Mary, the troops are turning gray back here. Even Jet.”

Mary gave in. “Oh, all right. We're almost there anyway, so now's as good a time as any to start. Keeping in mind what Helen and I told all of you last night—”

“Mary!”

“All right, all right, all right.” Mary took a breath. “This business of the missing gold has been mystifying people for almost a century,” she said. “Clever people. Knowledgeable people. People who, I must admit, are much smarter than Helen or myself.”

“*Thank* you, Mary.”

“Oh, no problem. Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is the reason all these people failed to locate the gold. It's not that they were stupid. Rather, it's because they didn't know everything.” Stopping, she turned to

face the others. “Think about it. The British Government had information, the Russians had information ... so forth and so on. But, whereas everyone had a *lot* of information, no one had *all* the information.”

“Ohhhhhh ...” Tom breathed.

Mary nodded. “By accident, Helen and I have been the only ones who've managed to see every bit of information concerning the missing gold.”

“So all it took,” Bud said, “was for you to fit the pieces together.”

“Not quite,” Mary admitted. Turning, she resumed walking. “It also took the locating of a few other items of information. Information which, when fitted to what I learned—”

Helen coughed.

“—what Helen and I learned, helped to realize where the gold was.

“But let's stay in the beginning for a while. According to both Oleksiy and Seletsky, Yefim Arzamatsev had kept precise records of what happened back in Djibouti. There were those who suspected that Arzamatsev's notes held clues regarding how the missing gold got smuggled to England. Neither Seletsky or Oleksiy could locate the notes.” Mary sighed. “But I think Helen and I have seen them.”

Helen inhaled sharply. “Perov's papers.”

“We were concentrating on technical documents, and so just barely glanced at the papers which I thought dealt with real estate,” Mary explained, looking back at her friend. “I certainly don't think those were the original notes made by Arzamatsev. For one thing, they didn't seem a hundred years old. But I do think they were transcriptions made by Perov.”

“Then, if Sherman has Perov's papers—” Tom began.

“Then you'd automatically think he'd be able to learn everything,” Mary finished. She firmly shook her head. “But he can't. All he can find out was how the gold got to England. *Not*, however, where the gold ended up.”

“Everyone pay attention,” Helen said to the group. “I've reached the point where I can recognize that look on Mary's face.”

“Let her enjoy herself,” Tom said to Helen and the others. “Mary's never had a chance to do this before—”. He then noticed the look on his

wife's face and smiled weakly. "Please go on, honey. Sugar. Sweetheart."

"One thing has been continually overlooked in this affair," Mary went on. "Regardless of who had what notes, the one inescapable fact is that Holmes hid the gold, and so only *Holmes* knew where the gold was." Mary once again stopped and turned, her eyes expectantly searching the faces of the others.

Sandy sighed. "Mom ..."

Mary shook her head. "You people are no fun. Oleksiy? Dane Zito Skiron? Anyone?"

Exchanging a look with Dane Zito Skiron, Levchenko crossed his arms. "I'll concede your point, *Polkovnyk* Swift, that you've gained access to more information than any of had on our own."

"Hold that thought, Oleksiy, because, very soon, you're going to learn how important the Kaimanove were ... and still are ... to the mystery's solution. And yes, not only have I seen all the information, but what I've seen has helped me find a few more items last night, and earlier this morning."

Tom was recalling how, before going to bed, Mary had spent several hours in the *Sky Queen's* computer bay; doing the same during the trip from Ukraine to London.

"For openers," Mary continued, "all of you know that the missing gold was uncovered in London, and identified by a Russian expatriate. But no one knew the expatriate's complete identity."

"That's ... not entirely true," Dane Zito Skiron said. "In our own research we know that Gerasim Pilkin was the expatriate who'd been working for British Intelligence."

Mary nodded. "Yes. But this is what I meant by everyone not having the complete information. The Kranjovians knew Pilkin's name. But Oleksiy's records on the missing gold carried, among other things, detailed histories of those people who've been involved in the search, and that's how I found out that Pilkin—"

"Related to Seletsky," Helen breathed in realization.

Mary smiled at her.

"And *that* was Seletsky's connection to this whole setup," Ned said.

Mary nodded. "If and when I speak to the Home Office, as well as

archivists within British Intelligence, I suspect we'll learn that Pilkin was desperately trying to contact people within Russia concerning the discovery of the gold. Unfortunately, for him, Edward Shortt took the problem, as well as the gold, to Holmes first."

"So we're back to Holmes and the gold," Tom said.

"Which is where we should be," Mary said. "But we can't entirely count out the involvement of the Russians at that time. According to the information Dane Zito Skiron gave me, Leonid Krasnin, the Soviet Union ambassador, tried to meet with Holmes, but Holmes turned down his invitation. Whatever Holmes had in mind, he didn't want the Bolshevik government involved. Was Krasnin somehow connected to the group which would, eventually, produce Seletsky? I don't know. But, in studying the same information concerning Holmes' itinerary, I learned that Holmes did carry out an interview with British Intelligence."

"But Holmes didn't tell British Intelligence about where he planned to hide the gold."

"Exactly. So. Who in British Intelligence could Holmes have wanted to talk to? Specifically, someone who could provide insight on the source of the gold?" She watched the faces of her audience, mentally counting *one ... two ... three ...*

Sandy spoke up. "Pilkin!"

"Points for Jet's Mommy," Mary agreed. "Right about now I'm running on conjecture, which is very un-Holmes-like. But I suspect further research will uncover that Holmes learned everything about the background of the missing gold from Pilkin, and it was Pilkin who gave Krasnin the idea to set spies out to track Holmes' movements. Unsuccessfully, as it turned out."

"You're right about it being conjecture," Tom said.

"You think so, dearest? I will now prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Holmes left a definite clue for the Kaimanove Cossacks to follow."

This increased everyone's attention.

Mary held out a hand. "Tom? Computer."

Tom passed over a Swift Enterprises "Tiny Idiot" hand computer which Mary accepted. She began tapping on the screen, accessing the device's memory. "I uploaded quite a bit of research into the Swiftnet," she said as she worked. "I'm now looking for ... ah! Here it is." She showed the screen

to Tom. “Recognize it?”

Glancing at the screen, Tom nodded. Mary then slowly passed the screen about, allowing everyone else a look at it.

“That's the Paget photo portrait of Holmes,” Dane Zito Skiron said.

“Exactly,” replied Mary. “Something about the portrait's been bothering me recently. If Helen and I had time to relax, rather than being taken hostage practically every other minute, then the answer might have come to me sooner. But, better late than never.” She pointed to a part of the image. “See this? The watch fob Holmes is wearing? See what's on it?”

Dane Zito Skiron nodded. “The Foreign Coin.”

“Most people, especially Holmes enthusiasts, have always called it 'The Foreign Coin', even though no one has been able to identify what sort of coin it was. Here.” Once again she tapped on the screen. “I'm expanding the image, and I want Tom to have first look.”

Curious, Tom accepted the computer from Mary and glanced at the screen.

He then took a longer, sharper look. “Oh my *God!*” He held the computer out. “Ned ... Sandy ... Bud. Look at *this*.”

The others (and Helen) crowded around the computer.

Sandy paled. “Oh, *Lord ...*”

“I love my family dearly,” Mary was explaining to the others. “But they've never been as interested in Holmes as I was, so this item would've escaped them if I hadn't pointed it out. Tom? Care to do the honors?”

Tom slowly looked up at the others. “The design on the coin. It's a Space Friend symbol.”

“Very true,” Mary agreed. “Now, riddle me this. How did Sherlock Holmes encounter a sample of an alien language well over half a century before the first recorded appearance of the same language on Earth?”

Tom handed the computer back to Mary. “You've definitely got the floor now.”

“Yes, but it's Oleksiy who'll take center stage.”

Levchenko blinked. “*Polkovnyk* Swift?”

“Your sword,” Mary said to him. “Let's see it.”

Levchenko had been carrying the *Zirka Risshenya* with him. For

prudence's sake he had wrapped the weapon very securely in its cloth scabbard, and now he slowly began uncovering it.

“Just the hilt will be enough,” Mary assured him. “Tom? Everyone? Take a close look at the pommel.”

Everyone did, and Tom once again hissed in surprise.

“What my darling husband is moments from saying,” Mary explained, “is that the marking on the pommel of Oleksiy's sword is the exact same Space Friend symbol which Holmes is wearing in the Paget portrait. And, as many of us have guessed, the *Zirka Risshenya* is indeed of extraterrestrial origin.”

“*Neveroyatnyy*,” one of the Kranjovians whispered.

“I don't think Holmes had an idea that the symbol on the sword was from an alien intelligence,” Mary went on, “but he knew it to be unique to the Kaimanove. I suspect it was his private message to the Cossacks that he knew how important the missing gold was to them, and, if they had carried out sufficient research, they eventually might've reasoned out the gold's hiding place. Tom dear? Can you read the symbol?”

Tom nodded. “I've seen the symbol often enough. In our language it loosely translates to 'control'. Or, more properly, 'nexus'. It depends on where it appears in a message.”

“Ummm. I've told you everything about what the *Zirka Risshenya* is capable of. Maybe you better take this part of the discussion.”

Tom scratched his head, thinking it over. “Well ... we know that both the Space Friends, as well as the Sender faction, have sent numerous devices to Earth. These devices all had different functions. From what you've told me about the sword's origin, it seems possible that it was originally another of the devices. Perhaps a central controlling mechanism designed to coordinate all the other devices.” He looked up at his wife. “You told me that it gave the user control over matter, as well as telekinetic ability. That would make it useful to any Space Friend or Sender that arrived on Earth.”

“It could also produce a barrier with the power to hide people from enemies,” Mary added. “That's how it protected me from being ambushed by Seletsky's people in the forest, briefly freezing me in time until the coast was clear.”

Levchenko and his Cossacks were looking dumbfounded.

Mary's heart went out to them. "Don't feel this has shortchanged or belittled your heritage," she told Levchenko. "Consider the fact that your tribe is the guardian of a source of enormous cosmic power. The Star of Judgment."

Levchenko was silently gazing at her.

"Okay," Helen suddenly said. "I guess this is where I put on the Dummy Hat again. If the sword was originally a meteorite, how did Oleksiy's ancestors know to carve the symbol on the pommel when the meteorite was made into a sword?"

"Remember that, among their abilities, the Space Friends could plant information directly into the minds of others," Tom explained.

Sandy's expression was stony, and Bud gently touched her shoulder. More than anyone else, Sandy possessed considerable experience with the programming power of Space Friend technology. "Oleksiy's ancestors could've been guided by the intelligence hidden within the meteorite," she said dully. "They would've had the symbol planted within their minds."

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry—" Mary began.

Sandy shook her head. "It's all right." But everyone noticed how she took a step further away from Levchenko and the sword.

"How would Holmes have known about the symbol?" Ned asked. "Would he have found out about it from Pilkin?"

"That," Mary admitted, "is still something of a mystery. Maybe Pilkin knew about the *Zirka Risshenya*. I don't know. Or perhaps Holmes encountered the Kaimanove during the Great Hiatus." She once again looked at Levchenko and his followers. "You might want to look into your history and determine if anyone matching Holmes' description visited your tribe between 1891 and 1894."

Helen decided it was time to recapture the ball. "Okay," she said. "*Back*, once again, to the location of the gold."

With a nod, Mary resumed strolling. "Helen, keep in mind that Holmes told Shortt he'd keep the gold close to him."

"Yeah. But it's not in his grave—"

"And it's nowhere in Sussex. But it's here. With Holmes. Now ... if we eliminate Holmes' grave, what are we left with?"

"Are we gonna reach a point anytime soon, Mary? And don't give me

that look.”

“Sorry. We're almost there, which gives me enough time for further background.” Mary kept quiet long enough to let the groans die down, then she went on. “We know two things for certain about Holmes' last days. First, he agreed to help out with the memorial to himself.”

Dane Zito Skiron gasped.

“Not yet,” Mary warned him. “Let me finish, although I suspect you know what's coming. The other thing we know is that he spent some time visiting some colleges and universities in England. Rather odd for someone who was supposed to be working on hiding a fortune in gold, wouldn't you think?”

“Except ...” Bud prompted.

“*Except* that, in researching the places Holmes lectured at, I find out that one of them ... a place where Holmes spent considerable time ... was Goldsmiths' University of London.” She smirked back at the group. “A rather apt name, one would think. But one which doesn't raise an immediate connection. That is, not unless we take into consideration the fact that Goldsmiths' boasts one of the premier art colleges in Great Britain. All sorts of art. Including ...” and here Mary stopped, giving a wave of her arm. “Sculpture.”

The group had arrived at the entrance to the Baker Street tube station. They were all staring at an almost ten foot high bronze statue depicting a man wearing an Inverness cape and a deerstalker. In one hand he was holding a Calabash pipe.

“I'll be ...” Tom began.

“Danged,” Helen added (quickly remembering that Mary was close enough to hear her original but unspoken response).

“And if we look closer,” Mary said, nodding at the statue of Sherlock Holmes, “we'll find a very familiar alien symbol on the coin attached to the watch fob. The group who set out to create a Holmes memorial did more than commission Paget to make a photographic portrait of Holmes. They also commissioned sculptors at Goldsmiths' to create this statue. And, in researching both the historical records at Goldsmiths', as well as the available Holmes files, I learned that Holmes offered considerable cooperation in the design and development of the statue. Some of it I determined to be of a rather personal, yet unspecified, nature.”

Levchenko had stepped closer and was gazing intently at the statue.

“So the gold,” he said excitedly. “Holmes took it and had it melted into the bronze?”

“I suspect not,” Mary told him. “If the intention was to eventually return the gold, then melting it would've been a mistake.”

“Then ...”

“Here's where it gets interesting,” Mary said. “Oleksiy? May I trouble you for the *Zirka Risshenya*? Please?”

Curious, Levchenko carefully unwrapped the sword, passing it over to Mary.

Tom was watching. “Mary, what—”

“Bear with me a moment longer,” Mary told him, hefting the sword in both hands and moving closer to the statue. “If I'm right, then no harm done. I hope,” she added in a lower voice. “But if I'm wrong, then I want the blame to fall on me alone. Now give me room.” She began swinging the sword back.

“Mary!”

But it was too late, and Mary swept the sword in a wide arc, sending the thin blade effortlessly through the body of the statue. A moment, then the upper half of the statue slid off the bottom half, falling noisily onto the sidewalk ...

Allowing a flood of gold coins to pour out from within the fallen half.

Staring at it, Mary worked to calm her breathing. “Case closed.”

Her action had caused shouts and gasps from all around, and the sound of police whistles could be heard as a crowd of bystanders began gathering, gradually hemming the group in.

Levchenko seemed to be oblivious to the growing commotion and went to his knees, reaching out to run his hands through the glittering pile of coins, the rest of the Cossacks gathering in around him.

Still holding onto the sword, Mary went to the still-standing bottom half of the statue, reaching with a hand into the hollow portion.

“It's got to be there,” she murmured. “I know it's ... aha!” She triumphantly held her hand aloft, and everyone could see the rolled up piece of paper in it. “Case *really* closed.”

“Uh, Mary?” Helen hesitantly said. “The rozzers.”

Looking, Mary saw people wearing the distinctive dark uniforms of the Metropolitan Police Service starting to close in from all sides.

“Ah, it's okay,” she called out to them. “Clearing up an old case here. Ah-hhh ... diplomatic immunity.” Lowering her voice she addressed her group. “Guys? Some help?”

“I'm Sandra Swift,” Sandy suddenly called out in a clear voice.

This brought the police to a halt (and caused most of the bystanders to take several large steps back). A female officer started murmuring into a microphone at her shoulder; Mary and the others managing to catch the words “bomb disposal unit”.

“I swear,” Sandy grumbled. “Some days you'd think—”

“We love you anyway,” Mary told her.

Tom was nodding at the paper which Mary was holding onto. “What've you got—”

“The real treasure,” Mary announced.

Once again she had everyone's attention, and they watched as Mary slowly unrolled the paper.

“Yeah,” she said. “It's in Russian. Was afraid of that. Tom? Be an angel and make something of this, pretty please? And be careful, this paper's sort of old.”

Gingerly accepting the paper, Tom began frowning at it.

“Mary,” Helen asked, “what is it?”

“Something which has been on my mind ever since you mentioned it back in Cairo.”

“Huh?”

“The Russian government originally sent this gold to Achinov. Remember? Twenty-five thousand rubles worth?”

Helen nodded.

“Refresh my memory. What's that worth in today's currency?”

“Oh. Ah-hhhh ... one hundred and twenty-four thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars.”

Mary nodded. “Oleksiy, I know you and the Kaimanove were interested in recovering the gold in order to clear your reputation. And maybe a lot

of other people were simply interested in solving the puzzle of where the gold was hidden. But let's be honest with ourselves. No one should really get this excited over one hundred and twenty-four thousand dollars."

"And two hundred and fifty."

"True. Thanks, Helen. As for the original amount? Twenty-five thousand rubles?" Mary stared at the group. "A mystery, yes. A puzzle, yes. But was that amount worth all of the trouble it's caused over the years? All of the effort? The ... the ..."

"*Mishegas*," Levchenko offered.

Helen thought: *Kosher Cossacks?*

"*Mishegas*, yes. Thank you, Oleksiy. But I mean, c'mon! The more I thought about it, the more it confused me, and I felt that there had to be something else besides the gold. I kept wondering about it and wondering about it. Then I got clues from two different sources. The first was the Kranjovians."

Mary noticed the reaction her comment made among the members of the Oligarchy. "Not necessarily you, Dane Zito Skiron. I suspect your interest in all of this was strictly that of a true Holmesian. But I couldn't figure out why the Oligarchy would be after the missing gold. At first I thought it might've been a diversion. A way to get closer to the *Zirka Risshenya*."

"But then Seletsky gave me another clue with all his babbling about 'real estate'. Tom? Anything?"

"I'm better with technical Russian," Tom said, his eyes still going over the paper. "But I'm managing to make most of this out. It seems to be some sort of legal deed."

Mary nodded, turning her attention to Levchenko. "Oleksiy, I don't think you quite told Helen and me everything. You said the Kaimanove had petitioned the Czar for permission to escort the gold in the first place."

Levchenko had risen to his feet, and he now nodded.

Mary tilted her head slightly. "But did the Kaimanove just offer to do this out of the kindness of their hearts? Your ancestors didn't ask the Czar for a reward of some sort?"

"Ah ... yes, *Polkovnyk* Swift. In return for escorting the gold, as well as for overall services given to Achinov, my tribe asked for a portion of land

..." The Cossack leader's eyes suddenly widened in realization. "*Boh!*"

"I'll fill in the rest," Mary said to everyone. "The Czar granted the request, and a formal deed was sent along with the gold. Perhaps your ancestors didn't know the deed was with the gold. But, as you pointed out, the gold disappeared before it reached Odessa. And if it had been stolen ..."

"Then the deed was stolen along with it," Tom finished, rolling up the paper.

"Details concerning the theft of the gold, as well as how it got to England, will be found in the papers Perov had, and which Sherman has no doubt memorized by now," Mary continued. "When Shortt transferred everything to Holmes, the deed was included as well. Holmes understood what the deed meant to the Kaimanove, which was another reason he left a clue behind for Oleksiy's people before hiding everything in the statue.

"But I suspect the true and current importance of the deed lay in what the Czar offered. Oleksiy? Where exactly was the land your people asked for?"

Levchenko seemed about to answer, but then he closed his mouth, glancing over at the Kranjovians.

"You're suddenly uncomfortable," Mary observed. "Believe me, I understand. But that's why I also wanted the Kranjovians with me; to try and sort this mess out as peacefully as possible." Once again she took in the entire group with her eyes. "At the time it probably didn't seem all that earth-shattering a deal. But, with the deed having surfaced at last, it should provide no small amount of interest to note that, back in 1899, the Czar formally gave to the Kaimanove a substantial amount of territory to the east of where the tribe lives ... a fact I confirmed by studying notes connected with the first Hague Convention, as well as some material I uncovered during my search through available information on Seletsky's background."

Bud frowned. "Then Seletsky's interest in the area—"

"Was based on the fact that the territory deeded to the Kaimanove is currently under control of the Kranjovian Oligarchy."

"Oh, Holy Magoo," Sandy breathed.

One of the members of the Inner Hive glowered at Mary. "That claim

—"

“Oh, I don't doubt that the legality of the deed is questionable, given the current circumstances,” Mary told him. “I'm not up on international law, although the way my head hurts, I feel that I should be. But consider two things. First: the enormous stink should Oleksiy and his people decide to take the matter up with the International Court of Justice. Kranjovia could still possibly win, but at a cost. And second: given the unstable political situation in the Ukraine these days, I don't think the Oligarchy wants a neighboring country coming together under a cloud of righteous anger directed against it.”

“Our borders, Mrs. Swift—”

“Oh, for God's sake,” Mary said tiredly. “I couldn't give a tick over your borders. Keep your dratted borders. But what happens when everyone finds out what we already know: that Kranjovia had been secretly arming Seletsky so that Seletsky could attempt a military coup against the Ukrainian government?”

The Inner Hive member paled.

Mary nodded. “The Ukraine is currently undergoing something of a political upheaval. But I think they'd immediately come together if this fact was made widespread. I've been thinking it over. Seletsky knew about the deed. He was holding that information over the heads of the Inner Hive, wasn't he? He was promising to bury all trace of the deed if he received technical and military aid from Kranjovia. Am I right? With Kranjovian support in one hand, and the *Zirka Risshenya* in the other, Seletsky figured he'd be standing pretty tall.”

The Inner Hive member took a step closer, and Mary noted how Sandy, Bud, Tom and Ned were tensing themselves.

“Mrs. Swift,” the man said. “I am Hisoka Broton Fall: 82nd within the Oligarchy. As such, I am the highest ranking member of the Oligarchy within this group, and I wish to emphatically assure you that neither I or my associates knew of the deed.” He gave a quick glance at the darkening faces of Levchenko and the Cossacks. “Yes, my associates and I were made aware that Seletsky was receiving assistance. We were told that Seletsky was in possession of something supremely important regarding future relations between our country and Ukraine. We were sent to assess the value of this claim and, based on our analysis, the Oligarchy was to decide whether or not to continue supporting Seletsky. We did *not* sanction any harmful actions directed against you or Mrs. Newton.”

“I believe you,” Mary said.

“In fact,” Hisoka Broton Fall went on, “once it was learned that you and Mrs. Newton were in the area, all possible defensive steps were made to withdraw from the situation. Please believe me. We’ve learned the consequences of dealing with Swifts.” The last was delivered with a glance at Sandy.

“But *that*,” Levchenko declared, pointing at the document in Tom's hand. “Our rightful territory—”

“The borders of the Oligarchy are *inviolable*—”

Mary suddenly thrust the blade of the *Zirka Rissshenya* between the two men, keeping them separate. Looking at her, everyone could see traces of bronze brightly coloring her eyes.

“*Both* of you,” she said. “Settle down.”

As Levchenko and Hisoka Broton Fall took a step apart, Mary went on. “I’m in a hurry to get home and resume my life,” she steadily said, keeping the sword in place. “But I am *not* leaving behind a war between two countries. *You*,” she said to Levchenko, “and *you*,” she added to Hisoka Broton Fall, “have been handed an opportunity to settle this situation calmly and peacefully.”

“Polkovnyk Swift—”

“*Mrs. Swift*—”

“Peacefully,” Mary insisted. “Consider how evenly matched the both of you are.” She looked at Hisoka Broton Fall. “Kranjovia possesses a great deal of technical and scientific know-how.”

“And my people?” Levchenko asked.

In answer, Mary raised the *Zirka Rissshenya*. “The Kaimanove ... the bulwark between Kranjovia and the Ukraine ... will have the Star of Judgment. Consider that. Consider how, if handled carefully, a solution could arrive that would mutually benefit both your countries.”

Watching her friend, Helen was remembering Genesis. And He placed at the east of the Garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword that turned every way to keep the way of the Tree of Life.

The Cossacks and the Kranjovians warily eyed each other.

Mary was struck with a sudden inspiration. “Perhaps a good symbolic start would be a joint Ukrainian/Kranjovian space mission. Perhaps with Kaimanove astronauts.”

Levchenko suddenly looked like a ten year old discovering that Christmas was arriving ahead of schedule.

The Kranjovians were exchanging looks. Then Hisoka Broton Fall turned back to Mary. “We would have to take this ... proposal ... back to Navsegda Adin,” he slowly said.

“Please do,” Mary replied. “Just keep in mind what a war between you and Ukraine would accomplish.”

“We're fully cognizant of what arrangements involving your family could lead to,” Hisoka Broton Fall said dryly.

Not everyone was taking in the discussion with total severity. Mary noticed how Sandy was favoring her with a small smile. And, whereas Dane Zito Skiron's expression was passive, his eyes were twinkling as he looked at her.

The mood was now being interrupted by the approaching sounds of sirens as cars and vans belonging to the police were arriving. The officers on the scene were ordering the onlookers to move back.

Mary noticed it. “Oh, dear. I suspect we'll all be busy for a while with explanations and stuff. Hopefully lunch will be offered. But, in the meantime, maybe I can try and make some amends. Tom? Ned? Bud? Could you and some of these other strong and hefty gentlemen put the statue back together?”

The men came forward, with Bud passing Jet over to her mother. Mary noted with interest how Levchenko and two Cossacks joined in the effort, as well as one of the Kranjovians. Together they began moving the top half of the Holmes statue back into place.

“Make sure all the gold is out,” Mary said. “Wouldn't want to go through this again.”

“All the gold is out,” Tom said as he worked. “But Mary, this isn't going to be a permanent fix. It'll take some careful repair—”

“Just get the two pieces back together,” Mary told him.

With some effort the top half of the statue was soon carefully realigned with the bottom. This while more police were gathering around (with Helen and Sandy busily talking to them, trying to keep them away a while longer).

“Now move away,” Mary instructed the men.

They did so, and Mary touched the tip of the *Zirka Risshenya* to the statue. Lines of brilliant blue-green fire immediately began racing throughout the bronze surface while the sound of crackling electricity filled the air.

After about thirty seconds, Mary moved the sword away. “That should be enough,” she said with satisfaction.

Tom, Ned and Levchenko went to gingerly touch the statue.

“It feels solid,” Tom said. “Possible reconstruction of the metal at the atomic level.”

And all's right with the world, Mary thought, smiling.

She then held the sword out to Levchenko. “You'll be needing this,” she told him.

The Cossack leader accepted it, but was keeping his gaze on Mary. “Are you certain you should trust me with this?” he asked in a low voice.

Mary's smile grew. “You'd doubt the word of a *polkovnyk*?”

Levchenko was still for a moment. Then, after giving a look to the Cossacks and the Kranjovians, turned to Mary and, with a sigh, offered the *Zirka Risshenya* back to her. “Perhaps it should be you who keeps it.”

Mary shook her head. “I've got enough cutlery at home. Besides, that thing's too big to chop vegetables with.”

“But we've all seen what you can accomplish with this,” Levchenko insisted. “I ... I can't ...”

“It's the symbol of your tribe,” Mary told him. “Not mine.”

Hisoka Broton Fall stepped closer. “You'd leave such power—”

“Would you rather *I* kept it?” Mary asked him coldly.

The Kranjovian stepped back, his mouth closing.

“Besides,” Mary said, “the *Zirka Risshenya* has the best fail-safe in the world. Its power can't be dishonorably or immorally used by anyone. Only by those possessing virtue and a need for justice.” She blinked. “Wow! I've always wanted to use dialogue like that.” She looked over at Sandy. “I don't know why you've been complaining all these years. This is fun.”

Helen rolled her eyes.

Levchenko was re-wrapping the sword in its sheath. “But I shouldn't

let you go unrewarded,” he insisted to Mary. “There has to be something ...”

“May I have three of the gold coins?” Mary asked.

Nodding, Levchenko bent down to where his men had been busily gathering up the rubles. Taking three he straightened up, passing the coins to her.

“Here you go,” Mary said to Helen, giving a coin to her. “Dane Zito Skiron?”

The Kranjovian caught the coin she tossed to him. “My thanks,” he said. “This will make an excellent addition to my collection, as well as a reminder of all of this ... although I can't imagine I'll be forgetting this anytime soon.”

“Makes two of us,” Helen said, polishing the coin on her sleeve, then taking a cautious bite.

“Oh, for pity's sake, Helen—” Mary began.

“After all of this I ain't being stuck with a bogus coin,” Helen insisted.

Shaking her head, Mary returned her attention to Levchenko. “There's one other favor I'd like from you.”

Levchenko nodded. “Name it.”

“Learn virtue,” she said solemnly. “Learn justice.” Her expression brightened. “And invite Helen and me to the wedding.”

“Yeah,” Helen chimed in, giving Levchenko an evil grin. “Ain't no more excuses for putting it off.”

Levchenko considered it. “True.”

“Sides,” Helen continued, “It's only fitting, seeing as how Mary and I are experts at getting people married. Of course,” she added, half to herself, “sometimes it takes a bit longer than others.”

Having climbed up on Sandy's shoulders, Jet had been waving at the policemen. “Peesmen?” she asked.

“That's right, dear,” Mary told her.

“Ga'ma g'to pi'son?”

Mary sighed. “Hopefully not. But I guess—”

A uniformed woman wearing the shoulder flashes of a Chief Inspector

came forward and, from her bearing, Mary thought she was going to be saluted.

“Scuse me, Mum,” she said, addressing Mary directly. “I’ve just been in contact with Sir Douglas, the Permanent Secretary. He feels that, given the ... unusual circumstances,” and here her eyes took in the entire group, “you and your company would perhaps accept his hospitality at 2 Marsham Street.”

“Which prison is that?” Helen whispered anxiously to Ned.

“Headquarters of the British Home Office,” Ned assured her.

“Oh,” Helen said, feeling just a tiny bit put out that the Tower of London wasn't in the offing.

“And a lunch will be offered,” the Chief Inspector said in all seriousness.

“Oh,” Mary said. “You heard that. Well,” she went on, looking at the others, “who's for a meal?”

Jet was clapping her hands and, with a large cordon of police serving as escorts, the group began being patiently herded towards a line of official looking black automobiles.

Mary paused just long enough to give the statue of Sherlock Holmes a parting look. She decided it was just hopeful imagination that caused her to believe she saw a smile on the statue's face.

Oh well, she thought and, with a smile of her own, joined the rest of the group.